

Reconsidering the Aesthetic Attributes and Value of AI-Generated Art from the Perspective of “Qu”

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Abstract: Drawing on the concept of “Qu” from traditional Chinese aesthetics, this paper examines the aesthetic generative mechanisms and value attribution of AI-generated art. Grounded in *Qu*’s key characteristics—non-instrumentality, balanced mediation, the principle of “deviating from convention while remaining in accord with aesthetic order,” and embodied experience—this study proposes an alternative framework for understanding AI art. By doing so, it seeks to articulate a middle path that reconciles human subjectivity with technological generativity, thereby fostering a model of human–technology co-existence within a posthuman context.

Keywords: AI-generated art; “Qu”; Aesthetic attributes; Artistic value; Innovation; Human–machine symbiosis

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1. Introduction

In recent years, AI-generated art has emerged as one of the most prominent applications of artificial intelligence in the cultural and artistic domains. On the technological front, models such as OpenAI’s DALL·E series, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion have undergone rapid iteration, significantly enhancing the precision, diversity, and complexity of text-to-image generation. At the same time, the commercial and cultural impact of AI-generated imagery has expanded markedly, with applications ranging from advertising and digital design to gaming and virtual reality. AI-generated works have also received awards in major competitions. This indicates that it is gradually transitioning from an experimental tool into an art form recognized by the professional community^[1].

Yet this rapid development has also given rise to profound concerns. As Zhou Bo has argued in “The Crisis of Artificial Intelligence and Artistic Creation,” the efficiency of AI image generation risks cheapening established artistic styles and eroding artistic uniqueness; the displacement of the creative subject by a “human + anthropomorphic system” contributes to aesthetic homogenization and the dissolution of the artist’s identity; moreover, the automation of skills threatens the continuity of cultural heritage, particularly traditional artistic techniques.

More fundamentally, traditional Western aesthetic theories struggle to adequately address AI-generated art. Most of these theories are grounded in the human subject and therefore struggle to address the ontological challenges introduced by AI’s involvement in artistic creation. For example, Baumgarten’s conception of art as the “perfection of sensuous cognition,” for instance, presupposes the unity of human sensation and reason, whereas AI’s “sensibility” is merely

a simulation of patterns devoid of lived experience. Similarly, Clive Bell's concept of "significant form" emphasizes emotional meaning shaped by subjective intention, yet AI-generated forms are largely driven by algorithmic probability, making it difficult to foreground the necessity of human agency.

In view of these limitations, this paper draws on the traditional Chinese theory of "Qu" to examine the aesthetic attributes of AI-generated images. "Qu" encompasses pleasure, meaningful interest, and a sense of vital resonance, and it emphasizes the dynamic generation of art as well as the interactive resonance between the work and its viewers. This perspective allows us to move beyond binary debates over whether AI art "counts" as art and instead refocus on aesthetic experience itself. By doing so, it opens a more nuanced and inclusive space for understanding AI-generated art within contemporary cultural contexts^[2].

2. The historical formation and semantic evolution of "Qu"

As a key category in classical Chinese aesthetics, "Qu" (interest or pleasure) originated semantically as a purely behavioral directive. The "Shuowen Jiezi" defines "Qu" as "Ji", where "Qu" denotes "swift movement" or "running quickly". Over time, its meaning gradually shifted from a notion of physical movement to that of mental intention. In the "Book of Han," "Biography of Wang Bao", the phrase "each has its "Qu" and "She", according to differing times and circumstances, appears; Yan Shigu glosses "Qu" as "that toward which the mind is directed," marking the emergence of a spiritual or intentional dimension.

By the Tang and Song dynasties, "Qu" had developed from a general aesthetic notion into an independent theory with rich connotations. Its initial role in aesthetics was to counter excessive rationalization in poetic creation. Yan Yu explicitly stated that "poetry has its own distinct "Qu", unrelated to rational principle." In this context, "Qu" refers to an intuitive aesthetic Quality in poetry that transcends logical reasoning.

During the Ming and Qing periods, "Qu" became a central aesthetic theory. "Xianqing Shangjian" classified "Qu" into "Tian Qu" (natural interest), "Ren Qu" (human interest), and "Wu Qu" (object-based interest) as criteria for evaluating the Qualitative rank of painting. During this period, theories of "Qu" were not only applied to the criticism of traditional painting but also showed a forward-looking character by extending to emerging art forms, particularly theatrical creation. In "Xianqing Ouji," Li Yu advanced the notion of "Ji Qu" (mechanism and interest), in which he regarded "ji" as the inner spiritual driving force of dramatic works, while "Qu" pertains to their artistic character and aesthetic resonance^[3].

In the modern and contemporary period, theories of "Qu" intersected with Western aesthetic thought and were elevated to the level of philosophy. Liang Qichao proposed an aesthetic of "the doctrine of aesthetic Qu", arguing that taste constitutes the primary driving force of life and that activities of taste possess a Quality of "action without utilitarian purpose," which he considered the fundamental condition of aesthetics. Zhu Guangqian emphasized, on the one hand, the disinterested nature of "the appreciation of aesthetic interest (Qu)," and on the other, extended this notion of "Qu" to life itself, viewing it as both a profound understanding of and an attachment to life. In 1996, Zhang Hongliang's Chinese Aesthetics of Qu offered a systematic analysis of the status, meanings, and historical development of Qu in traditional Chinese aesthetic thought, highlighting it as a core element of aesthetic sensibility and artistic resonance, and pioneering its inclusion in a systematic framework of aesthetic studies.

It is thus evident that "Qu" has been a continuous and central concept throughout the history of Chinese art criticism. With its long lineage, wide range of applications, and multifaceted meanings, it embodies the distinctive spirit of intuition and resonance within the Chinese aesthetic tradition, while continually undergoing reinterpretation and expansion within new artistic contexts.

3. The aesthetic generation of "Qu" in AI-generated art

This chapter aims to systematically analyze the generative mechanisms of "Qu" in AI painting. Unlike traditional artistic

creation, which relies primarily on human sensory perception and emotional experience, the aesthetic appeal of AI-generated art reflects both the uniqueness of technological generation and the active involvement of human subjects in the processes of creation and appreciation. This mechanism can be examined from three interrelated dimensions^[4].

3.1. Generative preconditions: Balanced mediation and the positioning of aesthetic purity

In Chinese aesthetic theory, the original function of “Qu” was to mediate the binary opposition between emotion and reason, a role that endowed “Qu” from the outset with an inherent sense of inclusiveness, balance, and moderation. This mediating function is evident in the relationship between the human subject and the natural scene. Taking Wang Wei’s poem “Zhu Li Guan” (“The Bamboo Grove”)—with the line “Sitting alone in the deep bamboo grove, I play the zither and let out a long whistle”—as an example, the secluded bamboo grove does not reveal its aesthetic resonance on its own; rather, its “Qu” emerges through the poet’s solitary sitting and music-making, where human emotion and natural rhythm converge. This is neither a mere naturalistic depiction nor unrestrained subjective projection, but an activation of latent aesthetic potential through human engagement.

In the modern and contemporary period, the introduction of Western theories further endowed “Qu” with a pursuit of aesthetic purity characterized by disinterestedness and purposelessness. Thinkers such as Zhu Guangqian and Liang Qichao emphasized that aesthetic experience must remain detached from utilitarian concerns, gradually positioning “Qu” as a core concept of aesthetic purity. From this perspective, before debating whether AI-generated images constitute “true art,” we might first acknowledge their capacity to be interesting—that is, to generate aesthetic pleasure independent of ontological classification. Such an approach allows aesthetic judgment to remain open, neutral, and unburdened by premature normative anxiety.

3.2. Modes of creation: Stylistic innovation as “Deviating from convention while remaining in accord with order”

In traditional Chinese art theory, the creation of “Qu” is often associated with resisting established paradigms and promoting artistic renewal, pointing toward an aesthetic effect that is novel, vivid, and unexpected. “Shiren Yuxie” records the statement that “poetry takes striking “Qu” as its guiding principle, and finds “Qu” in deviation from convention while remaining in accord with the Dao,” where “deviation” signifies a break from established norms, and “accord with the Dao” refers to the unity of inner coherence and aesthetic law. Similarly, Zhang Yan emphasizes in “Ciyuan” that “lyrics should take meaningful ‘Qu’ as their core and should not merely repeat the expressions or intentions of earlier writers.” In both cases, “Qu” refers not to superficial novelty but to creative transformation grounded in tradition. Li Qingzhao’s poem “Drunken Flower Shade” exemplifies this principle by replacing conventional autumnal symbols with interior imagery such as incense smoke and dim light, thereby reshaping emotional expression through atmospheric subtlety.

By contrast, early AI-generated art largely relied on stylistic imitation and recombination, lacking genuine deviation and thus attracting criticism. The 2016 project “The Next Rembrandt,” for instance, was dismissed by critic Jonathan Jones as “soulless,” reflecting its perceived absence of creative depth. With ongoing technological iteration—especially the widespread adoption of next-generation models such as Midjourney—AI-generated imagery has increasingly exhibited stylistic hybridity and a de-emphasis on identifiable sources. Its images are difficult to trace to any single artistic lineage, yet collectively they display a form of novelty that clearly distinguishes them from traditional paradigms.

However, the sense of “Qu” in AI-generated imagery is not stable or fixed. While its high productivity and controllability can produce an initial sense of surprise through the “unexpected,” they can also lead to stylistic homogenization and aesthetic fatigue. For example, the widespread use of high-precision surrealist styles in advertising has quickly diminished their novelty, resulting in a corresponding loss of aesthetic interest. The stylistic system of AI art is not static or closed, but continuously evolving. Award-winning works from the 2024 AIGC competition jointly organized by the Central Academy of Fine Arts and Tencent, as well as the constantly emerging new-stream styles on platforms such as Midjourney, demonstrate how “Qu” can be reactivated within specific contexts by breaking away from established

templates and renewing aesthetic effects^[5].

Importantly, such deviation does not fall outside aesthetic order. AI models are trained on the cumulative history of human art, and human intervention—through prompt design, selection, and refinement—continues to anchor AI outputs within shared aesthetic norms. Therefore, although innovation in AI-generated imagery often takes the form of stylistic “deviation,” it still operates, in overall terms, within the Dao of art.

3.3. Modes of appreciation: Interactive and shared aesthetic participation

The experience of “Qu” depends on embodied, personal insight rather than discursive explanation. As Yuan Hongdao observed, “Qu” resembles “the color of mountains or the taste of water—known only to those who experience it directly.” Zhang Dai’s solitary appreciation in “Watching Snow” at “The Pavilion by the Lake” similarly underscores the private, self-sufficient nature of such aesthetic moments. Comparable experiences can be found in the prolonged handling of scholars’ objects, a similar experience can be found in the practice of appreciating wenwan objects, where aesthetic pleasure does not arise from instant visual stimulation but gradually accumulates through long-term interaction between the individual and the object^[6].

Applied to AI-generated art, this experiential model suggests that aesthetic appreciation should not be limited to viewing final images. Instead, “Qu” unfolds throughout the generative process itself—from prompt formulation to iterative refinement. While this blurs the traditional boundary between creation and appreciation, it constitutes one of AI art’s distinctive features. The pleasure of experimentation and discovery becomes an integral component of aesthetic experience.

Moreover, this experience is highly shareable. Prompt engineering has become a core creative skill within AI art communities, with techniques circulating widely across platforms such as ArtStation and Reddit. As Oppenlaender et al. observe, users actively exchange strategies to refine output Quality and style, transforming spectators into co-creators. Consequently, “Qu” extends from individual insight to collective participation.

4. Theoretical implications of defining AI art through “Qu”

Building on the previous chapter’s analysis of how “Qu” is generated in AI painting, this chapter further explores its theoretical significance in defining the artistic value of AI works. A “Qu”-based perspective emphasizes the central role of human experience in aesthetic engagement while also accounting for the innovative potential inherent in AI generation. The discussion in this chapter is organized around three key dimensions^[7].

4.1. Dissolving human–machine antagonism and reaffirming human-centered aesthetics

As Ihab Hassan has argued within posthumanist theory, traditional humanist frameworks are no longer sufficient to account for the cultural and aesthetic configurations that emerge with the intervention of artificial intelligence. Contemporary thought increasingly emphasizes a symbiotic human–machine relationship, viewing AI as an extension of human capacities rather than a substitute for subjectivity.

Against this theoretical backdrop, evaluating AI-generated imagery with “Qu” as the core criterion directly responds to the conceptual shift from opposition to symbiosis. In Chinese aesthetics, “Qu” foregrounds moderation, harmony, and non-instrumentality, constituting an aesthetic perspective centered on subjective experience. Taking “Qu” as a reference point for assessing AI art helps move beyond binary debates such as whether AI works “count as art” or whether they “replace humans,” allowing aesthetic judgment to return to experience itself. At the same time, this approach does not diminish human subjectivity; on the contrary, it highlights its irreplaceability within the aesthetic domain. This is because “Qu”, by its nature, is an intuitive, instinctive “knowing smile” that arises from the interaction between the human mind and the object. While AI may master formal patterns and generate images with great efficiency, it cannot genuinely experience or perceive “Qu”. Accordingly, in AI art practice, pleasure remains fundamentally human: creators encounter

“Qu” through the modulation and exploration of prompts, viewers extend “Qu” through interaction and re-creation, and AI functions merely as a medium for generating and carrying pleasure. In this sense, human experience continues to constitute the ultimate measure of the value of generative artificial intelligence.

It follows that using “Qu” as the standard for assessing the artistic value of AI-generated imagery not only helps ease the tension in human-machine opposition, but also offers a balanced evaluative pathway for contemporary art—one that accommodates both subjectivity and technological generation. Rather than weakening a human-centered position, this perspective reaffirms, within a posthuman context, that the foundation of artistic value ultimately resides in human aesthetic perception and experience.

4.2. Innovation as criterion: Re-centering the value of originality

Examining the creative process of AI-generated imagery through the lens of “Qu” as “deviation from convention while remaining in accord with the Dao” reveals two key insights: On the one hand, it clarifies that the value of AI lies in innovation—the continual production of works that exhibit “deviant” Qualities while remaining aligned with aesthetic principles. On the other hand, it distills the irreplaceability of originality in contemporary art: only through genuine creative breakthroughs can the enduring vitality of art be sustained. This distillation manifests itself on two interconnected levels^[8].

At the level of style, AI’s realization of “deviation” relies heavily on the ongoing renewal of its technological pathways. Its innovation is not limited to the collage or deformation of preexisting artistic styles; rather, it more fundamentally arises from iterative advances in underlying algorithms and model architectures. For example, diffusion models have markedly enhanced the subtlety and complexity of image generation, enabling a higher degree of coherence between local detail and overall atmosphere. Meanwhile, the maturation of style transfer and cross-modal generation techniques allows AI to traverse established artistic traditions and recombine them with greater freedom, thereby giving rise to visual forms that diverge from existing paradigms. In this sense, AI’s “stylistic deviation” is not an arbitrary departure but a form of structural innovation grounded in technological evolution.

At the level of content, however, the realization of “accord with the Dao” underscores the decisive role of human creativity. Although AI offers an expansive range of possibilities in formal generation, the activation of genuine “aesthetic pleasure” ultimately depends on the creative input humans provide through prompt design, contextual framing, and the selective evaluation of outputs. AI lowers the threshold of traditional artistic technique, allowing artistic value to return more centrally to aesthetic judgment and conceptual imagination. Therefore, in the context of AI, the distinctiveness of human artists lies not in their technical skills, but in their ability to introduce “new interest (Qu)^[9].”

In sum, evaluating AI-generated imagery with “Qu” understood as “deviation from convention while remaining in accord with the Dao” not only acknowledges its technological advantages but also reaffirms the centrality of originality within the system of artistic value. AI produces the novelty of “deviation,” while humans calibrate the measure of “accord.” It is precisely within this collaborative structure that art retains its capacity for sustained innovation in a posthuman context, while the irreplaceability of originality becomes all the more salient.

4.3. Reconfiguring the aesthetic process: Equality between creation and appreciation

From the aesthetic appreciation of “Qu”, its core lies in the subject’s intuitive understanding and pleasure derived from direct experience, rather than in dazzling external forms. This characteristic requires the active engagement of the viewer, highlighting the necessity of individual interaction with the work. Introducing this perspective into the aesthetic evaluation of AI-generated images helps to highlight the viewer’s agency in processes of re-creation and, at the same time, reveals a distinctive feature of AI art in comparison with traditional painting: creation and appreciation no longer constitute clearly separated stages, but instead form an integrated, continuously evolving process marked by mutual permeation. As a result, the power structure within artistic practice undergoes a notable transformation, with creators and viewers tending toward greater parity in the AI context and traditional role boundaries correspondingly weakened.

Such shifts in artistic power relations brought about by technological innovation are not unprecedented in the history of art. The advent of printmaking diminished the monopoly of original works over aesthetic access; photography challenged painting's exclusive claim to "truth"; and modern art further opened interpretive authority to the public, as artists relinquished their sole prerogative to determine a work's meaning. Within this historical trajectory, AI-generated imagery not only grants viewers interpretive freedom but also enables their direct participation in processes of re-creation. Aesthetic activity thus moves away from the mere contemplation of finished works toward an open, interactive, and continuously extensible process. Accordingly, the evaluation of artistic value shifts from a singular emphasis on "completeness" to a heightened concern for the generative process and the experience of "Qu" itself.

5. Conclusion

In sum, "Qu" in AI-generated imagery arises from disinterested appreciation, is grounded in works that embody formal and stylistic innovation, and is realized through the viewer's observation, contemplation, and creative engagement, producing aesthetic experience and mental resonance. Theoretically, this framework revitalizes traditional Chinese aesthetics while offering a robust analytical model for AI art—one that resists technological reductionism and affirms the primacy of human aesthetic experience. In doing so, it ensures that artistic creation remains human-centered, even within increasingly intelligent technological environments.

Disclosure statement

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