



# The continuity of tradition in reshaping contemporary Chinese art forms

Lin Yan<sup>1,a</sup>, Caoyang Kang<sup>2,b</sup>, Xi Liu<sup>c\*</sup>, Zhijiao Wang<sup>d\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Leeds, England, UK

<sup>2</sup>Zhejiang University of Technology, Hangzhou, China

<sup>3</sup>University College London, London, UK

<sup>4</sup>Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

<sup>a</sup>2360919540@qq.com, <sup>b</sup>2757122973@qq.com

<sup>c\*</sup>wellington589125@gmail.com, <sup>d\*</sup>lingwadesu@gmail.com

**Abstract.** The study concerns the diminishing inheritance of Chinese traditional art practices in our modern age, it considers the significance of tradition and its continuity through time, place, and people. In the ever-revolving age of contemporary art practices, the heritage of ancient art reshapes modern approach towards art and design. Hence, the study proposes a question of: To what extent does traditional challenges and reshape contemporary Chinese art forms? It aims to examine the in the preservation of traditional cultures and aesthetics into contemporary approaches to art prices and design. Therefore, it highlights the ambivalent relationship in the continuity of tradition though a critical analysis in realms of Chinese ink painting, architecture, and sculptures.

**Keywords:** contemporary art, Chinese art, traditional culture, aesthetics

## 1 Introduction

In the modern world, people have always had a very special resonance to traditional culture, and today there is an increasing amount of discussion about the hybridity of modern design art and traditional culture. The perfect combination of these elements has become an important issue for artist, architects, and designers on how to use contemporary art thinking and regional and national cultural traditions to establish a multicultural pattern[1]; how to use traditional modelling art to present modern spiritual concepts to create contemporary Chinese design culture will be the social ideal and social responsibility given to modern designers by the rapidly developing society.

## 2 Reshaping contemporary art practice through ancient Chinese painting

A continuity in tradition can be manifested in Chinese painting; the utilization of traditional Chinese painting aesthetics as a source of creativity, exemplified in linework's

© The Author(s) 2023

E. Marino et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2023 5th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2023)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 806,

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-170-8\\_35](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-170-8_35)

and use of color. There are four primary components within traditional Chinese painting, poetry, calligraphy, painting and printing, each with its distinct artistic expressions that collides to construct an abundance and enriches the drawing plane, conveying a pleasure visual viewing experience[2].

Linework is the most prominent aspects of traditional Chinese painting, such it influences the stylistic qualities of the painting[1]. The expression of linework is an inner trajectory in the subjective consciousness of the artist, where the form is manifested through the treatment of lines. Treatment within the composition of linework; intersecting moments of lines; and the thickness of line weights institutes a dynamism and expression in the design. As exemplified in ancient artist Xie He's book 'The Record of the Classification of Old Painters', he highlights its vivid depiction of the landscape through six fundamental principles, utilizing line construct forms[3].

As exemplified in 'The Night Revels of Han Xizai, the artist's bold expressive use of contemporary colours to enhance the three-dimensional qualities of the depicted object, constructing a harmonious atmosphere within the picture plane. In the painting, the artist incorporates red ribbons to interrupt the cool toned atmosphere; the subdued dull clothing worn by the figure and full furniture creates dramatic contrast with the bright clothing on the servants[4]. The artist constructs a dynamic presentation of the scenery with verifying choices of colours; clothing as one can the artist's intended choices of depiction to transcend though time and place.

Traces of ancient ink painting can be identified within contemporary art practices approaches to reinforce the level of expression and richness, as explicitly exemplified in the film 'Shadow', directed by Zhang Yimou. In his extensive adaptation of monochrome atmosphere of the film, reflecting the aesthetic values of Chinese ink painting, where the negative space are intended for the viewer's interpretation and imaginative minds. The monochrome approach future institutes a dramatic contrast within the viewing experience, creating a compelling manifestation in the atmosphere qualities of the film. It denotes a sensation of calmness, reminiscent and transparency; hence scrutinizes a harmonious atmosphere that convey the inherited Chinese culture embedded within ink painting[3]. Through incorporating element of traditional ink painting aesthetic within the contemporary film production, it provides a discourse into past, and an introduction of the knowledge system accumulated through thousand of year into our modern time[5].

Moreover, stylistic qualities of ancient Chinese painting are also adopted in contemporary design approaches. Element of mountains, water, clouds, rocks and its composition constitute an important aspect the picture plane; it converts into an artist manifestation of abstraction and intangibility. These components are Implemented in architectural landscaping, to magnify the cultural inheritance of culture and history and reshape and redefine contemporary art practices[5].

### **3 Reconstruction and depiction of spatial qualities through Vernacular architecture**

Psychologists suggests that the key to recognizing and understanding the environment lies in the ability to recreate in memory the image of the spatial environment. In the historical process of the development of traditional culture, literature, art, architecture, and other forms of art are interconnected in terms of spatial imagery, and all focus on conveying emotions through context[6]. Traditional design culture also emphasizes the exaggeration and omission of the written form for the purpose of conveying the spirit; the structural state of the expression of space to highlight the continuity and hierarchy of the space; and the subtlety and timelessness of the form to bring out the sequence of the space with its profound connotations. By experiencing traditional spatial imagery, we can more accurately grasp the connotations of traditional design culture and gradually digest and innovate in the process to create new modern artworks with a traditional cultural core. It is therefore worth exploring how to reflect and reconstruct the spatial imagery of traditional design culture in modern art and design[7].

Vernacular architecture can be considered ad a carrier of culture and historical heritage, and it reshapes and reconstruct contemporary architecture. In architect Leoh Ming Pei's architectural treatment of the Suzhou Museum, he adopts courtyard methodology in the composition of building layout, with its white-walled façade, and traditional elements interspersed and embellished, dominating the visual focus of the space and providing a strong sense of unity[8]. The movement of the sunlight on the ground and walls through the modern steel mesh frame constructs a metaphor for the 'shadows of the balustrade' and 'shadows of the flowers on the pink walls' that resonates in landscape of Suzhou gardens. The modern expression of traditional cultural connotations has a modern simplicity and a traditional flavour. In the entire interior environment, the image of national cultural origins is also highlighted through the sense of historical continuity and regional heritage, and the spiritual connotations of traditional culture are further enriched and expanded[7].

The overall character of the building is very strong. In this way we can see the understanding of the interior design of Chinese Jiangnan architecture and the clever use of materials, technology, scale and techniques derived from the stylistic qualities of vernacular architecture[1]. The abstract quality of modern art is sought in the collision by finding the contrast and commonality of space. The building has evolved into an emotional resonance that fits well with the space. The building not only brings out its ethnic flavor to the forefront but also the simplicity and stylistic qualities of modern architectural space. The placement of the classical garden.

The natural atmosphere of the building is brought into the interior through borrowing views of the classical Suzhou gardens and Jiangnan dwellings. The layout has been carefully arranged to reconfigure the physical and virtual spaces; the artistic manifestation of the physical and virtual spaces refines the traditional forms, the traditional forms are refined and processed so that they evoke simplicity, thus giving a new interpretation, and meaning to the traditional architecture[9].

Moreover, the regeneration of traditional building materials is a combination of practicality and art, and the eventual formation of any design form is the result of people

using materials and improving technology over time. With the rapid changes in society, some traditional materials have lost their meaning in modern design as they have become unsuitable for the ever-changing demands of life. However, traditional materials such as brick, wood and stone are still irreplaceable and important in sustaining people's cultural ties and cultural heritage with their nature memories and sense of place. Traditional materials such as wooden structures, bricks, tiles and porcelain can be felt everywhere[10]. The perfect combination of traditional materials and modern materials conveys the continuity of history and culture into reshaping contemporary architecture.

In contemporary art practices, we need to take the traditional design cultural structure as the centerpiece and use the three-dimensional language of modern spatial composition through sound, language, and movement, using modern design concepts, techniques, and materials, with a little metaphor or exaggeration to combine, simplify and refine, then use modern techniques to break up and reconstruct to form a new form of space. In terms of culture, the space reflects traditional culture and has a strong contemporary flavor[11].

#### **4 Ancient sculptural form and its influence on contemporary art making**

Sculpture, as defined in dictionaries, is a multifaceted art form that engages with the physicality of space and matter, employing both additive and subtractive processes. This double entendre within the term 'sculpture' encapsulates its dual nature: it is both the act of carving or chiseling away material to reveal a form, as in stone or wood, and the process of modeling or assembling, where material is added, as in clay or bronze casting[10]. This dichotomy is reflected in the rich tapestry of global sculptural traditions. Ancient Chinese sculpture, for instance, is renowned for its vividness, emphasis on resemblance, and playful simplicity. Unlike the classical Greek paradigm that pursued the replication of idealized human forms and divine figures in pursuit of perfection, Chinese sculpture tended to favor the construction of spiritual resonance and atmospheric presence in its subjects[9].

The ancient Chinese approach was not to merely replicate or imagine but to integrate emotion and physicality in a harmonious dance of form and line. This integration is particularly evident in the religious sculptures from the Sui and Tang dynasties, where Buddha statues were rendered with garments flowing as naturally as a 'Wu belt in the wind', a phrase indicative of the graceful movement and fabric in the wind. Here, the sculptures achieved a dynamic beauty, capturing the essence of human and spiritual form in a manner that was both intimate and profound. Moving into the decorative intricacies, ancient Chinese sculpture, such as the Shang dynasty bronzes, exhibited a mastery of round carving and high relief in shallow depths, showcasing a decorative beauty that was three-dimensional and laden with symbolic meaning. The sculptures from this period often carried intense decorative elements, interweaving ethnicity and spirituality, bursting with a narrative power that transcended purely religious iconography[11].

Such sculptures were not just objects of admiration but also served as a narrative medium, authentically conveying the stories and values of the culture from which they arose. The regular and meticulous graphic designs allowed for a true expression of the artisan's message, enhancing the artistic appeal and creating a bridge between the viewer and the ancient narratives depicted[12].

In contemporary times, the legacy of ancient Chinese sculpture has found resonance in modern design, particularly in commercial products[10]. The Forbidden City Taobao series is a testament to how sculptural elements can be transposed into everyday objects such as books, bookmarks, mugs, and brooches. These items preserve the essence of traditional form and decorative beauty, embedding intricate graphic patterns into the fabric of popular culture. Modern design has embraced these archetypes, not merely copying them but reinterpreting them through a contemporary lens. It acknowledges the profound aesthetic and cultural values embodied in ancient Chinese sculpture while applying modern design principles[11]. The result is a modern design art imbued with national characteristics, reflecting the rich cultural heritage and possessing high artistic and aesthetic value.

The progression of art is invariably influenced by the prevailing aesthetics, socio-historical context, and technological advancements of the times. Today, as we find ourselves in an era of rapid change and cultural exchange, the application and reinterpretation of traditional sculptural forms continue to evolve. The spiritual connotations and symbolic meanings carried by these forms are the culmination of a long history, a testament to the enduring human need to express, communicate, and connect through the silent yet profound language of sculpture. In this interplay between the ancient and the modern[13], we find a dynamic and continuous dialogue, one that not only preserves the past but also propels it into the future. As such, the ancient Chinese sculptural forms, when adapted into modern design, do more than just serve a decorative purpose; they carry forward a narrative of cultural identity and heritage, allowing it to be appreciated anew by contemporary audiences worldwide. This evolution of sculpture, from ancient carvings to modern-day artifacts, reflects a broader narrative of human creativity and the ways in which we strive to make sense of our world through the shaping of materials, both tangible and intangible[14].

## 5 Conclusion

The interplay between tradition and modernity in contemporary Chinese art forms is a complex and dynamic process. It involves not just the preservation of traditional methods and motifs, but their transformation and recontextualization within modern practices. For example, Zhu Wei utilizes traditional fine-brush techniques and xuan paper from classical ink painting, modernizing these elements by incorporating his website and gallery information into the traditional red seals on his paintings. Qiu Deshu has developed a technique called "fissuring" where he tears xuan paper to reveal the canvas beneath, thus exploring the inversion of traditional ink painting composition.

In the realm of architecture, the integration of historic elements with new designs is evident. For instance, the design of a project in Hainan used a contrast between old

volcanic stone walls and a new steel and wood tensile space structure to symbolize the transformation of Hainan from a traditional island to an international free trade port<sup>2</sup>. Tahoe Qingyun Town's architecture<sup>[13]</sup>, with its reinterpretation of the roof and facade design elements from the Song Dynasty, melds historic aesthetics with modern construction methods, such as the use of steel structures and triangular supports<sup>3</sup>. The Mountain House in Mist by Shulin Architectural Design exemplifies a spatial dialogue with the local community, integrating traditional communal spaces with modern design to create a semi-transparent atmosphere using sun panels. Similarly, in sculpture, artists are engaging with traditional themes and techniques while incorporating contemporary concerns and aesthetics. For instance, Xu Lele, a member of the School of New Scholar Painting, revives the tradition of scholar painting by using historical techniques and combining them with contemporary life, demonstrating a modern approach to a classical form.

This synthesis is not merely additive; it represents a deep systematic approach that merges traditional Chinese cultural symbols, forms, and materials with contemporary artistic expressions<sup>[12]</sup>. Such strategies create new objects that maintain a dialogue with the past while innovating within the present's temporal and spatial coordinates. This creates a blend of tradition and modernity, shaping a unique and evolving artistic landscape that is distinctly Chinese yet universal in its appeal and significance.

## References

1. Zhang Daoyi. *The Complete Book of Industrial Design* [ M ] . Nanjing: Jiangsu Science and Technology Press.1994.
2. Zhang Fuya, Zhang Jianjun. *A journey of traditional crafts* [ M ] . Shenyang: Liaoning Art Publishing House, 2001. Shenyang: Liaoning Art Publishing House, 2001.
3. Liang Sicheng. *The Collected Works of Liang Sicheng* [ C ] . Beijing: China Construction Industry Press.1982.
4. Li Yu. *Leisurely sentiments* [ M ] . Chengdu :Sichuan Dictionary Press, 1995.
5. Xu Hengol. *Practical technical aesthetics* [ M ] . Tianjin: Tianjin Science and Technology Press.1995.
6. Wang Guowei. *Words of the Human World* [ C ] . Beijing: People's University of China Press.2005.
7. Gaylord von Bohm. *I.M. Pei on I.M. Pei* [ M ] . Lin Bing, translator. Shanghai: Wenhui Publishing House, 2004.
8. Wang Shouzhi. *The Chinese in the Bone* [ M ] . Harbin: Heilongjiang Fine Arts Harbin: Heilongjiang Fine Arts Publishing House, 2004.
9. Wang, W., & Wang, F. (2015). An Application and Study of Chinese Traditional Culture in Modern Art. *Asian Social Science*, 11(28). Retrieved from <https://ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ass/article/view/1080>
10. Melbourne. (2022). Exhibition highlights the influence of traditional cultural and artistic practices in contemporary Chinese culture. *ArtDaily*. Retrieved from [https://www.artdaily.com/index.asp?int\\_sec=11&int\\_new=144667](https://www.artdaily.com/index.asp?int_sec=11&int_new=144667)
11. Hearn, M. K. (2015). *How to Read Chinese Paintings*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. ISBN: 978-0300141877.

12. Ledderose, L. (2015). *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*. Princeton University Press. ISBN: 978-0691169683.
13. Wu Hung. (2016). *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History*. Thames & Hudson. ISBN: 978-0500239331.
14. Clark, H., & Wang, Q. (2017). Fashion in Contemporary Chinese Art. *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 4(2/3), 353-370.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

