

# The Artistic Expression of Zhao Mengfu's Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts from a General Sense of Creation

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**Abstract:** *The Nine Songs*, originally a chapter in Qu Yuan's work *Chu Shu*, depicting the love of the gods, has an important place in literary history for its romantic style and deep sense of family and country. Zhao Mengfu's "*Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts*" has been praised and discussed by later generations for its unique expressions of the image of "mountain ghosts". Because of the "common sense" of the beauty, many artists have different artistic expressions of the image of "mountain ghosts" in *The Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts*. Zhao Mengfu, with his unique image of the "Mountain Ghost", demonstrates his unique understanding of the *Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts*. This article focuses on the psychological context of Qu Yuan's and Zhao Mengfu's works from the creator's perspective, and combines the basic principles of art theory and painting theory to find the artistic mindset corresponding to this psychological context, which has certain implications for contemporary artistic creation.

**Keywords:** Zhao Mengfu; *The Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts*; Artistic Expression; Flux

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## Introduction

The Ghost of the Mountains is about a slender and feminine mountain ghost, riding on a leopard and clothed in grass, waiting for a rendezvous with her lover in the mountains. Wang Fuzhi of the Qing dynasty, in his *General Knowledge of the Ch'u Rhetoric, Volume 2*, comments: "This chapter is a lingering and loving one, naturally, for the words of love, to see the sound of faithfulness and sincerity. But it must not be the words of a wizard who compares himself to a mountain ghost or a wizard who compares himself to a gentleman, for every situation is getting worse." In the context of the text, the depiction of the mountain ghost has multiple meanings, on the one hand depicting the very portrayal of the life of the ghosts and gods. At this level, the chanting of the mountain ghost is a tribute to the ghosts of the mountains. On the other hand, if the mountain ghosts depicted in the context are 'de-deified', the description is of the love of a woman born in the mountains, and the author's expression is an ode to this pure love.

## 1. The psychological activity of art as a creator

Qu Yuan's political career was intertwined with his artistic life, and *the Nine Songs*, as one of his masterpieces of romanticism, is full of ideal meanings above the atmosphere of life in the expression of his characters' feelings and the description of the environment. In this respect, we can appreciate some of the 'human' and 'divine' rhythms. From the very first lines of 'The Ghosts of the Mountain' we can sense this 'overlapping of human and divine' imagery. "If there is a man in the mountain, he is covered in Ficus and carries a female lover." The word used here is 'man' rather than 'spirit' or 'god', which is a cognitive way of looking at each other, and the change in the angle of this gaze. On the other hand, it is from this simple gaze that the imagery of beauty accumulates and laid out. Literature is an imaginative art, and the author can create the artistic language environment needed for his feelings by constantly portraying, rendering and highlighting through the written language. I believe that the author's 'beauty and herbs' feature is also reflected in *Mountain Ghost*. This is also in keeping with the 'resistance' or 'beauty' that characterises works of art created during the war years. The author makes use of the 'gods' that grow in nature, giving them human forms and movements to express his aesthetic emotions and ideals, and directly responding to the author's aesthetic expectations and ideals in a positive way.

This expression in *The Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts* was of great inspiration to Zhao Mengfu in creating *The Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts*. From the perspective of art theory and the history of Chinese painting, Zhao Mengfu is considered an important person. *The Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts* is part of *the Nine Songs* and Calligraphy scroll of Zhao Mengfu from the early Yuan

dynasty. It was created in 1319 (the sixth year of the reign of Yuan Emperor Yan You) and, according to the character examination of Zhao Mengfu, was created in his later years, when his style had matured. As a court painter who served two dynasties, Zhao Mengfu had a different state of mind from other painters. His artistic conceptions were reflected in two points, namely, "painting is valued for its ancient meaning" and "the use of the same method in painting and calligraphy". It is written in *The Boat of Qinghe Paintings and Calligraphy* that "painting is valued for its ancient meaning; if there is no ancient meaning, there is no benefit in working. "Today, people who know that if they use slender brushes and rich colors, they will call themselves competent, but they do not know that there is a loss of ancient meaning and a hundred diseases, so how can they be seen? My paintings seem to be simple, but those who know them know that they are close to the past, so they think they are good. This can be said for those who know, not for those who do not."

We can examine what the 'ancient meaning' of Zhao Mengfu's terminology was in the process of creating *The Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts*, and thus gain some insight into the ancient meaning of the painting. In the creation of *The Ghosts of the Mountains*, the painting is a colorful line drawing, and the whole painting is simple and generous in appearance without losing its charm, which corresponds to "simplicity". In Zhao Mengfu's conception of painting, he was somewhat averse to colorful and detailed brushwork. It implies that when he expressed the image of a mountain ghost, he also used a "simple" brushwork to express the "beautiful woman" in Qu Yuan's painting. It is precisely because Zhao Mengfu resisted imitating the iconography of recent generations that he was able to extend the goal of his inheritance to the hallowed halls of the ancients in order to gain the original vitality of painting. In the author's view, we can understand "ancient meaning" through the overall analysis of *Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts*, which is neither thin nor brutal, but rigorous and straightforward, neat and sturdy "intentional writing"; its lines are neither "painterly" and "non-painting", but "not seeking to resemble the form" but "writing the spirit with the form". It is "not seeking to resemble" but "writing the spirit with the form". In terms of his creative state of mind, how could Zhao Mengfu in his later years not think of his homeland, the mountains and rivers, and his memories of his life? From this perspective, Zhao Mengfu and Qu Yuan shared a similar artistic state of mind. In addition, both of them share the concept of artistic creation, which is based on the "theory that all things are spiritual", in which nature and the gods are fused. From the perspective of this highly similar state of mind in artistic creation, *The Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts (Qu)* and *The Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts (Zhao)* are based on the expression of their respective artistic characteristics and common beauty.

## **2. Zhao Mengfu's Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts from a comparison of creative methods**

On a general level, Qu Yuan's composition of *The Nine Songs - The Ghosts of the Mountain* unfolds on the basis of his own romantic tendencies, and in *The Ghosts of the Mountain* we can see a large number of clusters of imagery. From the point of view of artistic creation theory, it is a superimposition of feelings. The author pays particular attention to the rendering of emotions and the portrayal of the environment. It is easy to see that the image of the mountain ghost is not only an image of the other side of the world to which the author aspires, but also a materialisation of the ideal realm and a mapping of his inner emotions, as shown by the portrayal of the "red leopard" and the "civet". "In the darkness of the sky and the darkness of the day, the east wind drifts and the spirits rain." It is through the portrayal of the environment that the so-called "low" atmosphere is created, which enhances the independence and aesthetic quality of the image itself in terms of artistic psychological stereotypes, and also portrays the spirit of the "mountain ghost" from another perspective. If we analyse the scene from a dramatic point of views, it is easy to understand that the description of the environment is also the beginning of the struggle and the beginning of the tragic brewing, laying a certain emotional foundation and environmental conditions for the expression of feelings later in the text. In addition, the description of the environment in the following text is not limited to the visual, but is further transferred to the auditory, making people weep. The 'thunder fills the air' and the 'wind soughs' are also onomatopoeic words that continue to bring out the emotion of sadness in the aural sense. The poem ends with the words, "I am sorry for my son's forgetfulness; I am not at leisure when you are thinking of me.", "You think of me and are suspicious of my work.", "Thinking of the Prince and worrying in vain." The emotions are expressed in the voice, and the thoughts of the "gentleman" are still unresolved after many twists and turns. This change of perspective not only brings about a flow of space and time in the scene, but also serves to immerse the reader in the identity of the protagonist and to evoke emotional resonance.



Yuan - Zhao Mengfu, *Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts*

Ink and wash on paper, album (22vo)

36.5 x 23.5 cm

Composed circa 1319

Now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei

When Zhao Mengfu created *the Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts*, he already had *the Nine Songs* made by many previous painters, and when he created the other images of *the Nine Songs* he did not differ much from his predecessors. For example, the anonymous *Nine Songs* from the Southern Song Dynasty in the Liaoning Provincial Museum, the *Nine Songs* by Zhang Wu and the *Nine Songs* by Wen Zhengming all depict the mountain ghost as a "goddess", but also as an "old man" in the 1361 volume. However, they are also depicted as "old men" in volumes such as the 1361 volume, reflecting more of a lean and haggard appearance than their spiritual beauty. Zhao Mengfu was therefore compelled to recreate his own image of the "mountain ghost" according to his own understanding and the meaning of Qu Yuan's text. In Zhao Mengfu's painting, the figure of the "mountain ghost" is materialized as a "goddess", and the expression of the figure is clear and rich, with more "humanized" features than in the other *Nine Songs* figures. The figure is more "humanized" than the other *Nine Songs* figures. "The 'mountain ghost' and its mount form a stable triangular structure in the middle of the scene, intertwined with the inverted triangular structure of the pine tree, reinforcing the visual stability. The use of line is also extraordinarily careful, with not too many long, soft strokes, but mostly chops, dots and hooks to 'float', making the 'mountain ghost' appear more like a woman in the woods 'pining for her ruler'. The painting is a "pensive" one. In terms of colouring the environment, Zhao Mengfu also adopts the same colour palette, using moderately saturated green and ochre to reflect the quietness of the deep forest and the bleakness of the environment. From the perspective of artistic psychological stereotypes, Zhao Mengfu can be said to be creating a secondary composition by feeling with his heart the state of mind of the characters depicted in Qu Yuan's brushwork, using

line and colour to express the "vividness of rhythm" of the mountain ghosts.

### **3. Inspiration for Artistic Creation from Qu Yuan's *Nine Songs of the Mountain Ghost* and Zhao Mengfu's *Nine Songs of the Mountain Ghost***

The artistic creation inspired here refers mainly to the creation between different disciplines of art. Qu Yuan's *Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts* and Zhao Mengfu's *Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts* belong to different artistic disciplines, with the former being imaginative art and the latter being visual art. There are many examples of contemporary works of literature and art based on the same theme. For example, the dance-poem drama *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* is an artistic work based on Wang Ximeng's *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*. When creating a second work, you need to appreciate the artistic thoughts and aesthetic feelings of the original author, restore the artist's state of mind according to the artistic elements such as the situation, images and plot he created, and reinterpret the deconstructed artistic feelings. This is a process of renunciation in which the artist chooses the right artistic language for his creation and materialises it through the right artistic expression. In the process of creating art, one should not take the original artwork out of context, misinterpret it or apply it rigidly, nor should one talk about it in general terms, completely detached from the subject matter and themes at hand, but in the process of 'secondary creation' one should deeply appreciate the humanistic sentiments and aesthetic ideals hidden therein, and apply them flexibly in one's own artistic creation. In the process of 'secondary creation', one should deeply appreciate the humanistic sentiments and aesthetic ideals hidden within, and apply them flexibly to one's own artistic creation.

In addition, from the perspective of subject matter, Qu Yuan's *Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts* and Zhao Mengfu's *Nine Songs - Mountain Ghosts* belong to different kinds of artistic creations under the same subject matter or theme, the former through words and emotions and the latter through images. In conveying the 'general sense' of beauty, they also reveal the role of different types of art in the discovery of beauty and the different aesthetic stimulation of the human senses. Therefore, a good art subject or theme deserves a profound exploration of artistic expression and new artistic styles. The current cultural and art market in China is already facing a situation of close integration with art technology, which is both a challenge and an opportunity for traditional art forms. Exploring and discovering new artistic styles or ways to convey traditional Chinese culture, bringing new opportunities to the literature and art market from the audience level, and providing readers and audiences with a variety of windows to appreciate outstanding culture, is also one of the issues that practitioners of culture and art should consider in their future creative path.

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