



## A Hundred-Year History of the Nationalization of Chinese Oil Painting

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### Abstract

Chinese oil painting creation in the true sense began in the early days of last century, from the end of the 19th century to the 1920s and 1930s, and the oil painting creation in this period laid foundation for the later development of Chinese oil painting, which made pioneering contribution; From the 1930s to the late 1970s was the second creation period of Chinese oil painting, when the oil painting creation and society and realpolitik were combined together, resulting in the art of oil painting entering common people's life and accepted by the general public; The oil painting creation since the new period is the third stage, when the nationalization of Chinese oil painting has been recognized by the world and become a component of the worldwide oil painting creation.

**Key words:** Chinese oil painting creation; Nationalization; Art spirit

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### INTRODUCTION

The nationalization of Chinese oil painting means that the oil painting, as an imported form of art from the west, which is learned, studied and transformed creatively by Chinese artists, finally can truly be used for their own purpose, to make free artistic expression and artistic creation. In some sense, artistic creation is the

combination of the artist's life experience and collective cultural experiences of the community he belongs to. What makes an excellent artist outstanding is his ability in connecting the life experience meaningful for him with the cultural experiences shared among his community, with such experiences being expressed in a proper way. Art is a unique cultural form, and one of its fundamental functions is communicating emotion, ideas and knowledge. Therefore, although artistic creation features strong individuality, it is backed by common cultural experiences of a community or a nation. When it comes to oil painting, of course, the common experiences shown in Chinese oil painting as well as the way to express them boast both personal and national traits. Just as Hermann Bahr, a German aesthetician, said, the history of painting coincides with the history of observation, and the changes in observational method result in the evolution of painting techniques. Painting techniques are developing in a bid to keep up with changes in observation patterns that is closely associated with people's relationship with the world: a person always observes the world with the attitude he has towards it. Hence the history of painting overlaps that of philosophy, or even the unwritten history of philosophy. Why do Chinese artists choose to perceive the world with oil painting, an artistic form having offered a way to observe the world? What kind of impact has been exerted on the nation's "observational method" by the evolution of China's society in the last 100 years? What has been observed by the Chinese nation in the sufferings and great changes it has undergone during this time? All above are well-witnessed by oil paintings that have been nationalized in the last century.

### THE FIRST STAGE: 1890S~1930S

The nationalization of Chinese oil painting can be roughly divided into three historical stages: the first stage is from the end of the 19th century to the early 1930s, which

can be said to be the early stage of Chinese oil painting. Western oil paintings came from the western world into China with missionaries during Ming and Qing Dynasties, with a lot of Chinese elements such as figures and landscapes being featured in them later: maybe this is how oil paintings were firstly introduced into China, but their nationalization did not begin simultaneously with their arrival. Generally speaking, Chinese oil painting in the real sense dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the times atmosphere of the declining of traditional culture and the eastward transmission of western sciences, many young students abandoned traditional paintings and traveled to Europe and the United States and Japan, to learn western painting, hoping to change the destiny of themselves and the nation through learning advanced western culture. These young artists and many other overseas students had the same confusion and contradictions: they hated the western powers that invaded China and colonized China, but they had to admit that the western culture was advanced and developed, and just in such pain and contradictions they learned and created. From the earlier Li Tiefu, Li Shutong and others, to Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, Pan Yuliang, Wen Yiduo, Liu Haisu, etc in the 1920s and 1930s, they not only taught themselves creation, but also were engaged in oil painting education, as the real first generation in the history of Chinese oil painting, starting a trend. At the beginning of the century when Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian and others were learning painting in Europe, it was just the thriving period of the western modernism trend of thought in literature and art. In the field of painting, the realism, impressionism, post-impressionism of the traditional academism and other modernist schools were mixing and coexisting, so the beginners could choose freely from their own interests and needs, to transplant the various schools once in diachronic development, which founded and promoted the development and prosperity of Chinese oil painting creation in this period.

Most of these pioneers began to learn drawing in their childhood, and they were taught traditional Chinese painting and culture. Take Xu Beihong as an example. Teaching in a village school, his father was good at painting flowers, birds and figures. Xu Beihong, who studied at home, had been interested in painting under the influence of his father in childhood. So he learned painting from his father and soon could offer some help. During his boyhood, he vagabonded with father and lived on selling calligraphic works and drawings. He started to teach painting in primary school and middle school at 17, and had travelled to places beyond his hometown, such as Shanghai, for selling his drawings. Lin Fengmian had a similar experience, with his father, a folk painter, instructing him to copy *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* when he was very young. As a little boy, he was fond of poetry and painting. Having won appreciation

from his teacher with his artistic talent, he had organized a poetry club in middle school. After they went abroad to learn and accept the western painting, consciously or unconsciously they integrated the spirit of Chinese traditional culture, and the art spirit of traditional Chinese painting into the oil painting creation, to show the national cultural elements in their works. Although the New Culture Movement (also called May Fourth Movement) spared no effort to advocate learning from the west and deny tradition, it is rather difficult for a nation to abandon its traditional legacy. Just like trying to leave the earth by pulling one's own hair, the attempt of throwing away tradition will surely go in vain. Indeed, it has already been an undoubted fact that their works had been infiltrated with cultural elements from tradition. Many of them consciously fused the traditional consciousness of Chinese and western cultures. For instance, when learning painting in France, Lin Fengmian was influenced by Yancesse, dean of Dijon Academy of Art and an artist specialized in relief sculpture. He no longer worshiped the western academism, but turned to the new art which was similar to the traditional art of China. While learning the realism art of western oil painting, he put more attention to the art of impressionism and expressionism, focusing on the form and creativity of art. Lin Fengmian as well as his schoolmates Lin Wenzheng and Wu Dayu, who were also overseas students in France, set up the "Hoppus Society", finding another way to link up Chinese and western art. By using the brush pen for traditional Chinese painting, Lin Fengmian combined the basis of traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy with the form, color and composition consciousness of the west. This free and natural combination enabled the Chinese artists to express completely Chinese feelings in modern ways, and to free themselves from the effects of the western art philosophy. Many future generations regard him as a pioneer of Chinese modern painting, who had profound influence on Chinese oil painting creation.

As a category of western art, oil painting is saturated with the spirit of western culture in all the composing elements. As the deepening of the understanding and learning of oil painting creation, the Chinese oil painting artists gradually performed experiments in all aspects such as theme and technique, making attempts in using this western art form to express the social customs, aesthetic interests of China. By portraying China's historical sufferings and realistic condition, they express the concept of life and aesthetic ideal of this community and nation. In terms of the scene structure and visual image, the traditional cultural elements were seen everywhere, such as dragon and phoenix pattern, Chinese character image and Chinese painting image etc, even in the technique level of oil painting creation, from light and shade figuration to outline drawing and flat coloring, from the three-dimensional perspective to "scatter perspective",

the Chinese traditional painting elements also gradually infiltrate, showing a strong nationalization tendency.

## THE SECOND STAGE: 1930S~1970S

From the late 1930s to that of 1970s, it was the second stage of the nationalization of Chinese oil painting. This was a stage when the oil painting nationalization in China continued to expand and deepen. It began with the whole nation's participation in Anti-Japanese War, when the oil painting artists used painting as a weapon, becoming a second front of the Anti-Japanese War. Realism became the mainstream of painting during this period, showing the artists' strong national consciousness. After the founding of new China, the realism oil painting creation had been further developed, with the emergence of a large number of oil painting creations in the themes of revolutionary history and praising the new realities. The oil painting creation in the 17<sup>th</sup> year after the founding of PRC showed strongly the pride of the Chinese nation, which had suffered from poverty and weakness for a hundred years. The art of oil painting got unprecedented popularity in China. During this period, in terms of oil painting, the art and reality, art and politics closely connected which had never happened before. From the whole nation's participation in the Anti-Japanese war, to the later art as a political means in 1940s, from the praise of new China in the 17<sup>th</sup> year since the founding of new China to the extremes of the cultural revolution, though the development of Chinese oil painting in nearly half a century was solemn and stirring and full of difficulties, the art of oil painting was accepted by Chinese people depending on various external factors.

In the early days of last century, the west was in the period of modernism trend of thought in literature and art, and the modernism in the western trend of thought in literature and art was a certain transcendence and criticism of the 19th century traditional realism. However, the western literary and artistic works learned, translated and introduced by the Chinese intellectuals in the May 4th movement was the 19th century realism in the western world which had already been "outdated". From the perspective of comparative culture, the acceptance of a foreign culture is a strong purposeful choice for receivers, and the reason why realism became a temporary choice of the Chinese intellectuals at that time was that they had found from it the weapon to criticize the reality and enlighten the nation; In terms of painting, the traditional literati paintings that were temperate and free were inappropriate in the era of the May 4th cultural movement, and were criticized and abandoned as the traditional culture, while one of the reasons why the western oil painting were preferred by the Chinese intellectuals was its realism, which was consistent with the new culture's spirit of intervening and criticizing the reality. After 1930s

and 1940s, with the change of social situation, especially the further strengthening of the relation between art and politics, the national enthusiasm rose to an all-time high, when literature and art again were closely combined with reality and politics, and the enthusiasm of the traditional Chinese "literati and officialdom" class that "every man has a share of responsibility for the fate of his country" and the tradition of "writings are for conveying truth" of traditional Chinese culture were further publicized, and the realistic spirit of oil painting fit in easily with the need of the modern intellectuals to concern about the society and reflect reality. Artists united under the banner of the National Arts Festival Anti-Japanese Association, which created a rare unity in the circle of literature and art since the May 4th movement, when the traditional and modern, the Chinese painting and oil painting, and different groups and schools found peace with one another, which accelerated the nationalization of oil painting creation. If the oil painting before the 1930s was only a few people's business, the oil painting creation and appreciation had undoubtedly become popular and universal after experiencing the whole nation cultural movements of the Anti-Japanese War, the 17 years since the founding of new China and the "revolutionary art" during the Cultural Revolution

## THE THIRD STAGE: 1980S~1990S

The third stage refers to the Chinese oil painting creation since the new period. First is the oil painting creation in the 1980s, when the ideological and cultural atmosphere is similar to that of the May 4th times that the unprecedented cultural enthusiasm of intellectuals showed, on one hand, the active participation in the reality and the profound criticism on it, and on the other hand was the emancipation of mind and desire to understand and learn western culture and art. In terms of oil painting creation, in one aspect, it was the regression of realism art tradition. The creations of Luo Zhongli, Chen Danqing and He Duoling in the 1980s depicted the nation which had gone through so many disasters with realism, recovering the tradition of realism in the early artistic creation.

In the other aspect is the "trendy art" experiment with a strong form of liberation. Oil painting is the art of west, the development and change of which have been the focus of the Chinese oil painting creators since introduced to China. Before the 1930s and 1940s, they learned from Japan and Europe and America, and after the founding of the country, they learned from Soviet Union. In the new era, when the door of the country was opened, facing the colorful western cultures and the thoughts of contemporary European and American art which swarm into China, people felt dizzy and obviously anxious and worried about being "denationalized from the earth" and depressed and hungry due to several decades of closed

door policy. Trendy artists had carried on bold, fast transplant and practice on western modernism, and these trendy experiments to study and imitate western modern art reflected that the artists desired to communicate with western contemporary art and to grasp the cultural reality of the times, behind which was still the current social realities and human ideal of China. The “Trendy Art” in the 1980s made form experiments through comprehensive introduction of the various styles of modern art from the west, to deny and eliminate the restrictions and influences of several decades of single political ideology on artistic creation, which objectively liberated the oil painting art form and endowed purer aesthetic form to the artistic creation in the new era. On the forms of art, the “Trendy Art” in the 1980s gave a shock to the Chinese oil painting, urging the artists to emancipate mind and improve art form innovation, which enhanced the Chinese oil painting creation to an unprecedented height.

In 1990s, the society was in transition to center on market economy, the whole society was freed rapidly from the single ideological opposite relations, and literature and art were also set free from the constraints of politics and ideology. People gradually calmed down from the enthusiasm of the enlightenment, back to focus on mundane life and realistic life. Many works of art began to display the local conditions and customs, regional culture and real life, with which the creators were familiar, and the technique of expression of Chinese traditional painting was also concerned by more and more oil painting creators, and transformed innovatively to integrate into the oil painting creation. Since the 1990s, oil painting creation has been more and more close to the real society of China, and has become an important part of national culture. In the meantime, with the deepening of the connection between China and the world, China’s oil painting creation has strengthened its connection with the world art, to become an important part of the art of oil painting in the world.

Compared with the western oil painting existing for hundreds of years, Chinese oil painting is still very young, but learning from the west and focusing on China’s

social reality and inheriting national culture spirit are not contradictory. The way to develop Chinese oil painting creation is surely the nationalization of oil painting, but there are two blind spots we need to avoid in the nationalization of oil painting: one is to avoid the simple and mechanical understanding of “only the national can be international”. The nationalization of oil painting creation means that oil painting creation should express the national emotion, aesthetic ideal and certain cultural habits, rather than the excessive worship of national culture. The other is the mentality of foreign worship and cultural tributary. The nationalization way with the purpose to come into view of the international powerful cultures, to attract the attention of international exhibition planners, and to cater to the curiosity of the western powerful cultures about China is not really to reflect the Chinese society from reality, and is also not desirable.

Throughout history, modern Chinese had suffered many mishaps for one hundred years and was influenced by the social environment. Though it is inevitable that art and society will influence each other, art is not merely prosperous on the surface, which needs more accumulation of life. After experiencing many times of political and cultural movements, especially the cultural storm of the Great Cultural Revolution, our nation and our artists’ ability to feel life has been completely destroyed, and it may need quite a long time, even several generations’ time, to restore this ability, which is the reality faced by our contemporary art, including oil painting. However, life goes on, from the ancient times to modern times, “the reason why they need artist is that no community altogether knows its own heart; and by failing in his knowledge a community deceives itself on the one subject concerning which ignorance means death”<sup>①</sup>. To understand and know our nation and ourselves still depends on us and our own artists.

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