

Pin as a Value Matrix in Chinese Aesthetics

XIONGBO SHI

Abstract: The goal of this paper is to discuss an important paradigm in Chinese artistic evaluation, one which can be identified as an efficacious framework, the gradation (*pin*) of both Chinese artists and their artworks. The four common categories (or four *pin*) in the ranking system – *shen* (divine or inspired), *miao* (marvellous), *neng* (competent), and *yi* (unconstrained) – are discussed in their original contexts. I contend that the stability within the evaluative classes contributes to the long-lasting efficacy of the *pin* system. Elaborating on this classification system, I suggest that the system of *pin* constitutes a unique value matrix in Chinese art discourse, which deserves to be incorporated into Western aesthetic discussions of comparative judgment of the value of art.

Keywords: Chinese aesthetics, *pin*, artistic value, value matrix

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1. *Pin* and its Early Use in Art Criticism

As the core term that holds up this evaluative framework, *pin* has two basic meanings. Firstly, it is a way of grouping things that is widely employed in Chinese people's classification of things. The Southern Song scholar Hong Zun (1120-1174), for example, classified coins into nine types (*pin*); the Qing dynasty ink maker Cao Sugong (1615-1689) categorized the ink sticks he made into eighteen groups (*pin*). In pre-modern Chinese texts, classifications like these are ubiquitous – one can find the classifications (*pin*) of flowers, teas, wines, incense materials, and other objects. Implied in every classification is an understanding, and then an appraisal, of that specific area. Quoting a Chinese passage that divides animals into fourteen groups, Michel Foucault said in the preface to *The Order of Things* that it demonstrates the “exotic charm of another system of thought” (Foucault 2002: xvi). Secondly, *pin* refers to the rank of things, indicating a degree or grade of excellence. This aspect of *pin* is closely related to the first aspect of classification; the difference lies in the fact that *pin* as a classification does not designate a hierarchy.

When the Southern dynasty scholar Yu Jianwu (487-551) in his *Shu pin* (Gradings of Calligraphers) classified 123 calligraphers from the Han to Liang dynasties into nine degrees – including in order upper-upper, upper-middle, upper-lower, middle-upper, and so on – it is apparent that Yu made a value judgement of the calligraphers. Before discussing the characteristics of Yu's evaluation, I would like to start with the background to this first work to apply *pin* theory in calligraphy criticism.

Calligraphy criticism is not the only art that developed a system of grading. In Yu's time, as John Timothy Wixted observed, “classification in the arts became the vogue” (Wixted 1983:

228). Other well-known examples are Zhong Rong's (469–518) *Shi pin* (Gradings of Poets) and Xie He's (act. 500–535) *Gu hua pin lu* (Old Records of Gradings of Painters). It is generally believed that the Chinese tradition of grading artists into different ranks owes much to the earlier nine-rank system, a civil service nomination system that assigned officials to nine ranks based on their talents, achievements, and abilities. The nine-rank system was used in the Three Kingdoms period (220–280) but was replaced by the imperial examination system in the Sui dynasty (581–618);¹ the period in between witnessed the first phase of evolution of Chinese art theory. Most of these early art theorists were scholars in the officialdom, thus it is easily understandable that they would tend to employ the classification schemes in the language of the arts as well as in the political administration.

At first glance, the early Chinese texts on the classification of the arts are not much different to earlier characterological texts: they all present short evaluative passages of individual artists. In Yu's *Shu pin*, for example, he started with directly writing down the names of three calligraphers who were ranked in the highest *pin* (degree, class) of upper-upper (*shang zhi shang*) – Zhang Zhi, Zhong You, and Wang Xizhi – and then providing an evaluative description of them. And next he went on to five other calligraphers who fell under the second highest degree of upper-middle (*Shang zhi zhong*), and so on. Other such works, Xie He's *Gu hua pin lu* for instance, also conformed to the same layout. But, by closely reading the descriptions of individual calligraphers in *Shu pin*, one will find that the traits Yu Jianwu focused on are different from earlier characterological texts such as Liu Yiqing's (403–444) *Shishuo xinyu* (A New Account of the Tales of the World). Critics in the characterological tradition, as Wixted noticed, tended to characterize people “in a few well-chosen, preferably abstruse and poetic words” such as *qi* (spirit), *feng* (air; temper), and *qing* (pure; spotless in conduct) (Wixted 1983: 232). In *Shu pin*, however, Yu was primarily concerned with the calligraphic practice of the calligraphers he chose. Comparing the three calligraphers from the upper-upper class, he wrote that:

Zhang Zhi stands first in *gongfu* (technical skill), and in *tianran* (heavenly spontaneity) he comes second; Zhong You stands first in *tianran*, and in *gongfu* he comes second. In *gongfu*, Wang Xizhi does not reach Zhang, but in *tianran* he surpassed him; in *tianran*, Wang does not reach Zhong, but in *gongfu* he surpassed him. (Huang 1979: 87)

The antithesis of *tianran* and *gongfu*, first used by Wang Sengqian (426–485) in *Lunshu* (On Calligraphy), is employed here as Yu's evaluative criteria.² Citing this passage, I want to demonstrate that, though Yu's *Shu pin* seems to follow the format of the texts in the characterological tradition, his discussion of the calligraphers tends to focus on their calligraphic practice and achievements rather than “characterizations.” Thus, on the surface, *Shu pin* seems to be just another work on personality appraisal (*renwu pinzhao*), but Yu's classification does in fact imply a certain artistic ground. In addition to this, it needs to be pointed out that throughout the whole *Shu pin*, there is no mention of any actual calligraphic work. That is, when Yu ranked Wang Xianzhi (344–386) in the upper-middle class, he made a holistic evaluation of Wang Xianzhi's calligraphic practice and his overall style.

2. Categories of Ranking

Yu Jianwu's three-degree classification – *shang* (upper), *zhong* (middle), *xia* (lower) – developed in the Tang dynasty (618–907) into a four-degree ranking system that employed specific names, for example, *shen* (divine or inspired), *miao* (marvellous), *neng* (competent), and *yi* (unconstrained). In *Shupin hou* (Gradings of Calligraphers Continuation), the early Tang artist-official Li Sizhen (?–696) followed Yu's model, but he added a new “unconstrained” or *yi* class of calligraphers who belonged to “a group beyond classification” (Vinograd 2016: 256). In the history of Chinese art criticism, this was the first time a critic used a specific category to identify a group of artists, and

it clearly influenced succeeding critics. A few decades after Li's *Shupin hou*, Zhang Huaiguan's (act. 713–741) *Shuduan* (Judgements on Calligraphers) pioneered the use of the tripartite scheme – *shen*, *miao*, and *neng* – to rank calligraphers. A unique feature of *Shuduan* is that Zhang started to distinguish various calligraphic scripts (such as regular, seal, and cursive) in the evaluative classification of a calligrapher. That is to say, the various scripts of the same calligrapher, based on their respective degrees of excellence, might be allocated to different classes.

It is generally believed that Zhang's tripartite scheme matches Yu's three-degree classification system. As Yolaine Escande explained:

there is a correspondence between the higher degree, *shang*, and the class called *shen* 神 (divine, inspired), between the average degree, *zhong*, and the *miao* 妙 (marvelous) class, and last between the lowest degree, *xia*, and the *neng* 能 (competent, talented) class...[Zhang's] gradings...are implicitly linked to traditional degree rankings (*shang*, *zhong*, *xia*). (Escande 2014: 150)

In fact, Zhang's three evaluative categories were nothing new in Tang art discourse. During the Six Dynasties, the aesthetic category of *shen*, for example, had already been extensively used in “discussions on authorial qualities, the creative process, and the principles of aesthetic judgment” (Cai 2004: 310–311). Besides, as all of the three terms are mentioned in Yu Jianwu's *Shu pin*, it can be assumed that Zhang Huaiguan was inspired by Yu's work to introduce the new evaluative tripartite system.

Shortly afterward, Zhang's tripartite scheme of *shen*, *miao*, *neng*, along with Li Sizhen's *yi*, was adopted and integrated by other art critics. In the Preface to *Tangchao minghua lu* (Record of Famous Painters of the Tang Dynasty), a text that ranks leading Tang painters and records their biographies, Zhu Jingxuan (act. 840–846) wrote that:

According to Zhang Huaiguan, calligraphy should be classified in three categories, i.e. *shen*, *miao*, and *neng*, and in each of these he distinguishes a superior, a middle and an inferior degree. Those outside the three categories have no method at all. But there is also the *yi* class (or category) which may be characterized either as excellent or as vile (high or low). (Sirén 1963: 34)

In Zhu Jingxuan's classification, the *yi* class of painters is added at the very end after the other three classes. In the early eleventh-century text *yizhou minghua lu* (Records of Famous Painters in Yizhou), however, Huang Xiufu (fl. 1006) ranked the *yi* class above the other three. This change in the status of *yi* or the unconstrained category, according to Vinograd, “may have been influenced by regional tastes, by personal preference for unconventional qualities, or by changes in the social status of painters” (Vinograd 2016: 256). Regardless of the ranking of *yi*, the tripartite ranking scheme of *shen*, *miao*, *neng*, or the four-category scheme that includes *yi*, has become an important paradigm in Chinese art discourse since the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). Accordingly, critical texts that employ such evaluative categories and rankings form a unique genre in Chinese art criticism. To give a few more examples, the Northern Song treatise *Xu Shuduan* (Judgements on Calligraphers Continuation), composed by Zhu Changwen (1039–1098), followed Zhang Huaiguan's tripartite evaluative model. The Ming dynasty artist Wang Zhideng's (1535–1612) *Wujun danqing zhi* (Record of the Painters of Suzhou) employed the four-degree classification of *shen*, *miao*, *neng*, and *yi*. Up until the Qing dynasty, when Bao Shichen (1775–1855) classified Qing dynasty calligraphers, his practice still applied such a traditional ranking system.

One might ask, why did this system develop and last for such a long time? I think this question can be examined from two perspectives. On one hand, the above-mentioned classifying schemes do play an active role in the pre-modern Chinese art world. As Vinograd well summarized, “such systems fulfill two major functions: *organizing* the diversity of information about artistic production, and *guiding assessment* of cultural, critical, and economic value” (ibid, p. 254). On the other hand, I contend that the stability within the evaluative classes or categories (*shen*, *miao*, *neng*, and

yi) contributes to the system's long-lasting efficacy. When the four-category classification first took shape during the end of Tang and the beginning of Northern Song, each of the four classes had been designated, implicitly or explicitly, its own stipulation. The distinction between the ranks is clearly drawn, and it is the tension created by the differences in degrees of excellence that maintains the operation of such a system.

It is thus necessary to further discuss the meanings of the four classes and their distinctions as understood by Chinese art critics. Zhang Huaiguan, the initiator of the three-class system of the Divine, Excellent, and Competent, wrote of the divergence between them in *Shudian*:

Miao aspires to *shen*; but one who walks cannot gallop. *Neng* hopes to become *miao*, but follows the rules excessively. (Escande 2014: 163)

Zhang's brief remarks make it evident that the three categories indicate "different degrees of value or quality" (*ibid*). In addition, readers obtain a vague idea that the calligraphers he ranked in the *neng* class cling slavishly to the calligraphic techniques, which may impede their movement to the higher class of *miao*. But beside that, one can hardly grasp the connotations of the other two categories.

Dou Meng (act. 742–755), a Tang scholar-official and a contemporary of Zhang Huaiguan, realizing that the ambiguities in key artistic terms caused difficulties in understanding texts on calligraphy, endeavored to define the commonly used aesthetic terms in his *Shu shu fu* (Rhapsody to Chinese Calligraphy). In Dou's book, we read that:

Shen: it can not be reached intentionally, but can be conceived.

Miao: having a multitude of shades and savors.

Neng: able to master all scripts.

Yi: being carefree and having no fixed direction.³

Somewhat obscure, Dou Meng's definitions aid us in understanding the meanings of the categories as they were used in Tang art discourse. The difference between the highest degree of *shen* and the lowest of *neng* is obvious: the Competent (*neng*) calligraphers only reach the level of proficiency in techniques, since to achieve the Inspired (*shen*), as Chiang Yee said, requires "years of practice" as well as "aesthetic insight and innate artistic power" on the part of the calligrapher (Chiang 1973: 223–224). The class of *miao* can be understood as the intermediate level between *shen* and *neng*. The last category, *yi*, is a rather slippery and contentious one in Chinese art criticism. It is difficult to differentiate *yi* from *shen*; occasionally, *yi* is ranked above *shen*, but more often it is used independently of the other three degrees. In principle, *yi* is employed to designate Chinese artists who do not hold to conventional rules or patterns. As Susan Nelson concisely described it, "*yi* presumed the artist's complete unpredictability and uniqueness, his disengagement from the genealogies of art history" (Nelson 1983: 410).⁴

3. *Pin* as Value Matrix

Elaborating on the Chinese art classification system, I suggest that the system of *pin* constitutes a unique value matrix in Chinese art discourse, by means of which Chinese scholars, connoisseurs, and art critics assess and rank the cultural, economic, and aesthetic values of different types of paintings and calligraphic works, if not all artworks. Most likely, such a Chinese theory of *pin* or evaluative classification would captivate Western aestheticians like Monroe Beardsley and Nelson Goodman, who, at one time or another, have entertained the idea of comparing or ranking the values of different artworks.⁵ As George Dickie said:

If the value of every work could be compared to the value of every other work, then all existing works could be envisaged as ranked in a hierarchical value matrix. We could then assign *specific* values to artworks, saying that those works at the top of the envisaged matrix are *excellent* works, those in the middle are *good* works, those at the bottom are *bad* works, and so on. (Dickie 1998: 131)

It is hard not to match the degrees of *excellent* and *good* with the categories of *shen* and *miao* in the Chinese ranking scheme, and it appears that the theory of *pin* or classification could provide the desired matrix. However, an immediate refutation of such an equivalence is that the focus of the evaluation in the Chinese theory of *pin* is the artists themselves, while the hierarchical matrix imagined by the Western art theorists would be used to compare and rank the values of artworks *as* artworks. From the sixth-century Yu Jianwu's *Shu pin* to the eleventh-century Zhu Changwen's *Xu shuduan*, as I mentioned previously, texts in the tradition of calligraphic classification rank the calligraphers, not any actual calligraphic work. A few Western sinologists also notice the difference between these kinds of evaluation. Escande, for example, wrote that:

The problem of objective evaluation, as conceptualized and aspired to in Europe, is avoided... Chinese art theory does indeed involve an esthetic reflection on evaluation, but its aim differs from that of Western art theory in that it focuses on the subject and not the object. (Escande 2014: 161, 165)

Escande's remarks can be countered from two perspectives. First, when early art critics such as Yu Jianwu classified the calligraphers, they *did* pay attention to the calligraphers' artistic practice and overall calligraphic style. This is even more manifest when Zhang Huaiguan subdivided the three classes – the Inspired, the Marvellous, and the Competent – into various calligraphic scripts.

Second, a more persuasive response, as made in an article by Richard Vinograd, is that the Chinese evaluative classification has evolved “over time to focus on works of art as the objects of evaluation” (Vinograd 2016: 256). It is likely that the shift originated in the connoisseurial literature of around the twelfth century. At and after that time, as Vinograd observed, ranking categories like *shen* (inspired) and *miao* (excellent) “might appear unsystematically as terms of praise in colophons or poems about painting [and calligraphy]” (ibid, p. 257). In a colophon to Dong Yuan's (act. 934–962) *Shankou daidu tu* (Awaiting the Ferry at the Foot of the Mountains), the Yuan painter and official connoisseur Ke Jiushi (1290–1343) identified the work presented as an authentic work from Dong and evaluated it as a real “divine piece” (*shen-pin*). This was not the first time the ranking categories were used for an actual work. In a colophon to the Northern Song long scroll *Qingming shanghe tu* (Along the River during the Qingming Festival), the Jin dynasty scholar Zhang Zhu (fl. 1186) noted that this scroll should be stored as a divine-class (*shen-pin*) artwork.

During the Ming dynasty, the formal ranking systems within a few art forms – especially painting and calligraphy – began to focus solely on the artworks. For example, in *Minghua shenpin mu* (A Catalogue of Famous Paintings Ranked in the Shen Class) and *Fatie shenpin mu* (A Catalogue of Shen--class Calligraphic Works), both produced by the Ming scholar-official Yang Shen (1488–1559), specific works of paintings and calligraphy become the focus of evaluation. In Yang's catalogue, every work was designated a title, followed occasionally by the artist's name, or the location of the work, or nothing. Under a few paintings and calligraphic works, Yang noted that the artist was unknown. I believe that Yang Shen's work marks an important turn in evaluative texts on Chinese painting and calligraphy because it signals when evaluative classification schemes started to rank artworks. When Yang determined to make a list of the best or the Divine works extant in his day, his primary concern was not the calligraphers or painters, their deeds or career achievements, but rather the artistic qualities as manifested in their specific artworks. When Yang ranked anonymous works such as *Toulao kannian tie* (Notes Written in the Declining Old Years) and *Xuetan hanyan tu* (Snow Shore and Cold Swallows) in the Inspired class, there is no denying the fact that he made a comparatively disinterested value judgement on the beauty of the aesthetic object.

4. Concluding Remarks

The Chinese grading system of *pin* is far from being an autonomous art theory. It is related, in origin, to the Chinese characterological tradition, within which a scholar-artist's inner being –

personality and moral integrity – and outer being – appearance, behavior and aesthetic self-discourse – are inseparable. What I want to explain here is that we cannot draw a simple conclusion about *pin* as a grading system as Chinese art critics paid no attention to the artistic value of a specific work of painting or calligraphy when they applied an evaluation category of *pin* to the work. This is a crucial issue. Because when a contemporary philosopher of art such as Malcolm Budd pronounces that artistic value is incommensurable, what he is talking about is the value of an artwork *as* an artwork, its intrinsic value rather than other kinds of value, not to mention the value of the creative subject (Budd 2008: 98). Artistic value is the concern of artistic judgment. This is reflected in many Chinese critical texts, such as in the following famous paragraph from the Ming dynasty artist and connoisseur Xiang Mu (fl. 1590):

[When it comes to appreciation,] there is appreciation by the ears, appreciation by the eyes, and appreciation by the mind... In the first place when a calligraphic work unfolds, if one looks up the authors of inscriptions and judges the work by the collectors' seals, rather than contemplating the work's *yi* (ideas) and *fa* (techniques) and identifying its paper and ink, we can use *mujian* (judging by the eyes) to describe this type of appreciation with which the viewer only factitiously praises some random brush lines. (Xiang 2002: 256-257)

One of Xiang's accusations against *mujian* is that those viewers employing *mujian* do not actually contemplate a work's *yi* (ideas) and *fa* (techniques). These two terms can be regarded as a pair that denotes the two aspects of the aesthetic objects in calligraphic appreciation.

A pure value matrix envisaged by analytic aestheticians is unlikely to be provided, because in the analytic tradition, as Bruce Vermazen claimed, two artworks can be compared only if they have the same independently valuable property and only that one valuable property (Vermazen 1975: 7-14). Nonetheless, it should be noted that the emergence of the aesthetic issue of comparing artistic value owes much to the fact that we tend to make judgments such as: this is good art, and that is bad; and Fan Kuan's *Travellers among Mountains and Streams* is better than Wang Yun's *Shadowy Summer Grove after Juran*. I think it is precisely this urge to compare artists and works of art that contributes to the development of the Chinese evaluative framework of *pin*, which I believe deserves to be incorporated into Western aesthetic discussions of comparative judgment of the value of art.

School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Lanzhou University, China

Notes

¹ For a brief discussion of the development of the rank system between the Han and the Tang, see Elman 2000: 5-7.

² For a discussion of *tianran* and *gongfu* in Six Dynasties' calligraphy criticism, see Ledderose 1984: 267.

³ Translation based on the following two versions: Escande 2014: 163; Chiang 1973: 220.

⁴ For more discussions on *yi*, see Xu 2001: 182-196.

⁵ See, for example, Beardsley 1979: 723-749; Vermazen 1975: 7-14.

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