

Translation

The Formation and Development of New Ink Art in China

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1. The Natural Emergence of New Ink Art

Since the May Fourth Movement, each turbulent political change in China has brought forth keen discussions and great transformations in reforming Chinese ink art, and the Third Central Committee Meeting of the 11th Conference of the Chinese Communist Party was no exception. Discussions of sensitive issue in the ink painting circle arose as the natural aftermath of the conference. In the particular cultural context of that moment, economic and scientific modernization became the center of social attention. For this reason it is right and proper that "modernity" should emerge as the fundamental concept pursued by many ink wash artists, as the so-called "reform" of ink wash was based on the premise of constructing a modern society and calling for modern thinking.

Not all ink painters supporting such reformation, however, happened to share the same views on the actual forms of reform. In light of recent history, the mainstream approach has always been to transform the qualities of ink paintings, including composition, form, color, and picturesque standard, while retaining a foothold on the framework of traditional ink painting² and realist ink painting³. This practice has caused mainstream ink painting to differ from both traditional and realist ink art. Mainstream painting is ubiquitous at exhibitions held at official art institutions, maintaining a central and leading status in the current Chinese ink art circle.

Another kind of ink painting is posited in a relatively marginal status, for its complete transcendence of the structures of traditional and realist ink painting allows the construction of a more independent artistic system. To a large extent, the genre is constructed through reference to Western contemporary art, allowing it to break free from the conventions of the cultural order. In the 1980s, this category of ink painting was labeled "modern ink painting" or "experimental ink"⁴. Looking at the new ink wash from the present perspective⁵, its emergence would seem to constitute a rupture with splendid tradition, a forgetting of cultural origins. Beholding it with the eyes of that specific time, however, we understand the reasons behind why artists pursuing experimentation in ink paintings drew their lessons from Western modern and contemporary art, stemming largely from a compulsion for a breakthrough from the stiff, rigid, and routine paradigm of ink art expression. In some ways, these artists' exerted effort in criticizing, absorbing, transforming, and reconstructing modern and contemporary art from the West in order to expedite an assimilation of their cultural imports; on the other hand, these artists utilized a modern consciousness to unearth the modern elements concealed in traditional art. Both methods facilitated the modernist transformation of ink art while creating a new possibility for artistic practice in ink, a towering achievement demonstrated by practice.

2. The Discomforts of New Ink Art

For decades new ink art has been in an awkward position. Although it was counted as “experimental” or contemporary art by ink painting circles, it was treated with aloofness by the experimental art world, as demonstrated by the absence of new ink art in the assemblies of large-scale exhibitions introducing experimental art. This occurred as a repercussion of the emphasis on the alteration of language advocated by most new ink artists, an interrogation of the medium of ink that obviously did not coincide with the questioning of contemporary culture in contemporary art. In the “Art Critic Annual Nomination Exhibition (Ink Painting Section)” of 1993, Yi Ying and Huang Zhuan both wrote to criticize experimental ink’s stolid reflection of contemporary culture⁶. I would like to express my assent to the view that the ultimate way out for new ink art is to establishing a relationship of point and counterpoint between the art form and contemporary culture. I am also aware, however, of the deep-rooted causes of the asynchronous relationship between new ink painting and Chinese contemporary art, making any simplified comparison between them inadvisable. Those with a grasp of the history of ink painting will understand that ink art is not only characterized by a strict formal paradigm but also by a complete system of values, both of which are interlinked. The reform of ink painting is difficult because, as artists ground themselves in the formal paradigms and systems of values of traditional ink art, the shift to any new form of expression is arduous and complex far beyond the level of technique. It would be even more difficult to effectively draw lessons from the experience of Western modern and contemporary art. Artists so grounded could only confine themselves to insubstantial adjustments and transmutations, at best. On the other hand, if ink painting is prone to the loss of the fulcrum propping up its entire existence when confronted with the attempt to reform such traditional value systems, this predicament is absent in the practice of Chinese contemporary oil painters⁷. Consequently, new ink painters encounter a choice: the reformation of symbols, schematics, composition, and color at the crux of ink art, or a complete deviation from this conventional fulcrum in pursuit of a new center and a new way out. New ink painters have spent almost twenty years deconstructing and reconstructing their ancient genre of painting, performing meritorious deeds that must not be obliterated. We should not get ahead of history or reality by judging modern ink art as we would Chinese contemporary painting, or we will be doomed to forever misunderstand the real historical connotations of ink painting today.

3. The Birth of Expressionist Ink Art

The expressive forms and artistic pursuits of traditional ink painting share certain similarities with Western Expressionism: the freedom of brushworks, the expression of personality, the catharsis of emotion, the figuration of imagery. It is for this reason that, in the mid-1980s, a group of artists borrowed the concepts of Western Expressionism to revamp traditional ink painting. The actual approach of their transformation took the form of utilizing new symbols and styles of composition while preserving the essence of ink, brush, and xuan paper. In this way they

discovered a number of practical means for the discovery and expression of the self. The emergence of expressionist ink painting aggrandized the sphere of concern and expression in ink, bringing a fresh approach. Art critic Li Yang regards expressionist ink art as the fatal foe of traditional ink painting, undermining the substratum of the latter⁸. Comparatively speaking, expressionist ink art often involves exaggerated and aberrant figuration, showing flexibility in spatial arrangement and intense turbulence in the management of ink effects. In addition, its themes often demonstrate intimate inner experience. Li Shinan (b.1940) and Li Jin (b.1958) are two prominent figures of the expressionist ink painting of the mid-1980s. The art of the former is characterized by heavy, dense ink that adopts emblematic signs and a surrealist sense of space, a visual combination that effectively stages a sense of loneliness and tragedy. The art of the latter especially aspires to the signification of primitiveness, emanating the power of the savage along with a tincture of sincerity.

Expressionist ink art attained substantial developments in the 1990s, and the accomplished expressionist ink painters participating in the exhibition "Zhang Li and Experiment" held in 1994 and 1995 attested to the maturity of the genre⁹. Li Xiaoxuan (b.1959) and Wang Yanping, in particular, amalgamate personal emotions, everyday experience, and urban themes in the totality of their work, which often astounds its audience. Both artists remain committed to the quintessence of ink and brush while creating modernist reforms in the spatial structure and figuration of ink painting. When expressionist ink artists import new cultural symbols into their practice, they stress linear structure and the calligraphic nature of line. On the whole, however, expressionist ink art has gradually unveiled a tendency to a graphological form. To expressionist ink artists, it is compulsory to surmount the canon of traditional ink art in order to achieve total impact and emotional emancipation. Moreover, line in their paintings shows several new aesthetic traits, effectively proving that line is a domain in ink art that demands continuous investigation and that we should not take traditional standards of ink and brush as the only maxims for the evaluation of contemporary ink painting.

4. Inauguration of a New Tradition: The Coalescence of Ink and Color

Most of the expressionist artists mentioned above were disciples of the principle of the supremacy of ink: even if colors was applied in their painting, they never violated the traditional axiom that ink and color must never hinder each other. Nevertheless, other artists have departed from the expression of contemporary visual experience, inheriting Lin Fengmian's (b.1900-1991) new tradition of drawing the extensive use of hue into ink painting when borrowing from Western artistic techniques. Until the mid-1990s there was a number of artists quite distinct in this practice, among them Hai Rihan (b.1958) and Zhu Zhenggeng (b.1939). Although these artists obtained their schema from different sources including folklore, Dunhuang, and the West, and their styles remain distinguishable from each other, they do resemble each other on a certain level: namely, both the deconstruction of the beau ideal of expression in traditional ink art and the turn from a relationship between ink and space to a new relationship between dots,

lines, surfaces, and colors. Furthermore, in emphasizing a miscellany of ink and colors, these artists profoundly transformed the conventional working mode of traditional ink painting, which generally reaches completion at one time; as a result, intense solidity and vigor accumulates in their work. Their artistic experiences demonstrate that when color sets its foot in ink painting on a broad scale, the stable structure composed of xuan paper, Chinese brush, and ink is shattered. Consequently, a new possibility of ink painting is born, a fact of far-reaching significance.

Tian Liming (b.1955) is a painter who indubitably belongs to the genre of expressionist ink art, but his work stands as a case of unique significance for his prodigious techniques, particularly the patches of color that decompose the traditional ink-brush relationship into a visual effect resembling luminous spots. Tian is not an adherent of the line; most of his paintings employ the artistry of the *mogu* method, a technique that largely dispenses with the delineation of contour lines.

5. Unconventional Abstract Ink Art

Traditional ink painting pays careful attention to the use of brush and ink, but, because ink follows the brush, it is the brush of which the most is required. This also means that traditional ink painting has favored the use of line. The greatest contribution of Gu Wenda (b.1955), who began to make a name for himself during the period of the '85 New Wave, has been to separate ink and brush even while continuing to emphasize the use of line, understanding both as independent expressive and aesthetic elements to be used in an expanded way. In terms of technique, such works primarily involved the splashing, pouring, and rinsing of large areas of ink, even using the airbrush in order to mold figurative forms in compositions essentially derived from the surrealism of Salvador Dali. At the time, he hoped to use the concepts of Western modernism to challenge tradition.

Gu Wenda's reforms have brought artists the immense revelation that ink painting can open onto another world of expression by leaving behind the notion of the relationship between ink and brush as the only standard of the picturesque. Later artists like Zhang Yu (b.1959) and Liu Zijian (b.1956) would bring push this kind of thinking to the extreme. They more fully use techniques like blowing, accumulating, breaking, pouring, hard-edged collage, and skin texture, creating a new artistic language of visual aggression and modern consciousness. This kind of language emphasizes the expression of power, speed, and tension, fully meeting the requirements of the modern exhibition space and its aesthetics. Shi Guo (b.1953) goes even further, using xuan paper to cover objects in semi-relief and then making rubbings in order to create surface textures that cannot be achieved with the traditional techniques of the Chinese brush, a way of working that also produces in the composition of the painting an effect of rhythm, light, and shadow rich in layers. In its reception of these artists the art world is divided: some hold that they have expanded the modes of expression of ink painting, while others believe that their work has lost touch with traditional ink expressions and relies more on effects unworthy of promotion.

Of course, not all abstract painters have completely abandoned brushwork; artists like Wang Chuan (b.1953) and Li Huasheng (b.1944) put great effort into expressing a traditional sense of ink and brush in thoroughly abstract structures. Their brushwork, however, vastly exceeds the notion of character in traditional literati painting, gaining an extremely expressive capacity. Liang Quan's (b.1948) artistic practice is obviously a special case within abstract ink in that much of his work is produced through methods of collage, granting primacy to the block such that line is formed through the edges of strips of paper. He thus employs a unique discursive mode to extend and develop tradition, also giving expression to the modern sentiment of the East.

6. On the Formation of Contemporaneity

The question of how ink painting might enter the contemporary has always been worthy of argument. Some believe that new ink painting can complete a massive transformation of language, and that this would in itself constitute a manifestation of contemporaneity. Influenced by this thinking, the work of some new ink painters is increasingly intricate and refined but tends towards formalism, further and further from the concerns of everyday life, and so loses its original vitality. Others maintain that contemporaneity is not limited to originality in style, language, and form but should also include the values of thought and spirit, implying that art should engage in profound consideration of historical and existing social and cultural problems as well as the conditions of human existence. If overturning tradition, transforming language, and airing personal sentiment become the ultimate goals rather than drawing social reform into the context of the reformation of ink painting, we will enter a new closed circle constructed by the concepts of the modernist elite. When modern ink painting arose in the 1980s, it was assimilated into a movement that adopted Western modern art as reference and goal. Even entering an international cultural context of postcolonialism, some ink painters hold that their art manifests a peripheral art of national identity or anti-Eurocentrism, but this cannot hide the fact that some new ink painting is essentially only discursively opposed to traditional ink painting. In light of this, so long as new ink painters hope that their own works bear a sense of the contemporary, they must undergo a new shift in the contemporary cultural context. That is to say, they must exert themselves to must trade obvious modernist discourses of individualism and formalism for public discourses reflecting contemporary cultural realities, thereby also revealing their concern for current reality.

Under the influence of this latter concept, some new ink painters entered into explorations of contemporary culture early on. Painters like Liu Qinghe (b.1961), Li Jin (b.1958), Huang Yihan (b.1963), and Shao Ge (b.1962) have all engaged in successful investigations. Some of them have indeed accomplished the work of transforming language through methods outside of language, as when they focus their concentration on the conditions of metropolitan human existence, consciously shifting the heart of depiction from internal experience to questions of reality and society. This also allows new ink art to move forward in its own progress. Then there is Zhu Xinjian (b.1953), who has always been categorized as a new

literati painter. Some critics even maintain that he indulges in the values of spiritual enlightenment through the aesthetics of the world, as with the traditional appreciation of flowers or the moon, but a close look at his work reveals that it is actually satire and parody of the prevailing lifestyles and values of consumer society. The artists describe here use their works to tell us in very vivid ways that the non-realist nature of ink painting does not affect its ability to use freehand imagery to raise concepts, nor does it affect its ability to manifest the values of concern for social reality. There are also ink painters influenced by Western contemporary art who have attempted to use groups of symbols to raise such concepts, telling us through their choice and management of symbols that the use of symbols to express concepts is equally feasible. Ink is no worse than any other art form, and in fact manifests national identity more easily. The problem is that new ink painters must not only master the historical properties of ink, but also grasp the most valuable questions of contemporary culture.

Experiments with ink in installation work began as early as the late-1980s, leaving us with profound impressions of work like Wang Chuan's *Ink/Point* and Wang Tiande's (b.1960) *Ink Menu*. These two works engage in the structural critique of traditional cultural from different angles, seeking their questions in contemporary culture and therefore extending the space of existence of ink. Today, we can see that work like this has expanded the concept of ink painting into ink art. In this way, ink can be understood not only as a symbol of national identity and ritual, but also as a process of moving from two dimensions to three.

7. Recent Developments

New ink wash has attained tremendous developments since stepping into the new millennium and has gradually obtained attention from academia and scholarly institutions, which has led to an array of important exhibitions¹⁰. As demonstrated by such critical and exploratory exhibitions, new ink art is apparently in a phase of dynamic development and progress. This is why discussions have been stirred up at the current juncture. Compared to the new ink wash of the 1980s, the new ink art of the new century not only stresses interaction with the contemporary moment and everyday life but also accentuates the expression of concepts about and concerns for the living conditions of the human race, gradually also coming to learn from various emerging art forms like installation and video art, and even from non-art territories like advertising and animation. These new areas of focus have greatly expanded the territories of expression in ink wash. Throughout this process, two-dimensional ink painting has ceaselessly motivated its self-transformation and self-extension to a point of completion, while at the same time establishing its influence and position in academia. Meanwhile, the development of multi-dimensional ink painting as a whole has evidently acquired more attention due to the impetus generated by new art methodologies. Artists like Xu Bing (b.1955), Gu Wenda, and Qiu Anxiong (b.1972)--along with many other artists engaged in forms of artistic practice including installation, video, oil painting, sculpture, and performance--boldly merge traditional and Western concepts; traditional and contemporary resources; traditional and Western techniques

in a seamless unity, bringing to ink art many new elements that deserve our earnest scrutiny.

¹ The “new ink wash” mentioned in the essay specifically points to the exploration in ink art after Chinese economic reform (Gaige Kaifang, literally “reform and opening up”) commencing in 1978, it includes variations such as “modern ink wash”, “experimental ink wash”, “avant-garde ink wash” and “contemporary ink wash”.

² Traditional ink painting refers to traditional literati (*wenren*) painting.

³ Realist ink painting refers to the ink art form established by artists including Xu Beihong. The form was strongly advocated by official art institutions and academies after Liberation in 1949 and gradually became a new artistic tradition.

⁴ In light of currently available information, the concept of experimental ink art originated with the second issue of *Guangdong Artists: Special Issue on Modern Ink Art* published in 1993. Although a lucid elaboration of the content of experimental ink wash was absent in the preface of that publication, we discover in the ten artist profiles in the issue that the editors generally referred to “experimental ink art” when speaking of any new ink practice characterized by marginal status. Later, some have narrowed the definition of experimental ink to abstract ink art, which deviates somewhat from the original meaning.

⁵ Including anti-Eurocentrism and the emphasis on ethnic or national identity.

⁶ Yi Ying, “Construction of Meaning,” *Jiangsu Art Monthly*, 1994, Issue 1; Huang Zhuan, “Chinese Modern Ink Painting after 1990s,” *The Lion Art Monthly*, 1993, Issue 9.

⁷ Because there have been great obstacles in the transformation from traditional ink painting to its modern and contemporary forms, modern ink art was relatively isolated and ignored during the 85 New Wave. See, for instance, the paucity of writing on modern ink painting in the volume *Chinese Contemporary Art History 1985-1986*, co-authored by Gao Minglu among others.

⁸ Li Yang, “Categories of Contemporary Chinese Painting,” *Jiangsu Pictorial*, 1996, Issue 1.

⁹ “*Experiments in Tension: 1994 Expressionist Ink Exhibition*”.

¹⁰ Of these, historical retrospectives include “Twenty Years of Experiments in Chinese Ink: 1980-2001,” curated by Pi Daojian and Wang Huangsheng; “Re-Ink: Invitational Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Ink and Wash Painting, 2000-2012,” curated by Lu Hong and Ji Shaofeng; and others. Such exhibitions have played an important role in organizing the historical threads of the development of new ink art and summarizing its historical experience. Critical and exploratory exhibitions, on the other hand, include “Ink/ Contemporary,” curated by Liu Xiaochun; “Reshuffle,” curated by Lu Hong and Sun Zhenhua; and others.