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BETWEEN FORM AND SPIRIT: A SPIRITUAL INQUIRY INTO THE ART OF HORSE PAINTING IN CHINA

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Abstract. Unlike Western traditional horse painting, rooted in mimetic theory, Chinese horse painting has embodied spiritual significance since its origins, seeking the perfect fusion of *form* (*xing*) and *spirit* (*shen*). This paper utilizes comparative East–West aesthetics, cultural memory theory, and iconographic analysis to examine its artistic spirit across three dimensions: historical, spiritual, and aesthetic. Historically, the genre's evolution accords with Hegel's triadic model: symbolic, classical, and romantic. Spiritually, the myth of the Dragon-Horse bearing the River Chart is analyzed to trace the genesis of the "Dragon–Horse spirit" (*longma jingshen*) and its enduring influence on the morphology and spiritual aspirations of equine imagery. Aesthetically, meticulous-style (*gongbi*) and freehand-style (*xieyi*) horse painting, though technically divergent, are shown to be unified by the principle of "form–spirit oneness" and by the common medium of ink wash, thereby epitomizing the character of Eastern art.

Keywords: Chinese horse painting art, dragon–horse spirit, national spirit, cultural memory, meticulous-style equine painting, freehand-style equine painting

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1. Introduction

Painting as an art form is a spiritual activity through which humanity transcends the demands of material survival. Its essence lies in encoding collective emotions and worldviews into visual symbols with aesthetic intent. However, as Erwin Panofsky observed, "The meaning of a work lies concealed behind its subject matter

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and form; without interpretation, meaning does not spontaneously manifest itself" (Yi 2022: 54).

This process of aesthetic encoding finds particularly vivid expression in the specialized genre of Chinese horse painting. From prehistoric rock engravings to contemporary ink-wash works, equine imagery has served as a visual language through which successive generations of Chinese painters articulated their conceptions of social order, spiritual beliefs, and aesthetic ideals. Jan Assmann defines the relationship between canon and archive as a "permanent dialectic": "... a situation very swiftly arose that Aleida Assmann describes as the separation of cultural memory into 'working and storage memory' – or 'canon and archive'" (Assmann 2011: 80). This conceptual framework illuminates the evolutionary lineage of *form* and *spirit* in Chinese horse painting. The tradition's continuity and transformation can be understood as the product of a dynamic interaction between archive – the accumulated repertoire of pictorial techniques and formal conventions – and canon – the selective reactivation and reinterpretation of these resources in response to shifting cultural imperatives. Through this interplay, Chinese horse painting has long transcended the horse's utilitarian associations to become a living cultural signifier.

This study, adopting a comparative East–West perspective, applies iconographic analysis and cultural memory theory to investigate the spiritual connotations of Chinese horse painting from a broad historical dimension. In the Yellow River basin and adjacent grasslands, horses have been integral to core social activities – hunting, warfare, and transportation – since the late Neolithic period. Their image has steadily



Figure 1. The Mandela Mountain petroglyphs (Bronze Age) (Fan and Fan 2014: 24).

accumulated layers of cultural metaphor and aesthetic value. Over thousands of years, horses have not only fulfilled vital productive functions but have also acquired distinct sociocultural roles, securing their place as one of the most enduring subjects in Chinese art.

The term *spirit* is capacious in scope. In the specific context of Chinese horse painting, this paper examines two primary dimensions: first, the national ethos embodied in the *dragon–horse spirit* (龙马精神) – a symbolic construct fusing the cosmic dynamism of the dragon with the noble vigor of the horse; and second, the aesthetic philosophy of the *unity of form and spirit*, a guiding principle that defines the genre's artistic pursuit.

As the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, once remarked: "The reduction of the horse to a domestic state, is the greatest acquisition, from the animal world, ever made by the art and industry of man. This noble animal partakes of the fatigues of war, and seems to feel the glory of victory." (Buffon 2011: 3). Since its domestication, the horse played a pivotal role in human history before the modern era, providing indispensable power for hunting, warfare, travel, and transport. However, the unique character of Chinese horse painting lies not merely in documenting this material history of human–horse relations, but in constructing a symbolic system centered on the *dragon–horse spirit*.

Petroglyphic research reveals abundant prehistoric equine imagery in rock art from regions such as the Yinshan and Altai mountains. These horse forms (Figure 1), typically carved in profile with bold, rough lines, may be regarded as the genetic source of the Chinese pictorial principle of "modeling through line." As early as the late Neolithic period, the Chinese had already developed the concept of the dragon as a totem. By the Shang and Zhou periods (c. 16th–5th centuries BCE), horses and dragons had become prevalent motifs within the decorative system of ritual bronzes. The *Rites of Zhou* (《周礼》) records that "horses eight *chi* or taller are considered dragons," hinting at the earliest intertextual conception of dragon and horse. In the pre-Qin classic *Book of Changes* (《周易》), the *Qian* hexagram draws upon the image of the horse, abstracting its robust and unyielding character into the ideal of ceaseless self-improvement.

As a visual art form spanning millennia, Chinese horse painting has evolved alongside the spiritual development of Chinese civilization. Since the 20th century, the utilitarian role of the horse has been rendered obsolete by industrialization. Yet, the tradition has undergone a modern transformation, integrating its inherent spirituality with Western art amid the currents of "Western learning spreading eastward."

Despite abundant research on technique, style, and form, scholarship has seldom addressed the fundamental question: Why has the horse, in Chinese art history, transcended its practical role to become an ever-renewing spiritual symbol? This paper seeks to address that gap, employing an interdisciplinary approach to elucidate both its national spirit and aesthetic consciousness.

2. Historical dimension: the evolution of form and spirit in horse painting art

In China, no other animal has so fully embodied a constellation of noble virtues and enjoyed such enduring admiration as the horse. Much like the lotus in traditional Chinese painting – whose ability to blossom from muddy waters lends it the symbolic meaning of purity and resilience (Li and Zhu 2024: 424) – the horse has long represented auspiciousness, good fortune, and the vitality of unbroken life cycles. Across the centuries, the history of horse painting offers a window into the aesthetic trajectory and spiritual ethos of Chinese art.

2.1. From productive tool to cultural symbol: origins and early development

The earliest phase of Chinese horse painting extends from prehistoric times to the pre-Qin era (c. Paleolithic period–3rd century BCE), corresponding to what Hegel termed the "symbolic stage" of art. This period's evolution accords with Jan Assmann's theory of "cultural memory": the rough lines of petroglyphs, totemic motifs, and the pictographic structure of the oracle-bone character for "horse" together form the visual genetic code of "storage memory," providing the material foundation for symbolic continuity. Its "functional memory" emerges in the steady elevation of meaning – from survival-driven reverence for hunting implements to the sanctity conferred by creation myths, culminating in a spiritual metamorphosis from the utilitarian to the deified.

One of the earliest major productive achievements of the Chinese people was the domestication of the horse. By the Shang dynasty (c. 16th century BCE), horses had become the primary productive force in society. Beyond their role in production and military preparedness, they served as transport for royalty and nobility and as objects of burial sacrifice. Unlike other livestock, such as donkeys or mules, horses were imbued with hierarchical significance, serving the political authority of the ruling class. From the *Chariot and Horse Procession* images of the Han dynasty to Zhang Xuan's *Spring Outing of Lady Guo* in the Tang to Yang Jin's *Kangxi's Southern Inspection Tour* in the Qing, equestrian travel has consistently functioned as a marker of social status.

Ancient rock art in northern China – such as the Mandela Mountain petroglyphs in Inner Mongolia – depicts numerous horses. Carbon-14 dating suggests that the earliest examples date to around 30,000–40,000 years ago in the Late Paleolithic, preserving humankind's earliest visual cognition of the horse. As humanity's "primordial language," these images functioned much like mythology or epic, appearing in totemic, shamanic, hunting, and warfare contexts. Despite primitive tools and techniques, ancient artists displayed acute observation of equine anatomy, achieving proportional accuracy and vivid stylization.

Before the adoption of written pictographs, all cultures passed through an extended phase of pictorial ideography. In China, the ancient oracle-bone script preserved pictographs of the horse from over three thousand years ago, making

China the only civilization to use pictographic writing continuously to the present day. This underlies the long-standing assertion that "calligraphy and painting share a common origin." The evolution of Chinese horse painting parallels the development of Chinese characters, moving from representational to abstract, from pictographs to symbolic forms (Table 1).

Table 1. Evolution of the Chinese character "马" (*horse*) from pictograph to modern linguistic symbol

Glyph form						
Name	Oracle bone script	Large seal script	Bronze script	Small seal script	Clerical script	Simplified Chinese
Period	c. 11th century BCE (Late Shang Dynasty)	c. 8th century BCE (Western Zhou)	322 BCE (Warring States period)	374 BCE (Qin Dynasty)	185 CE (Eastern Han Dynasty)	Post-1956 (Modern China)
Source	Inscription on oracle bones (King of Shang offered sacrifices to the former King Zhongding with the courtesy of a guest)	Inscription on the Mao Gong Ding, a bronze ritual vessel of the Western Zhou Dynasty	Inscription on the bronze tally (In 322 BC, King Huai of Chu issued a tax-exempt passage certificate to King Qi of E for transporting goods)	Stone Drum inscriptions before the Qin Dynasty	The Stele of Cao Quan of the Eastern Han Dynasty	Adopted in the Chinese character simplification scheme

In the Shang dynasty (c. 16th–11th centuries BCE), the "horse" character carved on oracle bones (late oracle-bone script in Table 1) represents the earliest extant horse imagery from China's civilized era. To highlight distinctive features, the depiction adopted a side-standing pose, well-suited to carving techniques. In the Warring States period, bronze inscriptions simplified the form further, substituting the horse's eye for the entire head. With the rise of centralized imperial authority, horses assumed an increasingly prominent role in social life, and horse imagery became a powerful symbol within the ritual system. The *Rites of Zhou* records: "In the third month of spring, cattle and horses are assembled, mares are led to pasture for breeding, and sacrificial animals, colts, and calves are counted and recorded" (Zheng and Kong 1999: 488), indicating that by the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), horses had been incorporated into the state's annual sacrificial system.

The ancient creation myth of the *River Chart and Luo Script* (河图洛书), first recorded in the *Book of History* (《尚书》), endowed the horse with sacred significance, establishing its archetype as a spiritual vessel. From the earliest rock engravings and pictographic images emerged the foundational artistic genes of Chinese horse representation: linear form and the pursuit of expressive essence. As the dragon–horse concept evolved alongside human–horse relations, Chinese horse painting entered a crucial stage of paradigm formation and artistic maturation.

2.2. Paradigmatic establishment and dragon–horse intertextuality: the classical phase

From the Qin through the Tang dynasties (3rd century BCE–9th century CE), horse painting gradually shifted from purely sacred or symbolic representation toward realism, with increasingly refined techniques. The classical paradigm germinated in the Wei and Jin periods (220–420 CE) and reached full maturity in the Tang dynasty, achieving the perfect integration of *form* (*xing*) and *spirit* (*shen*). During this process, "storage memory" was enriched by the maturation of *gongbi* (meticulous) techniques and the compositional mode of "dragon–horse unity." In contrast, "functional memory" deepened through the association of horses with imperial authority and sovereign majesty.

In the Eastern Zhou through Qin–Han eras, horse imagery appeared in silk paintings, lacquerware, tomb murals, pictorial stones, and pictorial bricks. The world-



Figure 2. Anonymous' *Painted Horse on Lacquered Vessel*, Qin Dynasty (Collection of Hubei Provincial Museum) (Yu 2015: 115).

famous terracotta horses of the Qin dynasty, with their vivid modeling, exemplify the 3rd-century BCE three-dimensional style. Influenced by the Confucian principle of "unity of form and substance," horse painting often incorporated decorative patterns, as seen in the *Painted Horse on Lacquered Vessel* (Figure 2), excavated in 1978 from tomb No. 44 at Shuihudi, Yunmeng, Hubei. The horse's robust form, surmounted by a bird in flight, evokes the impression of a steed soaring skyward. Based on legendary dragon–horse imagery, its elongated lines and draconic traits convey a distinctly romantic sensibility.

The Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), with its vast unified empire, elevated equestrian culture to new heights. Superior horses imported from Central Asia under Emperor Wu enriched both the quantity and quality of the imperial stables. Horses became political symbols, with the emperor himself likened to the "celestial horse" in poetry. The celebrated stone carving *Horse Trampling the Xiongnu* at General Huo Qubing's tomb epitomizes this monumental use of equine imagery for imperial propaganda. Han tomb reliefs – such as those at the Wu Family Shrine in Shandong – capture vigorous, dynamic horses through bold curves and knife-like incisions, creating the distinctive "Han horse" aesthetic (Figure 3). As E. H. Gombrich observed, "When a Chinese artist had to represent a prancing horse, he seemed to fit it together out of a number of rounded shapes" (Gombrich 1985: 104).

The Wei–Jin era saw the rise of aesthetic theory in painting, with Gu Kaizhi's "spirit-resonance" approach (*chuanshen lun*) shifting emphasis from formal likeness to spiritual expression. His *chi-neck, dragon-body* paradigm – seen in the *Nymph of the Luo River* (Figure 4) – integrated draconic attributes into equine form through fine, even lines, imbuing them with ethereal motion. This romanticized morphology reflects the intellectual freedom of the literati in this period.

The Tang dynasty brought the art of horse painting to its zenith. Saddled-horse painting (鞍马画) became an independent genre, with court painters such as Han Gan perfecting the classical paradigm. Han's *Herding Horses* (Figure 5) demonstrates meticulous observation of imperial steeds, aligning with physiognomy texts of the era. His rounded, muscular horses and angular human figures capture the grandeur of the High Tang, securing his influence for centuries.

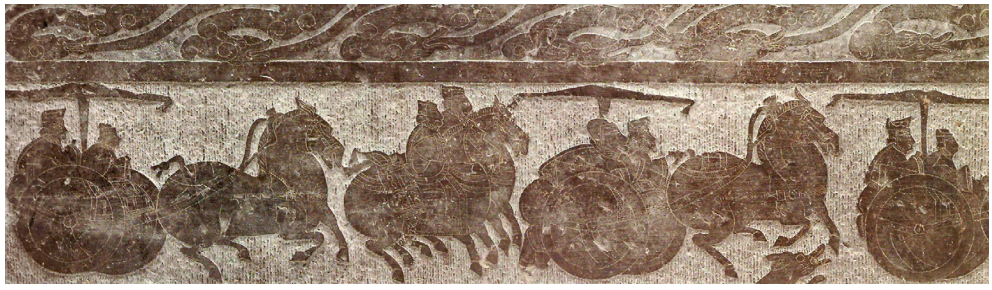

Figure 3. Anonymous' *Procession of Carriages and Horses*, Han Dynasty (pictorial stone relief) (Chen 2014: 1).



Figure 4. Gu Kaizhi's *Nymph of the Luo River* (detail), Jin Dynasty (Collection of the Liaoning Provincial Museum).



Figure 5. Han Gan's *Herding Horses*, Tang Dynasty (Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei) (Chen 2014: 37).

2.3. Literati aesthetics and temporal reconstruction: the transformation of horse painting

Following the establishment of the Tang dynasty's classical paradigm, Chinese horse painting underwent two pivotal transformations between the 10th century and the modern era: first, the rise of literati painting in the Song dynasty fostered a *linear delineation* approach to equine imagery; second, the modern period – under the impact of Western art – saw a turn toward expressive ink-wash painting. Throughout these transitions, the interplay between "storage memory" and "functional memory" persisted: the former embodied in the transmission of calligraphic brushwork and ink-wash modeling techniques; the latter in the evolving spiritual content, from the Song literati's rational pursuit of *gewu zhizhi* ("investigating things to extend knowledge") to the symbolic nationalism of Xu Beihong's horses, where technical innovation corresponded directly with transformations in cultural meaning. The strong infusion of Western modernist concepts ultimately freed horse painting from older constraints, enabling its integration into global art and its shift toward subjective, autonomous expression.

In the Song dynasty (960–1279), the ruling elite cultivated refined literary and artistic tastes, while neglect of military affairs led to a decline in horse administration. In painting, the emergence of *wenrenhua* (literati painting) promoted a restrained, elegant aesthetic that supplanted the sumptuous craftsmanship of the Tang. Representative artists include Li Gonglin, Li Tang, and Chen Juzhong.

Li Gonglin's *Five Horses* (Figure 6) depicts five tribute steeds from the Western Regions, rendered with precise linear outlines softened by light ink washes, exemplifying the understated spirit of literati horse painting. The *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings*

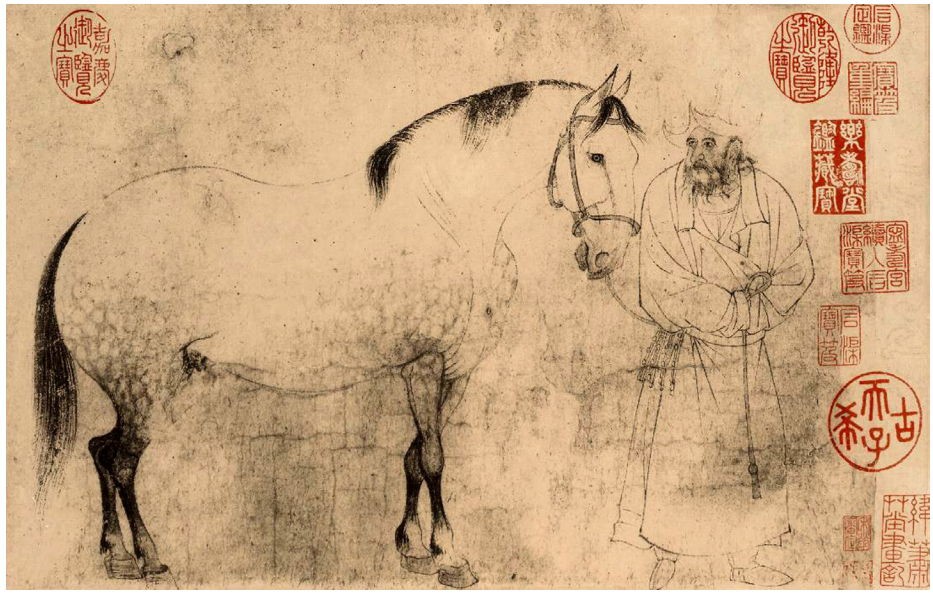

Figure 6. Li Gonglin's *Five Horses* (detail), Song Dynasty
(Collection of Tokyo National Museum, Japan) (Chen 2014: 84).



Figure 7. Zhao Mengfu's *Training Horses*, Yuan Dynasty
(Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei) (Chen 2014: 78).

(宣和画谱) remarks: "Generally speaking, Gonglin prioritizes conceptual intention, with compositional arrangement and ornament as secondary" (Yu 2016: 131). Here, "conceptual intention" refers to capturing the horse's temperament, making spiritual expression paramount, and subordinating form and color. Though monochromatic and devoid of polychrome flourish, Li's variations in brushwork allow viewers to sense the horses' robust physique and extraordinary bearing.

During the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), the Mongol rulers – an equestrian people – revitalized horse administration and horse culture, triggering a renaissance in equine art. The Yuan *jamuci* postal relay system, with its vast network of courier stations, dramatically increased demand for horses and stimulated breeding industries. The era's foremost horse painter, Zhao Mengfu, upheld the principle of "calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin," incorporating calligraphic brushwork into his compositions. His innovation lay in situating horses within natural environments, infusing the work with an authentic, everyday atmosphere. In *Training Horses* (Figure 7),a groom leads steeds against the wind, vividly evoking the pastoral life of the steppe.

In the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), foreign cultural influences began to permeate Chinese painting. While horse painting adopted some Western concepts, it experienced no fundamental transformation. Artistic achievement lagged the vigor of the Han–Tang and the sophistication of the Jin–Yuan periods. Court painters largely replicated Tang–Song conventions, with subject matter confined to imperial banquets and palace stables.

From the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) onward, the intense encounter between Chinese and Western art ushered in a new phase. The Italian Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining) transformed traditional *gongbi* techniques by combining Western perspective with inherent color rendering, creating a Sino-Western synthesis. His *Ten Prized Steeds: Snow-Spotted Eagle* (Figure 8) demonstrates precise rendering of form, structure, and proportion, achieving the verisimilitude of Western oil painting and exerting significant influence at court.



Figure 8. Giuseppe Castiglione's *Ten Prized Steeds: Xuediandiao*, Qing Dynasty (Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei) (Chen 2014: 19).

By the late 19th century, folk artists such as Ni Tian and Ren Yi experimented with *xieyi* (freehand) horse painting in ink wash. Among Shanghai School painters, some works approached the *mogu* ("boneless") style, which models form without contour lines, relying solely on ink wash. Yet, lacking integration of Western anatomical knowledge, these works fell short of a structural breakthrough.

The decisive transformation of modern ink-wash horse painting came with Xu Beihong, hailed as "the foremost master of freehand horse painting." In 1919, while studying at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris under the academic painter Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret, Xu was deeply influenced by Western aesthetics. Integrating Western painting theory with Chinese ink-wash traditions, he pioneered a new expressive paradigm. His *Galloping Horse* (Figure 9) broke free from formulaic convention while maintaining a distinctively Chinese spatial ethos. As French art historian Philippe Cinquini observed, "Xu's negative space is not absence but pneumatic extension; the horse dissolves into atmosphere, reminding the viewer that Chinese cosmology renders nature and animal as interstitial breath. In Géricault, by contrast, the horse's flank becomes a tensed spring, its vascular

bulges a clockwork of anatomical certainty – the canvas traps vitality as torque" (Cinquini 2023: 199).

By the 1930s, amid the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Xu's equine imagery shifted from literati refinement to national spirit, often portraying unbridled horses running free – symbolizing the collective memory of the *dragon–horse spirit*.

From a historical perspective, the technical evolution of Chinese horse painting can be summarized as three stages – engraving, meticulous brushwork, and freehand expression – corresponding to the stylistic arc from crude to refined to bold. This aligns with Hegel's tripartite progression of symbolic, classical, and romantic art, reflecting universal patterns in artistic development. The interaction of "storage memory" (technical transmission) and "functional memory" (spiritual renewal) has propelled the tradition from classical paradigms into modern forms, forming a complete genealogy of the unity between *form* and *spirit* in Chinese horse painting (Table 2). The driving force behind this synthesis lies in the deep cultural genes established by creation myths such as the *River Chart and Luo Script*.

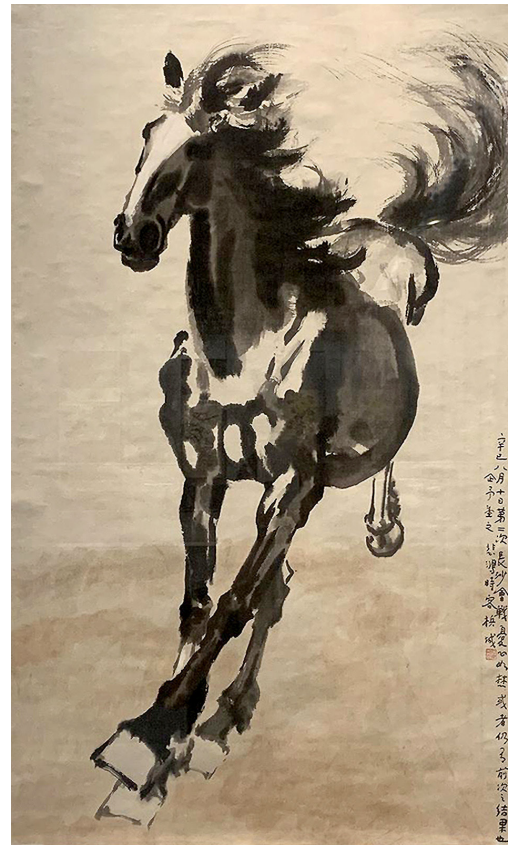

Figure 9. Xu Beihong's *Galloping Horse*, Modern Period (Collection of Xu Beihong Memorial Hall).

3. Spiritual dimension: the national cultural spirit of the dragon–horse totem

The ancient *Hetu Luoshu* (河图洛书) mythology sanctified the horse, giving rise to "dragon-horse" (*longma*) – a symbolic synthesis of the dragon totem and the noble qualities of the horse. In Chinese cosmology, this image became a national totem. As Jan Assmann has observed, such mythic narratives lie at the core of cultural symbol formation. The *Book of Changes* conceptualized the dragon-horse as a cosmological vehicle, enabling the *dragon–horse spirit* (*longma jingshen*) to be crystallized and transmitted through the dual records of text and image. As a result, horse painting

Table 2. Genealogy of form-spirit evolution in Chinese horse painting

Period	Author	Representative work	Medium	Technique (storage memory)	Artistic characteristics	Spirit (functional memory)	Current collection location
Prehistoric	Anonymous	Rock art, Damaidi, Gansu	Rock	Engraving	Rough linear modeling	Survival worship	Damaidi, Gansu
Western Zhou	Anonymous	"马" on the Da Yu Ding	Bronze	Casting and engraving	Symbolic pictograph	Ritual symbol	National Museum of China
Han Dynasty	Anonymous	Chariot and Horse Procession	Slate	Carving	Standardized integration of dragon-horse	Symbol of royal power	Wu Family Cemetery Stele Museum
Eastern Jin Dynasty	Gukaizhi	The Ode to the Goddess of the Luo River	Silk	Gongbi (meticulous style)	Detailed rendering	Serpentine neck and dragon-like body	Palace Museum, Beijing
Tang Dynasty	Han Gan	Night-Shining White	Silk	Gongbi (meticulous style)	Gorgeous and delicate	Aura of a Golden Age	Metropolitan Museum of Art, USA
Song Dynasty	Li Gonglin	Five Horses	Silk	Bai Miao (plain drawing)	Simple and elegant	Philosophical inquiry through observation	Tokyo National Museum, Japan
Yuan Dynasty	Zhao Mengfu	Taming the Steed	Paper	Gongbi (meticulous style)	Incorporating calligraphic brushwork	Literati elegance	National Palace Museum, Taipei
Qing Dynasty	Giuseppe Castiglione	Horses: Snow Speckled	Silk	Gongbi (meticulous style)	Realistic modeling and color	Imperial aura	National Palace Museum, Taipei
Modern Era	Xu Beihong	Galloping Horse	Paper	Freehand brushwork	Ink-wash freehand style	National resistance	Xu Beihong Memorial Hall

across the millennia has remained closely linked to the dragon, continually infused with national spirit. The ongoing reinterpretation of this primal symbol – adapting to historical changes – constitutes a process of "functional memory," ensuring the *dragon–horse spirit's* enduring vitality.

3.1. Longma futu: the influence of the dragon–horse concept on equine art

Tracing this cultural gene leads inevitably to the *longma* concept. Many scholars contend that the Chinese dragon totem emerged from the fusion of multiple animal totems, with the horse's head as a principal element. Wen Yiduo argued: "The dragon is a totemic being – an imagined creature existing only in symbolic form – created by combining many different totems" (Shi 2011: 16).

The Han-dynasty text *Shangshu Zhonghou·Wohe Ji* (尚书中侯·握河记) recounts: "When Fuxi ruled the world, a dragon-horse bearing a diagram emerged from the Yellow River" (Xia 2000: 4710). According to this foundational myth, the culture hero Fuxi, upon seeing a dragon-horse rising from the river with mysterious markings, derived the Eight Trigrams from them, thus inaugurating Chinese civilization. This image – the *longma futu* (龙马负图, "dragon-horse bearing the diagram") – became the central symbol of cultural genesis (Figure 10).

As the bearer of the River Chart, the dragon-horse was imbued with sacred authority, becoming a lasting emblem of auspiciousness and the cultural archetype of the *dragon–horse spirit*. Viewed cross-culturally, this fusion of sanctity and vitality is distinctive. In Chinese thought, the *longma* synthesizes dragon-like celestial potency with the horse's earthly vigor to create a triadic unity of *animal–nature–cosmos*. By contrast, Western equestrian imagery – such as the charger in the legend of St. George – operates within a binary logic of *saint–beast*, severing the horse from cosmological resonance and subordinating it to a human-centered moral narrative (Sterckx 2023: 7).

In Western traditions, dragons are often cast as embodiments of evil. As Chen notes, "A typical theme is the 'guardian dragon'. While often endowed with

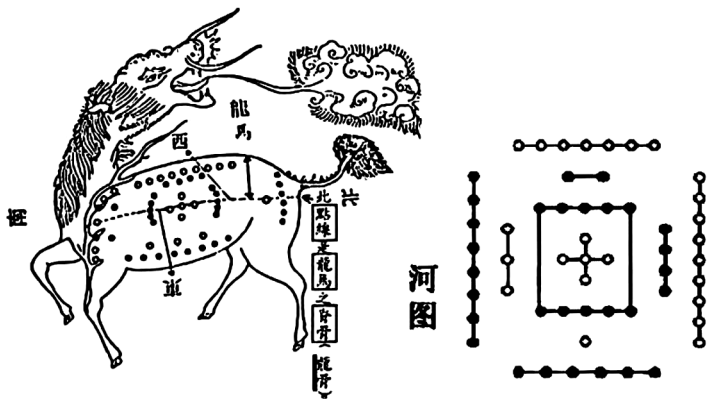

Figure 10. *Longma futu*: the dragon-horse bearing the diagram and mystical symbols (Cai 2022: 12).



Figure 11. *Horned Deity Riding Scene*, Han Dynasty
(Collection of Hunan Provincial Museum) (Fu 2023: 86).

protective abilities, their fierce and terrifying appearance perpetually instills unease" (Chen 2021: 78). Horses in such narratives serve largely as instrumental mounts for knights, reinforcing conqueror–conquered dualities. In contrast, the Eastern conception of *dragon–horse intertextuality* pursues a unity of *form* and *spirit*, rooted in the cosmological worldview of "Heaven's vigorous movement," rather than adversarial logic.

From the pre-Qin through Han dynasties, dragon–horse symbolism became increasingly integrated into artistic creation. For example, the lacquered coffin from the Mawangdui Han tomb features mythical beasts with elongated, flowing forms and ribbon-like tails – characteristics that evoke the dragon–horse aesthetic through cloud-like movement (Figure 11). During this period, horse imagery was enriched by cultural symbols such as the "celestial horse" (*tianma* 天马) *and the "divine steed"* (*shenju* 神驹), reflecting its ever-rising sociocultural status.

By the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern dynasties, horse painting had begun to free itself from purely religious or utilitarian functions, moving toward realism. Gu Kaizhi's "spirit-transmission" theory emphasized conveying a horse's inner vitality rather than merely replicating its external form, elevating the genre into a medium of spiritual expression. From the Sui and Tang onward, this tendency toward realism was reinforced by the flourishing "horse physiognomy culture" (*xiangma shu*). Illustrated manuals such as *The Collection on Stable Management and Horse Care* (司牧安骥集) included diagrams of superior horses (Figure 12) that described ideal traits like "eyes like hanging bells" and "ears like carved bamboo" – standards that shaped artists' depictions of equine excellence.



Figure 12. *Painting of Fine Horses*, Tang Dynasty,
from Li Shi's *Collection on Stable Management and Horse Care* (Li et al. 2004: 1).

3.2. The dragon–horse spirit: cultural symbolism and iconographic interpretation

The *dragon–horse spirit* – a fusion of dragon totemism and the horse's virtues – has evolved over centuries into a potent symbol of national character. The earliest known dragon image, a shell-inlaid figure excavated from Tomb M45 at the Xishuipo site in Puyang, Henan (c. 6500 years ago), already exhibits equine cranial features, underscoring the deep historical roots of this fusion. Eastern Han scholar Wang Fu observed that "the dragon's form in popular depiction often shows a horse's head with a serpentine tail" (Zhang 2024: 13). The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (《山海经·图赞》) even claims, "Horses are essentially of dragon essence, emerging from aquatic origins" (Xu 2024: 34). Astronomically, the horse deity corresponds to *Tiansi* (天驷), the fourth lunar mansion in the Eastern Azure Dragon constellation, escorting the moon across the heavens as the "Divine Steed of Heaven and Earth."

Philosophically, the *Book of Changes* encapsulated this union with the maxim: "Horses travel a thousand *li* alongside dragons." This marks the transformation of dragon–horse symbolism from mythic to metaphysical, crystallizing into a moral and cultural ideal. By the Tang dynasty, the concept was deeply embedded in literature and art. Kong Yingda explained in *Zhouyi Zhengyi*: "Nothing surpasses dragons in traversing the heavens; nothing surpasses horses in traversing the earth" (Li 1999: 1). Poets like Li Ye invoked the *dragon–horse spirit* to symbolize resilience and grandeur.

Applying Panofsky's three-tiered iconological method, one can trace the image's development:

Naturalistic level – depictions emphasize morphological likeness, as in the Han *Procession of Chariots and Horses*, where concise outlines and galloping legs convey dynamism.

Conventional level – equine imagery acquires symbolic associations, as in the *Six Steeds of Zhaoling*, where *form* (*xing*) serves to project *spirit* (*shen*) – valor, loyalty, and dynastic legitimacy.

Intrinsic level – the horse becomes a projection of national ethos, as in Yuan literati painting, where calligraphic brushwork infuses the image with transcendental ideals; in modern ink painting, liberated brushwork renews the *dragon–horse spirit* in a contemporary key.

Through the lens of cultural memory theory, brushwork and ink serve as vehicles of "storage memory," ensuring the recognizability of form. At the same time, evolving meanings activate "functional memory," reconstructing the relationship of *form* and *spirit* to meet the cultural needs of each era. In this way, the *dragon–horse spirit* endures as a "living cultural memory" spanning millennia.

3.3. Political metaphor: horse imagery as political discourse

Horse imagery in Chinese painting has always been deeply entangled with political discourse. In the age of cold weapons, horses were strategic assets, and successive dynasties established comprehensive horse administration systems. The *Book of Rites: Monthly Ordinances* notes: "In the second month of summer … mares are separated from the herd, stallions are tethered, and horse administration is implemented" (Jiang 1997: 202). Such systems directly influenced the production and symbolic use of equine art.



Figure 13. *Bronze horse of the Eastern Han Dynasty* (Collection of Baoding Museum, Hebei Province; photograph by the author).

In Chinese thought, the fine horse often served as a metaphor for human talent. The *Mozi* observes: "A fine horse is difficult to ride, yet it can bear heavy loads and travel great distances; exceptional talent is difficult to manage, yet it can bring honor to the ruler" (Fang 2015: 6). Once horse imagery became a symbol of ritual governance, its political messaging was embedded in art – from the bronze chariots of "the Son of Heaven's six-horse team" (Shen 1995: 293) in the Qin dynasty to the monumental stone horses at Huo Qubing's tomb (Figure 13). As Eastern Han general Ma Yuan stated: "Horses are the foundation of armored troops and the great utility of the state" (Fan 2007: 251), confirming horses' strategic value and important status as "instruments of state" during that period.

In the Tang, equine imagery conveyed status in leisure scenes, grandeur in ceremonial depictions, and martial pride in frontier hunting paintings. In the Song, Li Gonglin's



Figure 14. Ren Xianzuo's *Three Steeds*, Yuan Dynasty
(Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing) (Chen 2014: 237).

portrayals of tribute horses from frontier polities served tributary propaganda. In the Yuan, works like Zhang Yu's *Wenji's Return to Han* and Ren Xianzuo's *Three Steeds* (Figure 14) explicitly engaged in diplomatic narratives. In the Qing, Giuseppe Castiglione's court paintings – such as *One Hundred Horses* – combined Western realism with Chinese political symbolism, projecting the image of a multiethnic, cosmologically ordered empire.

From a semiotic perspective, the political construction of animal symbols is instructive. Yet the value orientation differs markedly: in Nazi Germany, animal symbols were alienated into tools of violence; in Chinese horse painting, the *dragon–horse spirit* conveyed humanistic ideals of harmony between humanity and nature, underscoring the unique ethos of Eastern cultural symbols.

4. Aesthetic dimension: the oriental aesthetic spirit of unity between form and spirit

In the lineage of Chinese aesthetics, the concept of the *unity between form and spirit* (*xing shen he yi*) stands as one of the most enduring artistic principles. Applied to horse painting, it is not merely a technical aim but a comprehensive philosophy – one that integrates the artist's observational precision, mastery of brush and ink, and cultivation of inner sensibility. This unity is at once an ontological proposition, an

epistemological approach, and an aesthetic criterion, guiding the transformation of natural forms into spiritual symbols.

The *form* (*xing*) refers to the tangible appearance – the horse's physical contours, musculature, and gait – while *spirit* (*shen*) denotes its inner vitality, temperament, and essence. As Xie He articulated in his *Six Laws of Painting* (*Liu Fa*), the highest standard is *qiyun shengdong* ("spirit resonance, life-motion") (Xie and Yao 2016: 1), in which brushwork breathes life into the subject. This principle is particularly resonant in horse painting, where a fractional misjudgment in proportion or line may dissipate the impression of strength and grace, and where failure to convey vitality results in mere anatomical likeness devoid of soul.

4.1. Theoretical foundations in Chinese aesthetics

From the *Book of Changes* to Tang–Song painting treatises, Chinese aesthetic thought consistently sought a balance between the external and the internal, rejecting mechanical imitation. Zong Bing's *Introduction to Painting* (*Huashu*) stressed that "painting models form by following its spirit." Gu Kaizhi's *On the Transmission of Spirit* (*Chuanshen Lun*) declared that capturing the spirit was superior to mere resemblance. This aesthetic heritage shaped the evaluative vocabulary of later horse painters, for whom the measure of success lay in whether the viewer could "hear the neigh and feel the wind" when standing before the painting.

The *Han Feizi: Outer Commentaries, Left Volume* (韩非子·外储说左上) records: "A guest painter worked for the King of Qi. The King of Qi asked: 'What is most difficult to paint?' He replied: 'Dogs and horses are most difficult.' 'What is easiest?' He replied: 'Ghosts and spirits are easiest.' Dogs and horses are familiar to people. They appear before us morning and evening, and cannot be approximated, hence the difficulty. Ghosts and spirits are formless entities that do not appear before us, hence their ease of depiction" (Han 2010: 402).

When the King of Qi once asked a court painter what subjects were the hardest and easiest to depict, the reply was unexpected: dogs and horses were the most difficult, while ghosts and spirits were the easiest. The reasoning was straightforward. Dogs and horses are ever-present in daily life, their forms deeply imprinted on the observer's mind; this familiarity makes any flaw in their portrayal instantly apparent, thus raising the challenge of faithful depiction. By contrast, ghosts and spirits possess no fixed appearance and never present themselves to the human eye, granting the artist far greater freedom and, paradoxically, making them easier to paint.

This exchange suggests that by the pre-Qin era, horse painting had already moved beyond the abstract and mystical imagery characteristic of ritual vessel motifs, turning toward a secular, realist approach to representation (Xu 2007: 145). The British poet and critic Stephen Spender observed in his 1930s essay *Social Purpose and the Artist's Attitude* that "historically, the development of art has primarily taken the direction of expanding realism" (Xu 2007: 146). This observation aligns with the evidence that Chinese painting, too, underwent a distinct realist phase.

However, this tendency toward formal likeness began to shift during the Han dynasty. The *Huainanzi* introduced the aesthetic principle of "governing form,"

stating: "When spirit leads, form benefits; when form dominates, spirit suffers" (Li and Xu 1988: 82). This laid the groundwork for prioritizing spirit over form – the philosophy of "emphasizing spirit above form, and conveying spirit through form." The concept finds a cross-cultural echo in Aristotle's notion of the "formal cause," in which the intrinsic essence determines the outward appearance, reflecting a shared Eastern and Western recognition that the inner reality shapes the visible form.

In the Wei–Jin period, the dialectic of *form* and *spirit* reached a decisive turning point. Gu Kaizhi's celebrated "theory of spirit transmission" marked the departure from mere objective mimesis toward the active construction of spirit. Xu Fuguan aptly noted: "Realism is part of an artist's training, but it is not the essence of what makes art art" (Xu 2007: 146). This prioritization of spiritual pursuit gradually led Chinese painters – especially in equine art – to place the conveyance of the horse's inner vitality above all technical concerns.

In *The Compelling Image*, James Cahill contrasts the representational strategies of Western and late Ming Chinese painting, crystallizing a core distinction in the traditional form–spirit paradigm: "If our parallel is valid, it would suggest that a major cause for the rejection both of Western styles in painting and of the innovations of Chang Hung was that something was missing from them which corresponded to the general principles and spiritual and humanistic values that the Chinese felt to be lacking in Western scientific thought and technology." (Cahill 1982: 35). This contrast illuminates the essence of Chinese form–spirit aesthetics. Form is not an end but a medium; it is rendered just sufficient to allow spirit to emerge, revealing a hierarchy in which spirit governs form rather than the other way around.

Guided by the ideal of "spiritual resemblance," horse painting across the ages has continually adapted to changing understandings of the relationship between *form* and *spirit*. In the Wei–Jin period, the "serpentine neck and draconic body" expressed divinity through stylized morphology; in the Tang, the robust and muscular forms conveyed the grandeur of a flourishing empire; in the Yuan, literati painters infused horses with the refined temperament of calligraphic brushwork; and in the modern era, expressionistic ink paintings – inflected with Western techniques – have expanded the possibilities of form–spirit interplay through bold experimentation with materials. While the styles shifted with each epoch, the balanced negotiation of *form* and *spirit* has consistently mirrored both the spirit of the times and the painter's vision.

From a comparative East–West perspective, differences in the spiritual aims, formal treatment, and narrative strategies of horse painting stem from distinct philosophical foundations, producing divergent aesthetic ideals (Table 3). Although Chinese horse painting once embraced realism, it ultimately sought to transcend surface likeness in pursuit of spiritual essence. This orientation is rooted in the Chinese philosophical ideal of the "unity of heaven and humanity," which directs art beyond mere representation toward the realm of life-force and spirit.

The cultural roots of this approach lie in the Chinese cosmological view of *qi*, the vital energy pervading all beings. The horse, as a dynamic embodiment of *qi*, became an ideal vehicle for exploring the interplay between vitality and form. Thus,

in literati discourse, *form* was never a static outline but a crystallization of motion, and *spirit* was not an abstract attribute but a visible, rhythmic pulse.

Table 3. Comparison of aesthetic paradigms in traditional Chinese and Western horse painting

Comparative dimensions	Traditional Chinese horse painting	Traditional Western horse painting
Philosophical foundation	Rooted in the "unity of heaven and humanity" concept, emphasizing the harmonious integration and mutual generation of subject and object	Based on "subject-object dualism," rational thinking emphasizes observation and representation of nature
Spiritual pursuit centers on "spiritual resemblance"	Centered on "spiritual resemblance," pursuing the "unity of *form* and *spirit*," bearing natural enlightenment, and embodying the spiritual aspirations of the nation	Centered on "formal resemblance," it serves as a vehicle for power and heroism, reconstructing reality while manifesting intrinsic human value
Stylistic characteristics	Linear modeling: expressing horse imagery through calligraphic line variations	Volumetric chiaroscuro modeling: creating realistic three-dimensional horse forms through light, shadow, and color manipulation
Spatial treatment	A scattered perspective, with an interplay of solid and void elements, creates a "subject-object unity" aesthetic, in which the spatial configuration adapts to compositional requirements	Focal perspective adheres to scientific principles, establishing artistic space that conforms to visual perspective laws
Color application	Subjective color usage employs restrained minimalism, grounded in inherent hues, while skillfully incorporating ink tones to achieve harmonious unity between chromatic expression and artistic conception	Objective color usage employs scientific color mixing and applies chromatic theory to create authentic representations of horses and their environments
Narrative expression	Emphasizes representation through symbolic expression, conveying philosophical reflections on nature, society, or human existence through horse demeanor and bearing	Emphasizes reproduction through horse dynamics and atmospheric staging to manifest power, passion, or narrative progression
Representative works	Li Gonglin's *Five Horses*, Zhao Mengfu's *Training Horses*, Xu Beihong's *Galloping Horses*	Jacques Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps,* Peter Paul Rubens' *Saint George Battles the Dragon*, Theodore Gericault's *The Wild Horse Race at Rome*.

4.2. Stylistic pathways and cross-cultural contrast

The path toward unity between *form* and *spirit* in horse painting historically developed along two stylistic routes:

Meticulous Realism (*gongbi*) – Exemplified by Han Gan of the Tang dynasty, this approach involves exacting observation, layered brushwork, and the careful modulation of ink and color to replicate the anatomical truth of the horse. In works like *Night-Shining White*, the steed's taut muscles, alert ears, and tense stance communicate not only physical precision but a poised readiness to spring forward. The *form* is rendered faithfully, but it is the poised, almost audible breath that conveys the *spirit*.

Freehand Expression (*xieyi*) – Flourishing in the Yuan and modern periods, this style prioritizes expressive brush strokes and dynamic composition over fine detail. Xu Beihong's *Galloping Horses*, often painted with a few sweeping lines, evoke the sensation of hooves pounding the earth and manes swept by the wind. Here, *form* is simplified to its kinetic essentials, allowing *spirit* to dominate.

Between these extremes, many painters pursued a *gong–xie* synthesis, balancing structural fidelity with expressive liberty, thus embodying the Chinese dictum that "likeness lies between form and formlessness."

The Eastern ideal of *xing shen he yi* contrasts sharply with the dominant trajectory of Western equestrian art, which – shaped by the legacy of ancient Greece and the Renaissance – often privileged anatomical exactitude and perspectival illusion. In Leonardo da Vinci's equestrian studies, for example, the horse is constructed from meticulous skeletal and muscular diagrams, aiming to perfect the *form* in service of verisimilitude.

By contrast, Chinese painters regarded the outward form as a conduit for inner essence rather than an end in itself. Chinese painting, seeking to recreate the rhythmic alternation of fullness and emptiness, movement and stillness, mirrors the *yin–yang* interplay of the cosmos. This orientation explains why Chinese horse painting may omit shadows or ignore single-point perspective – choices that, rather than signaling deficiency, affirm the primacy of spiritual evocation over optical realism.

4.3. Case studies in the unity of form and spirit

Li Gonglin's Tribute Horses – Through minimal use of color and careful line modulation, Li's work captures the restrained dignity of the horses, projecting their noble origins without ostentation. The subtle inflection of each line corresponds to a shift in the animal's temperament – serene, wary, spirited – embodying *spirit* through disciplined *form*.

Zhao Mengfu's Pastoral Horses – By placing horses in relaxed, rural settings, Zhao softened their grandeur, infusing them with a sense of literati leisure. The brushwork borrows from running script (*xingshu*) calligraphy, allowing the viewer to sense the pulse of life in the bend of a neck or the flick of a tail.

Xu Beihong's Galloping Herds – Xu's dynamic compositions dissolve the boundary between individual form and collective energy. His ink horses, painted in



Figure 15. Zhang Leyi's *Three Galloping Horses*, contemporary, the author's collection.

the turbulence of wartime, channel the national ethos into motion – hooves become the beat of resistance, manes the banners of resilience.

Zhang Leyi's Galloping Horses – Having studied both Eastern and Western traditions, Leyi harmonized horses with natural spatial environments through rigorous modeling. His *Galloping Horses* creates artistic conception through three horses in unbridled motion (Figure 15), achieving innovative transformation of East–West techniques with remarkable success in synthesis pathways.

In the Chinese context, achieving unity between *form* and *spirit* in horse painting is more than an artistic technique; it is a moral and philosophical act. The artist must harmonize perceptual observation with empathetic insight, aligning their *qi* with the subject's. Only then can the painting transcend depiction to become a site of communion between human and horse, culture and nature, present and past.

As such, the unity between *form* and *spirit* is not merely a criterion for aesthetic judgment but a living bridge across time, enabling the horse – whether etched in Neolithic rock, brushed onto Song silk, or splashed in modern ink – to carry forward the *dragon–horse spirit* into the shared cultural memory of the nation.

5. Conclusion

From prehistoric rock engravings to modern ink-wash masterpieces, the history of Chinese horse painting unfolds as a continuous dialogue between *form* and *spirit*, shaped by the currents of cultural memory. Across five millennia, the horse has evolved from a productive tool and ritual subject into a cultural emblem, a political metaphor, and an aesthetic ideal. The *dragon–horse spirit*, born of mythic synthesis, has served as both the symbolic anchor and the creative catalyst of this tradition, ensuring that each age reinterprets the horse in accordance with its own spiritual and social needs.

Historically, the trajectory of Chinese horse painting can be seen as a tripartite arc: the **symbolic stage** of early petroglyphs and oracle-bone pictographs, where sacred meaning outweighed anatomical accuracy; the **classical stage** of Tang and Song paradigms, where *form* and *spirit* attained structural and expressive harmony; and the **romantic–expressive stage** of modern ink wash, where the liberation of brushwork and infusion of Western techniques revitalized the tradition without erasing its cultural essence.

Spiritually, the fusion of dragon totemism and equine virtues has endowed horse imagery with a unique cosmological resonance. Unlike the adversarial horse–dragon binary in Western iconography, the Chinese *longma* embodies a harmonious unity of Heaven's vigor and Earth's vitality. This worldview underlies the enduring aesthetic of *xing shen he yi* – the conviction that physical form is inseparable from inner essence, and that true art lies in their mutual illumination.

Aesthetically, the achievement of unity between *form* and *spirit* demands both technical mastery and moral cultivation. Whether through the meticulous realism of Han Gan, the literati elegance of Li Gonglin, the calligraphic vitality of Zhao Mengfu, or the nationalistic dynamism of Xu Beihong, the greatest horse painters have not only depicted horses but conversed with them – matching the rhythm of their *qi* to that of their subjects. In doing so, they have transformed representation into communion and image into cultural legacy.

In the global art context, Chinese horse painting offers an alternative paradigm to Western mimesis: an art that seeks resonance over replication, breath over blueprint, and a balance between likeness and transcendence. In this lies its contemporary significance. As intercultural exchange deepens, the tradition's vitality will depend not on mere preservation but on creative transformation – just as Xu Beihong absorbed Western realism into the Chinese ink tradition, future artists may draw from global visual languages while remaining rooted in the cultural soil of the *dragon–horse spirit*.

Ultimately, the art of horse painting in China is a testament to the enduring power of cultural symbols to bridge epochs, mediums, and civilizations. Between *form* and *spirit*, it carries forward not only the image of the horse but the living pulse of the nation's aesthetic, moral, and cosmological imagination.

Data availability statement

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