

CHAPTER FOUR

“Living and Dead Rules”: The Role of Rules in Chinese Aesthetics

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Chinese poetry is generally regarded as a paragon of naturalness.¹ Even those who only know it from translations appreciate its condensed juxtaposition of nature and the human world, the embedding of human feelings and moods in vivid images of nature. Those who are familiar with Chinese poetry in its original language also know about other, sometimes more difficult aspects—the numerous allusions, the openness and frequent ambiguities. They also understand how it is possible to create images with a high degree of suggestiveness—to conjure up “images beyond the images” (*xiang wai zhi xiang*)²—or to suggest a lot with a little, due to the peculiarities of the Chinese language and poetics.

But there is also another side of Chinese poetry that, like its naturalness and suggestive qualities, is also representative: its regularity, i.e., its formal and methodological features. It can be shown, however, at least for classical poetry, that both aspects—naturalness and regularity—belong together like two sides of a coin: that suggestive, natural qualities exist only together with this other side: its regularity. Both complement each other and are mutually dependent on each other.

In the following, this relationship between rule and naturalness (*fa-ziran*) in Chinese poetry and art will be traced, to a certain extent, throughout the

history of Chinese literature—albeit without going into comparative aspects but rather following it from its autochthonous development. The focus of this study will be on the literary theory of the Ming and Qing periods, with a glance at Qing painting.

As we will see, the tension between rule and naturalness—between law and freedom—applies not only to literature and art: It also permeates China’s philosophical and social thinking. In this respect, the following could be understood not only as a stroll through China’s aesthetics, but also as an attempt to uncover a cultural pattern—a part of China’s cultural structure.

1. SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The term *fa*—to be translated with “law,” “rule,” “model,” “method,” but also verbally as “to take as a yardstick or model”—which was to play such an important role in the “theoretical” discussions on literature and art of the later dynasties, has its firm place in the history of (political and religious) ideas in China. Besides the Confucians and Daoists, one of the most important schools of thought in antiquity was the “School of Law” (*fa jia*). Its followers—the “Legalists”—advocated rigorous enforcement of criminal laws by an absolute ruler. The state was able to tighten and strengthen its system of power by the acceptance of this totalitarian thought in the third pre-Christian century in such a way that it succeeded in defeating its rivals and united the country under the despotic Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE) which, however, lasted only fifteen years.

Although the Confucian ruling class strongly opposed Legalist thinking, their ideas of a well-ordered society were related to those of the Legalists. Instead of the power of an absolute ruler and the application of rigorous penal laws, they advocated a government by moral example and moral legitimation of the ruler, but they demanded the observance of another, no less elaborate set of rules: the rules of rites and etiquette (*li*), which regulated the behavior of people in almost all situations in life. The affinity of both schools is also evident not least in the fact that after the fall of the Legalist Qin dynasty social reforms and administrative measures of the hated Qin rule were maintained and have an effect to the present day. Therefore, some Chinese intellectual historians call classical China Confucian only on the outside, but Legalistic on the inside (*wai ru nei fa*).³ In this respect, *fa* stands for a politically authoritarian side of China: for the Legalist–Confucian tradition, dominant in its history, oriented toward fixed rules and regulations; and, needless to point out, Communist China fits in seamlessly here.

Fa, however, also described for the thinkers of Chinese antiquity more than just human law, but also the law of the cosmic order. So it says in the

Guanzi, a text from the pre-Qin period, originating between Confucianism and Legalism (compiled approx. second to first century BCE):

That the four seasons should not change, that the stars should not change, that night and day should be with shade and light, with the glow of the sun and the moon, that is rule (*fa*).⁴

The ideas expressed in the *Guanzi* quotation are also related to Daoist thought. In the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Daodejing* it notes about the *fa* of the *Dao*—the primordial cause of reality: “The law of the *Dao* is its being what it is (*dao fa ziran*).”⁵ That is, being of oneself is the principle of the *Dao*, is the law according to which the *Dao* works and reveals itself; and it reveals itself as nature; in Chinese: as “what is by itself so” (*ziran*).

Finally—and this will be important for the later periods—*fa* is also a central concept in Chinese Buddhism, where it unites the two aforementioned aspects: human and cosmic law. But in Buddhism, *fa*, the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit term *dharma*, has an interesting double meaning: It first stands for the Buddhist doctrine and second for the phenomena of the world. In its first meaning, *fa* can be understood as a Buddhist equivalent to the Chinese *Dao*, the Confucian and Daoist “Way”: the “Way” of man (i.e., ethics) and of nature.

So already in Chinese antiquity we find the following two poles of *fa*: on the one hand regulations and rules issued or handed down by men, as in Confucianism/Legalism; in Daoism, on the other hand, the law of the constant change of nature, which evolves spontaneously, but whose activity is not without lawfulness.

If we search for the factors that reinforce the tendency toward regularity in Chinese literature, there are essentially three: an ideological, a linguistic and a social. The first is the aforementioned dominance of Confucian/Legalist thought, which endorsed human action according to guidelines and models. For China an important linguistic factor, which has shaped regularity particularly in poetry in a very special way, has to be added. The Chinese literary tradition is not necessarily richer in rules and forms than the occidental tradition with its multitude of rhetorical figures, verses, rhythms, meters, styles, and regulations, but has two Chinese peculiarities leading to predominantly regular forms: First, because of the monosyllabic nature combined with the ideographical characters of Chinese writing (i.e., that each character is pronounced with only one uninflected syllable and represents one word unit), orderly arrangements with the same line length or number of characters per line easily occur, as well as parallel structures,

especially the antithetical parallelism, which was to become one of the prominent features of classical Chinese poetry and prose. Secondly, the tonal nature of the spoken language leads to a regular, musical arrangement of the tones in the poem. The poetical form in which these linguistically conditioned rules were most conspicuously reflected is the regular poem (*lüshi*) of the Tang period (see below).

Finally, a social factor has to be added which in the Tang period contributed decisively to the turn from the rather free exploration of stylistic and musical forms of poetry during the preceding epoch to a fixed set of rules: While poetry during the pre-Tang period was still a relatively free art of the educated class, it became a compulsory program from the Tang period onwards, through the establishment of the civil servants' examination system. To write poetry was now, in addition to the interpretation of classics, one of the requirements in the examinations. A Chinese official was not expected to master administrative laws, but to be able to write verses in addition to the interpretation of the classics. In this respect, poetry was a social convention—a circumstance which favored regularity to a great extent. At the same time, this led to a stupendous erudition of the Chinese literati. The whole lyrical tradition was mastered and constantly referred to by making poetic allusions or interweaving quotations without having to fear that they would not be understood—as we do today.

In the course of the examination system, a new requirement was added during the Ming period: the interpretation of classics in the form of the so-called “eight-legged essay” (*baguwen*), which is likely to seek its equal in terms of rigid regularity. In the “eight-legged essay” the antithetic parallelism—here in prosaic form—also had to be strictly observed.⁶ Its popularity, apart from the linguistic conditions mentioned, seems to be connected with the omnipresence of *yin-yang* thought, so that Achilles Fang notes that parallelism is “ingrained in Chinese thinking.”⁷ The formulation of antithetic, but always related units also shows itself in the still popular antithetical couplets of two parallel sentences (*duilian*), which one encounters everywhere in China, at the entrances to temples, restaurants, and so on.

The regular poem and the eight-legged essay are by no means the only examples in which the tendency toward literary-artistic regularity can be demonstrated. Later, too, verse forms emerged, such as the *ci* and *sanqu* songs of the Song and Yuan periods, which, despite their different line lengths, required strict adherence to the original song rhythms, their rhyming patterns and tone sequences.

Regularity is also expressed in calligraphy and painting. In their various forms of writing (*shu*), the great calligraphic masters of the past have remained rule-setting until today. Their model-like pieces of calligraphy were called *fashu*—“rule writing.” The modern Chinese term for calligraphy

is called, reversely, *shufa*—“writing rule.” In painting, finally, one followed the principles of composition and brushstrokes (*cun*) of the Song dynasty painters, classified according to their structure. In this way, painting was less oriented to the objects of nature than to the regular models of an old master, and thus Chinese painting is essentially (especially during the Ming and Qing periods), as Max Loehr once remarked, “art-historical art.”⁸

How do the dynamics between rule and naturalness, between form and spirit, between law and freedom, unfold in Chinese literature?

As far as the relationship of Confucianism to poetry and art is concerned, the canonical writings contain only sparse statements on the subject, and yet little was enough to convey strict guidelines. For the Confucians, who were always conservative and oriented toward the past, the models for poetry were found in the glorified early period, in the canonized *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*), from which ideas of an artistic orthodoxy (*zheng*, literally “correct”) were derived: Poetry should not contain immoral thoughts, should express man’s intent (*zhi*), should serve both the education of the people and criticism of the ruler by the people; it should be moderate and balanced, ornamental but not overcharged. Different styles were called “changed” (*bian*) and often had something unorthodox and basically unacceptable about them.⁹

In the Daoist texts there are even fewer expressions that refer directly to literature and art, and yet it was precisely the book of *Zhuangzi*, with its lively and witty parables and anecdotes, that gave later poets and painters more inspiration than any other early texts, such as the story of a cook, named Ding, who shows his prince how to dismember an ox in accordance with the *Dao*:

His cook was cutting up an ox for the ruler Wen Hui. Whenever he applied his hand, leaned forward with his shoulder, planted his foot, and employed the pressure of his knee, in the audible ripping off of the skin, and slicing operation of the knife, the sounds were all in regular cadence. Movements and sounds proceeded as in a dance . . . The ruler said, “Ah! Admirable! That your art should have become so perfect!” (Having finished his operation), the cook laid down his knife, and replied to the remark, “What your servant loves is the . . . *Dao*, something beyond any skill. When I first began to cut up an ox, I saw nothing but the (entire) carcass. After three years I ceased to see it as a whole. Now I deal with it in a spirit-like manner, and do not look at it with my eyes.”¹⁰

The central sentence is here: “What your servant loves is the *Dao*, something beyond any skill (*jin hu ji*).” That is, when artistic creation happens out of

the *Dao*, it transcends mere craftsmanship and technique. A work created in this fashion is formed in the same way as the work of nature: it bears no traces of methodical creation—it appears natural and yet artistically perfect.

The two views of artistic creation—the Confucian which accentuates the moderate and regular, and the Daoist which prefers the natural—were by no means irreconcilable. Already in early literary theoretical works, for example in the comprehensive treatise *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong*) by Liu Xie from the fifth century, a classical synthesis, as it were, was formulated. In the opening chapter of this work (*Yuandao*: “On the Origin, the *Dao*”), the author draws a great analogy, playing with the polysemy of the character *wen*, which means both writing/literature and pattern/form as well as culture/civilization. For Liu Xie, the world in its wonderful form is the *Gestalt of Dao* (*dao zhi wen*); at the same time, *wen* as literature is the manifestation of the human spirit (*xin*). Finally, *wen* is also the cultivating influence of the sages of antiquity on human society, because they convey the *Dao* to man through the teachings of the canonical scriptures.¹¹ Since the work of nature—as also hinted at in the *Guanzi* quote—possesses a regularity that is shown in beautiful form, artistic creation, if it corresponds to the work of nature, also expresses itself in balanced, beautiful, natural forms. Regular beauty and naturalness are, therefore, not mutually exclusive; rather, it is precisely in their harmony that the literary work reflects the *Dao*, namely the cosmic *Dao* of the Daoists and that of the Confucian sages.

Almost at the same time as Liu Xie, a canon of “Six Rules” (*liu fa*) was established in painting by Xie He (ca. 500–535), the first of which demands that a painting must possess a “vital resonance” (*qiyun*) which reveals itself as “liveliness/naturalness” (*shengdong*).¹² So we also have here harmony of rule and naturalness; or in other words, a rule is established which demands naturalness—it should become the guiding idea for the whole further history of Chinese painting.

The aesthetic ideal of a harmony of regularity and naturalness—although already formulated in several pre-Tang period writings—was only realized in Tang times (especially the High Tang period: ca. 715–765). It brought forth a poetry that was praised by posterity as perfect: mainly the poetry of Du Fu (712–70) and Li Bai (701–62). At the same time, the regular poem (*lüshi*) became popular, which—as already mentioned—can hardly be surpassed in terms of regulations for formal features. The number of lines is fixed at eight, the number of characters per line at five or seven, with a caesura after the second or fourth character. No character may appear twice; grammatical auxiliary words, so-called empty characters, are to be avoided. Rhyme is obligatory. Antithetic parallelism is prescribed for the third and fourth lines

as well as for the fifth and sixth. Finally, each character must follow a tone scheme of alternating even and uneven tones, whereby—through a sophisticated compensation system—violations at one point can be fixed by making corresponding changes at another. In this way, a regular but musically varied sequence of words is created. This complex prosodic set of rules (*fa*) is called *gelü* or *geshi* (regular, formal structure). The regular poem, in which these characteristics are to be found, was the most modern at its time—hence it was called “poem in the new style” (*jin ti shi*); it has remained popular until today.

Despite the many regulations and prohibitions, the great poets of the Tang moved naturally and freely in the new form, as if there had been no restrictions for them whatsoever. Du Fu in particular became the master of the regular poem. Li Bai preferred less strict forms. So both poets represent the two starting positions: Du Fu is the Confucian-oriented poet who cares about the people and the country, from whose regular poems rules can be derived and learned for posterity. Li Bai, on the other hand, the Daoist, unbound artist genius, can only be admired—the naturalness of his works is inimitable.

2. DISCUSSION OF METHODS AND RULES

The poets of the Tang period hardly asked about rules themselves. They regarded the limitations of the new forms, which were first established with and through them, as a challenge to their abilities, and they simply wrote poetry in inspired moments and moods (*xingqu*). And the educated audience, who were familiar with the formal peculiarities, appreciated the expert, the “master” who “shows himself first in confinement,” as we have it in a line from Goethe;¹³ and it felt the aesthetic pleasure that we are also familiar with when we know, for example, how to follow the formal structures of a Bach fugue or Beethoven sonata. The question of the rules—the discussion of methods—arose only after this golden age: in the post-Tang period. It is the period of reflection on poetry.

In terms of intellectual history, the Song dynasty was the epoch of Neo-Confucianism. Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist influences mixed in it, but it was methodically strict and promoted human action according to rules and regulations. Zhu Xi, the great Neo-Confucian philosopher of the twelfth century, wrote: “Everything under Heaven has a fixed rule (*fa*). The learner must progress gradually according to its order.”¹⁴ But *Chan* (Japanese: *Zen*) Buddhism was also popular among writers and highly influential in the art and literature of the epoch, also in Neo-Confucianism itself. Its terminology—especially the term “enlightenment” (*wu*, Jap.: *satori*), which means the

breakthrough to the realization of “Non-Duality” (*bu er*) and the unity of subject and object—should now serve as a vehicle to explain and grasp the essence of poetry, its rules and laws: its *dharma* (*fa*).

What kinds of rules and methods of poetry were actually discussed by the Song dynasty writers? First, of course, the aforementioned prosodic rules (*gelü*) of the various forms of *shi* poetry. However, the focus of methodological interest was on compositional rules: rules of structuring sentences in the verse, the choice of words or the placement of characters as well as structural balancing. To the latter belonged the standard sequence of the four couplets in the “eight-line regulated poem”: 1. introduction (*qi*), 2. continuation (*cheng*), 3. turn (*zhuan*), and 4. summary (*he*); then the balancing of ups and downs (*qi fu*), opening and closing (*kai he*), call and answer (*zhao ying*)—all according to the *yin-yang* pattern, as well as the balanced combination of scenery with feeling (*jing* and *qing*) and fullness with emptiness (*shi* and *xu*). Finally, stylistic rules were also part of the discussions, such as avoiding directness and achieving a suggestive effect through images or literary allusions.

The poems of the Song period, as well as those of the middle and late Tang, are quite different from those of the High Tang. Even though the prosodic rules of the poems remained the same in the new and old style and were never actually up for discussion—and even further and prosodically no less difficult forms emerged (such as *ci* songs)—style, diction, and theme changed considerably. The poems of the Song literati were more prosaic, more unusual, more self-reflexive, and more everyday in their subject matter.

A good part of the discussion about rules in the Song period was, therefore, devoted to the topic: How can I orientate myself on a great role model without imitating it directly? In particular, the group of poets known as the Jiangxi School, which gathered around the important poet Huang Tingjian (1045–1105), developed sophisticated methods and rules of indirect imitation. In practice, for example, this meant using the words of the role models, but trying to give them a new meaning; or, conversely, imitating the meaning, but dressing it in new words.¹⁵ Also, one was anxious not to give too much polish to the poetic products: “Better clumsy than skillful, better plain than flowery, better rough than weak, better fancy than ordinary”—so it says programmatically in the writing of a pupil of Huang Tingjian.¹⁶ In short, a cultivated awkwardness and a relaxed approach to the poetic model characterize the lyrical activities of this group and, to a certain extent, the entire epoch. In the discussion about rules and methods a new (*Chan* Buddhist) slogan came up: “living rules” (*huo fa*). We find it for example with a member of the said Jiangxi group, Lü Benzong (fl. 1110):

When learning poetry you should know about living rules. By “living rule” I mean that one can master the rules (*guiju*) completely, but can go beyond them, that one can find inexhaustible variations and that these do not contradict the rules. This is the “Way” [of poetry]: it has fixed rules and yet it does not have them; it has no fixed rules and yet it has them.¹⁷

In spite of this ambivalent position about rules, the poets of the Jiangxi group, as a whole, tended more toward methodical and regular poetry. One of their contemporaries, Su Shi (1037–1101), also friend and cousin of Huang Tingjian, represented a much freer position. As a multi-talent and master in all three scholarly arts (poetry, calligraphy, and painting) and one of China’s most brilliant literary figures in general, he, too, repeatedly pointed out the importance of technical skill and rules, as quoted below:

There is the *Dao*, and there is the technique (*yi*). If you have only the *Dao* and no technique, things may form in your heart, but they won’t take shape in your hand.¹⁸

On the whole, however, he emphasizes the other aspect: naturalness. He describes the creation of his writings as follows:

It springs up out of me like a thousand buckets of water, without me having to choose it; it floods and gurgles effortlessly over the flat earth a thousand miles in one day. How it winds among mountains and rocks, how it forms when it meets things and adapts to them cannot be foreseen. What I do know, however, is that it always goes where it should go and always stops where it cannot but stop, and that is all! As for the rest, even I can’t guess [how it’s going to be].¹⁹

About the verses of a friend he says (not without reference to his own work) that they are

like moving clouds and flowing water, which from the outset are not subject to any fixed pattern, but go where they should go and hold where they cannot but stop. The principle of literature is naturalness. Then their design is completely unpredictable.²⁰

This means that artistic creation happens spontaneously and naturally, with elementary power, but it always follows an inner law: it goes where it should go, and is formed according to the rule of nature—being “so by itself” (*ziran*). So while in the Song period the poets of the Jiangxi group copied the

old masters with “living rules” and thereby strove for a naturalness of expression, Su Shi orientates his work on the rules of nature itself (*fa ziran*).

3. RULE AND ENLIGHTENMENT

In the following Ming and Qing periods, the discussion about rules was essentially carried out between two camps: a dominant archaistic movement (*fugu*: “back to antiquity”)—to be viewed, though, in a very differentiated way—which adhered to the orthodox tradition (*zheng*) and defended its rules, and counter-movements of heterodox, “nonconformist” literary figures. Nevertheless, we will see that the boundaries between the two camps are anything but clearly marked.

The Ming period (fourteenth to seventeenth centuries) is considered the epoch of archaism. In poetry, one no longer oriented oneself only toward the Tang period; one was fixated on it. The archaistic movement was based on Yan Yu’s (fl. 1180–1235) important literary theoretical work *Canglang’s Poetry Talk* from the Southern Song dynasty as well as the anthology *Graded Companion of Tang Poetry* (*Tangshi pinhui*) of Gao Bing (1350–1423), published in the Ming period. It culminated with the so-called Seven Earlier and Seven Later Masters in the Ming Dynasty. The arch-archaist of the Ming, Li Mengyang (1473–1529), one of the Seven Former Masters, coined the phrase: “Prose must be like that of the Qin and Han periods, poetry like that of the High Tang.”²¹ His thoughts on following firm rules were:

Words must have methods and rules before they can fit with musical laws, just as circles and squares must fit with compasses and rulers. The ancients used rules, which were not invented by them but actually created by nature. Now when we imitate the ancients, we are not imitating them but really imitating the natural law of things.²²

Li Mengyang’s remark reads like a cleverly formulated justification for imitating old masters. But as much as we may sneer at these poets today in their efforts at skilled and regular verses, we will not quite do justice to them if we classify them, as is often done, only as pure technicians or verse makers and thus dismiss them.

Let us first recall the ideal of artistic creation in China: harmony of form and spirit, of structure and naturalness. For the poets of the post-Tang period, this ideal had been achieved in the Tang period. Using the terminology of *Chan* Buddhism, the great Tang poets had written their poetry out of a state of “enlightenment.” Now it was necessary to reach a similar height by following the rules derived from their works—through methodical practice

as well as in the practice of *Chan* meditation. Such efforts were at the center of all archaistic movements, and Li Mengyang, with his declared goal of ultimately imitating the natural law of things, entirely adheres to this meaning.

Enlightenment (*wu*) and rule—the *dharma* (*fa*) of poetry—thus form an inseparable unity for the Ming archaists. Hu Yinglin (1551–1602), one of them, writes about their connection:

These two terms [enlightenment and rule, or *dharma*] have been the great pivot of poetry for a thousand ages. One cannot give up one for the sake of the other. If you have only rules without enlightenment, you are like a young monk clinging to the rules; enlightenment that does not proceed from rules is like “wild fox heterodoxy” (*waidao yehu*).²³

For the archaists, imitating old masters and following poetic rules should lead to poetic enlightenment, in other words to an intuitive mastery of the art of poetry.²⁴ This method was and is in China (and probably not only there) the usual practice for the learning of any art; the peculiarity is perhaps only that it also—and especially—applies to the art of poetry. The constant, hard practice following an example or a master is called *gongfu* in Chinese. This word, which we now use here in its Westernized form “Kungfu” as a synonym for Chinese karate, does not only refer to the martial arts, but also to the practice—and the resulting perfect performance—in each of the traditional arts of China, thus also in poetry and painting.

Let us keep in mind that the constant practice according to fixed rules led, on the one hand, to the attainment of a high degree of mastery, that is to the perfection of form, and on the other to the appropriation of the whole orthodox tradition, even to the degree that one became a part of it. The *fa*, the rules, thus form, as it were, the red thread that runs through the tradition of all classical arts in China.

4. RULE AND IDEA

In the late Ming period, when archaism reached its climax, a strong counter-current formed, namely in the three brothers Yuan Zongdao, Yuan Hongdao, and Yuan Zhongdao, who are called Gongan School according to their place of origin. They mocked the practice of imitation and regulated writing; instead, they emphasized that poetry should be an expression of both the poet’s individual sensitivity (*xingling*) and its specific epoch. Criticizing the fixation on the Tang period of the archaists, Yuan Hongdao (1568–1610), for example, pointed out that the greatness of the Tang poets consisted

precisely in the fact that they had no models to follow (*wu fa*); that they did not imitate masters of past epochs—although they certainly admired them.²⁵

In addition to “enlightenment,” another concept began to play an important role in the discussion about the flexible application of rules: idea (*yi*), i.e. the artistic conception of the poet which is realized in the work of art. Yuan Zhongdao (1570–1623) of the Gongan School, for example, stresses that the rule has to be considered to be the servant of the idea, and not the other way around (idea being servant to rule).²⁶ Corresponding tendencies also existed in painting theory, in which the term *xieyi*—sketching ideas—appears from the Yuan period onwards in the sense of a spontaneous, inspired expression of the artist.

Comparable voices can be heard from the archaist camp. Wang Shizhen (1526–90), one of the so-called Seven Later Masters of the Ming, writes:

I approach the rule from the idea. If the idea is there, then a rule is set up at the same time with it. Rule and idea merge to a unity. There is no recipe for the idea (*yi wu fang*), but rules are something essential (*fa you ti*).²⁷

Similarly Shen Deqian (1673–1769) in the Qing period:

If the idea does not lead the rule, but on the contrary the idea follows the rule, then we have nothing but dead rules.²⁸

If here *yi* stands for the subjective mind of the author who weighs up the meaningful use of a rule, then we find in the following remark another aspect of *yi*, namely its “meaning” as an objective “sense” or logic (like the “sense” of a word). The quotation comes from a Ming period author named Xu Bozu, who was apostrophized by his contemporaries as Xu, the little Du (Fu), i.e. as a skilled craftsman of his art:

A rule can be expressed in words; the idea (*yi*) of a rule, however, cannot be pronounced. Excellent writers grasp the idea of a rule when they use it; mediocre writers, however, achieve in the use of rules only similarity [to the requirements of the rules]. I myself hardly adhere to rules in poetry. As it comes, I begin; as it comes, I stop. As the case may be, I open and close; as the case may be, I let the speech melody rise and fall and set pauses. As it happens, the language becomes light or heavy, high or low. There, where the idea reaches, there are always corresponding words. I have never felt bound by rules; nor have I ever completely rejected rules. The masters of the art of antiquity were like the Cook Ding: [Their works] came forth following their heart and their hands. There’s no other

secret—they had their rules, too. From this point of view, if you look at all the arts under heaven, there has never been a master of an art who would have achieved a spiritual/divine skill without rules.²⁹

In *yi* there seem to be two aspects: on the one hand the guiding “idea” in the process of artistic creation—the “ego” of the poet, which in any case begins to stir from the late Ming period—on the other hand the “meaning” of the rule, which can only be grasped intuitively and which then makes the rule itself superfluous. Xu speaks of a relationship between rule and its meaning in a way which corresponds entirely to the well-known comparison of the relationship between word and meaning with fish and fish traps from the *Zhuangzi*:

Fish traps are there for the fish’s sake; if you have the fish, you forget the traps . . . Words are there for the sake of their meaning (*yi*); if one has the meaning, one forgets the words.³⁰

To stick to the rule would be, to remain in Zhuangzi’s image, to bring home only the fish trap and not the fish from the fishery. Instead, Xu Bozu says, it’s the meaning of form and rules that matters. Those who have grasped this no longer need to stick to the letter of the rule.

If we compare the function of both concepts—“enlightenment” and “idea”—in the process of artistic creation, then “enlightenment” applies to the intuitive, and “idea” to the conscious control of the artistic medium. A work created from “enlightenment,” in its ideal form, no longer reveals any traces of methodical creation; on the other hand, if the artistic “idea” leads the rule, then the latter loses its normative, restrictive effect and instead becomes a tool in the hand of the artist/poet, which he knows how to use at his own discretion.

5. THE RULE OF NON-RULE

While these two concepts were still largely separate during the Ming period, with the archaists tending toward the former and the “nonconformists” toward the latter, the fusion of the two approaches penetrates the subsequent Qing period. In this section we will also take a supplementary look at the “theory” of painting in that epoch to show that the question of rules—as a fundamentally aesthetic one—was posed across all the arts, and comparable answers were found.

The Qing period is regarded as a time of great nonconformist painters who took up the idea of the “rule of non-rule” (*wu fa zhi fa*) already

expressed in literature by the Gongan School, formulated it further and implemented it convincingly in their art. Among the painters of the early Qing who turned against the archaistic trend of the time, Shitao (or Daoji, ca. 1641–1717) should be mentioned first of all—one of the most important nonconformist literati painters in Chinese art history. He reacted to the copy mania of his contemporaries with the dictum: “The rule of non-rule is the highest rule (*wu fa er fa, nai wei zhi fa*).”³¹ On the inscription to a painting, dated 1691, he further explains this idea.

In the past, I once read the four words “I use my own rule” and was pleased about them; for if the painters of our time exclusively practice wearing the shroud of the old masters, and if the critics also say: “The style of such-and-such corresponds to the rule, the style of such-and-such does not correspond to it,” then that is for vomiting! So if this gentleman was able to follow his own rule—does he not already surpass the ordinary painters? But today I have backed down and realized that this is not the case, for under the immeasurably wide tent of the sky there is only one rule. Whoever has grasped it, wherever he goes, everything becomes the rule. Hence, why should one emphasize so much one’s own!—When the feeling grows, the power rises; and when it rises, it develops and creates the means, the way of expression. In reality, there is only this one becoming conscious, then one can create inexhaustibly, and there will not be a rule for it either. When I now painted these twenty-four sheets, I did not try in any way to agree with the old masters, nor did I determine my own rule. It was like with everything: The unconscious spiritual in us began to move, it was born, lifted through its power and developed on the path of utterance in order to complete forms and rules . . . Oh, later critics may call this my rule or the rule of the old masters; for my sake they may also call it the catch-all rule (*tianxia ren zhi fa*).³²

Shitao leaves behind both the rule and the “I” as guiding instances in the artistic process. His “one rule,” the “catch-all rule,” is nothing other than the *Dao* from which he wants to create. So here we have a transcendence of rule and ego into the mystical realm.

Similar ideas we find expressed in an inscription on a painting, dated 1760, by Zheng Xie (or Zheng Banqiao, 1693–1765), one of the so-called “Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou.” He writes about the rules—or methods—of painting:

The method of painting orchids is said to be three spikes and five leaves . . . But all of these techniques are only for beginners. The art of orchid

. . . painting is not like this, it is only so at the beginning, and it takes a whole lifetime to complete one's knowledge of it. Most of the great painters of old took the Creator to their teacher. Hence the way Heaven gives life is the way I try to paint.³³

As with Li Mengyang, we also find here the idea expressed that the ancients took nature's work as their model or rule (*fa ziran*); but the point is not to imitate their works as such, but rather to follow their intention.

The Qing period was not an epoch of great poetry. New forms were no longer created, and the old ones seemed to be exhausted. The strength of the Qing writers, therefore, was more in the reflection on poetry. Ye Xie, a late seventeenth-century writer, has extensively dealt with the topic of rule in his treatise "On the Origin of Poetry" (*Yuan shi*),³⁴ thereby illustrating the two sides of *fa*—dead and living rules—as in the following passage using examples from the nonliterary realm (in Stephen Owen's translation, quoted below "animate rule" is used for "living rules"):

There are the ones who say, "Every event and every thing (*wu*) has its rules. Why should poetry alone be different?" This may be so, but there are "dead rules" and "animate rules." If I were going to praise a person's beauty according to dead rules, I would ask, "Are there brows over the eyes? Are a nose and a mouth located in the middle? Do the hands take hold of things and do the feet walk along?" There are countless postures (*tai*) conveying grace or ugliness, yet I would never be able to get beyond the scope of questions such as those—these are "dead rules." Such beauty as stands unique, preeminent in all the world, is not to be found through them . . .

If this is so, then are there any rules at all in such beauty as stands unique, preeminent in all the world? Such rules are nothing less than some spirit (*shen*) that illuminates (*ming*) precisely those same constants: ears, eyes, mouth, and nose. And, finally, can rules for the way spirit illuminates things be spoken of? . . . Dead rules can be spoken of by the sort of person who takes a firm grasp of things. But if we are considering animate rules, then the rules are truly animated and absolutely cannot be "grasped" firmly.³⁵

Ye's example is intended to show that dead rules—normal proportions of a human being—are self-evident constants that can mediate neither spirit nor beauty. Likewise, the fixed rules of poetry such as tone rules, parallelisms, etc. are not worth mentioning for Ye Xie: "Even in the village school, when

reading the [standard collection of a] thousand poems, one no longer considers it necessary to say a word about them.”³⁶ So rules are not fixed quantities according to which one could create works of art; rather they result from the work itself, from the artist’s ability to change and his creative ingenuity.

He concludes his discussion of living, natural rules by comparing their work with the emergence of cloud patterns over the sacred mountain Taishan. The analogy to literature is again grounded (like Liu Xie’s) in the polysemy of the character *wen* (pattern/literature):

[The constantly changing clouds above Taishan] is the pattern of Heaven and Earth, the supreme achievement. But let us suppose that the pattern of Heaven and Earth were to be regulated by rules. Then when Mount Tai was going to send out its clouds, it would first muster the tribes of clouds and give them their orders: “I am now going to send you clouds out to make ‘the pattern of Heaven and Earth.’ You, go first; you, follow; you, go up; and you, you there, lie low. You, cloud, shine; you, make ripples like waves; you, double back in; you, spread out in the sky; you, open up wide; and you, lock your gates fast. And you over there, you shake your tail.” If Mount Tai sent them out like this and brought them back like this, then there wouldn’t be the least vitality in any of them. And this would be the formation of the pattern of Heaven and Earth!? The result of such a situation would be that Heaven and Earth would feel that the presence of Mount Tai was a burden; and Mount Tai in turn would feel that having clouds was a burden—and no cloud would ever come forth.³⁷

This image conveys an ideal of poetry or artistic creation, which we find already echoed in the parables of Zhuangzi or Su Shi: the work of art understood as a living, organic pattern, which does not follow given—dead—rules, but produces a regularity of its own (*ziran*).

In a treatise on poetics published in 1864, that is already after the Opium Wars, a writer named Zhu Tingzhen summarizes the discussion about rules and non-rules in the following way:

In poetry, on the one hand, there are no fixed rules, on the other hand, there are . . . A poet must direct the rules through his ego and must not let himself be directed by the rules. In this respect one begins with rules as rules and continues with the non-rule as rule. To be able to move within the rules without sticking to the rule means that one has reached the goal . . . The rule of the non-rule is the living rule (*huo fa*), the wonderfully subtle rule. If one can create according to the rule of non-rule, only then

one has an unsurpassable rule. For those who can do this, [what Su Shi said about his writing] applies that it “goes where it should go, and stops where it cannot but stop . . . [If one is guided by it,] then [the work] radiates a spiritual brightness. But if one sticks to fixed rules, does not direct the rules oneself, but follows them, then one has only dead rules (*si fa*).³⁸

Ye Xie and Zhu Tingzhen speak of a unity of naturalness and regularity in which archaistic and nonconformist approaches no longer lie so far apart. For the essence of “living rules” is not the absence of rules—arbitrary creation, creative chaos, or ingenious originality—but a transcendence of rules: regular *and* irregular. This means, on the one hand, no longer letting oneself be guided in the artistic process by the method learned, but by one’s own artistic ideas, on the other hand, trusting in the spontaneously working creative powers. A natural order and structure of the work of art is created by itself (like the work of nature)—just as Cook Ding’s knife moves in a natural way and allows the carved ox to effortlessly fall apart. Zheng Xie elsewhere calls this kind of work in painting “trusting one’s hand” (*xin shou*).³⁹ This degree of art, which in Chinese aesthetics is called *shen* (spiritual or as if made by a god)—a “divine” rulelessness—comes, however, at the end of first following rules. At the beginning of the learning process, also for the representatives of the “rule of non-rule,” that is for so-called “nonconformists” and “eccentrics,” there is practicing according to rules: the *gongfu*. Even Zhuangzi lets his cook admit that it took him years until he was able to go beyond mere skill and to cut up the ox out of the *Dao*, and the “eccentric” Zheng Xie expresses similar things.

The aim of the archaists to reach “enlightenment” or naturalness by following the correct rules—the *dharma* of poetry—thus in the end seems not so different from that of the followers of the non-rule; only the former, in their search for “enlightenment,” remain obliged to the models of the old masters, while the latter also begin with them, but seek to transcend them by taking the work of nature as a guideline and, at the same time, by bringing their own artistic ideas into play. To remain in the well-known *Chan* Buddhist metaphor, the difference between the two approaches could be compared with that between “gradual” and “sudden enlightenment” (*jianwu–dunwu*) in the Northern and Southern schools of *Chan*: Although both are identical in their aims, in practice they are fundamentally different in the sense that in “sudden enlightenment” the aim is to overcome duality and to reach unity of subject and object in a direct way and not as a goal of endless practice.

A not insignificant difference between the two currents lies in the result of their efforts, in the works of art themselves. Those of the archaists—in

poetry and painting—are made according to correct models, according to all the rules of the art, and may possess a certain spiritual radiance depending on the degree of “enlightenment” of the artist. They fit into the orthodox tradition, but in their timeless craftsmanship they reflect relatively little of the respective epoch and of the artist’s ego. The works of those who allow themselves to be guided by the rule of non-rule, on the other hand, are the agents of change who have advanced art and poetry, left behind a name and formed their own style (*zi cheng yi jia*); they are—like Du Fu—the milestones in the history of literature and art.

As far as the ideological background of the ideal of rule-conforming naturalness is concerned, we have observed that it is basically grounded on a synthesis of Confucian and Daoist or *Chan* Buddhist thought: What is asked for is a moderately balanced, methodical form according to fixed rules *and* at the same time creation in harmony with the unfathomable workings of nature. If in the discussion of this topic the Daoist/Buddhist component was emphasized, then Confucius would also have to be mentioned here additionally as an authority for the idea of transcendence of rule: At the mature age of over seventy, looking back on his various stages of life, the Master said about his moral *gongfu*: “At seventy I could follow all the movements of my heart without breaking the rules [of morality] (*cong xin suo yu, bu yu ju*).”⁴⁰

In this respect, one might conclude, we have here more than just a specific characteristic of Chinese literature and art, a mere ideal of artistic creation, which, seen as a whole, places more value on natural creativity in harmony with regular beauty than on originality and individual genius. Rather, it seems to be a cultural pattern that can perhaps also be found in other areas of life, such as social behavior. Could, for example, the ability of Chinese people today to act within strict restrictions (conforming to the rules), but still move relatively freely and easily, not also belong to this? The unity or mutual complementation of Confucianism/Legalism and Daoism/*Chan* Buddhism—of the authoritarian *and* the naturally free—seems to be more than just a characteristic of Chinese aesthetics. Perhaps, and with all due caution regarding such generalizations, it might form a building block of what the great contemporary Chinese aesthetician Li Zehou once termed the “cultural-psychological formation” (*wenhua xinli jiegou*) of China.⁴¹

NOTES

1. This chapter is based on chapters from my book in German: *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China: Von der Tradition bis zur Moderne* (Munich: K.G Saur, 2006). It is also available in a Chinese translation: Bu Songshan (K.-H.

- Pohl), *Zhongguo de meixue he wenxue lilun: Cong chuantong dao xiandai*, trans. Xiang Kai (Shanghai: Huadong shifandaxue chubanshe (East Normal University Publishing), 2010).
2. As remarked in a letter of Sikong Tu (837–908); Guo Shaoyu, *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan*, vol. 2 (Shangai, 1979), p. 201.
 3. About this expression, see also Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005), p. 31.
 4. *Guanzi jiaozheng* 管子校正, in *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* 新編諸子集成, vol. 5, p. 254 (Taipei, 1983) Gong Pengcheng, “Lun shi wen zhi ‘fa,’” in *Wenhua, wenxue yu meixue* (Taipei, 1988), p. 52.
 5. James Legge, *Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Taoism*, Vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 68.
 6. See Tu Ching-i, “The Chinese Examination Essay: Some Literary Considerations,” *Monumenta Serica* 31 (1974–75), p. 400ff.
 7. Achilles Fang, “Some Reflections on the Difficulty of Translation,” in A.F. Wright (ed.), *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 273.
 8. Max Loehr, “Art-historical Art: One Aspect of Ch’ing Painting,” *Oriental Art* N.S. vol. 16 (Spring 1970), pp. 35–37.
 9. See the programmatic “Great Preface” to the *Book of Songs*, trans. James Legge, *The Chinese Classics IV* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), pp. 34–37.
 10. Legge, *The Texts of Taoism*, vol 1., p. 198f (with modifications).
 11. Vincent Y.C. Shih (trans.), *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (bilingual edition) (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1983), pp. 19–21.
 12. William R.B. Acker, *Some T’ang and Pre-T’ang Texts on Chinese Painting* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), p. 4.
 13. In his poem *Natur und Kunst (Nature and Art)*: “In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister,” transl. John Irons.
 14. Hu Jingzhi (ed.), *Zhongguo gudian meixue congbian*, vol. 2 (Peking, 1988), p. 568.
 15. James J.Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 78.
 16. He Wenhuan, *Lidai shihua*, vol. 1 (Peking, 1981), p. 311. Cf. the German translation of *Canglang’s Poetry Talks (Canglang shihua)* by Günther Debon, *Ts’ang-lang’s Gespräche über die Dichtung: Ein Beitrag zur chinesischen Poetik* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1962), p. 20.
 17. Men Kui (Comp.) *Zhong guo lidai wenxian jingcui da dian* I (Peking 1990), p. 1117; cf. Richard John Lynn, “The Sudden and the Gradual in Chinese Poetry Criticism: An Examination of the Ch’an-Poetry Analogy,” in Peter Gregory (ed.), *Sudden and Gradual* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 392.
 18. Yan Zhongqi, (ed.), *Su Shi lun wenyi* (Peking, 1985), p. 183; Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 37.

19. Guo Shaoyu, *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan*, vol. 2, p. 310, Bush, *Chinese Literati*, p. 35.
20. Guo Shaoyu, *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan*, vol. 2, p. 307.
21. *Ming shi*, Peking 1974, j. 286, p. 7348.
22. Guo Shaoyu, *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan*, vol. 3, p. 52; James J.Y. Liu, *Art of Chinese Poetry*, p. 80; cf. R.J. Lynn, “Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: Wang Shih-chen’s Theory of Poetry and Its Antecedents,” in Wm Theodore DeBary (ed.), *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 232.
23. *Zhongguo meixue shi ziliao xuanbian* II (Peking, 1981), p. 142; cf. Lynn, “Orthodoxy,” p. 235.
24. Lynn, “Orthodoxy,” p. 219ff.
25. Jonathan Chaves (trans.), *Pilgrim of the Clouds: Poems and Essays by Yüan Hung-tao and His Brothers* (New York: Weatherhill, 1978), p. 18.
26. *Zhongguo meixue shi ziliao xuanbian* II, p. 165.
27. Hu Jingzhi, *Zhongguo gudian meixue congbian*, vol. 2, p. 577.
28. Zhao Yongji (ed.), *Gudai shihua jingyao* (Tianjin, 1989), p. 406.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
30. Legge, *The Texts of Taoism*, II, p. 141 (with modifications).
31. Yu Jianhua (Comp.) *Zhongguo lidai hualun leibian* II (Peking, 1986), p. 148; cf. Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art* (New York: Putnam Sons, 1967), p. 140.
32. Chen Zhuan, “Yuji shanfang hua wailu,” in *Meishu congshu*, vol. 1, No. 8, Taipei 1963, p. 79; cf. Victoria Contag, *Zwei Meister chinesischer Landschaftsmalerei Shih-t’ao und Shih-ch’i* (Baden Baden: W. Klein, 1955), p. 84f; see also James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 185.
33. Zheng Xie, *Zheng Banqiao ji* (Shanghai 1979), p. 222; cf. K.-H. Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch’iao: Poet, Painter and Calligrapher* (Nettetal: Steyler 1990), p. 141.
34. K.-H. Pohl, “Ye Xie’s *Yuan shi* – A Poetic of the Early Qing,” *T’oung Pao*, vol. 78 (1992), pp. 1–32.
35. Ye Xie, “Yuan shi,” in Wang Fuzhi (ed.), *Qing shihua*, vol. 2 (Shanghai, 1963), p. 574f; cf. Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 501–503.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Ye Xie, p. 577; transl. Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, p. 509, with modifications: Owen translates the last sentence: “And those clouds would still have to be sent out every single day!”
38. Zhao Yongji, *Gudai shihua jingyao*, p. 407 (*Xiaoyuan shihua*, vol. 1).
39. Zheng Xie, *Zheng Banqiao ji*, p. 154.
40. *Lunyu*, 2.4; James Legge (trans.), *The Chinese Classics* I, S. 147.
41. Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition (Huaxia meixue)*, trans. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), p. 4.

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