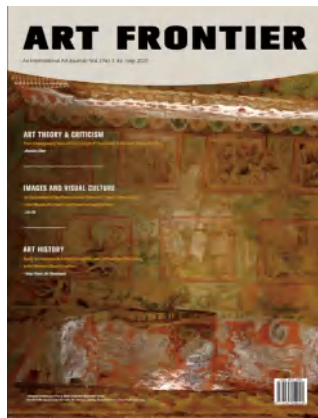




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Aesthetic Analysis of the Reconstruction Paths of “Fusion Theory” and “Harmonization Theory”: The Suspension of “Yi” in the Modernization of Twentieth-Century Chinese Art

Zhang Zien

Abstract

In the first half of the twentieth century, driven by the Art Revolution, Chinese art faced the dual pressures of the Western discourse system’s impact and modernization. Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian, as representatives of early French-educated Chinese artists, proposed two paths of traditional transformation that were similar in form but different in essence—“Fusion Theory” (融合論) and “Harmonization Theory” (調和論). Xu Beihong adopted the concept of “technical priority” to reform traditional painting through Western realism, creating a system of “realistic ink painting.” His “Fusion Theory” in art practice responded to the mainstream narrative of modernization and national salvation, but it objectively led to the neglect of the aesthetic realm of “Yi” (意) in literati painting and the “dilution of Yi” (淡意) in the development of modern Chinese art. Lin Fengmian, on the other hand, based his approach on the Chinese aesthetic subjectivity, proposing the “Harmonization Theory” to achieve a deep integration of Chinese and Western art forms at the level of formal language, while creating new art for the times. By analyzing both artists’ practices within the aesthetic and philosophical frameworks of Shitao’s (石濤) “the single stroke” (Yihualun, 一畫論) and Mou Zongsan’s (牟宗三) interpretation of Confucian philosophy of the mind. This paper explores the shortcomings of “Fusion Theory,” particularly its tendency toward a psychological separation from “Yi,” as well as the contributions and limitations of the “Harmonization Theory” as an independent response to the mainstream narrative. Through an aesthetic analysis of these two paths, this paper examines the predicament faced by the traditional aesthetic category of “Yi” in the context of the drastic modernization transformation of the twentieth century.

Key Words

Lin Fengmian, Xu Beihong, Yi-based aesthetics, Art Revolution, Harmonization Theory

Introduction

In the first half of the twentieth century, influenced by the May Fourth New Culture

Movement, a revolution in Chinese art emerged, which was aimed at transforming traditional Chinese art through Western artistic techniques and ideas. During this period, under the influence of the Western discourse system, Chinese artists undertook the modernization of traditional Chinese art, adopting diverse approaches to the relationship between tradition and modernity. Their differing understandings of and attitudes towards Western artistic forms and techniques led them to divergent paths of transforming tradition. Xu Beihong, the representative of the early school of studying in France, integrated Western realistic techniques with traditional painting themes and transformed the tradition with French classical art; Lin Fengmian, who was also an early painter to France, tried to translate the spirit of Chinese art in western formal language from the standpoint of Chinese aesthetic subject. The subtle differences between Xu and Lin in the path of transforming traditional art not only show the artists' various means of transforming the tradition, but also reflect the different aesthetic foundations under the differentiated understanding of the essence of art. A comparative study of their personal circumstances, artistic achievements and creative pursuits under the macro background of the times can reveal the aesthetic level limitations of the era needs and theoretical exploration of the transformation of traditional art.

1. On the “Yi” (意) Concept

In this paper, the term “Yi” (意) refers to the aesthetic spirit and original realm of creation, which are rooted in the theory of Chinese classical painting and take the integration of mind and object and the unity of heaven and man as the core. “Yi” is the core ontological category of classical Chinese aesthetics, signifying the infinite spiritual realm generated from the convergence of the artist’s temperament and the vitality of the cosmos in their artwork. It transcends the mere formal resemblance and emotional expression, representing the manifestation of art attaining the “Dao” (道), and in the vitality of rhythmic spirit, ultimately pursuing the highest aesthetic state of the fusion of subject and object and the seamless unity of Heaven and humanity. In

the theoretical framework, it primarily draws on Shitao’s theory of “the single stroke” which reveals the transcendence from the state of the “self” (有我) to that of the “non-self” (无我) in creative experience. Philosophically, it corresponds to Mou Zongsan’s interpretation of Confucian philosophy of the mind, particularly the proposition that “the mind is principle” (心即理), emphasizing the mind’s spontaneous self-manifestation and its intrinsic self-sufficiency of value, without reliance on external sources. This composite definition provides a unified aesthetic and philosophical basis for analyzing the fundamental differences between Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian, particularly in their handling of the relationship between “mind” and “matter,” “ontological ground” and “technique.”

2. Xu Beihong’s “Fusion Theory” and the Dilution of “Yi”

As a representative painter of the early state-sponsored study-abroad program in France, Xu Beihong’s “Fusion Theory” can essentially be summarized as an attempt to reform traditional Chinese painting through the Western realist system of painting. By introducing anatomical structure, perspective, and chiaroscuro from Western painting, he sought to compensate for what he regarded as deficiencies in traditional pictorial modeling, thereby employing a “scientific” mode of reform to serve the mainstream narrative of the time and to realize the utilitarian value of art. Xu Beihong absorbed the scientific realism of the nineteenth-century French academic tradition; while criticizing the shortcomings of Ming- and Qing-dynasty painting—characterized by “copying the ancients while departing from reality”—he simultaneously inherited the traditional literati painting’s view of art’s social function. In his 1918 lecture on *The Reform of Chinese Painting* (《中國繪畫改良論》), he proposed that “what is excellent in the ancient methods should be preserved; what is on the verge of extinction should be carried forward; what is inadequate should be reformed; and what is insufficient should be supplemented”¹ (古法之佳者守之, 垂絕者繼之, 不佳者改之, 未足者增之), a statement that concisely encapsulates the core aesthetic orientation of his “Fusion Theory.”

From the perspective of the essence of art, Xu Beihong held that “the purpose of painting lies in miao (ingenious) and xiao (likeness); miao belongs to beauty, while xiao belongs to technique.” (畫之目的曰“惟妙惟肖”；妙屬於美，肖屬於藝。) He regarded xiao as the foundation of painting, and miao as a higher artistic pursuit—namely, the pursuit of aesthetic beauty on the basis of realism. Realistic depiction, in his view, constitutes the foundation upon which beauty can arise: “One must rely on faithful representation in order to achieve likeness... there has never been miao without xiao.”² Thus, both the foundation of artistic creation and the essence of art itself were understood as xiao, attainable only through realism. In his lecture on *Beauty and Technique in Painting* (《畫之美與藝》), Xu further argued that technique consists in “exerting human effort so that nothing in the world can evade depiction,” (盡人力使萬物無遁形) whereas beauty is the aesthetic realm conveyed through technique. Even if a work were “extremely realistic yet lacking interest beyond the image,” (極寫真而無畫外之趣) the work of technique would still be regarded as accomplished on account of its realism (藝事已畢). Moreover, Xu insisted that technique could not be founded upon beauty; in his view, the expression of aesthetic realms could not be separated from realistic representation. He thus attributed the decline of Chinese painting since the Ming and Qing dynasties to the tendency of “emphasizing yi while neglecting form.” (重意輕形) This understanding of the essence of art led Xu Beihong to adopt a pessimistic view toward the traditional development of painting, arguing that Chinese painting had undergone continuous degeneration since the Song and Yuan periods. He bluntly stated that “the decline of all Chinese art has been caused by landscape painting” (中國一切藝術之不振，山水害之)³, pointing out that since the Yuan dynasty, the elevation of literati painters and expressive landscape painting had resulted in the decline of realistic bird-and-flower painting. He believed that the practice of “valuing the painter over the painting” (以人重畫) and the affectation of elegance—where landscape painting became a means of self-display (寫山水以自炫)—had caused traditional Chinese painting to lose the

spirit of technique. In response, Xu advocated a renewed emphasis on “classicism in Chinese art” (the dense and meticulous style of Song painting), together with the adoption of European realism. He thus rejected the tradition since the Yuan dynasty that prioritized yi (意), and introduced sketching as a methodological means of refining and restructuring traditional painting.



Figure 1. Xu Beihong, *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Retainers* (《田横五百士》) (detail), oil on canvas, 197×349 cm, 1928–1930. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing. Image source: *A Centennial History of Chinese Oil Painting*, p. 83.

In artistic practice, Xu Beihong’s “Fusion Theory” manifested first and foremost as a principle of technical priority. He treated sketching as the foundation of all pictorial modeling, replacing the traditional brush-and-ink attitude of “not seeking formal likeness” (不求形似) with precise anatomical form. He also reformed pictorial subject matter, selecting historical themes that responded to the mainstream narrative of national salvation, as well as animal subjects such as horses and lions. As shown in Fig. 1, his late-1920s oil painting *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Retainers* (figure 1) (《田横五百士》) employs a large-scale group composition to allude to contemporary realities through historical analogy, using tragic historical imagery to evoke an ethos of national salvation. As shown in Fig. 2, illustrates the work, *Go Forward* (《前进》) from his most celebrated series, *Gallop Horses* (figure 2) (《奔

馬》), captures fleeting moments of equine motion with meticulous realism while simultaneously serving as a symbol of the Chinese “dragon-horse spirit” (longma jingshen)—a spirit of vitality and perseverance. On the level of formal language, Xu constructed a system of “realist ink painting,” retaining certain linear techniques and materials from traditional painting while subordinating brushwork to realistic representation. As a result, the independent aesthetic value of brush and ink was weakened. In works such as *Jiu Fanggao* (《九方皋》), although traditional outlining and texturing techniques are used to depict trees and rocks, the figures and horses are rendered in a realistic manner; traditional brushwork serves the overall structural composition, functioning more instrumentally than aesthetically, and thus does not generate an autonomous aesthetic realm of yi (意).

Starting from the aesthetic premise that “truth equals beauty,” Xu Beihong treated technically achieved technique (yi, 艺, meaning technical skill) as the precondition of beauty, and accordingly introduced the Western scientific realist system of painting, which he believed had become “distorted” due to its emphasis on yi over form. Consequently, the aesthetic implication of his “Fusion Theory” lay in transforming the “mind-nature” (心性) embedded in traditional brushwork into “object-nature” (物性), replacing the traditional pictorial realm of yi (意) with the spiritual core of scientific rationalism. Xu Beihong’s artistic practice corresponded closely to the historical demands of the Art Revolution and the mainstream narrative of national salvation, and thus constituted what appeared to be an inevitable choice in the modernization of Chinese art, laying the aesthetic foundation for twentieth-century Chinese realist art. However, in promoting realist techniques and advocating a return to pre-Song and Yuan traditions of learning from nature, his approach objectively led to the narrowing and suspension of the aesthetic realm of yi (意) within the literati painting tradition. The subsequent phenomenon of the “attenuation of yi” in the development of modern Chinese art may therefore be traced to a systematic rupture in the theoretical exploration and transmission of the literati

aesthetic tradition.



Figure 2. Xu Beihong, *Go Forward* (《前進》), ink on paper, 1941. Image source: *Collected Paintings of Xu Beihong (Vol. I)*, p. 111.

3. Lin Fengmian’s “Harmonization Theory” and its Limited Exploration of Yi (意)

As another early Chinese painter who studied in France, Lin Fengmian did not exclusively revere Western realist techniques. Instead, he advocated a pluralistic absorption of Western modernism, particularly that of Impressionism and Fauvism, and, from the standpoint of Chinese aesthetic subjectivity, sought to reform traditional Chinese art through Western formal languages. In *The Future of Eastern and Western Art* (《東西藝術之前途》), he proposed that by harmonizing Chinese and Western art and allowing each to complement the other, “on the one hand, the fundamental methods of Western art should be introduced, with a historical perspective and

through concrete presentation; on the other hand, China’s existing art should be reexamined and reorganized and offered as a contribution to the world.”⁴ Through this process, he aimed to create a “new art of the world” that would simultaneously possess modern formal aesthetics and embody the inner spiritual essence of Chinese culture, thereby reconstructing the modernity of Chinese art through this bidirectional dialogue.

This theoretical exploration, grounded in a position of cultural nationalism and seeking to harmonize Chinese and Western art primarily at the level of formal language, exhibits—when compared with Xu Beihong’s veneration of Song–Yuan naturalism and his attenuation of the Ming–Qing aesthetic realm of yi (意)—a tendency to continue exploring along the developmental trajectory of Chinese aesthetic spirit. However, whether the introduction of external formal elements can ultimately reach the original ontological realm of yi as articulated in traditional painting theory must be examined systematically within a concrete aesthetic theoretical framework.

The exploration of the original aesthetic realm of painting has formed a mature theoretical lineage. As early as the Tang dynasty, Zhang Yanyuan proposed in *Famous Paintings through the Ages* (《歷代名畫記》) that “yi exists prior to the brush, and when the painting is complete, yi remains” (意存筆先, 畫盡意在), thus initiating this line of thought. During the Five Dynasties period, Jing Hao stated in *Notes on Brush Methods* (《筆法記》) that one should “measure the forms of things and grasp their truth” (度物象而取其真), placing zhen (truth) above mere formal resemblance and elevating the pursuit of the inner essence of objects beyond surface depiction to a higher standard of pictorial truth.

In the Northern Song dynasty, Guo Xi’s notion in *Lofty Record of Forests and Streams* (《林泉高致》) of “personally entering mountains and rivers to grasp them” (身及山川而取之), emphasizing the interpenetration of subject and object in artistic creation, together with Su Shi’s assertion that “to judge painting by formal

resemblance is to stand beside children” (論畫以形似，見與兒童鄰), both pointed toward an aesthetic theoretical direction that transcends resemblance in form and seeks the inner yi. This intellectual trajectory reached a philosophical synthesis and systematic elevation in Shitao’s concept of “the single stroke”, as articulated in *The Remarks on Painting* (Huayulu 《畫語錄》), and in the aesthetic system constructed upon it.

Shitao elevated the meaning of “the single stroke” from the level of brush-and-ink technique to an ontological principle—“the foundation of all existence and the root of all phenomena” (眾有之本，萬象之根). He constructed a complete creative realm that progresses from observational sketching—“searching exhaustively among extraordinary peaks and making drafts” (搜盡奇峰打草稿)—to intuitive integration—“spiritual encounter and transformative realization” (神遇跡化)—and ultimately to the state of “the law of ‘the single stroke’ is established by myself” (一畫之法，乃我自立). As a theoretical system that reveals the most fundamental elements and ultimate principles governing the structure of both worldly forms and pictorial images,⁵ it distilled traditional painting discourse into a rigorous aesthetic system unifying Heaven and humanity, cosmic ontology, and artistic praxis, thereby reaching a new height in traditional foundational thought.

Accordingly, using the original realm revealed by Shitao’s theory of “the single stroke” as the ultimate evaluative criterion to examine Lin Fengmian’s “theory of harmonization” allows for a clearer assessment of both the value and the limitations of his theoretical exploration and artistic practice. By translating traditional aesthetic imagery through Western forms, Lin Fengmian’s stance of “governing technique with the mind” (以心馭技) and his practice of “using my own methods” (我自用我法) achieved the standard of a “realm with the self” (有我之境) within Shitao’s aesthetic system. However, he did not accomplish a transition toward a “realm without the self” (无我之境), leaving his work marked by strong historical contingency and an unfinished quality.

Specifically, at the level of formal exploration, Lin Fengmian reached the first aesthetic realm within Shitao's aesthetic framework—the stage of “searching exhaustively among extraordinary peaks and making drafts,” (搜盡奇峰打草稿) corresponding to a “realm with the self.” (有我之境) Lin Fengmian not only objectively reappears the images, but also internalizes them into his personal emotional experience and works. He once put forward that “art is the expression of emotional impulse, but the method of expression needs a certain form”(藝術是情緒沖動之表現,但表現之方法,需要相當的形式)⁶ Therefore, he is no longer limited to the pen and ink formula of traditional Chinese painting, absorbs the western formal language of Impressionism and fauvism, creates the tension of the picture with dynamic lines and holistic color blocks, integrates strong subjective emotions into artistic practice, and realizes the deep integration of the subject and object of creation.

During the art revolution in the first half of the 20th century, landscape painting, as the representative theme of Lin Fengmian's art practice, has a concise and profound tragic color and unyielding emotional tension, which stems from his emotional experience during the war. Taking his ink-on-paper landscape works *Autumn Mountains* (figure 3) (《秋山》) and *Village* (figure 4) (《村落》) from the 1940s as examples, mountains, trees, villages, and flowing waters are rarely rendered through traditional texture strokes. Instead, they are delineated with swift, fluid lines and overlaid with dark, dense color washes. The landscape elements are highly simplified and geometrized, losing the interactive quality of traditional landscapes that allow spiritual wandering and imaginative travel (woyou 臥遊). They are transformed instead into austere, oppressive spiritual symbols and vehicles of emotional catharsis.

Meanwhile, dense, nearly square compositions and the layered progression of line and color generate a centripetal compressive force. Unlike the scattered perspective and expansive spatial conception of traditional landscapes, these compositions employ minimal blank space and convey a strong sense of pressure,

communicating the weight of Lin Fengmian’s inner anguish and anxiety.

At the same time, Lin Fengmian’s aesthetic pursuit, his critique of conservative imitation of the ancients, and his highly original personal artistic language enabled him to reach the second artistic realm within Shitao’s aesthetic framework—“I use my own methods.” He criticizes the traditional Chinese painting “for the conservative tradition, for the imitation of the ancients, for the plagiarism of the predecessors”(對於傳統的保守，對於古人的摹仿，對於前人的抄襲)⁷ It emphasizes that we must break away from the hearts of the ancients and create new art of the times from the heart based on natural phenomena.

In specific artistic practice, his original "Fengmian style" (風眠體) integrates the passion of western expressionism on the basis of retaining the rhythm of traditional Chinese calligraphy, and harmonizes with the simple and flowing lines in Han Dynasty stone reliefs and Dunhuang murals, creating a new line form with original and unrestrained expression. His 1943 work *Bamboo and Rock* (figure 5) (《竹石》) breaks away from the highly stylized brushwork tradition of bamboo painting established since Su Shi and Zheng Banqiao. Using rough and forceful strokes, it dismantles the convention of rendering bamboo through calligraphic formulas such as the “jie-character dot” (介字点) or “ge-character dot” (个字点), producing a pronounced visual impact.

The dense interweaving and conflicting lines divide the picture, making the overall space have a sense of rhythm and support, with the formal beauty of western modern art. In the use of color, he created his own artistic style by absorbing and integrating the western color style, borrowing from and surpassing the traditional Chinese principles of “assigning colors according to category” (隨類賦彩) and the preference for restrained elegance. Through strong chromatic contrasts and unified tonal schemes, he forged a distinctive personal style.

His “Fengmian style” (風眠體) landscapes are often based on dark blue and dark green, creating a heavy, profound or lonely atmosphere; And in part of the

picture, bright yellow and other warm color blocks with strong contrast are used or small-scale abrupt white space is left to break the silence of the picture and create visual impact, which has a distinctive personal style.

“The law of the single stroke is established by myself” (一畫之法，乃我自立) represents the highest realm within Shitao’s aesthetic system, raising artistic creation to the height of cosmic Ontology. As Shi Tao said, “the single stroke is the foundation of all existence and the root of all phenomena” (一畫者，眾有之本，萬象之根)⁸. By involving the “small self” (小我) into the cosmic “Great Dao” (大道), the artist transcends individual emotional expression and stylistic formation, liberates himself from the constraints of fixed methods (fa zhang 法障), and attains the supreme freedom of creation described as “having no method yet possessing method—this is the ultimate method” (無法而法，乃為至法). Only by imitating and representing the generative processes of the universe and all things can one enter the “realm without the self” (無我之境) and approach the ontological source that moves from finitude toward infinity. When evaluated against this criterion, artistic practices under the framework of the “theory of harmonization” reveal the incomplete nature of Lin Fengmian’s exploration of yi.

In Lin Fengmian's attempt to reconcile Chinese and Western art, and in the creation process of using western forms and eastern elements to create traditional aesthetic artistic conception, the subject's freedom of creation will be limited to a certain extent. Standing on the position of Chinese aesthetic subject, the creation is carried out in non-native modern artistic language. In order to weigh the Chinese and Western elements and think about how to realize the deep harmony between form and artistic conception, the participation of rational thinking will not be avoided, and then affect the intuitive state of artistic creation.

In order to ensure the formal beauty and integrity of the works, the natural expression of the artist's artistic intuition will be hindered, preventing the attainment of the state in which “painting flows directly from the heart.” (畫從心)

Under this standard, although Lin Fengmian’s “theory of harmonization” recognizes the deeper aesthetic value of yi relative to form and achieves breakthroughs at the formal level, his works ultimately fail, at the level of artistic conception, to reach the original “emptiness” (kong, 空) characterized by “forgetting both self and object.” They do not enter the cosmic-ontological dimension demanded by the theory of “the single stroke” and remain distant from the realm of “speaking for mountains and rivers” (代山川而言).

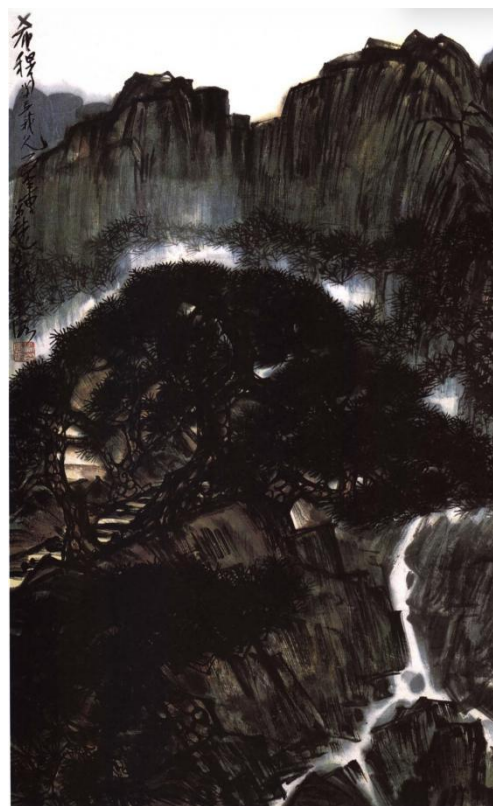


Figure 3. Lin Fengmian, *Landscape* (《山水》). Ink and color on paper, 1943. Image source: *Collected Paintings of Lin Fengmian (Vol. I)*, p. 28.

4. Theoretical Contributions and Limited Aesthetic Levels of the “Theory of Harmonization” from the Ontology Perspective of Yi

The modernization of Chinese art in the twentieth century was not merely a technical issue within artistic language itself, but rather a profound cultural problem arising under the impact of the West—namely, how to define the national identity of

art, and how to negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity, as well as between indigenous Chinese culture and foreign Western influences. The realistic transformation path chosen by Xu Beihong was more concerned at that time. The underlying reason may be that the "integration theory" advocated by Xu Beihong coincided with the needs of the times. Under the grand theme of saving the nation and ensuring its survival and art revolution, his artistic ideas are more scientific and have the function of social mobilization. The system of “realist ink-and-wash painting” (寫實水墨) he constructed, together with his large-scale historical and group-figure paintings, directly responded to the change of art and is consistent with the mainstream narration of the times, which is easier to be accepted and promoted.

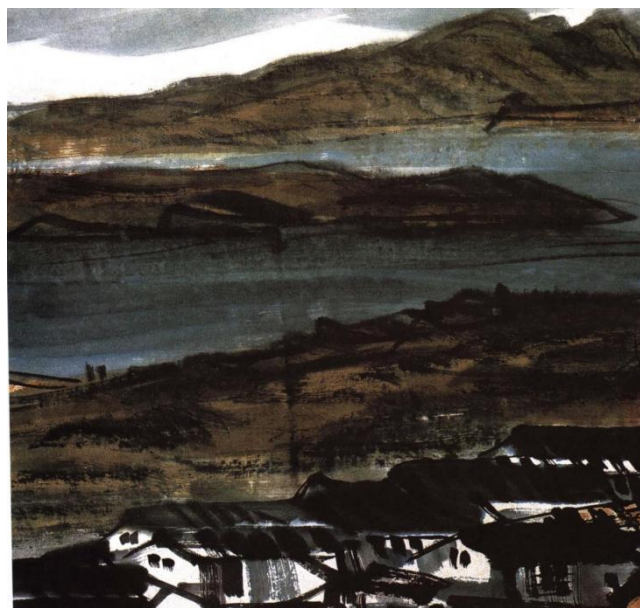


Figure 4. Lin Fengmian, *Village* (《村落》). Ink and color on paper, 1940s. Collection of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Image source: *Collected Paintings of Lin Fengmian (Vol. I)*, p. 27.

This transformation path guided by technical rationality meets the needs of the times of art transformation, and has been gradually popularized and institutionalized in the art education and evaluation system since the 20th century. It objectively responds to the needs of the times of art modernization transformation and national salvation, and improves the modeling ability of Chinese painting. However, the use of realism as the standard technique weakens the independent aesthetic value of

traditional pen and ink, and the painter's freedom of creation is blocked, unable to enter the intuitive state and difficult to achieve the rise of the level of aesthetic realm.. This dilemma reveals a fundamental tension between technique (ji 技) and mind/heart (xin 心) in artistic practice.

Taking Mou Zongsan's philosophical interpretation of Song—Ming Neo-Confucianism in *From Lu Xiangshan to Liu Jishan* as a reference, this tension may be further analyzed in terms of its ontological and praxis-based roots. In discussing Zhu Xi's epistemological path of gewu zhizhi (格物致知, the investigation of things to attain knowledge of principle), Mou Zongsan pointed out:

“Zhu Xi separates the mind (xin 心) and principle (li 理) into two; principle lies outside, and the mind seeks it externally... This path inevitably falls into ‘fragmentation’: principle is dispersed among things, and when the mind pursues it through objects, the moral subject is submerged and obscured.” (朱子析心與理為二，理在外而心求之.....此路不免落於‘支離’：理散在萬物，心逐物而求，則道德主體湮沒不彰。)⁹ Xu Beihong's advocacy of realism closely resembles this “investigating things” path within the artistic domain. That is, formal principles of representation (li 理) are externalized and embedded in concrete objects, and resemblance is pursued outwardly through technical training—thus repeating the fragmented separation of xin and li identified by Mou Zongsan in Zhu Xi's philosophy. When brush-and-ink yields to external realist standards, its function as a medium for the spontaneous expression of inner nature is weakened. As a result, the artist is unable to enter the intuitive state of “the unity of mind and principle” (xin-li heyi 心理合一), that original realm described by Shitao as “painting arising from the heart” (畫從心) and “forgetting both self and object” (物我兩忘).

By contrast, Lin Fengmian's reform program of the “theory of harmonization” responds to this problem from the opposite pole of pure technical rationality and, in effect, alleviates the suspension of yi imposed by dominant narratives. He proposed that “art is the expression of emotional impulse,” grounding artistic creation in the

emotional experience of the subject (the artist) and firmly situating it within the standpoint of national aesthetic subjectivity. External objects were not treated as the sole criterion of realism. The aesthetic implications of the “theory of harmonization” resonate implicitly with the Lu–Wang School of Mind philosophy, which holds that “the mind itself is principle” (心即理). Artistic yi thus flows naturally from the original mind, rather than being sought externally.



Figure 5. Lin Fengmian, *Bamboo and Rock* (《竹石》). Ink and color on paper, 1943. Image source:

Collected Paintings of Lin Fengmian (Vol. I), p. 29.

In works such as *Autumn Egrets* and *Fishing Village*, Lin Fengmian absorbed and applied the western formal language to innovate the traditional pen and ink, but the rhythm of lines and the lyricism of colors serve the expression of personal feelings and national collective will. His emphasis on emotional experience is independent of the mainstream narrative represented by Xu Beihong's realistic technology priority, which reserves a certain space for practice and improvement for the continuous exploration of “yi”. However, when analyzed at a higher level of aesthetic realm, Lin Fengmian's strong personal emotional expression in his artistic practice has become an important limitation in his exploration of the original realm of artistic creation. His

works often have a strong lyrical color, and the lonely and sad atmosphere they show has a personal emotional brand. They do not ascend to a broader cosmic mind (宇宙心性) and thus remain within the “realm with the self” (有我之境).

Lin Fengmian's theory and practice may be closely related to his systematic study of Western painting system in France in his early years. In *Recollections and Remembrances* (《回憶與懷念》), Lin Fengmian notes that from 1919 to 1925, he studied painting successively at the École des Beaux-Arts in Dijon and the Académie Colarossi in Paris¹⁰. The impact of the western academic realistic system and modern formal language on him made him “indulge in the frame of naturalism” in artistic creation. It was through President Yanxis that he “excavated the rich traditional treasures of the East” and “extracted the essence from various crafts”¹¹ that he turned toward the study and rediscovery of traditional Chinese art.

The western painting system's shaping of Lin Fengmian at the beginning of his creation may lead him to return to the tradition with a comparative and selective perspective, preferring “unorthodox” art with distinctive visual forms such as Han Dynasty stone paintings and song porcelain and folk art such as lacquer ware and shadow puppets, while his attention and understanding of the deep-seated tradition of pen and ink nature of literati paintings in the yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties are limited. As for his unique line, he said frankly that in his creation, “he always tried to draw brush lines like pencil... Like western painting manuscript and sketch”¹², which led him to favor the “ancient, simple, and fluid lines” of Ding ware and Cizhou ware, while offering relatively restrained evaluations of Yuan–Ming–Qing art.

This structure of artistic training—“Western first, Chinese later”—shaped by a specific historical context, meant that in harmonizing Chinese and Western art, Lin Fengmian often adopted an externalized, form-driven approach, appropriating traditional pictorial elements through formal transformation. While this approach successfully established his personal style of “using my own methods” (我自用我法) and provided a horizontal alternative to realism in the transformation of traditional art,

it remains distant from a vertical, in-depth theoretical exploration along the lineage of yi and from a direct experiential apprehension of the original creative realm.

In the specific historical period of the modern transformation of Chinese art, the impact of Western art and the rupture of Chinese tradition also made Lin Fengmian consciously undertake the mission of cultural reconstruction. This sense of mission affected the in-depth exploration of art noumenon to a certain extent. In addition, the inevitable differences between Chinese and Western artistic traditions also hinder the application of "harmonization theory" in artistic practice. Taken together, these factors account for the distance between Lin Fengmian's artistic practice and the original realm demanded by Shitao's theory of “the single stroke.”

Nevertheless, Lin Fengmian's unfinished exploration—standing apart from the mainstream, technique-centered trajectory of his time—preserved an emphasis on yi amid the tide of aesthetic instrumentalization. His pioneering attempts to “harmonize Chinese and Western art” under a mind-centered (心本位) creative vision offered a new path for the transformation of traditional art. During the Art Revolution of the first half of the twentieth century, the contributions and limitations of his “theory of harmonization” offer a profound reflection on the historical predicament of yi, as it faced challenges in transmission and transformation under modernity.

5. Conclusion

Xu Beihong's approach of “combining China and the West” and Lin Fengmian's proposal of “harmonizing China and the West” together represent two representative paths in the transformation of twentieth-century Chinese art. While Xu Beihong employed the Western realist system to carry out a scientized reform of traditional painting, his prioritization of technique inclined toward external principles and formal laws. As a result, the mind-centered (xin) tradition of literati painting that privileged yi (意) was objectively marginalized, and its continuity was impeded.

By contrast, Lin Fengmian, standing on the position of Chinese national aesthetic subject standard and integrating Chinese and Western form exploration, developed

along the vein of “yi”, and saw the aesthetic realm level beyond “form”. Although his attempts—due to the unavoidable involvement of rational deliberation and other constraints—failed to achieve a leap toward the realm of “no-self” (無我之境), this state of “not yet arrived” should not be regarded as a lack of artistic value. Rather, it was an inevitable choice shaped by a specific historical context. Lin Fengmian’s art embodies the difficult choices faced by artists during China’s cultural transformation, as artists negotiated between tradition and modernity, East and West, and the individual and the demands of the age. His explorations—both their achievements and their limitations—offer valuable insights for understanding the modern development of Chinese art.

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“融合論”與“調和論”改造路徑之美學辨析 ——“意”在二十世紀美術現代化轉型中的懸系

張紫恩

摘要：在二十世紀上半葉美術革命的推動下，中國美術面臨西方話語體系衝擊與現代化轉型的雙重壓力。徐悲鴻與林風眠作為早期留法畫家代表，分別提出“融合論”與“調和論”的兩種形似質異傳統改造路徑。徐悲鴻以“技術優先”觀念以西方寫實主義為科學標準改造傳統繪畫，構建“寫實水墨”體系。其“融合論”下的藝術實踐回應了時代現代化轉型與救亡圖存的主流敘事，但卻客觀上導致了文人畫“意”之審美境界體系被忽視與現代美術發展的“淡意”傾向。林風眠則立足中國審美主體性，提出“調和論”以嘗試在形式語言層面實現中西藝術的深層調和與時代新藝術的創造。通過將二人的藝術實踐置於石濤“一畫論”與牟宗三先生心學闡釋的美學與哲學框架中進行辨析，從意本位出發探討“融合論”下“心理分離”之弊與“調和論”獨立於時代主流，沿著“意”之脈絡探索的貢獻與局限。通過對兩種改造路徑的美學辨析，探討“意”這一傳統美學範疇在二十世紀激變的現代化轉型中，所面臨的存續困境。

關鍵詞：林風眠；徐悲鴻；意本位；美術革命；調和論