The Influence of Chen Hongshou's Figure Painting on Ukiyo-e—A Case Study of Katsushika Hokusai

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Abstract—**Chen Hongshou was one of the most outstanding painters in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, especially good at figure painting. By incorporating his own insights on the basis of the inheritance of painting traditions in the Tang and Song dynasties, Chen Hongshou injected new elements into the development of Chinese figure paintings, provided new ideas, and influenced all the greatest masters of ukiyo-e profoundly. This paper explains the spirit of Chen Hongshou's figure painting in terms of two points: "emulating the ancients" and "transforming the ancients", as well as the ukiyo-e "getting rid of" its traditional painting styles under the influence of Chen Hongshou from the data related to art exchanges between China and Japan. By comparing Chen Hongshou and Katsushika Hokusai from the point of view of "figure painting performances" and "figure aesthetic connotations", the comprehensive and profound influences of Chen's figure painting on the creative thinking and artistic concepts of the ukiyo-e are summarized.**

Keywords—**Chen Hongshou, figure painting, Ukiyo-e, Katsushika Hokusai**

I. Chen Hongshou's Figure Painting on the Spirit of "Ancient"

Chen Hongshou (1598–1652) was a painter in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. His courtesy name was Zhanghou, Laolian, he was also known as Xu'an, and later named as Huichi (means regret late), and he was a native of Zhuji, which is now part of Zhejiang Province. He initially learned painting from Lan Ying and studied under Liu Zongzhou at a young age. Although he once painted in the palace, but returned to the south later, then joined Shaoxing Yunmen Temple as a monk for more than one year after the fall of the Ming Danasty, later self-named Huichi, also called Laochi. He was skilled in painting in his whole life especially in figure painting. In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, a period which painters, calligraphers, as well as calligraphy and painting schools sprung, Chen Hongshou stood out with his unique artistic creativity, distinctive artistic personality, all-rounded artistic talents, and self-culture, and posed a far-reaching impact on the later generations among neighboring countries.

A. "Emulating the Ancients"

When discussing Chen Hongshou's painting style and its primary source "deeply steeped in the ancient method", "possessing the antiquity style", "taking the method from the ancients", and "deliberately emulating the antiquity" are used. [1] The term "emulating the antiquity" is associated with his work. And the background and process of his emulating antiquity are investigated in his style. Tracing and analyzing the origin of Chen Hongshou figure painting style, a very detailed analysis was concluded in Mao Qiling's *Biography of Chen Laolian*: "Lian's painting talent is very high, and each of his works employs different techniques in art: the structural method is learned from Wu Daozi; the brush painting technique from Zheng Fashi; ink techniques from Jing Hao; the Shu Xuan Fu Ran technique (a traditional Chinese painting technique) from Guan Daosheng; the painting style of ancient emperors, philosophers, and Confucian scholars is inspired by Li Gonglin; the Guanyin Shu Bi technique, a traditional Chinese painting method, from Wu Daozi and Li Gonglin; the Seven Buddhas technique from Wei Xie; the method of painting the statue of Wu Semo from Fan Qiong; the painting styles of Buddhist arhats, Bodhisattvas, Supernatural Beings, and Monsters from Zhang Sengyao; the Taoist-themed painting method from Li Gonglin; the depiction of the attire and demeanor of Scholar-officials from Yan Liben; the painting style of ladies from Zhou Fang; the portrayal of infants from Gou Longshuang; the depiction of the Duo Ji hairstyle (a Japanese hairstyle) from Zhou Fang...[1]" According to this description, it is evident that Chen Hongshou's figure painting can be divided into several major categories, each with its primary sources: philosophers, Buddhas, Guanyin, Arhats, Supernatural Beings, and monsters, drawing inspiration from Wu Daozi, Li Gonglin, and Yan Liben; as well as traditional Chinese paintings of ladies and infants, influenced by Zhou Fang, Li Gonglin, and others.

According to the above description, Li Gonglin was the most influential art master for Chen Hongshou's style. Chen Hongshou has been a great admirer of Li Gonglin since he was a child, and memorized Li's works by heart and was able to point out the mistakes of facsimiles of Li's works, indicating the extent of his admiration for Li. Chen's masterpiece, influenced by Li's painting style during his initial stage of learning, was *the Nine Songs*, created when he was 19. This painting is associated with Li Gonglin's *Nine Songs Illustration* to some extent. For example, the brushwork used by Chen Hongshou in creating the figures in the painting is characterized by a combination of circular and square strokes, which can be said to have been influenced to some extent by Li Gonglin's brushwork. When comparing the details of Chen Hongshou's work with Li Gonglin's, it is obvious that Chen Hongshou's *Nine Songs Illustration* is livelier and full of vitality, embodying the spirit of the original *Nine Songs*. And Chen's work shows an almost perfect portrayal of the spiritual status of the characters, especially in his Illustration of *Qu Yuan's Wandering Ode*, which perfectly captures Qu Yuan's thoughts, emotions, and qualities.

Secondly, Chen Hongshou's traditional Chinese painting of ladies have a direct relationship with Zhou Fang from the

Tang Dynasty. From the characteristics of Chen Hongshou's figures, Chen Hongshou was greatly influenced by Zhou Fang's style. In the Tang Dynasty, the aesthetic sense and regional aspects of the era made the people in the Tang Dynasty favored the image of fat and beautiful. At the same time, in *the Xuanhe Catalog of Painting Records*, "It is said that Zhou Fang's paintings of ladies were mainly of the plump type, but this is only a generalization, for Zhou Fang often traveled among the children of the nobility. Most of the women he saw were beautiful and luxurious noblewomen, and therefore, most of them were of the plump type." In the Ming and Qing dynasties, all the paintings of lady figures were characterized by thinness and slimness, except for Chen Hongshou, whose figures were plumper. Some of them were even very plump, especially in his depictions of the faces of the figures, they were all square or even bell-shaped, which can hardly be said to be not influenced by Zhou Fang's character images. Although during the Ming and Qing dynasties, people mostly appreciated slender and weak women, and most women in society were of this type, but Chen Hongshou's portrayal of figures did not follow the trend, he pursued antiquity diligently in his paintings, tried to cleanse "the society advocated gorgeousness" with the style of "Simple style in ancient times". Therefore, he deliberately painted more plump ladies, without being affected by the social painting style at that time, thus forming his personal characteristics. Chen Hongshou's approach is also highly unified with his life philosophy and creative trends, he advocated bold deformation in his art works, boldly emphasized the character's facial expression and feeling, or highlighted the effect of dress, modeling, etc., which together formed Chen Hongshou's style of graphic features and subconsciously embodied the characteristics of his life and personality. At the age of forty-five, Chen Hongshou, under the Chongzhen emperor's appreciation, was ordered to enter the palace to copy the emperor's portrait, thus he could see the collection of the Palace House of the famous paintings of the past. He could once again have an opportunity to study many famous masters' works in the past dynasties and to feel their spiritual connotation, which dramatically improved his painting skills.

To sum up, Chen Hongshou had a reverence for antiquity, he was constantly seeking and exploring it, at the same time, he also paid great attention to experiencing the "ancient" aesthetic connotations and cultural depths in order to establish his own style and his characteristic features. Later historians were deeply touched by this aspect and thus evaluated him: "His works are deeply influenced by ancient painting. They are silent and integrated, bearing the style of ancient times and remaining unaffected by the flashy and showy habits of the society of that time."

B. "Transforming the Ancients"

Chen Hongshou's artistic career cannot be separated from his study and imitation of the ancients. However, Chen Hongshou did not consider "deliberately emulating the antiquity" as the highest goal of his artistic life. Many sources prove that he learned to paint by copying ancient techniques in art, by constantly "changing his artistic method," and ultimately formed the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Chen Hongshou's style. In the realm of Chen Hongshou's artistic aesthetics, his "ancient" has transcended the so-called "ancient methods in art," "tradition," and "the ancients," and risen to an aesthetic significance and realm implying a deep cultural connotation.

Chen Hongshou had a special relationship with Li Gonglin from the beginning of his painting studies. It can be said that he earnestly absorbed Li Gonglin's techniques, from initially copying works that were 'similar and pleasing,' and later moving on to 'dissimilar yet pleasing' compositions. He copied Li Gonglin's works numerous times, gradually altering his painting style from circular to angular and from orderly to disorderly, until observers could no longer discern the difference. It can be seen that Chen Hongshou was copying Li's works, at the same time he was also following his nature of talent and comprehension, transforming what he learned to form his own art style. This evolution in Chen Hongshou's approach can be analyzed from two perspectives: the use of line and modeling. With regards to line usage, Li Gonglin is characterized by the "YouSi line technique (a technique in traditional Chinese painting)", which resembles the spinning of silk by spring silkworms, exhibiting neat and elongated lines, with more roundness and fewer angular folds. In Chen Hongshou's early work, *Nine Songs Illustration* (Fig. 1), one can observe the use of lines. Although there are many angular strokes, the majority are circular. Among the fine and round lines mixed with angular strokes, there is an emphasis on a pent-up atmosphere, unlike Li Gonglin's 'gentle and stable' lines. However, in Chen Hongshou's middle-aged painting, *Water Margin Leaves*, the distinct feature is the use of straight square strokes, unlike Li Gonglin's lines, which are more elongated and stretched. In terms of modeling, although Li Gonglin's existing works are few, from some of the works copied from him, his characteristic modeling is mostly proportionate, with the ratio of head to body generally around 1:5. The overall modeling tends to be rounded, without a sense of squareness; even the transitions of the figures seem calm and peaceful. Chen Hongshou's early works were relatively close to Li Gonglin in terms of modeling, but there was always something unusual, such as Qu Yuan's Wandering Ode (Fig. 2), where he exaggerated the proportions of Qu Yuan's head and body to express his loneliness at the time. Additionally, the clothing made of lines was mostly rounded with some square elements. Therefore, it can be seen that although Chen Hongshou emulated and learned from the ancients, he had his own insights and perceptions during the process of copying, combined with his unique temperament, thus created his distinctive artistic characteristics.

Fig. 1. Li Gonglin's Nine Songs Illustration (fragment).
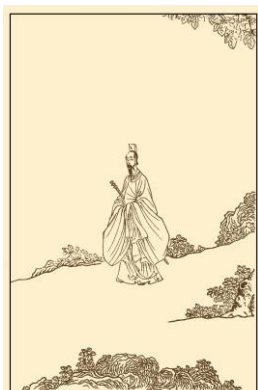
Fig. 2. Chen Hongshou's Qu Yuan's Wandering Ode.

Chen Hongshou had a deep desire and pursuit of "ancient methods", which also echoed the prevailing trend of his time. However, his analysis of the ancients and predecessors was remarkably sober. Particularly regarding which aspects of antiquity to emulate and how to learn from them, he demonstrated remarkable and thorough insights. Overall, Chen Hongshou placed great importance on the spiritual connotations of 'antiquity,' and considered it not just as an aesthetic category but also as a cultural symbol. He tirelessly sought to reconstruct the cultural depth of "antiquity".

II. CHEN HONGSHOU AND UKIYO-E

Ukiyo-e, a form of popular art that emerged during the Edo period in Japan (1603–1867), spread to the West predating Chinese art owing to the economic development that drove artistic revival. It significantly influenced French Impressionist painters in the 19th century, as well as artists from various other Western art movements. Throughout Japanese history, there has been a strong emphasis on learning from and inheriting Chinese culture through various means and channels. During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Japanese merchants traveled to China via the coastal ports of Zhejiang and brought back many excellent Chinese paintings to Japan. Among them were Tang Yin's *Beautys*, Qiu Shizhou's *Spring Palace Painting*, and inevitably, the representational works of Chen Hongshou, which represented the highest level of woodblock printing in China at that time, were also brought to Japan and later became the main artistic source that directly influenced Japanese ukiyo-e. Chen Hongshou's "Water Margin Characters" was copied, engraved, and reprinted continuously in the later period of ukiyo-e, and even forming a level of popularity.

Chen Hongshou's unique style of character painting, which absorbed ancient methods to create new artistic styles, with its innovative and varied compositions, and distinctive character transformations, such as his characteristic elongated heads and large chins, or the iconic features of large heads and small hands, have all been inherited by later ukiyo-e masters. According to Zhao Chengming's article *Chen Hongshou's art and influence on the Japanese ukiyo-e* "The leading ukiyo-e painters of 'Japaneseism,' including Katsushika Hokusai of the Tokugawa period and later Hiroshige Ando, actually absorbed a large number of techniques and essence from the art of the Chen Lao Lian of the Oriental art source, China, and even some of the pictures were directly copied from Chen Lao Lian's woodblock

prints.[2]" Moreover, during the later years of the Kansei period (1789–1801), the most famous painter of "Yakusha-e," Toshusai Sharaku, also deeply embodied Chen Hongshou's characteristics in his works, such as the hooked nose and large mouth in his paintings. Similarly, the Japanese art theorist Miyake Shotaro also stated in his book Eastern and Western Modern Art: "After the 9th century, significant changes occurred in Japanese art, particularly during the 19th century, marking the end of the influence of Chinese and Western art on Japanese art." This renowned Japanese art theorist could recognize this fact and further conducted a specific analysis: "The Japanese have a strong sense of lines but a weak sense of planes, which is their weakness, while the Chinese are stronger in planes compared to the Japanese." He also explicitly pointed out: "Such as the lines and planes in the woodblock prints of Ming Dynasty Chinese artist Chen Hongshou are quite rigid." However, in another chapter of his book, Miyake Shotaro mentioned: "The preference for distorted and flawed shapes is not limited to artists and tea ceremony practitioners in Japan but is also the aesthetic habit of the broad Japanese people. Therefore, the love of distorted and flawed shapes...is the aesthetic criterion of the Japanese people. This form of breaking away from the orthodox Chinese style is entirely rebellious against orthodox aesthetics.[3]" Mr. Huang Yongquan wrote in the preface to *The Collection of Chen Hongshou's Works*: "Contemporary international scholars even regard Chen Laolian as the first among many artists with thoroughly unique styles that emerged in the 17th century. Like Lao Lian's character paintings with large chins.[4]" It can be inferred that this form of breaking away from the orthodox Chinese style and rebelling against orthodox aesthetics should first belong to Chen Hongshou and a group of Chinese artists who opposed orthodox aesthetics. They gave Japanese artists new aesthetic tastes of breaking away from the orthodox Chinese art style and rebelling against orthodox aesthetics, and provided Japanese artists with enlightenment and the basis for "breaking away from the orthodox Chinese art style" in their absorption and practice. They "rejected neatness and symmetry" and chose "distortion and flaws," thus further conformed to the aesthetic choices of the Japanese public. Among them, Katsushika Hokusai, deeply influenced by Chen Hongshou's painting, also became a hero to the Japanese people, and his paintings, represented by him, became "the aesthetic criterion of the Japanese people."

III. THE INFLUENCE OF CHEN HONGSHOU'S FIGURE PAINTING ON KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI

A. Figure Painting Performances

Firstly, in terms of figure portrayal, Chen Hongshou emphasized the study of masters from the Tang and Song dynasties, drawing on traditional techniques. He continuously absorbed the essence of Wu Daozi and Li Gonglin's paintings, but he did not merely imitate the ancients. In his portrayal of the forty heroes from the Water Margin Leaves, Chen Hongshou exhibited his unique stylistic features, showing that he both inherited from the past and forged new paths. Water Margin Leaves is a monochrome woodblock print that utilizes line modeling with concise and dense lines and without additional coloring.

It emphasizes external contours while downplaying internal structures. Most depictions of Water Margin characters by Chen Hongshou feature strong and forceful angular lines, with transitions from circular to square shapes, creating lines that are lean and straight, vigorous and powerful[5]. For example, in his depiction of Lin Chong (Fig. 3), Chen Hongshou uses strong and vigorous lines, with many sharp corners at the turns, which is a typical manifestation of this style. Chen Hongshou's use of robust lines captures the characters' inner determination and strength, achieving a unity of form and spirit. Comparatively, Katsushika Hokusai's portrayal of Lin Chong (Fig. 4) also uses line drawing forms. Both depict the characters holding swords while turning their heads to look back. However, Hokusai uses Ding Tou Shu Wei lines (one of the methods of painting pleats on clothing of ancient Chinese figures), which made the lines more fluid and varied, with more detailed depictions of facial features and hands, resulting in a richer and more delicate portrayal of the characters. Moreover, Hokusai's depiction of Zhu Wu was also greatly influenced by Chen Hongshou. Chen Hongshou's depiction of Zhu Wu (Fig. 5), with his head covered in a headscarf and wearing wide robes, exudes the demeanor of a Confucian scholar, with piercing eyes and a contemplative expression while looking at the chess pieces on the ground. In terms of character portrayal, the lines are robust and well-organized. Hokusai's depiction of Zhu Wu (Fig. 6) basically follows Chen Hongshou's model, especially in Zhu Wu's clothing, beard, and feather fan, which are almost identical, except for the change from a sitting to a standing posture. Comparing these two, Chen Hongshou's portrayal of Zhu Wu features clear, concise lines, well-balanced spacing, an antique and peculiar style, and a compelling aura. In contrast, Hokusai's portrayal of Zhu Wu features richer lines and textures, with more curved lines outlining intricate clothing patterns, and more detailed facial features, presenting a character who is both scholarly and astute.

Fig. 3. Chen Hongshou, Water Margin Leaves (Lin Chong).

Fig. 4. Katsushika Hokusai's New Water Margin Painting (Lin Chong).

Fig. 5. Chen Hongshou, Water Margin Leaves (Zhu Wu).

Fig. 6. Katsushika Hokusai's New Water Margin Painting (Zhu Wu).

Secondly, in terms of compositional expression in figure painting, Chen Hongshou's *Water Margin Leaves* pays great attention to the use of blank-leaving. *In* the illustrations of storybooks since the Song and Yuan dynasties, there is less use of blank-leaving. Chen Hongshou's *Water Margin Leaves* differs from previous styles by placing only one character in the center of the picture, with a large amount of blank-leaving around it and no background setting. The focus of the ink lies in the character's body, movement, and facial features, thus highlighting the emotional characteristics of the central character. For example, Chen Hongshou's portrayal of Song Jiang exhibits a dignified demeanor and a majestic appearance, with his left hand lightly touching his beard and his right hand pointing forward, positioned slightly to the right of center, with blank leaving in front and behind. Although no soldiers are visible, it seems as if he is commanding tens of thousands of troops. Katsushika Hokusai inherited the aesthetic style established by Chen Hongshou, shifting from illustrations of Water Margin stories to individual character portraits. In his works *New Water Margin Painting* and *Loyalty Water Margin Painting Book*, each creation is an independent work of art. While drawing inspiration from Chen Hongshou's compositions of Water Margin characters, Hokusai's artistic styles are more flexible. In Hokusai's *New Water Margin Painting*, each character is typically depicted on one page, but for important characters, a double-page spread is used, allowing for humorous and witty depictions of two or three characters on one page. Hokusai's *New Water Margin Painting* also uses blank-leaving backgrounds for many characters. However, Chen Hongshou diverges from the narrative of the novel when illustrating the story in his paintings, which differs from Katsushika Hokusai's approach. Katsushika Hokusai adds important story elements to some character depictions, incorporating the artist's personal experiences and emotions[6]. For example, Zhang Shun (Fig. 7) is depicted with a background of surging waves, highlighting his extraordinary swimming ability and making the picture appear richer and more

dynamic.

Fig. 7. Katsushika Hokusai's New Water Margin Painting (Zhang Shun).

B. Figure Aesthetic Connotations

The portrayal of courtesans by Katsushika Hokusai, mainly geishas and performers from Kabuki theater, regardless of whether appearing charmingly pitiful in the early stages or bold and exotic in later periods, exudes a strong sense of worldly allure. The primary intent is to depict the pleasures of contemporary life, thus pursuing an aesthetic quest characterized by "vulgar" and "alluring" attributes. In contrast, Chen Hongshou predominantly depicted virtuous and elegant women, showcasing their leisurely and refined lifestyles alongside literati and scholar-officials. His aesthetic ideal is characterized by "elegance" and "refined grace". Chen Hongshou lived in the Jiangnan region during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, where societal conduct was heavily influenced by Neo-Confucianism. Despite certain advancements in socio-economic status, behaviors and manners, whether of courtesans or noble ladies, needed to conform to the notion of "ritual." Although Chen Hongshou exhibited a strong sense of concern for women and explored novel approaches in form, lines, and composition, the overall aesthetic appeal still needed to align with the contemporary societal tastes. "On the one hand, Chen Hongshou's artistic style differed from that of his contemporaneous literati painters, as he drew inspiration from folk woodblock prints and folk paintings, resulting in an aura of "antiquity" in his artistic style. On the other hand, his profound knowledge in Buddhism and literature added a sense of tranquility and elegance to his painting artistry[7]." Conversely, Katsushika Hokusai lived in late Edo-period Japan, a time of flourishing commodity economy, where citizens had more diverse aesthetic demands rooted in human nature. Ukiyo-e artists like Hokusai were not bound by feudal Confucian norms and could boldly depict the realities of secular society. Taking Chen Hongshou's Beauty (Fig. 8) as an example, she portrays a lady with crossed arms, leaning forward as if to greet someone, showcasing a feminine figure with slender shoulders, a long neck, and a towering hairstyle. With a serene demeanor and graceful posture. In contrast, Katsushika Hokusai's mature period bijin-ga paintings exude a worldly beauty, as seen in Two Beauties (Fig. 9), depicting two native Japanese women with intricately detailed facial features and luxurious attire. These women have tall, slender figures with distinctive Japanese characteristics, including elongated eyes, high bridged noses, and slightly parted lips. Enhanced by elaborate makeup and intricate hair ornaments, they exude a seductive, lavish beauty characteristic of secular allure [8].

Fig. 8. Chen Hongshou, Beauty.

Fig. 9. Katsushika Hokusai's Two Beauties.

In summary, it can be seen that Chen Hongshou's influence on ukiyo-e had a profound impact on the creative thinking and artistic concepts of ukiyo-e. Importantly, Chen Hongshou's creative thinking liberated ukiyo-e from the constraints of traditional Chinese painting, allowing ukiyo-e masters to break free from imitating Chinese traditions and develop their own unique style. This influence completely changed the individual appearance and overall fate of ukiyo-e. Overall, Chen Hongshou's influence on Japanese ukiyo-e was significant, and Japanese ukiyo-e's influence on Western art was substantial. This Eastern art form, while evolving and enriching itself, blended Eastern and Western artistic languages, thus further advancing the development of both Eastern and Western arts and making an indelible contribution to world art.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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