



## Establishment of Meaning of Ink Wash Painting in Modern Times: Evolution of Chinese Ink Wash Painting as a Formal Language of Oriental Figure Painting

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### Abstract

As an ancient oriental type of figure painting, Chinese ink wash painting's development and evolution is the most prominent part that most reflects the characteristics of contemporary era in Chinese artistic exploration in the 20th century. Present Chinese ink wash figure painting has already become one of the forms of creation among Chinese painting mainstream and the reform spirit it reflects has special aesthetic meaning to Chinese contemporary art in the multicultural background. This paper analyzes the language form transformation that Chinese ink wash figure painting has achieved by drawing on western modern artistic concepts for reference and other issues including artists' individual and personalized representation styles; it also discusses the artistic spirit and contemporary cultural significance reflected by deconstruction of classical ink wash painting language and integration of modern works under the background of globalization.

**Key words:** Chinese painting; Ink wash painting language; Multiculture; Formal language

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### INTRODUCTION

Chinese ink wash painting is a typical cultural symbol reflecting oriental aesthetic awareness. In the long-time development of classical art, Chinese painting has

established the language of ink wash painting possessing unique national characters. There exists a positive correspondence between its development and evolution and continuous shift of the cultural background, which reflects overall penetration of philosophic concept into the artistic form. Confucianism and Taoism that built the foundation of thought and culture of ancient Chinese society deeply affected artistic style and style evolution of Chinese painting. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century as various western philosophical thoughts and artistic concepts came into sight of Chinese culture, they influenced the expression style of Chinese modern art on another level.

### 1. CULTURE CONNOTATION OF FORMAL LANGUAGE OF INK WASH PAINTING

No art form can separately exist without its culture that serves as the soil with which art form develops. In other words, culture provides context for the existence of art. Chinese painting that possesses character of showing the traditional cultural depth and breadth is the complete statement of philosophical theory that man is an integral part of nature in art. The Taoism's praising of ink wash art has built basic frame of formal language of Chinese painting. Ink wash painting that formed during pursuit of harmonious coexistence of people and nature has greatly enriched painting concepts and expression techniques. Chinese painting has unique and profound qualities and essences of traditional culture, from which we can catch a glimpse of sense of national culture identity and cultural awareness.

The language form and even artistic form of traditional Chinese paintings are uninterruptedly carried forward. Painting's connotation is indicated by language of ink wash painting possessing cultural trait that is formed through reflections and insights on life and artistic value of images and colors has turned into the expression of

life awareness from visual form. Artistic development cannot be separated from the progress of national aesthetic view and aesthetic ideal, nor can it be separated from acceptance of artists' psychological makeup of personalized languages. Besides, the artists' requirements on expression are satisfied by obtaining new languages. Establishment of new visual forms based on existing formal language of painting itself is of significance to cultural inheritance.

Ink wash language bears the aesthetic accumulation by means of a special expression mode, with prominent characteristics of abstraction and stylization. The intervention of *writing* technique of oriental calligraphy in the painting further strengthens the features of Chinese painting language including abstraction, virtuality, and planarity. Essentially different with common visual artistic form, "Chinese painters particularly emphasize on lines and regard lines as main tool of drawing and expression. Any style campaign that tends to destroy the integrity of a line or treat the line as part of area usually would be considered as heresy isolated from the mainstream" (Cahill, 1987). The non-descriptive language form of ink wash painting has unique aesthetic meaning. Plato's notion of *absolute formal beauty* refers to research for objective rationality of objects themselves according to the source and quality of beauty, and it should reflect the intuitive abstract beauty of objects' modeling rule. Compared with Chinese traditional painting's modeling concept, such abstract beauty varies a lot in oriental and occidental expression. Kandinsky, the Russian abstractionism master, regarded realism and abstraction as two extreme methods for expressing the truth. In his opinion, the art's function of expressing ideas can be displayed by abstract forms, thereby showing the invisible spirit of objects. Whereas the space and time of Chinese painting adopts the abstraction with limited images to experience the process of realizing the truth, and conveys the life awareness of perfect harmony of subject and objects with endless changes of ink wash language.

Language of traditional ink wash painting is a broad semantic concept. As a language form, it is the result that has been proven to be effective by constant practice of generations of painters and has become a set of unique symbol system and specific expression rules. When the ink wash painting is analyzed from the perspective of function of knowing nature through the phenomenon, seeking for images of painting cannot be opposed to reality, nor can it exist without the latter. Infinite possibilities of color gradients can happen to water and ink that are effectively expressive. The expression of intrinsic characteristics of objects by means of the ink and lines' change of intensity and wetting-drying renders the pure formal beauty of language independent of substance, thereby establishing oriental unique expression mode by ink wash painting and finally helping painters reach the state of freely and fully expressing their feelings, showing temperaments, enjoying the pleasure, appreciating the beauty and conveying meanings.

## 2. EVOLUTION OF INK WASH PAINTING LANGUAGE IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE FIGURE PAINTING CATEGORY

As a subsystem of language system, ink wash figure painting's changes in styles during different periods reflect the influences of language environment on it. The first change of language system that developed in closed environment occurred because of the intervention of western Buddhist paintings as different culture in Han dynasty; the second change happened to the noumenon of painting. With development and maturity of calligraphy during Jin, Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties, it got involved into the painting language in the form of abstract symbol, initiating trend of literati painting in Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Due to introduction of western learning into China in modern time, the third change occurred that western painting concept had clear and definite effects on Chinese painting. Whether in order to maintain the traditional pureness, development is sought inside the original system or to achieve reconstruction of language form by introducing external different factors, Chinese figure painting is developing towards two extremes in a paradoxical movement of synchronicity, and seek breakthrough in surpassing traditional language with the spirit of *ink keeps up with times*.

Lines were adopted as the main modeling means in Chinese early figure painting that particularly put emphasis on constitution consciousness of the abstraction and decoration of lines, which suggests that painters' sense of beauty of ink wash painting's expression form has not reached the conscious state. This can be verified in classical works in history of painting. Among paintings on silk in the coffin chambers of Han dynasty found in archaeological excavation, we can find plane modeling of figures, exquisite outlines and accuracy contour. In the Period of Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern dynasties, the expression techniques of Indian Buddhist painting and Gupta Empire's sculpturing were introduced into Yellow River Plains. Those techniques that express the limited thickness of colors and images on the plane provide a supplement to the ink wash painting system. Since Tang dynasty, lines of calligraphy have intervened into the painting language and ink wash painting gradually took the lead, which proves such change of form conforms to the change of aesthetic conception at that time.

As in Song dynasty ink wash figure painting in freehand style first appeared, it was the first time that form implication of language of ink wash painting had been fully showed in figure paintings. Simple lines and ink change were used to arouse intuition and emotional of viewers, reflecting instinctive abstractness and marking the independence of ink wash painting. Since then, Chinese figure painting has fallen into the low tide and there has been no significant breakthrough in formal language exploration. Consequently, it fails to become the mainstream of painting.

Portraiture in Ming dynasty and Shanghai style figure painting in the late Qing dynasty reflect early effects of western art of painting so that painting realistically and modeling techniques was adopted in Chinese painting which began to seek appropriate language to express volume and structure. Within the frame of classical painting, development of language of ink wash painting is simply mature. However, because painters pursued the paintings function of emotion expression and viewing value excessively, it has gone to the extreme of following a set routine with empty concept. As the refinement of skills often contradicts quality of works, consummate skills of language can enhance their artistic quality. If depth study and portraying of figures are ignored, creativity will be lost. Chinese ink wash figure painting has been lost in traditional cultural context, which lays the realistic foundation for introducing different factors. Therefore, in exploring formal language of modern figure painting, learning from nature and introducing western concepts of painting realistically and modeling ideal will be inevitably adopted in order to seek humanistic spirit and aesthetic interests of art of painting.

### 3. REALISM EXPLORATION OF FORMAL LANGUAGE OF INK WASH PAINTING

Chinese art revolution began with the New Culture Movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which changed development trend of China's modern art and changed art form of ink wash painting as well as its cultural development. The introduction of western painting concepts and forms gave rise to the cultural thinking of binary opposition regarding tradition and innovation, the orient and occident, as well as the classic and modern.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century can be regarded the age witnessing the awakening of people in a true sense. During this period, Chinese figure painters portrayed living scenes of social groups with their accurate and intense feelings on reality. Tragedy aesthetics of realistic criticalness caused humanitarian care to be the most important goal in artistic expression. At this point, the focus of Chinese ink wash painting shifted from aesthetically expressing meaning to showing great care to human, thus narrowing the distance between abstract language of ink wash painting and human in reality, becoming a carrier to show great humanitarian care and achieving creative combination of traditional language form with western artistic concept on a new high level.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first problem concerning ink wash figure painting that needs to be solved is the conflicts between traditional freehand style and modern realistic style in terms of modeling. Modeling pays attention to external structure of three-dimensional objects and achieves construction of the contour. As realism concept was introduced to expression area of Chinese figure painting, only by seeking the methods of transformation and interpretation for language of ink

wash painting on the plane, can fluent expression be achieved through the language with characteristics of calligraphy on the level of modeling. Among intervention of different factors of western modeling style into Chinese traditional closed system of ink wash painting, the first to be affected is sketching from nature in a realistic way. Introducing these techniques is based on western realism painting system, which is completely different from Chinese traditional modeling in freehand style and hence it features with the ability to deconstruct language system fundamentally (Kong, 2000).

In terms of characteristics of language form, sketching firstly deconstructs aesthetic meaning dependently displayed by lines, and this deconstruction is achieved at the cost of weakening rhythmical image and freehand feature of ink wash painting. Painting model realistically has caused accurate human body modeling and scientific perspective first to appear in the Chinese painting and ink wash painting began to develop towards thoroughly modeling image, which undoubtedly is a great breakthrough on modeling concept and language of traditional figure painting. Seeking for coexistence with and interpretation of modeling again is the theme explored for ink wash painting in new cultural context.

In the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century, *painting realistically* is the theme of ink wash painting development. Traditional language of ink wash painting has turned into new realism language after experiencing reposition, integration, and supplementation. Transformation of ink wash painting language so that it has characteristics of calligraphy, coexistence with modern modeling method and coordination of realism modeling with abstract ink wash painting by weakening volume thickness and special depth proceeding from corresponding coordination of linear outlined structure with volume are trade-off decision of transformation of formal language of Chinese ink figure painting since the advocating of realism painting in modern times. Realism painting reconstructs the formal language between painting in freehand style and realism painting, thus marking breakthrough on traditional language norms in practice and laying foundation for diversified development of modern Chinese ink wash figure painting language.

### 4. DIVERSIFICATION OF FORMAL LANGUAGE OF CONTEMPORARY INK WASH PAINTING

Diversification is the most remarkable and fundamental feature of the development trend of Chinese contemporary art. Chinese society began economic and cultural all-around reform in 1980s. After *85 Artistic New Trend* occurred in mid 1980s, as environment for Chinese artistic creation gradually became relaxed, modern style became the theme of Chinese painting reform. Many young artists focused on combining western modern concepts

with Chinese traditional ink wash painting and exploring personalized styles by adopting unusual and the radical ways to get rid of the fixed mode of realism painting style that had formed since the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The western post-modern deconstruction awareness and diverse expression forms of modern painting language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century greatly affected creation concept and form reform of Chinese painting. Language innovation based on carrying forward traditions was made or form experiments revolutionarily were carried out for the purpose of changing the Chinese ink wash painting, and as a result, it showed diversification whether in theme, style, material, form, technique or aesthetic orientation. Such new artistic forms as new literati ink wash painting, ink and color painting, and modern experimental ink wash painting mixed various style including classical, modern, realistic, freehand, expressing and abstract styles. Exploration of ink wash painting language, after experiencing improvement and reforms, returned to the tradition for seek humanistic connotation, representation and expression of symbolic feeling in painting, which reveals the inclusiveness of Chinese culture. A large number of Chinese artists strived to seek personal unique experience in new culture environment, treated artistic creation with more open and free mind and endeavored to seek new development of artistic form of ink wash painting.

Abstract ink wash painting emerged in 1980s which built composition of the pictures in virtue of abstract elements in calligraphy, and this technique of creation strengthens visual effect of artistic works. Abstract ink wash painting focuses on transforming language into a kind of symbol which can convey spirits instead of reappearing objects. In this way, such focus brought ink wash painting back to origin of traditional art's formalism. Abstract ink wash painting does not completely equal to western abstract painting because its particularity has surpassed the level of the latter. This is a new way for artists to explore integration and commonality of traditional ink painting with western art in cultural pattern under the background of globalization.

Expressionism of ink wash painting also appeared in 1980s which based on carrying forward image expression in Chinese traditional painting combined creation experience of western modern expressionism in painting in order to convey the existence value and life awareness by virtue of ink wash painting language. Artists in expressionism style integrated the exaggeration and deformation of expressionism with fantasy of surrealism proceeding from dealing with such forms as materials and composition of picture of ink wash painting and they created intense visual tension by means of weird modeling, colors and wild calligraphic style so as to express emotions and meaning. Their works are divorced from peace and elegance of traditional ink wash painting and approach the western modern expressionism in terms of form as individuals' subjective consciousness came into category of expression and emphasizes the function of subjectivity in artistic creation.

In the ink wash figure painting field, ink wash painting language is a way of expression to display the existence of subject spirit, and expression of any ideal and thought must rely on this special language form. For development of ink wash figure painting, efforts must be constantly made to explore new expressional language, which requires us to have an open and inclusive artistic concept and use it in creation and practice. (a) Artists should take freehand style of ink wash painting as basic frame, absorb what is best from traditional culture, and appropriately learn the elements beneficial to artistic development from western painting so as to reinvest ink wash painting with formal innovation and modern sense. (b) Artists should sincerely express their own living feelings, explore present cultural context with individuation of language and create new visual forms on the base of maintaining style and spirit of traditional ink painting. On the whole, for showing effect of pictures and expressing internal emotions, both adjustment of the aesthetic character of linear composition of ink wash painting and experimental exploration beyond Chinese and western traditional norms can be used as an approach to realize transformation of ink wash painting language to modernization.

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## CONCLUSION

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With regard to expression of meaning of ink wash painting, language itself is not the most important aspect that is to be presented, and instead it is the culture and spirit behind the language. The exploration of modern Chinese ink wash painting language should synchronize with its spiritual direction, and breakthroughs in content and form should be achieved by interaction of cultural spirit and its own expression mode. Artists should face issues of present social life, philosophy, and aesthetics, actively work on materials development and innovation of language form, and transform their experience of life to an artistic symbol with emotional qualities, thereby facilitating the establishment of personalized style of ink wash painting art and its meaning in modern times.

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