

# The Modern Transformation of ‘Character in Painting Reflects the Painter's Character’: An Exploration of the Value of Chinese Painting Cultivation Theory in Shaping Personality and Cultivating Critical Thinking in Contemporary Art Education

Pei Liu

Sichuan Normal University

**Abstract**—As a core proposition of Chinese painting theory, ‘character in painting reflects the painter's character’ traditionally emphasizes the alignment of artistic quality with the spiritual realm and moral cultivation of the creator, embodying the ideal of ‘unity of technique and Tao’ in Chinese painting cultivation theory. Against the backdrop of contemporary art education's pronounced tendencies toward ‘technicalization’ and ‘utilitarianism,’ coupled with the marginalization of indigenous artistic discourse, the modern transformation of this proposition carries significant implications. This study traces the traditional origins of ‘character in painting reflects the painter's character’ and explores multiple dimensions of Chinese painting cultivation theory. It analyzes the logical underpinnings of its transformation in an era of value pluralism, with a focus on demonstrating the dual value of this theory in shaping personality and cultivating critical thinking in contemporary art education. By integrating pedagogical practices from institutional settings, the study proposes specific pathways for transformation. The findings suggest that the modern reinterpretation of traditional cultivation theory can provide indigenous resources for integrating ‘technique, Tao, and humanity’ in contemporary art education, contributing to the cultivation of artistic talents with humanistic literacy, independent thinking, and innovative capacity.

**Keywords**— Character in Painting Reflects the Painter's Character; Chinese Painting Cultivation Theory; Contemporary Art Education; Personality Shaping; Cultivation of Critical Thinking.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

Contemporary art education is confronting a series of practical dilemmas. Firstly, there is a pronounced tendency toward technicalization, where some institutions equate ‘technical training’ with ‘art education.’ This results in student works that exhibit ‘excessive technical proficiency but a lack of intrinsic substance.’ For instance, the ‘formulaic’ exam-oriented techniques promoted in preparatory courses for art college entrance examinations stifle students' creativity. Secondly, utilitarian motivations are increasingly prominent, with artistic creation becoming excessively linked to market demand. This fosters short-sighted practices such as ‘creating for exhibitions’ or ‘innovating for online traffic,’ neglecting art's function in cultivating character. Against the backdrop of tensions between globalization and localization, the

introduction of Western art education models—such as the Bauhaus ‘functionalism’ and contemporary ‘cross-media experimentation’—has driven formal innovation in art. However, it has also gradually marginalized the ‘spirit of freehand brushwork’ and the ‘cultivation tradition’ inherent in traditional Chinese art. Younger generations of art learners possess only vague understandings of concepts like the ‘spirit of brush and ink’ or ‘artistic conception creation,’ sometimes even viewing them as ‘outdated.’

Against this backdrop, a core question becomes increasingly clear: Can the connection between ‘cultivation, creation, and character’ embodied in the principle ‘character in painting reflects the painter's character’ transcend the limitations of traditional moral constraints and be transformed into an integrated path of ‘technical training, humanistic cultivation, and cognitive development’ in contemporary art education? How can concepts from Chinese painting cultivation theory, such as ‘accumulation of learning’ and ‘spiritual introspection,’ align with the modern educational goals of fostering ‘critical thinking’ and ‘sound personality’? Addressing these questions is crucial not only for the inheritance and development of Chinese painting cultivation theory in the contemporary era but also holds significant implications for the future direction of art education itself. Exploring a viable path for the modern transformation of the ‘character in painting reflects the painter's character’ proposition, enabling Chinese painting cultivation theory to function effectively within contemporary art education, could help resolve the current dilemmas. On one hand, it would integrate technical training with humanistic and cognitive development, ensuring students acquire both proficiency and intellectual depth, moving beyond mere technical display. On the other hand, it could rekindle art learners' engagement with the spirit of traditional Chinese art, repositioning the marginalized ‘freehand spirit’ and ‘cultivation tradition’ at the core of art education. By fostering a dialectical inheritance of traditional norms and a rational examination of self-expression, it can cultivate artistic talents who respect tradition while adapting to contemporary times and possessing innovative spirit. This exploratory process itself represents a

profound reflection on and potential reform of the concepts and methods underpinning contemporary art education.

## 1.2 Research Significance

### 1.2.1 Theoretical Significance

This research aims to move beyond the singular moral interpretation of ‘character in painting reflects the painter's character,’ reconstructing its contemporary meaning from the perspectives of ‘personality psychology’ and ‘educational philosophy,’ thereby expanding the interpretive dimensions of traditional painting theory. Furthermore, it seeks to establish a dialogue between ‘traditional cultivation theory’ and ‘modern art education,’ offering new insights that integrate ‘localization’ and ‘internationalization’ within art education theory.

### 1.2.2 Practical Significance

This study provides concrete proposals for curriculum reform in art institutions, such as integrating modules on ‘Painting Theory and Humanistic Cultivation’ and optimizing teaching processes for ‘sketching and creation.’ Additionally, it offers art educators a pedagogical framework for ‘transforming traditional resources,’ helping to alleviate the teaching dilemma of ‘prioritizing technique over humanistic cultivation.’

## 1.3 Review of Research Status at Home and Abroad

### 1.3.1 Research on the Traditional Concept of ‘Painting Quality Reflects Moral Character’

Domestic research on this concept is fruitful. Xu Fuguan, in *The Spirit of Chinese Art*<sup>1</sup>, emphasizes the decisive role of moral character on painting quality from a Confucian moral rationality perspective, highlighting the close link between ethics and art. Ye Lang, in *Outline of Chinese Aesthetic History*<sup>2</sup>, uses ‘form-spirit theory’ to explain their unity, offering an aesthetic perspective, but neither touches on modern transformation. Lu Shan, in *Research on the Forms and Aesthetic Connotations of Painting Evaluation in the Song Dynasty*, traces the origins and reviews the development before the Song Dynasty, revealing the blending of literati and academy styles in Song painting evaluation, deepening understanding of traditional painting theory. Wen Xia, in *The Structure of Moral Character in Chinese Calligraphy and Painting and Its Evaluation Functions*, focuses on the internal structure of moral character, using cases like Shi Tao to explore specific content and functional models under Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist integration, offering a novel and inspiring perspective. Overall, domestic research excels in theoretical deepening and case analysis but needs more on modern transformation.

Foreign research offers diverse perspectives. James Cahill, in *Illustrated History of Chinese Painting*<sup>3</sup>, links ‘literati painting’ with the personalities of scholar-officials but merely

describes cultural phenomena superficially, neglecting educational value. Susanne K. Langer, in *Artistic Issues*, though not directly discussing Chinese painting, proposes that ‘artworks are forms expressing emotions,’ aligning with traditional Chinese ideas like ‘words reflect the heart’ and ‘paintings are expressions of the heart.’ This provides cross-cultural theoretical support for ‘moral character determines painting quality.’ Langer's analysis of artistic form and emotional essence explains why Chinese painters value self-cultivation to enhance their works' quality, injecting new vitality and thinking dimensions into traditional research through cross-cultural dialogue.

### 1.3.2 Contemporary Research on Chinese Painting Cultivation Theory

Contemporary research on Chinese painting cultivation theory exhibits diverse approaches but also reveals certain limitations. Pan Gongkai's<sup>4</sup> discussion of ‘brush and ink language’ in his *History of Chinese Painting* advances technical inheritance and innovation yet fails to adequately address the intrinsic connection between cultivation theory and personality formation. Wen Fang's<sup>5</sup> interpretation of ‘landscape conception’ within cross-cultural contexts in *Between Two Cultures* highlights the cultural symbolic significance of cultivation theory while overlooking its historical function as a core component of art education. In contrast, Li Qiuchun and Wu Dan, in their study on the importance of cultural cultivation in Chinese painting creation, demonstrate how cultural refinement reflects the artist's worldview and values, arguing that artworks directly manifest the creator's inner emotions and scholarly depth—a perspective that substantiates the personality dimension of cultivation theory. Han Mei and Chen Shaowei further propose, in their examination of the relationship between Chinese painting and literary cultivation, that literary refinement serves as a crucial factor enhancing the foundational substance of traditional Chinese painting, a principle increasingly embraced by contemporary artists for its irreplaceable role in elevating artistic quality and sophistication. While these studies emphasize different aspects, they collectively recognize that the contemporary development of Chinese painting cultivation theory must integrate technical inheritance with personality education, achieving dual breakthroughs in formal innovation and spiritual deepening.

### 1.3.3 Research on Personality and Critical Thinking in Contemporary Art Education

Research on personality and critical thinking in contemporary art education is predominantly shaped by Western theoretical frameworks. Viktor Lowenfeld's emphasis on ‘creativity and personality integration’ in *Creative and Mental Growth* provides a psychological foundation for the personality dimension of art education yet fails to engage with the Eastern tradition's connection between ‘mind cultivation’ and artistic creation. Roger Fry's ‘formal criticism’ in *Vision*

<sup>1</sup> Fuguan Xu. *The Spirit of Chinese Art* [M]. East China Normal University Press, Shanghai, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Lang Ye. *Outline of Chinese Aesthetic History* [M]. Shanghai People's Publishing House, Shanghai, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Cahill, James. *Illustrated History of Chinese Painting* [M]. SDX Joint Publishing Company, Beijing, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Gongkai Pan. *On Brush and Ink* [J]. *Art Research*, 2001(03).

<sup>5</sup> Wen Fang. *Between Two Cultures* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2020.

and Design establishes a methodological framework for critical thinking, but its ‘external’ analytical approach overlooks the distinctly Eastern characteristics of ‘introspection-enlightenment’ in artistic cognition. Domestic research reveals two significant gaps: personality cultivation remains largely confined to the level of ‘moral education infiltration,’ failing to achieve organic integration with the aesthetic experience of artistic cultivation; critical thinking training excessively relies on the Western ‘questioning-argumentation’ model, with the transformation and application of the traditional ‘introspection-enlightenment’ approach remaining largely unexplored. Although Li Hongju’s application of multiple intelligences theory provides theoretical support for artistic cognition, it does not examine its interactive mechanisms with personality development. Liu Yan’e and colleagues’ proposal of a ‘personality-oriented’ approach to public art education in universities suggests pathways such as ‘updating educational concepts and optimizing teaching systems’ yet remains constrained by Western theoretical frameworks. Future research must construct an integrated ‘technique-Tao-humanity’ paradigm for art education through cross-cultural dialogue, achieving mutual theoretical enrichment and practical integration between Eastern and Western approaches to personality cultivation and critical thinking.

1.4 Research Framework and Methodology(Figure 1)

1.4.1 Research Framework

The research proceeds in four stages. First, deconstruction of tradition: analyze the core logic of ‘character in painting

reflects the painter's character’ and the multiple dimensions of cultivation theory to construct a conceptual system of traditional theory. Second, analysis of transformation logic: identify points of convergence and tension between traditional propositions and contemporary contexts, establishing criteria for transformation. Third, value demonstrate: examine applicability through the dual lenses of ‘personality shaping’ and ‘critical thinking cultivation,’ integrating principles from pedagogy and psychology. Fourth, construction of practical pathways: develop transformation strategies at curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative levels based on case analysis.

1.4.2 Research Methods

This study employs three primary methods. Documentary research systematically examines classical texts including Classification of Painters, Lofty Message of Forests and Streams, and Paintings by Monk Bitter Gourd, alongside modern theoretical works such as Eisner's The Arts and the Creation of Mind and Paul's Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Professional and Personal Life. Case analysis investigates practical implementations including the Central Academy of Fine Arts' ‘Cultivation Courses in the School of Chinese Painting’ and the China Academy of Art's ‘Philosophical Thought and Creation’ workshop to assess transformation outcomes. Interdisciplinary research integrates aesthetics (theories of artistic realm), pedagogy (core competency frameworks), and psychology (personality trait theories) to construct a multidimensional analytical framework.

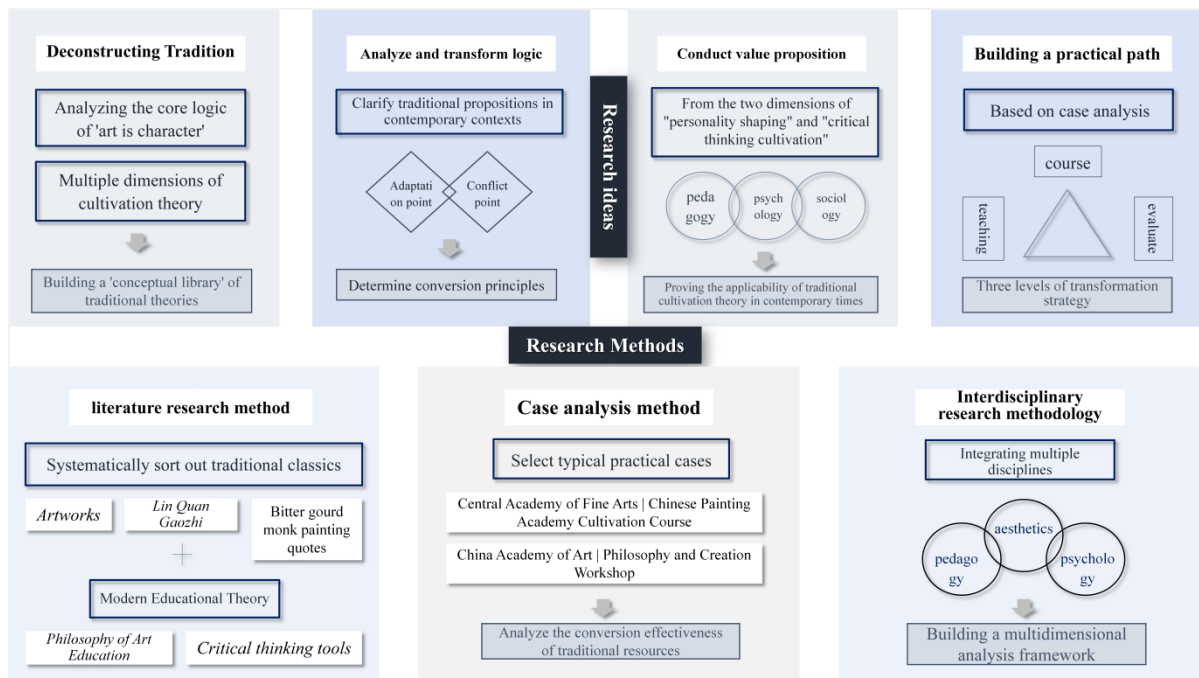


Figure 1 Research ideas and methods

(Source: self-made by the author)

## II. TRADITIONAL CONNOTATIONS OF 'CHARACTER IN PAINTING REFLECTS THE PAINTER'S CHARACTER' AND CHINESE PAINTING CULTIVATION THEORY

### 2.1 Origins and Core Logic of 'Character in Painting Reflects the Painter's Character'

The tradition of 'character evaluation' (pinzao) during the Wei and Jin dynasties laid the foundation for this concept. Liu Shao's *Treatise on Character*<sup>6</sup> classified human character based on innate talent and nature. Gu Kaizhi's notion of 'spiritual resonance through transference' extended character evaluation into painting, initially establishing a connection between painting quality and the painter's character. The Tang dynasty grading system further shaped this relationship. Xie He's *Classification of Painters*<sup>7</sup> employed a six-grade system to evaluate artworks; while primarily focused on technique, his concept of 'spirit resonance' (qiyun shengdong) implicitly demanded specific spiritual states from the creator. Zhang Yanyuan's *Record of Famous Paintings of All Dynasties*<sup>8</sup> introduced the idea of 'personality projection' from calligraphy into painting theory through his assertion that 'painting and calligraphy share the same essence and brush techniques.' Song dynasty Confucian ideology deepened this connection. Su Shi's critique of mere formal resemblance emphasized that the expressive quality of painting should stem from the painter's spiritual realm (xiongci). Guo Ruoxu's *Continued Records on Painting* explicitly established the core logic that 'when character is elevated, spirit resonance cannot but be elevated,' definitively linking moral character to artistic quality. This relationship operates through two dimensions of association. Explicit association manifests as direct correspondence between technical mastery and character, exemplified by Zhao Mengfu's posthumous critical belittlement due to his service under the Yuan dynasty. Implicit association operates as artistic style 'refracting' rather than 'copy' personality, as seen in Xu Wei's crazy release temperament expressing tension through his 'grand freehand' style—demonstrating how personality complexity generates diverse artistic expressions.

### 2.2 Multidimensional Framework of Chinese Painting Cultivation Theory

#### 2.2.1 Moral Cultivation: Spiritual Development Grounded in Virtue

At the Confucian level of 'benevolence,' Guo Xi's theory of 'landscape analogizing virtue' correlates the 'height, depth, and horizontality' of mountains and waters with the gentlemanly virtues of 'benevolence, wisdom, and courage,' emphasizing that creation must be premised on a mindset of 'loving others and cherishing things.' Within the Daoist framework of 'emptiness and tranquility,' Zong Bing advocated 'cleansing the mind to contemplate images,' requiring creators to eliminate utilitarian distractions and

approach nature with clarity—this "emptiness" represents not negative withdrawal but rather the manifestation of autonomous personhood.

#### 2.2.2 Scholarly Accumulation: Interdisciplinary Knowledge Integration

Adhering to the integrated concept of 'poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal engraving,' Zhao Mengfu emphasized the influence of calligraphic cultivation on painting through his assertion that 'rocks should resemble flying white, trees like seal script, and bamboo writing requires mastery of the eight calligraphic strokes.' Wang Wei's principle of 'poetry in painting and painting in poetry' demonstrates literary cultivation's role in constructing artistic conception. Practicing the principle of 'unity of knowledge and action,' Dong Qichang advocated 'reading ten thousand books and traveling ten thousand miles,' integrating book learning with life experience while opposing superficial creation divorced from reality.

#### 2.2.3 Spiritual Realm: Life Realization Transcending Technique

Guided by the concept of 'Heaven-Man unity,' Fan Kuai claim 'creating meaning through confronting landscapes,' seeking to apprehend cosmic principles in nature so that artworks embody 'the spirit of Heaven and Earth' rather than mere naturalistic depiction. In the discourse on 'refinement versus vulgarity,' Huang Yue's *Twenty-four Categories of Painting* employs categories such as 'placid and light' and 'lofty and ancient' to distinguish artistic grades—in essence using artistic style to stratify spiritual realms, guiding creators toward the 'orthodox and refined' mode of existence.

#### 2.2.4 Practical Principle: The Closed Loop of 'External Learning from Nature, Internal Obtaining from Mind'

'External learning from nature' emphasizes observation and imitation, as exemplified by Qi Bai shi's dedication to depicting myriad insects—constituting the 'material foundation' of cultivation. 'Internal obtaining from mind' requires the internalization and sublimate of observed phenomena, illustrated by Zheng Ban qiao's transformative process from 'bamboo in the eye' to 'bamboo in the mind' to 'bamboo in the hand'—representing the 'spiritual processing' dimension of cultivation.

## III. MODERN TRANSFORMATION OF 'CHARACTER IN PAINTING REFLECTS THE PAINTER'S CHARACTER': CONTEXT AND LOGIC

### 3.1 Modern Challenges to the Traditional Proposition

The diversification of personality connotations poses significant challenges. Traditionally, 'character' centered on Confucian virtues of loyalty, filial piety, and integrity, exhibiting singularity. Contemporary society, however, emphasizes personality complexity encompassing independence, tolerance, and innovation. Binding painting quality exclusively to traditional morality risks misjudging modern personalities—such as dismissing the rebellious spirit in avant-garde art. Artistic forms have achieved cross-boundary breakthroughs. Traditional painting quality was mediated through brush, ink, and rice paper, whereas contemporary art encompasses installation, video, and

<sup>6</sup> Liu Shao. *Biography* [M]. Jiangsu: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Sheikh. *Classification of Painters* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Zhang Yanyuan. *Record of Famous Paintings of All Dynasties* [M]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2023.

performance across media. Evaluation criteria have expanded from brush-and-ink style to conceptual depth and social engagement, necessitating a reconceptualization of how painting quality relates to character. Educational goals have undergone paradigmatic transformation. Traditional art education aimed at transmitting orthodox lineages through emulating ancients; contemporary art education prioritizes cultivating innovative talent capable of breakthrough while inheriting. The conservative tendency inherent in "character determines painting quality" appears superficially at odds with modernity's emphasis on innovation.

### 3.2 Core Directions of Modern Transformation

Shift from 'moral determinism' to 'personality correlation': weaken the unidirectional logic that noble character necessarily produces superior painting quality, emphasizing instead that artistic style diversely reflects personality traits. Melancholic personalities may manifest as delicate lyrical expression; rebellious temperaments may transform into critical artistic statements. Priority lies in

cultivating sincerity between painting and character, resisting hypocritical moral posturing in artistic creation. Shift from 'technique appendage' to 'competence core': elevate cultivation theory from supplementary status within brush-and-ink technique to the foundational level of artistic creation. Within contemporary art education, cultivation expands beyond traditional poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal engraving to encompass philosophical speculation, social cognition, and cross-media knowledge—positioning painting quality as external manifestation of comprehensive competence. Shift from 'closed inheritance' to 'open dialogue': preserve the spiritual core of 'technique-Tao unity'—notably that artistic creation must root in authentic life experience—while selectively integrating Western educational elements. Dewey's experiential emphasis on 'practice-reflection' cycles (Figure 2) and Foucault's archaeological insights for critical tracing inform an integrated system of 'traditional cultivation plus modern thinking.'

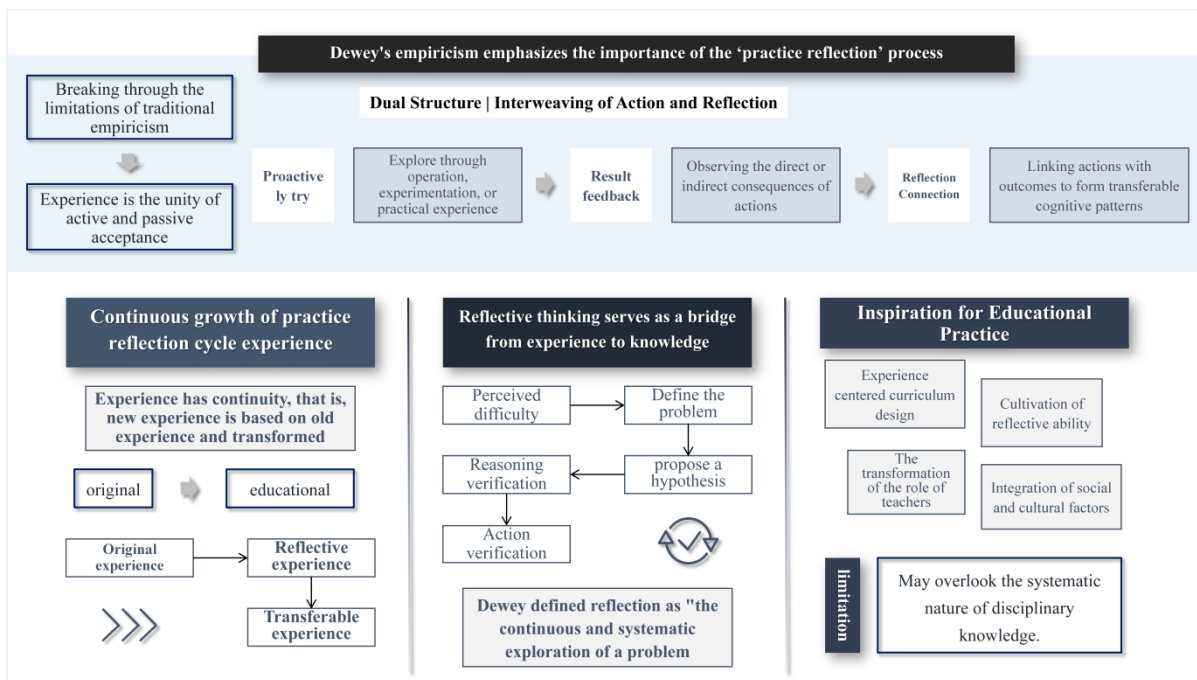


Figure 2 Dewey Empiricism's emphasis on the 'practice reflection' process

(Source: self-made by the author)

## IV. THE VALUE OF PERSONALITY CULTIVATION OF CHINESE PAINTING CULTIVATION THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY ART EDUCATION

### 4.1 Cultivating Artistic Ethics through Moral and Artistic Cultivation

To rectify the utilitarian mindset in artistic creation, we can rely on the traditional concept that one should cultivate oneself before establishing art, guiding students to reflect on the essence of art. For instance, by analyzing Bada Shanren's works, characterized by 'few ink dots but many tears,' students can appreciate his sentiment of expressing aspirations

through art amidst the collapse of his country and family. Contrasting this with the contemporary trend of prioritizing popularity over quality, we can establish the value of art as a means of self-expression and social dialogue. To cultivate a sense of artistic responsibility, we can draw inspiration from Shi Tao's spirit that brushwork should follow the times, emphasizing that artistic creation should possess social concern. In teaching, students can be guided to create thematic works using the Chinese painting technique of expressing aspirations through objects, such as employing landscape texture techniques to depict ecological protection or using flower-and-bird imagery to metaphorize social issues, thereby

integrating personal cultivation with public issues and highlighting social responsibility in one's character. Taking the "Chinese Painting Creation and Social Concern" course at the Central Academy of Fine Arts as an example, students are required to create works based on contemporary social issues after copying *The Refugees* (by Jiang Zhaohe). By combining brushwork language with social observation, students not only enhance their painting techniques but also strengthen their ethical awareness that art serves the spiritual needs of people.

#### *4.2 Nourishing Aesthetic Sensibility through Purifying the Mind and Appreciating Essence*

In terms of slow-experience training to alleviate modern anxiety, traditional quietude cultivation can be transformed into immersive observation in contemporary art education. For example, in calligraphy copying, students are required to slow down their writing speed and appreciate the coordination between the lifting, pressing, pausing, and accentuating of lines and their breathing rhythm, thereby cultivating concentration. During landscape sketching, students are guided to observe quietly for extended periods, prompting them to transition from merely observing object shapes to appreciating the vitality they contain, thus alleviating the impetuous mindset caused by fast-paced life. To cultivate empathetic and inclusive personality traits, the mind-object fusion thinking mode emphasized by 'purifying the mind and appreciating essence,' which involves experiencing the essence of objects with one's own heart, can be transformed into the ability to tolerate diverse artistic forms. For instance, in comparative teaching, students are guided to explore the common expression of life in the freehand style of literati paintings and the simplicity of folk art, avoiding judging artworks based on a single standard and thereby cultivating an open aesthetic sensibility. From a psychological perspective, research in positive psychology shows that immersive aesthetic experiences can activate the prefrontal cortex of the brain and enhance emotional regulation ability, providing interdisciplinary evidence for the nourishing effect of 'purifying the mind and appreciating essence' on personality stability.

#### *4.3 Forging Willpower through Perseverance*

Brushwork skills play a crucial role in cultivating the spirit of craftsmanship. The traditional training method in Chinese painting, which emphasizes 'honing one's skills over a decade,' such as the long-term practice required to achieve the effect of penetrating the paper with force in seal script lines, can correct the quick-fix tendency in contemporary education. To cultivate resilience in the face of creative dilemmas, the creative journey of traditional painters, such as Wu Changshuo's perseverance in learning painting at fifty, can serve as typical cases to inspire students. In teaching, 'creative bottleneck-sharing sessions' can be organized, allowing students to share their failure experiences and breakthrough achievements during the process of conception, composition, and revision. Combined with the cognitive understanding of the concept of infinite possibilities in painting from traditional

painting theories, students can develop resilience in the face of setbacks.

### V. THE VALUE OF CHINESE PAINTING CULTIVATION THEORY IN CULTIVATING CRITICAL THINKING IN CONTEMPORARY ART EDUCATION

#### *5.1 Critical Inheritance of Traditional Norms*

By upholding the dialectical thinking of 'learning from the ancients without being bound by them,' students are guided to critically analyze the rationality and limitations of traditional techniques. For instance, when studying 'texture techniques,' students are encouraged to deeply understand the expressive efficacy of Dong Yuan's 'phemp-fiber texture' in depicting the landscapes of southern China while contemplating its limitations in representing the northern Danxia landform. This leads to innovative attempts at integrating texture techniques, fostering a thinking model of 'respecting tradition—analyzing tradition—transcending tradition.' In the 'Contemporary Translation of Traditional Brushwork' workshop at the China Academy of Art, students took Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* as a reference and employed digital painting techniques to reconstruct the ink wash aesthetic. (Figure 3) During this process, teachers guided students in conducting a critical analysis of the modern adaptability of traditional elements such as negative space and lines. The final works not only retained the traditional spirit but also aligned with the visual experiences of the digital age, demonstrating the practical effectiveness of critical inheritance.

#### *5.2 Critical Cognition of Natural Authenticity*

Through an in-depth analysis that transcends imitation theory, the traditional concept of 'learning from nature externally and gaining spiritual essence internally' emphasizes the creative transformation of nature rather than mere replication. In teaching practice, the differences between Western realism and Chinese freehand artistic expression can be compared. For instance, students are guided to first accurately depict the morphological characteristics of landscapes using sketching techniques, and then employ the ink-play approach of Mi Family landscapes to convey the misty and rainy ambiance of mountains and waters. This enables students to grasp the distinction between visual authenticity and spiritual authenticity, cultivating their critical thinking ability to perceive the essence beneath appearances. For the progression of thinking from observing objects to comprehending underlying principles, students can draw on Guo Xi's theoretical perspective that 'landscapes can be traversed, viewed, toured, and inhabited,' encouraging them to not only focus on the external forms of nature but also delve deeper into the rational and emotional aspects it embodies. For example, in flower-and-bird painting sketching instruction, students are required to analyze floral morphology with biological knowledge while integrating personal emotional experiences, ensuring their works possess both rationality and emotional depth, thereby demonstrating the profound nature of critical cognition.

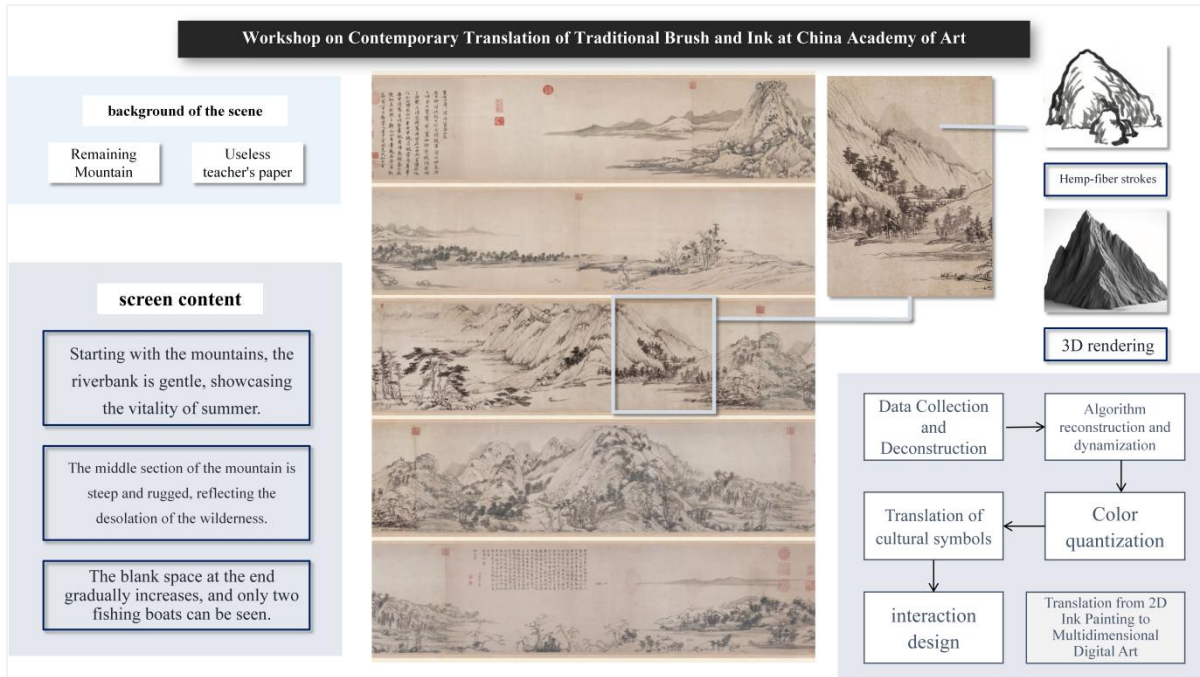


Figure 3 Workshop on Contemporary Translation of Traditional Brush and Ink at China Academy of Art

(Source: self-made by the author)

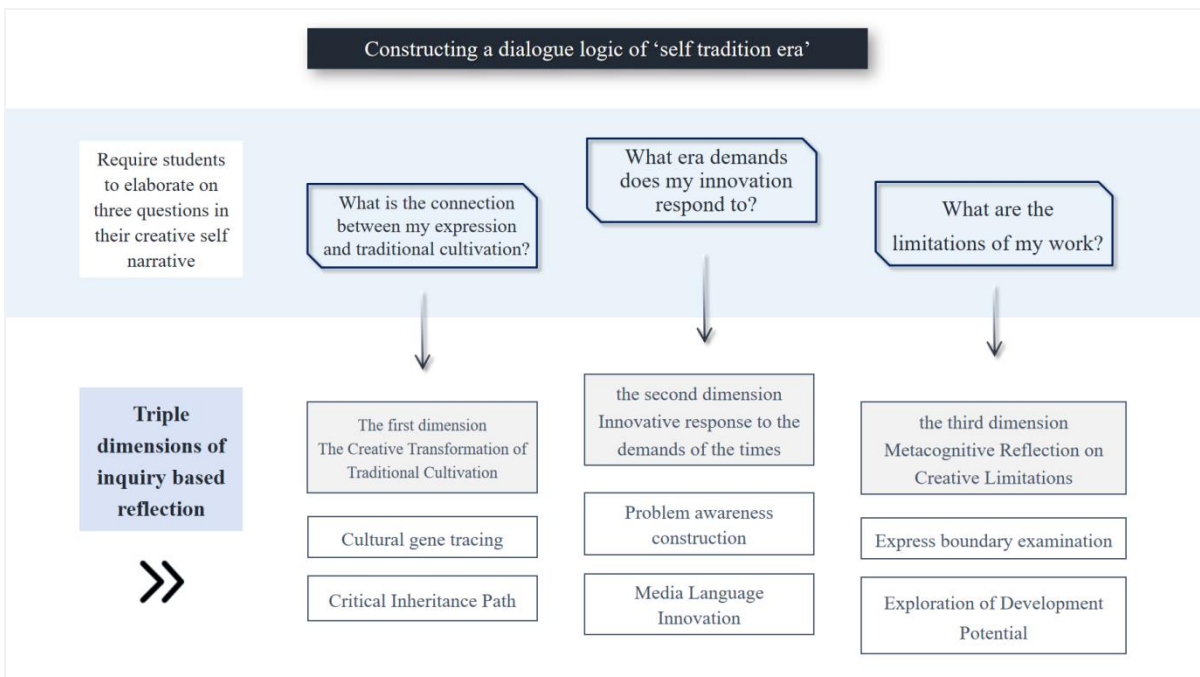


Figure 4 The dialogue logic of 'self tradition era'

(Source: self-made by the author)

### 5.3 Critical Reflection on Self-Expression

It is essential to guard against blind innovation that masquerades as individuality. The traditional concept of 'gaining spiritual essence internally' emphasizes sincere expression and opposes the pursuit of novelty for its own sake. In teaching, analyzing Pan Tianshou's artistic proposition of 'strengthening the bones' can guide students to reflect. His daring compositions are not deliberate attempts at being

unconventional but are rooted in a profound comprehension of the righteousness of heaven and earth. This encourages students to examine whether their innovations stem from genuine life experiences or are merely imitations of Western trends. Establishing a dialogue logic of 'self-tradition-era' (Figure 4) requires students to address three questions in their creative statements: What is the connection between my expression and traditional cultivation? Which era-specific

needs does my innovation respond to? What are the limitations of my works? Through such inquisitive reflection, students' rational critical awareness in self-expression is cultivated, preventing them from falling into the trap of self-admiration in isolation.

## VI. PRACTICAL PATHWAYS AND CHALLENGES IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL CULTIVATION THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY ART EDUCATION

### 6.1 Reconstruction of the Curriculum System

Core courses now include compulsory modules such as 'Selected Readings and Modern Interpretations of Chinese Painting Theories,' which systematically elucidates propositions like 'the quality of a painting reflects the character of its creator' and interprets them in conjunction with modern aesthetic theories. Another compulsory course, 'Artistic Cultivation and Personality Development,' integrates relevant theories from psychology and ethics to analyze the impact of artistic cultivation on personality formation. Elective courses include 'Cross-disciplinary Practice in Poetry, Calligraphy, Painting, and Seal Carving,' aimed at cultivating students' comprehensive literacy, and 'Dialogues between Traditional Cultivation Theory and Western Art Education,' designed to broaden students' international perspectives. The practical curriculum has been optimized by reconstructing the 'copying-sketching-creation' process. During the copying stage, personality analysis is introduced, such as examining the intrinsic connection between Fan Kuan's majestic painting style in *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* and the creator's personality. The sketching stage incorporates social observation, such as combining landscape sketching with regional cultural research. In the creation stage, students are required to submit reflection reports that elucidate the connections between their works, personal cultivation, and the contemporary context.

### 6.2 Innovation in Teaching Methods

A Traditional Art Experience Center has been established to create an immersive cultivation experience, featuring calligraphy copying studios, guqin performance areas, and tea break interaction spaces. These enable students to regulate their minds and bodies through traditional cultural activities during creative breaks and comprehend the intrinsic meaning of the unity of art and cultivation. Field trips to cultural heritage sites, such as Mount Huang and Lan Ting, are organized for sketching, transforming the act of traveling thousands of miles into practical cultivation experiences. Cross-media thinking training is implemented using a project-based learning model, requiring students to translate the artistic conceptions of Chinese paintings using new media art forms, such as virtual reality (VR) technology and video art. For instance, VR technology can be employed to demonstrate the spatial concept of 'a mustard seed containing Mount Sumeru,' during which students critically analyze the feasibility of translating traditional elements. Cross-disciplinary collaborations are conducted, with workshops jointly hosted by the Departments of Philosophy and Sociology, such as the 'Ink Language and Social Critique

Workshop,' encouraging students to create social-themed works using Chinese painting techniques and receive cross-disciplinary professional evaluations to cultivate diverse perspectives.

In addition to the aforementioned innovative teaching methods, case-based teaching can be introduced. Classic Chinese paintings from different eras and styles are selected for in-depth analysis of the creators' cultivation, creative approaches, and the influence of the historical context. For example, analyzing Xu Wei's paintings explores the connection between his unrestrained artistic style and his turbulent life experiences and unique personality traits, enabling students to grasp the significance of traditional cultivation theory in artistic creation from specific cases. Group discussion-based teaching is also crucial. Students are organized into groups to discuss an artistic theory or creative phenomenon, such as exploring the new connotations and applications of 'the quality of a painting reflects the character of its creator' in contemporary society. In group discussions, students can present their views, exchange different perspectives, stimulate intellectual collisions, and cultivate critical thinking and teamwork abilities. Inviting industry experts to give lectures is another effective teaching method. Experts, with their rich practical experience and profound theoretical knowledge, can share their insights and experiences in artistic creation and research, broadening students' horizons. For instance, inviting renowned traditional Chinese painters to discuss how they integrate traditional cultivation into modern creation and the problems encountered and solutions found during the process enables students to gain valuable experience from the perspective of frontline creators. Online learning platforms can also be utilized to provide students with abundant learning resources, including instructional videos on Chinese painting theories, high-definition images of artworks, and demonstrations of creative techniques, facilitating students' independent learning and consolidation of classroom knowledge after class. Additionally, an online interaction community can be set up, allowing students to ask questions, exchange learning experiences, and promote interaction and learning among themselves at any time.

### 6.3 Challenges and Countermeasures

#### *Challenge 1: The Contradiction between the Ambiguity of Traditional Cultivation Theory and the Quantitative Evaluation Requirements of Modern Education*

This contradiction is manifested in the difficulty of quantifying concepts such as 'purifying the mind to appreciate essence' and 'vitality and rhythm,' which conflict with the rigid requirements of credit systems and grade point averages in contemporary education. To address this, a 'process-based evaluation + qualitative feedback' system can be established. For example, students' copying notes, sketching reflections, and creation reflections can be included in the evaluation scope, and a diversified approach involving 'teacher evaluations + peer reviews + self-statements' can be adopted, focusing on qualitative descriptions of intellectual growth and personality changes.

### *Challenge 2: The Gap between Traditional Literacy and Modern Educational Competence among Teachers*

This gap is evident in the fact that some professional teachers, despite their exquisite techniques, have relatively weak foundations in painting theories or are familiar with traditions but lack modern educational concepts. To bridge this gap, teacher training can be conducted, with regular painting theory reading classes (inviting literary and historical scholars to teach) and modern educational methodology workshops (introducing Western critical thinking training tools). Additionally, cross-disciplinary collaboration can be promoted by forming teaching teams that combine ‘traditional cultivation + modern education,’ such as having traditional Chinese painting teachers responsible for technique instruction, philosophy teachers responsible for explaining cultivation theories, and education teachers responsible for designing thinking training sessions.

### *Challenge 3: The Conflict between Traditional Cultural Inheritance and the Impact of Modern Multiculturalism*

In the contemporary globalized context, multiculturalism is characterized by mutual integration, with various foreign cultural ideologies continuously influxing. The inheritance of traditional culture faces severe challenges, and the values and aesthetic concepts advocated by traditional cultivation theory are prone to marginalization under the impact of modern multiculturalism. For example, the spiritual pursuits emphasized in traditional art, such as tranquility and harmony with nature, stand in stark contrast to the fast-paced and utilitarian cultural environment of modern society, leading to a decline in some students' sense of identity with traditional culture. To address this conflict, the popularization of traditional culture education can be intensified. Relevant traditional culture courses, such as Chinese art history and traditional cultural philosophy, can be added to the curriculum to enable students to deeply understand the connotations and values of traditional culture. Traditional cultural activities, such as traditional art exhibitions and cultural lectures, can be organized to create a strong traditional cultural atmosphere. Students can be guided to establish correct cultural concepts, recognizing that traditional and modern cultures are not mutually exclusive but can learn from and integrate with each other. Students can be encouraged to draw on the essence of traditional culture and shape a modern art style with Chinese characteristics in the context of multiculturalism.

### *Challenge 4: The Mismatch between the Dissemination Methods of Traditional Cultivation Theory and Modern Educational Technologies*

The dissemination of traditional cultivation theory primarily relies on oral instruction from master to apprentice and written literature, which come with certain limitations. The advancement of modern educational technologies, such as online education and multimedia teaching, has brought both new opportunities and challenges to the field of education. Traditional dissemination methods struggle to keep pace with the rapid development of modern educational technologies, resulting in suboptimal dissemination outcomes for traditional cultivation theory in modern education. To address this issue, it is essential to fully leverage modern educational

technologies to innovate dissemination methods. Develop online courses that transform the content of traditional cultivation theory into engaging videos and animations, and disseminate them through online platforms to enable more students to access traditional culture. Employ multimedia teaching tools, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies, to create more intuitive and immersive learning experiences for students. For instance, utilize VR technology to allow students to immerse themselves in the creative process and artistic atmosphere of ancient paintings. Establish online communication communities where students can share their learning insights and exchange creative experiences, fostering interaction and learning among them.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The modern transformation of the proposition that ‘the quality of a painting reflects the character of its creator’ is not a mere replication of the traditional concept. Instead, it builds upon the core tenet of the profound connection between art and personality while breaking through the singularity of the moral dimension and the closedness of the formal level. It constructs an interactive model of ‘cultivation-creation-thinking’ that aligns with the contemporary context. The dimensions of traditional Chinese painting cultivation theory, including personality cultivation, accumulation of knowledge, and spiritual realm, provide indigenous resources for personality shaping in contemporary art education. On one hand, it can cultivate artistic ethics through the integration of moral and artistic development, nurture an aesthetic mindset through purifying the mind to appreciate essence, and forge a resilient character through perseverance. On the other hand, its principles, such as learning from the ancients without being bound by them and drawing inspiration from nature while achieving inner harmony, offer unique pathways for cultivating critical thinking through dialectical inheritance, in-depth cognition, and rational reflection. Despite facing numerous challenges, such as adapting evaluation systems and enhancing teacher competencies, during the practical implementation process, traditional cultivation theory can be fully transformed into a dynamic resource for contemporary art education through curriculum reconstruction, methodological innovation, and interdisciplinary collaboration. This not only helps correct the skill-oriented bias in art education but also injects cultural confidence into the cultivation of Chinese art talents, enabling them to uphold their indigenous spiritual roots while possessing independent thinking and innovative abilities in the globalized context. Future research can further focus on the transformation pathways of traditional cultivation theory in specific art disciplines and expand its educational application scope.

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