



# Breaking, Establishing, and Practicing: Exploring the National Flavor in Wu Guanzhong's Art Through *Where Does the Soul Reside*

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**Abstract.** At the end of the 20th century, the field of Chinese art faced a dual dilemma: the rigidity of traditional ink painting conventions and the failure of Western oil painting's localization. The criteria for defining artistic nationality and its realization paths became core academic issues. In his work *Where Does the Soul Reside: Random Thoughts on National Flavor in Art*, Wu Guanzhong proposed a central question: When creative materials and techniques are no longer exclusive, how should the national characteristics of art be defined and manifested? Based on this, this paper innovatively adopts a logical framework of breaking, establishing, and practicing to systematically analyze Wu Guanzhong's complete theoretical system of artistic nationalization. Breaking aims to eliminate three cognitive fallacies—theme determinism, material determinism and cultural isolationism to clear ideological obstacles in the process of nationalization. Establishing focuses on setting two core principles: artistic conception as the soul and true emotion as the root, anchoring the spiritual core of nationalization. Practicing realizes the connection between theory and practice through the creative methodology of "a kite never far from its string." Taking *Where Does the Soul Reside* as the core text, this paper combines Wu Guanzhong's academic discussions and creative practices to deeply analyze the internal logical connections of his breaking-establishing-practicing system, revealing the essential abode of national flavor in art. It provides a new academic perspective and reference paradigm for theoretical research and practical exploration of contemporary artistic nationalization.

**Keywords:** Wu Guanzhong; artistic nationalization; breaking-establishing-practicing; artistic conception; true emotion; a kite never far from its string

## 1 Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, one of the core propositions of Chinese art was how to construct an artistic system with both national characteristics and modernity amid the impact of Western artistic trends and the rigidity of traditional artistic conventions. Traditional ink painting lost its innovative vitality due to excessive emphasis on

brush and ink conventions. Although Western oil painting had been introduced for a century, it failed to shake off the label of foreign techniques and had obvious estrangement from national aesthetic habits and cultural contexts. Against this background, Wu Guanzhong, with his cross-cultural academic background and creative experience, conducted systematic reflections on the proposition of artistic nationalization. In his work *Where Does the Soul Reside: Random Thoughts on National Flavor in Art*, he directly addressed the core with a sharp question: "Creative materials and techniques are not patented, and no one has the right to monopolize them. Where, then, are the national characteristics of art displayed, hidden, or latent?"<sup>[1]</sup> (Wu, 1998, p4-5)

Wu Guanzhong's reflections were not isolated theoretical discussions but were based on his profound academic accumulation and creative practice. He received systematic Chinese and Western art education in his early years, deeply understanding the spirit of brush and ink in traditional Chinese painting and having a thorough grasp of the formal aesthetics of Western modern painting. In decades of creation and teaching after returning to China, he always explored the integration of Chinese and Western art. He refused to equate nationalization with the reproduction of traditional forms or the transplantation of Western techniques, instead striving to explore the spiritual core of national art. Existing studies mostly focus on interpreting individual views of Wu Guanzhong, such as "brush and ink equal zero" and "a kite never far from its string," or conduct case studies on his creative practice. They lack systematic integration and logical sorting of his nationalization theory. As concentrated expression of his nationalization theory, *Where Does the Soul Reside: Random Thoughts on National Flavor in Art* is not a simple statement of views but implies an inherent logical thread of breaking, establishing, and practicing. This paper innovatively refines the logical framework of breaking-establishing-practicing, reconstructs Wu Guanzhong's scattered ideas in a systematic way, clarifies the internal logic of his artistic nationalization theory through in-depth analysis of these three dimensions, and further answers the core question he raised: Where exactly does the national characteristics of art reside?

## 2 What to Break

Wu Guanzhong believed that the primary prerequisite for artistic nationalization is to "break the old," that is, to eliminate the fallacies that have long constrained artistic creation and theoretical cognition. These fallacies either equate national characteristics with the nationalization of surface forms, bind artistic value to specific tools and materials, or misunderstand cultural inheritance as closed isolation. Essentially, they are one-sided interpretations of the connotation of nationalization, leading nationalization practice into the misunderstandings of formalism or conservatism.

### 2.1 Theme Determinism

Theme determinism is the most common fallacy in the cognition of artistic nationalization. Its core view holds that works naturally possess nationality as long as they adopt traditional Chinese themes, such as historical figures, landscapes, flowers and birds, and

classical literary narratives. This view manifested in two extremes in 20th-century art practice: one is expressing Chinese themes with Western techniques, attempting to cover up the foreign nature of techniques through the nationality of themes; the other is adhering to the binding of traditional themes and traditional techniques, regarding the inheritance of themes as the sole proof of nationality. In *Where Does the Soul Reside*, Wu Guanzhong criticized this fallacy with two groups of cases: "Delacroix's *The Barque of Dante* is a Western painting. If we use his technique to depict Qu Yuan on the Miluo River, how should we distinguish its nationality? Works such as Lang Shining's birds and beasts, and Li Yishi's *The Song of Everlasting Regret* all endow Chinese styles by adopting Chinese themes. However, from the analysis of the language of plastic art itself, they have no new ideas and cannot be regarded as high-level Western painting techniques" (Wu, 1998, p4-5). Lang Shining's *Eight Horses* took the traditional Chinese theme of eight horses but completely adopted the realistic techniques of Western classical oil painting. The horse figures emphasized anatomical structure and light and shadow perspective, and brush and ink became tools for realism, lacking the charm of "expressing spirit through form" and the agility of "conveying emotion through brush and ink" in traditional Chinese painting. Its so-called national style only stayed at the superficial transplantation of themes, and the core of its artistic language still belonged to the Western classical realistic system, having nothing to do with the "artistic conception" and "vital energy" pursued by Chinese national aesthetics. Similarly, Li Yishi's *The Song of Everlasting Regret Paintings* had similar problems. With the literary narrative of Bai Juyi's *The Song of Everlasting Regret* as the clue, the work adopted Western sketch and watercolor techniques. The figure modeling and composition logic followed the principles of Western realistic painting. Although the theme was taken from classical Chinese literature and attempted to convey nationality through narrative content, from the perspective of the essential language of plastic art, it neither achieved the high-level application of Western realistic techniques nor integrated the spiritual core of traditional Chinese painting. Wu Guanzhong pointed out that although such works attempted the possibility and necessity of integrating Chinese and Western art, they confused the boundary between theme shell and national core, leading nationality to become a formal label. The formation of national characteristics is shaped by living environments such as long-term historical and geographical limitations. It is an aesthetic habit, emotional resonance, and spiritual trait deeply rooted in the national cultural gene, rather than a simple choice of theme. If nationality is judged only by theme, then depicting Qu Yuan with Western techniques is essentially the same as painting *Mona Lisa* with Chinese brush and ink: both are superficial misunderstandings of nationalization.

## 2.2 Material Determinism

Different from theme determinism which focuses on the surface of content, material determinism binds the evaluation criteria of nationality to creative tools, becoming a deep cognitive fallacy in the field of traditional Chinese painting. Its core view equates the nationality of Chinese painting with the use of the "four treasures of the study": brush, ink, paper, and inkstone, holding that brush and ink are the bottom line of

Chinese painting. Without brush and ink, it is not Chinese painting, let alone nationality. This view triggered a cross-century art debate in the 1990s. In *Brush and Ink Equal Zero*, Wu Guanzhong clearly refuted: "Isolated brush and ink divorced from specific paintings have no value" and "Brush and ink are only servants, absolutely enslaved to the expression of the artist's thoughts and emotions. As thoughts and emotions develop, the methods of brush and ink, as servants, are constantly changing their forms, with no way to consider what form they will present"<sup>[2]</sup> (Wu, 2010, p44-45). As creative tools, the value of brush and ink only exists in the process of serving the work's thoughts and emotions. If divorced from the artist's thoughts and emotions and the overall artistic conception of the work, no matter how exquisite the brush and ink techniques are, they are just meaningless technical displays and cannot form the national core of art. In *Where Does the Soul Reside*, he further explained: "For example, coarse pottery, rice paper, brush, and ink still retain their vitality, but their vitality only resides in the evolution of the works they serve" (Wu, 1998, p4-5). The value of materials depends on the spiritual connotation of the work, not the other way around.

Wu Guanzhong's creative practice was a direct refutation of material determinism. His 1998 oil painting on canvas *Hometown Nostalgia* (Fig. 1) adopted Western oil painting materials but abandoned the heavy light and shadow modeling of Western oil painting. With concise lines and soft color blocks, it depicted a rural scene full of Eastern poetry. The blank space processing and the flexible rhythm of lines in the painting conveyed the ethereal and distant artistic conception of traditional Chinese painting. The emotion of hometown nostalgia was expressed through the integration of Chinese and Western forms. Nationality was not weakened by the Western nature of materials, but strengthened by the national characteristics of emotions. The academic value of this "brush and ink debate" went far beyond the superficial discussion of "whether brush and ink have value." By breaking material determinism, Wu Guanzhong elevated the evaluation criteria of artistic nationality from the tool level to the spiritual level. Whether it is oil painting canvas or rice paper, oil painting pigment or ink, as long as it can carry the nation's emotions and artistic conception, it is an effective carrier of nationalization.



**Fig. 1.** Wu, G. Z. (1998). *Hometown Nostalgia* [Oil on canvas]. Private collection.

### 2.3 Cultural Isolationism

After eliminating the cognitive fallacies at the theme and material levels, Wu Guanzhong further criticized cultural isolationism which hindered the process of nationalization. The core view of this conservative fallacy holds that to maintain the purity of national art, it is necessary to exclude the influence of Western art. Chinese and Western paintings should keep a distance or even not interfere with each other; otherwise, it is "forgetting one's ancestors" or "worshipping foreign things." In *Where Does the Soul Reside*, Wu Guanzhong pointed out that the root of this view is "long-term aggression and discrimination in modern times, which aroused self-respect through inferiority." Guarding national characteristics through isolation is essentially a mentality of covering up cultural inferiority with cultural self-respect, regarding national art as a closed pure breed, which violates the historical law of art constantly absorbing and creating. Wu Guanzhong took Pan Tianshou's theory of "keeping a distance between Chinese and Western paintings" as an example for analysis: "Pan Tianshou said that Chinese and Western paintings should keep a distance. His original intention was to give play to national characteristics, but it was also used as an excuse to exclude the West, oppose the integration of Chinese and Western art, and only seek pure breeds. I love my teacher, but I love the truth more. The experience of Teacher Pan's own artistic creation cannot cover the overall development of national art." (Wu, 1998, p4-5) Pan Tianshou's proposition of keeping a distance was originally intended to avoid the loss of their respective national characteristics due to the blind integration of Chinese and Western art, not to reject all Western influences. However, some theorists misinterpreted it as the basis for cultural isolationism, closing national art into a pure breed and ignoring the essence of national art as accumulation, constant absorption and creation.

To refute cultural isolationism, Wu Guanzhong proposed the theory of common laws in *Pair Wings and Linked Vines—Exploring the Echo between Art and Science*. From a scientific perspective, he explained that Chinese and Western art are interrelated in terms of visual forms based on scientific common laws, and pointed out the complementary relationship between science and technology and art. Its core meaning is that although Chinese and Western art show different formal features due to different cultural contexts, they share commonalities at the advanced aesthetic level such as formal beauty and visual laws. Artificial cultural isolation violates the objective law of artistic development. He used multiple groups of cases to confirm this view: "Da Vinci's sketch landscapes are quite similar to Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*; Botticelli's works emphasize line modeling, flatness, and the sense of fluttering ribbons, which are very different from the rounded and rich three-dimensional atmosphere of Raphael and Titian, and have a unique Eastern charm; in Utrillo's works, one can feel the desolation and sadness, as well as the Chinese poetic sentiment of 'Listening to the spring rain all night in a small building, and the apricot blossoms will be sold in the deep alley tomorrow morning,' plus his expression techniques that emphasize the contrast of plane division and the effect of lines"<sup>[3]</sup> (Wu, 2008, 125-127). At the same time, traditional Chinese art also contains formal elements of Western modern painting: "The geometric composition in Xu Gu's works and the contrast and connection between points, lines, and masses are also similar to the

sense of form in Western modern painting"(Wu,2008,125-127).In addition,Wu Guanzhong used his own academic experience to confirm the authenticity of common laws:"I have always focused on the commonalities of Chinese and Western aesthetics.I love the beauty of traditional painting,copied a lot of works,loved it deeply,and still love it.I also truly love the beauty of Western painting.I love both the East and the West.My love is not exclusive,but out of true affection,not fickleness.Precisely because I learned the advantages of the West,I recognized the characteristics,shortcomings,and deficiencies of my own nation better through comparison"(Wu,2008,p125-127).This non-exclusive love is not a betrayal of national art,but discovering the commonalities between Chinese and Western art with an open perspective.Recognizing commonalities can help avoid losing national identity when learning from the advantages of Western art,and avoid falling into closed rigidity when adhering to national characteristics.The essence of nationalization is to show characteristics through exchange and mutual learning,rather than guarding pure breeds in isolation.

### 3 What to Establish

After systematically eliminating the three cognitive fallacies and clearing ideological obstacles,Wu Guanzhong further clarified the two core value principles of artistic nationalization:establishing artistic conception as the soul and establishing true emotion as the root.These two principles support each other and are indispensable,jointly forming the core carrier of national flavor in art and answering the core question of"what form national characteristics exist."

#### 3.1 Artistic Conception as the Soul

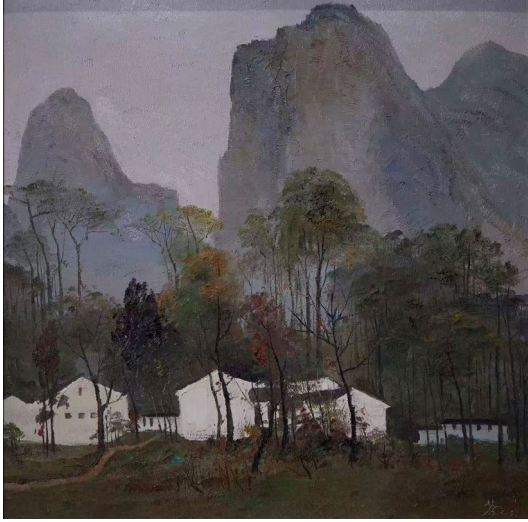
In his work *Native and Foreign,Foreign and Native—Random Thoughts on the Nationalization of Oil Painting*,Wu Guanzhong clearly pointed out:"The nationalization of oil painting is certainly not aligning with traditional forms.I do not consider form first;I only pursue artistic conception,Eastern charm,national temperament,and feelings that resonate with my elders,brothers,and sisters"(Wu,1980,p129-133).In his theoretical system,establishing artistic conception is the soul of artistic nationalization.Whether using Western techniques or Chinese brush and ink,whether expressing modern themes or traditional themes,as long as the work contains Eastern charm and national temperament,it can arouse national aesthetic resonance and possess true nationality.The artistic conception referred to by Wu Guanzhong is essentially the poetic quality in traditional Chinese aesthetics.He emphasized many times that all art tends to be poetic,and proposed that"the combination of Chinese charm,Chinese artistic conception and Western modern formal beauty is a new subject"and"I use Eastern charm to absorb Western form and color"<sup>[4]</sup> (Wu,2009,p.32).Hu's(2019)research pointed out that Wu Guanzhong integrated and digested the in-depth research on formal language in Western modernist painting with the implication of Eastern beauty.He expanded the expressive power of modern formal beauty language without losing Eastern charm.The pursuit and creation of poetic lyrical artistic conception are not only Wu Guanzhong's

way to resist the scholarly spirit of traditional literati painting but also a way to reflect his Eastern artistic conception.<sup>[5]</sup> Here, charm refers to the implication of endless meaning beyond words pursued by traditional Chinese aesthetics, which is the core of artistic conception. Form and color, on the other hand, are the formal languages of Western modern painting. The essence of absorbing form and color with charm is to integrate Western formal beauty into Eastern poetic artistic conception, enabling works to possess both the formal tension of modern art and the implication and depth pursued by national aesthetics.

Wu Guanzhong's 1973 oil painting *Mountains in Guilin* (Fig.2) is a model work embodying the creative concept of artistic conception as the soul. Created with Western oil painting media, this work did not stick to the realistic light and shadow modeling techniques commonly used in Western landscape painting. Instead, it outlined the outline and charm of Guilin's peaks with concise and refined lines, and layered the texture of mountains and stones with warm and transparent color blocks, cleverly breaking the inherent boundaries between Chinese and Western artistic expressions. Western scholars' research pointed out that from the 1970s to the 1980s, Wu Guanzhong gradually entered the field of Chinese painting with watercolor painting as a creative springboard. While continuing to use traditional materials such as brush, ink, paper, and inkstone, he strived to inject modern artistic spirit.<sup>[6]</sup> He took the initiative to break free from the constraints of the original form and color of objects, and reconstructed the expression logic with a highly innovative artistic concept. In his landscape paintings during this period, he shifted his focus to the exploration of formal beauty, promoted a simple and pure aesthetic expression, and his painting style gradually evolved towards abstraction. Through the density of points, the rhythm of lines, and the layout of planes, he constructed a unique art world<sup>[7]</sup> (Prizant, 2012; Lee, 2024). In his artistic cognition, each emotional appeal should find the most suitable expression carrier, and it is this core belief that makes his works not only deeply rooted in the charm and essence of traditional Eastern aesthetics but also possess the pioneering characteristics of contemporary art, forming an irreproducible personal style. This exploration is not an isolated artistic attempt but a core creative thread running through his transitional period, forming a deep echo with the artistic pursuit of integrating Eastern charm with Western form.

Therefore, *Mountains in Guilin* not only retains the unique poetic blank space and flexible line beauty of traditional Chinese landscape painting but also enables the national artistic conception to obtain a more contemporary presentation through the transformation of modern formal language. This creative practice truly realized the in-depth integration of Western form and Eastern artistic conception, proving that oil painting, a foreign art medium, can also carry national aesthetic emotions and show a strong national flavor. In contrast, his 1994 ink painting *Norway* (Fig.3), even though the theme focuses on foreign scenery, still takes Eastern artistic conception as the spiritual guidance, further confirming the universal value of artistic conception as the core of nationalization. In addition, the two works *Spring* and *Autumn* expanded the artistic conception expression dimension of traditional ink painting with modern abstract language. The light colors and intertwined messy lines set off each other. Although they do not depict specific flower and grass forms, they vividly convey the vigorous vitality

of spring and the quiet beauty of autumn through the soft tension of colors and the rhythmic changes of lines. They broke away from the fixed conventions of cun, ca, dian, and ran in traditional landscape painting. Their core value is not to reproduce traditional aesthetics with modern abstract language, but to arouse the viewer's deep association with seasonal characteristics through the emotional tension of colors and lines, and then respond to the eternal pursuit of flowing vitality and distant sentiment in Eastern aesthetics.



**Fig. 2.** Wu, G. Z. (1973). Mountains in Guilin [Oil painting]. National Art Museum of China.



**Fig. 3.** Wu, G. Z. (1994). Norway [Ink painting]. Private collection.

### 3.2 True Emotion as the Root

If artistic conception is the soul of artistic nationalization, then true emotion is the root of nationalization. Without the injection of true emotion, artistic conception will become an empty formal shell, and national flavor will become a deliberately flaunted label. In his prose discussions, Wu Guanzhong often used love and marriage as metaphors to concretize abstract creative theories, emphasizing the core position of true emotion in creation, criticizing false creation that covers up inferiority with self-respect, and clarifying the value principle of true emotion as the root. In *Where Does the Soul Reside*, he directly stated: "The process of sketching is the whole process from falling in love to getting married. If you no longer sketch and only graft photos, or even copy photos, this is similar to marriage without a courtship process, and such marriages are common today" (Wu, 1998, p4-5). In his view, sketching is not a simple reproduction of nature, but a process of emotional resonance between the artist and the creative object. Through observation, feeling, and empathy, the spiritual characteristics of the object are internalized into one's own emotional experience and finally presented in artistic form. This process is like the life experience from falling in love to getting married. However, copying photos is an arranged marriage without emotional foundation. Such works will inevitably lack vitality, let alone nationality. The transmission of nationality needs to take the artist's true feelings as the medium. Creations divorced from true emotion, no matter how "nationalized" in form, are just soulless shells.

In his prose *Pair Wings and Linked Vines*, Wu Guanzhong further explained the creative value of true emotion: "Intuition includes illusion. The so-called 'not seeing while looking' is because one only focuses on the images one likes, becomes intoxicated, and ignores the rest. 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder' and 'all concubines lose their color.' Others may see it as prejudice, but prejudice and preference in art are the yeast of creation" (Wu, 2008, p125-127). The prejudice and preference here are not blind subjective assumptions, but the concentrated expression of the artist's true feelings for the creative object. Just as the beauty in the eyes of a lover is the result of emotional projection, the preference in art is the artist's in-depth grasp of the spiritual core of the object. This true emotion is the yeast of creation, which can make the work ferment a unique artistic charm and allow national emotions to flow naturally. Wu Guanzhong's emphasis on true emotion is essentially a criticism of false nationalization. This view is particularly sharp in *Where Does the Soul Reside*: "However, if one fundamentally lacks a pure love for art, blindly flaunts national characteristics, imposes them on others, and covers up inferiority with self-respect, it can only set off a market of fake flowers" (Wu, 1998, p4-5). The market of fake flowers he refers to are works that use national characteristics as a gimmick but lack true feelings—some deliberately imitate traditional brush and ink conventions but have no traditional artistic conception, some forcibly use Chinese themes but have no national emotions, and some flaunt integration of Chinese and Western art but are only rigid splicing of techniques. These works are like fake flowers: although they have the appearance of nationalization, they have no temperature of life, cannot arouse the viewer's emotional resonance, and cannot convey true national flavor. Even *Norway*, which expresses Western themes, Wu Guanzhong injected Eastern feelings. He depicted Norway's forests and lakes with ink and

wash, using concise lines and light colors. The injection of true emotion makes Western themes also possess Eastern national flavor. The core of Wu Guanzhong's "establishing true emotion as the root" is to personalize and vitalize artistic creation. Nationalization is never about pasting labels, but integrating national emotions and aesthetics into every link of creation, making the work a living body with temperature. Only with true emotion as the root can artistic conception take root, and national flavor can be naturally manifested.

#### 4 How to Practice

After eliminating cognitive fallacies and establishing core principles, Wu Guanzhong further proposed the practical path of artistic nationalization, namely the theory of "a kite never far from its string." "A kite never far from its string" is a core viewpoint with strong metaphorical color in Wu Guanzhong's artistic thought. It vividly summarizes the dialectical relationship between artistic innovation and national cultural roots, which requires both tension and connection. In this metaphor, the kite symbolizes works of art, especially their pursuit of formal beauty, abstract beauty, and modern expression. The string is the unbreakable connection between the kite and the earth, that is, the source of life, cultural heritage, and people's emotions on which the work is based. In his work *A Kite Never Far from Its String—Creation Notes*, Wu Guanzhong explained: "Materials and feelings from life are abstracted into a certain artistic form by the author through subtraction, division, or other methods, but there must still be a thread connecting the work to the source in life. A kite never far from its string—only by not breaking the string can we grasp the communication between the audience and the work"<sup>[8]</sup> (Wu, 1983, p89-90). This discussion accurately points to the key of practicing: subtraction and division refer to the transcendence of rigid realism and stylized language advocated in breaking, which is a process of form refinement and abstraction, and the motivation for the kite to fly high. Connecting to the source corresponds to the fundamental principles established in establishing, emphasizing that any abstraction and innovation cannot be separated from the soil of national life, the genes of cultural aesthetics, and the emotions that people can resonate with. "Not breaking the string" is not a constraint but a guarantee—it ensures that the high flight of art does not become a rootless kite, and that the national soul is maintained and inherited while form innovation is carried out. Therefore, "a kite never far from its string" requires artists to always maintain a prudent and positive tension when dealing with a series of complex relationships such as tradition and modernity, nation and world, and form and content: they must courageously let the kite fly high, boldly absorb and transform all beneficial formal languages; at the same time, they must always feel the traction of the "string" in their hands, so that innovation is deeply rooted in the soil of national culture and the pulse of the times.

The power of "a kite never far from its string" comes from the fact that the string itself is not a one-dimensional constraint but is closely intertwined with multiple connotations. This string is specifically reflected in three mutually supporting levels, which

together constitute the foundation for the formation and evaluation criteria of the nationality of works of art.

First, the thread derived from genuine life experiences. Wu Guanzhong firmly opposed creating works by working behind closed doors, emphasizing that the starting point of all formal abstraction must be the artist's vivid and direct feelings about the objective world. This feeling needs to go through a process similar to "from falling in love to getting married." It is this true emotion from life that fills the abstract lines with internal vitality, ensuring that artistic abstraction has a solid empirical foundation and emotional temperature.

Second, the thread integrated into deep cultural heritage. The abstract refinement of art cannot be a game of pure formalism, but must be infiltrated and transformed by the genes of national cultural aesthetics. Wu Guanzhong was good at transforming the charm of Chinese art into modern formal language. In his 1989 series *Birds' Paradise*, he depicted the big banyan tree in Xinhui, Guangdong, not sticking to realistic depiction, but constructing a formal space full of life rhythm with complex, twisted, and thick-thin changing abstract lines. These lines are not only a refinement of natural forms but also a modern expression of the aesthetic concept of expressing meaning through lines and vivid vitality in Chinese calligraphy and freehand painting. Although the picture is abstract, the sense of vitality and freedom contained in it is an Eastern pursuit of the artistic conception of paradise, perfectly interpreting how taking artistic conception as the soul can be manifested through specific formal languages.

Third, the thread tied to the broad public emotions, realizing the pursuit of both elegance and popularity. Wu Guanzhong always adhered to the creative ideal of "winning the approval of the masses and the applause of experts," believing that the ultimate value of art lies in its ability to resonate spiritually with the broadest compatriots. An important purpose of "a kite never far from its string" is precisely to grasp the communication between the audience and the work. The people's emotions here refer to the aesthetic preferences and emotional foundations rooted in common historical memories, geographical environments, and lifestyles. For example, in many of his works depicting the water towns in the south of the Yangtze River, although he used the plane division of modern composition, the main colors of black, white, and gray, the scattered layout of houses, and the quiet poetry flowing in the picture accurately captured and sublimated the collective aesthetic memory and homesickness of Chinese people for the south of the Yangtze River's white walls, black tiles, small bridges, and flowing water. This resonance made his abstract exploration not alienate the public, but aroused a more universal national aesthetic identity through formal beauty.

Cui's (2022) research also confirmed this core logic. She pointed out that the essence of "a kite never far from its string" is to realize the dialectical unity of artistic innovation and national roots.<sup>[9]</sup> Only by taking life as the source, culture as the vein, and people's emotions as the link can artists make their works have both modern formal tension and adhere to national aesthetic charm. This is highly consistent with Wu Guanzhong's practical path of artistic nationalization and provides important theoretical reference and practical enlightenment for similar artistic explorations. The core of not breaking the string is to achieve a balance between exploring form and finding spiritual belonging. It is not a constraint on artistic innovation but a control over the direction of

nationalization. If the string is too tight, the kite cannot fly high, and art will be rigid and lack innovation, falling into the dilemma of rigid traditional conventions. If the string is too loose or broken, the kite will lose control, and the work will be divorced from life and national emotions, becoming a formal game, falling into the misunderstanding of transplanting Western techniques. Only when the tightness is moderate can the kite fly high to achieve form innovation without losing direction, adhere to spiritual belonging, and finally realize the unity of form innovation and national characteristics.

Wu Guanzhong's statement at the end of *Where Does the Soul Reside* can be regarded as a deep annotation to "a kite never far from its string": "There are absolutely no eternal pure breeds. The skulls of our ancestors in Zhoukoudian have left precious cultural relics, but they are no longer the facial features of our descendants. Sons may not look like their fathers, and they don't have to. Genetic genes are a subject for scientists. The genetic genes in art are more hidden, and they are often only reflected in feelings. Even if the appearance is not similar, the genes may be present in the pulse. There is rhythm in the pulse, or rhythm resides in the pulse. To put it mysteriously, there is a soul. Where does the soul reside? It resides in the background of successive cultures, in their respective sufferings and sorrows, in their pride and elation..." (Wu, 1998, p4-5). Here, the pulse and soul are exactly the string in "a kite never far from its string." The form of art can be innovated, just as the appearance does not have to be like the father, but the national cultural genes and emotional pulse cannot be broken, just as the genes are still in the pulse. The fundamental purpose of "not breaking the string" is to guard the national soul, so that art can always take root in the national cultural soil and the pulse of the times in innovation, which is also the only practical path of artistic nationalization.

## 5 Conclusion

The national flavor of art does not reside in fixed themes, materials, or closed forms, but in the endless cultural pulse and life rhythm nourished and maintained by artistic conception and true emotion. This conclusion not only responds to the practical dilemma of the Chinese art world at the end of the 20th century but also provides important enlightenment for contemporary artistic nationalization: nationalization is not the reproduction of traditional forms, nor the exclusion of Western techniques, nor superficial labeling, but deep spiritual internalization. Only by showing national aesthetic characteristics through artistic conception, conveying national emotional resonance through true emotion, and adhering to cultural roots in innovation can works of art truly possess national flavor and show Chinese characteristics in the world art arena. Wu Guanzhong's nationalization practice not only reflects a profound commitment to national art but also shows an open and inclusive modern perspective. What he constructed is not only a theoretical paradigm for artistic nationalization but also provides a reference ideological resource for contemporary art to handle the relationships between "tradition and modernity" and "nation and world." The value of this theoretical system lies not only in responding to historical propositions but also in continuously

providing enlightenment and guidance for current and future artistic creation and theoretical research.

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