

The Style and Characteristics of Flower-and-Bird Painting in The Western Fujian Province in Modern Times

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Abstract: The 20th century was a period of change in the development of Chinese flower-and-bird painting. Traditional brush and ink painting blended with Western painting colors and concepts to present new forms of painting. Following the peak of Ming and Qing Dynasties' development in Minxi (the western of Fujian) painting, a group of freehand flower-and-bird painters represented by the "four Masters of Shanghang" Li Shaoqi, Luo Xiaofan, Qiu Tian, and Song Shengyu, who inherited the Minxi painting style of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, learned the new painting language combines the styles of Paintings of Shanghai school, Lingnanism, and Lingdongism. The unique new style of painting highlights the posture of Minxi flower-and-bird paintings, thus influencing the modern times changes of flower-and-bird paintings of Fujian.

Keywords: Flower-and-bird painting of Western Fujian; Eclectic; Accumulation of the past and preservation of the present; Patriotism; Style and characteristics

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1. Introduction

During the Kaiyuan period (AD713---741) of the Tang Dynasty, the style of writing in western Fujian gradually developed. In the Ming Dynasty, the circulation of the commodity trade market in the Tingjiang River Basin connected the economic and cultural exchanges between Minxi and neighboring provinces, and promoted the development of the regional economy in Minxi. Driven by economic development, the government and academies in Western Fujian were prosperous, and the academies were perfected, forming a cultural pattern with Tingzhou Prefecture as the regional cultural center, and getting rid of the stagnant cultural development in the Tang and Song Dynasties. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, a group of painters represented by Shangguan Zhou, Hua Yan, and Huang Shen, represented by the "Three Masters in Minxi," emerged in western Fujian. The aesthetic meaning of and the appreciation of elegance and vulgar paintings promoted the new development of painting in Fujian province during Ming and Qing Dynasties to a certain extent.

Western Fujian is located in an advantageous geographical area transitioning from the coast to the inland. It borders Zhangzhou city and Quanzhou city to the southeast, Guangdong province to the south, and central Fujian to the north. It is the hub of the three provinces of Fujian, Guangdong and Jiangxi. Benefiting from the geographical advantages, the people of Western Fujian learn from the regional culture of Jiangsu province, Zhejiang province, Guangdong province and other places on the basis of the traditional regional culture, forming a cultural atmosphere of multi-cultural integration.

2. Exploring new styles of painting while inheriting traditional ones

Modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters inherited Huayan's exquisite and rigorous painting style. For instance, Huang Shen used cursive calligraphy in his paintings, focused on interest and charm and neglected modeling. At the same time, their works are close to life in content and novel and unique in form. On one hand, they inherited the traditional painting styles of the "Three Masters of Western Fujian" in Ming and Qing Dynasties. The fresh and elegant style of painting is full of interest and boasts elegance and popular appreciation. Hence, it has created a new aesthetic pattern for the modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painting in the form of expression.

The author of this paper, through the previous research on the biographical information of the Minxi flower-and-bird painter group represented by Li Shaoqi, Luo Xiaofan, Qiu Tian, and Song Shengyu, finds that they mostly make a living by selling their works and are identified as professional painters [1]. The particularity of professional painters who make a living by painting gives the modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters a solid foundation in modeling, and can accurately grasp the characteristics, modeling structure, composition relationship, etc. of the painting objects. They pay attention to observing life in their daily training, are good at sketching, and capture the charm of the objects they draw. For example, Qiu Tian used freehand brushwork to depict birds and when expressing flowers and birds, he used wide brushstrokes with technique of big freehand brushwork. Qiu also drew parts from folk paintings in terms of the expression of colors which are characterized by vividness, richness and attractiveness.



Figure 1.
Luo Xiaofan's "Lu Liu"



Figure 2.
Song Shengyu's "Lotus Pond"

Modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters formed their own painting styles as to brush, ink and color, composition and chapters, but in their concise and easy brushwork, it can be seen that they have inherited the rigorous and vivid expression of Hua Yan's representation of objects. Such as Luo Xiaofan's "Lu Liu" (**Figure 1**), collected by Fujian Provincial Art Museum. The picture is composed of long banners. Two egrets fly over the willow bushes, and the willow leaves are intensified in the shades of ink and the free brush strokes, enhancing the density and showing the degree of virtuality and reality. In the painting, two egrets are painted with light ochre by painting the wings and abdomen with the scattered front, and the image is conveyed in a few strokes. The work vividly outlines the dynamic relationship between the bird's beak, eyes, and wings, with rigorous modeling and vivid taste. In addition, the modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters inherited Huang Shen's style and characteristics, which means infusing calligraphy into painting. It's safe to say that it achieves unity of form and spirit. For example, Song Shengyu's "Lotus Pond Clear Interest" (**Figure 2**), a simple number of strokes outlines the different shapes of the blossoming lotus in the lotus pond, showing the postures of budding, about to bloom, not blooming, blooming, full blooming, which is so vivid. In the form of pieces, the leaves convey the spatial relationship of the lotus pond through the contrast of ink color. Similar works include "Bamboo and Stone Picture," "Clean Fun," "A Spring Grass Break in the Spring and a Rainy Season" and etc.

3. Combine new changes in eclecticism

The densely distributed tributary water system has activated the economic and cultural exchanges between Western Fujian, also known as Minxi, and three provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong and other places. Minxi painters traveled to Zhejiang, Shanghai, Guangdong and other places. Modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters inherited the traditional painting style of Minxi, combined with the strengths of Shanghai school, Lingnanism, and Lingdongism to jointly create interesting paintings and open up new styles of Minxi flower-and-bird painting.

Lingnanism is a school formed in Guangzhou in the early twentieth century. Lingnan painters represented by Gao Jianfu, Gao Qifeng, and Chen Shuren put forward the painting idea of "Eclectic Chinese and Western, blending the ancient and the modern." They developed the technique of "Powder to still-drying pigment and "Technique of adding water." The painting technique is based on the Chinese language of brush and ink and integrates Japanese painting's rendering of the environment, light and shadow, forming a painting style that emphasizes both color and ink. As a result, it appeals to both the affluent and the ordinary. Western Fujian flower-and-bird painters of the modern era absorbed the brush and ink language and expression techniques of Gao Jianfu, Gao Qifeng, and Chen Shuren's painting styles, and on this basis, they re-innovated and formed freehand flower-and-bird paintings with literati painting as the core and eclectic Western modernism. Song Shengyu's "Maple Leaf Eagle Map" (**Figure 3**) is part of the Fujian Provincial Art Museum's collection. The eagle in the painting expresses the light and shadow of birds with the painting technique of hitting the powder, enhancing the volume relationship, and fusing the traditional Chinese painting technique of hitting the powder with the pursuit of the volume and texture of the object in the Western classical painting. The posture is shaped, eagle stands on the red maple tree and showing its heroic appearance. The red maple leaves scattered on the branches set off the atmosphere of the picture, presenting a smart picture mood. Similar works include Li Shaoqi's "Tiger Wei Tu," Luo Xiaofan's "The Drama in the Depth of the Green Pudding" and etc.

The Shanghai School, also known as the "Hai Pai School," refers to Shanghai in the 19th century, under the rapid development of the market economy, attracted painters from all over the world. The majority of them came from ordinary people who made a living by selling paintings and generating rich themes. They are adept at absorbing information from folk art and Western paintings. The creative features of paintings allow for significant reforms and breakthroughs in traditional Chinese painting, merging

Chinese and Western painting and ushering in the new. You can observe Minxi flower-and-bird painters' absorption of Shanghai style paintings in the language of colour and ink throughout their modern works, whether they are large-scale paintings or small-scale sketches. Luo Xiaofan and Song Shengyu, for example, use vibrant colors and a mix of ink and wash in their work. They frequently use common subjects like fruits and vegetables, flowers, woodlands and birds, and etc, emphasizing on objective expression and attractive aesthetic results. They often choose popular subjects such as fruits and vegetables, flowers, forests and birds, etc., focusing on objective expression and beautiful artistic effects.

The Fujian Provincial Art Museum, for example, has a collection of Luo Xiaofan's "A Hundred Flowers" (Figure 4). The vase's shape is shaped in the picture using little freehand brushwork of contemporaneous form. The object's light and shadow, as well as the volume space, are reflected in the colour and ink changes. The light source is flecked with highlights, and the light source is tuned to represent the object's shadow. The flowers are written in Mogu Technique, which uses subtle colour shifts to portray the ups and downs of the petals. Luo Xiaofan combines the brush and ink of Chinese painting with the perspective relationship of Western painting to express the object. The brush and ink are flexible and colorful, and the picture leaves people with a thriving atmosphere. Another example is Song Shengyu who often draws on the color language of Shanghai style paintings in his paintings, focusing on the integration of traditional paintings and folk paintings, using bold colors, and the pictures are full of wit and enjoy both appreciation of both the affluent and the ordinary.



Figure 3. Song Shengyu's "Maple Leaf Eagle Map"



Figure 4. Luo Xiaofan's "A Hundred Flowers Blooming"

Lingdong refers to the three cities of Chaozhou, Shantou and Jieyang today, and is generally called Chaoshan. Over the past century, there have been many artists in Chaoshan, including scholar painters,

professional painters, literati painters, and ladies painters. Lingdongism refers to a school of painting formed in the Chaoshan area of Guangdong in the 1830s. It was set off by Sun Peigu, Fan Changqian, Gao Zhenzhi and others. They paid attention to the brush and ink of traditional Chinese painting and praised freehand painting. Modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters went to Chaoshan to earn a living in the mid-twentieth century, either selling paintings or teaching art courses in local schools. During their travels in the Lingdong area, they made many friends in painting circle, met with Chaoshan painters such as Gao Zhenzhi, Sun Peigu, and Huang Shiting, and held regular exhibitions together to discuss poetry and painting. Among the existing paintings of Qiu Tian, one of the “Wisteria Birds” is a collaboration between Qiu Tian and Sun Peigu. Another example is Qiu Tian’s “Playing with Each Other in the Depth of Green Puddings,” the bleak reeds in the distance are rippling, four egrets with different postures happily searching for food on one side, and the reeds are isolated and motionless in the pond water nearby. This work borders on the features of moving, quiet echoing each other and liveliness. A poem is attached to the painting which goes as following: “I have gray hair down because of sorrow at my forties; why do the white egrets on the waterside also hang on their heads without sorrow.” A poem makes people deeply feel Qiu Tian’s deep feelings of sorrow. Similar works include Luo Xiaofan’s “Spring River Plumbing,” Qiu Tian’s “Dongli Qiuju,” Song Shengyu’s “Autumn Picture” and etc.

Thanks to the superior geographical space and regional cultural characteristics, the modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters often travel to provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong and other places. They are expert at absorbing and learning the strengths of various families, including all kinds of painting techniques, and pioneering innovations. All of these gave birth to a flower-and-bird painting style with regional characteristics of western Fujian.

4. Expressing patriotic feelings with brush and ink

Minxi, namely the western Fujian was an early revolutionary base area opened up by the Central Soviet Area. Many proletarian revolutionaries have fought with revolutionary spirits here, and it is known as the “revolutionary red land.” The special regional political culture has influenced the creation of modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters. The painters used to use flowers, grass, birds and birds to express their inner revolutionary feelings, inspire the people of the country, influence the people, and propagate revolutionary ideas, so that every Chinese would understand the significance of protecting their motherland. This was a special mission given to them by the times.

Modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters made use of the themes of lions, tigers, and eagles as themes to create, and used symbolic techniques to metaphorically express the meaning of national rejuvenation and to inspire Chinese people. The tiger is the king of beasts, mighty and masculine. In that special era, the tiger entrusted the people with confidence in the rise of the country. “The revolutionary era is the era of fighting the Manchu and Qing Dynasty. At that time, the youth was full of vigor and the tiger was painted the most. He was so fierce that he couldn’t wait to turn into a tiger, eat the enemy clean, and have morale like a rainbow ^[2].” Modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters often utilized the painting of tigers as a carrier to express their patriotic feelings. The metaphor: the roaring tiger presents as a deterrent, implies that the Chinese people’s indomitable will is irresistible. For example, Li Shaoqi and Luo Xiaofan’s “Tiger Prestige” (**Figure 5**), a tiger in the painting is glaring like a torch, with strong and agile limbs, staring at the front with its mouth wide open, like the roar of a rocky slope among the hills and trees, the painter expresses the ferocity and majesty of the tiger. The paint expressed his own roar at the social situation. He seems to hope to speak out for the country and the nation and awaken the revolutionary enthusiasm of the people. Another example is Luo Xiaofan’s “Glorious Wind under the Moon,” under the tree sits a male tiger with sharp teeth, and his dignified and calm eyes are like the roar of a revolutionary ready to go. The imagery of weeds, old trees, and a moonlight environment makes the atmosphere of the painting more

solemn. Another example is that after the founding of the People's Republic of China, Li Shaoqi's "The Meeting of Wind and Clouds," the "Wind Tiger, Cloud and Dragon" painted in the painting is a metaphor for the roar of the tiger and the rising of the wind.



Figure 5. Li Shaoqi and Luo Xiaofan's "Tiger Prestige"

In addition, modern times Minxi flower-and-bird painters frequently use lions, tigers, eagles, and other beasts and birds as themes, employing their powerful and magnificent metaphors to rise up aesthetically, and convey their patriotic thoughts through brush and ink. Qiu Tian's "Pine Eagle," for example, used metaphor to spread revolutionary principles and raise people's patriotic passion. Song Shengyu's "Night Crane" is another example of a frigid mood created by a round of cold night moon, a single crane, and a few lonely pine branches. Minxi flower-and-bird painters of contemporary times use brush and ink to communicate their views, expressing intense revolutionary zeal and patriotism, which has become one of the style characteristics of modern times. Minxi flower-and-bird paintings.

Natural factors such as mountains and rivers, geographic location, and transportation have influenced the socioeconomic and cultural development of distinct places in subtle ways over time, resulting in a variety of social and cultural phenomena in different areas. The growth of Minxi throughout the Tang and Song Dynasties was delayed by the rugged environment surrounded by mountains that blocked traffic. The Tingjiang River provided efficient water and land transit between the cities of western Fujian during the Ming and Qing dynasties, producing a cultural pattern with Tingzhou as the regional centre. The culture and education of Western Fujian developed under the impact of the regional cultural atmosphere of valuing education, excellent literary works followed one after another, and the culture of science and education was revitalised. The development of economy and culture provided the material and cultural foundation for the prosperity of painting in the west of Fujian, and made the painters of Minxi during the Ming and Qing

Dynasties enjoy a high reputation in the history of Fujian painting.

With the development of waterway traffic in the Tingjiang River Basin in the twentieth century, Western Fujian's regional cultural center, which was driven by commodity economy and trade, gradually shifted from Tingzhou to ShangHang. In western Fujian, a group of flower and bird painters led by Li Shaoqi, Luo Xiaofan, Qiu Tian, and Song Shengyu appeared. They pioneered research into the subject matter, form, brush and ink, and taste of classic freehand flower-and-bird paintings, as well as brush and ink style and feeling mood. Their main contributions include: eclectically incorporating the past and present; seeking a balance between popular aesthetics and self-aesthetics; blending literati emotional expression in the basic tone of elegant and popular paintings and forming a unique style feature; and occupying the developmental context of Fujian painting history. An important location and a high reputation, it has an influence on modern Fujianese flower-and-bird painters.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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