



A Study of the Development History and Stylistic Features of Chinese Ink

Painting

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Abstract: The modern ink painting in China started in the 1980s and it didn't become popular until the late 1990s. Up till now, it has become a major branch of Chinese art and painting. This paper makes a brief review on the historical development of Chinese ink painting based on the current studies on the topic. Compared with the western painting, the Chinese ink painting enjoys a special position in terms of spiritual forms, Artistic function, Language Structure, ink and brush form. The study finds that ink painting has a strong philosophical conception of Chinese cultural traditions and an ideology that matches its history, culture and religious beliefs. The values and ideology of the traditional Chinese philosophical outlook can be glimpsed in ink painting, and the ancient subsistence smallholder economic system also permeated and influenced the way of painting in terms of economic and social development. This influence ultimately reflected in the ancient philosophical system of thinking .

Keywords: ink painting, Chinese painting, art, modern art

I. Introduction

Since the 1990s, Chinese modern ink painting has been developing rapidly, with its characteristics emphasising not only the structure of the brush and ink, symbolic forms and painting procedures, but also the personal spirit and experience of the author reflected in his works during the art creation. As a branch of Chinese painting, ink painting has a long history of over a thousand years. During its development, it kept evolving, and the art form has developed and innovated in its practical application, forming different schools and styles in different social contexts. In terms of painting methods and genres, ink painting has been influenced by the historical environment. The combination of ink and water as well as the lightness and intensity of the ink colour have been expressed in different forms. Ink painting has a strong philosophical conception of Chinese cultural traditions and an ideology that matches its history, culture and religious beliefs. The values and ideology of the traditional Chinese philosophical outlook can be glimpsed in ink painting, and the ancient subsistence smallholder economic system also permeated and influenced the way of painting in terms of economic and social development^[1]. This influence ultimately reflected in the ancient philosophical system of thinking the the painting.

On the surface, modern ink painting appears to be a historical subversion of traditional ink painting, but in terms of historical evolution, it is a contemporary process of how the material of ink and brush has changed step by step in response to the development of the times^[2]. The definition of 'modern ink painting' has been theoretically discussed and practically explored by countless commentators and practitioners throughout history, but the agreed definition has never been made and there are still different views on its definition and connotation^[3]. In fact, if the term 'modern ink painting' is regarded as an active phenomenon in art history, the issue would seem to be clearer. However, to understand the essence of modern ink painting, there is a need to study it and summarise its stylistic characteristics.

II. Literature Review

In order to ensure that the data is comprehensive, accurate and objective, this paper uses data searching method via CNKI, the largest and most comprehensive coverage data base in China to collect sample data source. To guarantee the direction and development of traditional Chinese painting, and improve the quality of literature analysis, academic papers from CNI-indexed journals were selected as the data source. The terms "Chinese painting" and "Chinese ink painting" were used as the search terms, and the search period was from 1979 to 2019. The result showed over 5,000 articles were retrieved. The irrelevant entries were removed, resulting in a total of 5091 valid articles.

The number of annual publications in the field of Chinese painting research is shown in Figure 1. The development of Chinese painting has gone through three stages. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in late 1970s, Chinese painting underwent a long period of recovery. In 1981 the Chinese Painting Institute was established, though few art

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exhibitions were organized and it could not meet the needs of the public. The development of Chinese painting during this period was slow, as exhibitions were underdeveloped and there was a huge gap between the art and the needs of society. In the millennium Chinese painting began to attract the attention of domestic scholars and the attention of the public. During this period, Hu Jintao, the Chairman of the China, proposed in his report to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Communist Party of China that 'cultural self-awareness and cultural confidence are of great significance in enhancing the quality of the nation and shaping a good atmosphere', which provided guiding ideas for the development of Chinese painting^[4]. This has provided a guiding ideology for the development of Chinese painting. In order to promote the new development of Chinese painting and the establishment of an oriental cultural system, the Chinese Painting Society was established in 2011, and the research development of Chinese painting entered a peak period, while theoretical research and creative practice of Chinese painting also entered a heyday in the same period^[5]. From 2015, the study on Chinese paintings entered a steady period with an annual publication of 300 articles, proving a strong study interest from the academic field.



Figure 1, Annual trend chart of literature publication from 1979-2019

III. The origin and growth of Chinese ink painting

Chinese ink painting has an important place in the history of Chinese painting. The origin of the Chinese ink painting has been bothering the academic researchers and scholars for hundreds of years due to the lack of solid proofs and materials. Throughout Chinese history, the changes in dynasties caused the great losses of ink painting. In spite of the losses, some records are true and the saying or quotations of the sages true^[6]. In any case, it is the distance of time and the sparse history that make it difficult to find a clear trail. The question of the origins of Chinese ink painting is not the only one that haunts the researchers. Back to Tang and Song dynasties, when ink painting flourished, there was not much information about the origins of ink and ink painting. For example, the history of traditional ink can be traced as far as Gu Kaizhi, before which Chinese painting tended to rely on fragmentary records. During the Song and Yuan periods, most painterly literati painters were confined to the tradition of ink painting. Therefore, the origin of Chinese ink painting has long been a puzzle to the world.

Chinese ink painting is a traditional culture with Chinese characteristics. It has a deep foundation in the national language and culture. It is unique in the forest of art styles in the world, and it is the result of the aesthetic choices and perceptions of thousands of Chinese cultural accumulation. Chinese ink painting began in the Tang Dynasty, first in the field of landscape painting. Wang Wei, the great poet and literati painter of the Tang Dynasty, is generally regarded as the ancestor of ink painting landscape painting, having created a 'broken ink landscape', a major role in Chinese landscape ink painting and the founder of poetry, calligraphy and painting (Figure 2). Chinese ink painting, from the Tang Dynasty onwards, entered a new world and has continued to develop ever since until it reached a peak.



Figure 2, Wang Wei's ink painting: A picture of the dry snow of the Yangtze River (Source: Online)

The particular forms of expression in the ink painting landscape painting techniques of the Five Dynasties period(907BC-909BC) laid an important foundation for Song dynasty painting, which was mainly dominated by landscape painting, with the images mainly highlighting the beauty of the landscape's mood. In addition to the peak of development in landscape painting, the Song dynasty also laid a certain foundation in the painting of figures. In Song dynasty, the ink paintings featured in bold and simple style of brushwork with a few simple strokes. The development of the figure in realism laid the foundation for later painting. The rise of literati painting in the late Northern Song dynasty also contributed to the development of Chinese painting, with more colourful expressions, romantic spirit and richer, broader contexts, enriching the gardens of Chinese literature and art and the spiritual world of man.

Literati painting reached its peak of maturity by the Yuan dynasty, when literati painting underwent great changes, as opposed to the Song dynasty.

While literati painting in the Song period was strictly standardised and deformed from the mainstream painting proper, the rise of the 'meaning of literati painting' was due to the reclusive nature of literati painters in the Yuan dynasty, who became the subject of innovation. Starting with Zhao Mengfu's 'use of calligraphy in painting'(Figure 3), the four Yuan artists (Huang Gongwang, Wang Meng, Ni Zan and Wu Zhen) followed expression of subjective activism, emphasising the use of calligraphy in painting, applying seal script, dizi, regular script, running script, cursive script and other calligraphic forms to Chinese ink painting. The pursuit of the combination of brush and ink with poetry, calligraphy, painting and printing led traditional Chinese painting to finally embark on the path of capitalism. In short, Chinese ink painting during the Yuan dynasty was a splendid legacy in history and had a great influence on literati painting in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Literati painting thus became the dominant painting in Chinese painting.



Figure 3 Zhao Mengfu's ink painting: A picture of Arhat in red dress. (Source: Liaoning Library, China)

The Ming and Qing dynasties were a period of great importance in traditional painting, when Chinese cultural painting reached its peak. Literati painting was glorious in the history of China. Chinese landscape and ink painting inherited the strong continuity of the Song and Yuan periods and worked perfectly with poetry, calligraphy and painting, thus enhancing the art form of literati painting. This led to the emergence of the representative generation of Dong Qichang, who put forward the true meaning of the 'North-South Theory' and summed up the theory of Chinese ink painting. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese painting took shape in the form of painting birds and flowers in a realistic manner. In particular, the four Jiangnan schools of the Ming dynasty were the most representative, and the painting of birds and flowers was a further pursuit of the object to express the painter's unified interest, based on the understanding of the previous artists. Since then, Chinese ink painting has become more enriched and complete under the brushwork of the two masters, Chen Chun and Xu Wei. Chen Chun is known for his ink paintings of flowers, but he also specialises in the colourless and foliage painting methods. He combines them with a more simple and elegant element of calligraphy. The painting depicts pear blossoms on a folded branch, diagonally from the top to the bottom. The red pear blossoms and the leaves in ink and blue are not outlined, but painted directly in colour. The colour is concise without losing its authenticity(Figure 4). Later generations have built on his style and developed it to form a school of Chinese painting that continues to evolve. The Ming and Qing dynasties were therefore the most glorious period in the history of Chinese literati painting.



Figure 4, ink painting of flowers by Chen Chun.(Source: Taipei Imperial Palace Museum)



In modern times, Chinese ink painting has undergone unprecedented changes and trials, and has shown diversity in the field of painting, with traditional painting being subjected to the impact of modern art and the blending of Chinese and Western cultures^[7]. The first reason why Chinese ink painting has shown prosperity is due to the unceasing pursuit and exploration of traditional painting by ancient literati painters. The ancient painter Qi Baishi, for example, devoted his life to the study of Chinese ink painting and eventually became a great literati painter(Figure 5). Secondly, it stems from the exchange and merging of Chinese and Western cultures, as in the case of the ancient painter Xu Beihong. This all led to a diversification in the field of painting.

Figure 5, an ink painting of Qi Baishi: Shrimps. (Source: Internet)

IV. Stylistic Features of Chinese Ink Painting

I. Spiritual forms

In an era when Confucianism was the dominant culture, the literati and scholars, who were influenced by the traditional Taoist and Confucian ideology, were in a feudal society where dynasties changed and officialdom fluctuated. Although they had the ideal of 'serving the country and helping the world', they did not have the ability to 'succeed in establishing a career'. They had no choice but to express their depression through their paintings, thus their works conveyed to the world that they had never forgotten the society nor the country even if they were retired^[8]. This is a reflection of the authors' discontent with reality since they could do nothing to change it. This spiritual form of the hermit has led to the emergence of traditional literati paintings with the words "clear and empty", "quiet", "cold", "remote" and "indifferent".

The authors of modern ink painting, on the other hand, have inherited the 'anti-traditional' passion of their predecessors. In the face of contemporary urban civilisation and secular culture, contemporary painters have entered a spiritual situation from which there is no escape. In the current global world, with the development of modern high technology and the widespread promotion of media, even in the most remote mountainous areas, the so-called artists' poor performances can reach the screen of everyone's mobile screen. The general anxious mental dilemma suffered by contemporary people has led ink painting creators to confront the current social and cultural realities through their paintings. As a result, contemporary ink painting differs from the impoverished and feeble spiritual form of traditional painting. Instead of escaping the reality, the modern ink painting faces the world and seek for the social values and pursues truth.

2. Artistic function

With the awakening and strengthening of the consciousness of the subject and the reflection of modern society's cultural criticism on itself, the creation of ink painting has changed from stating a strong political 'collective consciousness' to the author's own individual expression of life experience, while inheriting the traditional literati painting's characteristic of emphasizing the expression of inner emotions. However, unlike traditional literati painting, which is a soliloquy of the mind, contemporary ink painting is based on a concern for the underprivileged and a disdain for the injustices of the world^[9]. The expression of emotion comes from the author's personal experience and profound reflection on the various phenomena of the current society. The resulting interrogation, questioning and criticism of contemporary society and culture have become the radical quality of contemporary ink painting in terms of its aesthetic and artistic function.

Confucianism has always been the main artistic function of traditional Chinese painting, but as the times evolved, the influence of Confucianism and Taoism was weakened, and the artistic function was gradually transformed from a tool for political indoctrination to a free expression of personal emotion, making the artistic function of traditional painting far removed from the world and more concerned with the individual's own soul^[10]. The rebellious quality of traditional literati painting, which is reflected in their works due to the social context in which they live, has its own cultural critical significance, while the contemporary ink painters' righteousness has become another distinctive embodiment of the artistic function of the contemporary ink painting style.

3. Language Structure

With the exhibition "95 Tensions and Expressions Ink Painting Exhibition" at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing in 1995, the strong deviation from the norms of brush and ink in the works has given rise to a series of new topics: language, which has become the focus of much attention of the modern artists. It means that the innovation of ink painting is entering into a period of linguistic self-regulation and linguistic construction, bringing the modern transformation of ink language closer and closer to success"^[11] In the exhibition, the painters have intensified the formal tension of China and expressed a rich and profound spiritual meaning in a relatively simple language. This contemporary ink painting creation, characterised by the strengthening of the formal function of the language, has transformed the structural features of traditional painting with its comprehensive artistic language of poetry, calligraphy, painting and printing into an emphasis on the independent body of painting. The emphasis on the visual language form of traditional painting changed into an emphasis on the language form of painting itself.

In the context of different times, the language structure of painting was also influenced by the particular historical situation, so that the combined language structure of poetry, calligraphy, painting and printing in traditional painting emerged in the light of the traditional culture. In the face of the diversified development of the current era, highlighting the formal function of the language of painting is the ultimate goal of contemporary ink painting in the context of the times.

4. Ink and Brush Form

The traditional ink and brush form is a combination of writing, intention, chance, instantaneousness, fluidity, interpenetration and randomness, and after long-time evolution and sharpening, it has formed a set of highly programmed ink and brush forms. This is to reflect the author's interpretation of his own emotions on the subject of the painting, the fit between the language and the subject of the painting, and the embodiment of the spiritual quality of the work itself. In this way, the viewer and the author of the painting are able to empathise with each other in an effort to

understand the work. Contemporary ink painting, on the other hand, has made great efforts in the style of "brush and ink". They no longer stick to the traditional rules of painting, or copy the brush and ink style of literati painting, instead, they turn to the study of the causes of this language style and the laws of thinking that emerge from it. They either change the order of traditional brush and ink, or enlarge the traditional brush and ink symbols "translations", with the borrowing western types of painting, to fit the contemporary experience of life in the context of the modern times. A powerful aesthetic effect is achieved through the above techniques: partial enlargement, exaggeration and strengthening of the pure 'language' of expression, the dismantling of the traditional ink painting formula, the random laying out, the focus on the composition of point, line and surface elements, its brush and ink forms, the harmony and elegance of the picture as well as a sound symphony of ink painting. The modern ink and brush forms have given rise to a new critical spirit and reflective tone, which in turn has given rise to the modern character that contemporary ink painting art should have.

V. Conclusion

The history of traditional ink painting is a long and puzzling one, but over the long development of its history, people are impressed by its spiritual meanings out of simple lines and strokes. With the development of modern technology and society, cross culture exchanges is becoming more frequent and it has caused people to think about whether to protect their own local cultural, or develop it into a new era by learning from the others. The modern ink art, in this case is the enviable result of the global communication.

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