



## **Impact and features of Chinese realism in painting with focus on tradition and modernity**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The relevance of the research topic lies in the fact that Western trends dominate in contemporary the Chinese realistic art, while interest in traditional painting techniques in a realistic direction has practically disappeared. To preserve the national cultural heritage, it is necessary to study more carefully the possibilities of applying traditional ideas in modern realistic painting. The purpose of the study is to identify the features of the traditional foundations of Chinese painting and their applied value for teaching students of modern painting. The objectives of the research are to analyze the scientific literature on the topic, conduct a survey among students to assess the traditions of Chinese re-artistic painting, as well as summarize the results of empirical research. The research methodology includes the methods of the general scientific group (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction), as well as methods of art history analysis: historical and logical; analogy method; method of formal comparison. In an empirical study, the method of statistical analysis was used, applied using the program Neural Designer, a tool for advanced statistical analysis. The research materials were the results of a survey of 3rd year students (bachelor's degree). Three groups of students were interviewed, each of which included 25 people: two experimental groups and one control group. The author of the study came to the conclusion that the combination of traditional and modern techniques in realistic painting in the classroom can increase the motivation for learning, develop new technical skills among students studying in the specialty «painting and graphics».

**Keywords:** realistic painting, Chinese art, traditional Chinese painting, learning motivation, contemporary art.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The relevance of the research topic is due to the fact that the realistic art in China, with its sophistication, is of interest to European society, which is accustomed to approach the canons of beauty from a rational point of view. The Eastern approach to art is not similar to the Western one, it is defined through a worldview, which is based on the doctrine of Tao [1, p.2]. Painting did not occupy the highest level in the Chinese art hierarchy, such as music or calligraphy, but it can rightfully be considered a synthesis of the spiritual heritage of the Chinese people, since it combined both calligraphy and poetry, and was itself a unique phenomenon [3, p.2871].

In Chinese art, the term «realism» first used in 1992 by art critic Li Xiangting, who refers to a well-known style of contemporary art practiced in the 1990s by a group of Beijing artists in the aftermath of Deng Xiaoping's defeat in Tiananmen Square in 1989 [5, p.65]. This was forced closure earlier that year of the Chinese realistic art exhibition at the National Gallery in Beijing. The new realism, seen as a parody of socialist realism, the only form of established figural painting in China at the time, impressed Western art collectors, although Chinese art critics view it ambiguously, who are outraged by its western orientation [4, p.83].

Top contemporary artists associated with this movement, including Yue Minjun, known for his «smiling» self-portraits such as those in his Hat series; Fan Lijun, known for his depictions of «bald young men»; and Zhang Xiaogang, best known for his Bloodlines series [8, p.218]. These artists are among the most successful contemporary artists in China. The Chinese Pop Art movement of the late 1980s this challenged the political and social assumptions of the mainland after the Cultural Revolution (1966-70) and Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976) [9, p.4].

History Cynical realism began in Beijing in the early 1990s, during the post-1989 somber mood that followed the Tiananmen Square demonstrations [10, p.24]. The sudden closure of avant-garde art exhibitions such as the Chinese Avant-garde exhibition at the National Gallery, combined with a disappointing political climate, has frightened many artists into going underground [11, c.30].

There were no more public exhibitions, there was no market for their paintings and there is no main forum where you can declare yourself. Surprisingly, the lack of money and opportunities sharpened their creativity and stimulated creative discussion. As a result, such artists as Yue Minjun, Yang Shaobin, Wang Jinsong, and Song Yonghong have merged into groups (the Yuanmingyuan Artists Society and Oriental Village), holding illegal art exhibitions and sharing ideas [14, p.3]. It was in this underground art environment that influential critic and curator Li Xiantin - editor of Fine Art Magazine, organizer of the «Star Show» in 1979 and editor of the authoritative «China Fine Art Newspaper» in 1985, which first came up with the realism. Lee has been a very important contact and source of knowledge for overseas art collectors and curators, and an equally important promoter of underground artists. Thus, he participates in a role in shaping the emerging trend of cynical realism [13, p.126].

Some modern researchers think, that Chinese realism technique influenced by traditional Gohua style, which translated literally and emphasizes the originality of Chinese art in relation to the Greek-European tradition [15, p.87]. Gohua's works are so unusual for the eye of a European that, for the first time contemplating them, he experiences surprise, even misunderstanding, and at the same time one feels the simplicity, accessibility and naturalness of the image in the picture.

As the researchers note, there is a big difference in the external design of the painting in the West and in the East: «the Chinese scroll cannot be considered a painting in our understanding. It has neither a heavy gilded frame, nor even a thin baguette that would delimit it from the plane of the wall, turning it into an isolated closed world. It also lacks that material materiality, which is inherent in a picture in a frame. In addition, it was never a permanent decoration of the room, but was hung out only for viewing, and then rolled up and put away again in a special box» [15, p.86].

At the beginning of our era painting gradually gains recognition and is formed as a full-fledged art. For example, Gu Kaichih is considered as a founder and reformer of Chinese art [16, p.45]. His paintings had a vivid secular connotation. Known for his works, such as «Wise and respectable women», «Instructions of the senior lady of the court», «Fairy of the Lo River» (a long scroll, the images on which reveal the story in time, where the landscape is first shown as a kind of combined composition) [17, p.77].

It is Gu Kaichih who is credited with the formation of the basic principles of genuine painting, which he later adopted and reproduced in his treatise. Xie He is known primarily as a Chinese art theorist who lived in the 5th century. In his work «Gu hua ping lu» (records on the classification of old painting), he formulated six laws, which formed the basis of Chinese classical painting. The entire Chinese philosophy of painting boils down to various interpretations and commentaries of the six laws of Xie He. The most important of these is the first law, which provided the basis for the rest. So, the first law sounds like «Quin Shendong». This principle was the most important and, of course, to this day is translated and commented in different ways [19, p.308].

Based on the work of Chinese researchers, we can give a few examples:

- 1) echoes of the spirit, which mean vitality;
- 2) rhythmic vitality, or spiritualized rhythm, expressed in movements of life;
- 3) harmonious movement of living breathing;
- 4) changes, or transformations, or harmony, or the echo of the spirit in a living movement;
- 5) the plan, which should include harmony and vitality [18, p.19].

The essence of this law lies in the transfer by the artist through the picture of qi - the spiritual energy on which the material foundation of the world is based. A painter in the process of creativity must experience a special inner tension, such a concentration of spiritual vitality, so that at the moment of work he exudes a thrill of life, filling the work with it [20, p.71].

The second law of «gufa yunbi» says that an artist must possess the skill of using a brush as the main working tool. With the help of a brush, he skillfully reveals the inner essence of the world, while not distorting it. A true master knows the art of handling a brush, knows where and with what force to press on it, where to move smoothly, and where to make a sharp blow [18, p.19].

True art is not determined by external means, they are only instruments for achieving the goal, but they do not constitute mastery itself. True art lies in the ability to convey the inner content through the external form. It is unacceptable for Chinese art to create an empty form without filling it with inner content. Consequently, the attitude towards a work of art will be determined by its inner strength. The master must put a sense of harmony and moderation into his art. When an artist holds a brush, he uses it to transfer his inner thoughts and feelings to paper, the boundaries between paper and the artist's heart are erased [15, p.88].

When working on an object of art, the master will not be too harsh or too soft in handling the brush, his heart is in harmony with his hands and a sense of proportion is manifested in the whole drawing [16, p.45].

The highest stage of art acts as nature itself, which is guided by Tao. Even the most skilled craftsman is somehow limited in his abilities. Every master is good only in his work, and human capabilities have a limit, none of them has power over time. There is art that is not subject to time and circumstances, it has no limitations - it is permanent and perfect - this is nature itself, acting under the authority of Tao, which sets all things in motion [13, p.125].

What is considered to be the highest degree of art cannot be achieved either through external decoration or through the comprehension of handicraft art. The inside always prevails over the outside, no matter what efforts are made. The only way to comprehend the highest art is to follow nature with heart and soul, to achieve unity with it. «In essence, we are talking about that complete and absolute inner concentration of the artist, which presupposes oblivion of everything external.

This state is characteristic of every painter at the moment of a creative act, when his hands, as it were, sculpt a sculpture by themselves, cut a stone, write silk or sheets of paper. Here, attention is focused on the very process of creativity that goes on in the artist, regardless of what takes on material embodiment in stone, in words, in sounds, at the moment when the work is formed inside him, but has not yet poured out, has not acquired a bodily external form» [17, p.76].

Higher mastery presupposes participation in the formation of things in the world through contemplation of the Tao and penetration into the essence of its law. A person gains wisdom, and his capabilities are likened to natural ones [19, p.310].

Chinese painting is considered alongside calligraphy, in other words, painting is close to graphics. Both the great law of the «One Line» («go hua») reigns. Many Chinese artists were engaged not only in painting, but also developed an aesthetic theory, leaving behind written works in which they interpreted the art of painting from the philosophy point [6, p.4]. The idea of the One Line has a double meaning: on the one hand, it is the Absolute, a kind of higher bar that separates all things and the one, on the other, it is a multitude of individual things that permeate this One. In other words, here is the idea of total unity [4, p.87].

The inside always prevails over the outside, no matter what efforts are made. The only way to comprehend the highest art is to follow nature with heart and soul, to achieve unity with it. «In essence, we are talking about that complete and absolute inner concentration of the artist, which presupposes oblivion of everything external [2, p.214].

Because of the long-term impact of Confucianism on art, Chinese painting is dominated by ideas against over-expression of emotions. Thus, we can argue that emotion in creativity is manifested with restraint in order to emphasize the beauty of the work, which not only determines the standard of aesthetic taste, but also at the same time sets a requirement for the behavior of a noble person. A noble person should observe the principle of Zhong Yong philosophy, which is the basis of a person's high morality. At the same time, Confucianism required the artist to display high human dignity [1, p.10].

In the process of teaching painting, the artist needed to form more elevated spiritual qualities. If artists want to portray the unity of beauty and kindness, then they must necessarily demonstrate their generous essence, the so-called good moral qualities of painting as the noble character of the artist himself. For example, the famous artist Su Shi introduced the term «painting of noble people», «meaning by this Confucian concept that only people of noble origin can achieve in painting a true expression of the being of the world [5, p.67].

In connection with the above, in the subjects of traditional Chinese painting, including the painting of the Haishan School, there are rarely themes of war, bloody massacre, images of dead bodies, which often appear, for example, in Western painting. The Chinese artist always tries not to adhere to such content in his work. This is the result of the influence of the idea of «humanity and justice» (according to the teachings of Mencius in Confucianism) on Chinese traditional painting [6, p.7].

Note that in traditional Chinese painting certain genres have long been established: landscape «Mountains and Waters», painting «Flowers and Birds», portrait [4, p.86]. Thus, from the Tang Dynasty to the Sun and Yuan Empires, the Mountains and Waters landscape was the most popular. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, painting «Flowers and Birds» developed very quickly. Over the course of a thousand years of Chinese painting history, artists from different dynasties, including the Haishan School, have always sought to symbolize certain types of trees, birds, especially flowers, among which bamboo, plum flowers, orchids, and chrysanthemums became popular [5, p. 65].

Chinese traditional painting of the «Flowers and Birds» genre has received tremendous success not only because of the beauty of flowers. More importantly, flowers have become the most important symbol of spiritual quality. For example, one of the most beloved symbols of this kind in Chinese painting is bamboo. In Chinese paintings, bamboo is not just a plant but also a symbol of human character. «Bamboo was a favorite object of the work of artists who believed that this plant possessed all the virtues of a perfect person: flexibility and resilience» [7, p.77].

Depicting bamboo, the artist sings of a real husband with high moral qualities, sometimes comparing his character with him. «Art by its origin is associated with the phenomenon of spirituality. The emergence of aesthetic feeling as a special form of human experience of universal harmony with the world is necessarily expressed already in early works of art [10, p.23].

And in Chinese paintings, flowers symbolically emphasized the spirituality of a noble person. And this tendency came from the aesthetic concept of Confucianism moral metaphor. The essence of the concept is that natural objects are beautiful due to the fact that they can be compared with the moral qualities of a person. In this way, people feel the beauty of the human character [11, p.30].

The symbolism of flowers and trees with the moral qualities of a noble person go through Confucianism. The idea of a «moral metaphor» has always existed in the history of the development of Chinese painting, and to this day artists love to depict bamboo, plum flowers, orchids, pine trees, which have a typical symbolic meaning. The symbolism of plum flowers is specific: the peduncle is the absolute beginning; the cup supporting the flower is drawn with three strokes, as it embodies three forces - Heaven, Earth and Man [13, p.125].

The flower itself is the personification of the five primary elements and therefore is depicted with five petals. All parts associated with a tree have an even number of elements, which reflects stability - a property of the Earth. Chinese artists have confirmed in them moral human qualities: plum flowers are proud and independent, the orchid is highly moral, the bamboo is stubborn and patient, the pine is strong [16, p.47].

These qualities are manifested in the following works of the «Haishan School»: Xu Gong «Bamboo» [10, p.24], «Painting about plum flowers and a crane» [10, p. 24], Wu Tao «Plum flowers» [10, p.24], Wu Changshuo «Painting about a pine tree and stones» [10, p.25], «Plum Flowers» [10, p.25], «A Picture of a Pine and Bamboo» [10, p.25].

The image of bamboo, plum flowers, orchids, pines constitutes the concept of four perfect, also symbolizing noble people, whose friendship and mutual support have passed all the tests. The formation and development of painting of the concept of four perfect was associated with the development of painting in the genre of «Flowers and Birds», and the development of internal motivation took place under the influence of the idea of moral metaphor and the requirements of Confucianism to the qualities of human character [11, p.30].

Consequently, artists can not only get spiritual pleasure through drawing the four perfect, but also eliminate all secular burdens. Chinese painting, especially the landscape of the «Mountains-Waters» genre, has an obvious specificity of the unity of man and the sky, which is closely related to Taoism. Taoism preaches the unity of man and heaven: man must follow nature and maintain a harmonious relationship with nature [11, p.30].

The idea of Taoism forced artists to move away from the real world and live in the forest in order to improve their moral character and moral value; first it was necessary to find beauty in nature, and then only to paint pictures. They insisted that only a person with a noble character can make paintings an achievement of the standard of beauty. And a person with bad qualities cannot get information about beauty from nature, so his paintings will be ugly, rough, boring. If we turn to European art, comparing it with Chinese painting, we can see that Chinese painters paid more attention to nature and their work has never been a servant of religion [12, p. 346].

According to Xiaolong Wang, Ling Cai, «the most important value criterion for the works of Chinese authors is a pure soul and adherence to nature» [16, p.52]. Artists' love for nature motivates the development of landscape painting of the «Mountains-Waters» genre, and mountains and waters in Chinese painting, as you know, symbolize the place of the kingdom of the immortals or a fairy-tale land. The mountains are regarded as the magical mountains of Kunlun, in which the Taoist deities of immortality live. Nature is perceived as a manifestation of universal Taoism, as the embodiment of the eternal and endless cycle of natural processes, as the personification of the beauty of the world.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research methodology includes the methods of the general scientific group (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction), as well as methods of art history analysis: historical and logical; analogy method; method of formal comparison.

In an empirical study, the method of statistical analysis was used, applied using the program Neural Designer, a tool for advanced statistical analysis.

The research materials were the results of a survey of 3rd year students (bachelor's degree). Three groups of students were interviewed, each of which included 25 people. The general sample consisted of 75 respondents. The survey is based on questionnaire 1:

1. How important, in your opinion, is the inclusion of traditional elements in contemporary painting?
2. How do you rate the quality of traditional painting techniques?
3. Would you like to improve your painting skills using traditional techniques?
4. How interesting is it for you to study traditional painting techniques as the basis of modern painting?
5. Would you like to learn how to synthesize traditional techniques and modern painting to create your own artistic style?

Between the first and second questionnaires, we conducted 10 sessions on the traditional technique of Chinese painting in comparison with modern painting.

In order to verify the results obtained, we conducted a repeated survey on the questionnaire 2:

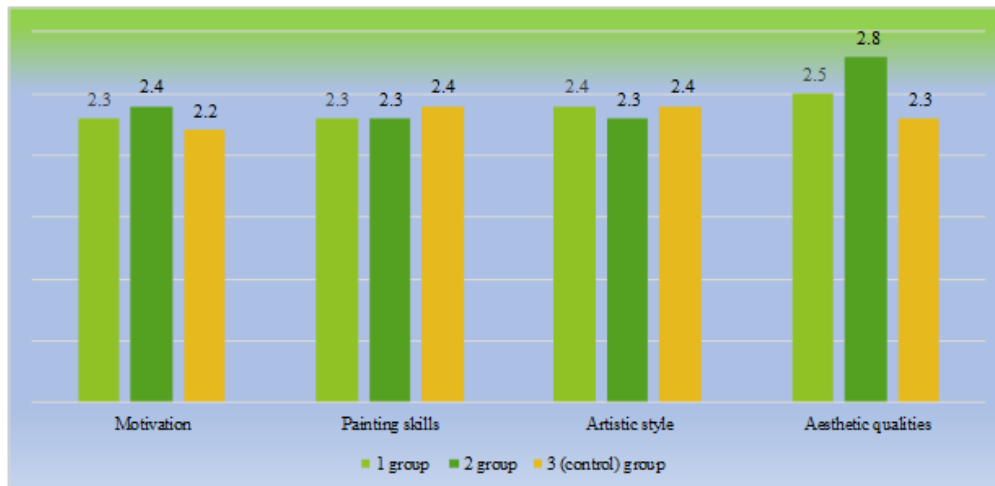
1. How do you assess your ability to master traditional painting techniques?
2. How interested are you in a special course in traditional painting in your department?
3. How important do you consider mastering traditional painting techniques for a contemporary artist?
4. How do you rate the aesthetic qualities of traditional techniques in comparison with modern painting?
5. How do you rate your interest in traditional painting after the experimental classes?

Each question in the questionnaires was rated on a 10-point scale in ascending order. With the help of the program, 75 questionnaires were processed and the average score for each of the questions was derived. The analysis criterion is: a low level of score from 1 to 3 points; the average level of assessment is from 4 to 6 points; high level of assessment from 7 to 10 points. The survey conducted among three groups of 3rd year students, two groups passed experimental classes, and the third group was reserved as a control group. This made it possible to identify the general attitude of students to the combination of traditions and modern trends in painting, as well as to identify the level of motivation for teaching traditional techniques in military painting.

## RESULTS

Based on the survey, the following criteria were identified: motivation, painting skills, artistic style and aesthetic qualities.

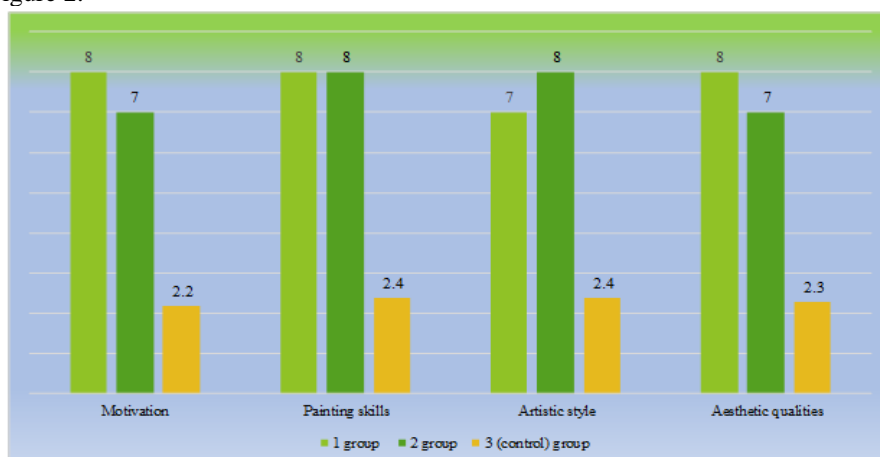
The first survey gave the following results (Figure 1).



**Fig.1: Students' assessment of the possibilities of traditional painting in comparison with modern painting (compiled by the author)**

As can be seen in Figure 1, students rated all four criteria at a low level. This situation was before the classes on the comparative analysis of the techniques of traditional and modern painting according to the methodology by Son-Mey Chiu [12, p.347].

The class included an introductory course in oil painting in traditional and modern styles, a course in ink painting in traditional and modern styles, and a master class in traditional painting. After a series of sessions, students in two experimental groups clearly changed their minds about the possibilities of applying traditional painting techniques to contemporary art. The third (the control) group, in which the classes were not conducted, remained at the same positions with a low level in all four criteria. The results of the second survey are presented in Figure 2.



**Fig.2: Students' assessment of the possibilities of traditional painting in comparison with modern painting after series of classes (compiled by the author)**

Thus, as can be seen in Figure 2, the majority of students in the two experimental groups acquired: a high level of motivation to learn traditional techniques in modern realist painting; increased their interest in studying the traditions of Chinese realism and also highly appreciated the level of possibilities for the development of the author's style with the help of artistic techniques in traditional and modern Chinese realistic art.

## DISCUSSION

The theses of our research on the possibilities of using traditional painting techniques in contemporary Chinese realistic art are confirmed in a number of works by such authors as Sze-Teng, Liong Yen-Chang, Huang Shumeng Li, Zhongkai Huang, Jingyang Ma [13].

At the same time, some researchers note that the study of traditional art as a basis for modern painting can increase the level of students' motivation to learn. Such ideas are expressed and proven in the works by such authors as Yuting Pan, Wei Yu [19] and Zhenhao Dong, Jing Wan, Chaoyue Li, Han Jiang, Yingge Qian [20].

In modern scientific literature, there is also a point of view that the combination of modern and traditional painting techniques allows to create a unique author's style [20, p.30]. These ideas are also expressed in the works by such authors such as Sze-Teng, Liong Yen-Chang, Huang Shumeng Li, Zhongkai Huang, Jingyang Ma [13] and Sheng Jin, Min Fan, Yongchao Wang, Qi Liu [11]. These theses are confirmed by the results of our empirical research.

The implementation of the combination of styles is also possible with the help of computer technology, which has been proven in the work by Xiaolong Wang, Ling Cai [16]. The authors of this study confirm our thesis that new opportunities for the use of traditional techniques in modern realistic painting in China allow improving the quality of skills of young artists [16, p.47].

Despite the extensive historiography of the issue under study, a scientific discussion on this topic remains open, since so far there have been very few studies of student motivation in relation to the study of traditional painting.

## CONCLUSION

As a result of the conducted content analysis of scientific literature, we came to conclusions:

- realistic painting in China combines the traditions of Western European painting (technique, manner of painting) and classical Chinese art (subject of works, subject repertoire);
- the history of Chinese painting reflects the socio-cultural situation in the country and is a kind of historical source, evidence of the historical transformations of Chinese culture;
- Chinese realistic painting is an extremely multifaceted and multi-component phenomenon of the development of Chinese painting, denoting certain changes in the realistic manner of painting, which in one way or another are determined by historical, socio-political conditions: the development of modern painting indicates the existence of different possibilities of using traditional techniques to express those or other aesthetic ideals.

The results of our empirical research allow us to conclude that the combination of tradition and modernity in Chinese realistic painting creates conditions for motivating students to study in the specialty «painting and drawing», increases students' interest in studying traditional techniques of oil painting and painting with ink.

The theoretical significance of the work lies in the fact that the article examines the little-studied aspects of the possibility of combining tradition and modernity in realistic painting. The article also reveals the leading concepts that determined the general development of Chinese realism in painting.

The practical significance of the work lies in the fact that the results of the study are important for the subsequent art history and cultural studies of the art of China in the XXI century.

Research materials can be used for the university courses focused on the study of world art history; as a source study base for research in the field of art history, sociology of art, world art culture and for special courses on Chinese realism as a direction of modern painting.

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