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ABSTRACT

This thesis delved into the evolution of Chinese painting styles, spanning from ancient times to the present, placing emphasis on both traditional art painting styles and contemporary illustrations. By closely examining the production process of the Four Treasures of the Study (ink, inkstone, brush, paper) and thoroughly analyzing the fundamental elements of lines, ink tones, and aesthetic conception, this paper aims to demonstrate the similarities and differences between ancient Chinese art and contemporary Chinese illustration and how tools of the time influenced stylistic evolution over time. Additionally, the author's visual thesis integrates artistic techniques from the past with contemporary painting methods, aiming to pay homage to an ancient heritage and evoke a sense of nostalgia for one's homeland.

FROM TRADITION TO MODERNITY: CRAFTSMANSHIP OF FOUR
TREASURES OF THE STUDY AND THE EVOLUTION AND
DEVELOPMENT OF PAINTING TECHNIQUES

by

Yuanjing Chu

B.F.A., Tianjin Academy of Fine Art School, 2019

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Illustration

Syracuse University

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Introduction

As a Chinese student pursuing education in the United States, I have often experienced culture shock. The American way of life vastly differs from China's, and it took me two years to adjust and adapt. Americans are renowned for their straightforwardness and free-spirited nature, and they strongly emphasize on emotional expression and non-verbal communication. By contrast, Chinese culture values implicit expression, which is reflected in art. Traditional Chinese painting techniques, such as the use of shadows, thin line clouds, shades of ink, and liberal use of white space, create a translucent appearance that evokes a sense of subtlety and introspection.

For instance, Wang Meng's *Ge Zhichuan Moving House* and Ni Zan's *The Rongxi Studio* are notable examples of Chinese painting techniques reflecting cultural values. Wang Meng employs thin, sparse lines depicting a desolate landscape, conveying a sense of loneliness and introspection. Similarly, Ni Zan creates an atmosphere of quiet contemplation by portraying scattered rocks and sparse trees. These paintings exemplify how Chinese art reflects the subtleties and cultural values of the society it represents.



Figure 1 Rongxi Studio, Ni Zan, 1372, Tang Dynasty

The Chinese culture has a rich history of using intricate expressions to convey ideas and emotions, merging scenery and sentiments in a nuanced manner. In traditional Chinese painting, the emphasis lies in conveying the artistic conception and atmosphere, blending subjective life sentiment with objective natural scenery, and this approach has led to intentionally vague and unclear picture lines in Chinese paintings.

Early Chinese people had limited tools and materials at their disposal, with engravings on rock or board, oracle bones, and bamboo and wood slips being the three most significant recording forms of early Chinese civilization (Zhang, 2004). The invention of the Four Treasures of the Study, including the brush that absorbs water, the ink that can change the shade of color, the inkstone that can grind ink, and paper to paint on, unprecedentedly transformed the way of Chinese classical painting, gives more variation to the lines and colors in the artworks. And it is precisely because of this relatively single-color but highly varied saturation expression, this implicit and abstract form of expression were present in Chinese culture since ancient times and is closely related to the painting tools used in Chinese art, finally leading to the unique style of “artistic conception” in Chinese painting.

When I was young, I often found my grandfather engrossed in his art at his desk. He was enthusiastic about traditional calligraphy, landscapes, flowers, and birds. He explained to me that these things are not only for artistic appreciation, but the meaning hidden in the paintings really matters. My grandfather wished I would be like the plum blossoms in Dong Shouping’s paintings, not afraid of the coldness, and bloom freely. He wished I would be as beautiful and happy as the woman in *Lady Guoguo’s Spring Outing*. He inspired me to become ambitious, peaceful, and as far-reaching as the mountains in Huang Binhong’s *Qingcheng*

Mountain Colors. He also enlightened me on how the development of traditional Chinese painting is inseparable from ancient Chinese wisdom, as embodied in the Four Treasures of the Study. These tools promote the development of traditional Chinese culture and hold special significance for me as they come from my hometown of Anhui province.

Anhui province may not have the same international recognition as China's more famous cities like Beijing and Shanghai, but the province has a rich history dating back thousands of years. Despite the vastness of China's cultural legacy, many aspects remain unknown to the wider world, with some even fading away with time. Regrettably, many Chinese people are unaware of the origins of the Four Treasures of the Study, or the challenges ancient artisans face in creating them under limited conditions. It holds extraordinary significance for China, as it promotes the development of Chinese art and changes people's lives. The Four Treasures of the Study are the building blocks of Chinese painting culture, and I hope that more people will come to understand their significance. While modern technology has enabled significant research and even replication or replacement of traditional skills, people are at risk of neglecting to learn these skills and depending entirely on technology. As a proud resident of Anhui, I believe that the world needs to recognize and appreciate the traditions and treasures of my home province.



Figure 2 *Spring outing (Part)*, Zhang Xuan, 907, Tang Dynasty

What Are the Four Treasures of the Study?

The Four Treasures of the Study represent four significant inventions in Chinese history, particularly in the fields of calligraphy and painting. Notably, the brush, one of the Four Treasures, holds great significance in both calligraphy and painting, serving as an essential tool for both writing and art-making in Chinese culture. Their origins date back to the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 AD), and they have remained a crucial part of the development of traditional Chinese calligraphy. Traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy ink is made from soot and ashes obtained from burning pine wood and glue. The intensity and saturation of the ink can be adjusted according to the amount of water added. In contrast to today's liquid or lump form of ink, traditional ink was stored in the form of earth and stone during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). When required,

the soil and stone were ground into a fine powder, after which water was added to make it available for use. In the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD), people experimented with adding precious herbal materials to the soot to produce ink bricks. These innovations led to changes in the process of making ink, improving the overall quality of the ink used in Chinese painting and calligraphy.

The inkstone, also called ink slab, was created to facilitate grinding traditional solid inks and evolved alongside the development of brush and ink. The inkstone's surface is smooth and has a well to store water. The choice of materials for the inkstone can influence the quality of the ink. A high-quality stone is essential for grinding ink in Chinese painting. The stone should be devoid of impurities and particles and have water-resistant properties to prevent ink from evaporating or being absorbed too quickly. In addition to the most common inkstones carved from regular stones, there are jade and pottery inkstones. In the past, the quality of an inkstone was evaluated based on two crucial aspects: the rate at which the ink sticks fused with water during the grinding process and the refinement of the fusion of carbon molecules and water molecules in ink. The finest inkstone produces ink that is dark as night shades and smooth as oil. Consequently, the best-quality Chinese paintings require inkstones of exceptionally high quality.

The origins of the traditional brush can be traced back to the Neolithic Age.

It underwent significant improvements during the Qing Dynasty, specifically under the guidance of General Meng Tian between 221-206 AD. Initially, people utilized bamboo sticks for writing, but the ink would quickly dry out, necessitating frequent dipping and consuming excessive time. One day, while hunting, Meng Tian observed bloodstains on the ground from a rabbit's tail dragging along. He took the rabbit's fur and attached it to a bamboo tube, experimenting with it for writing purposes. This marked the birth of the brush, a tool that can absorb water and be used for extended periods. Varying types of animal hair can produce distinct textures in writing and painting. The intricate production of brushes occurred primarily in Xuancheng, Anhui Province, from the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) through the Tang and Song Dynasties (960-1279 AD). Material selection was a meticulous process, with wild rabbit fur from the mountains and fields in autumn being chosen, specifically the small amount of elastic hair on the rabbit's back to meet the requirements. Obtaining such high-quality rabbit fur was exceedingly challenging at the time, leading to the current use of alternative animal fur, like wolf wool, as a substitute for rabbit fur.

As one of the most significant substrates to record writing and art, paper has undergone a remarkable evolution. Paper was typically produced by the following steps: mixing mulberry bark, hemp, and rags with water, mashing it into pulp multiple times, pressing out the liquid, and hanging the thin mat to dry in the sun,

resulting in a highly absorbent paper that complements ink usage. Paper production in China can be traced back to the Western Han Dynasty. However, the breakthrough in understanding paper-making techniques occurred in the first year of Yuanxing in the Eastern Han Dynasty (105 AD) when Cai Lun developed a method that incorporated more readily available raw materials such as bark, hemp, rags, and old fishing nets, leading to the production of higher-quality paper at a more affordable price, thus becoming favored among the populace. In the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing Dynasties (1636-1912), the demand for paper kept increasing due to educational development, literary and artistic flourishing, and commercial expansion. The craft of papermaking became more advanced. During this period, many books record the process of paper making, such as Su Yijian's *Paper Score*¹ in the Song Dynasty, Song Yingxing's *Tiangong Kaiwu*² in the Ming Dynasty, which even features detailed diagrams of paper-making procedures, making it the most comprehensive record of paper-making technology of its time.

¹ It is part of <Wenfang Sipu>, the total is 5 juan, The earliest book recording four treasures of study.

² Also called <The Exploitation of The Worlds of Nature>, It was a Chinese encyclopedia.

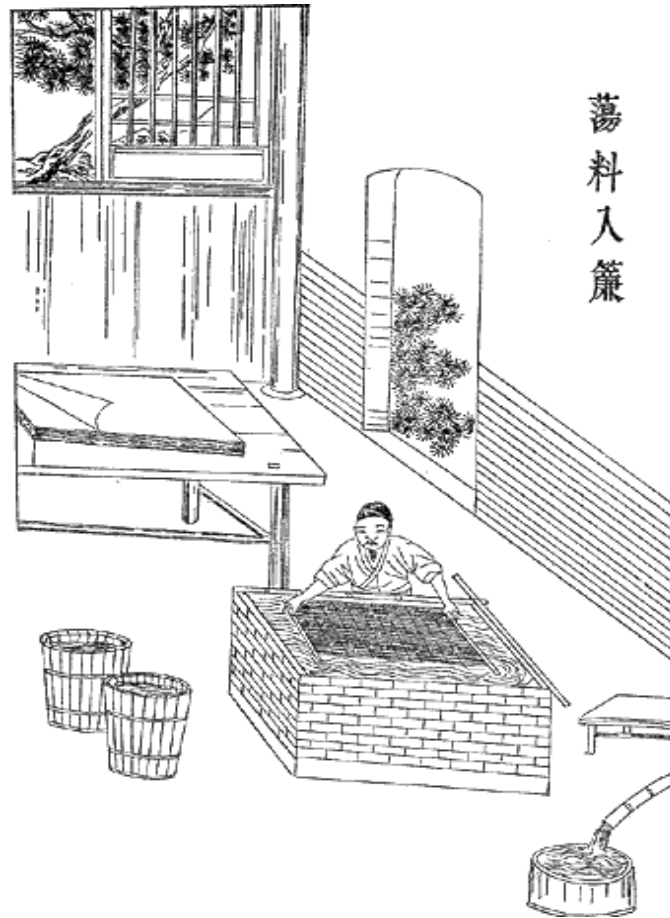


Figure 3 *Tiangong Kaiwu* (Paper making, Part), Song Yingxing, 1637

The emergence of the Four Treasures of the Study brought about significant transformations in people's lives during that era. It eliminated the laborious task of carving on wooden boards and mitigated concerns regarding the gradual deterioration of the boards due to time and insect damage. The ink, produced through diverse processes, could be preserved for extended periods without fading. Furthermore, the distinct fragrance of the ink, when applied to paper, acted as a deterrent against insect damage. The Four Treasures of the Study offered a superior

means of recording history and enabled us to comprehend the splendid civilization of the past.

Brushes, inks, paper, and inkstones have also assumed an indispensable role as precious possessions in the studies of ancient literati. They embody China's cultural heritage, foster the development of Chinese calligraphy and painting, and serve as witnesses to the progress of human history.

The Features and Development of Chinese Painting

Chinese painting styles have undergone a diverse and extensive evolution spanning over 7,000 years. The journey of Chinese visual expression began with rock walls as a medium for primitive writings, advanced to pottery surfaces for inscriptions, and gradually expanded to encompass fabric and paper, which became widely utilized for various forms of artistic and written expression. Similar to the structure of Chinese characters, the Chinese painting style features stylized representations of observed landscapes, emphasizing similarity rather than exact replication, as described earlier. In Chinese painting, artists excel at capturing the intrinsic qualities of their subjects, utilizing lines to distill the essence of the image and ink washes to portray changes in relative lightness and darkness. The interplay between brushstrokes and ink washes, varying in thickness, direction, and intensity, creates mood, atmosphere, and subtle nuances within the painting.

Concurrently, Chinese painting and poetry share a profound connection. The conveyance of emotions through words and the visual impact found in painting combine to evoke deep feelings, providing a synesthetic experience.

Evolution of The Painting Style

After the emergence of the Four Treasures of the Study, through continuous exploration, people became increasingly proficient using of these tools. Gradually, Chinese painting works started to exhibit different styles and themes.

Prior to the Han Dynasty (206 BC- 220 AD), with the introduction of Buddhism to China by traveling scholars, coupled with the influence of Buddhist culture and people's religious beliefs, an increasing number of individuals began to embrace and worship deities, resulting in Chinese ink paintings primarily focusing on depicting people. During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the turbulent North-South division subsided, allowing people more time to pursue their own lives. Chinese painting gradually matured and flourished during this period. The advancements in social productivity during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) led to increased emphasis on quality of life and cultural-ethical standards, especially for the upper classes. As a result, room dividers adorned with beautiful mountains, grasslands, flowers, and birds became popular in royal palaces. The categorization of paintings into genres such as people, landscapes, flowers, and birds became more explicit and more organized, particularly with the emergence of the green landscape style

represented by Li Sisun and Li Zhaodao, and the inky landscape style represented by Wang Wei. These artists are regarded as the founders of the *Nan Bei Er Zong*, symbolizing the divergence in the interpretation of landscape painting between the aristocracy and the educated class.



Figure 4 *Sail Boats and Pavilion*, Li Sixun, Tang Dynasty (618-907)

The Song Dynasty witnessed a period of stability in society, the economy, and people's lives, providing a conducive environment for Chinese painting to flourish. Notably, Zhang Zeduan's painting *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* depicted the prosperous secular life of the time. At the same time, stable social circumstances allowed people to pursue art with more remarkable dedication. The landscape style during the Southern Song Dynasty (960-1127) emphasized the expression of spirit, and a form of art known as *literati painting* emerged. Literati painting refers to the paintings created by Chinese literati and scholars in feudal society. Throughout history, scholars revered nature, the heavens, and the earth due to their limited understanding of the world. Some scholars believed that immersing oneself in the beauty of mountains and water could help cultivate one's temperament. Hence, literati painters often sought to depict landscapes, flowers, and trees to express their emotions. Among these subjects, the "Four Gentlemen" paintings gained significant popularity and were highly sought after. The "Four Gentlemen" represent four characters: plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum. Plum blossoms, clad in snow, represent purity; orchids, elegant and pleasant, represent virtuosity; bamboo, tough and flexible, represents modest warriors; chrysanthemum, novel and independent, represents the hermit.



Figure 5 Plum blossom, Orchid, Bamboo, and Chrysanthemum, Wu Changshuo, 1920

Artistic Conception

As mentioned above, the influence of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism prompted people to pay more attention to inner emotional changes. In an over-generalization, Chinese people prefer making analogies and metaphors to describe their inner thoughts rather than directly elaborating. As Zong Baihua said in *Aesthetic Walk*: “Subjective life sentiment and objective natural scene blend and permeate each other, and the spiritual realm of achievement constitutes the artistic

conception of art.” (Zong, B. 2005, P9) This artistic conception can be understood as “Scenario Blending”. Poets and painters connect beauty and emotion, using metaphors or anthropomorphic techniques to express their emotions. Artists employ elements from the universe, such as mountains, rivers, flowers, or animals, as vehicles to reflect their souls, subsequently utilizing specific art forms like painting or poetry to convey emotions. The artistic conception serves as the essence of Chinese painting, transcending the realm of concrete objects, finite subjects, or natural scenes, thereby establishing a mutual interdependence and symbiotic relationship between nature and life.

Line Drawing

Besides ink landscapes, Chinese paintings also showcase distinct features and a captivating interest in figure painting. Chinese figure painting has traditionally relied on lines and ink washes to create volume, with simple line sketches as the foundation for modeling figures. By skillfully manipulating the thickness, length, and density of lines, artists effectively express the volume, dynamics, and spatiality of the forms depicted. This way of painting differs from European classical figure oil paintings, where shapes and gradations are used to indicate mass, while historically Chinese art, particularly in the figure painting style known as “Bai Miao” (line drawing), relies more on lines and tonal washes to depict volume through the intersection of lines. It is important to note that while

Chinese painting relies on lines, the objects themselves are not composed of lines, but of multiple surfaces. This determines that Chinese ink brush drawing is not based on realism but on depicting concepts. Wu Daozi in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) astonishingly described the characters in the *Scroll of Eighty-Seven Immortals*. He is good at expressing the volume of objects by changing the lines' width, making the complete picture vivid and three-dimensional. Wu Daozi's works significantly influenced subsequent generations, earning him the honorary title of "Painting Saint."



Figure 6 *The Eighty-seven Immortals*, Wu Daozi, Tang Dynasty (618-907)

As technology advances, alternative approaches to painting have gradually emerged. Artists are exploring the use of tools to replace the laborious techniques of traditional painting. Fountain pens, ink storage soft-tip pens, and digital painting have gained popularity. With the aid of technology, painters no longer need to engage in time-consuming color mixing, prepare brushes of various sizes, replace colors, or clean palettes. Artists can employ more convenient and efficient painting tools, facilitating unprecedented achievements in painting. Presently, digital painting is increasingly favored and appreciated by illustrators. It enables the

simulation of various painting tools, allowing artists to utilize multiple brushes and textures within a single artwork. Digital art can even replicate the effects of traditional painting. Some artists may also employ computer software to manipulate images and create visually impactful effects.

Thanks to social and cultural progress, painters are no longer limited to landscapes or figures as subjects. They began to express their inner imagination and fantasies about the unknown world. This newfound freedom has opened doors for artists, granting them expanded choices and creative space.

Chinese Style in Illustration Today

The demand for artwork today is increasing, and many artists are beginning to explore efficient and convenient methods to enhance their creative output. Their artistic expressions have expanded beyond the boundaries of traditional mediums like paper or canvas, as they now employ a variety of materials and integrated painting techniques. Some artists have adapted their roles and embraced the identity of illustrators, creating paintings with commercial objectives rather than solely channeling their emotions into their works. Likewise, to cater to the evolving aesthetic preferences of the public, many illustrators are actively pursuing their distinct painting styles to seize more opportunities for engagement and appreciation. To stand out among the many talented illustrators worldwide,

Chinese illustrators need to find their own areas of expertise and unique styles to compete in the market.

During the early 19th century, China experienced cultural influences from European art due to the colonial presence of Western countries. From the introduction of Western oil painting to the present, many Chinese artists studied European art styles and concepts intensely while inadvertently neglecting the history of traditional Chinese art and culture. Some artists recognized this imbalance and began to reevaluate and integrate their knowledge of Western painting into the realm of Chinese art.

China boasts a history that spans over 5,000 years, characterized by a wealth of myths and legends about ghosts and immortals. Today, these stories have served as a wellspring of inspiration for illustrators, providing them with abundant creative material to draw upon. The tales of gods and immortals offer a glimpse into a world of power and enchantment, sparking the imagination of illustrators. Through their creativity, illustrators can bring these characters to life with distinct and unique imagery, resulting in endless possibilities. Stories such as *Kuafu chasing the sun*, *Nuwa mending the sky*, *Jingwei filling the sea*, and many others have been passed down through generations, embodying the essence of Chinese culture and values. Like Grimm's fairy tales in the West, they convey moral messages, recounting the blessings bestowed by the gods and immortals who have

brought life and meaning to the world. These stories hold significant educational value and have influenced generations of individuals.

In Snow Fish's illustrations works myths and legends serve as the primary themes for his illustrations. His style is flat and characterized by smooth, vivid lines. He fully utilizes the contrast of colors to accentuate the main characters in the painting. Under his skilled hand, the characters in the story come to life, embodying unique colors and characteristics.



Figure 7 *Illustrations of ancient Chinese myths and legends*, Snow fish, 2020

Chinese culture encompasses symbolic patterns and motifs known as Chinese elements, which hold special meanings and are deeply ingrained in the national artistic style. These elements, such as clouds, animals, and flowers, represent people's aspirations in life. Contemporary Chinese illustrators often incorporate these motifs into their works to enrich the imagery and imbue them with a distinctly Chinese aesthetic. In my own visual thesis, I have also utilized these patterns and motifs to enhance the content of my artwork and add decorative elements.

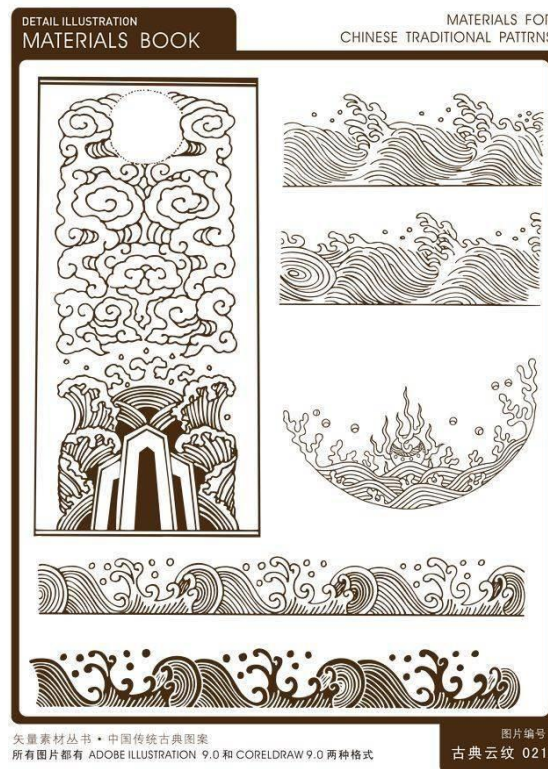


Figure 8 *Zhong Guo Chuan Tong Gu Dian Tu An*, Jiamian Zou, Ben Lie, Jia Lie; Page 21, 2006, ISBN:

9787539419022

Traditional Chinese painting heavily relies on ink and brushes as its primary tools. The color palette typically consists of black and white or cyan and vermilion, creating striking contrasts. Chinese painting has always been closely tied to the artist's brush control, whether through splashed ink or precise lines. This demanding process demands incredible patience and skill, especially considering the thinness of the paper used in Chinese painting, leaving little margin for error with each stroke. Artists had to carefully manage the ink and pressure applied to the brush. It was difficult to fathom the amount of time, mistakes, and paper that artists like Zhang Zeduan³ devoted to their masterpieces, such as *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*.

While digital art offers convenience, it lacks the meticulousness and craftsmanship of handmade art and, therefore may attain a different level of value than traditional art. Many artists, especially illustrators today, strive to combine traditional media with technology, preserving the unique texture of traditional painting while allowing for modifications on the digital platform. For instance, in an interview, Victo Ngai revealed that she typically employs a nib pen or brush for her lines, creates texture layers on paper, scans these materials, and paints them digitally in Adobe Photoshop using unique brushes. In my visual thesis, I also use

³ Zhang Zeduan (1085-1145), Chinese painter of the Song dynasty. He lived during the transitional period from the Northern Song to the Southern Song and was instrumental in the early history of the Chinese landscape art style known as Shan Shui.

a combination of traditional painting techniques and digital art. This way, the essence of traditional painting is preserved on the screen, providing more choices and color variations.

When people discuss Chinese painting, in addition to the fundamental, black-and-white ink wash paintings, one should pay attention to the colors of Chinese painting. These colors are produced by blending other materials, such as metals or herbs, based on the principles of ink-making, resulting in unique hues and tones.

Color is a vital element in traditional Chinese painting in conveying the artist's intended meaning. Contrary to the misconception that traditional Chinese painting is limited to black and white, the color range used in this art form is much more varied. In fact, color is also widely used in painting to make the artwork more vibrant and complete, and to better convey the artist's emotions. In ancient times, color pigments were extracted from precious gemstones, ores, and medicinal plants, such as sapphire, ruby, emerald, making them rare and costly. The colors used in traditional Chinese painting are divided into two categories: pure and variegated. Pure colors are based on the Yin-Yang⁴ and Five Elements theory⁵, which express the traditional Chinese frame of mind. Pure colors are similar to the

⁴ Ying and Yang: It refers to the two opposing and interconnected forces that exist in all things in the world.

⁵ The Five Elements: It consists of the operations and transformations of five basic substances, namely "Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water." It emphasizes the concept of the whole.

three primary colors in western color theory, these are fundamental colors used in Chinese painting. The five colors in China were developed based on the available resources during that era. These five colors symbolize the essence of all natural elements and are revered as the purest colors in the world. Due to the complexity and expense of extracting pure colors, their use was primarily limited to the royal class.

On the other hand, variegated colors are derived from impure materials, which can also be formed by mixing pure colors together. Unlike pure colors, variegated colors are not restricted in their use. The unique method of color blending in traditional Chinese painting reflects the essence of nature and conveys meaning in the artwork. Please refer to the following two figures excerpted from Tin Huang's paper to further appreciate the five elemental colors in traditional Chinese painting. It is worth noting that due to the existence of a language barrier, although the term "Green" is used in the table, extensive research leads me to believe that the most accurate description of this color would be cyan or dark cyan.



Figure 9 *Five colors and Five Chinese elements*. Sohu, n.d

Color/ element/ nature relationship

COLOR	Red	Yellow	Green	White	Black
ELEMENT	Fire	Earth	Wood	Gold	Water
NATURE	Yang	Yang	Yin	Yang	Yin

Figure 10 *Chinese Color Theory*; Tin Christopher Hang, n.d.

In recent times, contemporary illustrators have begun to use these Chinese colors to color paintings, making the colors of the pictures richer and more vivid.

For example, in addition to using many Chinese elements in her paintings, Kuri Huang also skillfully uses “five colors” in color matching. In her painting, Huang extensively uses yellow and red to depict flames and clouds and a small amount of cyan to depict mountains and rivers. Lian Yang is the best example of using the five Chinese colors. She even used mineral pigment to create her work to pursue of the most traditional Chinese colors, directly restoring the original Chinese style colors.



Figure 11 *Monkey*, Kuri Huang, 2019



Figure 12 *Yuhuan Yang, Lian Yang, 2021*

Lines are paramount in traditional Chinese painting, serving as a vital component of artistic expression. The artistic expression of lines is extraordinarily strong. It can express not only the outline of the object, but also the shape, movement, and even the volume, interlocking lines can give the illusion of three dimensions to a flat picture. Today illustrators are more flexible in their use of lines. Contemporary illustrators can infuse lines with color, enhancing the vividness of the artwork. Short and thick lines give a strong emotion, while soft and thin lines give a gentle and comfortable feeling. For instance, illustrator Zao Dao adeptly employs stern lines to convey a scene's grandeur or loose and delicate lines to depict the movement of wind. By skillfully manipulating the changes in

lines, illustrators imbue their pictures with a range of emotions, creating a compelling visual experience.



Figure 13 From *Song Feng*, Zao Dao, 2015

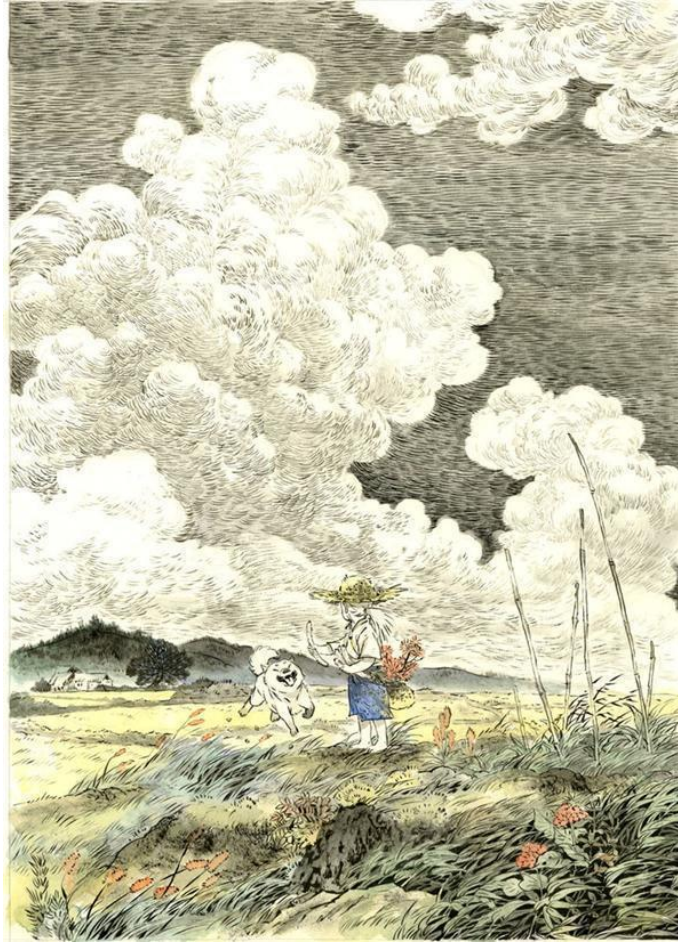


Figure 14 From *Song Feng*, Zao Dao, 2015

Chinese paintings are traditionally crafted on delicate rice paper or silk fabric. The ink's absorption into these surfaces results in unique patterns reminiscent of the filters used in photography. These intricate textures add a captivating dimension to the artwork, enhancing its overall visual appeal and imbuing it with a distinct textural quality. Contemporary illustrators have found ways to emulate the visual effects of traditional hand-painted works by incorporating paper textures into their digital illustrations. This can be achieved

using digital techniques that simulate paper textures or by selecting special paper when printing the artwork. Chinese illustrators strive to evoke the essence of hand-painted styles, ensuring a cohesive and unified visual experience.

Examination of the Visual Thesis

When I decided to make Four Treasures of the Study my thesis topic, I deliberated extensively on the form of creation. Around 12 years ago, during my initial foray into painting, my education primarily revolved around Western painting principles, emphasizing volume and exploring the interplay of light and shadow. Traditional Chinese painting received scant attention in my education, even in the art exams I undertook throughout my childhood, which were solely focused on the Western painting system. While this approach to painting provided a solid foundation for my artistic skills, I recognized the desire to deepen my understanding of my own nation's traditional culture. In conversations with foreign friends, I discovered that traditional Chinese paintings were relatively unfamiliar to artists outside of China. Motivated by a desire to shed light on Chinese traditional culture and its invaluable artistic heritage, I wholeheartedly chose "Four Treasures of the Study" as the theme for my graduation project. These treasures, namely the brush, ink, paper, and inkstone, serve as the cornerstone of Chinese painting, and I fervently hope that one day they gain the recognition worldwide.

I used to rely on the convenience of digital painting, which resulted in my lack of experience in hand-painting. In creating my visual thesis, I paid tribute to the contribution of the ancients to Chinese art by using a natural brush and ink. Throughout the process, I faced various difficulties, with the control of the brush being the most challenging. I experimented with different brushes and inks, considering factors such as brush tip thickness and fur selection, as they could somewhat impact the line's shape. Moreover, the quality of the ink also played a role in determining the line's quality. After numerous failures, I decided to conduct tests and training on brushes and inks before embarking on the final drawing. I chose a brush made of wolf hair as the primary material, as it offered excellent elasticity, resulting in smooth lines.



Figure 15 *Inkstone making*, Yuanjing Chu, ink, 2023

Drawing lines with a brush presented additional challenges for me. Having grown accustomed to digital drawing, I struggled to transition to direct drawing on a larger sheet of paper. Unlike the flexibility of adjusting paper size and zooming in or out on a computer, drawing on paper requires meticulous positioning of the characters on the page. Moreover, after scanning the draft and importing it into Photoshop, I should have noticed the issue of the original lines appearing less prominent on the long scroll. To address this, I continued using a brush even after importing the draft into Photoshop. I created additional line elements with the brush and scanned them into the computer, mimicking the traditional Chinese brush style. These brush elements were then used to correct errors in the scanned image. Upon completing the entire line drawing, I carefully reviewed the composition and added more lines to enhance the image's completeness. Although the process was tedious and monotonous, the clean lines proved invaluable for later color adjustments, because I could quickly distinguish between the characters and the background.



Figure 16 *Paper Making*, Yuanjing Chu, ink, 2023

I opted for digital painting to achieve the desired colors. This method offers modernity and convenient adjustments through an infinite number of layers and a broader color palette. In my illustration, I portrayed two "instructors" guiding the audience by creating the "Four Treasures of Study." I designed the illustrations as horizontal to provide an immersive experience reminiscent of Chinese scroll paintings. Historically, due to the delicate nature of paper, preserving scroll paintings posed challenges. To overcome this, artists developed special techniques to transfer the artworks onto silk fabric, securing them with two wooden bars. This allowed the paintings to be easily rolled up for storage and transportation while preserving the longevity of their colors.



Figure 17 *Paper making*, Yuanjing Chu, digital color, 2023



Figure 18 *Four scrolls of four treasures of study*, Yuanjing Chu, 2023

Conclusion

The brush, ink, paper, and inkstone are remarkable inventions from China that have contributed to the development of the world. They played a vital role in developing Chinese painting and brought convenience to the world at large. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC- 220 AD) in 130 BCE- 1453 CE, Silk Road⁶ brought the paper to the world. The presence of the Four Treasure of The Study has eliminated the need to record history in a complicated way. In my visual thesis, I aimed to delve into the ancient techniques used by the artists in crafting four treasures found

⁶ Silk Road was a network of Eurasian trade routes. Spanning over 6400 kilometers.

in a scholar's studio. By delving into the wisdom of the ancients, more people will be able to know about China.

As technology continues to advance, the field of painting undergoes constant innovation. Combining of traditional and digital painting techniques allows the painting to have the texture of traditional art, and the ability to manipulate images quickly and easily. Not only can it bring more intuitive expression, but it enables illustrators to work more quickly and make corrections more easily. The fact is that digital art is also more easily reproduced and promoted, and more prevalent among illustrators, photographers, and commercial artists.

In contrast, traditional art is characterized by its unique, irreplicable nature. Each brushstroke and mark the artist makes on the canvas is a treasure that cannot be reproduced. In the realm of artistic development, illustrators should not merely follow advancements in technology but also take the time to appreciate and apply traditional art skills. For instance, the brushstrokes produced by ink on paper through the painter's control of the brush are unpredictable compared to digitally programmed brushes, and traditional painting is often produced with countless unknowns, adding an element of excitement and surprise to the artistic process. The journey of art creation has no bounds. Embracing traditional art allows illustrators to express themselves in unparalleled ways and connects them to the rich heritage and wisdom of generations past.

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VITA

NAME OF AUTHOR: Yuanjing Chu

PLACE OF BIRTH: Anhui, China

DATE OF BIRTH: September 30, 1996

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

Syracuse University

Tianjin Academy of Fine Art

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Fine Arts in Illustration, 2023, Syracuse University

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture, 2019, Tianjin Academy of Fine Art

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Assistant Art Teacher, Fan Qie Tian Art School, 2015-2016