

## On Kuo Shen's "Yuan Dong" and Its Significance in Painting History

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**Keywords:** Yuan Dong; the Jiangnan painting; freehand brushwork; cultivation of moral character; natural principles.

**Abstract:** As the founder of Southern School Painting, Yuan Dong did not produce much influence in the Five Dynasties and the early Northern Song Dynasty. However, in the middle and late periods of the Northern Song Dynasty, Dong was "discovered" by Kuo Shen for the first time, and then became the orthodoxy of Southern School literati painting in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. His image went through a historical process of continuous superimposition and construction. Kuo Shen's "Yuan Dong" represents the aesthetic paradigm corresponding to the development of Neo-Confucianism in Song Dynasty. The "impressionist" painting style and "real mountains in Jiangnan" depicted in pictures become the source of the later "Southern School" literati painting system.

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, most scholars believe that the rediscovery of Yuan Dong in Song Dynasty was mainly attributed to Fu Mi, whose identity of painter and theorist played a decisive role. However, the painting history shows that Kuo Shen, a scientist, is the real discoverer of Yuan Dong's value; Mi only inherited and developed the opinion of Shen. However, the emergence of Yuan Dong is inevitable even without the efforts of Kuo Shen and Fu Mi.

### 2. The Evolution of Yuan Dong's Image

Yuan Dong had no influence on the painting history during the Five Dynasties and the early Northern Song Dynasty. He was not included in the *Commentary on Famous Paintings of the Song Dynasty*, nor the *Famous Paintings of Five Dynasties: Supplementary Book* written by Dao-Chun Liu from the Northern Song Dynasty. The earliest literature about Yuan Dong was found in Ruo-xu Guo's *Records of Pictures in the Northern Song Dynasty*, which recorded that Dong "was good at painting landscapes"; and that his landscape paintings had two styles: "ink paintings like Wei Wang" and "colored paintings like Si-xun Li". *The Xuanhe Book of Painting* of the Northern Song Dynasty also recorded Yuan Dong in detail and highly valued his painting. The book contains three points which are particularly noteworthy. First, Yuan Dong drew magnificent landscape paintings, which "can make people feel the magnificence when they see the painting". Second, Yuan Dong drew colored landscape paintings. Third, Yuan Dong also drew paintings based on literature lyricism, which can "help the poets to express their thoughts and emotions". In Kuo Shen's *Meng Xi Bi Tan*, Yuan Dong's landscape paintings depicted "haze on hillside and distant view". He drew "real mountains in Jiangnan (the region south to the Yangtze River)" with the style of "freehand". In the artistic conception, Yuan Dong's landscape paintings reflected "exquisite feelings and remote thoughts like foreign lands". "There seemed to be a twilight on the top of the distant mountain, which is a stroke of genius." Fu Mi's *History of Painting* holds that "Yuan Dong's paintings are plain and artless." Kuo Shen and Fu Mi neglected Yuan Dong's colored landscapes. The style of his ink landscape painting was "plain" and began to have the characteristics of "freehand brushwork". By the Yuan Dynasty, Yuan Dong's position rose sharply. He became an authentic master of landscape painting. His painting style became more and more "plain" and his brushwork became more and more expressive. Yuan painters Ke-gong Gao, Gong-wang Huang, Zhen Wu and Meng

Wang strongly praised Yuan Dong and created their own painting styles on the basis of learning from Yuan Dong and Ju Ran. By the Ming Dynasty, “Yuan Dong” gradually changed from the authentic master of landscape painting to the pioneer of the “Southern School” painting; his painting style was “simple”. Qi-chang Dong believed that all the “Southern School” masters learned from Yuan Dong and Ju Ran. In Ming Dynasty, the Women Painting School took Yuan Dong as the criterion of imitation.

From the evolution of Yuan Dong’s “image” in various periods, following conclusions can be found. Yuan Dong’s paintings had little influence in the Five Dynasties and the early Northern Song Dynasty. Dao-chun Liu did not mention Yuan Dong in *Commentary on Famous Paintings of the Song Dynasty* and *Famous Paintings of Five Dynasties: Supplementary Book*. Later, Ruo-xu Guo included Yuan Dong in his *Records of Pictures*, writing that Dong was good at landscape paintings, and that he drew colors paintings as well as ink paintings. In Kuo Shen’s article, in the middle and late Northern Song Dynasty, “Yuan Dong” suddenly showed a strong tendency of “literati painting”: he was good at the drawing mountains and rivers of Jiangnan (the regions to South of the Yangtze River); his artistic style is freehand brushwork. Then, Fu Mi pushed Yuan Dong to a higher position, believing that his landscape paintings were superb works with the features of plain and artlessness. He completely neglected Yuan Dong’s colored landscape paintings, as well as his paintings on animals like tigers and dragons. It seems that Yuan Dong only drew plain and naive landscape paintings. *The Xuanhe Book of Painting* in the late Northern Song Dynasty highly appraised the two kinds of landscape paintings of Yuan Dong. In the Yuan and Ming dynasties, with the efforts of Hou Tang, Wen-yan Xia, Gong-wang Huang, Zhen Wu, Meng Wang, Shi-zhen Wang, Shi-long Mo, Zhi-qi Tang and Qi-chang Dong, Yuan Dong became more and more important and influential, and finally became the pioneer of Southern School Painting.

### 3. Kuo Shen’s “Yuan Dong”

The 17th Volume of Kuo Shen’s *Meng Xi Bi Tan* contains following recording. “Yuan Dong lived in the Jiangnan area was good at painting. He was especially skilled in depicting haze on hillside and distant view. He drew real mountains in the south of the Yangtze River, and did not like to show the virtuosity. Thereafter, Ju Ran, a Buddhist monk of Jianye, learnt the technique of painting from Dong. Their paintings are superb. Generally speaking, their paintings are freehand brushwork which should be viewed from distance. The viewer cannot see clear objects if they look closely. But look from distance, the scenery in the painting becomes bright and beautiful. They reflect exquisite feelings and remote thoughts like foreign lands. For example, Dong painted *The Picture of Twilight*. Only standing in distance can the viewer find far-reaching villages at dusk. There seemed to be twilight on the top of the distant mountain, which is a stroke of genius.” This record has been mentioned for many times by later generations. When Qi-chang Dong constructed the “Southern School” painting tradition, the paragraph played an important role. The record has far-reaching impacts on the generation of the “Yuan Dong” concept and on the history of literati painting.

Kuo Shen’s “rediscovery” of “Yuan Dong” can be summarized from this record in *Meng Xi Bi Tan*. First, Yuan Dong’s landscape paintings were not included magnificent pictures recorded in *The Xuanhe Book of Painting*. Only the gentle and light pictures of “haze on hillside and distant view” were mentioned. Most of them depicted “real mountains in the south of the Yangtze River”. Second, Yuan Dong’s colored landscape paintings similar to Si-xun Li were not mentioned. Third, Yuan Dong did not like “to show the virtuosity”, and adopted the style of freehand brushwork. If you look his works closely, you can’t distinguish any concrete objects; the scenery becomes distinct if you stand in distance. Fourthly, the artistic conception of Yuan Dong’s landscape paintings is “reflecting exquisite feelings and remote thoughts like foreign lands”. Fifthly, *The Picture of Twilight* depicted scenery “at dusk”. There seemed to be twilight on the top of the distant mountain. Especially noteworthy is that Kuo Shen’s evaluation of Yuan Dong, “freehand brushwork”, was also used to evaluate Meng-fu Zhao’s painting with calligraphy and Zan Ni’s “freehand” paintings. It becomes the important aesthetic value pursued by later literati painters, and

develops into the watershed between “literati painting” and “imperial-court painting”, and between the “Southern School” and “Northern School” paintings.

#### **4. The Ideological History Background of Constructing “Yuan Dong”**

From the perspective of the ideological history and the art history, the emergence of Yuan Dong is both accidental and inevitable. Why so many masters and masterpieces of landscape painting appeared during the Five Dynasties and the Song Dynasty? Guan-tao Jin believed that landscape painting was the visual image of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty, which expressed Song people’s understanding of the natural universe and the moral order of human relations. Drawing and appreciating landscape paintings had the value of purifying the nature and cultivating the moral character. In the process of Neo-Confucianism rising, landscape paintings became the most direct means for literati to express the natural principles. At that time, painting was no longer regarded as a “craft”, but a proper way for gentlemen to cultivate their moral integrity. This was why a large number of literati and scholars in the Song Dynasty devoted themselves to painting creation and evaluation. Although the Neo-Confucianism was established in the Southern Song Dynasty, throughout the history of painting, it can be found that the two branches of Neo-Confucianism and the form of landscape painting developed synchronously. The Cheng-Zhu school Neo-Confucianism opened up a third way for scholars. Between “entering the official career” and “retiring from public life”, they could choose meditation and self-cultivation, which was embodied in the routine of “half-day meditation and half-day reading”. It is neither a metaphysical tour of visiting mountains and rivers nor a Buddhist meditation of emptiness, but a Confucian meditation of “indoor tour” of the natural principles. Landscape painting is undoubtedly the best visual display of this meditative self-cultivation. However, inside the Neo-Confucianism school of the Song Dynasty, there were differences between the “nature as ideal pattern” philosophy and the “mind is the same as principle” philosophy, and between different understanding of “Qi”. These differences were also reflected in landscape paintings, which was also the reason why “Yuan Dong” was rediscovered in the Song Dynasty.

Kuo Shen’s “Yuan Dong” corresponds to the way of painting to express the inner spiritual world and the plain painting style which requires the removal of excessive “Qi”. The appearance of the plain style of southern landscape painting corresponding to the magnificent northern painting is inevitable. Yuan Dong came from “Jiangnan”; he was good at painting landscapes of various styles. His image in the painting history is ambiguous due to the lack of literature. These conditions help to construct the image of “Yuan Dong”. Kuo Shen’s “Yuan Dong” comes on the stage in this way, which indicates that new ideas and new ways of self-cultivation will be popular, and that new landscape painting style will become prevalent. This new painting style does not need to strictly follow the constraints of the natural order; painters can express subjective feeling through relaxed “freehand” brushwork. It is no longer necessary to put the order of “natural principles” in the first place. The existing stylized composition and painting techniques can be subverted. The ideas of “nature as ideal pattern” and “mind is the same as principle” require the removal of excessive “Qi” and endow these paintings with the legitimacy of moral cultivation and aesthetic value conforming to the new “natural principles”. Of course, in the hand of Kuo Shen, the meaning construction of Yuan Dong is only the beginning.

#### **5. The Significance in Painting History**

##### **5.1 The beginning of “Dong and Ju Tradition”**

The most important features of “Dong Ju Tradition” are the plain ink landscape and freehand brushwork with the characteristics of the southern region. In this tradition, Yuan Dong and Ju Ran form a solid combination. According to existing literature, it is Kuo Shen who first listed Ju Ran as a disciple of Yuan Dong. He wrote in *Meng Xi Bi Tan, Volume 17: Calligraphy and Painting*, “thereafter, Ju Ran, a Buddhist monk of Jianye, learnt the technique of painting from Dong. Their

paintings are superb.” Kuo Shen first constructed the “Dong Ju Tradition” on the basis of rediscovering the value of “Yuan Dong”. Fu Mi, as a scholar, painter and theorist, further developed the theory of Shen. After the efforts of four scholars in the Yuan Dynasty, the image of Dong was finally pushed to the peak by Shi-long Mo and Qi-chang Dong in the Ming Dynasty. Kuo Shen was the beginning of constructing the image of “Yuan Dong” literati paintings. The main value of Wei Wang on the Southern School lies in his spiritual and symbolic significance. Yuan Dong became the real pioneer of “Southern School” because of his antagonism with the three masters of the “Northern School”.

## 5.2 Establishment of the “Jiangnan Painting”

Landscape painting embodies the realm of the integration of nature and human beings. In the Five Dynasties and the Northern Song Dynasty, on one hand, landscape painting focused on the objective expression of “natural objects” and devoted themselves to “the prosperous Qi and Zhi”; on the other hand, under the influence of the idea, “nature as ideal pattern”, painters attached importance to subjective feelings and required to remove excessive “Qi”. These features became value pursued by “scholar painters”. The lyric “Jiangnan Painting” which depicted southern landscapes came into being at the historic moment. According to Qi-chang Dong, the “ink painting” and “shading” of the Southern School corresponded to “coloring” and “outlining” of the Northern School. The distinction between North and South here does not involve the characteristics of natural landscape. However, in different periods of the history, representative painters of the Southern School mainly lived in the South and drew landscapes with the characteristics of the South. Looking back on the history of painting, we can see the clear and meaningful pedigree of “Jiangnan Painting”. In this pedigree, Kuo Shen’s “Yuan Dong” is the pioneer for his ink paintings on southern landscape, and for his expressive brushwork and lyric artistic conception. When Kuo Shen rediscovered “Yuan Dong” as “Jiangnan people”, he had not yet constructed the meaning of his plain and artless expressive painting style. But it indicated that “Jiangnan painting”, the new aesthetic paradigm corresponding to the new moral cultivation mode, was about to rise.

## 5.3 Metaphysical significance of “freehand brushwork”

In Kuo Shen’s description of Yuan Dong’s painting style, two opinions deserve special attention. One is that he “did not like to show the virtuosity”; the other one is that he created “freehand brushwork”. On the surface, “virtuosity” means strict and tense painting method, while the “freehand” technique represents a relaxed and unrestrained painting style. However, if we study deeply, we will find that relaxed “freehand” brushwork can express spirit and subjective feelings better. It expresses inner world more directly and tends to “be alike in spirit”. “Virtuosity”, on the contrary, can better describe external objects and tends to be “similar in form or appearance”. But this kind of “freehand” technique is absolutely not simple and random scrawl. In addition to visual experience in which “the viewer cannot see clear objects if they look closely. But look from distance, the scenery in the painting is bright and beautiful”, the pictures also expressed artistic conception of “exquisite feelings and remote thoughts like foreign lands.” This kind of freehand brushwork was called as “ink play” by Fu Mi and his son, and became the “freehand brushwork without seeking resemblance” by Zan Ni in Yuan Dynasty. However, from Kuo Shen’s “freehand brushwork” to Meng-fu Zhao’s “using calligraphy to draw” and Zan Ni’s “freehand”, the implications are different. Kuo Shen used free strokes to express external images; Zhao “used calligraphy to draw” to “worship ancient times”; Ni wanted to express the spirit of leisure. From Kuo Shen, the techniques of landscape painting began to have independent aesthetic value; the “freehand brushwork” had moral significance of expressing subjective intentions.

## 6. Conclusion

*Bi Fa Ji* written by Jing Hao in the Five Dynasties began to construct a cosmological view of “representing reality”; *Lin Quan Gao Zhi (The Elegance of the Bamboo and Spring)* written by Xi Guo and his son in the Northern Song Dynasty injected “moral” value into landscape paintings.

Afterwards, the significance of landscape paintings in self-cultivation and representing “natural principles” was gradually established and widely accepted. Kuo Shen’s “Yuan Dong” represents a new aesthetic paradigm full of meaning construction. The authenticity of “Yuan Dong” in the history of painting is no longer important; the moral significance and aesthetic value represented by “Yuan Dong” are important. Since the middle and late periods of the Northern Song Dynasty, Yuan Dong’s image and painting style have been varied greatly from the true painting history. In the process of constructing the meaning of “Yuan Dong”, Kuo Shen, who appeared as a scientist, first “rediscovered” the new aesthetic value and significance represented by “Yuan Dong”.

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