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Exploring Cultural Survival of Chinese Oil Painters in Early 20th Century Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Research Methods

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Abstract

The subject of my research is the local style of the group of Chinese oil painters who stayed in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. This research will be illustrated through two methodologies and approaches: interpretive phenomenology and textual analysis, and ethnography and case study.

1 Reflections on the Phenomenology of Interpretation

The first is a reflection on interpretive phenomenology. Matua(2015,p.6) once wrote in his book that in essence, interpretive phenomenological research results in a detailed interpretation of the meanings and structures of a particular phenomenon as it is experienced first-hand. It is clear from the quotation that interpretative phenomenology requires a detailed explanation of a specific phenomenon. The object of my research is the localisation of the paintings of Chinese oil painters who stayed in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, i.e. the content, structure and symbolic meaning of the artists' output, adding a personal interpretation to this phenomenon, analysing and explaining the causes and significance of the localisation phenomenon, and dissecting the artistic language and its symbolic meaning through the interpretation of the oil painters' creative language, creative forms and creative psychology. Through the interpretation of the creative language, forms and psychology of the artists, the artistic language and its symbolic meaning are dissected.

Here I cite the works of Fang Junbi and Pan Yuliang, representative figures of the group, for illustration. In 1925, Fang Junbi's oil painting of a figure, Portrait of Old Lady Chen (Figure 1), was the cover of a retrospective exhibition of Fang Junbi's 60 years of painting at the Musée de la Senouche in Paris in 1984. Although the painting depicts a modern-day old



Figure 1: Portrait of Old Lady Chen by Fang Junbi(1925)

woman (Wei Yue Lang, mother of Chen Jun Bi), the author deliberately chose her in a Buddhist robe, sitting upright on a futon cushion, thus epitomising the tens of thousands of Buddhist followers in China - and the symbol of "sitting meditation" in the eyes of the West. The image is also a symbol of what Westerners see as the "sitting" of the East. The woman is holding a rosary in her right hand and a sutra in her left, gazing in contemplation, looking serene and absorbed in meditation. In the background, a porcelain incense burner on the left side of the painting is emitting curling smoke, adding to the subtle, esoteric and religious atmosphere of the setting. The plum branches are introduced from the right side of the painting, both as a visual accent in the background and as a metaphor for the stoic and humble character of the figure in the painting.

Pan Yuliang produced a few of oil paintings of figures based on Chinese folk opera and dance in the mid to late 1950s. In this case, Two Dancers(Figure 2) are appropriately elongated, with their soft, boneless, twisting bodies bringing out the curved outer contours



图 114: (左) 潘玉良《双人袖舞》，布面油画，尺寸不详，1955 年。中国美术馆藏。
图 115: (右) 潘玉良《双人舞扇》，布面油画，33x24cm，1955 年。安徽省博物馆藏。

Figure 2: Two Dancers by Pan Yuliang (1955)

and a strong sense of movement. The composition of the figures is also bold and subtle, with the two women interspersed from side to side and echoing up and down, as if they were the two rhythms of the eight trigrams, showing a strong sense of the beauty of Eastern forms. At the same time, the dancers' costumes appear at first glance to have a Matisse-like flat decorative character, yet they are purely Chinese folk patterns. The linear outline of the Chinese painting is incorporated into the oil painting, giving the whole work a strong local Chinese folk character and a joyful atmosphere. The Fan Dance for Two is also typical of Pan Yuliang's work of this period. The composition is very similar to that of Dance with Sleeves, in which two women dance with their fans raised, one behind the other. The whole work is particularly decorative in its colouring, with the author's loose brushwork boldly laying and dabbing the figures' costumes in contrasting colours of red and yellow, and then applying dots of oil paint in various parts of the painting, which are bright and colourful. The rhythm of folklore is immediately apparent. Pan Yuliang seems to understand the dialectical philosophy that "the most vulgar is the most elegant" and has chosen such unique folkloric subjects as "sleeve dance" and "fan dance", which are combined with women's interpretations and assembled into a very The exhibition is a symbol of Chinese "folklore". In this way, they present the local folklore of China. The above examples show that the phenomenon of localisation of Chinese oil painting is diverse and widespread, and that studying this phenomenon can provide some inspiration for my localisation practice.

HPR (Hermeneutical principles for research) demand pathways that value ‘individual’ experience and allow for interpretation in a spiral fashion by respective parties to the research. Revision, experimental application, and testing of these developed principles occurred concurrently within and throughout the pilot.

(Conroy,2003,p.36)

Through my practice of localisation of oil painting, I have seen that Chinese painting is still the dominant form of painting in art events, exhibitions and mainstream thinking in China today, and that the development of oil painting on this basis will also integrate and develop with Chinese cultural characteristics, thus forming the phenomenon of localisation. One hundred years ago, the first artists who stayed in Europe also had traditional Chinese painting in mind. Although the localisation phenomenon was still in its infancy at that time, it is still possible to see the shadow of Chinese local culture through their works, and their beginnings had a very important enlightening effect on the subsequent development of localised Chinese oil painting.

Here is an example of the Shanghainese painting movement to demonstrate the emergence of the phenomenon of the localisation of Chinese oil painting in the early 20th century. The

concept of the "Shanghainese painting movement" comes from the Republican period, i.e. the beginning of the 20th century, as Chen Baoyi's (1942,p.544)"A brief account of the process of the foreign painting movement" puts it: "The inflow of Western painting into our country has been a long time coming. But it was only in the last thirty years or so that the foreign painting movement began in China. And the beginning of the foreign painting movement in Shanghai can also be said to be the beginning of the foreign painting movement in China." The Shanghai Ocean Painting Movement was a series of initiatives implemented by a group of international students who returned from studying in Europe, America and Japan to promote the development of Western painting, which in turn spread throughout China and was a development of the process of changing Chinese art from its classical form to its modern form. In 1930, the newspaper Liangyou(Figure 3) published a serialised column on selected Western Chinese paintings, introducing twelve important Western painters of the time and

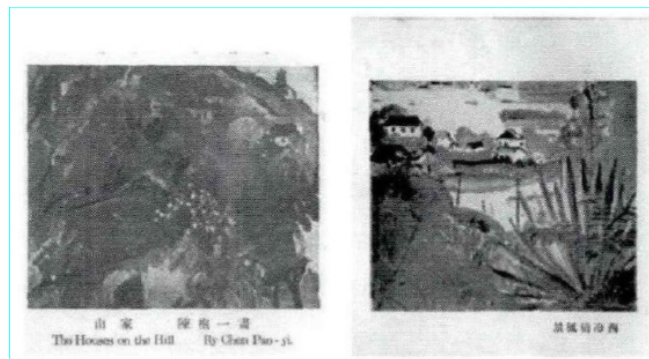


Figure 3: The newspaper Liangyou (1930)

their works. These twelve works were representative of Western painting at the time, and among them were three works that incorporated traditional Chinese subjects into oil painting:

Ni Yide's A Faraway View of Huqiu (Figure 4)combines Chinese natural landscape symbols

with oil painting, expressing a rustic and elegant rhythm; Pan Yuliang's landscape sketch,

By the Qiantang River Pan Yuliang's landscape sketch, By the Qiantang River(Figure 4),

incorporates elements of Chinese landscape scenery and draws on the characteristics of

Impressionism, reflecting the beauty of the fusion of the two arts; Huang Chao-kuan's

Autumn in the Old City(Figure 4) blends traditional architectural landscape symbols with



Figure 4: From left to right A Faraway View of Huqiu by Ni Yide、 the Qiantang River by

Pan Yuliang、 Autumn in the Old City by Huang Chao-kuan (1930)

expressive oil painting, using colour and brushwork in a steady and rounded manner. It can be seen that when oil painting was first introduced to China in the early 20th century, the development of localisation had already begun, and each of the artists in the group was an individual with 'personal' experience, but they were all constantly exploring and progressing along the path of localisation.

In making these connections, there is an opportunity to theoretically frame interpretive phenomenological research utilizing Heideggerian concepts such as lived experience, everyday ordinariness, Dasein, being in the world, being with, encounters with entities, temporality, and the care structure. From this vantage point, there is an opportunity to explicate one of the key goals within Heidegger's philosophy, which is exposing the meaning of everyday ordinary human existence.

(Horrigan-Kelly, 2016).

The connection between the artist and the work of art is closely related, and the production of a work of art is closely linked to the painter's artistic experience, as the quote says lived experience, everyday ordinariness, etc. Here is an example of the Chinese oil painter

Changyu, who studied in France in the early 20th century, to illustrate. As a young boy from a well-off family, Changyu went to Paris in 1919 as part of a work-study programme in

France. Changyu once lamented his early life of ease: Once upon a time I was comfortable living alone and didn't need to have a family. One could paint and play as much as one liked, one was at ease and did not feel lonely.(1995,p.39) As can be seen in his early works 'Bouquet of Roses' (Figure 5)and 'Birds and Bonsai'(Figure 6), the overall colour palette of white and



Figure 5: Bouquet of Roses for Changyu(1929)

pink gives a warm and soft feeling of deep dreaminess, with a subtle balance of form and colour to create the most harmonious atmosphere in a simple, uncomplicated way. It was not until his middle age that a change in his family caused him to go from being a wealthy man to being penniless in an instant and life was difficult. The hardships of his later years led him to



Figure 6: Birds and Bonsai of Changyu, 1940s)

accept an invitation to teach in Taiwan, China, a change of heart from his earlier years. But Changyu's weariness and refusal to cooperate with painters and his contempt for money are recorded in Pang Kaun-ling's recollections of :

"I witnessed many times when Changyu was surrounded by people wanting to buy his line drawings of figures, and he gave them away while refusing the money people gave him. He was approached by painters who wanted his paintings, but he refused them all. From time to time he was invited to dinner, and for dinner he did not refuse, and this is probably how he lived in Paris for over ten years Changyu once warned me, 'Never fall for a dealer's trick'. When people asked him to paint their portraits, he made three agreements: first, pay up front, second, don't look at the painting while it is being painted, and third, take the painting and leave without making such and such comments. If you agree to these conditions, you will paint, otherwise you will not paint."

(Pang Kaun-ling, 1988, p.84-85)

Such an attitude to life made his financial situation even more difficult, so when one looks at Changyu's works in his later years, they mostly show the bleak landscape with its ancient roads, or the yellow sandy roads with no one in sight. In the painting, there is only the tiny, lonely animal in the vast, empty sky, and the viewer can feel the loneliness and desolation of this wanderer in his old age. The above examples show that Changyu's life and artistic experiences directly influenced his creations and are directly reflected in his artworks.

While this methodology can provide valuable insights into the nature of subjective experience, there are also several limitations that should be considered: One limitation of the phenomenological approach in art-related research is its subjective nature, as noted by Watanabe (2021). Watanabe argues that phenomenology may not provide a complete understanding of the experience of art, as subjective experience is inherently individual and difficult to generalize. For example, in a study of the experience of viewing a specific artwork, participants may have vastly different experiences based on their personal background, culture, and previous experiences with art. Additionally, Watanabe notes that the phenomenological approach may be limited by the researcher's own biases and assumptions, which can influence the interpretation of data. This highlights the need for multiple perspectives and approaches in art-related research, beyond the phenomenological approach.

(Watanabe, K, 2021, p.69-74)

Overall, while the phenomenological method can provide valuable insights into the nature of subjective experience, it is important to recognize its limitations and use it in conjunction with methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being studied. In phenomenology I focus on the method of textual analysis. This is applied in the following way: the Chinese painters who stayed in Europe left behind many letters, diaries and manifestos that provide insights into their artistic intentions, influences and techniques. These texts are analysed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the artists' work and the wider artistic movements in which they were involved. Secondly, when viewing the exhibition, an analysis of the exhibition catalogue and museum labels providing contextual information about the artworks, including the biographies of the artists, the historical and cultural context in which the works were created, and the materials and techniques used, enables a better understanding of the social context in which they were created.

2 Reflections on Ethnography

The second is a reflection on ethnography. Creswell, J.W. (2007) said ethnography is a qualitative design in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group. The cultural group I am studying is the Chinese oil painters who stayed in Europe in the early 20th century. From the quotation, I know that the findings of the qualitative ethnographic research method are cultural descriptions, in which my understanding of culture is a collection of ideas, behavioural habits, representative figures and activities derived from them that have developed over a long period of time. The Chinese social environment at the beginning of the 20th century was in a period of transition, and various trends of thought emerged accordingly.

Many outstanding oil painters who studied in Europe emerged during this period, such as Zao

Wou-ki, Changyu and Pan Yuliang, who borrowed from Western oil painting and blended

it with traditional Chinese painting, thus forming the characteristics of an oil painting style with a sense of localisation. Here, for example, the oil painting Landscape (Figure 7) by the painter Qiu Di in the 1930s. The 'zigzag' composition of the painting draws the viewer's eye to the distant landscape like a landscape painting, while the dark trunk of a tree in the close up scene conforms to the traditional composition of a landscape painting, and the painting has the decorative character of traditional Chinese brush painting. In addition, Liang Bai Bo's oil painting Portrait of a Women (Figure 7) incorporates the traditional Chinese figure of a lady, with her features and contours concealed in the articulation of colour, and the vividness



Figure 7: From left to right Landscape by Qiu Di(1930) Portrait of a Women by Liang Bai Bo(1935)

and elegance of the figure, which is based on the traditional painting of a lady. Zhang Yin is one of the few painters in the Declan Society who uses the brush to create oil paintings, such as his oil painting Portrait of a Man, which depicts a female figure with Chinese characteristics, using lines to outline her features and then applying colour, with a very strong localised character.

No longer simply viewed as the objects of study, the perspectives of these rational (native) actors provided the materials for developing relativist doctrines, which advocated for an internal logic underlying each culture, thus exposing the prejudicial nature of evaluative statements regarding evolutionary stages and/or degrees of morality.

(Kwame Harrison, 2018)

The focus of my research is on localisation, not only in terms of the analysis of the artists' works and achievements, but also in terms of the impact of the social context, ideological trends and economic development of the early twentieth century on the artist community, in order to provide supporting evidence for the analysis of localisation and to make the research more convincing. Here I illustrate the background to the 20th century wave of expatriation to demonstrate the necessary connection between the intrinsic causes of localisation and its

context. In the beginning of the 20th century, against the historical background of the Xinhai Revolution and the May Fourth New Culture Movement, and amidst the stirring social and cultural trend of "aesthetic education", a large number of Chinese students travelled to the European continent to study Western art. The European continent was the birthplace of Western painting, unlike the early days when Western painting techniques and concepts were indirectly introduced from Japan. As Pan Tianshou put it:

Since the post-Gwang and Xuan, to the early years of the Republic, the power of Western painting in the Middle Kingdom began to rise gradually. ""Because of this, there was a tendency for young people in China to directly and thoroughly pursue European and Western painting"" "The number of people who went directly to Europe to study Western painting was increasing, so that there were people in England, America, Italy and France, so it could be said to have flourished.

(Pan Tianshou,1983,p.294)

It is clear from Pan Tianshou's words that China was hoping to use these students to discover the essence of Western painting directly from the art treasures of the West since the Renaissance. These students were thus charged with the task of enlightening the country's 'new art'. Using Western art as an impetus to touch and deconstruct tradition, they were able to build up a new humanistic ideology and artistic spirit. History proves that those who went abroad to study oil painting, such as Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, Lin Fengmian and Wu Dayu, were instrumental in establishing the development, education and dissemination of modern Western painting in China.

In Kwame Harrison's ethnographic qualitative study, he had this to say :

As a consequence of ethnocentrism—that is, the tendency for all people to position their own cultural beliefs and practices at the center of their worldview (i.e., to see them as “normal”)—native members of a cultural group are at times blind to many of the most salient aspects of their lifeways. Thus, a flexible and situated position somewhere between an insider and outsider is typically upheld as ideal.

(Kwame Harrison, 2018)

In my research, there is a similarity between the group of artists I am studying and my cultural beliefs and practices, i.e. having the same cultural background and practising oil painting. As the quote states, the researcher's 'flexible and situated position between insider and outsider is often considered ideal'. My relevance to the group of early twentieth-century Chinese Europeans reflects both the insider relationship and the fact that we are in different positions in different times, i.e. different positions and perspectives depending on the context of the

time. Through a case study approach, I will select typical examples from the group of Chinese oil painters, identify the localised elements within them, put aside the discussion of the various styles of oil painting and cut straight to the study of the language of oil painting itself.

The ethnographic methodology also has some limitations: The researcher's presence and participation may influence the behavior and experiences of those being studied, potentially altering the data obtained. One limitation of the ethnographic approach in art-related research is the potential for the researcher's presence and participation to influence the behavior of those being studied, as noted by Phillips (2019). Phillips argues that the ethnographic approach in art museums can be challenging due to the presence of visitors, as researchers' presence can affect the behavior and experiences of visitors and museum staff. For example, a researcher conducting an ethnographic study of visitor experiences in a museum may inadvertently influence the visitors' behavior, such as their interactions with the artwork or their engagement with the museum staff. Additionally, the researcher's personal biases and assumptions may affect their interpretation of the data. This highlights the need for reflexivity and transparency in ethnographic research in order to minimize potential biases and acknowledge the limitations of the approach.

(Phillips, 2019,p.125-146)

In ethnography I mainly use the case study method of research. By focusing on artworks, artists or foreign painting movements that were produced in the context of China's early 20th century exodus, the case study method in the ethnographic approach can be used to study art history. The ethnographic method involves conducting fieldwork and participant observation, which can be applied to art historical research by scrutinising the social, cultural and historical factors that influenced the production of art. In addition to this, the study of representative figures within groups through the case study method can involve detailed

analysis of individual works such as Changyu's Curved Nude Woman and Pan Yuliang's

Self-Portrait, examining the localised phenomena behind the works and revealing insights into the cultural, social and political forces that shaped the artworks. Overall, the use of a case study approach within an Ethnographic methodology can provide a rich and nuanced understanding of localisation studies by exploring the complex relationships between artworks, artists and their cultural, social and historical contexts.

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