

The Current Status of Chinese Painting under Contemporary Aesthetic Education in China

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Abstract: Under the contemporary aesthetic education system in China, the development of Chinese painting exhibits a dual trend of traditional inheritance and innovative exploration. On one hand, academic education emphasizes the transmission of classical brush-and-ink techniques and aesthetic spirit, adopting a teaching model that combines copying from masters with sketching from life. On the other hand, in the context of globalization and multicultural integration, Chinese painting is gradually breaking free from the constraints of traditional subjects and forms, incorporating contemporary visual language and cross-media experimentation. Some artists attempt to integrate ink painting with digital technology and installation art to respond to cultural issues in modern society, though such efforts also spark debate over the core value of brush-and-ink. Aesthetic education policies promote Chinese painting through textbook reforms, exhibitions, and public education programs. However, its popularization still faces challenges such as a lack of interest among youth and utilitarian tendencies driven by market forces. Looking forward, Chinese painting must seek a balance between cultural confidence and open innovation-preserving the essence of national art while revitalizing its role in contemporary aesthetic education.

Keywords: Chinese Painting, Aesthetic Education, Tradition and Innovation, Philosophical Aesthetics.

1. Aesthetic Education Policies

In October 2020, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools in the New Era. The document proposes to “enhance students’ aesthetic and humanistic literacy, promote the spirit of Chinese aesthetic education, cultivate people with beauty, refine character through beauty, and nurture vitality with beauty, integrating aesthetic education throughout the entire talent training process at all levels and types of schools.” This policy underscores a nationwide implementation of aesthetic education, actively advancing efforts from universities to primary schools and from urban to rural areas.

2. Background of Aesthetic Education

During the May Fourth Movement period, Chinese intellectuals began reforming and innovating Chinese painting. Master Qi Baishi advocated inheriting tradition while developing a unique personal style within it. Meanwhile, Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian pioneered a new path of integrating Chinese and Western art. Zhang Daqian, drawing on Chinese philosophical aesthetics, developed an abstract expressionist style characterized by splashed ink and color[1].

Some critics have remarked that if, in the early years after the founding of the People’s Republic, China had adopted Lin Fengmian’s teaching system instead of Xu Beihong’s, art masters might have emerged earlier. They argue that Xu’s emphasis on sketching from life merely advanced the technical aspects of Chinese painting without bringing about fundamental transformation. In contrast, Lin’s adoption of Western modernism might have accelerated the emergence of

Chinese masters. However, both Xu and Lin advocated for a fusion of Chinese and Western approaches, which remains a valuable foundation for nurturing talent in Chinese painting under contemporary aesthetic education. These debates over educational direction have persisted for more than a century.

Aesthetic education, whether it emphasizes beauty as beauty or regards ugliness as beauty, should not be reduced to mere formality-let alone fall entirely into formalism. Regarding aesthetic education in China, Mr. Cai Yuanpei once proposed the idea of “prioritizing moral education, supplemented by practical and physical education, and completing moral development through aesthetic education,” fully reflecting the vital role aesthetic education plays in the development of a nation. In the context of contemporary aesthetic education, whether Chinese painting chooses innovation or adheres to tradition is a question worthy of reflection. Cai Yuanpei also advocated replacing religion with aesthetic education[2]. As Zhang Yanyuan of the Tang dynasty noted in his Records of Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties, “It nurtures moral teaching and benefits the people’s virtue,” highlighting the significance of painting in individual lives and even for an entire nation. As one of the most important indigenous cultural forms within contemporary aesthetic education, Chinese painting is naturally expected to shoulder an essential mission in the new era.

The term “aesthetics” was first introduced by Baumgarten in his 1735 work Reflections on Poetry. As an independent discipline, aesthetics was formally named in 1750 with the publication of his treatise on sensory perception, Aesthetica. Later, Kant proposed the concept of “pure beauty,” and Schiller introduced the notion of “aesthetic education.” Since then, aesthetic education has developed into a discipline closely related to sensibility and the cultivation of beauty. In the practice of contemporary aesthetic education in China,

Cai Yuanpei's century-old theory of "replacing religion with aesthetic education" remains a significant and influential source. In 1911, Cai Yuanpei translated the term "aesthetic education" from German into Chinese, drawing primarily on Kant's ideas about the transcendence and universality of beauty. Since the late 19th century, earlier generations of aestheticians and scholars—such as Wang Guowei, Cai Yuanpei, Zhu Guangqian, and Zong Baihua—have made indelible contributions to the development of modern aesthetic education in China. They adapted and assimilated Western aesthetic theories and educational resources, integrating them into the framework of Chinese modern aesthetic education. On December 19, 2020, the "High-Level Forum on the Construction of Contemporary Aesthetic Education and the Development of Art Education," hosted by Art magazine and Shaanxi Normal University, was held at the university's Chang'an campus[3]. At the forum, Feng Minsheng interpreted the significance of aesthetic education in the new era from the perspective of its contemporary relevance. He argued that in the new era, aesthetic education has become a prominent topic of interest across society, education, and the arts. Participant Zhang Gan stated that aesthetic education is essentially education in aesthetics—it cultivates people's abilities to recognize, experience, feel, appreciate, and create beauty. It fosters ideals, emotions, character, and qualities rooted in beauty, echoing the ancient Chinese concept of the "Six Arts."

2.1. Aesthetic Education in Chinese Painting

In 1966, the onset of the ten-year Cultural Revolution marked a catastrophe for Chinese painting as well. Classified among the "Five Black Categories," traditional Chinese painting was severely suppressed, and many of its classical techniques were nearly lost. The rupture in the lineage of traditional Chinese philosophy forced Chinese painting onto a path dominated by muscle memory and a spirit of craftsmanship, rather than philosophical depth. In 1985, Mr. Li Xiaoshan published *My View on Contemporary Chinese Painting*, asserting that "Chinese painting has reached a dead end; only Western painting can save it." At that critical juncture of wholesale Westernization, China's millennia-old philosophical and aesthetic traditions had become disoriented, and Chinese painting was left to search for direction amid turbulent times—a search that proved long and arduous. Western philosophical aesthetics infiltrated university education, and Chinese painting began to be evaluated through the lens of Western theories[4]. For a long time, Chinese painting was almost regarded with disdain by the Chinese themselves, and assessments of its value were often made using foreign standards. Under contemporary aesthetic education, however, Chinese painting should not be reduced to mere technical exercise or muscular repetition. Rather, it ought to be recognized as a visual embodiment of Chinese philosophical and aesthetic thought. As a vital component of contemporary aesthetic education in China, Chinese painting naturally holds a central position. However, without the support of contemporary aesthetic education grounded in Chinese philosophical and aesthetic thought, Chinese painting is like a headless fly—lacking direction and purpose. On the surface, Chinese painting under modern aesthetic education appears to thrive, with frequent exhibitions and a flourishing of styles such as highly detailed gongbi and richly expressive xieyi. These works are often technically brilliant and visually stunning. Yet, only a small number of these

contemporary works truly embody the aesthetic spirit of traditional Chinese philosophy. Many creations emphasize craftsmanship while lacking the philosophical and aesthetic consciousness rooted in tradition. When we find ourselves relying on a single standard to evaluate Chinese painting under contemporary aesthetic education, it becomes a phenomenon worth serious reflection. Today's gongbi and xieyi styles are not only a continuation of dialogue with traditional Chinese aesthetics but are also deeply influenced by Western philosophical and aesthetic thought. While the incorporation of Western techniques may enrich the technical diversity of Chinese painting, without the guiding soul of Chinese philosophical aesthetics, such works become little more than empty shells—soulless forms wandering the land of China.

2.2. The Philosophical Aesthetic of Chinese Painting under Contemporary Aesthetic Education

The decline of philosophical aesthetics in Chinese painting under contemporary aesthetic education was highlighted in a discussion held on June 20, 2020, featuring four academicians—Fan Di'an, Jin Shangyi, Shang Hui, and Ma Jingru. In his remarks, President Fan Di'an emphasized: "In creation, while we advocate the ideal of expressing beauty, we also encourage stylistic diversity. We aim to present beauty through artistic creation, to enlighten and inspire people with its aesthetic conception. In research, we must highlight the spirit of Chinese aesthetic education and reclaim the spirit of beauty through the inheritance of cultural traditions." Traditional Chinese culture inherently contains profound philosophical thought. The *Three Character Classic* (*San Zi Jing*), long used as an introductory text in children's education, begins by imparting life philosophy to the Chinese people—guiding them in understanding basic moral values concerning the state, family, and life itself. Its rhythmic structure and lyrical language convey the essence of aesthetic education. So why does contemporary Chinese painting under aesthetic education focus so heavily on technique while lacking philosophical and aesthetic depth? This can largely be attributed to the erosion of the spirit of traditional culture. The widespread belief that "it is difficult to produce true masters of Chinese painting under today's aesthetic education" reflects an awareness of how vital the traditional cultural spirit is to Chinese painting. This deficiency is not a result of Xu Beihong's teaching system, nor that of Lin Fengmian—it is, rather, a deeper issue rooted in the disconnect from traditional philosophical aesthetics[5].

During the Renaissance, Western thinkers brought God down from the altar and elevated humanity to divine status. Western philosophy became human-centered—rational, empirical, and scientific. Within this philosophical and aesthetic framework, Western painting continuously pursued disruption, innovation, and scientific rigor. The invention of the camera in the latter half of the 19th century, the discovery of the three primary colors of light, the rise of Freud's psychoanalytic theories, and the emergence of Impressionism—all marked a transformation of Western painting from realism to expressive use of color. These developments demonstrate that painting in the West has always been a direct embodiment of philosophical and aesthetic thought. In contrast, Chinese philosophy and aesthetics emphasize the harmony between heaven and humanity (*tian ren he yi*). This foundational worldview

shaped the emergence of the three major themes in Chinese painting—figures, landscapes (shanshui), and birds-and-flowers (huaniao)—reflecting a strong inclusiveness. Chinese painting has always adapted its expressive modes according to the painter’s personality, temperament, technique, and chosen subject matter, much like the stylized gestures and vocalizations of Peking Opera. A striking example is Dunhuang: from the pre-Qin era to the Yuan and Qing dynasties, while stylistic elements evolved, the fundamental nature of Chinese painting remained unchanged. The underlying cultural and aesthetic context persisted, rooted firmly in Chinese philosophy. Dunhuang murals are not only technically sophisticated but are also infused with a rich spiritual essence. Walter Benjamin once noted the scholarly identity of Chinese painters: “In China, titles such as ‘painter and great scholar,’ ‘calligrapher, poet, and painter’ are common for painting masters... These painters are scholars.” Benjamin believed that literati painters created an integrated art of writing, thinking, and image through the play of brush and ink. He also emphasized that literati painting and calligraphy represent the essence of Chinese art: “Beginning with the pursuit of intellectual imagery, Chinese painting is above all a form of intellectual art.” Therefore, under contemporary aesthetic education, Chinese painting must seek to reclaim the philosophical and aesthetic spirit rooted in Chinese thought. Only in doing so can it possess a spiritual core. The question is no longer whether it is better to adopt Western techniques or to adhere to Chinese traditions. Rather, the focus should be on restoring the philosophical essence that gives Chinese painting its soul.

3. Conclusion

The exploration of Chinese painting within the framework of contemporary aesthetic education is not merely an artistic endeavor—it is a response to the needs of the times. As the nation promotes the integrated development of moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education (“Five Educations in Unison”), the role of art, and particularly of Chinese painting, becomes ever more significant. Chinese

painting is an indispensable part of aesthetic education in the visual arts. Against the backdrop of contemporary aesthetic education in China, a fundamental question arises: how should we evaluate Chinese painting today? Whether approached as the foundation of visual art or as a manifestation of philosophical aesthetics, its role and value continue to provoke widespread debate. The current state of Chinese painting under contemporary aesthetic education raises important questions that deserve thoughtful reflection. At the heart of these reflections lies a central challenge: how can we express the spirit of Chinese painting through a distinctly Chinese aesthetic language? This question is crucial, for Chinese painting possesses a unique visual vocabulary—one that can convey the cultural confidence of the Chinese people. As a vital branch of native Chinese culture, Chinese painting is not only a medium of artistic expression but also a key force in realizing the Chinese Dream, fostering national unity, affirming cultural identity, and contributing to the nation’s strength and cultural development.

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