
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Chinese Painting: Exploration and Comparison

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| ABSTRACT

Chinese painting is full of poetic, expressive power and rhythm, which is different from Western painting and could be unique in global art history and research. The poetic, expressive power and rhythm in Chinese painting have been unique in the global art world. Therefore, it should be evaluated correctly, thoroughly and accurately but not be included only as an example in the dominant Western art world. Doing comparisons between Chinese painting and Western painting is supposed to compare them with one another equally. Learning about the Chinese language and culture is also quite significant when studying Chinese painting to get to know it deeply enough and profoundly.

| KEYWORDS

Chinese Painting, Poetic, expressive power, Rhythm, Equal comparison, Chinese cultural studies.

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1. Introduction

Chinese painting is full of unique poetic, expressive power, rhythm and Chineseness. Methods and ways of exploring and comparing Chinese painting and Western painting are always onwards but seem not at an equal level. Along with the long art history, the exploration, research and studies in the field of Chinese painting and comparison between Chinese painting and Western painting have never stopped. A lot of scholars have done countless research and comparisons about them. Learning about Chinese painting is not easy and simple work to do, which takes time and energy and, most importantly, requires a solid foundation of art history and artistic knowledge as well as profound and well-rounded comprehension of it. This could not be based on a global evaluation system or a Western system but only on a Chinese system. Also, there are, indeed, many differences between Chinese painting and Western painting which are worth exploring. However, how to explore and evaluate Chinese painting accurately as well as compare it with Western painting respectively and well could be a significant key to truly understanding Chinese painting without any stereotypes, prejudice and condescension from the Western art world.

This article will be based on the existing research, findings and studies that scholars and experts have done to talk about the specialties in Chinese painting, including the poetic, expressive power, rhythm and Chineseness in it as well as try to look for proper ways and find out the appropriate method to do research on and learn about Chinese painting. Typical and famous Chinese paintings and Western paintings will be analyzed and compared in the article as examples to display the differences between these two painting styles and artistic types as well. It is significant to know about the mindset, structure, art history and relevant content of Chinese painting overall, perhaps have domestic experience under the circumstance of Chinese culture as well, then explore and study the poetic, expressive power, rhythm and Chineseness of it and compare it with Western style at an equal position in art history finally. Therefore, throughout the whole article, it is obvious that analysis and exploration of Chinese painting and ways and suggestions about doing a comparison between Chinese painting and Western painting will be mentioned in detail as well.

2. Exploration in Chinese Painting

When trying to do exploration and study Chinese painting, one is supposed to know about some of the most key elements, typical and artistic painting styles and concepts in Chinese painting, for instance, the poetic, expressive power (*Shi Yi*) of Chinese painting and the rhythm (*Qi Yun*) containing and hiding into the painting. According to Binyon, Chinese painting is about expression but not only about likeness (Binyon, 1923); it is obvious that the poetic, expressive power of Chinese painting really matters here. Although there is also such stuff called illusion versus expression in Western art, the expressive power in Chinese painting is completely different from it because it is poetic instead of realistic or straight forward presented. This is one of the most typical specialties in Chinese painting due to its uniqueness which Western painting does not have. It seems it is even hard to express or explain this special concept in English because it is not commonly seen or heard in the Western art world. However, when it comes to Chinese painting, this is one of the most significant and essential parts that researchers or scholars cannot avoid or ignore because the poetic, expressive power is probably one of the most essential essences in Chinese painting and displays both the explicit and implicit expressive power of Chinese painting. Its expressive power is not only visual but also emotional simultaneously. In art history, Chinese painting has always been poetic, which not only empowers its value of expression but also makes it stand out from all kinds of paintings in the world. People can hardly find this power in any of those oil paintings in the West, so it could help understand Chinese painting authentically and locally through this category.

2.1 Poetic Expressive Power

The concept of poetic, expressive power is originally from ancient Chinese poems, which means an artistic writing style of the poem within the range of Chinese aesthetics which could bring the poems mixed live artistic powers and emotions such as romantic creation and also make them visible and imaginative as images and paintings. Based on this foundation of ancient Chinese poetry, every Chinese poem could be drawn in a painting, and basically, every Chinese painting could be used to write poems as well, particularly in Chinese landscape paintings; they are tightly linked and connected and can not be separated and isolated, that is what exactly is called the integration of Chinese poem and Chinese painting (*Shi zhong you hua, Hua zhong you shi*). This is also a famous comment and evaluation phrase from Su Shi, one of the most well-known poets, literati, painters and calligraphers in the Song dynasty, to Wang Wei, one of the most famous poets and painters in the Tang Dynasty. Unlike French landscape paintings, such as oil paintings from Corot or Greek landscape paintings, which are so clear and straight forward, Chinese landscape paintings are usually emerging and submerging between there be, and there be not (Jullien, 2009). The paintings of Wang Wei are good examples of this viewpoint and the poetic, expressive power in Chinese painting; for instance, his painting *Hiking in the Snowy Mountains* (*Xue Shan Xing Lv Tu*) contains a lot of poetic elements in it. There are only three so small ink images of people in this painting, and the majority of it is the scenery of extending mountains, trees, wooden houses and snow which leaves people a lot of space for imagination and lets viewers think about the meanings and poetic world fully existed in this painting. In addition, the visible objective image (*Yi Xiang*) in these paintings with invisible subjective emotions from the painters is also supposed to be seen and appreciated due to its symbolic pictorial expressive function for the poetic, expressive power and the emotional conveyor function for the painters. Examples could be those typical mountains, waters, flowers and birds (*Shan Shui Hua Niao*) in Chinese painting, especially since Song Dynasty. The feeling of There be, and There be not, and the expression of presence and absence (Jullien, 2009) that could be brought to the viewers display the emotional power of its poetic power as well. While in Western painting, it is rare to see such kind of painting style. Western painting is realistic and like a window. Unlike Chinese painting, which is like a platform to exhibit all elements, images and things, it is not really about the true objects but more about poetic art. Therefore, it could also be said that Chinese poem is paintable and provides characterizing expression and version for Chinese painting.



Figure 1. Jean Baptist Camille Corot Memories of Mortefontaine
Source: Shuhua Art (2021).

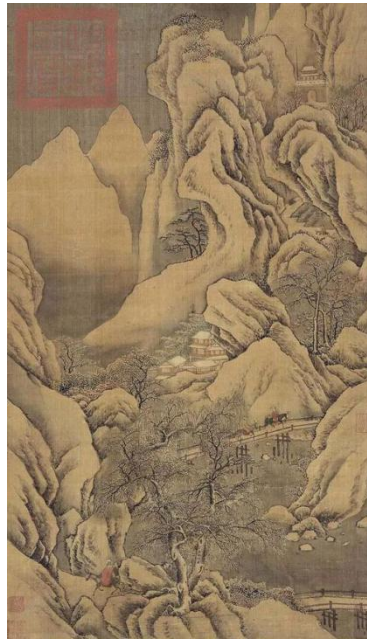


Figure 2. Wang Wei Hiking in the Snowy Mountains (Xue Shan Xing Lv Tu)
Source About Book and Paintings (2022).

2.2 Rhythm

Another one of the essential part of Chinese painting is the deep-rooted rhythm in it, as already mentioned in many professional books and papers. This is not only in Chinese painting but also popular in Chinese calligraphy and writing, so Chinese art is a combination and integration of all these sorts of subjects. That is also the reason a lot of famous Chinese painters are also well-known Chinese calligraphers and writers because they could use and convey the rhythm through their ink brushes in whatever kind and style of their artworks. Speaking of rhythm, the six laws of Xie He are also a must to mention because the activation and inspiring power of the rhythm (*Qi Yun Sheng Dong*) is the first law in this theory. As Roger Fry also wrote about it in his article, the rhythm of the lines is delineated and drawn by the feelings of the artists, which could communicate to us directly (Fry, 1956); those lines with either clear or vague forms are the containers and conveyors of the rhythm. Also, the lines are not only delineated to display the figures but also to be communicative to the viewers. Rhythm, which could express and convey the spirit and lively energy of Chinese paintings, is a standard to evaluate Chinese painting, in particular, figure painting first because the best way to evaluate whether a figure painting is good or not is by looking at its rhythm to see if it is deeply displaying the figure and analyzing if the eyes of the figure are active and expressive (*Chuan Shen*) enough. It spread to other types of painting then, but there is one thing that never changes the usage of rhythm is still the theme and the lines. Having an excellent and perfect rhythm in a Chinese painting is also one of the highest standards and goals for most Chinese painters now. Chinese painting is never about real delineation and reflection from the real world on the surface explicitly but mostly about the implicit existing and combining Chi, which could also be called rhythm.

2.3 Chineseness

These elements are actually really Chinese style things, including a lot of Chineseness. Chineseness means the specialty and uniqueness that only exist in Chinese painting, which has been highly accredited, recognized and appreciated over time in art history and the representation and symbols representing Chinese painting that Western painting does not have, which could help distinguish from other types and styles of paintings as well. Exploring Chinese painting cannot get rid of Chineseness and even needs to learn about it so profoundly as well as try to get away from the current dominated Western system in the art world, which to be specific, the European and American style of evaluation and way of thinking towards art, fine arts, art history and art world particularly Chinese painting. It could be difficult to really do so, but it is supposed to be done.

3. Methods to Do Comparisons in Chinese Painting

The article Art and History: Exploring the counterchange condition, written by Martin Powers, it is talked about how to study non-European cultures but not specifically Chinese culture and Chinese painting though they are mentioned in it, so how to study Chinese painting or to be detailed, how to do a comparison between Chinese painting and Western painting could be discussed here. It has always been a heated topic because there is no such common way or standard to do so. Everybody has his or her own opinions, which are possibly even hard or unrealistic to realize or practice. What is trying to come up here is looking for practical and possible ways that people can take action.

3.1 Chinese Language and Cultural Studies

First of all, language plays a really important role in this point, including translation. Although it is supposed that scholars and researchers who do a comparison between Chinese painting and Western painting speak and understand the local languages, such as both Chinese and English, it is still probable that some people who do not even speak or comprehend the languages so well just start translating or doing researches. This is definitely not fine because misunderstandings and inaccurate and incorrect translations would lead to a lot of confusion and mistakes when doing research on Chinese painting. Besides, there is a huge problem in language which is a wide range of Chinese proper nouns and words in Chinese paintings cannot be translated into English or other languages so perfectly because they might not even have that kind of words or concepts in their art history or paintings in the Western art world and the translation version of some Chinese painting theories might not be exactly the same as the original version of meanings, so it is truly a struggle, and the only way is probably the scholars and researchers learning Chinese so well like native speakers and then trying to do explanation to other westerners who do not speak the language. This is also an ideal way for them to avoid essentialism which has been mentioned by Powers in his article as well (Powers, 1995). It is possible for them to get rid of this way if they can comprehend the language well enough and would not ignore other important things in Chinese texts and context.

3.2 Domestic Chinese Experience

Moreover, knowing Chinese is perhaps not sufficient yet. Due to the dominance of Western art instead of Eastern art over time, it seems it is unavoidable for European and American artists and scholars to be influenced by Western systems and painting when evaluating Chinese art for the reason that they are immersed in the Western world, not Chinese society. Therefore, it would be better if they could ever get a chance to stay in China for a certain period of time or a long enough time to immerse themselves in the Chinese environment and domestic Chinese social system. Culture, including literature, history, painting, music, society, and so on, can never be viewed respectively because they are always together. When comparing Chinese painting with others, it must be based on the Chinese painting itself first and then do comparison. Only when people are really in the atmosphere, and they have a variety of first-hand materials, can they truly understand Chinese painting to some extent? This is not encouraging or appealing that everyone who wants to do this field of Chinese painting should go to China, but their local experience would be less or even not be there, and their comprehension and understanding of Chinese painting are not likely to be complete and well-rounded sufficiently, probably, if they do not spend time on China. Except for that, it is also likely that people who have been to China still have condescended viewpoints towards Chinese painting, not to mention those who have never been to China but do the studies of Chinese painting might still hold on stereotypes and prejudice towards it based on what they have read, learned and heard in Western academia system. Therefore, this is one of the unavoidable and significant aspects which needs to be taken into consideration.

3.3 Comparisons between Chinese Painting and Western Painting

Some valuable perspectives from Martin Powers have already been presented, such as escaping from ethnic innuendo, avoiding essentialism and nationalism, developing comparisons dialectically, and so on (Powers, 1995). There is one outstanding point among all these above not having a double standard. Martin has talked about several theoretical but also practical ways to do so, but the double standard part is probably the key. No matter whether the double standard is explicit or implicit, it has been existing for quite a long time and could ruin the comparison between Chinese painting and Western painting because Westerners never stand on an equal stage to look at Eastern art. They think they have a higher hierarchy than the East and kind of look down upon Eastern art. Comparison is we put things together in the same or similar way, and it should not be done unequally. It is interesting, but to be honest, westerners usually have this kind of condescension, while Chinese do not even talk about it. They do not expect or require others to think in their way, but this does not mean others could do that to them. However, when it comes to rethinking the way of comparison (Powers, 1995), it is not mentioned in detail how to do it. When it is about comparison, it is so important for people not to have any presupposition or assumption in advance. It seems it could be hard to get away from it, but it is true that a lot of people might have a mindset by default before they actually do the comparison, so having learned and known about both cultures and artworks matters a lot here. Comparing Chinese painting and Western painting needs to have someone who is an expert in painting but holding on objective mindsets on both sides of painting without prejudice and can put themselves in the contextualizing environment at the moment as well (Elkins, 2010).

4. Conclusion

Exploring the poetic, expressive power and rhythm in Chinese painting as well as doing a comparison between Chinese painting and Western painting is like the process step by step; when learning about Chinese painting studies profoundly and well enough, it could be time to do comparison gradually as well. While doing a comparison, it is not only regarding professional research but also about Chinese painting and culture introduction and spreading. It is good to have voices from the Chinese painting side rather than the majority of painting and art world is only existed and controlled in the Western side. This does not mean changing the current system or evaluation process completely, but it should be allowed to let Chinese painting speak and have the cultural status in the entire world of art and painting, encouraging people to rethink and reevaluate the way of looking at Chinese painting

and the methodology of comparison, correct mistakes and stereotypes deep rooted and existed towards Chinese painting to make sure the whole system regarding art and fine arts including painting creation, evaluation and comment is fair and objective sufficiently. In short, it is supposed to have an equal position for both Chinese painting and Western painting.

Overall and last but not least, it is important to go through and study general and specific content regarding Chinese art and art history, the background of Chinese painters, the spirit and essence of Chinese painting, and explore the poetic, expressive power, rhythm and Chineseness of Chinese painting initially, try to stay in local Chinese culture zone for a certain amount of time then and make a comparison between Chinese painting and Western painting equally and fairly without stereotypes, prejudice or condescension at the sight of global art world gradually and eventually. This article talks about the above research findings but still has limitations, such as a lack of sufficient enriching examples, professional theoretical support and depth of analysis. Hopefully, future research and findings can fill up these limitations and go in-depth into the exploration of Chinese painting and the effective and proper ways and methods of comparison between Chinese painting and Western painting to ensure Chinese painting has its supposed influential and equal position and status in world art history.

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