

## *Indigenous Spirituality of Chinese Oil Painters in Europe in the Early 20th Century*

Gengyang Ren, University of Wales Trinity St David, United Kingdom

The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

The Chinese painters who studied in France in the early 20th century produced many oil painters with an indigenous style, such as Changyu and Zao Wou-ki. This thesis will theorise the issue of indigeneity at the level of critical debate and shed light on the indigenous spiritual beliefs and worldview behind the work of this group of oil painters. By doing so, it will help the audience to better understand and interpret the issue of indigeneity in Chinese oil painting. To help better support the painter's views on the issue of indigenisation, this essay will draw on textual analysis, case studies, specifically interviews with the painter and those around him, textual materials, and exhibition records, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the indigenous spiritual beliefs of Chinese oil painters. This essay illustrates the use of the 'Chinese heart' of Chinese painters in oil painting and reveals the indigenous spiritual beliefs of this group in the face of new cultural forms. Through such historical combing and case studies, this article attempts to inform and enlighten the systematic study of traditional Chinese subject matter and its aesthetic integration with Western art in modern Chinese art history.

Keywords: Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs, Oil Painting, Chinese Painters

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum

[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## 1. Background and Context

The pioneers of Chinese oil painting in France created oil paintings with national characteristics through their study of Western painting, including the absorption of realism and early modernism. Their idea of combining East and West pushed the introduced forms of oil painting from encountering and colliding with local art to gradually embarking on a path of integration. This essay discusses the fusion of modern Chinese oil painting with Western modernist painting by examining the history of the pioneers of oil painting in the Republican period in their exploration of the use of traditional subjects in oil painting, as well as case studies of specific artists who blended East and West and East and West, such as the painters Chang Yu, who pursued a modern style of painting, Lin Fengmian, the 'person to nationalise Chinese Western painting', who emphasised the blending of East and West, sorting out the relevant oil painting language, discussing the elements of traditional subject matter in the picture, integrating Chinese and Western art resources through rational perception and sensual practice, and gaining a deeper understanding of the issue of localisation.

This essay will mainly use visual textual analysis and case studies, so the documentation collected so far includes mainly books, catalogues and albums, promotional materials for exhibitions, reviews, magazines, newspapers, etc., as well as artworks. In previous literature, Guo Hui's Writing Chinese art history in early twentieth-century China article mentions compared with numerous studies on the modern historiography of Chinese history, the study of Chinese art history as a professional discipline is still in a preliminary phase. Careful reading of original materials and detailed research on images and texts have barely begun, and a comprehensive discussion of what these materials can reveal about art history in twentieth-century China remains a large gap in Chinese cultural studies. This dissertation is an attempt to do some of the work of closing the gap.

It is clear that research into the history of Chinese art at the beginning of the twentieth century still needs to be supplemented. In the reviews of Chinese oil painters, they are mostly limited to broad introductions, with few studies specifically among the Chinese oil painters of the group who stayed in France, and in addition there is little literature on the in-depth interpretation of their formal language from the perspective of professional practice. Therefore, I will conduct a comprehensive and in-depth study of Chinese oil painters who studied in France and their works from a more specific and clear perspective, which will be of some reference value in sorting out their overall development.

With regard to the state of research related to this thesis, the core and peripheral literature is divided into two levels in terms of categories: the first level is the content of relevant keywords, while the second level is the content of relevant problematic points. They can be roughly divided into the following sections: literature dealing with the localisation of oil painting in the Republican period, traditional themes of Chinese painting, cases of related artists (artistic ideas, works, backgrounds) (1911-1949), research literature related to modern Chinese and Western art history (1840 to the present), and research papers on related topics. These historical narrative documents address the relevant points of issue studied in this thesis, and reading such documents facilitates the understanding of the historical and cultural contexts during the research of this subject, as well as the mastery of the ideas and practices of the research subject.

As presented in the literature review, qualitative methods - including textual analysis, and case studies - will be used to present the reader with Indigenous spiritual beliefs within this

group of oil painters. Of these secondary sources, I found the case study very useful as it is an interpretive phenomenological methodology that affirms the manifestation of Aboriginal spirituality based on stories recorded in multiple histories. For example, in the works, the personal presentation of painting techniques and colouring techniques, the relevance of the painting themes to Chinese history, and also the fact that my practice revolves around the localisation of Chinese oil painting, which is closely related to the subject of the study.

## 2. Analysing Manifestations of Indigenous Spirituality Through Case Studies

This section will analyse Changyu's oil paintings of floral still lifes. Changyu (1901-1966) travelled to France for over forty years, he lived a life of obscurity and poverty and eventually died in France. He was chosen for this study because of his rigorous training in traditional Chinese painting and the influence of European artists, so it is important to examine the evolution of his personal style, specifically exemplifying his traditional Eastern spiritual and philosophical ideas in his floral still-life paintings, the meaning and formal language of the combination of still-life oil painting with traditional Chinese floral and bird subjects, as a way of demonstrating Changyu's indigenous spirituality.

Although Changyu has lived in Paris for almost his entire life, he has never forgotten his native culture and has not been absent from the process of modern Chinese art. Modern Chinese art has been developing in the direction of change, innovation and localisation, and Changyu, as a painter who left China, has kept an eye on the art situation in China, maintained exchanges with some local artists, and interacted with a series of avant-garde art movements that have emerged in China. localisation.

Changyu states (1946) that I have nothing in my life, I am just a painter. I don't think there is any need to give any explanation about my work, when viewing my work it should be clear that what I am trying to say is just a simple concept. It is clear from his words that he wanted his paintings to be simply understood by the viewer and did not want to give too much thought to them. Take, for example, his early traditional Chinese flower and bird painting, Peony in Colour and Ink (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Peony in Colour and Ink by Changyu (1921)

The simplicity and clarity of the subject matter of this piece is in keeping with Changyu's concept of simplicity. This painting uses traditional Chinese ink painting motifs and the boneless flower technique. Boneless flowers are a traditional Chinese painting technique that uses lines to express the outline and structure of the flowers without filling the frame, giving the visual white space and thus revealing the dynamic beauty of the flowers. By placing the still life in the middle of the painting without too many brush strokes to shape the flowers,

Changyu has abandoned the traditional three-dimensional shaping method of oil painting and combined traditional Chinese floral and bird subjects with oil painting still life, and presented them in a modern expressive way.

I believe that the expression of localisation in modern art requires the addition of cultural spirit and personal ideas to tradition in order to ultimately create a good combination. A good example of this is Changyu, a very thoughtful person with a sensitivity and self-consciousness towards traditional Chinese culture. Here are some descriptions of Changyu's character and life from the sidelines. Zhang Daqian told his assistants when he held exhibitions in Paris in 1956 and 1961 respectively that He (Changyu) was one of the first painters to study in France and has the title of China's Matisse; he's much older than Zao Wou-ki in terms of qualifications, he's just particularly eccentric (2001, p.76). Despite his lonely and sensitive appearance, he was full of love for life at heart and often spoke to the trees, sometimes playing music to the plants (2001, p.84). He also enjoys quietly observing small animals and even spends hours writing a story about them (1997). In these descriptions, it is as if Changyu's heart concealed a world of whimsy, and his works show his childlike heart, which expresses itself freely in a world far from his homeland. Perhaps it is his eccentricity that gives the work its original and sincere expression. From the early still-life oil painting 'Bouquet of Roses' (Figure 2), it is clear that from the very beginning he set out to create a simple and straightforward style of painting, with a white vase on a black background and pink roses blooming proudly, releasing a personal style that is uncontested and unobtrusive. The Chinese have been fond of using objects as metaphors for people since ancient times, as the ancient Chinese poet (1992, p.218) Tao Qian once said in his poem 'Seven Songs of a Poor Man all tribes have their own trust, but the lone cloud has no support. .... If a soulmate does not exist, what is the sadness of having passed away. In his poem, Tao Qian compares himself to a lonely cloud in the sky, coming and going alone, and even though he has no soulmates, he still insists on his personal sentiments and does not feel sad even though he sticks to his poor ambition. Tao Qian and Changyu are similar in that Tao Qian uses the cloud in his poem to describe himself, while Changyu uses the rosebush in his painting as a metaphor for his solitary character and his uncontested spirituality, which is also a reflection of his indigenous spirit.



Figure 2: Bouquet of Roses for Changyu (1929)

The background of Changyu's life in Paris also played a part in the development of his indigenous style. The poems in *The Flowers of Evil*, a collection with a modernist launch pad, include Baudelaire's 1852 essay 'The Travelling Bohemian'. The French term for Bohemia is actually the term for the Gypsies, a common subject for romantic poets, and is pervaded by nostalgia. Bohemia (2003) became synonymous with a free and open way of living for oneself. After the First World War, Europe was hit by a wave of hedonism and

people sought emotional release in the excitement of alcohol, opium and novelty. At this time, Changyu was still young, and during the day, in addition to painting at the 'Grand Cottage', he used to read and sketch in cafes to exercise his powers of observation and expression, putting himself in a bohemian state of being and experiencing life thoroughly. For someone with a background in Eastern culture, Changyu's paintings reveal a quiet and restrained oriental quality compared to the passionate expressions of artists in the European cultural vision, such as the painting *Birds and Bonsai* (Figure 3). The subject of this painting is a depiction of folding flowers, which can be broken down into a combination of still life oil painting and traditional bird and flower subject matter. The pot is a traditional Chinese porcelain pot and the scene is of folding flowers, both placed together against a pink background, with a bird perched on a flowering branch with a dynamic sense of taking off to feed, a sense of movement in the stillness and simplicity. The flowerpot in the painting is small, seemingly out of proportion to the folded branches, but it highlights the tenacity of the flower bowl that the artist is trying to express. The painting is also a testament to Changyu's restrained and quiet way of expression.



Figure 3: *Birds and Bonsai* of Changyu (1940s)

Gu Yue (2010,p.18-33) has mentioned in his article, it is only in recent years that Changyu's expressive re-creation of traditional flower and bird painting has become generally appreciated. His knowledge spans the ancient, the modern, the Chinese and the Western, blending between the fields of literature, history, philosophy and poetry, painting and calligraphy. His paintings reflect the depth of traditional culture and the essence of modern art. From the quotation, it is clear that Changyu's combination of East and West in his oil paintings is recognised by contemporary artists and his localised spirit is worthy of being seen by the viewer. At the end of the nineteenth century, European art history was marked by a transformation from 'likeness' to 'unlikeness'. The history of European art at the end of the 19th century saw a revolution in painting from 'likeness' to 'unlike'. From Aristotle's 'imitation' of creation to the creation of form, from the transformation of form and colour to space, from classical to modern physics, from impressionism to abstract art, or from 'likeness' (where a realistic focus on colour led to a loss of accuracy in form) to 'unlikeness'. From impressionism to abstraction, or from "likeness without likeness" (the final stripping away of form to transform "likeness" into some "spiritual" point of view, to achieve a powerful inner resonance), the development of modern art has been written in the history of art by an endless series of new experiments. The development of modern art has been written in art history by an endless stream of new experiments. The 'Changyu style' is the embodiment of 'between likeness and unlikeness'. Although he encountered the 'abstract expressionist' trend in the West after the Second World War, Changyu's subject matter did not break through to total abstraction, but remained true to the 'simplicity' of traditional Chinese literati painting. In his late work, *The Lonely Elephant* (Figure 4), for example, in his later years he was lonely and

unsupported, but his paintings are still free of complex brushwork, with complex and delicate layers permeating the 'simple' forms of expression. This is the result of the social transformation he experienced, which was based on the brutal conditions of war and cultural conflict, as well as his own difficult fate, and then projected onto the mental picture of the transformation process, which is the result of his personal life journey and experience, and the necessary condition for the creation of his unique style. As can be seen, style is not only material and spiritual, but also associated with inner vitality. It is a concrete expression of artistic qualities and extends to all aspects of life in a realistic context, deeply affecting and touching every viewer. In ancient China, traditional literati painting emphasised that 'the painting is like the person', and this can also be seen in Changyu. In *The Lonely Elephant*, one can sense that he was in a state of anguish and loneliness, and this is an expression of his indigenous spirit in his work.



Figure 4: Changyu's *The Lonely Elephant* (1960s)

The works of Lin Fengmian, another oil painter who stayed in France during the same period, are cited for analysis. Lin Fengmian's oil paintings of women are typical in their representation of the imagery of traditional Chinese painting. Qian. Z (2014, p.92) has mentioned in his research Lin further departed from his pictorial reference by self-consciously utilizing easily recognizable mediums and techniques from traditional Chinese painting, albeit executed using an unconventional method. The ink and mineral colors, the smoothly flowing lines, and the skillful play of ink wash give the painting an unmistakably Chinese look. Thus, these paintings function as the medium for Lin's reconnection with Western modernism, but a reconnection for the purpose of a new departure. It is clear from the quotation that Lin Fengmian wanted to use techniques from traditional Chinese painting to fuse with the West and thereby achieve a localised effect. For example, in his oil painting *The Lady* (Figure 5), the lady is beautifully posed, set in a cool palette of blue and white amidst dynamic forms, moving and still, using the brush and elegant colours to capture an illusion, a kind of unattainable imaginative beauty. In his oil paintings of women, he combines elements of traditional Chinese painting and modern Western painting, with a symbolic aesthetic. A masterpiece of Lin Fengmian's oil paintings of Peking Opera characters, *Farewell My Concubine* (Figure 6) gives the viewer an imaginative space in this painting. The ethereal stage background of the characters is painted in white oil, and the simple and contemporary tragic form of King Yu and Yu Ji is more intense than the subtle traditional literati paintings, but the tone highlights the imaginative elements of traditional national painting that emphasise the divine.



Figure 5: The Lady of Lin Fengmian (1950s)



Figure 6: Farewell My Concubine of Lin Fengmian (1950s)

Among Lin Fengmian's sleeve paintings, there are not many works with landscape (Figure 7) themes. In the imaginative expression of Landscape, the objects in the painting are blended with the expressions of traditional Chinese ink painting and the spontaneity of Western modern painting, seemingly encompassing everything in a seamless manner. The visual impact of light and colour combined with geometric shapes reveals the inner quality of the traditional landscape form, with the gurgling water in the foreground, the village and huts in the mid-ground, and the white clouds and mountains in the distance, displaying a peaceful and meaningful imaginative landscape. Lin Fengmian's imaginative composition of the painting finds a balance between the convergence and homogeneity of the heterogeneous cultures of China and the West in the art of painting.



Figure 7: Landscape of Lin Fengmian (1965)

Lin Fengmian's works can be seen to be filled with the expression of 'imagery' in Chinese painting. "The term 'imagery' is one of the core categories in classical Chinese art theory, and is also a widely used term in contemporary Chinese art criticism. Lin Fengmian's imaginative oil paintings can be understood as a form of development of oil painting in the context of Chinese culture. It is therefore clear that Lin Fengmian's work is strongly influenced by indigenous spirit and traditional culture, and that the 'imagery' embodied in his work is therefore one of the typical characteristics of the fusion of Western modernist painting language with the human element of traditional subject matter.

### **3. Conclusion: Spiritual Integration of Chinese and Western Cultures**

At a time when figures, landscapes and birds in Chinese painting were merging with figures, landscapes and still life in Western painting, we see expressive works dominating, especially in the early 20th century. This was not fashionable, but the result of a century-long collision between the Chinese tradition, especially that of literati painting, and the modernism of Western painting. In terms of art history, it resembles the development from the monumental realistic landscapes of China's Song dynasty (especially the Northern Song) to the more realistic landscapes of the Yuan dynasty. In modern times, it has a similar developmental logic to that of Western painting from a realistic style based on the aesthetics of Renaissance reproduction to modernism. The two are not antagonistic, let alone hostile. Expressiveness can not only express personal sentiments, but also convey local sentiments and spiritual beliefs. This is what I have learnt from my research into the history of the early 20th century oil painters who incorporated traditional Chinese subjects into Western oil painting, and it shows that there was a conflict in the process of integration, not a political one but an artistic one, and more broadly, a cultural one. These oil painters who stayed in France transformed traditional Chinese subjects such as figures, landscapes and birds into modern localised oil paintings, providing a successful example of the development of localization.



## References

Changyu. (1946). Interview with Changyu by Pierre Joffroy, *Paris Liberation Journal*, 21.

Changyu. (1921). *Painted Ink Peony* [Watercolour on paper].

Changyu. (1929). *Bouquet of Roses* [Oil on canvas]. private collection, Taipei.

Changyu. (1940s). *Birds and Bonsai* [Oil on wood]. the National Museum of History, Taipei.

Guo Weisen and Bao Jingcheng. (1992). *The Complete Translation of Tao Qian's Works*. Guiyang: Guizhou People's Publishing House.

Gu Yue. (2010). *The Modernity of Changyu's Art Revealed*. Beijing: Rongbaozhai Publishing House.

Lin Fengmian. (1950s). *Farewell My Concubine* [Oil on canvas]. National Academy of Painting, Shanghai.

Lin Fengmian. (1950s). *The Lady* [Oil on canvas]. National Academy of Painting, Shanghai.

Lin Fengmian. (1965). *Landscape* [Oil on canvas]. National Academy of Painting, Shanghai.

Murger. Scenes and Sun Shuzi. (2003). *The life of the literati in the Latin Quarter of Paris*. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House.

Qian, Z. (2014). *Toward a Sinicized Modernism: The Artistic Practice of Lin Fengmian in Wartime China, 1937-1949*. New York University.

Robert Frank. (1997). Interview with Robert Frank, interviewed by Changyu for *Sotheby's auction catalogue*, 19 October.

Yi Shufan. (2001). *The Complete Paintings of Changyu*. Taipei: Guozhu Foundation, Grand Future Art Press.