

artist profile

JACQUELINE CHAO

CHAN SHENGYAO

From a distance, the painting *The Creator of All Beings* (2006) appears to be a traditional Chinese mountainous landscape, with rising cliffs and a two-story temple with peaked roofs nestled above a waterfall. In its center, a gaping chasm bursts open from which a single nude female figure emerges. Another figure floats mysteriously above her, while a large but abstractly rendered meditating figure looms high against the mountains and clouds beyond. As our eyes probe more deeply into the landscape, we begin to see faces and outlines of human beings in different emotional states, some with mouths open as if yelling. Yet, the expression of the central meditative figure remains calm, the landscape itself the product of her thoughts.

Chan Shengyao's intention behind *The Creator of All Beings*, as with many of his works, is to make us simultaneously question ourselves together with the world that we see, and to position each of us as this 'creator of all beings.' He says:

The creator is an indescribable condition. All beings have enlightenment power to create infinite beings and universes. Every universe and every being is filled with eternal life power and is immortal. In this painting, the beings live in an eternal space without life and death phenomena. In this free space, all beings enjoy freedom and their own creations.¹

For centuries, Chinese artists and philosophers have contemplated "creativity" and "creation," ruminating upon the source of all creative activity, and Chan follows in this tradition as he avidly explores concepts of creativity in his art. Born in Taipei, Taiwan, in 1958, Chan began painting as a childhood hobby, and his methods and techniques are largely self-taught. Chan moved to the United States in 1986 and lived there for ten years, two of which were spent attending the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Kansas. In 1996, Chan moved to Vancouver, Canada. Years of living in the United States and Canada exposed him to Western art media and materials, notably oil painting, spray painting and different support materials, which he began to further integrate into his work. Since 1998, Chan has combined Chinese ink, acrylic and other materials in a fusion of painting and sculpture, merging the two into a play on pre-existing media and materials to create a series of large abstract and semi-abstract ink paintings.

Chan's style is drawn from a firm foundation in classical Chinese culture, but he considers himself an international artist who prefers to focus instead on broader philosophical issues. Chan has identified nature as his greatest artistic inspiration, a childhood love that has consistently influenced his artwork. On the one hand, he is attracted to nature as the natural, untamed, physical landscape; on the other hand, to Chan, 'Nature' refers to an inherent creative structure and force that underlies all things. Chan's fascination with and his curiosity about nature moved him to study Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, resulting in work that is undeniably spiritual, but not necessarily religious. Rather, Chan's artwork and artistic philosophy is "spiritual" in the sense that spirituality may be understood as a way of living the ordinary while appreciating the extraordinary. For Chan, truly great



Chan Shengyao, *The Creator of All Beings*, ink and mixed media on cloth, 213.36 x 152.4 cm, 2006.
Image courtesy © Chan Shengyao.

art is an expression drawn from communion with his own inner nature and creative power, for which he has coined the term “enlightenment power,” to describe the eternal state of ultimate harmony between humans, nature, and the natural power of creativity itself.

During the sixth century, the painter and theorist Xie He (active ca. 500-535) extolled the Six Principles of Painting: six elements which he deemed the qualifying characteristics of a successful painting.² Ahead of the other more formal elements of a painting such as color and composition, the primary principle Xie describes is *qiyun* or “spirit resonance,” which refers to a painting’s vitality.³ Its position as the first principle illustrates its importance to the success of a painting. In this early period, great painting was still recognized as requiring a particular *qi* or intangible “vitality” or “spirit” in order to be successful. In the late Tang dynasty (618-907), Zhang Yanyuan (act. mid ninth century), one of the earliest Chinese art historians, drew on this concept of *qiyun* to further define what made a painting great:

Now, if one makes use of marking line and ruler, the result will be dead painting. But if one guards the spirit and concentrates upon unity, there will be real painting. [...] Now, the more one revolves thought and wields the brush while consciously thinking of oneself as painting, the less success one will have when painting....⁴

Just as Zhang argues that a successful painting must be drawn from within the mind unconsciously and intuitively, the result of inner inspiration and drawn from within the artist’s mind and inner nature, so it is for Chan that within one’s own inner nature can visions be created and from which artistic inspiration can be found. His brushwork is imbued with vitality of spirit, and his compositional arrangements and perspectival views are imaginatively manipulated. In *Moon in the Sky* (2008) Chan plays with ideas of perspective, simultaneously pointing to the traditional absence of linear perspective in Chinese painting. When asked to discuss this painting, Chan responded:

Chinese art has no perspective, but it can have lots of vision. Sometimes the house is oversized and sometimes the figure is over-sized, there is no right ratio equation. I’m trying to find another space for modern Chinese painting. I want to create another perspective. Looking at the painting, it looks like Chinese painting, but from another angle, it looks like Western painting. How do you define it as Chinese painting or Western painting? A moon shining in the sky, the moon represents a light in night time. It’s a new hope just starting, a hope for putting Chinese art’s non-perspective and Western art’s perspective together for further in-depth development.⁵

Historically, traditional Chinese landscape paintings have placed multiple perspectives within a single scene to attempt to capture the essence of the landscape itself. Trees are sometimes larger than they should appear, the monumentality of a mountain within a landscape is exaggerated, and temples are often painted so as to reveal their full architectural layout, a view that would have been impossible to capture from the vantage point set by the artist. Bird’s eye perspective therefore becomes an expressive tool to Chan, as do the geometric shapes he incorporated in an allusion

to European one-point perspective. The Chinese characters that title the work are blended into the composition to appear as mountain forms, referencing the historical link between Chinese calligraphy and painting. Abstraction and realism exist and merge simultaneously in this “landscape,” where creativity is constantly in action: old and new, eastern and western, converge to create a new language.

Classical Chinese literature is steeped in discussions on creativity, and by extension, the art-making process. Notions of “inspiration” and “creativity” as found within one’s inner or self-nature are often discussed in Buddhist texts. An example may be drawn from the teachings found in *Chan* (Zen) Buddhism: the *Platform Sutra* (often referred to as *The Sutra of Huineng*), records an event in the personal history of Huineng (638-713), the sixth and last official patriarch of Chan/Zen Buddhism in China. Speaking before a large assembly, Huineng recalled visiting a temple:

At the time there was a wind blowing, and the pennants were flapping. One monk said, ‘the wind is moving.’ Another said, ‘The pennants are moving.’ They argued on and on, so I came forward and said, ‘It is not the wind moving, it is not the pennants moving; it is your minds moving.’⁶

In another well-known episode from the *Platform Sutra*, the Fifth patriarch visited Huineng late one night and taught him the *Diamond Sutra*, another major text in the Chan Buddhist textual canon. Huineng recollects:

...I was suddenly and completely enlightened, and understood that all things exist in self-nature.... Who would have thought that self-nature is intrinsically pure? Who would have thought that self-nature is free from birth and death? Who would have thought that self-nature is complete within itself? Who would have thought that self-nature is unchanging? Who would have thought that all things are manifestations of self-nature?⁷

Chan was greatly influenced by the messages of these famous stories, in which the power of the mind in dictating perception and self-perception, and in allowing humans to achieve Buddhist enlightenment, is both questioned and emphasized.

Ancient Chinese thinkers not only believed in the power of one’s inner nature as expressed in Buddhism, but also in the harmonious unification of the forces of one’s self-nature with the greater forces of the universe. With the coexistence of Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian principles, a single landscape painting itself was open to various and even syncretic readings. During the early Song Dynasty, Neo-Confucianism emerged with a blend of all three teachings, maintaining the Confucian concept of self-cultivation as a traditional form of learning together with the idea that “man could achieve union with the ultimate ‘principles’ of cosmic creativity only by realizing the innate moral mind within the self.”⁸ This metaphysical concept of a “cosmic creativity” was borrowed from existing Daoist and Buddhist ideologies. Song dynasty philosophers like Wang Zhe (1112-1170) emphasized that Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism were ultimately “different paths to the same truth.”⁹ Neo-

Confucian thinkers therefore believed that humans were not simply beings within the world, but were also “co-creators.”¹⁰

Chan’s personal artistic philosophy of “enlightenment power” is ultimately grounded within these classical philosophical concepts of creation and human existence. In 2009, Chan painted two versions of large-scale work entitled *Enlightenment Power* (2009), using multiple sheets of high quality “jade board” rice paper. In one version, a sea of green, blue and black ink splatters is parted by a large white space of blank paper, a chasm of blank space that seems to reference the void underpinning all creation. Chan uses traditional materials in creating this work, yet the appearance fails to conform to tradition. In the second version, a form that begins like a large brushstroke extends into a chain of circles that increase in size, the blank space in the middle emerging like cracks of blank paper within the seams. Alongside this space, which cuts across the entire painting, the splattering of ink no longer appears random. In these two paintings, both order and chaos appear side by side. The feeling of movement is constant, eternal and indestructible – a visual expression of Huineng’s description of self-nature as undying and intrinsically pure.

It becomes clear with paintings such as these that Chan Shengyao’s concept of “enlightenment power” is both deeply personal and profoundly all-encompassing as he deals broadly with the power of the mind, notions of creativity, and the human spirit. Chan’s art calls for a search within the human heart and mind, an exploration into our metaphysical existence. In reinterpreting classical Chinese philosophies of the past, Chan defines a new artistic vision for the present.



Chan Shengyao, *Enlightenment Power* 覺能 (version 1 above, version 2 below), both ink and mixed media on paper, both 365.76 x 701.04 cm, 2009. Images courtesy © Chan Shengyao.





Chan Shengyao, *Moon in the Sky*, ink on paper, 91.44 x 182.88 cm, 2008.
Image courtesy © Chan Shengyao.

Jacqueline J. Chao is a doctoral student in Art History at Arizona State University, with research interests in Chinese painting. This article is a shortened version of an essay to be published in a catalogue study of the art of Chan Shengyao, forthcoming Fall 2010. This two-volume catalogue will feature broader and more in-depth discussion of his recent artworks, interviews with the artist, and English translations of his writings. For more information about the artist please contact Art Founders Inc. www.artfounders.com

Endnotes

- 1 Telephone interview with Chan Shengyao, November 23, 2008.
- 2 Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 40. As translated by Bush and Shih, the Six Principles are “First, Spirit Resonance which means vitality; second, Bone Method which is [a way of] using the brush; third, Correspondence to the Object which means the depicting of forms; fourth, Suitability to Type which has to do with the laying on of colors; fifth, Division and Planning, that is placing and arrangement; and sixth, Transmission by Copying, that is to say the copying of models.”
- 3 Scholars have translated Xie He’s “Six Laws” differently. For a discussion of the differences in translation of the “Six Laws,” and in particular *qiyun* or “spirit resonance” by William Acker, Alexander Soper and James Cahill, see Robert Thorp and Richard Vinograd, *Chinese Art and Culture* (New York: Harry Abrams, 2001), 177.
- 4 Bush, 62.
- 5 Telephone interview with Chan Shengyao, June 18, 2008.
- 6 Thomas F. Cleary, *The Sutra of Hui-neng*, vol. 3 of *Classics of Buddhism and Zen: The Collected Translations of Thomas Cleary* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 16.
- 7 Stephen Addiss, ed., *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea, and Japan* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008), 26. Other translators have translated this passage differently, sometimes listing four statements instead of five. See Cleary, *The Sutra of Hui-neng*, 12, and *The Diamond Sutra and Sutra of Hui-neng*, trans. A. F. Price and Wong Mou-Lam (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), 73.
- 8 Wen Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy 8th-14th Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 75.
- 9 Stephen Little, *Realm of the Immortals: Daoism in the Arts of China* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1988), 9.
- 10 Fong, 71. In discussing Neo-Confucianism, Fong quotes the words of eleventh-century philosopher Chang Tsai (Zhang Zai; 1020-1077), who said “By expanding one’s mind, one is able to embody the things of the whole world. If things are not embodied, it is because the mind has excluded them... As [the sage] views the world, there is in it no one thing that is not his own self.”