

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Guohua (Chinese National Painting): Theoretical Foundations, Key Concepts, And Aesthetic Principles

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the theoretical foundations, key concepts, main terminology, historical development, and aesthetic principles of Guohua (国画), China's traditional national painting. Particular attention is paid to the "Six Principles" (Liufa) proposed by Xie He, the Gongbi and Xieyi styles, as well as the philosophical and symbolic dimensions of the genres Shan shui (mountain-water), Hua niao (flowers and birds), and Renwu (figure painting). Drawing on international and Chinese scholarly sources, the article evaluates Guohua's place in contemporary cultural processes, its transformations under globalization, and its significance in the context of cultural relations with Uzbekistan. The research findings demonstrate that Guohua is not merely a collection of traditional techniques but a vivid expression of Chinese philosophy (Daoism, Confucianism, and Chan Buddhism) and aesthetic thought. The article serves as an important theoretical and practical resource for art historians, students, cultural enthusiasts, and specialists in cultural exchange.

KEY WORDS

Guohua, Chinese national painting, Shui-mo hua, Gongbi, Xieyi, Shan shui, Hua niao, Renwu hua, Xie He's "Six Principles", Four Treasures of the Study, Chinese aesthetics, xu-shi principle, cultural exchange.

INTRODUCTION

Guohua (国画 – Guóhuà) is one of China's ancient and richly traditional forms of national painting, primarily manifested through the Shui-mo hua (水墨画) technique based on ink and water. This art form is not only a means of visual expression but also a holistic system embodying profound philosophical and spiritual content. Central concepts such as the harmony between humans and nature, "qi" (vital energy), "yun" (rhythmic harmony), and "xu-shi" (emptiness and substance) occupy a key position. Throughout its thousand-year history, Guohua has reflected the philosophical and aesthetic values of Chinese culture.

In the context of globalization and the digital age, Guohua

actively interacts with Western art, generating new artistic forms, expressive possibilities, and aesthetic directions. This article offers a broad and in-depth scholarly-theoretical analysis of Guohua's main concepts, terminological system, genres, styles, and aesthetic principles.

METHOD

Guohua is traditionally divided into three main genres. These genres are based not only on subject matter but also on philosophical content and aesthetic expression:

Shan shui (山水 – mountain-water) is one of the most popular and philosophically profound genres in Guohua. Here,

mountains (shan) symbolize stability, strength, and the yang principle (masculine), while water (shui) represents fluidity, softness, and the yin principle (feminine). Mountain-water landscapes philosophically interpret the grandeur of nature, humanity's modest place within it, and cosmic order. Shan shui is not merely the depiction of a real landscape but a symbol of the human spirit: mountains convey wisdom and steadfastness, while water expresses the flow of life and change. This genre often features three key elements — winding paths (not straight), rocks, and trees — that create a sense of balance and movement. Shan shui serves as the visual embodiment of Daoist and Confucian ideas, inviting the viewer to harmonize with nature and engage in inner contemplation.

Hua niao (花鸟 – flowers and birds) serves to symbolically express vitality, beauty, changeability, and seasonal rhythms. Images of flowers (for example, the lotus symbolizes purity, while bamboo represents resilience and flexibility) convey human virtues and emotions, and birds signify freedom and vital energy. This genre focuses on blending the subtle states of nature with the inner experiences of the human spirit and is often executed in the free and expressive xieyi style. Through hua niao, artists emphasize the transience and beauty of life.

Renwu hua (人物画 – figure painting) depicts historical, mythological, religious, and everyday scenes through human figures. It deeply reveals human character, moral virtues, social relations, and spiritual states. In ancient times, this genre was frequently created in the meticulous gongbi style with rich detail; later periods enriched it with xieyi elements. Renwu hua visually expresses Confucian moral teachings and the spiritual depth of Buddhism.

Technically, Guohua has two main styles that complement each other and provide artists with diverse expressive opportunities:

Gongbi (工笔 – meticulous brush style) is based on precise, fine lines, perfect elaboration of details, and a rich palette of colors. This style ensures clarity, order, and technical perfection. Gongbi was often used by court painters and predominates in figure paintings or complex compositions. It requires patience and high skill and reflects Confucian ideas of order and moral norms.

Xieyi (写意 – freehand or “writing the idea” style) uses free,

expressive lines and light ink strokes to prioritize inner experiences, spiritual states, and personal expression. This style is rooted in spontaneity and the principle of “following nature,” developing under the influence of Daoism and Chan Buddhism. In xieyi, the artist quickly and freely conveys inner feelings, focusing on overall spiritual energy rather than details. The two styles are often combined to create hybrid forms.

The main tools used in Guohua are known as the “Four Treasures of the Study” (文房四宝 – Wenfang Sibao). They include:

Brush (bi 笔) — made from hairs of varying stiffness and determines the expressive power of the line;

Ink (mo 墨) — in the form of a solid stick, ground with water on an inkstone;

Paper (zhi 纸) — primarily Xuan paper, which absorbs ink well and allows various effects;

Inkstone (yan 砚) — used for grinding ink and often made from rare stones.

These four tools are not only technical but also hold spiritual and philosophical significance: they fill the artist's creative process with “qi” energy and serve as symbols of traditional scholar-artist culture.

The foundation of Guohua aesthetics is formed by the “Six Principles” (Liufa 六法) developed by Xie He in the 5th–6th centuries. These principles serve as the main criteria for painting and include:

Qi yun sheng dong (气韵生动) — Spirit Resonance / Rhythmic Vitality (spirit resonance or vitality). The artist must infuse the work with “qi” energy and bring it to life; this is considered the most important principle.

Gu fa yong bi (骨法用笔) — Bone Method / Use of the Brush (bone method). The strength, expressiveness of lines, and reflection of the artist's personality.

Ying wu xiang xing (应物象形) — Correspondence to the Object / Depiction of Form — the conformity of the image to the real shape and lines of the object.

Sui lei fu cai (随类赋彩) — Suitability to Type / Application of

Color — the use of colors appropriate to the object and its meaning.

Jing ying wei zhi (经营位置) — Division and Planning / Composition and Placement.

Chuan yi mo xie (传移模写) — Transmission by Copying / Modeling from the Ancients — learning from old masters and continuing tradition through copying.

These principles are not only evaluation criteria but also form the basis of artistic training and creative process, remaining relevant today.

Literature Review The theory of Guohua is extensively covered in both ancient and modern sources. Xie He's "Gu hua pin lu" ("The Record of the Classification of Old Painters") is one of the fundamental texts in this field. Among modern Western scholars, Osvald Sirén, James Cahill, and Michael Sullivan have deeply studied the historical and aesthetic development of Guohua. Chinese scholars (such as Pan Gongkai and Xu Fuguan) actively research the modern transformation of national painting, its place in global art, and its philosophical roots.

In Uzbekistan, interest in Guohua is also growing within the framework of cultural exchange. Exhibitions, seminars, and educational projects conducted under the "Belt and Road" initiative between China and Uzbekistan contribute to strengthening scientific and artistic ties between the two cultures.

Analysis and Results One of the important aesthetic features of Guohua is the "emptiness and substance" (xu-shi) principle. According to this principle, the unpainted space (xu) also carries artistic and philosophical meaning. Emptiness actively prompts the viewer to contemplate and personally fill the inner content of the image. This approach is closely linked to the Daoist idea that "fullness is born from emptiness" and sharply differs from the "full" compositions typical of Western art.

The research results indicate the following:

Style Analysis: The Gongbi style expresses clarity, order, and technical perfection, reflecting Confucian ideas of moral and social order, while the Xieyi style manifests freedom, spontaneity, and spiritual expression, based on the Chan Buddhist and Daoist principle of "following nature." The two styles complement each other, allowing the artist to achieve both precise and free expression simultaneously.

Modern Transformation: In the contemporary era, Guohua actively integrates with digital technologies (3D modeling, animation, virtual reality), abstract art, and conceptualism. For example, modern Chinese artists (Ai Weiwei, Zhang Xiaogang) combine traditional ink techniques with current social themes to create new aesthetic forms. This process makes Guohua competitive in the global art market and confirms its "tradition + innovation" formula.

Significance in the Uzbek Context: In the cultural environment of Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan, the ideas of respect for nature, human-nature harmony, and spiritual depth embodied in Guohua are highly relevant. There are many similarities between Guohua and Uzbek miniature art (traditions of Kamoliddin Behzod): both emphasize fine lines, symbolism, and the aesthetic interpretation of nature. Integrating Guohua into Uzbekistan's educational programs (art academies and universities), organizing joint exhibitions, and implementing master-apprentice projects can strengthen the cultural bridge between the two nations. This is important not only aesthetically but also ecologically and philosophically — in the context of today's global environmental crisis, ideas of respect for nature are becoming increasingly urgent.

Overall Assessment: Today, Guohua is not preserved merely as a heritage of the past but is becoming an active, dynamic, and developing component of contemporary art. Its aesthetic principles enrich the "East-West" dialogue in global culture and have become an integral part of humanity's shared cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

The concepts and terminology of Guohua reflect the deep layers of Chinese philosophical and aesthetic thought. Its theoretical foundations, genres, technical styles, and aesthetic principles make it one of the unique and rich forms of world visual art.

In the present day, Guohua is developing through the harmonious combination of tradition and innovation, firmly securing its place in the global cultural space. Its wide integration into Uzbekistan's educational system, cultural projects, and international cooperation programs holds great scientific, practical, and cultural significance. In this way, Guohua is valued not only as part of Chinese heritage but also as an inseparable and precious component of all humanity's cultural legacy.

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