

From “Brushwork Centricity” to “Formative Reconstruction”: On the Paradigm Shift in Formal Expression within Ink Figure Painting

Na Li, Tsetsegdelger D

Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, 11000, Mongolia

ABSTRACT

Since the 20th century, Chinese ink figure painting has undergone a profound modern transformation, its core manifestation being a paradigm shift from traditional “brushwork-centricism” towards “formative reconstruction” that integrates Western realist modelling. This paper aims to systematically trace the historical trajectory, intrinsic motivations, and concrete manifestations of this shift from the perspective of formal language within artistic ontology. It first delineates the independent aesthetic value of ‘brushwork and ink’ within the traditional literati painting system and its limitations in the realm of figure painting; Secondly, it focuses on analysing how the ‘Xu-Jiang System’ integrated sketching techniques into ink wash painting, laying the foundation for the new paradigm. Finally, by examining the practices of contemporary artists such as Zhou Jingxin and Liu Guohui, it explores how they creatively resolved the tension between brushwork and form, ultimately forging a novel formal language system that harmonises national connotations with modern visual tension.

KEYWORDS

Brushwork and Ink; Form; Paradigm Shift; Realistic Ink Figure Painting; Xu-Jiang System.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within traditional Chinese painting, particularly the literati painting tradition that emerged after the Song and Yuan dynasties, ‘brushwork and ink’ gradually transcended its purely representational function to develop into a core category possessing independent aesthetic value. Xie He's ‘Six Principles’ first elevated brushwork to prominence through his emphasis on ‘bone method in brushwork’ [1]. By the Tang dynasty, Zhang Yanyuan further established brushwork's foundational role when he asserted: ‘To depict objects, one must capture their form; to capture form, one must preserve their bone spirit; both bone spirit and form derive from artistic conception and culminate in brushwork’ [2]. By the Qing dynasty, artists such as Yun Nantian pursued the aesthetic essence of ‘brush and ink’ to its zenith. Consequently, the formal beauty inherent in brushwork itself-manifested in calligraphic qualities like the turning, lifting, variation in density, and interplay of dryness and wetness-became the paramount criterion for evaluating paintings, giving rise to what is termed ‘brush-and-ink centralism.’

This paradigm achieved magnificent accomplishments in landscape and flower-and-bird painting, yet revealed its limitations in figure painting. An excessive emphasis on the calligraphic nature and formalisation of brushwork often led to neglect of ‘formative’ issues such as anatomical accuracy, proportion, and dynamic representation in figures. Traditional figure painting, particularly depictions of literati scholars and court ladies by literati artists, often rendered figures conceptually and symbolically. The pursuit lay in capturing a certain ‘ethereal spirit’ or ‘archaic charm’ transcending

concrete form, rather than the precise rendering of a living individual's state. As Lang Shaojun observed: 'In traditional literati figure painting, the "form" serves as a vehicle for "meaning", yet this "form" itself lacks independent and profound exploration.' [3] When early 20th-century China confronted social upheaval and the impact of Western culture, this traditional paradigm-prioritising brushwork over form-proved inadequate to meet the demands of depicting reality and reflecting social life.

2. THE CORNERSTONE OF PARADIGM SHIFT: THE 'XU-JIANG SYSTEM' AND THE INTRODUCTION OF REALISTIC FORM

The modern transformation of Chinese ink figure painting commenced with a profound 'paradigm revolution.' At its core were Xu Beihong and Jiang Zhaohua, whose pioneering 'Xu-Jiang System' successfully undermined the dominance of 'brush-and-ink centralism.' By systematically integrating Western realist 'formative' concepts into the ink tradition, they achieved a fundamental shift in formal language.

Xu Beihong served as the theoretical advocate for this shift. Recognising the inherent weaknesses in traditional figure painting's representational techniques, he unequivocally declared: 'Sketching forms the foundation of all representational arts' [4], advocating that 'the finest elements of ancient methods should be preserved, the endangered should be revived, the inadequate should be reformed, the insufficient should be augmented, and the adoptable aspects of Western painting should be assimilated' [5]. This philosophy provided the theoretical grounding for creative practices integrating Eastern and Western approaches. Jiang Zhaohua emerged as the most outstanding practitioner of this ideology. His landmark work, *The Displaced People*, comprehensively demonstrated the immense expressive power achievable through the fusion of realistic form and ink-wash language. Within this piece, the modelling of figures strictly adheres to anatomical and perspective principles, featuring precise facial structures and natural movement, conveying a powerful sense of authenticity. However, Jiang did not merely imitate Western sketching with a brush. He creatively employed traditional ink techniques such as contouring and dry-brush texturing to render structure, volume, and light-and-shadow effects. For instance, in depicting eye sockets and cheekbones, he used dry-brush side-stroke texturing to convey the undulations of bone and the texture of muscle while preserving the rugged yet moist beauty of ink. Pan Tianshou once remarked: 'He has fused the mastery of Chinese brushwork with the formative principles of Western sketching, unifying realism with the capture of spirit.'

The establishment of the 'Xu-Jiang System' signalled a fundamental shift in the evaluation criteria for Chinese ink figure painting: an artist's skill was no longer judged solely by the antiquity of their brushwork, but increasingly by the precision and vitality of their form, and their ability to profoundly reveal the subject's inner world. This laid a solid paradigmatic foundation for the subsequent development of substantive ink figure painting[6].

3. CONTEMPORARY DEEPENING: INTEGRATING "FORM" AND "BRUSHWORK" THROUGH DIVERSE PATHWAYS

Building upon the groundwork laid by the "Xu-Jiang System", contemporary artists have pursued more multifaceted and profound explorations. Their central challenge lies in maintaining the rigour of "form" while simultaneously revitalising and expanding the independent aesthetic value of "brushwork", elevating their relationship from mere "combination" to a higher level of "fusion".

Painter Zhou Jingxin's concept of 'ink sculpture' offers a highly innovative contemporary solution to the tension between brushwork and form. Abandoning traditional approaches reliant on linear modelling and chiaroscuro, he sculpts forms purely through the arrangement, combination, and

layering of brushstrokes. In works such as his Water Margin Series and Battle Against the Flood, figures and landscapes are constructed from individual 'brushstrokes' possessing direction, volume, and variations in density. These strokes are both 'ink and brush' and, when combined, form a solid "form". Zhou himself explains: "My paintings are "written" with the brush, and also "sculpted" with the brush... I aspire for my ink and brush to possess sculptural capacity, and for my forms to carry the essence of ink and brush." [7] This approach endows his works with a potent sense of volume and visual tension, while simultaneously infusing them with the rhythmic cadence and poetic charm of calligraphic expression, achieving a methodological unity between 'ink and brush' and "form". Another representative figure, Liu Guohui, has attained remarkable success on the path of 'expressive realism'. His works exhibit solid modelling and rigorous structure, yet fully leverage the expressive strengths of Chinese painting's "writing" tradition in brushwork application. His lines flow with fluid variation-sometimes taut and continuous to outline contours, other times abrupt and soaring to define structure. The swiftness and decisiveness of his brushstrokes imbue his figures with dynamic vitality and life force. In historical compositions such as Yue Fei's Return to the Capital with Imperial Orders, he masterfully captures the intricate dynamics and interrelationships of numerous figures while enveloping the entire composition in a unified rhythm of brushwork. This 'written' form of representation satisfies modern visual demands for realism while preserving the essence of Chinese ink spirit to the utmost, standing as a successful paradigm within the 'form reconstruction' framework.

4. CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE AND REFLECTIONS ON PARADIGM SHIFT

The transition from 'brushwork-centric' to 'form reconstruction' holds profound implications. Firstly, it vastly expands the expressive capacity of ink figure painting, enabling it to adeptly depict grand historical narratives, profound social realities, and complex individual psychologies. This endows the ancient genre with potent modernity and contemporary relevance. Secondly, it dismantled the insular system of literati painting, compelling ink language to continually renew itself through dialogue with the other-the Western figurative system-thus securing sustained developmental momentum. Yet this shift also raises questions worthy of reflection. For instance, in emphasising formal accuracy, has the independent aesthetic value of brushwork been somewhat diminished? Have certain works fallen into the rut of 'ink sketches'? Contemporary artists of distinction have answered this through their practice: true fusion is not mere technical superimposition, but the assimilation and integration of foreign representational concepts through the spirit of Chinese ink brushwork. The goal is to forge a new form of ink art possessing an independent cultural character-neither traditional literati painting nor Western realist painting.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the development of authentic ink figure painting in China since the 20th century constitutes a paradigm shift centred on formal language – a transition from 'brushwork-centric' to 'formative reconstruction'. This transformation was pioneered by masters such as Xu Beihong and Jiang Zhaohua, and subsequently deepened and expanded by contemporary artists including Zhou Jingxin and Liu Guohui. Through their distinctive artistic practices, they creatively resolved the tension between the calligraphic expressiveness and poetic charm of brushwork versus the rigour and scientific precision of form, successfully establishing a novel formal language system that harmonises national heritage with modern sensibilities. This paradigm shift has not only reshaped the appearance of ink figure painting but also made it a quintessential microcosm of modernity's transformation within Chinese art. Its accumulated experience and achievements hold profound implications for the creation and development of contemporary Chinese art as a whole.

REFERENCES

- [1] Xie He. Ancient Paintings: A Record of Their Merits. Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2016.
- [2] Zhang Yanyuan (Tang Dynasty). Records of Famous Paintings Through the Ages: Volume One [M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2011.
- [3] Lang Shaojun. On Modern Chinese Fine Arts [M]. Nanjing: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 1996: 112.
- [4] Xu Beihong. Collected Writings on Xu Beihong's Art [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Press, 2005: 68.
- [5] Xu Beihong. Collected Writings on Xu Beihong's Art [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Pictorial Press, 2005: 15.
- [6] Pan Gongkai. Pan Tianshou on Art [M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2011: 89.
- [7] Zhou Jingxin. Perception and Presentation: Zhou Jingxin on Ink Sculpture [J]. Chinese Painter, 2010(4): 5-7.