

Research on Zhou Sicong's Artistic Journey and Ink Techniques

Hening Gong^{1*†}, Shutong Zhang^{1†}

¹Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: gonghening2004@qq.com

†These authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered as co-first author.

Abstract. Zhou Sicong occupies a pivotal place in contemporary Chinese art as a leading female painter whose practice is marked by sustained humanistic engagement and a highly individual command of ink. Taking her early, middle, and late creative phases as the main thread, this article examines how her ink language developed across key works, mapping a stylistic shift from realism to expressionism and, in her later years, to a more lyrical mode. Through close readings of representative paintings alongside relevant theoretical perspectives, the study shows how Zhou fused technical experimentation with emotional intensity to construct a distinctive visual ethics of lived experience. Her oeuvre thus carries enduring artistic significance and, at the same time, illuminates the ways Chinese ink painting has been reoriented in the modern era.

Keywords: Zhou Sicong, Ink Techniques, Realism and Expression, *The Miners*

1. Introduction

Within the long continuum of contemporary Chinese art history, Zhou Sicong occupies an irreplaceable position through her outstanding artistic achievements and profound humanistic spirit. The sense of oppression and sorrow conveyed in her works is a reflection of her compassionate heart, characterized by her ability to "empathize with the suffering and sympathize with all living beings." Possessing a keen artistic sensitivity, Zhou captured the hardships and struggles of her time and people, transforming these emotions into visual form through her brushwork, endowing her works with a deeply moving power.

This compassion, emanating from within, coupled with her profound insight into the world, elevated Zhou's art beyond mere technical prowess to a realm of higher artistic temperament. As art critic Lang Shaojun once remarked, "One of the defining characteristics of Zhou Sicong's works is their elevated tone... especially in her works following *The Miners*. Their simple yet pure spirit mirrors her integrity, sincerity, and unpretentious character; her noble demeanor sustains her noble character" [1].

2. Zhou Sicong's life and artistic journey

Zhou Sicong was born in 1939 in Hebei Province, China. Passionate about art from a young age, she pursued rigorous training during her secondary education and was later admitted to the Chinese Painting Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. In 1964, she met Mr. Lu Chen, with whom

she formed a lifelong partnership. Zhou Sicong passed away in 1996 at the age of 57 at Beijing Ditan Hospital due to acute necrotizing pancreatitis [2].

Commenting on Zhou Sicong's painting style, Lu Chen remarked: "Sicong's artistic journey can broadly be divided into three stages: realism, expressionism, and lyricism" [3].

In her early practice, Zhou Sicong worked within the orbit of the so-called "Xu-Jiang School." Her handling of line and figure construction clearly drew on Western realist training, and she was sympathetic to its call to bring a more "scientific" observational logic into Chinese ink figure painting [4]. By the middle stage of her career, however, her visual language had shifted under the impact of artists such as Käthe Kollwitz and the Maruki couple. The emphasis moved toward the suffering and precarious lives of ordinary people, and she increasingly relied on magnification, deformation, and tense, compressed bodies to convey social tragedy. In her later years, prolonged illness altered both her working rhythm and subject matter: she turned to smaller formats and more inward themes—lotuses, quiet landscapes, and related motifs—among which the Lotus series stands out as the most characteristic culmination of this phase.

3. Artistic creation during the realist period

In the years following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese art was redirected toward new social and political aims. Zhou Sicong's work from this realist phase reflects that context clearly, with a sustained focus on ordinary laborers and people at the grassroots. Under the guidance of her mentor Jiang Zhaohe, her early paintings are notable for their relatively rich palette, close reliance on life sketching, and a firm commitment to realist representation. A representative example is *The People and the Premier*, produced in memory of Premier Zhou Enlai and grounded in key scenes associated with his public life. The painting centers on Zhou Enlai comforting victims after the 1966 Hebei earthquake [5], and its emotional force comes from the directness of the encounter it stages. Structurally, Zhou builds the figures through a realist drawing method, using center-tip brushwork to articulate contours and to bind line and plane into a coherent whole. Her strokes are quick yet controlled, carrying a calligraphic rhythm that retains the classical qualities of Chinese figure linework through subtle shifts in pressure and speed. She deepens the affective weight of the scene by pushing ink contrasts in the faces, while alternating dry, restrained marks with more fluid washes in the clothing to differentiate the quake survivors from the Premier. This handling of brush and ink sharpens their visual and moral contrast, and ultimately shapes a collective portrait of "the people and the Premier" as mutually present within a shared historical moment.

4. Artistic creation during the expressive period

After several years of sustained experimentation, Zhou Sicong worked with Lu Chen on five major pieces that make up the *Miners* series. Set against the experience of miners in Northeast China during World War II, these works recount a collective history of exploitation, endurance, resistance, and eventual survival, turning individual bodies into witnesses of a larger national trauma [6].

Stylistically, this stage marks Zhou's clear departure from the measured descriptiveness of realist line drawing. She tightens the figure into simplified, forceful contours, and allows deliberate exaggeration and deformation to carry the emotional load of the image. Although the underlying structure remains credible, the body is compressed into upright, almost geometric frameworks that feel rough on the surface yet charged with contained strength. By enlarging facial and bodily features, pushing forms toward abstraction, and letting distortion register pressure and confinement, Zhou articulates both her repudiation of war and her sympathy for those trapped within it.

Her handling of drapery also shifts accordingly. Instead of meticulous detailing, folds are driven by the body's movement and reinforced through broad ink blocks, so that volume and light–shadow relations emerge with a sculptural weight. The resulting line is slow, dense, and blunt, closer to freehand inscription than to academic draftsmanship, and it is often intensified through dry-brush friction that thickens texture and heightens tension. Spatial depth is built from layered ink—frequently through heavy, dark, almost scorched passages—so the figures seem to occupy an atmosphere of physical and moral gravity. Stark black–white oppositions, along with limbs bent or twisted beyond natural proportion, produce a palpable sense of oppression; at the same time, the contrast between dry-brushed faces and ink-washed grounds concentrates the viewer's attention on suffering as the emotional core of the series.

5. Artistic creation during the lyrical period

In the final phase of Zhou Sicong's career, worsening health reshaped both her working conditions and her artistic attention. She gradually turned away from large, labor-intensive figure compositions and concentrated instead on smaller formats that allowed for a more intimate, meditative pace.

Drawing on the disciplined skills she had developed in figure painting, Zhou carried her sensitivity to gesture, weight, and inner feeling into this late lotus world. The lotus motifs are not treated as decorative subjects; rather, they function as vessels of memory and subdued sorrow. Through restrained brushwork and quiet tonal rhythms, she built images that feel spacious and calm on the surface yet remain emotionally saturated underneath. What emerges is a lyrical register in which personal experience and pictorial imagery interpenetrate, producing an atmosphere that is both serene and quietly haunting.

6. Conclusion

Zhou Sicong's artistic trajectory shows that technique and spirit do not advance separately in major artistic practices; they mature through constant mutual shaping. If her legacy is to be meaningfully carried forward, two points are especially worth holding onto.

First, at the level of technique, form cannot be detached from what it seeks to express. Zhou's achievement rests on how brush, ink, and structure are continually re-anchored in lived emotion. This requires more than technical proficiency: it demands an awareness of the cultural and historical meanings sedimented within technique, and the ability to activate those meanings through one's own experience so that technical language becomes both coherent and expressive.

Second, at the level of stylistic renewal, inheritance is not repetition. Creative transformation must begin from the artist's own distinctive sensibility and visual habits. The most durable thread in Zhou's work is her humanistic concern; it is this ethical attention to life that gives her formal experiments their necessity. To inherit her in a living way is to dismantle and rebuild technique in response to one's own time and subject, searching for new possibilities in the productive tension between tradition and individuality. In that movement, technique is not only passed down but also pushed toward a deeper aesthetic awareness.

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