



# An Introduction to the Influence of Neo-expressionism on Contemporary Chinese Oil Painting

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## Abstract

This thesis focuses on the spread and application of neo-expressionism in China. Neo-expressionism is a further development from expressionism. After decades of development, neo-expressionist art has had a profound impact on the exploration of individualization, nationalization and ontologization of contemporary Chinese oil painting. Among the many contemporary Chinese oil painting artists, there are also some artists who have received the influence of neo-expressionism, and through their practice, they continue to integrate Western neo-expressionism with the local Chinese culture and explore the development of local oil painting from their own perspective. The article focuses on Chinese artists' absorption and fusion of neo-expressionism, and identifies how Chinese artists, in the face of neo-expressionism, can eventually form a Chinese oil painting style through conceptual criticism and transformation and the fusion of Chinese and Western formal languages, presenting a more diversified art pattern in China. Neo-expressionism is an important direction that contemporary Chinese oil painting needs to continue to study.

## Keywords

Art, neo-expressionism, Chinese oil painting, nationalization, discussion

## 1. Introduction

The initial purpose of every work of art is to express the artist's aesthetic ideal to others and to reveal a certain phenomenon. In other words, any content that can be called a work of art must transcend the appearance of each depicted object contained therein and achieve artistic treatment by revealing the connotation and commonality of the depicted object.

After the reform and opening up in the 1980s, China's literary and artistic policies were gradually relaxed from a high-handed state, and German neo-expressionist oil paintings were introduced to China, which attracted great attention from Chinese artists and critics, and brought a great influence to Chinese painting art. All the oil painting artists in China were influenced by neo-expressionism to different degrees, which caused China to explore and pay attention to neo-expressionism, and in the process of exploration and practice, promoted the new development of China's oil painting. In addition, in China's traditional painting thought, the artistic thought of writing is similar to neo-expressionism, and under the influence of neo-expressionism, the expressiveness in China's painting has also been developed to a great extent and the development path has been broadened. The neo-expressionism of the 1980s not only looked at the beautiful things, but also put its eyes on some contemplative, strange and broken things, and also portrayed the inner world of people at that time, which is unique to the school of neo-expressionism and can be said to be its "new" place.

## 2. Criticism of traditional concept

Since the reform and opening up, China's painting art has seen a great prospect of development, and the spread of foreign art has broadened the horizons of Chinese artists and provided fresh blood for the development of Chinese art. Among them, German Neo-Expressionism, with its strong and intuitive way of emotional expression and impactful picture layout, has caused a great impact on the domestic art field, which also provided a new inspiration for the development of Chinese painting art.

Since oil painting entered China at the beginning of the twentieth century, oil painting has also gradually become an important driving force in promoting and modernizing traditional art. After a hundred years of integration, as well as continuous localization and development, it has grown and developed step by step in the local Chinese culture, growing little by little and gradually becoming a modern art like Chinese painting. When oil painting was first introduced, it experienced a period of prosperity and the emergence of oil painters such as Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, and Liu Haisu, who continued to think and explore, looking for a suitable path of localization and continuous fusion with themselves. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, socialist realist art was very popular in that period. In the fifties and sixties, a large number of oil painting artists studied the realist tradition of Russian art and devoted themselves to establishing a new era of national artistic images. By the 1980s, oil painting faced two paths, which could be said to be both fresh and challenging. From this aspect, the diversified evolution of Western post-modern art and the gradual marginalization of easel painting; from the other side, China after the reform and opening up also entered the image era (Zhang Yuanming, 2019). In this situation, the traditional value and meaning of oil painting is facing unprecedented pressure and cognitive dilemma. In the current context of increasingly diversified art, exploring a new language of painting and the artistic and cultural identity of contemporary China is an urgent issue for oil painting artists who better adhere to traditional painting.

The Chinese painting scene in the twentieth century was characterized by calls for reform and practice. Scholars and literary artists of the time advocated reform; they no longer clung to old ideas and advocated the absorption of advanced Western art theories. It was against this cultural and social background that neo-expressionism was recognized by the Chinese art world. In other words, it was in the midst of the repressive and turbulent social environment that neo-expressionism triggered the ideal of "self-expression" among creators, and the rapid development of expressionist painting that revealed inner emotions and thoughts (Xu Peijun, 2005). In addition, the New Culture Movement took the dregs of feudal culture as the object of criticism and focused on the promotion of individuality and spiritual freedom, which were in line with the concept of Neo-Expressionism.

## 3. Change of Art Concepts

Since the 1980s and 1990s, with the continuous development of the open policy, more and more Chinese oil painting artists have been able to go to different parts of the world to study, to appreciate different art and to understand different artistic characteristics. At that time, the growth of German art made it the first choice for many oil painters to study abroad. At this time, Xu Jiang and Ma Lu Chinese oil painters were also influenced by the "New Expressionism". Afterwards, when the artists who had gone abroad to study returned to China, the choice of the times led them to enter higher art education institutions, so that "Neo-Expressionism" gradually appeared in the domestic art scene and expanded its influence on the development of local oil painting through its continuous integration with local art. The personalized and nationalized characteristics of "Neo-Expressionism" were in line with the cultural orientation and artistic development needs of China in the 1990s, so neo-expressionism began to plant the seeds of development in the Chinese art environment.

Chinese realism is about "stability", choosing to tell the right story, or to tell some righteous events. After neo-expressionism was introduced to China, there was a shift in the concept of art. Its own expression of the subject's innermost being, its spiritual and physical liberation, brought a fresh stream of water to the art field at that time. It had a wide impact on Chinese contemporary oil painting, on the one hand, it was reflected in the exploration of the national and personalized artistic concept of "Neo-Expressionism", and on the other hand, it was reflected in the exaggerated and deformed language techniques and more innovative ideology to achieve artistic innovation. On the other hand, it is reflected in the artistic innovation through exaggerated language techniques and more innovative ideas, which inspired Chinese artists to explore the language of painting and new ideas (Cui Longfan, 2010). All of these were constantly contributing to the transformation of artistic concepts at the time. Under the influence of neo-expressionism, Chinese oil painting creators paid more and more attention to the impor-

tance of integrating Chinese artistic language with local cultural experience, and in their continuous practice, they created the beginnings of Chinese new imagery expressions, which gradually built up the connection between historical culture and local experience.

After the 85 New Wave, the Chinese art world was in a state of disorientation and uncertainty in the process of breaking through the rigidity of art education, and many artists were at a loss as to how to deal with the exchange between traditional and foreign cultures (Wu Bo, 2018). The introduction of this artistic trend brought revelation to the situation at that time. Ma Lu, as the first person to be exposed to German Neo-Expressionism, was the first student sent to Germany on a public assignment. Upon his return to China, he took the initiative to explore how to express a sense of nationality in his pictures, and he began to focus on traditional Chinese ink and wash, as well as on the form of Chinese calligraphy and realistic painting as a new path, and combined it with social reality, going in search of typical characters and events in the society of the time. When making paintings, he incorporated the artistic expression method of neo-expressionism, trying to use abstract and deformed painting forms to express his questions and concerns about himself, others, life, and social phenomena. In addition, he tries to eliminate and conceal the subject matter of his works while not abandoning the image at the same time. Xu Jiang's works such as "The Big Bombing" and "Siege" created after his studies are majestic, and a sense of historical images with unique charm can be felt in the images, and the images he created show his concern for and examination of the local Chinese culture. In his series of works "Green Dog", Zhou Chunya, a famous contemporary painter in China, shows a symbolic representation with equal similarity to "Neo-Expressionism". In his artistic treatment, he first exaggerates and subjectively colors the green dog, turning it into a visual symbol full of self-personality, symbolizing the artist's personal thought infusion, while in his brushwork; he shows the meaning of traditional Chinese literati painting.

The strong visual tension and ideological vibration of "Neo-Expressionism" influenced many Chinese oil painting artists at that time. While adhering to the localization of Chinese oil painting, they also developed and integrated the artistic forms and ideological connotations of this genre, and on this basis, continued to explore and innovate, giving a more diversified artistic outlook to contemporary Chinese oil painting.

#### **4. Fusion of formal language**

China's art development has always shown its drawing on the expressive techniques and creative concepts of German Neo-Expressionism. Under the influence of this artistic trend, many Chinese artists have changed the traditional Chinese painting guidelines of writing shapes with shapes, and used stronger colors and exaggerated lines to express their emotions in their creations, which has promoted the development of Chinese art in a long-term practice. In other words, China's expressive painting is not a wholesale imitation of German Neo-Expressionism, but while learning from its expression, it consciously or unconsciously takes into account the spirit of traditional Chinese painting and explores a new form of painting expression in China.

The element of realism in Chinese indigenous art and some traditional folk art has become the fundamental cultural support for the development of expressionist painting in China. They are also the source of the spiritual force and cultural tradition for the development of contemporary Chinese expressive painting. In terms of creation, they also bring the "archetypes" into the art of expressionist painting, searching for the fit with the national cultural tradition. On the one hand, the "new" material of painting is also a direction of localization for expressionist painters, and some of them choose to instill Chinese emotional expressions in the language of Western painting. The choice of materials from traditional culture and local Chinese art, the transformation of artistic language and the transformation of painting materials are two of the more common ways to develop traditional painting into contemporary. On the other hand, the main problem is "from form to spirit". In some expressive paintings, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between those that have been borrowed and evolved from Western expressionism, or those that have elements that reflect the flavor of Yi painting, but seem to have no obvious connection to the traditional Yi form. Of course, the contemporary transformation and development of the traditional spirit of writing is achieved by drawing from traditional cultural concepts, artistic spirit, and expressions, and constantly combining the two in the path of localization. The modern transformation of the traditional spirit of writing is partly reflected in the book-like brushwork characteristics in the picture, but also in the traditional aesthetic concept. These will not hinder the continuous progress of Chinese oil painting, and the development of expressive painting will have more possibilities. Contemporary Chinese expressive painting explores both the integration of social culture and the embodiment of the artist's personal values.

In the context of public perception, "Neo-Expressionism" is more obviously characterized by the use of subjec-

tive abstract images and integrated material language, which brings a distinct innovation in the overall effect of the picture and is the main external difference between "Neo-Expressionism" and "Expressionism". This is the main external difference between "Neo-Expressionism" and "Expressionism". Chinese artists also drew inspiration from "Neo-Expressionism" in their use of mixed media. Among the group of artists who have returned to China from Germany, Zhang Guolong is one of the representative artists in the use of mixed media. He is fond of the oriental symbolism of yellow earth, sandstone, rice paper, and tablet topiaries, and from the beginning his work "Yellow Earth" shows a strong Chinese symbolism; the yellow earth has nurtured yellow people, and contains an inherent sense of yellow earth accumulation (Xu Qing, 2018). His works are profoundly influenced by Anselm Kiefer, but present localized Chinese linguistic characteristics. In his works, he expresses his own reflections on the yellow earth of his homeland and his pursuit of the spirit of unity of heaven and man in traditional Chinese culture.

Among the group of contemporary Chinese oil painters who have conducted ontological language exploration and achieved considerable success, Shen Ling and Yan Ping are outstanding representatives. Shen Ling's works use strong visual sensory effects, bold brushstrokes and strong colors to express the unique facial features and physique of the figures, and to give vent to their inner emotions in a straightforward manner. Also as a female painter Yan Ping, her works are also not too wide narrative scope, the picture is striking, the use of brushwork and color is sharp and powerful, and her spirited brushwork and color with strong subjective emotion expresses the true self-narrative. In particular, her works from the early 1990s, such as the Mother and Child series, focus on the expression of her true self. Her paintings have the charm of Chinese calligraphy and Chinese calligraphy painting, which mostly express the plain social reality in the subject matter, but with strong shock and impact in the visual effect.

Unlike the fetishism of the 85 New Wave period, the study and research of "Neo-Expressionism" by contemporary Chinese oil painters is not a kind of rigid application completely detached from the social and cultural reality, but an innovative development on the fertile soil of local culture. Since the 1990s, Chinese artists, especially oil painters, have been visiting Germany and the United States with a strong sense of purpose and a noble mission (Xu Qing, 2019). Faced with the visual impact and ideological shock of "Neo-Expressionism", Ma Lu, Xu Jiang, Zhou Chunya, Zhang Guolong, Shen Ling, Yan Ping and others directly or indirectly accepted the expression and ideology of this school, while deeply rooted in the oriental, local cultural environment for innovation, giving contemporary Chinese oil painting a more colorful appearance and a temperament more in tune with global cultural intermingling.

## 5. Conclusion

The introduction of neo-expressionism has had a great impact on contemporary Chinese oil painting. The development of Neo-Expressionism in China is reasonable, in line with social conditions and the development of the art field, and is an important step in the gradual diversification of Chinese painting styles. Nowadays, Chinese artists should also keep cognizing neo-expressionism in depth and keep integrating Chinese traditional culture with contemporary art to fully show their own cultural identity.

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