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From *shensi* to *jingjie*: the Method of Artistic Imagination and the Highest Aesthetic Realm

Abstract

The article examines the content and meaning of the Chinese aesthetic concept of *shensi* and its relation to the notion of the highest aesthetic realm (*jingjie*). Spiritual contemplation or artistic imagination (*shensi*) was thoroughly explored by Liu Xie (465 – 522) in his theoretical work on literary writing *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* in the 6th century. This work is the first systematic theory of artistic production in classical Chinese aesthetics. The aesthetic theory of *jingjie*, however, was first explored by Wang Changling (698 – 756) in the Tang Dynasty, but further developed by Wang Guowei (1877 – 1927) on the threshold of the 20th century, which is considered the beginning of the modernisation of Chinese aesthetics. The article explores both concepts in detail and argues that *shensi* is actually the aesthetic method that leads to the attainment of the highest aesthetic realm (*jingjie*) when successfully applied and manifested in the artistic process and in the artwork itself.

Keywords

shensi, *jingjie*, Liu Xie, Wang Changling, Wang Guowei, Chinese aesthetics

1. Introduction*

The first part of the article examines Liu Xie's aesthetic concept of *shensi* as defined in the 26th chapter of his work *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍). In order to shed light on the general content of this aesthetic concept, I will only present those parts of the chapter that I consider central to understanding its fundamental meaning. Since Liu Xie's literary theory is deeply rooted in Daoist philosophy, especially in Zhuangzi's philosophy, I will first introduce his central philosophical concepts that fundamentally shaped the aesthetic theory of Liu Xie's time, namely the Wei Jin and the Six Dynasties period in the sixth century, which is considered the birth of Classical Chinese aesthetics. For a better understanding of Liu Xie's aesthetic concept of *shensi*, I will also present the basic features of the aesthetics of this period.

In the second part of the article, we will explore the concept of *aesthetic realm* or *jingjie* and its historical development from its founding by Wang Changling 王昌齡 (ca. 689 – 765) to its further elaborations and developments by Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877 – 1927). The article will show how the two aesthetic concepts are related and similar in content and how they are mutually dependent in achieving the highest aesthetic value of the artwork and a profound aesthetic experience.

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2. The Philosophical Foundation of *shensi* and the Essential Characteristics of the Wei Jin Aesthetics

Shensi 神思 as an aesthetic category refers to the process of artistic-creative thinking and encompasses the whole range of mental activities involved in artistic creation from preparation, conceptualisation, inspiration to artistic production of the artwork (Zhang 2021: ix). As an aesthetic category and method, *shensi* integrates the following aspects, elaborated and discussed in detail in the next subchapter:

- a) imagination
- b) the expression of the spirit of the artist conditioned by harmonious unification of the will (*zhi*) (as the faculty of the heart-mind) and vital energy or potential (*qi*). To achieve this unity, the artist should fast the mind (*xinzhai*) to grasp the true essence of creativity and create the artwork spontaneously and effortlessly.
- c) the aesthetic emotions elevated natural emotions and contemplation on life in response to external objects and situations. The aesthetic subject constantly interacts with the external world and is stimulated and inspired by its contents.

Shensi was already discussed by Lu Ji 陸機 (261 – 303) in his work *The Art of Writing* (*Wen fu* 文賦) in the 3rd century, but developed theoretically by Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 465 – ca. 522) in his literary theoretical work *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*. Since in Liu Xie's time, namely the Six Dynasties, the Neo-Daoist *Xuanxue* School was in the focus of interest, his literary theory was based on Daoist, especially Zhuangzi's aesthetics and philosophy. Zhuangzi's philosophy of "wandering at ease" or *xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊 involves mastery of a skill (*gongfu* 功夫), aesthetic perfection, freedom, and liberation of the human mind to achieve unity with the Dao. Wandering at ease is the state of being free from all attachments, expectations, and any kind of utilitarian thinking and purpose. There is no external goal, yet it is in harmony and oneness with the Dao. This oneness represents the ultimate state of a liberated human mind. According to Zhuangzi, freedom of the human mind and emancipation from the worldliness of human existence can be achieved in two ways. The first way is to achieve the liberation of the human mind and unity with the Dao through the methods of *xinzhai* 心齋 or fasting of the heart-mind, and 坐忘 *zuowang* or sitting in forgetfulness. The second way, however, is through artistic creativity.

In the method of *xinzhai*, physical and emotional desires and any utilitarian purposes are expelled, and one can integrate with nature and discover (or grasp) its true essence. By sitting in forgetfulness, however, Zhuangzi transcended conceptual or analytical thinking and judgments gained through the process of socialisation and moral cultivation, overwhelmed by anxieties, worries, desires, life, and death, and sought to open a way to dissolve the boundaries of interpersonal relationships so that one could become one with nature (or Dao).

In Zhuangzi's philosophy, unity or oneness with Dao can also be achieved through artistic engagement, which is inseparable from the aforementioned methods. In Butcher Ding's story of the *Inner Chapters*, Zhuangzi emphasises the importance of *xuji* 虛己 (emptying of the self) with the resolution of the opposition between the subject and the object on the one hand, and the opposition between the subject and technique or artistic skill on the other, both of

which are carried out to achieve enjoyment in oneness with Dao. Therefore, the material enjoyment that the skill brings is not important to Zhuangzi; what matters is the transformation of the mind of the cook who has achieved the embodiment of Dao, which, in his view, is prior to any skill.¹ The story outlines the path from learning the technique to the embodiment of the Dao and describes the process from learning the technique to the realm of artistic creativity (Ni 2002: 299).

For example, Zhuangzi's parable of butcher Ding develops this process of attaining this highest aesthetic experience. As we will see in Liu Xie's elaboration of *shensi*, Liu Xie relates directly to Zhuangzi's aesthetic method of embodying the Dao in the artistic process.

As mentioned above, to better understand Liu Xie's literary theory, it is important to shed light on the fundamental features of Wei Jin and Six Dynasties aesthetics. The basic concepts of Chinese aesthetics as expressed in literary theory, as well as the theories of painting and music, were developed precisely during the Wei Jin period. Discussions about the meaning and role of art in the Wei Jin period broke away from political and moral issues and sought to define art and the creative process. In contrast to the Confucian aesthetics of the Han Dynasty, which focused on accurate representations of the external environment, people's behaviours and attitudes, and important events of the time, the Wei Jin period rose to the level of abstraction and formed aesthetic paradigms based mainly on Chinese cosmology and Daoist (especially Zhuangzi's) philosophy. It is therefore not surprising that concepts such as vitality or breath – energy (*qi* 氣), harmony (*yun* 韻), the beauty of *Yinyang* complementarity, purity or clarity (*qing* 清), murkiness (*zhuo* 濁), blandness (*dan* 淡), and serenity (*jing* 靜), which manifest themselves in the aesthetics of all art genres, were central to such approaches.

The shift away from Confucian aesthetics that prevailed in Han Dynasty to Zhuangzi's was driven by political crises and social instability, and a pervasive sense of an uncertain future. While Confucius worked to change the world for the better, Zhuangzi chose to adapt to the chaos of his time. Rather than attempting to transform or cultivate others, he viewed the troubled world as the work of art (DeWoskin 1982: 157).

The Wei Jin period is considered one of the most fruitful and creative periods in philosophy, art and psychology in Chinese history. The cultural and ideational breakthrough was facilitated by significant socio-political changes caused by the fragmentation of power and the invasion of nomadic peoples from the north (especially the Huns and later the Xianbei) who began to conquer northern China to the relatively underdeveloped south. Economic and socio-political power was taken over by wealthy aristocratic clans (especially the Cao and Tuoba clans) who (in addition to constant political intrigues and struggles for supremacy) passionately devoted themselves to poetry, calligraphy, wine drinking, and Daoist philosophy, as did philosophers and artists during these turbulent times.²

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臣之所好者道也，進乎技矣 “What your servant loves is the method of the Dao, something in advance of any art.” (Zhuangzi 2021 [s.d.]: *Neipian, Yangsheng zhu*: 2)

This led to the decline of the study of Confucian classics that prevailed in the Han dynasty (from 206 BC to 220), considering that Confucianism in the Han dynasty had little to do with the original Confucian doctrine, since Confucianism in the Han dynasty merged with Legalism, which we know as the first reform of Confucianism that led to Confucianism as a state doctrine. On the other hand, the invasion of foreign peoples into the central Chinese plain in the north was also responsible for the decline of Confucianism. They did not continue the system of imperial examinations whose beginnings had been laid by Emperor Han Wudi in the Western Han Dynasty. As a result, officials lost the opportunity to obtain high official titles and began to focus more and more on art, painting, and literature.

In reaction to the rigidity of Han Confucianism and the rejection of its rigid moral principles and norms, Neo-Daoism, known as the School of Mysteries (*Xuanxue*), whose chief exponents were the philosophers Wang Bi (226 – 249) and He Yan (195 – 249), emerged. The *Xuanxue* school was based mainly on the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, but also contained some Confucian elements. The philosophical debates in which the intellectual elite participated are known as Pure Conversations (*qingtan*). They dealt with the search for a new morality, metaphysics, and logic. The sages from the Bamboo Grove also participated in the Pure Conversations (Sernelj 2017: 230–231).

Li Zehou describes the Wei Jin period as the awakening of man or people (*ren de juexing*) (Li 2003: 80). In contrast to the rigid emphasis on ancient traditions, customs, honour, and moral integrity that characterised the Han dynasty, in the Wei Jin people and all aspects of their personalities come to the fore.

In the art and literature of the Wei Jin period, emphasis was placed on the value of human life and the expression of human emotions and feelings; human character and spirit, in the sense of unlimited potential possibilities, became the centre of aesthetic, social, and cultural debates (Sernelj 2017: 230–231). The kind of attitude to life that prevailed in this period is shown most clearly and directly in poetry and painting. Central themes in poetry were the awareness of mortality, the transience and brevity of life, grief and regret, the fear of premature death and the loss of loved ones, and at the same time, the veneration and enjoyment of life while it lasts. The aesthetic ideal of the ruling elite was to express human wisdom and sublime character through striking appearance, which was reflected in painting in the depiction of a spirit that transcended the physical image. In the aesthetic perception of the Wei Jin period, which was full of political upheaval and crisis, human individuality transcended communal consciousness. People of this period preferred to enjoy nature and express their personalities aesthetically, without the constraints of ritual formality and politics that characterised Han Dynasty aesthetics.

The emerging aesthetic style of Wei Jin was thus based on an awareness of the transience of life, a devotion to the enjoyment of life, and an immersion in philosophical discussions. These were no longer so much concerned with the human observation of nature and exploration of the external world (*waiza-ishijiede tansuo*), but rather focused on ontology in the sense of finding the inner substance (*neizai shitide zhuiqiu*), whereby the richness and diversity of reality are only possible when all human potentials for it are fulfilled. This meant achieving a fully realised self or state of wisdom (*zhiren*) – what Wang Bi also called great beauty (*damei*), while also preserving human suffering and joy. Focusing on the human inner self, which has unlimited possibilities,

rather than on the outer world, was both a criterion for beauty in art and the heart of philosophy (Sernelj 2017: 230–231).

The art and aesthetics of the Wei Jin were heavily influenced by Wang Bi's ontology, which addresses the issue of attaining infinity or unlimitness (*wuxian* 無限) by overcoming limitation or finity (*youxian* 有限) within the philosophical discourse of presence (*you* 有) and absence (*wu* 無), where Wang Bi held that the Dao and everything that exists arose from absence. Wang's ontology was thus based on the concept of absence (*yi wu wei ben* 以無為本):

“The most original Dao, equal to nature, infinity, the newborn, simplicity, and truth. But why is it called ‘absence’? Because all this – namely, the Dao, nature, simplicity, truth – is nameless. As soon as the name appears, the Dao disappears.” (Rošker 2005: 207)

Wang Bi's ontology is based on the binary category of *benmo* (roots and branches), in which roots refer to the origin and, at the same time, the source (Dao) of everything that exists (*wanwu*), and branches to their concrete (physical) expression. On the other hand, beauty was defined by Wang Bi as the manifestation of the infinite, unlimited (*wuxian*) through the transcendence of finitude or limitation (*youxian*), which surpasses forms, colours, and melodies and sounds, signifying a state of absolute spiritual freedom.

These ontoepistemological ideas are contained in basic aesthetic concepts such as “words cannot fully convey meaning” (*yan bu jin yi* 言不盡意), “depiction of the spirit through form” (*yi xing xie shen* 以形寫神), and “harmonious creativity” (*qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動).³ These concepts were the subject of discussion in all the theoretical works of the Wei Jin period.

The concept of *depiction of the spirit through form* was introduced to traditional Chinese aesthetics and art by Gu Kaizhi (344 – 406), one of the most respected and famous painters and theorists in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, while the concept “words cannot fully convey meaning”, as we have seen above, comes from Wang Bi's ontology. *Qiyun shengdong*, however, is defined by Li Zehou as follows:

所謂氣韻生動就是要求繪畫生動地表現出人的內在精神氣質，格調風度，而不在外在環境，事件，形狀，姿態的如何鋪張描述。

“The requirement of the so-called *qiyun shengdong* is that the painting vividly expresses the inner character and state of mind of the person, the artistic style, and the moral qualities and attitude of the creator, which is not reflected in the luxurious description of the external environment, circumstances, events, forms and attitudes.” (Li 2003: 86)

Depiction the spirit through form (*yi xing xie shen*) has a similar meaning to *qiyun shengdong*. It is an expression of the inner being (spirit), character, state

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From this period we know the famous Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (*Zhulin qi xian*), of whom Ji Kang and Ruan Ji are the most famous. Most of them had the opportunity to act on the political level, but due to the uncertain political situation and the depravity and corruption of the aristocratic clans, they decided to retire to solitude, where they devoted themselves to the creation of poetry, music, calligraphy and philosophy. They deliberately stayed away from political issues, mainly so as not to jeopardize their free life and risk

possible beheading if they criticized the political situation (unfortunately, Ji Kang could not prevent this). What they aspired to was to enjoy life in the most spontaneous way possible, which is known as Zhuangzi's free and easy wandering (*xiaoyao you*).

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For a detailed analysis and interpretation of the aesthetic concept of *qiyun shengdong* see: Sernelj 2021.

of mind manifested through physical (external) form. Gu Kaizhi, who coined this concept, defined it as follows:

四體妍蚩本無關於妙處，傳神寫照正在阿堵中。

Whether the four limbs (parts of the body) are beautiful or not is not a standard. What is crucial is the representation of the spirit transmitted through the eyes.

As Li Zehou says, the eyes are the mirror of the soul, and this is what the artists tried to portray. This means that the actual form of the body or human actions is actually secondary and subordinate to the expression of the inner spirit (Li 2003: 87).

According to Li Zehou, the aesthetic criterion and concept of “words cannot fully convey the meaning” (*yan bu jin yi*) in literary art is about conveying the meaning beyond words. This concept basically expresses the principles of *Xuanxue* philosophy. From Wang Bi’s commentaries on the *Book of Changes*, we see that both words and images are tools of transmitting the spirit, which are inherently limited. What is important is that despite these limitations, we strive to express the infinity of the essence (*benti*) of things:

盡意莫若象，盡象莫若言，言者所以明象，得象忘言，象者所以以存意，得意忘象。

“Nothing can express a meaning more fully than an image. Nothing can express an image more fully than words. It is the words that make the image clear. When this happens, the words are forgotten. The image is the place where there is meaning. When meaning is achieved, the image is forgotten.” (Wang Bi, in: Li 2003: 87)

The aesthetic concept of “words cannot fully convey meaning” reveals one of the most important Chinese aesthetic properties, namely the suggestive nature of works of art. This fundamental characteristic is not only a poetic feature in the artwork but an indication of deeper aesthetic meaning beyond the concrete representation, which allows the audience complete freedom in experiencing and interpreting the artwork, and thus the highest (i.e. transformative) aesthetic experience. As we shall see, Wang Bi’s paradigm of the relationship among image, word, and meaning (*xiang-yan-yi* 象言意) is at the heart of Liu Xie’s literary theory and will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on *shensi*.

3. Liu Xie’s *shensi*

Shensi is an aesthetic method used in the creative artistic process. The basic contents of *shensi* relate to the artist’s state of mind in the artistic process, imagination, inspiration, emotion and the relationship between the inner spirit and external objects. Although it is discussed in the context of literary art, it is considered a general aesthetic method in artistic production.

In Chinese aesthetics, the emphasis is on considering the relationship between man and nature. In this respect, nature or the external world and phenomena are the basis of knowledge and cognition, so that the contemplation of nature is understood as the starting point for any real or true creativity. Therefore, the representation of nature (or natural images) is at the heart of all the arts. However, the highest aesthetic value does not lie in copying or imitating scenes of nature, but in expressing the inner experience and contemplation of external reality. In this respect, it is always subjective, but still able to represent the profound human experience, which is universal. However, *shensi* is a complex and multifaceted aesthetic method that constitutes the creative

artistic process. Some scholars translate *shensi* in English as divine thinking, thinking in imagination, artistic imagination, the soul of creation, etc. Because of its multi-layered connotations, I think it is better to leave the term untranslated in order to grasp its multi-dimensionality.

Shensi is composed of two characters, *shen* 神 (*the spirit, mind, the divine*) and *si* 思 (*thinking, contemplating and concentrating*). In the context of aesthetics, the *spirit (shen)* is not (necessarily) endowed with anything divine in the sense of the supernatural or superhuman force, but refers to the deepest realm of human existence that is open to transcendental experiences of the self within nature (world, cosmos).⁴

Si or *contemplation* refers directly to the processual dimension of such a transcendent, namely aesthetic activity. In Liu Xie's book on literary theory, the chapter on *Shensi* discusses this central aesthetic concept as the guiding principle of artistic creation. *Shensi* is the primary method of engaging in writing and the fundamental principle for conceptualising writing; moreover, it is a predominant aesthetic principle throughout the creative process.

Liu Xie's book *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* is the first systematic theoretical work on literary art and criticism, and with the chapter on *shensi*, it is also the first aesthetic theory about the role of the thought process in artistic creation in Chinese history. Liu Xie's book consists of two parts. The first 25 chapters deal with literary styles, while the remaining 24 chapters deal with the guiding principles of literary creation. From the chapter on *shensi* to a summary note on writing principles, various aspects of creation are discussed, generally regarded as theories of literary creation (Zhang 2021: 2).

Shensi as a category and method of thinking in artistic creation refers to conceptualisation and imagination, in other words, to the unity of cognition, intuition, emotion and inspiration. The thinking process is composed of the aesthetic mindset, the formation of aesthetic images and their artistic implementation (Zhang 2021: 7). The most basic characteristic of artistic imagination is the ability to transcend time and space. *Shensi* involves the artistic inspiration that occurs in the process of creation, which comes to the author unintentionally and spontaneously, beyond the artist's control and will. As Zhang (2021: 8) notes, the character *shen* in *shensi* denotes the wondrously inexplicable state of mind when inspiration comes to the author.

A very important aspect of *shensi* is its mechanism of producing aesthetic stimulation by connecting the inner imagination with external objects. It is not about purely subjective thought, but aesthetic stimulation produced by physical objects. Liu Xie defines this as the interaction between the mind and objects. This aspect of *shensi* is extremely important because it reveals the

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Gu Ming Dong translates and conceptualizes Liu Xie's concept of *shensi* as the *divine thinking*, which refers to the creation of the artwork as attaining the status of the divine (Gu 2021: 238). In the chapter "Divine Thinking and Artistic Creation" of his book *Fusion of Critical Horizons in Chinese and Western Language, Poetics, Aesthetics*, Gu explores the divine as an attribute that can be found in Western and Chinese cultures. Although they are based on different mythological and onto-epistemological as well as aesthetic grounds, the divine

nature of artists and their work in fact exists in both (and many other) cultural traditions (Gu 2021: 238). In this regard, Gu points out the multiple meanings of the character *shen* (divinity or divine in a non-theological, namely a secular and practical sense) in Chinese tradition, which in various circumstances denotes gods and deities in heaven, the souls of the deceased, the mysterious rationale of the universe, the human mind and spirit, and the outward expression of a person (Gu 2021: 245).

essential characteristic of Chinese aesthetics: the aesthetic subject is never isolated from the external world (or nature), instead, it is always inherently connected to it. The fusion or unity with nature is considered the origin of the artist's artistic inspiration and aesthetic consciousness.

In what follows we will examine important passages in Liu Xie's definition of *shensi*, written in the 26th chapter of his work, where we read his definition of *shensi* as follows:⁵

古人云：形在江海之上，心存魏闕之下。神思之謂也。文之思也，其神遠矣。故寂然凝慮，思接千載；悄焉動容，視通萬里；吟詠之間，吐納珠玉之聲；眉睫之前，卷舒風雲之色；其思理之致乎！

“The ancients said: One may be on the rivers and sea in body, but his mind remains at the palace gate. This is what I mean by *shensi* or spiritual thought or imagination. One who is engaged in literary thoughts travels far in spirit. Quietly absorbed in contemplation, his thinking reaches back one thousand years; and only with slightest movement of his countenance, his vision penetrates ten thousand li; he creates the music of pearls and jade between his poetic lines, and he witness the rolling of wind and clouds right before his brows and lashes. These things are possible because of the imagination.” (Liu 2015 [s.d.]: 26)

Already in the first line, Liu Xie refers to Zhuangzi. According to Vincent Shen (Vincent Yu-Chunag Shih), Zhuangzi speaks of the worldly ambition of a man who is in retirement (2015: 208, note 1), but Liu Xie ignores this implication and deals only with the amazing power of thought that transports one to places where one's body is not.

Imagination, as mentioned earlier, is the fundamental aesthetic faculty of the Wei Jin period. The core of imagination is the ability to transcend time and space and creatively form images or even experiences that might never have happened in reality. In the Zhuangzian sense, imagination is a direct expression of human freedom. As Liu Xie vividly and poetically describes this human capacity, in the imagination one can freely travel beyond time and space and form new aesthetic experiences, which are then reproduced in literary (or any other work of art). Imagination is, therefore, one of the most fundamental psychological (or spiritual) activities in the process of artistic creation or *shensi*, as well as the most direct experience of human freedom.

Liu Xie further explains the meaning of imagination in the artistic process and its relation to the external objects:

故思理為妙，神與物游。神居胸臆，而志氣統其關鍵；物沿耳目，而辭令管其樞機。樞機方通，則物無隱貌；關鍵將塞，則神有遁心。是以陶鈞文思，貴在虛靜，疏淪五藏，澡雪精神。

“Hence, the intrinsic principle of imagination creates mysterious subtlety and spirit and physical things float together. The spirit resides in the mind and yet the will and vital force govern its crux. Physical things go along with ears and eyes and written words express their vital element. If it is expressed smoothly, the appearance of physical things will be then clearly expressed. If the crux (the governance of the will and vital force) is blocked, then the spirit will hide in the heart-mind. Therefore, in creation of literary thought, emptiness and tranquillity (of the mind) are crucial to cleanse the five sense organs and to purify the spirit.”⁶ (Liu 2015 [s.d.]: 26)

In this section of the chapter, Liu Xie describes the depth of imagination and contemplation in which the mind and external phenomena (whether physical objects or social affairs) wander or float freely. The spirit dwells in the mind and is controlled by the will (intentions) and vital force (creative potential or creative vitality). We perceive external phenomena with our senses (eyes and ears), reflected and expressed in words. When words, as the central force, are communicated appropriately (structured), the appearance of things or

phenomena is clearly expressed.⁷ When intention and vital force (creativity) are not harmoniously united, the spirit or imagination is gone. To be skilled in literary thought (or any other artistic creation), the artist must have an empty and tranquil mind. In such a state of mind, the sense organs (sense perception) can open up in their entirety without being hindered by their limitations, enabling the spirit to create in absolute freedom. To avoid this distortion of the expression of the imagination, one must attain an empty and tranquil state of mind, and purify the spirit. Here Liu Xie obviously refers to Zhuangzi's method of fasting the heart-mind (*xinzhai*), which enables the creative subject to grasp the essence of creativity that transcends the realm of will (intention, feelings). Only in the state of emptiness and stillness of the heart-mind can the vital creative potential freely stimulate the imagination (in communication with physical objects of the external world), since the Dao as the ultimate creativity gathers only in emptiness.⁸

The reference to Zhuangzi and his aesthetic method of embodying the Dao through (artistic) skill is present in the second paragraph of the text:

積學以儲寶，酌理以富才，研閱以窮照，馴致以擇辭，然後使元解之宰，尋聲律而定墨；獨照之匠，窺意象而運斤：此蓋馭文之首術，謀篇之大端。

“One has also to acquire learning in order to maintain a store of precious information, and to contemplate the nature of reason so as to enrich his talents; he must search deeply and experience widely in order that he may exhaustively evoke the source of light; he must draw upon literary traditions in order to make his expressions felicitous and smooth. It is only then that he commissions the ‘mysterious butcher’ (who dwells within him) to write in accord with musical patterns; and it is then that he sets the incomparably brilliant ‘master wheelwright’ (who dwells within him) to wield the ax in harmony with his intuitive insights. This, in short, is the first step in the art of writing, and the main principle employed in the planning of a literary piece.” (Liu 2015 [s.d.]: 26)

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To better understand Liu Xie's definition of *shensi*, I will cite parts of the chapter that describe the aesthetic meaning and content of *shensi* and discuss particular issues along the way. Liu Xie's *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* was beautifully translated in English by Vincent Shen in 1959 and published by Columbia University Press. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of cited passages from the chapter on *shensi* are Vincent Shen's, published in the new revisited edition 2015 by the The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

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Translation of this paragraph is mine.

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This creative process was clearly described already in the chapter “On Music” (*Yueji*) of the *Book of Rites (Liji)* in. The chapter “On Music” could be regarded as the first text which deals with aesthetic theory in a very concrete way, since it describes the whole aesthetic process: 凡音之起，由人心生也。人心之動，物使之然也。感於物而動，故形於聲。聲相應，故生變；變成方，謂之音；比音而樂之，及于戚羽旄，謂之樂。“All the modulations of the voice arise

from the mind, and the various affections of the mind are produced by things (external to it). The affections thus produced are manifested in the sounds that are uttered. Changes are produced by the way in which those sounds respond to one another; and those changes constitute what we call the modulations of the voice. The combination of those modulated sounds, so as to give pleasure, and the (direction in harmony with them of the) shields and axes, and of the plumes and ox-tails, constitutes what we call music.” transl. James Legge).

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无聽之以耳而聽之以心，无聽之以心而聽之以氣。聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也。“Do not listen with your ears, but with your heart-mind. Do not listen with your heart-mind, but with your *qi* (vital potential). The hearing stops at ears, the heart-mind stops at symbol. *Qi* (the vital potential) is empty, and therefore able to receive things, and the accumulated emptiness is *Dao*. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.” (Zhuangzi 2021 [s.d.]: *Nei pian, Renjian shi*: 2)

In this section of the text, Liu Xie describes the first step in the art of writing, namely the process of learning and mastering the skill, referring to the story of Ding the butcher and the master wheelwright in Zhuangzi. Mastering the skill is only possible by integrating knowledge on the one hand, and deeply observing and understanding the phenomena of the external world on the other. The sentence “to wield the axe in harmony with his intuitive insights (窺意象而運斤)” is a very significant part of this paragraph, because it highlights the aesthetic concept of *yixiang* (意象), which was coined by Liu Xie, although it was established before him as two separate aesthetic concepts, namely *yi* 意, which refers to the author’s feelings and thoughts, and *xiang* 象, that refers to the object’s appearance (or the image). Vincent Shen translated *yixiang* as the intuitive insight, Ye Lang for instance, translates it as the *idea-image*, which means the fusion between feeling and scene, with both existing only in harmonious union (Ye 2010: 103). However, as Ye Lang points out, it is the result of intuition that is super-logical and shows the original nature of things, or the world (Ye 2010: 116), which is entirely consistent with Vincent Shen’s understanding of the term.

However, Cai Zongqi (2017: 185) points out that the transcendental conception of *yi* as an important development in Chinese literary and art criticism was developed in the cognitive-cosmological paradigm of *idea-image-words* (*yi* 意-*xiang* 象-*yan* 言) by Wang Bi. According to Cai, in appropriating this paradigm to explore the creative process, neither Lu Ji nor Liu Xie used *idea* (*yi*) to represent the initial transcendental phase of literary creation. Instead, they conceptualised this creative phase as a daimonic⁹ flight of the mind (*shensi*) and paraphrased it with a series of poetic images and hyperbolic statements. While Lu Ji identifies *idea* (*yi*) with the general intention of an author, Liu Xie uses the compound *yixiang* to describe the result of *shensi*: an inner image of a work to be created. It is not until Wang Changling (698 – 756) that the term *yi* begins to acquire a transcendental meaning in calligraphy criticism. However, if transcendental contemplation consists of a daimonic flight of the mind (*shensi*), both Lu Ji and Liu Xie claim that a representation of the external world means a dynamic influx of the images of nature, mixed with emotions and words, in the mind (Cai 2017: 186). As Cai notes (Cai 2017: 189), for Liu Xie, and Wang Changling roughly two hundred years later, the compound *yixiang* epitomises an optimal outcome of the dynamic interaction between subject and object, between feelings and images of nature in the third creative phase.

Then, the role of emotions or feelings is another significant content of *shensi*, which will be discussed in the next section. In the chapter, we read the following:

夫神思方運，萬涂競萌，規矩虛位，刻鏤無形。登山則情滿于山，觀海則意溢于海，我才之多少，將與風云而并驅矣。

“When *shensi* (or spiritual thought) is in operation, all possible vistas open up before it. Rules and principles become mere formalities and there is not the least trace of carving and engraving (referring to laborious effort). When one ascends mountains (in such an inspired state), the whole mountain will be tinged with the colouring of his own feelings; and when his eyes rove over the seas, the seas will be saturated with his ideas. He can roam as companion of the wind and the clouds according to the measure of his talents.” (Liu 2015 [s.d.]: 26)

As stated in this paragraph, *shensi*, when at work, opens the imagination in which the principles and rules of literary production are superfluous. However, in the state of imaginative thought, emotion and feeling are the driving force

of artistic production. As indicated in the previous section of the chapter, the emotions are not only gifted by the natural ones, namely sorrow, joy, sadness, etc., but they are elevated ones, the so-called aesthetic emotions, derived from the natural emotions, but only as inspiration from life experience. In the process of artistic creation, these emotions bring to light the universal human experience of the world and in a certain way reveal the essence of human existence.¹⁰

According to Liu Xie, aesthetic emotions are an aesthetic response to the objects or scenery (*jing* 境) in nature or the external world. The artist is moved by a certain scene and expresses their emotions in the artwork. The scene, however, is not just a scene, but one that is projected into the consciousness of the subject (Zhang 2021: 60), who is not detached from the external world, but grasps the object and engages with it.

It is also important to emphasise the inherent connection between the changes in the external world that resonate with the changes in the artist's mood. The objectification of these changes in the scenery (in nature and in the artist) is the aesthetic expression revealed in the artwork. Emotions, then, are the driving force for artistic thought in creation (*shensi*).

According to Zhang, emotions are not static, but develop and change in response to external stimuli, leading to a creative urge on the part of the artist (Zhang 2021: 60). Physical objects present themselves through shapes and forms, while the inner spirit responds to stimuli through emotions. As Zhang states, the scenery depicted in a poem or other art form is not purely natural scenery, but is projected by the artistic subject, who is imbued with emotions and thoughts and expresses themselves in images (Zhang 2021: 62). In other words, the scenery in nature stimulates emotions that are projected outward through the images. As the emotions are inspired, aspired to, and enriched by the physical objects of the outside world or nature, they represent a reciprocal relationship between subject and object that reinforce and transmit each other.

The successful application of the *shensi* method in the creative artistic process leads to the aesthetic realm (*jingjie* 境界), which can be understood as the result of the successful execution of all phases of artistic creation. Although, as we shall see in the next section of the article, the content of *jingjie* is imbued with similar content as *shensi*, I argue, however, that *jingjie* not only represents the highest aesthetic achievement of the artwork (as a result of the *shensi* method), but is therefore endowed with the ability to convey the transcendent quality of the artwork to the audience. In this sense, only those artworks that have reached the aesthetic realm enable a transcendent transformation that allows the viewer to experience the unique meaning and value of human existence.

In the next subsection, we will examine the development and content of the aesthetic realm or *jingjie*.

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Daimon derives from the Latin word *daemon*, denoting the spirit.

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Under this aspect, *shensi* can be comprehended as what Gu Ming Dong (and some other scholars) call *divine thinking*. Divine thinking is a creative process in which the subjective spirit in the artist grasps the objective essence

of the universe and brings about a fusion of the two. Through “divine thinking”, an artist enters the realm of the divine, an imaginative space built on the subjective perception of the objective essence of an object, and creates a representative totality that encompasses the subjective divine in the artist and the objective divine in the world (Gu 2021: 264).

4. The Aesthetic Realm (*jingjie* 境界)

Jingjie is one of the most important aesthetic concepts in Chinese poetry, literary criticism, and other arts. In other words, *jingjie* is the core of Chinese aesthetics in general. Duan Lian argues that *jingjie* 境界 and *yijing* 意境 are variations of *jing* 境 that have both differences and similarities in terms of their literal and poetic connotations, namely subjectivity and objectivity. The most common English translations of the term are *world*, *sphere*, *atmosphere*, *domain*, *realm*, *poetic state* and the like (Duan 2007: 55). I consider Li Zehou's translation, namely the aesthetic realm (Li 2010: 209), to be the most appropriate, as it directly illuminates its meaning.

“At first, the meaning of *jingjie* was related to geopolitical discourses and objective features of external reality. Under the influence of Buddhist discourses, it gained its philosophical-religious meaning associated with the union of external and internal elements transformed into a specific mental realm through external formations and images.” (Rošker 2021: 115)

In order to better understand the complex meaning of *jingjie*, we will first examine its etymological connotation and its manifestation as an aesthetic concept in the theory of poetics of Wang Changling 王昌齡 (ca. 689 – 765), the famous poet of the Tang Dynasty.

In the first etymological dictionary from the first century, the *Shuowen jiezi*, *jing* 竟 is defined as the moment when the music ends. This definition refers to a specific period of time when music is already over, but the melody still lingers:

竟俗本作境，今正，樂曲盡為竟，引伸為邊界之稱。

“The common saying of *jing* 竟 is *jing* 境. At present times it means the moment when the music ends. This meaning extends to the end of all things as well as to the end of boundary or territory.” (Duan 2007: 56)

Here the meaning of *jing* or *jingjie* can be defined as a concept of realm, space, or sphere (Wong 1989: 256). However, when the music is over, the lingering sound leaves listeners with a lasting musical aura that is spatial and temporal, forming an audible perceptual world (Duan 2007: 56).

Jingjie is a translation of the Sanskrit word *vasaya*, which in Buddhist terminology means *territory*, *domain*, *area*, *environment*, “sphere”, “spiritual domain”, the sphere of mind, the sphere of form to the eye, etc., and refers to sense perception or any objective mental projection regarded as reality. Therefore, many scholars, including Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877 – 1927), translated *jingjie* as *world*, which refers to a fusion or harmonious coexistence of the inner spirit and the external environment in the poetic world (Duan 2007: 56).

Wang Changling, however, was the first who brought out the aesthetic category of *jing* 境 in his work *Poetic norms* (*Shige* 詩格):

詩有三境：一曰物境。欲為山水詩，則張泉石雲峰之境，極麗絕秀者，神之於心，處身於境，視境於心，鑿然掌中，然後用思，瞭然境象，故得形似。二曰情境。娛樂愁怨，皆張於意而處於身，然後馳思，深得其情。三曰意境。亦張之於意而思之於心，則得其真矣。

“A poem accomplishes aesthetic conception in three ways. The first is through objects, the second is through sentiments, and the third is through an imagined scene. 1) Through objects: If you want to write poems about landscape, you need to observe intensely springs and creeks, rocks and towering peaks, imprint their extraordinary beauty and charm on your memory, put yourself in the scene created in your mind, and view in your mind's eye the image you obtain until you can see it as vividly as if it were right on your palm. By then, you can start to think about

writing the poem. A deep appreciation of the scene and its objects is instrumental in achieving a true poetic image. 2) Through sentiments: Sentiments such as happiness, pleasure, sorrow, and anger should be allowed to develop in your mind. You should experience them personally to fully grasp the nature of these emotions. This will enable you to express them in a profound way. 3) Through an imagined scene: This requires you to reach aesthetic appreciation by reflecting it in your mind time and again. Then you can capture the genuine nature of an idea.” (Wang Changling, in: *Key Concepts in Chinese Thought* 2021)

Wu 物 literarily means *things, objects*. *Wujing* 物境 depicts scenery, objects, events or things through an artistic vision. It refers to the objective description and observation of nature or scenery. It is an observation of the objective, accomplished beauty of nature or things.

Qing 情 means *emotion, feeling, sentiment and affection*. *Qingjing* 情境 refers to how and in what artistic way an artist expresses his or her emotion and feeling in the artwork. It refers to subjective, emotional descriptions of things and events. It is a subjective expression of deep emotion through artistic work.

Yi 意 means *idea, mind, intention, inclination*. *Yijing* 意境 is the state of sublimation of an artistic image, vision, and inner imagination of an artist through a certain process of creativity (Wong 1989: 218–236). It refers to the poetic and mystical of the mental imagination and is a unity of emotion and scenery and the realm of consciousness of the innermost being (*neixin yishi* 內心意識), or the realm of spirit.

In other words, *wujing* refers to the material world, *qingjing* to the emotional world, and *yijing* to the conceptual world. The material world is visual; it describes the natural scene. The emotional world is not entirely visual in the sense that visual images or landscapes do not simply represent it, but convey human emotions within the images and landscapes. On the other hand, the conceptual world focuses on the representation of the ideas and meanings implied in the scene (Duan 2007: 60).

These three poetic *jing* have become the most important aesthetic terms in poetry and painting, with *yijing* as the deepest and most sublime aesthetic realm and achievement (Wong 1989: 236). The three poetic states (or worlds) can be treated separately or interactively. When considered separately, *yijing* is at the highest and deepest level. The lowest level of these three concepts is imitation or object description or the *wujing* state. However, most artistic works contain the interaction of these three different states. *Jingjie* is the overall aesthetic effect of the artwork achieved through the three states of *jing* (Wong 1989: 225).

In the 20th century, Wang Guowei made a great contribution to understanding the *jingjie* and enhanced its importance. Wang added many details to illustrate the various states of *jingjie* (Wong 1989: 220) and articulated its theoretical connotations in the context of the dialogue with Western aesthetics and philosophy. He discussed his theory of *jingjie* at length in his work *Poetic Remarks in the Human World* (*Renjian Cihua* 人間詞話), which is considered the center of his aesthetic thought. Wang Guowei translated *jing*, *jingjie* and *yijing* as poetic world because a poetic world is not only the natural world described in a poem, but a subjective world created by a poet in his work (Wong 1989: 220).

Following the Western distinction between realism and idealism, he argued that poetry has a creative state (*zaojing* 造境) and a descriptive state (*xiejing* 寫境):

有造境，有寫境。此理想與寫實二派之所有分。然二者頗難分別。因大詩人所造之境，必合乎自然，所寫之境，亦必鄰於理想故也。

“The creative state and the descriptive state mark the difference between realist and idealist writers. They are difficult to distinguish, but because great poets create the world in harmony with nature (and actual life) and the world that they describe must also approach the ideal.” (Wang Guowei 2021 [s.d.]: 1:2)

However, the created world or created state (*zaojing*) is more spiritual, conceptual, and sentient, while the descriptive state is more visual, perceptual, and pictorial. For Wang, however, *jingjie* does not only refer to scenes and objects; joy, sadness, anger, and happiness also form a world in the human heart (Duan 2007: 61).

As Wang Keping noted, the creative state, usually embodied in the works of idealists or romantics, uses means such as imagination, invention, etc., to express subjective feelings, while the descriptive state, reflected in the works of realists, presents an image of the reality of the human condition. However, both states share the common pursuit of the poetic state (Wang Keping 2002: 46).

In his aesthetic theory, Wang Guowei also distinguished between the attainment of the poetic state or *jingjie* through a subjective and objective artistic creativity expressed through the “world” with a self (*you wo zhi jing* 有我之境) and a “world” without a self (*wu wo zhi jing* 無我之境):

有有我之境，有無我之境。有我之境，以我觀物，故物皆著我之色彩。無我之境，以物觀物，故不知何者為我，何者為物。 。 。無我之境，人惟於靜中得之。有我之境，於由動之靜時得之。故一優美，一宏壯也。

“There exists the world with the self and the world without the self. In the world with the self, it is ‘I’ who observe the objects and the objects are hence endowed with my colours. In the world without the self, ‘I’ observe objects through objects themselves and hence do not know who is ‘I’ and who is the object. The world without the self is attained only in quietude. The world with the self is attained in the silence after being overwhelmed by emotions. Hence, the ‘world without the self’ is graceful and beautiful, while the ‘world with the self’ is magnificent and grand.” (Wang Guowei 2021 [s.d.]: 1:3)

The state with the self is attained by the observation or contemplation of objects by the self, and are therefore endowed with a subjective hue. The state without the self is attained by the observation of the object through the object, whereby one cannot know what is “I” and what is an “object”.¹¹ In other words, the separation or distinction between the self and the object is unclear. The state (or world) without the self is attained only in the state of stillness, silence, and by intuition or direct observation. The state with the self, on the other hand, is achieved in the stillness that follows strong emotional engagement. Here, Wang Guowei used the concept of *dongjing* 動靜 (*movement and stillness*) to bring forward a different state of feeling when observing the object. Stillness or silence refers to moderate feelings or emotions without great ripples. At this point, the poet is in a state of stillness like the object itself. *Dong* 動 or *movement*, on the other hand, refers to intense emotions that guide not only the aesthetic orientation of the observer of the object but also immerse the properties of the object in these intense emotions. In the state of *tranquil* (*jing* 靜) observation of the object, the self and the object have no conflict and are presented in the elegant style of a poem. In an active (*dong*) observation of the object, the “self” (*wo* 我) obstructs the inherent quality of the object, resulting in a robust and splendid style. The first state refers to

artistic creation, which is effortless, spontaneous and resembles nature itself as the highest aesthetic quality.

According to Wu, it is obvious that the world without the self has a higher status, and this distinction between the two states actually relates to the Kantian aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime (Wu 2002: 447). In the world without the self, the personal and emotional elements are transcended and the beauty of tranquilly is achieved. In the “world with the self”, the poet’s will and emotions are strongly projected into the world, bringing with them the feeling of the sublime (Wu 2002: 447).

Wang Keping translates these two worlds as the state of self-involvement and the state of self-detachment, arguing that the difference between them is quantitative rather than qualitative (Wang Keping 2002: 47). The former involves a self-identification with the object that is subjective, emotional, and strongly personified, whereas in the state of self-detachment the self is so deeply lost in the object that it seems to disappear. This state can only be reached in complete quietude and serenity. This fact is very significant because it relates to the Chan Buddhist notion of *desirelessness* (*wu nian* 無念), on the one hand, and, in my opinion, also to the Daoist notion of the *self-less* (*wu ji* 無己) state of the heart-mind, in which one can fully integrate with the Dao (or nature), as well as with the Zhuangzi’s method of fasting of the heart-mind (*xinzhai*), which leads to the dissolution of desires and mental activities in order to experience the Dao as the essence of creativity and life itself. Wang Keping argues, however, that in this state, one can detach oneself from any distinctions between subject and object and look at things in a purely objective way (Wang Keping 2002: 47).

The presence and absence of the self in a poem is further discussed through the poetic problem or *gejing* 隔境 (*veiled scene*). Through the terms *ge* 隔 (*veiled*) and *buge* 不隔 (*non-veiled*), Wang Guowei defined whether a poem achieves a supreme aesthetic state of *jingjie*. Wang explained what *ge* (*veiled*) means as follows:

語語都在目前便是不隔。

“If every word comes alive before one’s eyes, then, it is not veiled.” (Wang Guowei 2021 [s.d.]: 1: 40)

If a poem describes the scene vividly and true to life, then such a poem has no poetic problem of *gejing*. In other words, a poem that captures the essence of true emotions and true scenes has a quality of immediacy or transparency. Then, such a poem is not veiled (*bu ge*) (Duan 2007: 65). On the other hand, poems that have a poetic problem of representing the veiled state (*gejing*) are weak in describing the scene, and the reader has difficulty visualising it and experiencing the poet’s feelings about the scene (Duan 2007: 66).

Wang Guowei has distinguished between mediocre poets and great poets precisely by the poetic problem or *gejing*. Mediocre poets whose poems are veiled rely excessively on allusions, quotations, substitute words and other literary devices. Great poets, on the other hand, who create poems that are not veiled, are experienced directly. Unveiled poetry is then available through the

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This may remind us of Husserl’s phenomenological method of “bracketing” (putting aside our judgements and experiences about the

object) in order to see the thing (the object) in itself.

natural expression of genuine feelings and scenes, which enables the reader to gain intuitive understanding and deep appreciation (Wang Keping 2002: 48), and this ability is in line with the main qualities of the poetic state or *jingjie*, which are based on the representation of both sincere feelings and emotions (*zhen qinggan* 真情感) and true scenes and objects (*zhen jingwu* 真境物) (Wang Keping 2002: 48).

As noted by many Chinese scholars (e.g., Wang Keping, Duan Lian, Wu Jiang, Li Zehou), Wang Guowei developed his aesthetic theory by drawing inspirations from Western aesthetics, especially Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Schiller, and Kant on the one hand, and from Wang Guowei's preceding literary critics, such as Yan Yu, Wang Changling, Wang Shizhen, and others.

According to Wang Keping (2020: 272) and Li Zehou (2010: 212), Wang Guowei's *jingjie* (the poetic state or the aesthetic realm respectively) was inspired by Yan Yu's idea of "inspired interest" (*xingqu* 興趣) and Wang Shizhen's notion of "subtle charm or spiritual flavour" (*shenyun* 神韻), but Wang's theory of *jingjie* is by far the most essential or fundamental of poetic creation and its aesthetic meaning. However, it contains both ideas but is clearer, more articulate, and more fundamental because it is based on the intuitive, the contemplative, and the philosophical (Wang Keping 2020: 273). According to Wang Keping, Wang Guowei tends to identify poetry with philosophy.¹² However, while poetry is more intuitive and philosophy more abstract, both are contemplative. When *jingjie* manifests through visual imagery, intuitive perception, and poetic wisdom, it helps people grasp the truth through aesthetic contemplation and philosophical reflection in a direct way (Wang Keping 2020: 273). As Rošker points out, poetry and philosophy are inherently linked precisely because *jingjie* is endowed with noumenal dimension, and when manifested in the poem or philosophical work, it illuminates the inner experience, reflection, comprehension and contemplation of the life itself:

"Because *jingjie* possesses a noumenal dimension, it can also be discovered in numerous (but certainly not all) good philosophical works. They also contain insights, which convey a philosophical idea not only through conceptual phrases, but rather through that, which is engraved between the lines, creating a certain atmosphere, consisting of images, associations, sensations and emotions, experienced and expressed by their author on the one, and perceived and re-experienced by the readers. No wonder that – precisely through the realm of inner experience – philosophy is often linked to literature or poetry." (Rošker 2021: 116)

Wang Guowei is strongly concerned with the human condition apart from aesthetic experience and artistic creation, in the sense that the poet is ultimately concerned with the true essence of human life in relation to the infinite universe (Wang Keping 2020: 273).

Li Zehou (2010: 210) understands Wang Guowei's aesthetic realm as the revelation of life through the relationship between emotion and scene and the objectified realm of the artistic subject. In other words, the aesthetic realm is the manifestation of the realm of human life. It has its origin in the emotional experience of life, which is then transformed into the artistic subject (namely, the work of art) and hence articulated in an artistic way.

As mentioned earlier, the "realm" for Wang Guowei does not only refer to a landscape or scene. The emotions of joy, sorrow, anger, and pleasure also form a kind of aesthetic realm in the human heart. Thus, when a poem captures a real scene or real emotion in words, it can be said to convey an aesthetic realm (Wang Guowei, in: Li 2010: 210). According to Li, Wang Guowei refers to

the objectification of psychological emotion to construct an artistic noumenon that manifests something about human life. This artistic *noumenon* provides a way out of the suffering of individual sensual existence (Li 2010: 210), and this is the goal of art for Wang Guowei and other Confucian intellectuals who were never religious.¹³ As Li Zehou notes (Li 2010: 210), only in art could he find the thing in itself that gave comfort and meaning to his life, even if he realised that this could only be unreliable and temporary salvation.

In this context, the aesthetic effect of *jingjie* undoubtedly conveys a deep spiritual meaning, for according to Wu, *jingjie*, attained through the appreciation of art, is the sudden realisation and cognition of the ultimate reality, embodying at the same time the principle of truth, goodness, and beauty. The experience contained in *jingjie* is not only aesthetic, but also religious and existentialist (Wu 2002: 450).

5. Conclusion: The Method of *shensi* Leading to the Aesthetic Realm of *jingjie*

As we have seen, *shensi* is an aesthetic method used in the process of artistic creation. Liu Xie defines it as the imagination as the faculty of the heart-mind where the artist can transcend time and space and let the spirit become inspired by external objects or the world and unite with it. In the aesthetic sense, such spirit refers to the deepest mental level of human existence where one is open to transcendence. *Shensi* literally means spiritual contemplation, however, as we have seen in Liu Xie's elaboration, it is undoubtedly endowed with many other connotations that refer to different levels of the creative process.

However, the most obvious similarity between the content of *shensi* and *jingjie* is reflected in their particular treatment of the relationship between the subject and the object, or the landscape and the emotions. *Shensi* as a method used in the creative process requires a certain state of mind, which must be empty and tranquil. In such a state, the artist can transmit the experience of living in the world and of the world in a most direct way that resonates with the universal human experience. The same faculty is required to attain the aesthetic realm or *jingjie*.

The successful application of the *shensi* method in the creative artistic process leads to the attainment of the aesthetic realm (*jingjie*), which can be understood as the result of the successful execution of all phases of artistic creation. However, I argue that *jingjie* not only represents the highest aesthetic achievement of the artwork (as a result of the *shensi* method), but is also endowed with the ability to convey the transcendent quality of the artwork to the audience. In this sense, only the artworks that have achieved this highest

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For the modern Chinese philosopher Fang Dongmei, for example, this connection goes even deeper, as he emphasises the importance of the broader but equally intrinsic link between philosophy and art in general. In his view, they occupy a higher position in the cognitive and aesthetic development of human beings as human beings, for they “lead to the enrichment of human wisdom in the intellectual and artistic realms” (Wang Keping 2020: 184).

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“In this context, Li Zehou highlights that such a theoretical foundation pertains to agnosticism, which was philosophically quite mature for ancient times, because the existence of supernatural deities is difficult to confirm or to falsify. Hence, in his view, such an agnostic principle is a strong evidence for the ‘clear rational spirit’ inherent to the Confucian ideational system (Li 1980, 89).” (Rošker 2020: 49)

aesthetic realm enable a transcendent transformation that allows the viewer to experience the unique meaning and value of human existence. I, therefore, argue that *shensi* (the aesthetic method) and *jingjie* (the aesthetic realm) are intrinsically connected in the Chinese aesthetic tradition, forming a unique aesthetic theory of artistic production on the one hand and its transcendent quality on the other.

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Téa Sernelj

Od shensi-ja do jingjie-ja: metoda umjetničke uobrazilje i najviša estetička sfera

Sažetak

U članku se ispituje sadržaj i značenje kineskog estetskog koncepta shensi i njegov odnos prema pojmu najvišeg estetskog područja (jingjie). Duhovnu kontemplaciju ili umjetničku uobrazilju (shensi) temeljito je istražio Liu Xie (465. – 522.) u svom teorijskom radu o književnom pisanju Književni um i rezbarjenje zmajeva u 6. stoljeću. Ovo je djelo prva sustavna teorija umjetničkog stvaralaštva u klasičnoj kineskoj estetici. Međutim, estetsku teoriju jingjie-ja prvi je istražio Wang Changling (698. – 756.) tijekom dinastije Tang, ali ju je dalje razvio Wang Guowei (1877. – 1927.) na pragu 20. stoljeća, što se smatra početkom modernizacije kineske estetike. Članak detaljno istražuje oba koncepta i argumentira da je shensi zapravo estetska metoda koja vodi do postizanja najviše estetičke sfere (jingjie) kada se uspješno primjenjuje i pojavljuje u umjetničkom procesu i samom umjetničkom djelu.

Ključne riječi

shensi, jingjie, Liu Xie, Wang Changling, Wang Guowei, kineska estetika

Téa Sernelj

Von shensi zu jingjie: die Methode der künstlerischen Einbildungskraft und die höchste ästhetische Sphäre

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel untersucht den Inhalt und die Bedeutung des chinesischen ästhetischen Begriffs shensi und dessen Beziehung zur Notion der höchsten ästhetischen Sphäre jingjie. Spirituelle Kontemplation oder künstlerische Einbildungskraft (shensi) wurde von Liu Xie (465–522) im 6. Jahrhundert in seiner theoretischen Arbeit zum literarischen Schreiben, Wenxin Diaolong: Das literarische Schaffen ist wie das Schnitzen eines Drachen, *profund erforscht*. Dieses Werk ist die erste systematische Theorie des künstlerischen Schaffens in der klassischen chinesischen Ästhetik. Der ästhetischen Theorie des jingjie ist allerdings Wang Changling (698–756) während der Tang-Dynastie als Erster auf den Grund gegangen; sie wurde aber von Wang

Guowei (1877–1927) an der Schwelle zum 20. Jahrhundert weiterentwickelt, die als Beginn der Modernisierung der chinesischen Ästhetik angesehen wird. Der Artikel exploriert beide Konzepte im Detail und argumentiert, dass shensi tatsächlich die ästhetische Methode ist, die zum Erreichen der höchsten ästhetischen Sphäre (jingjie) führt, wenn sie erfolgreich angewendet und im künstlerischen Prozess sowie im Kunstwerk selbst manifestiert wird.

Schlüsselwörter

shensi, jingjie, Liu Xie, Wang Changling, Wang Guowei, chinesische Ästhetik

Téa Sernelj

Du *shensi* au *jingjie* : la méthode de l'imagination artistique et la plus haute sphère esthétique

Résumé

Cet article examine le contenu et la signification du concept esthétique chinois shensi et son rapport au concept de la plus haute sphère esthétique (jingjie). La contemplation spirituelle, ou l'imagination artistique (shensi), a été rigoureusement étudiée par Liu Xie (465 – 522) dans son travail théorique sur l'écriture littéraire Le Cœur de la littérature et la Sculpture des dragons au VIème siècle. Cette œuvre constitue la première théorie systématique de la création artistique dans l'esthétique classique chinoise. Cependant, la théorie esthétique du jingjie a été pour la première fois étudiée par Wang Changling (698 – 756) durant la dynastie Tang, mais a été plus tard développée par Wang Guowei (1877 – 1927) à l'aube du XXème siècle, ce qui est considéré comme le début de la modernisation de l'esthétique chinoise. Cet article visite de manière détaillée les deux concepts et soutient que le shensi est, en réalité, une méthode esthétique qui mène à la réalisation de la plus haute sphère esthétique (jingjie) lorsque son application est menée à bien, et qu'elle se manifeste dans le processus artistique et dans l'œuvre artistique même.

Mots-clés

shensi, jingjie, Liu Xie, Wang Changling, Wang Guowei, esthétique chinoise