

The Historical Background of the Neo-Chinese Painting Movement in the 20th Century and Its Integration of Chinese and Western Art

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Keywords: Neo-Chinese Painting; Chinese-Western Art Integration; 20th Century Chinese Art; Traditional Chinese Painting; Western Painting Techniques; Portrait Painting; Landscape Painting; Art Education; Cultural Modernization

Abstract: In the 20th-century Chinese modern art movement, the Neo-Chinese Painting movement, as an important practice of integrating Chinese and Western art, originated from the impact of Western culture and the need for Chinese art modernization. Influenced by the semi-colonial and semi-feudal social pattern after the Opium War and the "democracy and science" thought of the New Culture Movement, traditional Chinese painting is facing a realistic transformation. Based on the historical and social background of the Neo-Chinese Painting movement, this paper compares the differences between the core techniques of traditional Chinese painting and Western painting. It combines the typical cases in the field of portrait painting and landscape painting, analyzes the specific path of integrating Chinese and Western art, and discusses the breakthroughs and characteristics of technical innovation.

1. The Historical and Social Background of Neo-Chinese Painting

Nowadays, Western art is the dominant force in the art world. It means that the traditional arts of various countries or tribes, due to colonization and other reasons, have gradually and imperceptibly been infiltrated, influenced, and even replaced by Western culture, to some extent. This phenomenon also occurred in China's history. During the Neo-Chinese painting movement, traditional Chinese paintings were influenced by Western drawings and oil paintings, and a period of "realistic transformation of Chinese paintings" emerged, which was also called the Neo-Chinese painting movement later on.

In the late Qing Dynasty, in 1840, the Opium War broke out. China was forced to open its doors. During the war with Britain, China was reduced to a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. At that period, it also aroused the awakening of many Chinese people. Leaders of the New Culture Movement, represented by Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Hu Shi, and Lu Xun, launched a movement for ideological liberation, advocating democracy, science, and opposing feudal autocracy and Confucianism.

In art, the avant-garde artists responded to the call of the New Culture Movement by transforming traditional Chinese painting to create a new style of art. The Neo-Chinese Painting movement played two roles in modern art in China: From the perspective of visual art, the realistic transformation of Chinese painting was a reform aimed at the traditional literati ink painting of the Ming and Qing dynasties, which lacked innovation and needed to be revitalized. From the perspective of the idea, realistic techniques were employed to convey the events of the Opium War, the New Culture Movement, and the Anti-Japanese War, as well as the national salvation and heroic resistance during those periods, and to depict the suffering of the people.

2. The Difference Between Traditional Chinese Painting and Western Painting Techniques

2.1 Traditional Chinese Painting Techniques

The traditional Chinese painting techniques emphasize Xieyi (freehand) expression, focusing on capturing the essence of a subject with expressive, free-flowing brushstrokes and less detail. In the

creation of landscape paintings, ink tones are used to create a sense of movement and emotion. Artists use different shades of ink and water to create depth and texture. Lines are used to shape the forms, and through flexible brushstrokes and the interplay of emptiness and fullness, objects and figures are depicted. From the perspective of ink, it is divided into five tones: dry, thick, heavy, light, and clear. As for lines, they are classified based on different brushstrokes into various line-drawing methods such as nail-head texture strokes, mouse-tail texture strokes, iron wire texture strokes, raindrop-dot texture strokes, and so on.

2.2 Western Painting Techniques

Western painting is largely governed by scientific principles. During the painting process, using the technique of perspective to construct a focal perspective makes the image more realistic. Furthermore, the proportions of the objects in the paintings are appropriate. The composition method based on geometric principles makes the paintings extremely three-dimensional and dynamic in terms of the paintings' sense of movement and stillness. In terms of color, by utilizing knowledge related to optics and color theory, such as light and shade contrast, to shape the form of characters, and by rationalizing color combinations to enhance the tone of the image, it can reflect the real objective objects. Therefore, the Western artistic concept is the manifestation of scientific consciousness and the rational spirit of truth. For example, in Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the artist employed realistic painting methods, painting layer by layer thinly to convey the skin transitions and the heavy feeling of the *Mona Lisa*'s body. In Raphael's *The Academy of Athens*, we can see that the buildings behind Plato and Aristotle present the precise architectural perspective principle. These are all the theories used in Western painting.

3. The Practical Path and Cases of the Integration of Chinese and Western Art

3.1 The Influence of the West under the Art Education System

The integration of Chinese and Western art can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s. Some Western artists who came to China and influenced Chinese painting. For instance, the Czech painter Vojtech Chytil visited China in 1917 and taught at the National Peking Art School with QI Baishi. The French painter Andre Claouodot visited China in 1926 and held teaching positions at the National Peking Art School and the Western Painting Department of the National West Lake Art Institute. Both of them influenced Chinese painting during their visit. Therefore, the first integration of Chinese and Western art was under the background of the art education system.

Subsequently, numerous excellent Neo-Chinese paintings emerged, such as Jiang Zhaohe's *Dispersal*, which is a traditional paper-based ink-wash Chinese painting. The creation of this work is based on the Chinese aesthetics of the brush stroke. It integrates Western realistic techniques such as anatomy, perspective, and structures to express the author's emotional resentment. Additionally, Tagore's portrait by Xu Beihong. It was painted by Chinese linear brushwork, also combined with Western realistic techniques to depict Tagore's face and hands. In this painting, we can see that the artist has added a background to the Chinese painting, employing an Asian-Western fusion style to present Tagore's image.

Due to the influence of Chinese Lao and Zhuang philosophical thoughts and the oppression of the feudal monarchy, traditional Chinese landscape paintings usually express their thoughts and emotions through the painting itself. Their painting style tends to be harmonious and serene. In the themes of portrait paintings, there are usually no works painted with solo images. Most portraits show a group of people, or, through painting, life scenes, to pursue the harmony and unity between the characters and the overall environment.

3.2 Case Analysis of Chinese and Western Integration in the Field of Portraits

In Chinese painting, the portrait can be broadly classified into Buddhist, Taoist, and court ladies. They strive to depict the individuality of the characters vividly and artistically, with a dynamic and lively atmosphere, and aim to achieve a balance between form and spirit. [1] The method of achieving

vividness often involves embedding the expression of the character's personality within the depiction of the environment, atmosphere, body posture, and movement. The forms of portrait painting are divided into two categories: fine brushwork and freehand brushwork painting. The fine brushwork focuses more on details and is known for its realistic depiction. Thus, eighteen kinds of line drawing methods emerged, such as Gu Hongzhong's "The Night Revels of Han Xizai." On the other hand, the freehand style focuses on the expressive effect, and the painter's idea is usually conveyed by freehand brushwork in Chinese painting.

In Western painting, oil painting is the traditional and primary medium for portrait drawing. Compared to black-and-white sketches, oil painting has the attribute of color. Compared to acrylic, oil painting can utilize techniques such as glazing and blending to delicately and precisely depict the subject. Its durability for preservation is strong compared with other materials. Oil is the medium in oil painting, while water is the medium in Chinese painting, whether ink wash, freehand brushwork, or fine brushwork. It is commonly known as "oil and water do not mix". The use of media in Western oil painting and Chinese painting forms a completely different contrast in terms of the medium used.

Moreover, when it comes to portrait, taking Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa as an example, da Vinci's fine painting technique, which is now known as the color tone transitional method, can be seen from Mona Lisa's cheekbones and hands that there is no obvious black-and-white transition between the mass of the character, but rather through scientific and precise perspective, anatomy, and fine blending techniques to achieve a lifelike portrayal of the portrait [2].

3.2.1 Jiang Zhaohe's Work

Regarding the integration of Eastern and Western art, taking Jiang Zhaohe's work *Dispersal* as an example, this work was created in 1943. It takes two years to finish the whole work. The entire scroll is set against a backdrop of rubble, depicting over a hundred refugees who suffered greatly from the war disaster. It portrays the tragic scene of the destitute masses being displaced during the war and records the heavy disasters brought to the Chinese nation by the Japanese invaders. In terms of the painting technique, it is evident that the entire work utilizes traditional Chinese painting pigments for coloring. However, the precise proportion structure of the characters on the canvas and the dynamics follow the realistic style of Western sketching, rather than the traditional freehand or fine brushwork technique.

As shown in Figure 1, the painting combines the structural elements of sketching with the lines of ink and watercolor, creating a new style in the Chinese portrait field [3]. The artist not only depicts the external appearance of the characters, but also pays attention to the detailed exploration of the characters' inner world, creating a mournful atmosphere and expressing the author's indignant emotions, which has a strong artistic effect.



Fig. 1 Jiang Zhaohe- *Dispersal*, 1943, Neo-Chinese painting

3.2.2 Xu Beihong's Tagore

In this study, take the portrait painting *Tagore* made by Xu Beihong as an example. In traditional Chinese painting, it is rare to see a single person's portrait. Most of the portrait paintings depict a group of people or a storytelling scene. In *Tagore*, the background beneath the characters is visible.

However, in general Chinese painting, the background is not depicted, often left blank. Therefore, we can conclude that the Tagore is a combination of pieces incorporating Chinese and Western painting techniques. As shown in Figure 2, the work painted by Xu Beihong changed the overly delicate brushstrokes of oil paintings and the freehand or meticulous techniques of traditional Chinese paintings. Instead, the painting mixed traditional freehand brushwork with a Western, detailed, realistic depiction to present Tagore. Specifically, Xu Beihong overturned the imitation of traditional brushstrokes in the ink paintings of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The depiction of the head and hands is quite realistic, but the clothing patterns are only sketched with simple lines. The painter skillfully applied perspective and human anatomy knowledge, combining realistic techniques with Chinese ink painting methods to create an artistic image with both form and spirit.



Fig. 2 Xu Beihong- Tagore, 1940, Neo-Chinese painting

Here is another example by Xu Beihong, titled "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains." The technique of the painting employs ink line drawing techniques combined with flat coloring. The painting was created during the third year of the anti-Japanese War, using the spirit of the foolish old man to represent the persistent spirit of the anti-war metaphorically. In terms of artistic expression, it can be seen that compared to the work mentioned above, Tagore (which was also by Xu Beihong), this painting technique is slightly inferior in technique to the last one, and it gives a sense of being out of place. This is because when Xu Beihong painted the foolish old man, he found a couple of Indian people to be the models. The three naked men in the center of the picture were live painting under Indian models. In conclusion, this work exposes the difficulties the artist encountered when integrating Chinese and Western elements, as well as the sense of being out of place that may appear on the canvas.

3.2.3 Lin Fengmian's Work: Farewell My Concubine and Lamp, Flowers and Fruits



Fig. 3 Lin Fengmian - Farewell My Concubine, 1900-1991, Neo-Chinese painting



Fig. 4 Lin Fengmian - Lamp, flowers and fruits, 1960, Neo-Chinese painting

Due to the background and upbringing by Lin Fengmian, people often comment on his works with a subtle "bitterness". However, Lin Fengmian's works, especially his paintings of women, can be seen to combine the traditional Chinese image of women's clothing with Western modern painting. His works are shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4. Among them, Farewell My Concubine is a representative work by him, which uses the Western modern painting style to handle both the image of Chinese women and the characters of Chinese Peking Opera. In addition, Lin Fengmian's paintings can also be recognized as a combination of Chinese style and Cézanne's still life painting style, especially in his Lamp, flowers and fruits.

3.3 Case Analysis of Chinese and Western Integration in the Field of Landscape Painting

3.3.1 The Technique Difference Between Traditional Landscape Painting and Western Landscape Painting

In terms of landscapes, in Chinese painting, it is called "shan shui"("mountain water"), emphasizing the beauty and spiritual harmony between humans and nature, often featuring vast mountains and flowing water rendered in monochrome ink and subtle colors on paper or silk.

In Chinese painting, landscape paintings are divided into two categories: ink landscape and blue-green landscape painting. Ink landscape uses the density and lightness of ink to depict the forms and atmosphere of mountains and rivers, while blue-green landscape adds colors to present the nature more sophisticated and in detail.

Wang Meng's Seclusion in Bian Mountain is one of the representative Chinese ink landscape paintings. This work has a very full composition, with hills and mountains often taking over the whole painting; the layout was also very complex, with mountains after mountains, water over water, layers upon layers. He was good at using unfolding texture (a painting skill) and ink points to make the mountains look lush, presenting the audience with a vast view. Wang Meng's life had always been tangled with the contradiction of "going out" and "staying still", so his landscape painting has a strong complex of seclusion [4].

Wang Ximeng's A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains is a representative work of the blue-green landscape style. He painted the entire scroll with blue-green color, following the traditional blue-green landscape painting techniques. He used stone blue and green to set the main color tone, but also employed many precious shades of green for multiple layering. In terms of perspective, he adopted the method of scattered perspective, integrating the magnificent landscape into one painting. From the work, one can observe the application of the three distant viewing methods - deep distance, plain area, and high distance. A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains is the first blue-green landscape painting in history, so it positioned an inevitable status in Chinese landscape painting. There is another

special feature in this painting, the scattered perspective. Scattered perspective is a traditional Chinese painting technique in which the viewer's viewpoint is not fixed to a single point but rather moves across the painting, observing objects from multiple angles to convey spatial relationships and a broader view of the subject [5]. Unlike the Western single-point perspective, which aims for a realistic, fixed viewpoint, the scattered perspective creates a dynamic, comprehensive, and imaginative view, allowing for the integration of different heights and distances into a single composition.

Hobbema's *Tree-lined Road* is regarded as his representative work throughout his life, as it features the intuitive focus perspective formed by the trees in the painting. The painting depicts a very ordinary muddy country road. The scattered and drifting clouds in the sky give a sense of tranquility and harmony to the rural road. The strong visual perspective effect in the picture precisely reflects the scientific and accurate pursuit of perspective and realistic techniques in Western landscape paintings. It forms a sharp contrast with the scattered perspective in Chinese paintings mentioned earlier.

3.3.2 The Integration Practice of Landscape Painting in the Neo-Chinese Painting

In landscape paintings, *Ten Thousand Crimson Hills*, painted by Li Keran, and cooperative work by Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue - *A Land So Rich in Beauty*, are regarded as representative works of the fusion of Chinese and Western styles in landscape painting. Li Keran's *Ten Thousand Crimson Hills* was created in 1962 and consists of 7 series of traditional Chinese paintings. The painting is painted in vermilion color, presenting a vivid scene of Ten Thousand Crimson Hills. In terms of colour, Li Keran's work has changed from the traditional ink-wash and green landscape styles of Chinese painting. Instead, he used vermilion red to cover the entire painting. From the perspective of painting strokes, there are no traditional variations of ink colors, such as light, dark, and clear. Instead, it is a series of hard and regular flat brushstrokes [6]. This is particularly evident in the central buildings and pedestrians in the painting. Li Keran's paintings have overturned traditional Chinese painting works and borrowed the composition of postmodernist works from the second half of the 19th century in the West.



Fig. 5 Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue - *A Land So Rich in Beauty*, 1959, Neo-Chinese painting

Figure 5 is the Neo-Chinese ink painting *A Land So Rich in Beauty*, jointly created by Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue, which is a large-scale work based on the poem *Qinyuan Chun - Snow* by a great Chinese leader, Chairman Mao. It intends to depict the vibrant scenes of the People's Republic of China after its establishment, with people's lives flourishing. From the colour scheme, it can be seen that *A Land So Rich in Beauty* does not follow the colour scheme of the traditional Chinese green and blue landscape paintings. Instead, it represents the scene of the new era with a hint of blue from the morning mountain rocks, symbolizing the magnificent scene of the establishment of the People's Republic of China [7]. The red sun in the picture is very eye-catching, which is not the usual color scheme in Chinese paintings. The entire picture combines the techniques of Western oil painting and local realistic painting with the material of Chinese painting pigments to create a large-scale ink painting.

4. Conclusion

The 20th-century Neo-Chinese Painting Movement emerged amid China's semi-colonial, semi-feudal context and the New Culture Movement's call for reform. It addressed the stagnation of

traditional Ming-Qing literati painting by integrating Western art, marking a pivotal shift in Chinese art history. Traditional Chinese painting, rooted in Xieyi (freehand) expression, ink tones, and scattered perspective, differs sharply from Western painting's reliance on scientific principles—like focal perspective, anatomy, and color theory. The movement's integration, driven initially by art education, yielded iconic works. Jiang Zhaohe's *Dispersal* merged Chinese ink with Western sketch structure; Xu Beihong's *Tagore* combined linear brushwork with realistic depiction. In landscapes, Li Keran's *Ten Thousand Crimson Hills* adopted Western composition and color while retaining Chinese materials.

This integration revitalized Chinese painting, enabling it to reflect modern history and bridge Eastern and Western aesthetics. It remains a crucial paradigm for balancing tradition and innovation in contemporary Chinese art.

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