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Article

# The Social Influence and Critical Thinking of the Neo-Chinese Painting Movement in the 20th Century

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**Abstract:** The Neo-Chinese painting movement in 20th-century China represents not only an innovative approach to artistic techniques but also a significant exploration of Chinese painting as it responds to the challenges of modernity within a specific historical context. This paper examines the social impact of the movement, with particular attention to its role in shaping patriotic emotional expression and transforming the relationship between artworks and their audiences. By situating key artists and works within broader political and cultural developments, the study analyzes how visual strategies, subject matter, and exhibition practices contributed to new forms of national consciousness and public engagement. Furthermore, the paper summarizes the core disputes surrounding the inheritance of traditional painting conventions and the integration of Chinese and Western artistic concepts, comparing the positions of different art schools and critical discourses. Through this comparative lens, it clarifies how debates on form, medium, and ideology reflected deeper tensions between continuity and rupture in cultural identity. Finally, in conjunction with contemporary art practices, the paper reflects on the ongoing dilemma of Chinese painting between inheritance and innovation, and offers critical insights into possible future directions for the development of Chinese painting in a globalized art world.

**Keywords:** modern art; chinese painting; social influence; cultural identity; artistic innovation; tradition; modernity

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### 1. Introduction

During the Neo-Chinese painting movement, traditional Chinese paintings were influenced by Western drawings and oil paintings, leading to a period of realistic transformation in Chinese art [1]. In the late Qing Dynasty, avant-garde artists responded to the call for cultural reform by transforming traditional Chinese painting to create a new style of art.

The realistic shift in Chinese painting served as a reform targeting the conventional literati ink painting of the Ming and Qing dynasties, which lacked innovation and required change. Realistic methods were also employed to depict significant historical events, such as the Opium War, cultural reform movements, and resistance efforts during times of national crisis, while portraying the hardships endured by the people [2].

### 2. The Social Impact under the Neo-Chinese Painting

The Neo-Chinese painting style during the period of modernism emerged as a response to the historical demand for the modernization of the Chinese art movement. This is primarily evident in the emphasis on the vitality of the spirit rather than a focus on realistic representation. One prominent advocate of this approach highlighted the importance of integrating Chinese and Western elements, asserting that drawing serves as the foundation of all forms of art and promoting realism as a central theme in Chinese

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art. While advocating for the adoption of Western techniques to enhance Chinese paintings, traditional Chinese brushwork and ink were not entirely dismissed. The Tang Dynasty line painting, *The Scroll of Eighty-seven Immortals*, serves as a classical example of precise proportions, elegant characters, and the fluidity of Chinese ink lines, showcasing the enduring value of traditional techniques [3, 4].

Examining the history of Chinese art in the 20th century reveals a dynamic interplay between the assimilation of Western art and the inheritance of Chinese artistic traditions. This interplay, influenced by various factors, resulted in a diverse pattern of integration and coexistence among different art forms and styles [1, 5]. This diversity significantly contributed to the richness and complexity of Chinese art throughout the century.

Patriotic sentiment played a significant role in the later Neo-Chinese art movement [6, 7]. With the establishment of a new societal framework, the audience for Chinese paintings shifted from the feudal landlord class to the broader working population. This transformation reflected the evolving cultural and social priorities of the time.

Traditional flower-and-bird paintings and landscape paintings, once valued for their leisurely and aesthetic qualities, were increasingly viewed as outdated and irrelevant. Realist themes came to dominate the art movement, paralleling similar trends in Western countries during periods of significant social upheaval [8]. For instance, artists in certain regions used their work to convey collective grief and national sentiment, moving beyond purely personal themes to address broader societal concerns.

The painting described here, titled "*The Founding Ceremony of the Nation*," depicts the grand scene of a significant historical event. The work underwent multiple revisions before reaching its final form. It symbolizes the beginning of a new chapter in history. The painting features a central figure delivering a speech, with other notable individuals positioned in the background. The use of bright, saturated colors, inspired by traditional folk art, conveys a sense of joy and prosperity [7]. Although this is an oil painting rather than a traditional Chinese painting, its use of vibrant tones and cultural motifs aligns it with the Neo-Chinese style.



**Figure 1.** Dong Xiwen, *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation*, 1953, oil painting.

The artwork described here, titled "*The Bloodstained Shirt*," portrays themes of social transformation and resistance. It depicts a central figure holding a bloodstained garment aloft, symbolizing dissatisfaction with long-standing exploitation. Surrounding the figure are various characters, including a child clinging to the central figure, an elderly woman expressing anger, and a group of individuals confronting a representative of the old societal order. The sharp contrast between the oppressed and the oppressors underscores the work's powerful narrative. This piece, originally presented as a sketch, holds a significant place in the art world. Later, it was reinterpreted in color by another artist, further enhancing its impact [9].



Figure 2. Wang Shikuo, *The Bloodstained Shirt*, 1959.

### 3. The Historical Inevitability of the Neo-Chinese Painting Movement

The emergence of the Neo-Chinese painting movement was an inevitable occurrence under the circumstances of colonial crisis and modernity. It represented a way of addressing cultural anxiety through art as a method of self-preservation. After the Opium War, Western realistic paintings, such as court portraits and war-themed documentary works, were introduced alongside the conflict. This posed a significant challenge to traditional Chinese painting, which lacked realistic effects but emphasized expressive and abstract ink brushwork [10]. From the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, radical criticism of the Neo-Chinese painting movement and the societal critique of traditional artworks during times of national peril led to their perception as ineffective ink works. Furthermore, the demand for war art during periods of national crisis focused on propaganda mobilization and the documentation of suffering.

During the Neo-Chinese painting movement, what appeared to be a reform of artistic style was, in fact, a response to historical necessity. The Opium War in the late Qing Dynasty marked a pivotal turning point [7].

Under the political and historical circumstances of that era, the future and role of Chinese paintings as an artistic medium, as well as their use in expressing the lives and destinies of ordinary people, were shaped by the historical developments of the 20th century. The debate surrounding the use of brushstrokes as the primary technique further underscored the historical demand for modernization and reform in Chinese painting.

### 4. The Critical Thinking on Neo-Chinese Painting Movement

**The Core Differences Between the Reformists and the Traditionalists:** In the revolution of Chinese painting, there are two major groups of artists. One group consists of those who studied abroad and mastered both Chinese and Western art. They advocate a path of integrating traditional Chinese and Western elements. This group includes artists who pursued a synthesis of these styles. The other group firmly defends traditional art, and in their painting techniques, they do not incorporate any Western elements. This group is often referred to as traditionalists. They significantly advanced Chinese flower-and-bird painting, landscape painting, and portrait painting, bringing these forms to their peak.

**The Innovation of Traditionalism: A Case Study of Pan Tianshou** — Pan Tianshou was an artist who adhered to tradition but still introduced changes to traditional Chinese painting. His paintings were characterized by their simplicity and clarity, incorporating his strong individuality. Pan Tianshou's works neither deviated from tradition nor disconnected from the spirit of the times. He opposed the blending of Chinese and Western elements in modern Chinese art, believing that the two should remain distinct and not be confused.

Figure 3 is *The Impression of Blossoms of Yandang Mountain* by Pan Tianshou. For flower-and-bird paintings, most Chinese painters usually depict themes such as plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums, and peonies to convey their thoughts and emotions. However, in Pan Tianshou's paintings, the elegant and luxurious peonies are rarely seen. Even though Pan Tianshou paints traditional themes such as plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum, he does so with a unique style. Regarding the painting *The*

Impression of Blossoms of Yandang Mountain, he emphasized not just painting artificially cultivated flowers or traditional flowers. Instead, he highlighted the beauty of mountain flowers and wild grass, which had rarely been depicted by ancient artists. "Paint something lively and wild" was his approach to avoid being stereotyped. In this painting, a cluster of mountain flowers with thick branches exudes vitality. The rich red, elegant white, and tender yellow blend together, creating a sense of boundless energy. On the right side of the picture is "Pan Gong Stone." Pan Tianshou uses extremely simple brushstrokes to outline a tilted large stone, contrasting the green of the right-side pine trees with the left-side mountain flowers, creating a charming effect. On the stone, two frogs are perched, looking into the distance, adding liveliness to the painting and balancing the tilted mountain stone. The blank space on the left, where the frogs gaze into the distance, extends the composition. This blank space in the upper left highlights the theme of the painting, making the colors more vivid, lively, and full of charm, while expanding aesthetic horizons.

Pan Tianshou employed the techniques of traditional Chinese painting but completely changed the usual depiction of plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums, and fiery peonies. Instead, he brought wild flowers and grass, often overlooked, to the forefront as the main subjects of his paintings.

He changed the objects depicted in the paintings, while maintaining the traditional brushwork characteristic of traditional Chinese painting [11].



**Figure 3.** Pan Tianshou, The Impression of Blossoms of Yandang Mountain, 1962, Chinese painting.

Controversy of Regional Art Schools: Taking Lingnan School as an Example — In addition to Pan Tianshou and others who advocated maintaining the traditional characteristics of Chinese painting while undergoing realistic transformation during the modernization of Chinese painting, there were also those who opposed the blind adoption of foreign art styles. This included not only Western art but also influences from other Asian countries on traditional Chinese painting.

In the early 20th century, the art group in Guangdong was dominated by the "Syncretic School," which combined Japanese painting styles, and another group of artists who advocated for traditional Chinese art. This resulted in two opposing artistic forces: the old school and the Neo-Chinese style [12]. At that time, a confrontation emerged between traditional and innovative aspects of Chinese painting. There was a fierce debate over whether Chinese painting needed reform through the adoption of Western painting techniques and concepts. Some critics argued that traditional and authentic Chinese painting was fundamentally different from the so-called Neo-Chinese painting, which incorporated elements from Japanese painting. They called for the re-establishment of the authentic lineage of national painting.

In response to this criticism, a representative figure of the Lingnan School explained that Western techniques such as light and shadow and perspective were applied to Chinese painting. The aim was to retain the elegant and ancient elements of Chinese painting while absorbing composition methods from Western painting [13]. By integrating elements from both the East and the West, a harmonious painting pathway was formed. This approach did not solely follow European painting but also drew inspiration from Egyptian, Indian, and Persian art, incorporating these influences into Chinese painting as a source of nourishment.

In conclusion, this artistic perspective demonstrated a broad and strategic awareness. The reform of Chinese painting was envisioned as not only incorporating elements from Western painting but also absorbing influences from other countries' artistic traditions. The Neo-Chinese Painting created by this school was based on traditional Japanese painting, integrating certain techniques and concepts from Western painting, such as light and shadow, space, and perspective, while expanding the themes of painting to a broader scope. It was believed that any subject matter could be depicted in paintings.

### **5. The Influence of the Integration of Chinese and Western Painting on Chinese Traditional Painting**

The integration of Eastern and Western art was a notable aspect of the Neo-Chinese Painting movement, marking a period of significant cultural exchange and influence between Eastern and Western artistic traditions. In traditional Chinese painting, the use of ink and lines is the essence. Although ink painting is monochromatic, there are still five ink tones that can be expressed: dry, thick, heavy, light, and clear. The ink techniques can be further divided into splashing ink and broken ink. Splashing ink refers to large-scale painting with unrestrained brushstrokes, while broken ink is divided into "drying ink covering moist ink" and "moist ink blending with dry ink," respectively. Chinese painting excels at using ink and lines to represent objects, with its highest pursuit being the expression of the texture, emotion, and spirit of the depicted subject. With just a few strokes, it can outline and shape the subject, which is something that Western painting cannot achieve. This is the soul of freehand painting in Chinese art and also the most significant difference between Western and Chinese painting.

However, in Western art, there is no trace of the ink techniques, shading methods, and scumbling techniques of traditional Chinese painting. Instead, Western art employs more scientific and precise artistic principles, such as color mixing methods, brushstrokes, perspective, and proportion. After the integration of the two, traditional Chinese painting abandoned the original rules for blending color and ink and the traditional Chinese line drawing, incorporating Western human body proportions and sketching the outlines of characters in the form of Western sketching, while still using Chinese painting pigments for coloring [10]. For example, in traditional Chinese painting, there is no special treatment of the relationship with the background, but in Western painting, the foreground, middle ground, and background layers are emphasized, and the principle of highlighting the main subject through the background is used to handle the color and sketch relationship between the main and secondary elements. In the integration of Chinese and Western art, there are also works that attempt to add the background to figure painting to express the relationship between the figure and the environment. Additionally, Chinese painting is characterized by scattered perspective, which is mostly used in genre paintings and comic strips. The scenes are often grand and expressed through the form of long scrolls using narrative language about court and urban life. In contrast, Western painting often represents the reality of people, things, and events through precise and grand scenes or a corner of still life, with perspective being one of the important evaluation criteria for realistic painting. This aspect is reflected in the integration of Chinese and Western art through the creation of works that combine these elements.

As mentioned earlier, artists dedicated themselves to reforming traditional Chinese painting in the 20th century by integrating the scientific rules of Western sketching and oil painting. Ultimately, what history presented were still Chinese-themed subjects that used Chinese painting pigments and silk paper as the medium for painting, but most of them adopted Western scientific painting principles in terms of composition, proportions, and perspective. Such a transformation indeed changed the traditional Chinese figures and landscapes in history, presenting various distinct artistic expressions. However, during the Neo-Chinese painting movement, Western realistic techniques were incorporated using Chinese painting materials for modern transformation. This process abandoned traditional Chinese painting concepts, including brushstrokes, line drawing,

and fragmented perspective. Currently, the inheritance and transformation of Chinese painting are at a critical point.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper presents an analysis of the artistic development during the process of transforming Chinese painting through realism, as well as an artistic commentary on the works at that time. All art history inherently involves criticism, as the descriptions, interpretations, and evaluations of works are integral to this process. In essence, describing, interpreting, and evaluating works of art is a fundamental aspect of criticism. The development of art history and art criticism is deeply interconnected and progresses simultaneously.

The Neo-Chinese painting movement in the 20th century represented a significant effort by Chinese painting to address the challenges of modernization. Its integration practices hold considerable contemporary relevance, though they are not without historical limitations. To further advance contemporary Chinese painting, it is essential to re-evaluate the balance between traditional heritage and artistic innovation, reflecting on the ongoing debates [14–16]. It is recommended to safeguard traditional culture while revitalizing artistic expression through contemporary concepts.

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