

# The Rise and Development of Hunan Gong Bi Painting from 1980 to 2000: Expressing Life Through Tradition

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**Abstract:** *Gong Bi painting, one of China's most influential traditional art forms, evolved significantly in the 20th century, transforming into modern Gong Bi painting. Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) experienced a resurgence in the 1980s, becoming a prominent force in the field. This resurgence introduced a new style, "using tradition to express contemporary life," which blended classical techniques with modern themes. During this period, Hunan Gong Bi painting achieved significant accomplishments, becoming a major influence in the national Gong Bi painting scene. This paper aims to analyze the specific characteristics of "using tradition to express contemporary life" from an iconographic perspective. The study employs qualitative research methods, including case studies, observation, interviews, literature analysis, and thematic analysis. Findings reveal that HGP retained the intricate line work and refined color application typical of traditional Gong Bi painting. In terms of theme, Hunan Gong Bi painting focused more on contemporary life and natural scenery. This fresh style met the post-Cultural Revolution society's need for diverse cultural forms and artistic styles.*

**Keywords:** Hunan Gong Bi Painting; Using Tradition to Express Contemporary Life; Iconographic.

## 1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Gong Bi painting, also known as "fine brushwork" or "meticulous painting," is renowned for its intricate and precise brushwork. This style emphasizes detail and accuracy, depicting objects through meticulous lines and colors to achieve precise and delicate images. The origins of Gong Bi painting can be traced back to the Han Dynasty (3rd century BCE), with the "Figures and Phoenixes on Silk" unearthed in Changsha being one of the earliest existing examples of Chinese Gong Bi painting.

Gong Bi painting is primarily created using brushes on silk or paper, employing techniques such as outline drawing (Bai Miao), heavy coloration (Zhong Cai), and light coloration (Dan Cai). Zeng (2002) explained in his book, Bai Miao involves delineating the shapes of objects with lines alone, Zhong Cai adds rich colors to these lines, and Dan Cai uses light colors to achieve a balance between form and color. The materials commonly used in Gong Bi painting include ink and mineral colors, with water control techniques to depict light and shade. The subjects of Gong Bi painting are mainly categorized into figures, flowers and birds, and landscapes. Figure painting focuses on the depiction of human forms and dynamics, flower-and-bird painting emphasizes realistic portrayals of nature, and landscape painting showcases majestic natural scenery, each with its unique characteristics. Historically, traditional Gong Bi painting has not only been an art form but also played significant social roles in religious rituals, political propaganda, and scientific education. Wang (2019).

In the 20th century, as Western capitalism globalized, China embarked on a modernization process, which can be divided into three stages. First, the New Culture Movement of 1919, regarded as the starting point of modern culture, aimed to transform China with Western culture. During this period, Gong Bi painting began to adopt Western realism, gradually transitioning into modern Gong Bi painting. Second, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government emphasized art as a tool for political propaganda, which led to changes in the themes and styles of Gong Bi painting, focusing on realism and political subjects to serve national propaganda needs. Especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Gong Bi painting faced strict limitations, being required to highlight "revolutionary" themes, depicting leaders and heroic deeds, becoming a singular propaganda tool. This period's Gong Bi painting emphasized grandiose and idealized images, lacking personalization and diversity, significantly restricting artists' creative freedom.

In the 1980s, China entered a period of artistic "rebirth." With the end of the Cultural Revolution and the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the political environment became more relaxed, the economy rapidly developed, social ideologies diversified, and the demand for new cultural forms and artistic styles grew.

Freed from political constraints, China sought new artistic styles. Hunan Province, located in central China with Changsha as its capital, proposed the concept of "expressing life through tradition" in Gong Bi painting, becoming a strong influence in China. For instance, Hunan is reputed as the "strongest province for Gong Bi painting in China," and its Gong Bi painting has become a model for university education. Between 1980 and 2000, Hunan hosted numerous Gong Bi painting exhibitions in places like Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Singapore. These exhibitions not only enhanced the recognition of Hunan Gong Bi painting but also earned it nationwide acclaim. This study aims to analyze the characteristics of HGP that "express life through tradition" through case studies.

This research employs qualitative methods, including case studies and iconographic analysis, to explore the techniques, themes, and ideologies of Hunan Gong Bi painting. Research tools include literature analysis, archival data, and field interviews. Data analysis uses thematic analysis, guided by a theoretical framework for coding and comparison.

This study adopts W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of iconology, one of the most commonly used theories in art research. Iconology originated from Cesare Ripa's 1592 publication "Iconologia" and reached its peak in the pioneering research of Erwin Panofsky. Iconology is used to analyze images and their underlying meanings, divided into three levels:

(1) Image:

Including forms, paintings, or portraits, and the basic elements of visual art such as texture, lines, shapes, and colors.

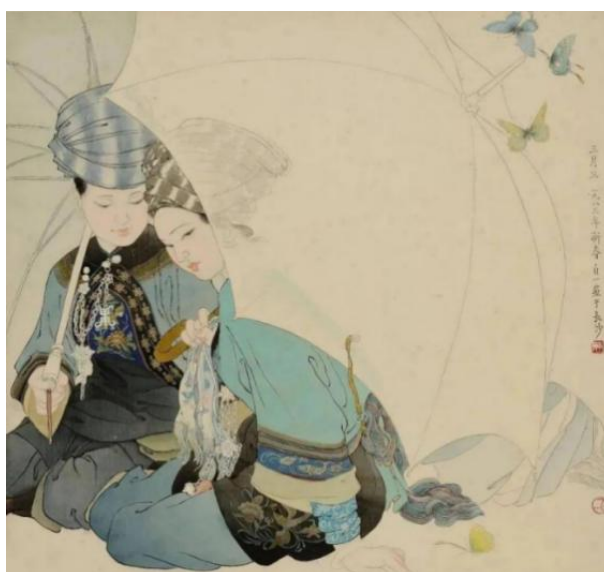
(2) Text:

Including words, ideas, discourses, or "science," with Mitchell viewing these discourses as symbolic codes awaiting interpretation by the audience. For thematic analysis, the text is divided into three aspects: time, theme, and emotion.

(3) Ideology:

Involves understanding the social context behind images and texts. According to Pierre Bourdieu's theory, artworks are not only products of genius artists but also reflect societal aesthetic values. Therefore, Gong Bi painting is influenced by both macro social factors and the micro-level individual artists.

## 2. FIGURE GONG BI PAINTING "MARCH 3RD"



**Figure 1:** March 3rd, Silk;Ink, 1981, 68cmX68cm

"March 3rd" is one of the most famous works created by Chen during this period. As show in Figure 1. Fully embodies the characteristics of HGP. "Sixty Years of Hunan Literature and Art." (2013) mentions that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a group of Hunan-born painters, organized by Chen Baiyi, lived with ethnic minorities in Hunan to experience their different lifestyles. This immersion resulted in a series of paintings depicting the local customs and cultures of Hunan in the early 1980s.

From image perspective, The texture of "March 3rd" is created using Gong Bi painting techniques on silk, measuring 68 x 68 cm. The painting emphasizes the use of lines, employing traditional Gong Bi line drawing techniques to outline the figures while reducing the use of realistic sketching for volume. In terms of composition, the artist uses the white drawing technique to outline two parasols that occupy much of the space. Detailed depictions of two girls and delicately drawn patterns on their clothes are prominent. A few butterflies in the top right corner add a sense of movement and prevent the elegant colors of the parasols from appearing too monotonous, also serving to balance the composition. Wang (2016) believes that Chen was among the first painters after the Chinese economic reform to move away from the template-like narrative compositions of the Cultural Revolution era, adopting a composition that embraces the traditional philosophy of "leaving space" (Liu Bai). Overall, Chen has indeed better preserved the aesthetics of traditional Chinese painting.

In terms of color, The painting uses light colors for the faces and solid colors for clothing and accessories, reducing the light and dark structure seen in realistic figures. Zhou (2012) commented that Chen Baiyi's portrayal of figures aligns more with the artistry of traditional Chinese painting rather than blindly pursuing Western realism. Deng also focused on the lines in "March 3rd," noting that Chen Baiyi's lines are simple yet complex, seemingly comprising only a few lines but capable of depicting various expressions and emotions of the figures.

"March 3rd" tells a story related to the ethnic minorities of Hunan, depicting a festival of the Zhuang ethnic minority dedicated to unmarried men and women, known as a "social gathering" celebration. Young men and women from various places gather, with boys showcasing their singing talents to the girls. If the girls hear a song or voice they like, they respond, leading to mutual acquaintance. This celebration is highly characteristic of ethnic regional features.

### 3. FLOWER AND BIRD GONG BI PAINTING - "NING"

The flower and bird painting of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) fully embodies the characteristic of "using traditional techniques to depict modern life." Li (2021) considers Hunan's flower and bird paintings distinct from other regions' traditional Gong Bi works, emphasizing expansion and innovation. "Ning" (Figure 2), created by Hunan Gong Bi flower and bird painter Mo Gaoxiang in the 1980s, exemplifies this approach.



**Figure 2:** Ning, Silk;Ink,1989,110cmX110cm

From image perspective, The texture of the image utilizes traditional Gong Bi materials on silk, measuring 110 x 110 cm. The composition expands beyond the traditional focus on branches (Zhe Zhi method) to include a larger range of expression. The positioning of the bird and the relationship between leaves and branches contribute to a dynamic composition. This broader approach allows for a more intricate and engaging visual experience.

In terms of color, Primarily uses light ink and thin washes, simplifying the use of natural colors and differing from traditional Gong Bi's pursuit of natural color accuracy. The painting retains traditional treatments of birds, using fine lines to outline feathers and varying line densities to create a sense of volume. However, the focus is on the leaves, which are not depicted with heavy ink but are outlined with light ink and then colored or inked beside the lines. Wu (2011) believes that Mo's subdued colors lend the painting a refreshing beauty.

The painting incorporates elements of Western art, particularly in its treatment of light and shadow, which are seldom found in traditional Gong Bi flower and bird paintings. Light, an important element in Western painting and photography, is depicted not by directly transplanting Western techniques but by using traditional shading techniques to achieve the effect of Western lighting. Li (1993) notes that the painting renders a dark background to highlight brighter objects, enhancing contrast to convey a sense of light. The use of light or white edges where leaves overlap or meet the dark background creates a transition that suggests the shimmering of light and leaves. Subjectively leaving white spaces also serves to depict the rhythm of light.

From theme perspective, "Ning" differs thematically from traditional Gong Bi flower and bird paintings, which typically focus on birds, insects, or animals with plants serving as background or embellishment. Mo Gaoxiang reverses this approach, with leaves occupying over 90% of the composition and the bird acting as a focal point. Mo Gaoxiang (2013) explains, "We should discover beauty in the commonplace aspects of life, not just imitate traditional subjects but paint what moves us."

However, the theme of "Ning" also reflects the distinctive everyday life characteristic of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP). In terms of technique, it shows different explorations, incorporating more Western methods. Overall, Mo Gaoxiang's "Ning" successfully blends traditional Chinese techniques with modern elements and Western influences, making it a significant example of the innovative direction HGP has taken.

#### **4. LANDSCAPE PAINTING - "FALLING CLOUDS"**

"Landscape painting" represents a challenge and a blind spot in modern Gong Bi creation. Qian (2015) believes that Gong Bi painting's depiction of landscapes lacks the convenience of Xie Yi (freehand brushwork) painting, as the latter's few strokes can better capture the spirit and artistic conception of landscape paintings. Consequently, landscape themes are almost absent in China's Gong Bi painting exhibitions. However, the Gong Bi landscape painting "Falling Clouds" by Hunan painter Yang Xianshun stood out and was selected for seven China National Art Exhibitions during the 1990s.





**Figure 3:** Falling Clouds, Xuan paper;Ink, 1997,132cmX62cm

From image perspective, The texture of "Falling Clouds" (Figure 3) is a heavy color Gong Bi painting on rice paper, measuring 132 x 62 cm. In this image, Yang Xianshun downplayed the use of lines to highlight the impact of color. In terms of color, Yang breaks away from the traditional Gong Bi landscape's most commonly used "blue" and "green" palette, introducing red hues never previously used in traditional Gong Bi paintings. This innovative use of color adds a fresh and dynamic element to the painting.

The composition deviates from the traditional landscape painting norm of "leaving space for the sky above and a river or ground below." Instead, he fills the entire canvas with subjects, creating a densely packed scene. The distorted houses and trees convey a strong sense of modernity. Cao (2017) believes that Yang's landscapes are distinguished because he boldly breaks away from traditional aesthetic concepts in every aspect.

From theme perspective, Yang depicts a small village nestled at the foot of mountains, a departure from the traditional landscape painting practice of choosing grand scenes to convey a "majestic and grand" sentiment that instills awe in the viewer. Yang's theme abandons this concept to portray a more intimate life. Cao (2017) considers Yang's choice of landscape painting themes to be the antithesis of traditional landscapes, yet this approach endows landscape painting with a new expressive language that narrows the distance between the painting and the viewer.

From the ideology perspective, the 1980s saw a return to the diversification of art's social functions, providing artists with creative space. From the individual practitioner perspective, an artist's personal creativity became the

main determinant of their work. Against this backdrop, Hunan painter Chen Baiyi's creativity in "using traditional techniques to depict life" helped shape a school of painting.

Therefore, the rise of HGP demonstrated a successful adaptation to societal needs. After the solemn and heavy atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution, there was a strong demand for art that was refreshing and grounded in cultural roots. Thematically, these paintings showcased a fresh, natural lifestyle, reflecting a return to the simplicity and beauty of everyday life. In terms of technique, in a national context where it was difficult to move away from the Western realism style, HGP took the lead in exploring a path that inherited and revitalized tradition.

In summary, Hunan Gong Bi painting combines traditional and modern elements in its techniques, retaining delicate lines and refined use of colors. Artists employ traditional line-drawing techniques and light coloring to depict Hunan's natural landscapes and everyday life. For example, Chen Baiyi's "Listening to the Jade Spring" and "March 3rd" fully illustrate these technical features, making the works both intricately detailed and contemporary. The themes of Hunan Gong Bi painting focus more on contemporary life and natural scenery rather than traditional religious and historical subjects. For instance, "March 3rd" portrays a traditional festival of Hunan's ethnic minorities, showcasing joyous scenes of young men and women, while Mo Gaoxiang's "Peace" depicts the harmonious relationship between birds and leaves, reflecting the vitality and beauty of nature. These thematic choices not only resonate with the audience's life experiences but also reflect an understanding and concern for contemporary society.

After the Cultural Revolution, there was a growing demand in Chinese society for diverse cultural forms and artistic styles. Hunan Gong Bi painting responded to this trend by integrating traditional techniques with modern life subjects, successfully meeting the aesthetic and cultural needs of society. This artistic form has gained widespread recognition nationwide, achieving significant success in art education and market promotion. It demonstrates the social function and value of the "expressing life through tradition" style. In conclusion, through innovation and integration in painting techniques, thematic choices, and social functions, Hunan Gong Bi painting successfully adapted to the prevailing trends and demands of the time, providing valuable experience and insights for the development of modern Gong Bi painting.

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