

Revisiting Traditional Visual Culture in Contemporary Chinese Painting

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Abstract

In the context of economic globalization, contemporary art trends and concepts have increasingly influenced Chinese painting. The focus has shifted from emphasizing technique to considering what cultural values a painting should convey or lead from an international perspective. As Chinese painting has developed to the present day, a key focus has become how to transform traditional culture into something meaningful in a contemporary context, thereby giving Chinese traditional culture broader international influence. This article explores how visual elements from conventional culture are reinterpreted in contemporary Chinese painting, seeking the essential factors for contemporary painting's return to tradition. The views presented in this article are a further extension of my master's thesis, "A Study on the Phenomenon of Irony in Contemporary Chinese Painting".

Keywords

Contemporary Painting, Traditional Visual Elements, Reconstruction

1. Introduction

Since the May Fourth Movement up until the 1990s, the creation model of Chinese modern and contemporary art largely imitated and borrowed from Western thought and artistic forms, with artists adopting a radical attitude of breaking and rejecting traditional culture. They pursued the expression of "new" things, (Lu, 2014) believing that the new and popular were good while lacking reflection on the essence of social life and cultural values. In contemporary times, however, painting has begun to return to tradition, with artists striving to draw inspiration and sources from traditional culture. Traditional visual elements are increasingly dominant in contemporary painting, frequently appearing in many works. Of course, these elements are not simply placed unchanged into the artists' works;

instead, they are given new meanings through specific forms of expression, allowing the paintings to contain both contemporary artistic values and maintain national characteristics. In contemporary China, many painters, such as Liu Qinghe, Chen Shuxia, Wang Huaiqing, Yue Minjun, Yuan Yaoming, and others, create by appropriating and reorganizing existing texts and images from tradition. The following sections attempt to interpret how contemporary painting re-understands traditional visual culture through the analysis of individual artists' works.

2. Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Visual Texts

Contemporary painters deconstruct and then reconstruct traditional visual texts, imbuing the new painting texts with more layers of meaning. In a sense, this is a challenge and breakthrough of all established rules, orders, and standards, and it is one of the prominent features of contemporary art. For example, artist Wang Huaiqing deconstructs and reconstructs Chinese Ming-style furniture in his work. His artistic creation is characterized by “subtraction,” abandoning rich colors, precise shapes, and spatial dimensions, replacing them with basic monochrome, lines, and flat visual features as forms of expression, pursuing the infinite within the limited. Viewers can still clearly understand what he is expressing through the simplified structures, creating an experience that goes beyond the real objects being depicted, immersing them in a “seemingly familiar yet strange” memory that Wang Huaiqing creates. For example, his work “Ancient Emperor” (Figure 1) imitates portraits of Qing dynasty emperors (Figure 2), rethinking and reinterpreting traditional painting language. Wang Huaiqing deconstructs the emperor's portrait from four aspects: line, surface, decoration, and space. First, the delicate and precise contour lines are erased, with a few thick lines and heavy



Figure 1. Anonymous, “Portrait of Emperor Qianlong in Court Attire”, Ink on silk, Qing dynasty.



Figure 2. Wang Huaqing, “Ancient Emperors”, 200 * 135 cm, oil on canvas, comprehensive materials, 2015.

black blocks added at key parts of the body. Second, the intricate surface within the contour lines is replaced by chaotic and irregular lines. Third, the most symbolic and decorative elements, such as the dragon throne, footstool, and dragon symbols on the emperor’s robe, are removed. Fourth, based on the original depiction of the dragon throne, footstool, and the shape and direction of the robe from the waist to the knees to the ankles of the seated figure, the presence of three-dimensional space is easily perceived. Arnheim states, “The addition of the third dimension greatly enhances the richness of a painting, comparable to the effect created by adding some harmonic treatment to a simple melody in music” (Arnheim, 2019). With the removal of the dragon throne and footstool, the three-dimensional space disappears, reducing the complexity and richness of the composition. The visual text is reduced to a simple combination of points, lines, and planes. Despite the simplification, our ability to recognize the portrait as that of a Qing dynasty emperor remains intact. However, the artist’s minimalist treatment of painting language does not result in a simple visual effect for the viewer (because the viewer does not merely “overlook” what is seen, but engages in a complex and challenging process of reconstructing the deconstructed image, which requires a thorough examination of the viewer’s accumulated experience, broad knowledge, and accurate memory). Instead, it heightens the viewer’s visual impact. As the artist Soulages put it, “The fewer the means, the stronger the expression.” The difference between complex meanings and simple forms can produce something quite intricate. Using Arnheim’s hypothesis: “If a painter reproduces Cain and Abel using only the simplicity of these two figures, compared to the original work, the conflicting content—such as goodness and evil, acceptance and

rejection—becomes more pronounced.” (Arnheim, 2019). Simplicity and complexity are a pair of mutually exclusive yet interdependent categories; each’s transcendence of the other propels them in opposite directions. The painter, perhaps with sincere intent, has structurally unified and summarized the portrait of the Qing emperor, ultimately creating a form of “ironic transcendence”¹ (Zhao, 2016).

Secondly, his work “Night Banquet” (Figure 3) is a parody of the fourth scene—the musical ensemble—from Gu Hongzhong’s “Night Revels of Han Xizai” (Figure 4), a painting from the Five Dynasties period (Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms). The artist deconstructs and reconstructs the scene by employing the principle of “similarity.” Similarity acts as a structural rule, assembling disjointed elements such as a fan, hat, chair, and shoes visually linked to Han Xizai into a fragmented composition. Through the resemblance of these individual elements,



Figure 3. Wang Huaiqing, “Night Banquet”, oil on canvas, 1996.



Figure 4. Gu Hongzhong, “Detail of The Night Revels of Han Xizai”, ink and color on silk, Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period.

¹Sincere Intent → Unreliable Text → Willing Acceptance. Even though viewers know that the depicted figure is not an accurate representation of a Qing dynasty emperor, they are still willing to acknowledge it as the image of a certain Qing emperor. (*Zhao, 2016, Principles and Inference of Semiotics*, p. 272.

the viewer instinctively reconstructs the absent figure of Han Xizai in their mind, despite the lack of his direct depiction in the image. In other words, although Han Xizai's image is absent from the visual text, he is paradoxically present in the viewer's perception.

Compared to "Ancient Emperor", the visual language in "Night Banquet" is even more concise, consisting only of the interweaving of lines and planes, and the stark contrast between the white background and black shapes. This disrupts the order of the visual symbols in the original painting, halting the lively depiction of the night banquet's progress. Instead, it evokes a sense of desolation after the revelry has ended, with scattered cups and dishes and an empty hall, prompting viewers to reflect on the cultural values of a bygone era. Wang Huaqing's simplification, deconstruction, and reorganization of the visual elements are an exploration of the extent to which established orders in traditional Chinese painting can be deconstructed and reanalyzed, or how artistic genres can be transformed into extended spaces. This approach subverts the entire traditional painting's expressive system, creating a structural irony in the visual language (Xu, 2020).

3. Combination of Contradictory Elements

In the 1990s, contemporary artist Li Luming's "Chinese Gesture No. 18" directly appropriates the "Buddha" hand gesture and posture, presenting a green "Buddha" hand holding a bright pink mobile phone, with the fingernails painted in vivid purple nail polish. The mobile phone represents technological progress, economic development, and the symbol of the internet communication era, while purple nails represent fashion and femininity, hinting at material consumption. The Buddha's hand, a traditional cultural and religious symbol, combines with contemporary elements in a single text, creating a conflict of symbols and causing visual discomfort and absurdity. The text intends to express the conflict between religious belief and the materialistic consumption era, questioning whether our faith has disappeared or transformed into a belief in information technology and fashion consumption in this materialistic age.

Yuan Yaoming's "New Qin Terracotta Warriors Series" "feminizes" the image of Qin terracotta warriors by boldly grafting and transplanting them with sexy and fit female figures. The "feminized" Qin terracotta warriors appear "androgynous," with the intent of blurring the gender difference between male and female, transitioning from masculine strength to feminine grace, and re-integrating a hermaphroditic visual concept. The absurdity of the terracotta warriors, displaying some feminine traits, and leaning towards feminine qualities, surpasses the traditional positioning of masculine strength. The abnormal combination of images might lead viewers to naturally associate with concepts like "transvestites," "cross-dressing," "feminized men," or "sex change surgeries," which are not accepted by the majority of society, subverting social gender norms. Subverting societal norms around gender, to some extent, signifies progress in gender concepts and challenges the oddity of cross-dressing behaviors that deviate from different genders

norms. Yuan Yaoming's "Qin Terracotta Warriors Series" aims to reveal whether the "androgynous" return is merely an extension of feminine posture as a critique, "queer reflection"² on gender, or a reverse questioning of everyday norms. Just as the Qin terracotta warriors are "feminized" in a satirical manner, it critiques the idea of women playing male roles in society.

Liu Qinghe's contemporary ink paintings explore ink language along a vertical timeline, using a staining technique that weakens the presence of lines. However, horizontally, his work unfolds in two entirely different directions, with a cross-contextual combination of heterogeneous symbols, rejecting logical and stereotyped text combinations, and creating a "disembodied" poetic feeling. For example, in "Here I Am" (Figure 5) Couple, the foreground features two fashionable urban figures, while the background is a freehand landscape in the "flat and distant" style from ancient times. The combination of two systems of symbols that should not intersect in time disrupts the normal procedure of interpreting the text's surface meaning, guiding viewers toward a deeper interpretation of the text.



Figure 5. Qinghe Liu, "Here I Am", 180 × 140 cm, ink on paper, 2001.

Similarly, Chen Shuxia's "Between Mountains and Waters" (Figure 6) series combines traditional landscape backgrounds with modern figures. Still, Chen Shuxia's work is more playful and whimsical, less about the seriousness of established culture and more about recalling a state of "mind wandering" between mountains and waters. She uses the medium of oil painting to interpret traditional

²Queer theory originally referred to a derogatory term used by mainstream Western culture to describe people of the same gender are in love, implying "strangeness." Later, it was adopted by radicals to encapsulate their theory, carrying a sense of irony. Queer theory posits that gender identity and sexual orientation are not "natural" but are shaped through social and cultural processes, with a critique of the elements of gender oppression.

Chinese spirit and temperament, breaking the boundaries between medium and subject.



Figure 6. Chen Shuxia, “Three Birds”, 250 × 156 cm, oil on canvas, 2006.

Whether it is Liu Qinghe, Yuan Yaoming, or Li Luming, their paintings share a common feature: the elements forming the picture may have no temporal or spatial connection, but they form a new system of meaning. Symbols carrying different meanings are combined in a single text, deepening the structural layers of meaning. This creates a visual effect where tradition and the contemporary, absurdity and seriousness, the unfamiliar and the familiar coexist, breaking the continuity of space and time, disrupting the narrative of the picture, subverting the viewer’s expectations, and encouraging reflection on the “meaning beyond the painting.”

4. Conclusion

Earlier artists hoped to emphasize the solidity and clarity of objects, while contemporary artists sought to eliminate the materiality of visual objects or reduce space as much as possible. Earlier artists aimed for logical picture relationships, whereas contemporary painting pursued an illogical or super-logical visual effect. Contemporary painting merges past and present, encouraging viewers to interpret by combining two temporal texts. The deconstruction of traditional culture by contemporary Chinese painting is a return to an inheritance of tradition, as well as a transcendence and innovation of it. Tradition and contemporary are

developing forward in a contradictory yet integrated manner. Additionally, the return to traditional culture in contemporary Chinese painting is an artistic trend and cultural phenomenon that has flourished since the 20th century, representing the introspection and maturity of modern culture. This is the artists' attempt to establish the position of national identity under the influence of the international art atmosphere.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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