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Applying the Elements of Traditional Chinese Painting in Chinese Oil Painting Creation

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Abstract

Applying the elements of traditional Chinese painting in oil painting creation is a research topic that scholars often pay attention to. They all use artistic works to analyze how Chinese oil painters apply traditional Chinese painting elements. However, when existing studies analyze oil paintings, most discussions only briefly mention that a certain work uses traditional Chinese painting elements, but the specific application methods and processes are not clearly stated. In addition, most studies use the works of Wu Guanzhong, Zhao Wuji, Xu Beihong, and Lin Fengmian as examples to analyze the application of traditional Chinese painting elements. Many classic oil paintings use elements of traditional Chinese painting that have not been studied. For example, the oil paintings included in The Art of the Party collection. Therefore, the researcher tries to observe the oil paintings in The Art of the Party as a starting point and combine them with relevant historical documents to study the specific methods and exploration process of Chinese oil painters using traditional Chinese painting elements when creating oil paintings. When conducting research, the researcher mainly discusses the specific process of selecting the theme of the work, collecting materials, conceiving ideas, drawing sketches, and formal creation. Then, the researcher tries to analyze the results that Chinese oil painters use traditional Chinese painting elements in oil paintings, providing new research achievements for this topic.

Keywords: *Traditional Chinese painting; Oil painting; Application; The Art of the Party; Fine art*

Introduction

The integration of traditional Chinese painting elements into oil painting creation is normally the most sought-after research topic in its field. From the review research, the researcher found that there is a research gap toward this topic. As said by Guan Ying (2014), she found that the traditional Chinese painting language can be used in modern oil painting creation, mainly by incorporating the lines of Chinese painting, the use of brushes, inks, and colors. However, she only mentioned that these methods can be used in oil painting creation, without analyzing how

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the artists use these methods in conjunction with furthermore the specific works. According to Yao Jinying (2015), she found that the traditional Chinese painting methods that can be used in oil painting creation include the method of using brush, color, and line. Compared have done the study by Guan Ying, Yao Jinying combined the oil paintings of Wang Yuezhi, Xu Beihong, and Wang Yidong to analyze the process of Chinese oil painters using these methods. However, the content of the discussion was too concise. Therefore, there are many knowledge gaps in the specific creative process and methods of Chinese oil painters using traditional Chinese painting elements, and it is necessary to conduct further in-depth research.

In 2021, it coincided with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China. The China Central Television, the National Museum of China, and the Central Academy of Fine Arts jointly produced more than 100 episodes of the program *The Art of the Party*, and the *Theme Exhibition of the Art of the Party* were held at the National Museum of China on June 22, 2021. At the same time, Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Press published a collection of artworks of the same name - *The Art of the Party* in 2023. There are 51 oil paintings in the collection, including works created by famous artists of various periods and works created by young artists who have emerged in recent years. Their paintings are rich in creative skills and unique, which were better express the history of the Party. To make the works conform to the aesthetic characteristics of the Chinese people, the Chinese painters incorporated traditional Chinese painting elements, such as the brushing techniques, coloring, and layout of Chinese paintings. These oil paintings that incorporate elements of traditional Chinese painting provide researchers with research opportunities. Therefore, the researcher will select works that have used traditional Chinese painting elements from the collection of *The Art of the Party* as samples, and study the specific processes and methods of Chinese oil painters who have used traditional Chinese painting elements in their artworks by observing the content of the works and using second-hand historical documents.

The Explanation of the Choice of Artworks, Elements and Traditional Chinese Painting

There are mainly 4 samples of artworks selected for this study (see Table 1), and have three reasons why these works were selected as samples: first, these artworks all use elements of traditional Chinese painting; Second, the artists who created these classic artworks have received professional art education. On the one hand, some artists have received European art education. For example, Wu Zuoren studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, France. As a student of Wu Zuoren, Ai Zhongxin will be influenced by his teacher. On the other hand, in the 1950s, Soviet expert Konstantin Mefodievich Maximov was invited by China to set up an oil painting training class and teach oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Many artists were selected to participate in the class, such as Zhan Jianjun. These artists have received professional art education from both China and the West, allowing them to create works that incorporate elements of Chinese and Western art. Third, these oil paintings are classic artworks that have been passed down through historical selection and are rich in artistic appeal, and ideological and spiritual shock.

Table 1: Samples of Artworks

No.	Title	Author	Time	Size	Collection Institution
1	Great Strike of 1922	Fang Zengxian	1968	157cm*240cm	Private Collection
2	The Five Heroes of Langya Mountain	Zhan Jianjun	1959	186cm*203cm	National Museum of China

3	China's Border Troops	Wang Chaoxiang, Yang Bingli, Cheng Jianli	2018	220cm*200cm*3	National Art Museum of China
4	Chinese Red Army's Long March	Ai Zhongxin	1957	100cm*275cm	Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution

According to a query on the Cambridge Dictionary, element refers to a part of something. The term *elements* in this study refers to the creative techniques of traditional Chinese painting, mainly including the techniques of brush, color, composition, perspective, etc. Regarding the concept of traditional Chinese painting, it can be divided into broad and narrow senses (see Table 2). Broadly speaking, Chinese painting refers to traditional Chinese painting, including scroll paintings, murals, New Year paintings, prints, lacquer paintings, etc.; In a narrow sense, it specifically refers to ancient scroll paintings and paintings created by long-established traditions using unique Chinese brushes, inks, pigments, rice paper, silk, and other tools and materials (Zhou, 2011). The term *traditional Chinese painting* in this study refers to the narrow meaning.

Table 2: The Concept of Traditional Chinese Painting

No.	Category	Content of the Concept
1	Broad Sense	Scroll Paintings, Murals New, Year Paintings, Prints Lacquer, Paintings
2	Narrow Sense	Ancient Scroll Paintings

The Study of Artworks with Chinese Painting Elements

Great Strike of 1922 Integrates Various Elements of Traditional Chinese Painting

In *The Art of the Party*, many classic oil paintings incorporate the painting techniques of traditional Chinese painting, such as brushwork, composition, perspective, and imagery. Among them, Fang Zengxian's *Great Strike of 1922* (see Figure 1) is a representative work that incorporates traditional Chinese painting elements into oil painting creation.



Figure 1: Fang Zengxian - *Great Strike of 1922*

Source: Collection of *The Art of the Party*

In 1921, Mao Zedong went to the Anyuan Road Mine in Pingxiang City, Jiangxi Province to disseminate revolutionary ideas. In 1968, Fang Zengxian used this scene as a blueprint to create the classic oil painting *Great Strike of 1922*. In fact, it was Fang Zengxian and two students from the Traditional Chinese Painting Department who first received the task of creating Mao

Zedong in Anyuan. After receiving the task, they immediately went to Anyuan District, Pingxiang City, Jiangxi Province to live for a period, where they experienced local life, collected materials, and looked for creative inspiration. After Fang Zengxian and his students came back, they decided to create a large-scale traditional Chinese painting after careful consideration. In the beginning, students were mainly responsible for the creative work, with Fang Zengxian only guiding from behind. According to Fang Zengxian's recollection, the original sketch was drawn by a student. The atmosphere of the picture was good, but it was difficult for students who had not studied traditional Chinese painting or oil painting to enlarge the manuscript to a size of several meters. Later, the school's leader discussed with Fang Zengxian and decided to ask him to complete this work in the form of ink painting (Chen, 2010). Since the student's professional foundation was not solid, the final creative task fell on Fang Zengxian. After taking over the creative task, he completed the draft based on the collected materials and began to think about creation. However, after thinking about it, Fang Zengxian found that it was quite difficult to create such a large-scale work in the form of traditional Chinese painting, and it did not meet the standards of *red*, *light*, and *bright* at that time. *Red* means that the figure's image should be red; *light* means that the painting technique should be realistic and smooth; *bright* means that the picture should be bright and beautiful (Baik. Baidu. <https://baik.baidu.com>). After communicating and negotiating with the school, Fang Zengxian finally decided to create this work in the form of an oil painting.

Fang Zengxian encountered a difficulty in the creative process. Mao Zedong was a young man when he was disseminating revolutionary ideas in Anyuan District, Pingxiang City, Jiangxi Province. Fang Zengxian wanted to express the profile of young Mao Zedong. However, there were no image documents related to Mao Zedong in the literature at that time. There was no reference for the figures, so the creation was in trouble. Later, Fang Zengxian found a profile photo of Mao Zedong in his middle age and drew Mao Zedong's image based on this photo. Through various efforts and practical attempts, the painting of Mao Zedong's image was finally completed.

Although the *Great Strike of 1922* is an oil painting, Fang Zengxian integrated the expression methods of Chinese painting. First of all, in terms of brushwork, Fang Zengxian chose the flat coating method of traditional Chinese painting. The use of black pigments and toning oils on the figures' costumes and props creates a very similar effect to the blending of ink and water in Chinese freehand paintings. Then, use black lines to outline the outer contour of the figure to achieve the effect of emphasizing the structure of the figure. This method is a typical expression of Zhejiang School figure painting, which has both the light and shadow effect of Western oil painting and the vivid charm of Chinese ink painting.

Secondly, in terms of composition. Fang Zengxian did not fill up the whole picture, but left nearly half of the space blank to highlight the characters. The wooden table, bench, shovel, pickaxe and other props in the picture omit many detailed descriptions, and the front and rear relationships of the objects do not adopt the Western spatial perspective technique of large for near, and small for far. On the contrary, the virtual and real techniques of Chinese painting are used to deal with it. In addition, there is a seal in the lower left corner of the picture with the Chinese characters *Huan Qi Gong Nong Qian Bai Wan* (that is the work's title *Great Strike of 1922*), and on the right is a text inscription related to the work. This layout of the picture is also derived from Chinese painting. The seal in the lower left corner is called a corner seal, which is common in Chinese calligraphy and painting works. The reason why Fang Zengxian covered the lower left corner has two main functions: first, like the inscription on the right, it fills the emptiness of the picture and balances the picture; second, the color of the seal is red,

which echoes the color change of the red inscription on the right.

Finally, Fang Zengxian also used the image expression method of Chinese painting. In the expression of the word *Huan Qi* (that means awaken) in *Huan Qi Gong Nong Qian Bai Wan*, Fang Zengxian turned Mao Zedong's left hand into a clenched fist. The surrounding workers and peasants raised their heads, looked up at Mao Zedong with firm eyes, and listened carefully. Mao Zedong's passionate preaching seemed to ignite the ideological consciousness of resisting exploitation and oppression in the heart.

The Five Heroes of Langya Mountain Absorb the Brushwork Techniques of Traditional Chinese Painting

In 1959, it was the 10th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. To commemorate the National Day, the Chinese Revolutionary History Museum was about to open, so in 1958, a group of outstanding painters was selected to create a batch of works with revolutionary historical themes for exhibition. Zhan Jianjun was selected to be part of this creative team. Among many topics, Zhan Jianjun chose *The Five Heroes of Langya Mountain* (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Zhan Jianjun - *the Five Heroes of Langya Mountain*

Source: Collection of *The Art of the Party*

After determining the theme of creation, Zhan Jianjun first went to the museum to collect text

and image documents, and felt the real historical situation through the documents. Secondly, it happened that the Bayi Film Studio was filming a movie about the *Five Heroes of Langya Mountain* at that time. Zhan Jianjun took this opportunity to review it and happened to meet one of the five heroes who is still alive. Through communication with the hero, he had a more accurate understanding of the historical situation at that time. Finally, Zhan Jianjun personally went to Langya Mountain in Baoding City, Hebei Province to experience life and collect materials. After early efforts, Zhan Jianjun decided to freeze the scene on the scene of the five heroes preparing to jump off the cliff and drew a sketch (see Figure 3). However, when Zhan Jianjun submitted the sketch to the leader for review, the leader believed that the heroic spirit could only be reflected in battle, so the leader asked him to go back and reconsider it. After Zhan Jianjun went back, he revised the sketch into combat scenes such as shooting and throwing grenades (see Figure 4), but everyone thought it was not as relevant to the theme as the first draft. Therefore, it was decided to continue working with the original sketch.



Figure 3: Sketch of *the Five Heroes of Langya Mountain* (1)



Figure 4: Sketch of *the Five Heroes..... of Langya Mountain* (2)

Source: China National Fine Arts

Source: Oil Painting

The Five Heroes of Langya Mountain adopts a triangular composition, which is stable and magnificent. In the specific painting process, Zhan Jianjun used Chinese brush techniques. For example, in terms of figure modeling, Zhan Jianjun did not use the realistic expression method of Western oil painting, but chose the imagery modeling of Chinese painting, focusing on expressing the momentum and expression of the figures. Zhan Jianjun believes that the use of oil painting brushwork should be combined with the form of objective objects to pursue the reposing of the subjective spirit. The brushstrokes must follow not only the appearance of the objective objects, but also the inner emotions (Zhao & Yu, 2015). Therefore, his brushstrokes are relatively broad. For example, the clothes of the soldiers, the ground, and the sky behind them are all represented by large-scale brushstrokes. This kind of chisel-and-axe-chop brushwork comes from the large axe-chop technique in Chinese landscape painting, so the brushwork is unrestrained, elegant, and extremely tense. Although there are no exquisite details, the vividness and spirit of the figures are expressed vividly.

China's Border Troops Draw Lessons from Composition of Traditional Chinese Painting

In 2018, Wang Chaoxiang, Yang Bingli, and Cheng Jianli received the task of the “National Theme Art Creation Project” hosted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China. After discussion, they decided to choose military themes that they were familiar with for their creation. Finally, the three painters jointly created the oil painting *China's Border Troops* (see Figure 5) based on the daily patrol scenes of northern Xinjiang soldiers guarding the motherland.



Figure 5: Wang Chaoxiang, Yang Bingli, and Cheng Jianli - *China's Border Troops*

Source: Collection of *The Art of the Party*

After deciding on the subject matter, the three painters went to the Inner Mongolia Border Guard Corps to sketch. While sketching, the painters saw many touching scenes. According to Cheng Jianli's recollection, Inner Mongolia has a border defense line of eight thousand miles, and they especially went to the border defense regiment to sketch. At that time, the night temperature dropped from more than 20 degrees below zero to 30 or 40 degrees. The sudden drop in temperature made horses vulnerable to frostbite. Many soldiers put their coats on the horses. This scene gave them a greater impulse to paint this painting well (Shen, 2023). Painters feel the warm scene in the cold snow, and this unique feeling transforms into the painter's strong emotions, which promotes the creative expression of the work.

China's Border Troops is created in the form of a triptych. The artist chose three different patrol scenes to express the theme. On the left are soldiers patrolling with horses. To show the soldiers' familiarity with the terrain, the artist made one of the horses jump up; The middle depicts a group of soldiers patrolling the border defense line on foot with guns. The soldier at the front opens his mouth and looks forward with determination as if he is shouting slogans

and leading the soldiers to move forward bravely. On the right is a group of soldiers patrolling the borderline on snowmobiles. Despite the cold wind blowing against their faces, the soldiers still move forward resolutely.

In the process of creating *China's Border Troops*, the painters borrowed the compositional layout methods from traditional Chinese paintings. For example, painters encountered a difficult problem, that is, how to represent white snow under strong light. After thinking, the painters painted the bodies of horses and dogs, the badges on military caps, human faces, and the camouflage uniforms of soldiers into dark and warm colors, forming a contrast in coldness, warmth, black and white, and density with the white snow. The power and vividness of the picture are enhanced through the virtuality and reality of the front and rear lights. This way of expression comes from the layout method of "considering white as black" in traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting. "Considering white as black" refers to arranging the blank space of the picture as if it were the actual place of depiction. Although there is no depiction in the blank space, it is treated as an important part of the picture to arrange and think about (Zhu, 2010). The three painters adopted this method of expression, which created a strong contrast between looseness and tightness in the entire picture. There is an artistic conception in the painting where the loose parts are enough for a horse to gallop, and the tight parts are not penetrated by the wind.

Chinese Red Army's Long March Learns from Perspective of Traditional Chinese Painting

In addition to the compositional form, the perspective rules of Chinese painting are also often used in oil painting creation, such as Ai Zhongxin's *Chinese Red Army's Long March* (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Ai Zhongxin - *Chinese Red Army's Long March*

Source: Collection of *The Art of the Party*

In 1957, to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army organized more than 400 painters to participate in the creation of revolutionary historical paintings, and held the "30th Anniversary Art Exhibition of the People's Liberation Army" at the Working People's Cultural Palace in Beijing (Lu, 2009), Ai Zhongxin received the task of creating *Chinese Red Army's Long March*.

During the conception and creation process, Ai Zhongxin encountered a problem. Even Ai Zhongxin himself had not personally experienced the Long March, nor had he conducted an on-the-spot investigation in Jiabin Mountain in Ya'an City, Sichuan Province. He wanted to show the scene of the Red Army crossing the snow-capped mountains, which made it difficult. However, Ai Zhongxin was lucky enough to find a Red Army member who had participated

in the Long March and asked him about the scene at that time. Ai Zhongxin (1995) communicated with Red Army soldiers who participated in the Long March and learned about the touching scenes during the turbulent years, and the hardships of trekking on snowy slopes and climbing ice cliffs. The towering mountains towering in the sky immediately emerged in his mind. He feels that this majestic snow-capped mountain is a symbol of the revolutionary will of the Red Army. This majestic mountain can be used as a theme to promote creative ideas. In addition to consulting the old Red Army, Ai Zhongxin also contacted his own life experience. In 1943, Ai Zhongxin lived in northwest Sichuan for a while. During that winter, Ai Zhongxin looked at Qionglai every day. The snow-white mountains on a sunny day suddenly became dense with haze. Jiajin Mountain is just northwest of Qionglai City. Ai Zhongxin's connection with his feelings in life, although relatively meager, is an indispensable ingredient in his creation of landscape and historical paintings.

Ai Zhongxin combined the old Red Army's explanation and his own life experience to have an overall conception of the scene. But it was Mao Zedong's poetry that ultimately played a decisive role. Ai Zhongxin once mentioned that in the creative process of *Crossing the Snow Mountain*, two lines of Chairman Mao's poems played a decisive role: "I am even happier with the thousands of miles of snow in Minshan Mountain, and the three armies are all happy after it has passed". This is a description of a scene and an expression of emotions. The scenes blend together and show the high spirit of revolutionary optimism (Ai, 1995).

Inspired by the artistic conception of Mao Zedong's poems, Ai Zhongxin combined with the previous ideas to finally draw the picture that he wanted to express in his heart. In terms of creative techniques, the perspective method of Chinese landscape painting was borrowed. Ai Zhongxin chose a panoramic composition. The close-up view is a sloping snow slope, and the Red Army soldiers are climbing up with difficulty. After climbing the snow slope, they have to cross the ice valley in the middle section, and then continue to cross the tall icebergs. High mountains, freezing snow, and cold winds could not hinder the progress of the Red Army. The field of view of the scene is very wide, the figures are relatively small, and the slopes and cliffs covered with ice and snow are relatively large and towering, integrating people and scenery. This processing method draws on the "High Distance" in the "Three Distance Methods" of Chinese landscape painting. "High Distance" refers to looking up from the bottom of the mountain to the top of the mountain (He, 2012), which expresses a perspective of looking up. Ai Zhongxin used this perspective to fully demonstrate that the Red Army soldiers still maintained their iron will and spirit to overcome difficulties and obstacles when facing a dangerous environment.

Conclusion

Through this, the researcher found that oil painting is an art based on Western culture. If it is just a simple imitation, it will neither conform to the development regularity of the art itself nor meet the requirements of Chinese national culture. It will also be detrimental to the development of oil painting art in China. It is precisely because of this that Chinese oil painters have worked hard to root Western oil paintings in traditional Chinese culture through practical exploration and create artworks whose content and form meet the cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic needs of the Chinese nation. Judging from the oil paintings in *The Art of the Party*, artists went deep into the land of China to experience life and find creative inspiration and materials. Then, through in-depth exploration and research of traditional Chinese painting elements, the expression methods of Chinese paintings were skillfully and harmoniously integrated into Western oil paintings, artistically telling Chinese stories, spreading Chinese

traditional culture, and promoting the development of Chinese art forward.

By analyzing the specific process of creating oil paintings, the researcher can more clearly show readers the specific methods of Chinese oil painters using traditional Chinese painting elements, and fill the knowledge gaps in existing research. Many works incorporate traditional Chinese painting elements into oil paintings, and the samples of works used by the researcher in the study are only a small part of them. However, this study can provide a reference for other future researchers. Future scholars who want to continue to study this topic can further study the specific processes and methods of Chinese oil painters using traditional Chinese painting elements by selecting other works that have not been studied as samples and combining historical documents, thereby enriching the practical and theoretical research experience of oil painting creation.

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