



Intercultural Perspectives on Image Construction and Aesthetic Narrative in Chinese Painting

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Supported by the Humanities and Social Sciences Planning Project of Chongqing Education Commission (20SKGH194, 2020); Phased results of the scientific research project of Chongqing Three Gorges University (19QN15, 2019).

Received 12 September 2021; accepted 20 October 2021

Published online 26 December 2021

Abstract

Visual media are advancing at a breakneck pace in the modern era. Images, as a form of cultural communication that is critical, contain an abundance of narrative meanings. Due to the similarity of painting image symbols, it's worth considering how images express the narrative's metaphorical function. In light of this, this paper aims to analyze some representative contemporary Chinese paintings. On the one hand, it is to conduct cross-cultural research into the narrative methods of Chinese painting images' image themes and visual symbols. On the other hand, it is to investigate the cross-cultural narration and appreciation of images. We hope that this study will deepen our understanding of these works and their image narration, assist cross-cultural audiences in comprehending the narrative methods of Chinese painting images and the corresponding Chinese culture, heighten the viewer's aesthetic appreciation, and promote cultural interaction between the East and the West.

Key words: Images of Chinese painting; Intercultural studies; Aesthetic appreciation; Aesthetic narrative; Image construction

Li, C. L., & Saat, M. K. (2021). Intercultural Perspectives on Image Construction and Aesthetic Narrative in Chinese Painting. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 17(4), 53-58. Available from:

<http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/12311>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12311>

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, images and visual culture have been studied classically in art history, the humanities, and social sciences, and have frequently been incorporated into cross-disciplinary studies such as iconography, image turn, visual turn, and the spatial turn etc. Pictorial narratives, in addition to linguistic texts, are metaphorical expressions of visual culture's pictorial images. Paintings are created by first capturing visual material, then translating certain visual characteristics of the image into a pictorial language, and finally innovating the image's subject and content narrative. The meaning of an image is determined by its history and culture. "It will never be complete but will always be a fluid image subject to change at any time. That is, it varies not only between cultural contexts but also between epochs. As a result, there is no single, unchanging, universal 'true meaning of the image', "according to Hall (2001). It requires the viewer to interpret the image of the painting in light of the current cultural context. While aesthetic appreciation is a more effective way to engage viewers in primary art appreciation than pictorial technique, cultural diversity presents unique challenges for foreign audiences, and a divide between author and audience in terms of pictorial narrative and cultural transmission persists. Cultural-historical perspectives on image capture, appreciation of traditional Chinese painting, and cross-cultural explorations of pictorial images and aesthetic experiences, including interaction design and psychology. Surprisingly, the intertextual relationship between the construction of pictorial images and aesthetic narratives has not been adequately investigated from an aesthetic, ontological perspective of artistic creation, especially given how few

studies have taken Chinese pictorial images as their object of study and investigated the connection between Chinese pictorial images and aesthetic narratives in any systematic way, such as through expository writing. Meanwhile, among the works on ancient Western painting is “Image and Myth: A History of Pictorial Narration in Greek Art” (Giuliani, 2013).

However, when it comes to the pictorial narrative of Chinese painting, for example, Wang (2005) study of two Chinese visual art research practices from the methodological and objectivist perspectives, Zhang (2017), and Shang (2019) respective have conducted research on the pictorial construction of historical painting using the pictorial narrative method, but the mechanism of the aesthetic narrative of images from a cross-cultural perspective has not been established. Therefore, this paper is based on the findings of scholars Martin Powers and Craig Clunes on Chinese art history, as well as on Panofsky’s traditional “iconography” and W.J.T. Mitchell’s “iconographic”. The primary objective of this empirical study is to examine the aesthetic narrative associations of Chinese painting images from a cross-cultural perspective, using examples from aesthetic and visual culture, within the framework of Panofsky’s traditional “iconography” theory, W.J.T. Mitchell’s “iconography” theory, and Pierce’s semiotics theory etc. Through the analysis and interpretation of these works, this study aims to explain the narrative approach and aesthetic experience of Eastern and Western pictorial expressions. The importance and originality of this study are that it explores and interprets the meaning of images generated by the presentation of cross-cultural images of contemporary Chinese painting, thereby constructing an image of Chinese culture through artistic images and contributing to increased aesthetic appreciation and cultural exchange among cross-cultural audiences.

1. CHINESE PAINTING’S IMAGE NARRATIVE AND VISUAL SYMBOL

The term “image narrative” was coined by Tzvetan Todorov, a French literary theorist, in his book “The Grammar of the Decameron” (1969) in which he proposed that “narratology” is the science of narrating works. The term narratology is derived from the Latin root *narrato* (narrative) and the Greek suffix *logia* (science). Roland Barthes argues that non-literary works, such as painting, film, theater, and conversation, all have a narrative function. Since the 1960s, the study of image narrative has drawn on phenomenology, sociology, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, aesthetics, and ethics, among others, who have discussed image narrative in terms of laws, methods, and functions and attempted to improve the relevant conceptual system.

In China, pictorial narrative painting began with primitive totems, rock paintings, and frescoes and has

since expanded to include Chinese paintings, New Year paintings, novel illustrations, advertising paintings, newspapers, comic strips, films, television, and advertisements, as well as new media design. It is a visual narrative expressed through images, and the narrative can be a single image narrative or a diverse image narrative, for example, incorporating both static and moving images in two states. In terms of time, the narrative is not limited to the present, but can be extended to the past or the future; in terms of space, the narrative is expansive, allowing the author and audience to think infinitely in space. In addition to expressing personal emotions, the narrative can also elevate national civilization, national spirit, and the construction of cultural images.

The process by which a national spirit and cultural image are developed. Image narratives must be both “technical and poetic,” “poetic and historical,” and “pictorial and historical” to be missionary and evocative in a particular historical context (Yu, 2017). In other words, pictorial narrative refers to the entire process of pictorial narrative within a particular historical and social context, in which the artist examines or views an aesthetic image with an aesthetic attitude, combines personal poetic imagination with image reconstruction, and employs various media to create a unique context or spread the spirit of a particular era using historical and artistic reality. For instance, the various animal images found in Palaeolithic rock paintings throughout Europe, such as in the south of France and around the Franks in northern Spain (Azéma, 2021), reflect primitive human concepts of totem worship, witchcraft beliefs, and veneration of reproduction. For example, during the same period, the ‘Deer Hunt’ rock painting from northern China depicts a hunter shooting a wild deer, a rock painting that reflects a witchcraft scenario and represents the success of hunting and animal reproduction by primitive humans.

The numerous images of “dogs” surrounding the Bo people’s hanging coffins in Gongxian County, Sichuan, are intended to represent the “dog’s” supernatural power as a visual symbol. According to ancient Chinese texts, the people of this region revered dogs, just as the Huns revered wolves. The majority of images in primitive rock paintings are of dancing figures, humanoid figures, animal or hunting figures, and so on. The copied drawings evolved into pictorial narrative symbols, and the images were analogically combined and reconstructed to create new culturally significant written and visual symbols that are not representations of concrete objects but rather abstracted image-processed images. Ostriches, bison, camels, yaks, antelopes, northern goats, reindeer, wolves, tigers, leopards, jackals, dogs, horses, and donkeys are among the pictorial symbols. Most of them are exaggerated, deformed, enlarged, reduced, or strange-looking, and they progress from figurative to abstract, from objects to images, and from images to symbols,

in a majestic and reverent state of mind. Additionally, a significant number of them are mysteriously tinted, inspiring endless reverie and reflecting a sublime beauty.

Similar pictorial symbols appear in contemporary painting, for example, in the Chinese painter Xu Lei's depictions of mountains, rocks, trees, and horses, where the images are symbolic manifestations of the unnatural in nature that exists between the real and the imaginary, the ancient and the modern, and the Chinese and the Western. For example, in his solo exhibition on the theme of Interact, which opened in Madrid, Spain (2018), the artist combined European Renaissance frescoes of mountains and rocks with Chinese frescoes to depict the representation of stone in both Eastern and Western painting. He attempts to depict the same thing in a variety of cultural and contextual settings, utilizing the language and techniques of contemporary neo-brush painting to highlight the cultural and aesthetic differences between China and the West. Thus, the image serves as more than a symbolic representation; it also serves as a reflection of the cultural spirit of various countries and nations. Simultaneously, we sense a mysterious and absurd thought in the artist's earlier works, such as "The Dreaming", "The Night Watch", and "Day in the Night" etc. The same can be said of "Lost Fragrance," a Chinese paper painting depicting a white horse behind a blue-grey curtain, its head stretched out in a melancholy gaze at the black high heels on the classical furniture in front of it; the floor is a checkered pattern echoing the blue-grey and black furniture, all of which appear to be in conversation, a narrative expression of image and idea. The stage's melancholy white horse, the terrified warbler, the classical cane chairs, and the draped curtain serve as visual symbols.

"Pictorial images are representations of historical or religious events in a visual format", It is Panofsky's definition of iconography. In other words, pictorial narrative requires insight into how certain themes and concepts have been represented through objects and events over time, and how their meaning and content must be further interpreted to create a world with "symbolic" value. The iconographer's task, he argues, is to decode and explain the concepts concealed beneath visual symbols. In this context, how can the cross-cultural image of Chinese painting be transformed to reflect the image of cultural ontology in contemporary painting? All of these are worthwhile considerations based on the visual symbols of images.

2. CULTURAL ONTOLOGY'S IDENTITY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

Images are visual forms constructed from symbolic carriers and symbols of concepts, emotions, meanings,

and values that exist independently of and in relation to words, speech, and physical practices. This is particularly evident in painter Xu Lei's 2017 series of works based on the image of "bed". "The Beds of the World" (e.g., Figure 1) series depicts images of Eastern culture, such as the couch bed in "Han Xizai's Night Banquet" of the Fifth Dynasty, the screen bed in Zhou Wenru's "The Meeting of Chess on a Heavy Screen", and Japanese tatami mats, alongside European medieval clerics' beds, Persian hammocks, and Freud's hypnotic beds. The image has a strong literary narrative. According to the painter, he is employing a modern vernacular language to speak cross-contextually about ancient times. Influenced by Freudian psychology, the painter wishes to convey a sense of despair or subconsciousness through his painted images, believing that the image's symbol, the "water wave", represents time's encroachment.



Figure 1
Xu Lei, "World's Bed-1 Silk". Paper, 52cm x 113 cm, 2017



Figure 2
Xu Lei, "Mutual Walk". Silk, 106cm x 149 cm, 2017

The traditional ancient Chinese images in his work represent China's ancient aesthetics, whereas the approach is an expression of cultural ontological self-awareness.

The artist attempts to convey the dynamic nature of ideas through the image's form, which narrates an obscure imagery of point and beauty through images. 'Mutual Walk' (e.g., Figure 2) by Xu depicts a 'horse' divided into two parts but integrated by the artist's deft handling, the upper part depicting a retro-toned Chinese courtyard stallion from the Tang and Song dynasties with its feminine beauty, while the lower part depicts a light blue-grey Western Greek antiquity. The lower section depicts

a masculine horse from a western ancient Greek temple relief in a light blue-grey hue, evoking the masculine beauty of male strength and alluding to warriors, psychics, and fertility. The fusion of images from various cultures spans time and space, and Xu's image is associated with Chinese philosophy, as stated in Chuang Tzu: "Life between heaven and earth is like the passing of a white horse, a flash of time." In Chinese culture, the horse is a representation of time, memory, and longing. Nor is it comparable to Surrealist painting, in which imagery serves as the visual symbol for the proposition: a burning trumpet, a shoe missing a toe, an entire tree hidden inside a leaf, and a bleeding plaster statue. Surrealism employs visual experience to interpret "external reality" through these uncanny images, which reconfigure the image's imagery in a different time and space. However, Xu's image narratives merely reorder the relationships and contexts of images, employing images from diverse cultures to represent the subconscious 'psychological reality' of visual experience.

The Wedding of Van Eyck, a contemporary Chinese painter Chen Lin's paper work, replaces the image of a bird with that of a 'human' in Jan van Eyck's Renaissance portrait of the Arnolfini couple, while The Dance of Botticelli employs Chinese painting to reorganize and transform Botticelli's classic Western image of the Holy Confessions. "Botticelli's Dance" The Fish's Delight-Cheng Huai is based on Zhuangzi's aesthetic concept of "Cheng Huai Taste, Cheng Huai View the Elephant," in which the bird looks down at the mysterious and philosophical fish swimming in the water below. The work 'Sense of Porcelain-Out' chronicles the drama of the birds, the painted book, and the porcelain, juxtaposing time and space, movement and stillness, and thus creating a mysterious classical beauty. The work's composition is divided and reconfigured visually with images, visually combining natural objects with non-naturalistic elements to create a cultural space that transcends visual experience. This requires a more nuanced interpretation of image and meaning, image and medium, and image and painter, informed by the viewer's knowledge of the painting's context, period, and cultural transmission. This is also the transition of Chinese contemporary painting from nature to culture, with images taking the place of textual narratives, conveying new narrative meanings through form and language, and establishing a shift in cultural terminology and a system of pictorial discourse as Chinese contemporary art progresses (Ning, 2009).

The art of the past becomes the image of the present, and reconstruction is the only way forward. Because the artwork has a cultural connotation, we can only return to the artwork's meaning through a space-time and space defined by culture (Panofsk, 1955). He argues that the deeper meaning of a work of art cannot be elucidated solely through image identification but must be understood in the broader humanities context. In other

words, reconstructing the work necessitates a return to the historical context in which it was created, and pictorial narratives can be achieved only through this cycle. It is therefore critical to examine image narratives in relation to cultural ontologies.

3 . I N T E R P R E T A T I O N O F C O N T E M P O R A R Y C H I N E S E P A I N T I N G I M A G E S T Y L E S A N D A E S T H E T I C S Y M B O L S F R O M A C R O S S - C U L T U R A L P E R S P E C T I V E

In prehistoric times, prior to the invention of writing, images were used to record rituals, hunting, and other activities. As mankind continued to develop and evolve, and the complexity of what he desired to express increased, he began to write, particularly in pictographs, which implied a metaphorical rhythm at the time. Images have always contained metaphors (Prinz, 2021), and the origins of art are associated with witchcraft, mythology, and religion. In ancient Greek art, gods were frequently depicted, either symbolizing a particular trait or metaphorically representing an abstract object. These later forms of iconography are anthropomorphic and allegorical in nature. However, truly symbolic images emerged during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, when artists developed various symbols and allegories and applied them to their daily lives. As a result, image symbolism persists to the present day.

The symbolism of images is inextricably linked to style, as suggested in 1915 by the Rhenish aesthete Wölfflin in his book "Stylistics of Art", There is no one-size-fits-all artistic form or style. Artworks and their sociohistorical styles, visual forms, and cultural dimensions constitute a constant intervention of images and imagery. Painting is not merely a representation of the world..... An analytical approach focused on quality and representation cannot address all relevant facts exhaustively, necessitating a reproductive approach". From this vantage point, stylistics is concerned with certain "standards" of visual signification, which constitute the pictorial image's unique value. The purpose of the pictorial image is not to describe the world as it is, but to transform it through the visual image's imaginative possibilities. This means that painting is no longer about "drawing a picture," but about conveying the painting's meaning and emotion through the painting. The creative expression demonstrates how this narrative and aesthetic expression of the image is accomplished. The composition, lines, colors, ink and brushwork of an image all work in tandem with the image's metaphor. The various lines, shapes, and styles in a work express the painter's inner thoughts and feelings, which instill in us beliefs, doubts, hopes, needs, and ideal forms of attachment.

As the new development brought about by multimedia visuals and technological innovations, the expression of painting image metaphors is influenced by unique social environments, political concepts, cultural blending, and painting styles, and the metaphors of painting images are connected to life experiences, complex emotional experiences, a rich cultural accumulation, and value aspirations of truth, goodness, and beauty. In a cross-cultural context, human aesthetic experience and perception are constantly evolving to accommodate the visual impact of the existing environment, and the phenomenon of metaphor in painting images has grown in popularity. As previously stated, Xu Lei, who views Freud's theory as a mechanism for explaining the subconscious in painting, views metaphor as the expression of suppressed unconscious intuition via mysterious forms of symbolism. "Metaphor is a deeply functional expression of painting that, through the image, elicits hidden references, ideas, and desires about the painter" (Wang, 2016). As a result, the viewer must examine the correspondence between the image's narrative function and aesthetic form to uncover the veil of cultural images hidden beneath the image.

We already know from the narrative of images that images, metaphors, styles, symbols, and cultures are inextricably linked. Comparing and contrasting pictorial space in Chinese and Western art is largely a function of examining two distinct cultures (Yuping, 2016). "Culture is a manifestation of symbolism, and human activity is fundamentally a 'sign' or 'symbol'. Individuals fundamentally embody their identities through a variety of symbolic activities. Similarly, art as a culture is a symbolic mode of signification that is the product and outcome of human symbolic activity" (Cassirer, 1916). For instance, Xu's "Cloudy Mountains" combines the clear and lofty willow branches of the famous Chinese painter Ni Zan's Yuan dynasty painting with the shadows of Da Vinci's Renaissance trees, in which the artist argues that "viewing" Chinese culture through the image of the ancient mountains is equivalent to viewing Chinese culture during the Song dynasty. From Fan Kuan's "Journey to the Mountains" to Ni Zan's "Wooded Valley on Mount Yu" in the Yuan Dynasty and modern landscape painting, the image of "mountains" may be eroding..... pictorial images, in the form of narratives, represent various temporal and temporal consciousnesses of the past. In a cross-cultural perspective, the overlapping of time and space, the combination of multiple spatially overlapping images, constitutes an aesthetic symbol. Art is the abstraction of natural forms of 'subjective experience' into symbolic forms, which enable the imagination and comprehension of emotions (Langer, 1953). In addition, the painter's physicalisation of mental traces and personal emotions based on traditional painting reflects the new generation of painters' emphasis on the visual tension of images and the plurality of their narratives.

CONCLUSION

We have examined the cultural appreciation of Chinese painting images in the aesthetics of cross-cultural narratives in this study. The most obvious finding of this study was the use of contemporary classical works to illustrate the meaning of images expressed in various expressions of the same pictorial symbol across cultures, where the image's metaphorical function is not only related to the image's subject matter, but also to its style. The metaphorical function of images is not only determined by their subject matter, but also by their style. For instance, Xu's "Mutual Mountain" and "Mutual Walking" series, as well as Chen's flat overlapping bird images, demonstrate modernity's conceptual characteristics and visual communication forms. The analysis of specific works demonstrates that we have diverse representations of the same image in painting across time, history, culture, and contexts, that images convey the cultural images of various countries and nations narratively, and that the visual symbols of images represent philosophical ideas, aesthetic attitudes, and cultural values in specific contexts.

Due to the diversity of expressions and approaches to painting creation, this study's limitation is that the images chosen are only a sampling of representative works and do not represent the absolute trend in contemporary Chinese painting creation. Despite the small sample size, this work provides valuable insight into the metaphorical meaning of Chinese painting images in a cross-cultural and cross-contextual context, enabling the viewer to understand the painting's intentions and promoting a sublimated aesthetic experience, while also providing valuable insights into the relationship between image symbols and artistic styles. A fruitful area of research is the further examination of the differences between Eastern and Western pictorial imagery and culture, which requires us to transform our aesthetic attitudes in light of contemporary development and aesthetic perception, as well as to experience the potent power of cultural ontology through the aesthetic narrative of images.

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