Appreciating Artwork *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond* Through Cultural Contexts

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the appreciation of contemporary Chinese paintings from Henan Province. The researcher has selected the painting *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond* by the artist Li Mingwei from Henan Province, China, as the focal point of the study. The work is analyzed in terms of formalism. Still, it is also explicitly studied in terms of cultural concepts that manifest through values, behaviors, needs, and environments in the field of art. The aim of the study was primarily to explore the association between formalism in painting and socio-cultural concepts. The study employed descriptive qualitative methods for data collection, incorporating both written and visual data gathered through empirical fieldwork. Documentation, visual recording, and observation methods were used to collect information related to the paintings under study. The results of the study show that Li Mingwei's work *Moonlight over the Lotus Pond* applies traditional Chinese cultural elements to the creation of oil paintings. The concepts utilized in the study form the basis for categorizing the identity of the painting through a cultural approach, encompassing subject, design, and aesthetic significance. The significance of the study suggests that contemporary Chinese paintings in Henan Province can be viewed not only from the formalist perspective of art but also presented through a cultural context. This study contributes to the understanding of the meaning, concept, and aim of design utilized by contemporary Chinese artists in shaping the image of their paintings.

**Keywords**

Art appreciation, socio-cultural, oil painting art, formalism

1. Introduction

The artistic language of Chinese contemporary painting is characterized by the reflection of the inner world of the painter, that is, the thoughts and feelings of the painter are reflected in the form of the work (He Xiuli, 2013). It is the expression of identity, aesthetic values, philosophy, and behavior in the process of creating works. In Chinese contemporary painting, painters try to present an oriental aesthetic based on Chinese culture.

Yang Zhonghua (2013) claims that in the 1980s, after the implementation of the "Reform and Opening Up" policy in China, Chinese artists wanted to break away from the Western cultural identity and establish their own cultural identity in the context of Western-dominated globalization. In the context of globalization dominated by the West, Chinese artists show their desire to get rid of Western cultural identity and establish their own cultural identity in the exhibition mechanism. These ideas have driven the development of Chinese contemporary art, leading some artists to seek solutions from China's local cultural experience and to emphasize the expression of the "Chinese experience" in their works.

Since the 1990s, groups of Chinese contemporary painters have been influenced by this idea and have tried to integrate Chinese cultural ideas into oil painting from different perspectives, leading to a focus on the fusion of
Western oil painting art and local artistic language. These are some of the main expressive features that have emerged in Chinese contemporary oil painting (Sun Kunlun, 2016).

It also shows that local culture is once again being emphasized by contemporary Chinese painters, to the extent that more and more oil paintings closely related to Chinese culture are appearing, such as "Moonlight over the Lotus Pond" by Li Mingwei, a painter from Henan Province, China.

This work, which incorporates the ideas of traditional Chinese culture, is characterized by a semi-abstract portrayal of the image. Its significance lies in the fact that it inspires forms and meanings based on Chinese culture.

Cha Li (1985) pointed out that oil painting is an important development trend in contemporary Chinese painting, and its speed of development determines the degree of development of Chinese painting. Therefore, Chinese contemporary oil painting is worth studying.

Art is a part of social and cultural expression, and any artist is influenced by a specific social life and culture and forms his or her thoughts and character (Wang Hongjian, 2010). Art exists within a society and reflects its culture. From the 1990s to the present, Li Mingwei has been creating impressive oil paintings whose meaning is inextricably linked to Chinese culture.

Ma Keyao (2016) suggests that culture includes literature, art, ideas, beliefs, values, behaviors, customs, etc. and that scholars around the world, despite their varied interpretations of culture, recognize that culture is created by humans. It is an attribute of humanity itself. Arnold thinks culture is the ability to know the "best thing". It is the application of the "best thing" to one's spirit and soul, and the pursuit of the "best thing" (Storey, 2019).

2. Research objectives

The purpose of this paper is to visually explain the art form of the work in the context of the socio-cultural system. It is seen in the context of values, environment, needs, and behaviours reflected in the process of creating the work as follows:

1) Identify the design and meaning in the paintings of Moonlight over the Lotus Pond.

2) Analyze the association of formalistic aspects of art in the artwork of Moonlight over the Lotus Pond through the socio-cultural system.

3. Conceptual framework

The combination of interdisciplin ary approaches uses concepts from formalist art and culture to view the design of the image in the work “Moonlight over the Lotus Pond”. The combination of these concepts is adapted into a conceptual framework that is thought of in parallel with the analysis and serves as a reference for the questions in the study.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 1. The theoretical framework is adapted from the formalistic concept of art, social and cultural systems.
4. Research method

The study approach is qualitatively descriptive with inter-disciplinary implementation using a case study design of work analysis on cultural elements in Contemporary Chinese painting. Cultural feature studies are carried out to classify the subject design and organization of the form of the painting. There are three data collection methods used which are observation, visual recording, and documentation.

5. Artwork description

This work is entitled "Moonlight over the Lotus Pond". Its Chinese name is He tang yue se. This work was produced by a painter named Li Mingwei. The media used in this work is a type of "oil painting". This work measures 100cm x 80cm. The work was released in 1999. The artist presents this work in the stream of Chinese contemporary oil painting style. This painting shows a view of a lotus pond with water under the light of the moon. It shows the atmosphere of the pond at night, which is consistent with the meaning of the title of the painting. One of the main descriptive points of the work is the lotus pond below, where we can clearly see a lot of lotus leaves, rosettes and stems, and they have a lot of different forms. It can also be determined that behind these plants is a hill, but it does not show up very clearly due to the fact that it's in the nighttime color. Above the hill is a deep sky, and another descriptive focus of the image is the moon in the sky, which is not shown in its specific form, but instead is replaced by a glowing area, made visible by being in a dark sky. To further enhance the atmosphere in the lotus pond, the artist designed the water surface in bright colors to highlight the refraction of moonlight on the surface. There are unrecognizable objects to the left and right of the bottom of the work, as this area is logically dark, as there are no lighting elements in this area either. All in all, the objects in this work are not complex and are mainly based on the moon, the sky, the hills in the distance and the lotus pond.

(Li Mingwei, Oil painting, This painting measures 100cm x 80cm, Year 2007)

Figure 2. Moonlight over the Lotus Pond.

6. Value

Li Xingming (2006) Point out that value is something that people consider to be the best. It is something that possesses the nature of being sought after, of being interesting and useful. It is also defined in the philosophical sphere as beliefs in a particular way in a goal worthy of individual or social aspiration.

The value in a work of art is the embodiment of the beliefs and philosophical concepts that the artist aspires to in the society and culture. Its existence is guided by the local social culture. The art of Chinese painting permeates and reflects traditional Chinese cultural ideas, philosophical thoughts as well as aesthetics (Han Wei, 2021).

First of all, the subject of the work created in the image is the lotus flower, which represents an excellent quality. In traditional Chinese culture, the lotus flower usually symbolizes a noble and unsullied quality, which refers to the excellent character embodied in a person's behavior and an ideal personality (Liang Weimin, 2015). Painters try to embody this traditional cultural idea through the image of painting.

Secondly, in terms of the use of colors, the artist has used almost pure white colors on the water reflecting the moonlight over the lotus pond. This is also an emphasised part of the work. White also symbolises purity. By
arranging the white color in an environment surrounded by dark blue, the artist employs the principle of contrasting design to enhance the expression of the noble qualities symbolised by the subject image in the work. Moreover, the colors of the work are mainly white and blue, which is in line with the idea of "returning to simplicity" in Chinese Taoism in terms of morality. Li Xuesong (2010) points out that the idea of "returning to simplicity" breaks the traditional way of appreciating oil paintings from an aesthetic point of view, and gorgeous colors are no longer the only way of reflecting the aesthetics of oil paintings; instead, the use of simple colors in oil paintings has become a common aesthetic tendency to present a kind of simplicity and beauty.

In addition, the use of shapes and lines in the artwork focuses on plants. Through observation it can be noticed that the appearance of these lotus flowers and leaves appear blurred to varying degrees. And this also happens to the lines used to depict the stems of the plants. This form of expression reflects the Chinese Taoist philosophical views. Li Xuesong (2010) points out that Taoist philosophical ideas on the exploration of the human spirit and the spirit of nature influenced painters' understanding of form. This led them to believe that form was not to express a specific image, but rather a vehicle for the artist's emotions.

Finally, the design principles of balance and unity are emphasized in his artwork, where the plants in the pool of the work present a state of equanimity, i.e., the plants on the left and the right side of the pool are visually close in weight. In addition, despite the presence of many different objects, such as lotus flowers, clouds, and rosettes, they are all colored in blue. The application of these design principles hides the Confucian idea of "neutralization". Zhang Liqun (1997) points out that the idea of "neutralization" is to achieve harmony through reconciliation. It is characterized by harmony, balance, unity, moderation and uniformity in the law of art forms.

7. Environments

The concept of environment in the cultural model is divided into two types, one is the natural environment and the other is the socio-cultural environment. The environment is the biggest constraint on cultural development (Lu Bin, 1991).

Chen Weiyan (2008) points out that art as a form of culture, its formation and development cannot be separated from the social environment in which it is located. On the one hand, art expresses the development and change of the society, and on the other hand, the society also influences the development of art.

This work of art was created by the author in 2007, after the implementation of China's "reform and opening up" policy in 1978. The participation of Chinese culture in international cultural exchanges led to the weakening of traditional culture. Therefore, the intellectuals seeking the spirit of Chinese culture in the 1990s returned to classical Chinese philosophy for ultimate care and ethical paradigms (Tao Dongfeng et al., 2016). Based on the influence of such a social and cultural environment, painters are motivated to create. When Li Mingwei carries out his artistic creation, he constantly absorbs traditional culture and incorporates various artistic ideas, consciously linking his artistic creation with social and cultural development.

Painter Li Mingwei works and lives in Kaifeng, Henan Province, China, a place known for its history and culture. There is a strong atmosphere of traditional Chinese culture in the social environment around him. This cultural environment gives the painter a lot of inspiration, and the traditional cultural ideas presented in the form of his works are a source of inspiration and reference for the painter's creativity.

The lotus flower, the subject of the work, is a common natural landscape in daily life. This natural beauty of the lotus pond under the moonlight at night attracted the painter's eyes and inspired his desire to create, forming the basis for his work "Moonlight over the Lotus Pond".

8. Behaviour

Behaviour in culture can be understood through various methods. The study is based on his attitudes in terms of religious life, personal community and relationship with nature. Each ethnic group has its own attitude in facing the challenges of life in its environment (Sulaiman, 2022).

The behaviours and ethical concepts of a certain society always have to be reflected through the subject, content and ideas of art works, and any art is always a reflection of the social life of a certain era. And people's behaviours and ethical concepts are the main components of social life, therefore, art works mostly contain the contents of people's behaviours (Peng Jixiang, 2019).

The natural scenery depicted in the artwork is the result of the artist's careful observation of nature. The image...
shows the many forms of the lotus flower, the distant looming mountains and the serene sky. These images are concise but vivid. It reflects the artist's good observation of plants in nature in real life, and reflects the artist's love of nature.

The artist's use of the appearance of the lotus flower, which symbolises noble qualities, and the white color, which represents purity, to shape the image of his work relates to his view of life. It reflects his attitude and character as an artist in social life.

Behaviour is something inherent in the painter himself. In the work "Moonlight over the Lotus Pond", the painter tries to use the art form he created to convey information and emotions. He highlights traditional Chinese cultural elements and philosophical values in his artwork, demonstrating a unique cultural value, which is also determined by the painter's behaviour. It also proves the artist's esteem and recognition of his country's culture.

9. Necessity

Zhang Yanguo (2000) states that psychologists believe that need is desire. It is usually expressed in material aspects, such as living conditions, and spiritual aspects, such as art, literature, and morality. Spiritual needs are the reflection and product of cultural activities in a particular era.

In the context of the development of contemporary art in China, the needs embodied in artists' works can be divided into three types, the first being aesthetic needs, the second being emotional needs, and the third being cultural needs.

Hong Yan (2020) claims that art is a kind of spiritual product that creates aesthetic objects and satisfies people's aesthetic needs as its characteristic purpose and pursuit. In this artwork, it shows the subject of traditional cultural images, more minimalist colors, and indistinct object shapes. All these forms clearly show the aesthetic tendency of the artist, which is formed based on the artist's aesthetic needs and, at the same time, satisfies the aesthetic needs of some members of the society.

The noble qualities symbolised through form and subject in Li Mingwei's works are his pursuit of an ideal personality and his emotional needs. At the same time, the spiritual pursuit expressed in his works will also satisfy the psychological needs of other groups in society. Artworks can simultaneously satisfy the psychological needs of different groups of people, and art makes life better and more meaningful because it satisfies the psychological needs of human beings (Hong Fudan et al., 2016).

Art is a form of social and cultural expression. It is indispensable in the process of fulfilling social and cultural needs. In the process of creating the artwork "Moonlight over the Lotus Pond", the symbolic meaning and philosophical value that exists through the subject and art form is a continuation of traditional Chinese culture.

10. Conclusion

Li Mingwei's paintings are interpreted by means of oil painting. The forms presented in the works are not randomly arranged, they conform to the laws of the principles of artistic forms. All the arrangements and combinations of artistic elements in the works are the result of the artist's careful layout and thinking. It has its own uniqueness and beauty.

In the production of the painting "Moonlight over the Lotus Pond", the conception of the subject and the use of forms in the work took place on the basis of the core of Chinese culture, supported by several cultural concepts such as values, environment, necessity, and behaviour. These four cultural values were applied to develop the work under study.

The subject of the work's image was mainly influenced by traditional Chinese cultural thought, while the art form was influenced mainly by philosophical thought.

Art and culture are closely related, and they both come from the human mind. The appreciation of works of art can be explored not only from a formalist perspective but also from a cultural one. It is embodied in the process and mode of creation in painting, as well as the cultural significance expressed and implied in the artwork itself.

References
