

Disengagement



**Unrelated to the Objective World in
Chinese and East Asian Art**

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Abstract

Distinguished from representation, another kind of art of “Word-Writing” finds echoes in Paleolithic art (e.g. the Lascaux cave), which features a type of “drawings” of lines and dots, in addition to mimetic images and patterns as signs and symbols in art history. Not being fully explained so far, this kind of “drawings/traces” can be a research subject if approached from the perspective of *shufa* (Chinese traditional art of Word-Writing which highlights spontaneity/freedom of expressing moods or feelings and also refers to a kind of freehand brushwork correlating) and *xieyi* (Chinese traditional painting which becomes similar to a kind of “Word-Writing”).



At the 34th World Congress of Art History in 2016, the first forum focused on how the ideation of Art differs in cultures across historical eras. In fact, the issue of engagement in Art varies greatly and has been in constant transition.

Art has been taken as a vehicle of studying History because the Artwork represents phenomena and conveys meanings — literal, symbolic or metaphorical, etc. But if the Artwork bears no “content” (meaning), with no tangible association with the Object, or, so to speak, the real world, can it still be seen as “artistic”? The question draws our attention to *shufa* 书法 (word-writing art) in Chinese and East Asian art¹, which disengages from specific events or objects and has established its own aesthetic system as well as a rich repertoire of creative methods. In the late 13th century (the early Yuan Dynasty), Chinese painting underwent a fundamental transformation, which led to the advent of *xieyi* 写意 painting (*xieyi* literally means

1 Each Chinese character can be designed and modified in two ways. The first way is through graphic design, termed *meishuzi* (美术字 decorative Chinese characters) in Chinese, and “calligraphy” in English. The font variations can amount to as many as 251 in modern computers. The second way is *shufa* 书法, word-writing art (also generally translated as calligraphy), which is distinguishable from Abstract Expressionism through its applied methods of the Chinese art of writing. This pictographic latter approach does not seek to convey motions and emotions through the formation of shapes and strength forms like *meishuzi* (calligraphy); instead, it focuses on the modification of lines of strength, and trajectory remaining within the same shape, or free to transform the form of each character in writing, strength, and trajectory.

“writing of intent”), derived from and grounded upon *shufa*.² Although not yet totally severed from the representation of the Object, *xieyi* painting features highly individualized expression and becomes a kind of Art independent from the visible world and real-life events; a kind of writing of “the Heart” in non-verbal form (“writing” here means release, escape, spontaneity, and transcendence). Subsequently, a whole set of theories emerged and developed along this line. This kind of Art becomes a pure expression of humanity in an abstract sense, not as images circumscribed by specific timeframe and space. In the field of Art History, this kind of Art can no longer be treated as historical material in representational forms. Such poetic expression of human perception is “ethereal” in the sense that it bears no association with social circumstances and specific existential states. Hence, it is not a reflection of History but only conveys the profundity and intensity of humanity, comparable to absolute music. This artistic tradition, which first originated in China and then spread to other East Asian cultures, has formed a self-sufficient/autonomous system in spirit transition and boundless exploration. All in all, it does not correspond to politics, society, or history.

Engagement, generally concerning the content of art, also pays attention to the question of what art is (what is Art), so it may involve more than “content”. Previously, studies of Art History had by and large hinged upon “representational art”, which is drawn from ancient Greek philosophical and epistemological ideas as explicated in the Germanic context (If we put on hold the habitual way of thinking in new art history that focuses on studying the Artist and historical eras, e.g., politics, economy, culture, psychology, and gender, etc.) Even with no immediate/unmediated association with the Object, the Artwork as image can still arouse complex mental reactions through the mechanism of illusionism (as E. H.

2 Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫, a famous Chinese painter from the Yuan Dynasty, wrote a postscript on his painting *Xiushi shulin tu* 秀石疏林图 (*Graceful Rocks and Sparse Woods*), which makes clear that the aim of painting lies not in representation of the Object but in appliance of the creative principle of *shufa* for the end of self-expression. Portraying subjects such as stones, trees, and bamboos shall deploy the brushwork of *shufa*. Judging by his personal experience and creative work, Zhao had adopted the *shufa* style that had been well established since Wang Xizhi 王羲之 from the Eastern Jin Dynasty (See *Zhao Mengfu shu lanting xu* 赵孟頫书兰亭序 (*Zhao Mengfu's Transcript of the Lanting Preface*) (Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2010). From Zhao Mengfu, a creative line of Chinese painting swiftly took shape, shifting from representation to immediate self-expression through adopting the *shufa* brushwork.

Gombrich has discussed).³ If Art does not function as a link between humanity and the real world (If art is not about relationship with matter, relationship with the world, and relationship with essence/existence), then what can art be? how shall we define and assess the Art? Indeed, what other ends can it serve?

Shufa 书法 (word-writing art) has, indeed, no mimetic or representative association with the Object. *Xieyi* 写意 painting, which derived from and is grounded upon *shufa*, uses the method of spiritual expression in *shufa* (especially the feeling that can be felt to oneself, but cannot be clearly conscious, let alone resort to speech, could be stored in and vent off), rather than the approaches of representation. *Shufa* depicts the characters, which serve the basic function of expressing meanings, but every single character owns different physical forms. Chinese hieroglyphic characters are fundamentally different from alphabetic writing. As graphic characters, they are independent images, do not directly correspond to their pronunciation. (Chinese dialects are born in diversity, most of which are embedded with too much discrepancy from each other to communicate easily. But Chinese characters have had unified form since the beginning, meaning that Chinese people could understand compatriots from other places and that texts from thousands of years ago could be read, even if the original pronunciation is unknown.) Each Chinese character can be designed and modified in two ways, *meishuzi* and *shufa* (see footnote 2), which were both roughly translated as “calligraphy” in English. *Shufa* functions in a different way: it records the psychological fluctuations of writers in their handwriting. The variations are subtle changes, unconscious outpourings of mind; *shufa* as art turns the variations of personal body and mind changes into an intentional pursuit. The intentional pursuit in *shufa* comes from two aspects: 1. the instantaneous expression during writing; 2. the perennial accumulation of habitual nature. The instantaneous expressions reflect the momentary mood, mental state, passion, and the generated movements, or happen in certain emotional states (therefore, artists usually trigger or accelerate the passion by means of alcohol or drugs). In contrast, the perennial accumulations relate to the individuals’ long-term experience and memories and

3 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960).

the delicate alteration they evoke, as well as to the experience and temperaments gleaned from their predecessors (this requires unremitting practice and persistent copying of the ancients' work, like how sportsmen and musicians practice their skills). The moves and variations in one piece of writing are completed at one time, with Chinese brush pen, on Chinese *Xuan* paper (宣纸, a kind of Chinese rice-paper), using Chinese ink (墨, *Mo*, a special pigment), to present the particular subtle and delicate results.

But the two artistic forms of Chinese characters (*meishuzi* and *shufa*) are totally different from the phenomenological concept of characters as image-demolishing. Therefore, the problem of *shufa* 书法 and *xieyi* 写意 is not a phenomenological issue, but a problem of philosophical anthropology; to address this problem more systematically, I will soon publish an ontological research paper.

Although *shufa* is a kind of script, the artistic asset doesn't lie in its status as a written document but in its status as an artistic form that presents signs or any kind of object, i.e., *xieyi* painting. This requires us to rethink the distinction between *shufa* and language. In a phenomenological sense, language, be it hieroglyphic or alphabetic, always features a kind of physical presence registered by human consciousness; while reading, the physical form from the language written into words is then demolished. This physical presence no longer matters and ends in a sort of mental oblivion, but meanings from the text generate new images and other things. The physical presence of alphabetic language leaves no traces in human consciousness when the end of conveying meanings is fulfilled, with only two exceptions.⁴

4 Chinese scholar Zhang Xianglong 张祥龙 has used the theory of phenomenology to study Chinese *shufa*. As he argues, "if we think along the line of phenomenology as proposed by E. Husserl, our attention will be drawn to the sign as an autonomous/self-sufficient entity, e.g., words in print...then we perceive it from outside, i.e., its external appearance immediately seen. Such an appearance as an object has erased the innate character of the word, i.e., to convey meanings. Provided that such an appearance still bears a verbal function, its nature then changes fundamentally. The presence of a word as an entity is immediate to us, but our attention is not drawn to it, and it is no longer a register of our 'mental activities'. Our interest and intention only point toward what meanings it conveys and further toward the Object as the signified. Our association with it is elusive in the sense that our intentional action is not riveted on it, yet also does not utterly dispense with it. From it we gain access to meaning and, thereby, approach the signified, i.e., something or some situation." Zhang Xianglong, "Why can Chinese Calligraphy Become an Art" 为什么中国书法能成为艺术. In Zhang Xianglong, *Cong xianxiangxue dao Kong Fuzi 从现象学到孔夫子 (From Phenomenology to Confucius)* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2011), 455.

Firstly, such physical presence of language has become a kind of image, meaning “figural” — be it poetry or prose. As Michel Foucault has argued,

Pursuing its quarry by two paths, the calligram sets the most perfect trap. By its double function, it guarantees capture, as neither discourse alone nor a pure drawing could do. It banishes the invincible absence that defeats words, imposing upon them, by the ruses of a writing at play in space, the visible form of their referent. Cleverly arranged on a sheet of paper, signs invoke the very thing of which they speak from outside, by the margin they outline, by the emergence of their mass on the blank space of the page.⁵

But this is not what matters about *shufa*. Chinese characters can be combined and made into signs of a pictorial nature and single characters can also be made into figures like pictures. Ample cases of the kind can be found in Chinese tradition. “Modern *shufa*” as a subdivision of contemporary Chinese art already runs against the traditional ideation of *shufa* and has been described as “writing/non-writing” by Wang Dongling 王冬龄. Among the 13 categories of modern *shufa* outlined in Wang’s discourse, there are five⁶ featuring how Chinese

5 Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. and ed. by James Harkness, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 22.

6 Among these categories are: 1. The calligrammatic school, i.e., recovering the hieroglyphic form of the Chinese language as in its infancy, which constitutes a long-running legacy in the *shufa* tradition. In the 1980s, many Chinese artists explored the imagistic asset of Chinese characters and rendered them “pictorial”, even with added coloration. 3. The geometric school, i.e., rendering the characters in highly structured geometric forms with stunning visual effects and aesthetic flavors. Repeated renditions can make the character like a kind of conceptual writing. 7. The ink school emphasizes the way of ink-appliance, with wash and splash the key method that renders the brushwork blotchy with white traces. 8. The semantic school pivots on the meaning of characters, mainly featuring phrases both hieroglyphic and symbolic at once. Characters of varying functionalities are collaged to evoke a kind of ambience which does not draw on any singular noun or verb but on the holistic unity of all characters (Gestalt). 9. The syntactic school focuses on the evocative connotation of words, generally related to the tradition of Romanticism, but to feelings and sensations of mundane life in modern time. The latter has induced a kind of poetics of modernity. LaoZhu, “Zhongguo xiandai shufa de cengci yu fangxiang” 中国现代书法的层次与方向 (“Facets and directions of modern *shufa* in China”). In Wang Dongling, ed., *Zhongguo xiandai shufa lunwen xuan* 中国现代书法论文选 (*A Collection of Critical Essays on Modern Shufa in China*) (Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 2004), 157–164.

characters are again rendered in a way such that they become pictures of tangible things, which echoes Foucault's discourse on the "pursuing" of meanings.

Secondly, the typography of Chinese characters is standardized and embellished to serve various purposes; this is why "*shufa*" is translated as "word-writing art" but not "calligraphy"⁷. Embellishment of characters or letters as scripts is a kind of designing and modelling that must either comply with rigid rules and serve sacramental ends, just as Quran quotes written in mosques do, or aim to delight the human eyes in visual terms. In today's world, advertising and graphic design tackles the issue of how to design the shape, outline, coloration, volume, texture, and feel of movement of characters or letters. While studying in an art school in China, two parallel courses must be taken, one on applied decorative Chinese characters (实用美术字), the other on *shufa* (word-writing art). Decorative Chinese characters and *shufa* are two different things. Highly beautified design of the shape of characters or letters draws the viewer's attention to form, not content, and the physical presence of the "writing" again becomes the focal point. This is a consensus commonly shared in the design industry. The radical traces of writing have explored new directions and functions of dissemination, such as Robert Indiana's⁸ word painting and sculpture "LOVE" and Milton Glaser's⁹ I ♥ NY, created in 1977, inspired by Indiana's "LOVE". Different from alphabetic languages, Chinese characters, hieroglyphs (which are also used in Japanese, and appeared in the Korean and Vietnamese languages in the past) are far more intricate and complex, just as Zhang Xianglong 张祥龙 has discussed in great

7 My PhD supervisor Lothar Ledderose told me that his PhD supervisor Dietrich Seckel translated *shufa* as *Schriftkunst* not *Kalligraphie*.

8 Robert Indiana (1928–2018) is an American Pop artist. In 1965 his designed image LOVE was printed on greeting cards sold at MoMA, and in 1970 it was converted to the first sculptural version. In 1973 the lettering appeared on an 8-cent federal postage stamp; after that, it became widespread.

9 Milton Glaser (1929–2020), an American graphic designer, made I ♥ NY, the official slogan/logo of the New York State Department of Commerce.

detail.¹⁰ Such intricacy and complexity concern not only appearance but also semantics. Thus, the figural/pictorial asset of Chinese characters can move from abstract or pure outside appearance to a more synthetic state of being, further highlighted and amplified by semantic assets. However, one can barely say that such rich formal valences of Chinese characters are all that *shufa* is about, because the essence of *shufa* lies in brushwork, or, to be specific, the powerful morphology of line as a vehicle of expressing humanity. It is natural that brushwork drawn from *shufa* later affected fundamental changes in Chinese painting.

For the expressiveness of brushwork to be optimized in terms of using the morphology of line to capture humanity in a freer way and to express more, the Artist shall steer away from representation of the Object and explore a theoretical system of abstraction. Chinese aesthetics has a rich repertoire of theories with a solid philosophical foundation, as well as a whole set of creative methods. Subsequently, China and East Asia in general have formed an Art History that diverges from Western Art History, which was formed by ancient Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions. The timeframe of the advancement of Asian Art History roughly corresponds with the Italian Renaissance initiated by Giotto (c.a. 1266–1337), and two strands of Art History evolved parallel to each other thereafter; this cannot be something fortuitous.

Slightly later than Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫 (1254–1322), both Huang Gongwang

10 “Words consist of a number of letters arranged in form, while the form of Chinese characters composed of strokes. For example, the character 永 illustrates the most essential eight strokes, nevertheless, the combinations are very diverse and pictorially, constructing a space similar to the hexagrams in *The Book of Changes*, but much richer. A Chinese character can be composed of one to more than thirty strokes, because Chinese characters have the function of constructing meaning (referring to things, pictograms, knowing meaning, etc.) and modern phonetics (half of the pictophonetic characters). It can be seen that the richness of strokes of Chinese characters and Western phonetics characters is incomparable...The combination of and connection between Chinese strokes can be described as countless diversification. Moreover, other letters are used to represent sounds and form words, which are meaningless in forms themselves, and the single sounds they represent are generally detached from meaning. The strokes of Chinese characters themselves may be intentional, and their combination not only constructs the meaning, but also the pronunciation. Therefore, the strokes of Chinese characters are different from the letters that make up words. It is another fundamentally different way of constructing meaning, more similar to Distinctive Features suggested by phonetics.”Zhang Xianglong, “Why can Chinese Calligraphy Become an Art” 为什么中国书法能成为艺术. In Zhang Xianglong, *Cong xianxiangxue dao Kong Fuzi 从现象学到孔夫子* (From Phenomenology to Confucius) (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2011).

黄公望 (1269–1354) and Ni Zan 倪瓒 (1301–1374) defied representational painting in both theory and creative practices.¹¹ Ni Zan made it clear that painting shall not aim at portraying objective things, but shall adopt brushwork to express one's selfhood (“*xiongzhong yiqi*” 胸中逸气 [the feel of spontaneity and transcendence in the Heart]).¹² But the emergence of self-sufficient theories started with the discourse on the Northern and Southern School proposed by the *Songjiang* 松江 coterie led by Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636) in the mid to late Ming period¹³, which traced its origins to the High Tang period (the early 8th

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- 11 See *Shi Qu Bao Ji* 石渠宝笈, volume 30. The Cursive and seal script technique of art applied in painting is inherited directly from Zhao Mengfu. Huang Gongwang wrote in the postscript that “I personally saw his streaks and sprays of ink, when I was a pupil in the Songxue Zhai” (recorded in *Shi Qu Bao Ji*, volume 30). Songxue Zhai is Zhao's studio. Huang's painting, *Cliff of Mount Tianchi*, now in the collection of the Palace Museum, has a postscript written by his contemporary, a *Hanlin Daizhi* (title of official) of the Yuan Dynasty, Liu Guan, that reads “As Wuxing's chief disciple, who could become an old hand without bleeding fingers.” Wuxing is an honorific title of Zhao Mengfu and Huang Gongwang here was respected by Liu Guan as the first disciple of Zhao. 草籀笔法入画直接传承自赵孟頫，黄公望有诗云：“当年亲见公挥洒，松雪斋中小学生。”（载《石渠宝笈》初编卷三十）故宫博物院藏黄公望《天池石壁图》有同代人元朝翰林待制柳贯题跋：“吴兴室内大弟子，几人斲轮无血指。”
- 12 See *Qing Men Ge Quan Ji* 清闷阁全集. Ni Zan has close exchanges with Huang Gongwang, but he has a more conscious expression on the functions of brushwork. In his *Response to Zhang Zaozhonghe* wrote: “Today I went out to a quiet place outside town, and read the deeds of Shanyuan. With painting to capture the scenery, the twists and turns could present the best of its beauty, which might be beyond me. If daubing hastily, only the material aspects of things are left; this is not the intention of painting. Painters in my heart, have nothing more than free brushwork, not for imitation, but just for self-amusement. Recently, I travelled around and occasionally came to town. People who asked me for paintings insist on their own assignment and are strict on time, or there could be contempt, insult, and wrath everywhere. I'm so wronged! How can you accuse the eunuch of having no beard? Because it is just me working with what I have.” 倪瓒与黄公望交往密切，但对笔法的作用有更为自觉地表述，在其《答张藻仲书》中写道：“今日出城外闲静处，始得读剡源事迹。图写景物，曲折能尽状其妙处，盖我则不能之。若草草点染，遗其骊黄牝牡之形色，则又非为图之意。仆之所谓画者，不过逸笔草草，不求形似，聊以自娱耳。近迂游偶来城邑，索画者必欲依彼所指授，又欲应时而得，鄙辱怒骂，无所不有。冤矣乎。诿可责寺人以髻也！是亦仆自有以取之耶。”
- 13 See *Hua Chan Shi Sui Bi* 画禅室随笔. Dong Qichang explored it with his contemporaries Chen Jiru, Mo Shilong, and Shen Hao. Dong concluded in volume two of his *Hua Chan Shi Sui Bi* that “the Zen sect has two schools, north and south, divided since the Tang dynasty. And the two schools of painting are not divided due to geography, but how they paint. The North School was founded by Li Sixun and his son Li Zhaodao, whose technique of coloring landscapes was inherited by Zhao Gan, Zhao Boju, Zhao Bosu, until the Ma Yuan and Xia Gui generation. The South School, typified by Wang Mojie (Wang Wei), rendered light with ink and converted the contouring way of painting; the techniques were passed on to Zhang Zao, Jing Hao, Guan Tong, Dong Yuan, Ju Ran, Guo Zhongshu, Mi Fu, and his first son Mi Youren, until the Four Masters of Yuan Dynasty. It is just like the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Hui Neng, who created Zen culture, which was then spread by Ma Ju (Mazu Daoyi), Yunmen, Linji, offspring of the flourishing

century).¹⁴ The fundamental change in Chinese painting in this period lies in the prevalence of the language of line just as in *shufa*¹⁵ and the use of ink in lieu of color as the key means to evoke ambience/atmosphere but not real objects.¹⁶

Such a transition of aesthetic consciousness and technique of creation artwork is grounded upon worldviews and epistemology. Ever since the dawn of the modern era, methodologies drawn from Western art history have predominated in Chinese art history, so much so that the history of *shufa* and *xieyi* painting in China and East Asia in general has long been overshadowed. Due to contending worldviews and epistemologies, the two kinds of Art are incompatible with one another. In Western art history, the essence is seen as veracious (Truth), embodied in the myriad of things human can perceive and comprehend. The Artwork serves to present upshots or processes of such embodiment and to address ontological concerns or the structure of consciousness as image of the phenomenon. From Aristotle and Plato, medieval scholasticism, Kant, to Husserl and Heidegger, Western thinking has long been proceeding along this line. By contrast, no such noumenon as the essence has been validated in ancient Chinese thought,

Southern school; the North School gradually became weaker mainly because the the cliffs of clouds and the traces of stones (so-called by Mojie [Wang Wei]) are far more amazing than the mystery of nature. Between the strokes is the epiphany of creation. Dongpo (Su Shi), who appreciated the mural paintings by Wu Daozi and Wang Wei, also said: I am the same as Wei. These are words from a confidant.”董其昌与同时的陈继儒、莫是龙、沈颢共同探求，在董其昌《画禅室随笔》卷二中总结为：“禅家有南北二宗，唐时始分。画之南北二宗，亦唐时分也。但其人非南北耳。北宗则李思训父子着色山水，流传而为宋之赵干、赵伯驹、伯驩，以至马、夏辈。南宗则王摩诘始用渲淡，一变勾斫（一作研，乃误）之法，其传为张躁、荆、关、董、巨、郭忠恕、米家父子，以至元之四大家，亦如六祖之后有马驹（马祖道一）、云门、临济，儿孙之盛，而北宗微矣。要之，摩诘所谓云峰石迹，迥出天机，笔意纵横，参乎造化者，东坡（苏轼）赞吴道子、王维画壁，亦云：吾于（王）维也无间然（完全一致）。知言哉。”

14 Methods of Wang Wei (701–761) and Wu Daozi have always been documented, but their original works haven't been preserved. A landscape painting in the recently discovered Han Xiu's tomb (Tang Dynasty) shows that there are indeed paintings created with the materials and methods completely identical to *shufa*.

15 That is “the techniques which not only use lines but also simultaneously use difference gradation of ink colours were passed on to Zhang Zao, Jing Hao, Guan Tong, Dong Yuan, Ju Ran, Guo Zhongshu, Mi Fu, and his first son Mi Youren, until the Four Masters of Yuan Dynasty.” See *Hua Chan Shi Sui Bi*.

16 “The South School, typified by Wang Mojie (Wang Wei), rendered light with ink and converted the contouring way of painting...Mojie (Wang Wei) said that the cliffs of clouds and the traces of stones are far more amazing than the mystery of nature, between the strokes and the epiphany of creation.” See *Hua Chan Shi Sui Bi*.

except for the “being of non-being” (在 in Chinese, pronounced as *wai*, i.e., the combination of the initial of *wu* 无 and the vowel of *zai* 在). “Being of Non-being” means the essence of the world and humanity lies in nonexistence — a kind of Void, which yet is impregnated with the relationship between human and all correlations to other related factors and can become “Real” through the engagement of human consciousness, perception, and cognization. Hence the four facets of humanity, i.e. me-to-me, me-to-others, me-to-it, and me-to-He (the sacred or transcendent), from which emerge the world and human nature, are engrained in all human consciousness and human actions. *Wai* can be “incarnated” in different entities and ideas, from which various philosophies or ontologies originated across cultures and historical eras. Therefore, the myriad of things is not the virtual presence of the essence/noumenon, nor is it not. What really makes the difference is a keen awareness of the “being of non-being” — nonexistent and free, just as the variety of human perceptions and existential states is embodied in images and facts when a human faces life and the world in either a highly proactive or pessimistic way.

In such a framework, the absence of the thing-in-itself leads to the groundlessness of phenomena and the Truth becomes reliant on humans’ interpretation and ends up becoming a vacancy after *aletheia*. Ancient Chinese philosophy features Lao Tzu’s 老子 ontological discourse that goes as “from being comes the myriad of things, and from non-being comes being”¹⁷. When coming to Zen Buddhism, monk-thinkers from the Sui and Tang Dynasty (581–907), especially Master Hui Neng 慧能¹⁸, posited “not a thing exists in the world

17 See The Book of Tao and Teh (老子·四十章). “All things of the world / are born from Existence (Being), and Being from Nothingness.” 天下万物生于有，有生于无。Lao Tzu, *The Book of Tao and Teh*, trans. Gu Zhengkun (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010).

18 Hui Neng 慧能 (638–713) has five famous disciples: Qingyuan Xingsi, Nanyue Huairang, Heze Shenhui, Nanyang Huizhong, and Yongjia Xuanjue. His disciples then developed their own schools; among them, Qingyuan and Nanyue were the most successful. Nanyue developed into Linji and Weiyang, while Qingyuan developed into Caodong, Yunmen, and Fayang, together forming the Five Schools of Zen, the so-called five leaves from the same branch.

at all”, inspired by Indian philosophy, especially *mādhyamaka* preached by Nāgārjuna (150–250). This transcendence of both noumena and phenomena liberated the heart and mind of Chinese literati and disengaged them from the entrapment of worldly concerns. *Shufa* resonates with such transcendent aims, featuring “spiritualism” of self-expression, from which derived *shanshui hua* 山水畫 (the mountains-and-waters painting, a landscape painting written as Word-Writing Art). These monk-thinkers assigned the ultimate being to non-being, thereby transcended the strictures imposed by family ties and worldly life, as well as ego and egoism. By contrast, the Artist remains an ordinary person and the four facets of humanity associated with “being of non-being” as outlined above are all embodied and engrained in his/her life experience. The Artist is still a Being. Traces of brushwork left behind during the act of “writing” *shufa* register the Artist’s bodily movement and mental activities, reveal his self-cultivation; this requires the Artist to turn inward or face outward, to the outside world, to draw inspiration for his art. The outside world is not an absolute representational Object, but a “nature” that nurtures humanities. From Indian philosophy’s spiritual transcendence to Lao Tzu’s quietism and nonaction, the Artist can continue his life smoothly through self-negation. A derivative of *shufa*, *xieyi* painting has gone further in terms of broadening and enriching the ideation and creative latitude of *xieyi*. Aberrant from the norm of Western art history, such an alternative highlights the issue of engagement. It can be said that *shufa* marks the apogee of achievement of Chinese art and East Asian art in general, and that Chinese painting was fundamentally transformed by the adoption the creative principle of *shufa*. *Xieyi* hence becomes the first type of Chinese art not encapsulated by the canopy of Western Art History. *Xieyi* renders the representational content of images, specific timeframes, and spaces irrelevant. It is all about the expressiveness of the abstract trace, which cogently relates human temperament — e.g., emotion, mood, and the like — which is timeless across history. Not merely presenting regional/provincial cases, *xieyi* has become the predominant creative principle in Chinese art and East Asian Art in general, starting from as early as the 2nd–4th century and threading

through history until artistic ideas imported from the West took center stage in the art scene in China in the late 19th century. Even in today's postcolonial era, *xieyi* remains the key asset of East Asian art — an issue that can be addressed from the perspective of engagement.

To take a step further, non-representational art forms such as *shufa* can find echoes in Paleolithic cave art (e.g., Lascaux), which shows traces of drawing such as lines and dots besides other mimetic images, a phenomenon yet to be fully explained.¹⁹ To construe such traces as signs indicates a way of exegesis still under the sway of Judeo-Christian hermeneutics of image. To make sense of a sign, one must count on the shaping of it, whereas in *shufa* traces (strokes/lines) shall be rendered “significant” in their own right. In light of this line of thinking, we shall explore a third type of images/pictures that features immediate expression of feeling, mood and the other unspeakable spirits — for all kinds of purposes and out of all kinds of motives. A better understanding of *shufa* and *xieyi* painting can help us unravel the issue of engagement.

Thanks in part to the work of Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, Abstract Expressionism has freed Art from the shackles of representation, although how to study non-representational art remains an issue. Besides mentalité and sociohistorical contexts, we need to study the noumenon of Art as well. As an epitome of the noumenon of Art, *shufa* provides a critical lens for us to rethink the issue of engagement, in reference to both arts in its infancy, during early human history, and modern art such as abstract art.²⁰

19 Don Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola discovered Altamira cave in 1875. At the time, all interpretations, regardless of the dispute on whether it was Paleolithic cave art, were predicated on the assumption that the found cave paintings are realistic images.

20 In the early stage of abstract art in Western, attention has been paid to disengaging of this art from reproducing material Objects as “die Reinheit der Gestaltung”(fine form), which can be referred to Oswald Herzog, in his article on “Der Abstrakte Expressionismus” (*Der Sturm*, Zweites Heft, 1919, 29): “Abstract Expressionism is perfect Expressionism. It is pure creation. It casts spiritual processes into a corporeal mould. It does not borrow objects from the real world; it creates its own objects... The abstract reveals the will of the artist; it becomes expression...” English after William A. Drake.

Chinese art history is not all about *shufa* and *xieyi* painting, beyond which there are plentiful written documents, visual images, and material cultures worthy of research. The tripartite of image-language-material as a gateway of studying human civilization serves to validate seemingly “non-artistic” images or objects as suitable subjects for historical study. As a discipline of the Humanities, Art History has been steering towards imagology (*Bildwissenschaft*), i.e., studying images as a way of addressing a wide range of issues on history and humanity. This does not mean we no longer need history of art-itself, i.e., art in history. If our study of images fails to address the core aesthetic ideas and values that have come into being in a culture in the *longue durée*, then it can only be counted as a science of picture, not Art History.

(Translated by Li Jin)

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