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Classical Origins and Modern & Contemporary Catalysts of Non-Figurative Expression in Chinese Landscape Painting

Yuheng Wang, Hao Hu*

College of Fine Arts, Northwest Minzu University, Lanzhou, China
**Corresponding Author. Email: 2285906447@qq.com*

Abstract. Chinese landscape painting boasts a profound tradition of non-figurative expression. This feature is not a derivative of Western modern abstract art, but possesses self-sufficient classical origins rooted in the autonomous evolution of brush-and-ink formulas, the aesthetic awareness of "being between likeness and unlikeness", and the spatial philosophy of "treating blank space as solid black". On this basis, this paper examines the evolutionary path of non-figuration in landscape painting since the 20th century. The convergence of formal autonomy of Western modernism and Eastern aesthetics has served as a catalytic opportunity for this process. Chinese artists have conducted explorations along two avenues: the "internalized abstraction" grounded in brush and ink, and the "external experimental innovation" dominated by material concepts. The former is represented by Huang Binhong's vigorous and rich brushwork and Zhang Daqian's late-period splashed-color landscapes, while the latter is represented by Liu Guosong's Modern Ink Painting Movement. This study finds that the non-figuration of landscape painting is not a betrayal of its realistic tradition, but a natural extension of its inherent logic within modern contexts, thereby presenting a unique path of modernity defined by "externalization of internal origins".

Keywords: Chinese landscape painting, non-figuration, spiritual resonance

1. Introduction

In the historical narration of 20th-century Chinese fine arts, the modern transformation of Chinese landscape painting has always been a controversial core subject. The most profound modern reform of landscape painting has not occurred along the realistic orientation, but unfolded quietly along the non-figurative path. From Huang Binhong's brush-and-ink realm of vigor and richness, to the magnificent splashed-color landscapes of Zhang Daqian's later years, and further to Liu Guosong's material experiments typified by his "striated texture strokes", landscape painting has gradually broken free from the shackles of depicting physical objects and advanced toward explorations of abstract forms.

This shift has sparked theoretical debates that persist to this day. In terms of conceptual terminology, this paper adopts "non-figuration" rather than "abstraction" as its primary category. This choice aims to avoid forcing the traditional aesthetics of landscape painting into the theoretical framework of Western abstract art. The term "non-figuration" is more inclusive, covering the broad

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spectrum ranging from imagistic expression that "abandons physical appearance to capture inner essence" to formal explorations completely detached from physical subjects.

2. Non-figurative elements in classical landscape painting

Chinese landscape painting has always taken mountains and rivers as its thematic subject and never completely cut off its connection with natural objects. Yet over its thousands of years of development, a brush-and-ink system independent of object depiction, a freehand spirit surpassing formal likeness, and spatial wisdom of controlling the tangible with the intangible have long formed a rich reserve of non-figurative elements. These elements do not amount to abstract art in the Western definition, as they never take the abandonment of natural subjects as the prerequisite for their validity. Still, they provide sufficient inherent conditions for the non-figurative development of landscape painting.

The brush-and-ink system of landscape painting is far from passive recording of natural scenery, but a formal language system with strong self-regulation. This trait is most fully reflected in the construction and evolution of painting formulas. Formulas refer to standardized brush-and-ink techniques summarized by painters of successive dynasties for Chinese landscape painting. They generate imagery expression through refining natural forms and act as a bridge connecting art and nature. This system covers multiple sets of technical rules including brushwork, ink application and texture strokes. These formulas are not rigid formal dogmas, but "high generalization and formal refinement of vibrant yet chaotic natural images with deliberate cultural selection". Formulas contain both objective and subjective factors. They are categorized distillations of natural shapes as well as carriers of creators' emotional expressions. This dual nature constitutes the uniqueness of the intrinsic language of landscape painting.

From a historical perspective, the self-awareness of formulaic language in landscape painting emerged much earlier than that of Western painting. Lu Fusheng pointed out the necessity of establishing painting formulas exclusive to landscape painting. In a sense, the formulaic construction of Chinese landscape painting equals the formal construction of the painting's own intrinsic language. It differs from Western modern art's pursuit of formal autonomy in cultural logic, yet the two share profound similarities in returning painting to its own essence. If the self-regulated evolution of texture strokes supplies the technical gene for the non-figurative development of landscape painting, the aesthetic idea of standing between likeness and unlikeness offers a more fundamental ideological gene. The formation of this idea went through a long course from capturing spirit via accurate form, to abandoning outer appearance for inner spirit, and finally to striking a balance between likeness and unlikeness. Before the rise of literati painting, similarity in form and spirit was the universal pursuit in painting creation. Su Shi was the core figure who brought the aesthetics of valuing artistic conception to its peak during its development. His remark that judging a painting merely by formal likeness is comparable to the thinking of young children sparked long-standing academic disputes. Nevertheless, Su Shi broke the absolute authority of formal likeness with his powerful statement, thus creating legitimate space for the aesthetic value of non-likeness. From then on, disregard for rigid formal likeness gradually became the core aesthetic principle of literati painting. It can be seen that the state between likeness and unlikeness is not a gradual change of quantity, but a qualitative leap. It no longer defines painting as simple imitation of nature, but regards painting as the tangible trace formed by the integration of the painter's subjective spirit and the physical features of natural objects. As Shi Tao wrote, mountains and rivers meet my spirit and manifest themselves in painting traces. This ontological thought that views artistic creation as the immediate presentation of the Dao bears striking similarities in underlying logic to Italian artist

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Lucio Fontana's performance art of slashing canvases. Both regard artistic acts themselves as direct demonstration of the formation of the world, rather than reproduction of existing forms [1].

The third classical origin of non-figurative expression in landscape painting lies in its unique spatial concept. Such space is not geometric space built with perspective methods, but artistic conception space presented through the mutual generation of the tangible and the intangible. Within this spatial system, blankness is not an absence of depiction, but a highly expressive presence. The aesthetic core governing this space is the non-representational aesthetic ideal of "vigorous resonance of spirit". Ranking first among the Six Principles put forward by Xie He of the Southern Dynasties in *Record of the Classification of Ancient Paintings*, vigorous resonance of spirit has been honored by later generations as the highest aesthetic standard of Chinese painting. The system of Six Principles centered on vigorous resonance of spirit formulated by Xie He includes specific technical requirements such as structural brushwork and shaping forms according to objects [2]. Jing Hao of the Five Dynasties extended this theory to landscape painting in *Notes on Brushwork* and proposed the Six Essentials to deepen brush-and-ink expression. His explanations of *qi* and *yun* are particularly precise: "Qi means the mind moves along with the brush, capturing imagery without confusion; yun means concealing deliberate strokes to establish form, achieving refined taste free from vulgarity." Here, *qi* refers to the infusion of the creator's life force; the mind flows smoothly with the brush without stagnation, enabling accurate capture of imagery. *Yun* stands for lingering charm beyond visible brush-and-ink traces. Artists hide contrived marks to construct forms and therefore obtain elegant taste beyond vulgarity. Neither *qi* nor *yun* aims at precise depiction of natural objects, but at the life rhythm and spiritual temperament revealed in the process of brush and ink application.

Vigorous resonance of spirit endows landscape painting with soul, while blankness provides room for this soul. Blankness in Chinese painting is not an oversight, but a conscious aesthetic strategy. "Treating blank space as solid ink" serves as its core expressive method, requiring painters to handle the relationship between the tangible and the intangible with artistic dialectics, and link aesthetic perception, understanding and creation. Zong Baihua stated that painted artistic images belong to the tangible part, and the imagination they inspire belongs to the intangible part; the combination of tangible and intangible elements forms artistic conception. Ma Yuan and Xia Gui of the Southern Song Dynasty brought this wisdom to its extreme in their corner landscape paintings, creating well-arranged density and sparsity through the contrast between blank areas and painted subjects. Guo Xi of the Northern Song Dynasty illustrated in *Lofty Ambitions among Mountains and Streams*: tall mountains need mist to veil their midsections, distant waters need shelters to interrupt their flowing lines. Blankness is not only physical omission, but also the opening of psychological space, leading the limited frame of a painting to the boundless imagery beyond the visible scene.

In terms of ink application, apart from the five gradations of ink recognized in Chinese painting, blank white is considered the sixth color, the color without hue. Hua Lin of the Qing Dynasty wrote: "White refers to the natural white of paper. It is used to render the sky, water, breaks in mist and clouds on sunlit mountain faces, flat hillsides, vast sky and water outside the painted scene, clear cloud formations, dim mountain feet and ethereal treetops..." This practice of including white in the color system turns the act of not painting into an active form of expression. The art of Bada Shanren pushed this aesthetics of blankness to the utmost. In his works, natural subjects are simplified to the minimum while blank space takes up most of the picture. Blankness is not merely reserved space for composition, but a field of spiritual tension. Bada Shanren combined objects that cannot grow naturally in reality into simple arrangements, "forming abstract patterns to express his inner

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emotions". This artistic method of carrying profound and extensive spiritual connotations with extremely simplified subjects is itself a highly mature form of non-figurative expression.

3. Catalysts and paths for non-figuration in landscape painting in the 20th century

Though non-figurative elements of landscape painting were abundantly accumulated in classical painting theories, their transformation from latent elements into conscious artistic paths could not have been realized without the historical catalyst of artistic exchange between China and the West in the 20th century.

3.1. The historical catalyst of Sino-Western artistic exchange

The formal revolution of Western modern art offered a reference system both unfamiliar and familiar for the non-figurative exploration of landscape painting. Its radical stance of completely discarding natural objects appeared unfamiliar, yet profound resonances existed between it and the brush-and-ink techniques of Chinese painting and calligraphy in aspects including expressiveness of writing, contingency and physical engagement. This heterogeneous yet kinship relationship allowed Chinese artists to feel intense impact upon encountering Western abstract art, and meanwhile obtained the opportunity to seek answers from their own cultural traditions.

The encounter between formal autonomy of Western modernism and Eastern aesthetics ranks among the most fascinating cross-cultural phenomena in the art history of the 20th century. Superficially, a chronological sequence exists between the two sides: Abstract Expressionism reached its prime in the 1940s and 1950s, while experimental explorations of modern Chinese ink painting unfolded gradually afterwards. This easily leads to a one-sided narrative that modern Chinese abstract ink painting was influenced by Western art. In-depth comparative studies demonstrate, however, that the relationship between the two is far more complicated.

Western Abstract Expressionism and modern Chinese ink painting are two distinct artistic forms that adopt similar techniques for painters' emotional expression yet possess disparate cultural foundations. While modern Chinese abstract ink painting absorbed influences from modern Western expressive and constructive art, it bears no essential connection with Western expression theory and constructivism. Western expressive art developed against its traditional representational art on the basis of learning from Eastern imagist art. This indicates the relationship between the two sides is not a one-way influence, but a more intricate reciprocal interaction. Western Abstract Expressionism drew inspiration from Eastern calligraphy and Zen Buddhism at its inception, and modern Chinese ink painting rediscovered abstract potentials within its own tradition under the stimulation of Western abstraction.

At the level of creation mechanism, striking parallels can be found between Abstract Expressionism and Chinese wild cursive freehand painting. Both lay emphasis on physical engagement, transformation of emotional energy and physical formation of traces. Jackson Pollock's drip painting technique directly converted the painter's bodily movements into marks on canvas, which shares an essential similarity with the creative state of fluid, vigorous strokes in Chinese calligraphy and the accidental effects of free ink diffusion on paper in splashed-ink grand freehand painting. Both break conventional brushwork, seek dynamic imbalance and asymmetry, and convey inner spiritual states through forms beyond fixed formal constraints.

Zao Wou-Ki and Chu Teh-Chun stand as the most representative figures of this cross-cultural artistic practice. Two sources formed the roots of Zao Wou-Ki's abstraction: "on the one hand, modern Western painting; on the other hand, traditional Chinese landscape painting. Landscape

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painting embraces the concept of freehand brushwork, which captures the spiritual charm of scenery, discards trivial details to retain essence, and focuses on artistic conception and expression of the painter's emotions". Wang Ruiting held the view that "Zao Wou-Ki integrated composition and artistic conception of traditional Chinese landscape painting with forms and passion of Western Abstract Expressionism to shape a profound and grand artistic style, making him the first artist to infuse artistic conception of Chinese painting into the realm of oil painting". Zao Wou-Ki was initially reluctant to create with ink, the purely Eastern medium. His practice with oil paints freed him from rigid, inherited literati brush-and-ink conventions prevailing since the Ming and Qing dynasties, enabling him to trace back directly to the intuitive perception of nature in landscape paintings of the Tang and Song Dynasties amid abstract creation. Chu Teh-Chun's art also embodies such profound integration. His works, "though inspired by Western modernism, coincide perfectly with the spacious ethereality and spiritual resonance of Chinese landscape painting in spatial arrangement and color application". The artistic practices of Zao Wou-Ki and Chu Teh-Chun have proven that non-figurative expression of landscape painting is not confined to the ink medium. Its spiritual core, the pursuit of spiritual resonance, interplay of emptiness and solidity, and artistic conception, can acquire new formal vitality in any artistic medium.

3.2. Internalized abstraction: Huang Binhong and Zhang Daqian

Since the 20th century, explorations into the non-figuration of landscape painting have unfolded along two paths. The first is "internalized abstraction" rooted in traditional brush and ink techniques, and the second is "external pioneering experiments" dominated by materials and artistic concepts. On the basis of inheriting the brush-and-ink system, internalized abstraction pushes brush-and-ink language to its extreme and allows the picture to gravitate toward abstraction naturally. Artists do not pursue abstraction deliberately; their works' abstract nature arises from the advanced development of self-governing brush-and-ink rules. When the form, rhythm and spiritual connotation of brush and ink reach their pinnacle, physical images fade away, and a pure realm of brush and ink comes into view.

Huang Binhong's landscape paintings are regarded as an outstanding representative of the transition of Chinese painting from the classical era to modern times. His stylistic transformation in later years summarized and expanded traditional brush-and-ink language. By depicting the abundant vitality and profound richness of mountains and rivers, he embodied inner beauty and applied abstract formal language. This artistic orientation aligned with modern art trends, lifting Chinese landscape painting to a higher aesthetic realm [3]. His inclination toward non-figurative art first and foremost manifests in his unique pursuit of "inner beauty", a core aesthetic category. Inner beauty occupied a central position in Huang Binhong's system of artistic thought. He stated, "Art influences human beings; superior works pursue inner beauty rather than superficial glamour. Gilded and colored paintings relying on superficial glamour only arouse desires for extravagance and indulgence; inner beauty derives from constant cultivation of body and mind, free of selfish cravings of any kind." This distinction between inner beauty and superficial glamour essentially corresponds to the contrast between non-figurative and figurative art. Superficial glamour focuses on sensory colors and formal resemblance, while inner beauty transcends concrete objects and embodies the internal sublimation of brush-and-ink spirit. As scholars put it, "In Huang Binhong's view, all natural things can be transformed into brush and ink. He saw no need for meticulous outlining of picturesque landscapes; his creation was a refined distillation akin to unwinding a cocoon, which purified artistic expression and finally returned to the authenticity of inner beauty."

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The traits of darkness, density, thickness and weight in Huang Binhong's late landscape paintings serve as distinct markers of his abstract formal language. He aimed not to depict clear outlines, but built dark-toned scenes via accumulated ink and broken ink techniques, laying emphasis on layers of ink and the process of wielding brush and ink. Bai Di pointed out that this dark structural framework is the materialized form of inner beauty, and Huang Binhong's paintings bridged the artistic concepts of Chinese and Western painting. His non-figurative expression advanced entirely within traditional brush-and-ink conventions, steered landscape painting toward abstraction and set an enlightening example. The theory of inner beauty shifted the focus of painting from "what to paint to how to paint". It represents an Eastern interpretation of modernist formal autonomy, rooted in the Chinese philosophical belief that the Dao and concrete instruments are inseparable.

If Huang Binhong's abstract quality stemmed from the additive development of brush and ink, the abstraction in Zhang Daqian's late splashed-color works originated from the subtractive transformation of such techniques. He replaced delicate outlining with large-scale splashing, and substituted conscious shaping of forms with the free flow of water, ink and mineral pigments. Zhang Daqian developed the bold splashed-ink and splashed-color techniques in his later years due to severe eye disease. After 1961, his landscape creation entered its late phase. "While exploring ways to renovate Chinese painting, he pioneered the new style of splashed ink and splashed color. This period marked the peak of his personal innovation after mastering the full heritage of traditional painting, fully conforming to his painting principle of learning from the ancients first, then from nature, and finally from one's own mind." He integrated figurative elements into abstraction and injected new vitality into Chinese painting. *Splashed Colors of the Dingwei Year* takes azurite blue and malachite green as its main hues. The upper half uses splashed colors to abstract natural imagery, while the lower half renders mountains, rocks and streams with ink washes, with dotted details linking the virtual and tangible parts. Balancing the fluidity of splashed colors and deliberate brush control, the work inherits the narrative tradition of landscape painting and incorporates Western abstract elements, forming an artistic language that conveys cosmic perception as well as Eastern artistic conception. Though Huang Binhong and Zhang Daqian took different paths, both achieved abstraction based on traditional foundations. They dissolved landscape motifs into formal language and proved the feasibility of internalized abstraction: the non-figuration of landscape painting does not require the rejection of tradition, for profound comprehension of traditional brush-and-ink spirit inherently contains the power for breakthrough.

3.3. External pioneering experiments: Liu Kuo-Sung and the Modern Ink Painting Movement

In contrast, Liu Kuo-Sung's external pioneering experiments broke traditional boundaries and carried out radical explorations in materials, techniques and concepts, so as to express the spirit of landscape painting with a new visual language. Honored as the Father of Modern Ink Painting in Taiwan, Liu Kuo-Sung, an artist, educator and art promoter active from the 20th century to the 21st century, played a pivotal role in advancing the modernization of ink painting. Over his artistic career spanning more than seventy years, he consistently challenged and reshaped the formal and conceptual boundaries of ink art through bold experimental creation methods and theoretical propositions, thus transforming the traditional medium into a modern visual language with a global vision. Liu Kuo-Sung's artistic development features remarkable turning points. Marked by his founding of the May Art Association in his early years, he criticized the conservative art circle of the time, committed himself to promoting the modern art movement, and advocated comprehensive learning from Western artistic concepts. Nevertheless, after viewing the authentic work *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* by Fan Kuan collected in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, he

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began to reflect deeply on the limitations of blindly following Western modern art, and developed a strong sense of mission to carry forward traditional national culture. Thereafter, he resolutely abandoned oil painting media, returned to the creation system of traditional paper and ink, and advocated the practical path of integrating Chinese and Western art.

His most iconic technical innovation is the texture-stripping cun stroke. In 1963, he cooperated with a paper mill to develop handmade Kuo-Sung Paper. "He swept large brushstrokes across the surface of thick cotton paper full of paper fibres… After the ink dried completely, he stripped the fibres beneath the ink to leave white lines." The subtlety of this technique lies in two aspects. On the one hand, it produces visual effects entirely different from traditional brush and ink; the sharp and varied white lines deliver a strong sense of abstract composition. On the other hand, it is not arbitrary destruction, but rooted in an in-depth understanding of the physical properties of paper and ink, representing controlled accidental effects. Shang Hui pointed out that Liu Kuo-Sung's solo exhibition of new ink paintings held at the National Art Museum of China in the early 1980s exerted a profound influence on China's painting circle. He applied his original Kuo-Sung Paper and stripped paper fibres after painting to form textures of mountains and rivers, or presented only flowing and fluctuating color blocks in ink works seemingly in the style of Western abstract painting [4]. Even more daringly, Liu Kuo-Sung "created space-themed paintings featuring the sun, the moon and the earth with brush, ink and rice paper as media. He also adopted the spraying technique for the first time to spray water-based pigments on the picture and create gradient or fading effects". At the end of 1968, he was deeply shocked by photographs of the Earth taken from lunar orbit by the US Apollo 8 spacecraft. "Traditional Chinese cosmology described the world with the concept of a round heaven and square earth, yet the photographs displayed a spherical Earth and curved lunar surface. This unprecedented visual experience ignited his imagination." Starting from 1969, he created the Space Series. Besides large-area ink washes, he combined ink, pigments and collage within a single composition, and even integrated hard-edge art and pop art into ink creation. This series extended the observation subjects of landscape painting from mountains and rivers on the Earth's surface to the vast universe. While expanding thematic scope, it thoroughly altered the spatial perception mode of landscape painting. Viewers no longer stand on the ground looking up at lofty mountains, but hover in outer space overlooking the Earth. Such dramatic shift of perspective itself carries a strong non-figurative effect.

Following Liu Kuo-Sung, the Modern Ink Painting Movement flourished after the 1980s. The concept of ink painting took shape with the emergence of Chinese contemporary art in the 1980s. The Ink Painting Movement originated from the 85 Art Trend and thrived after the 1990s as an integral part of contemporary cultural issues. Concepts such as abstract ink painting, experimental ink painting and conceptual ink painting emerged one after another. The Experimental Ink Painting promoted by Zhang Yu started in 1995 to conduct researches on the non-figurative nature of abstraction in modern ink painting. Later, modern ink painting gradually referred to ink works featuring abstract forms, expressive comprehensive materials, non-figurative creations with mixed techniques and installations [5]. These explorations were no longer confined to easel painting, but extended ink painting as a cultural symbol to contemporary art fields including installation, performance art and video art. The materiality and cultural connotation of ink painting were examined under brand-new problem awareness. Notably, despite formal similarities between explorations of the Modern Ink Painting Movement and Western abstract art, its cultural pursuit always bears distinct national subjective consciousness. As some researchers commented, modern ink painting "seeks various resources to build its own image of abstraction independent from the West, and its modern state serves as a powerful refutation of Western centrism. It respects Eastern

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discourse power, engages with reality, forms a crucial element in the evolution of modern art, and adds unique conceptual features to modern Chinese art". This indicates that although external pioneering experiments are the most radical in techniques and closest to Western abstraction, their underlying pursuit remains the establishment of Chineseness — redefining the contemporary possibilities of ink painting by breaking the boundaries of traditional brush and ink.

4. Conclusion

Reviewing the evolutionary course of landscape painting from classical non-figurative elements to modern and contemporary non-figurative approaches, a clear historical logic can be identified. The non-figuration of landscape painting is neither a simple transplantation of Western abstraction nor a natural continuation of traditional brush and ink techniques. Instead, it constitutes a dynamic process of "externalization of internal origins". This conclusion helps transcend two prevalent biased narratives. The first is the negation viewpoint, which holds that the abstraction of landscape painting betrays its realistic tradition and represents blind imitation of Western art. Nevertheless, analyses in this paper have demonstrated that classical landscape painting accumulates abundant non-figurative elements. Aesthetic concepts including disregard for rigid formal likeness, treating blank space as solid ink and vigorous resonance of spirit share profound parallels with the essence of Western abstraction despite their differences. The non-figuration of landscape painting is a natural extension of its inherent logic, rather than forced implantation of alien foreign culture.

The second is the Westernization viewpoint, which claims that non-figurative explorations of modern Chinese ink painting are essentially a Chinese variant of Western abstract art. Yet this paper also verifies that Chinese artists have maintained intricate dialogue and transformation between Western abstraction and Eastern traditions, rather than engaging in mere imitation and emulation. Examples include Huang Binhong's pursuit of inner beauty based on brush and ink, Zhang Daqian's splashed-color innovation rooted in heritage, and Liu Kuo-Sung's artistic path of embracing Western styles before returning to native traditions.

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