

# Expressing the aesthetic of Chinese painting through color relationships

Li Jingjing<sup>1, a, \*</sup>, Zhang Ming<sup>2, b,</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Building A, Vanke International Center, No.179 Daguan Road, Gong Shu District, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, 310064, China

<sup>2</sup>Building E, Vanke International Center, Li shui Road, Gong Shu District, Hang Zhou, Zhejiang Province, 310000, China

a.lijingjing\_20071111@sina.com, b.zhangming1229\_24@yahoo.com

**\*Corresponding Author**

**Abstract:** This paper explores the expression of aesthetic conception in Chinese painting, with a particular focus on the significant role of color relationships in creating artistic conception. As the highest pursuit in Chinese art, aesthetic conception emphasizes transcending the form itself through the interplay of reality and void, thereby conveying the vitality of life and boundless sentiments. Traditional Chinese painting often employs "leaving blank" to express this conception, while contemporary painters are beginning to explore scientific color relationships to achieve a vivid and dynamic effect. The paper analyzes the aesthetic value of various color contrasts (such as hue contrast, complementary contrast, light and dark contrast, warm and cool contrast, and color area contrast) in creating aesthetic conception, combining ancient Chinese painting practices with Western color theories. It concludes that rich color relationships can better express the interplay of reality and void. Finally, the paper emphasizes that color, as a visual symbol, can serve as a means of personalized expression for painters and offers a new direction for the innovation of contemporary Chinese painting.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic conception, Color relationships, Chinese painting, Interplay of reality and void, Artistic innovation

## 1. Introduction

This paper delves into the significant role of color relationships in creating the aesthetic conception in Chinese painting, emphasizing the unique value of color as a visual symbol in expressing emotions and conveying artistic conception. The article first explains that aesthetic conception, as the highest pursuit in Chinese art, lies in transcending form through the interplay of reality and void to convey the vitality of life and boundless sentiments. Traditional Chinese painting often employs "leaving blank" to express this conception, while contemporary painters are beginning to explore scientific color relationships to achieve a vivid and dynamic effect. The paper further analyzes the aesthetic value of various color relationships, such as hue contrast, complementary contrast, light and dark contrast, warm and cool contrast, and color area contrast. By integrating ancient Chinese painting practices with Western color theories, it demonstrates that rich color relationships can better express the interplay of reality and void. Finally, the paper highlights that the fusion of science and art in color relationships is an important direction for the innovation of contemporary Chinese painting, providing painters with a means of personalized expression and propelling the development of Chinese painting art.

## 2. Conception: the ultimate pursuit in Chinese art

The ultimate pursuit in Chinese art is "aesthetic conception" (Yijing), which means that the entirety of an artwork (both content and form) transcends the work itself to evoke a sense of vitality and boundless sentiment. As Hegel said, "The mind and its art are higher than nature." In addition to employing the traditional technique of "leaving blank" to express conception, contemporary Chinese painters are now exploring scientific color relationships to create vivid and dynamic works that express the beauty of conception and achieve true freedom in color creation. From the essence of color, it is more in line with the direct expression of human color perception and emotional response. For example, the murals from ancient

China, driven by spontaneous color instincts, presented a bold and unrestrained aesthetic character, achieving a vivid dynamism created by intense colors.

## 2.1. The definition and philosophical basis of conception

What is "conception"(Yijing)? It is the interplay of reality and void. Laozi, in classical Chinese philosophy, interpreted the void and the solid as the unity of opposites, stating, "The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth; the named is the mother of all things. "Chinese classical philosophy, which has dominated traditional Chinese aesthetics, holds that the essence of beauty lies in the interplay of reality and void.

The Tang Dynasty poet Zhang Ruoxu, in his poem "Spring River Moonlit Night," wrote: "The spring river's tide links with the sea's flatness, and the bright moon over the sea is born with the tide. The shimmering waves stretch for thousands of miles, where in the spring river is the moon not bright? The river winds around fragrant meadows, and the sunlit flowers in the forest seem like rosy clouds. Frost flows in the air unnoticed, and the white sand on the beach is invisible. The river and sky share one color without a speck of dust, and the bright solitary moon wheel hangs in the sky. Who by the river first saw the moon, and in which year did the river moon first shine on man? Life's generations are endless, while the river moon remains the same year after year. Not knowing for whom the river moon waits, only seeing the Yangtze River send flowing water. A piece of white cloud drifts away leisurely, and the blue maple ferry is filled with boundless sorrow. Who tonight is in a flat boat, and where is the moonlit tower filled with longing..."Wen Yiduo praised it repeatedly: "A more profound cosmic consciousness! A deeper and more serene realm!"

In traditional Chinese painting, the main form of expressing aesthetic conception is "leaving blank. "The composition of traditional Chinese painting often leaves" empty spaces" of varying sizes on the canvas. Through these "blanks," the primary and secondary relationships are expressed, the conception is highlighted, and the painter's emotions are conveyed. Ma Yuan's "Fishing Alone in the Cold River" is an excellent example. The stark contrast between the solitary boat and the vast river in the painting highlights a strong sense of conception. The objects in the painting are "solid," while the large areas of blank are "void. "The interplay of reality and void creates the conception. Wang Guowei said, "The works of great masters are those that touch the heart deeply in their expression of emotions and that broaden the eyes in their depiction of scenery. "The emergence of conception stems from the artist's genuine emotions, from the artist's embrace of life with all their being, and from the profound understanding of the essence of life, which is "learning from nature externally and finding inspiration within. "This is the fundamental pursuit of truth in art because it reflects the essence of humanity and the deeper purpose of human existence. Conception embodies the painter's artistic ideals and aesthetic pursuits. An excellent work of art should be one that is filled with "conception," for only such works can evoke aesthetic emotions and realize their aesthetic value.

## 2.2. The expression of conception in Chinese painting

If traditional Chinese painting expresses the beauty of conception through the interplay of reality and void by "leaving blank," then contemporary Chinese painting should create a vivid and dynamic conception through color. This is because color has a symbolic function and aligns with the traditional Chinese system of imagistic thinking. Chinese painters have always emphasized "imagistic" modeling. After achieving a rich diversity of colors, color has gradually become a part of the painter's aesthetic character as a manifestation of life's sensations, with subtle color perceptions always lingering within the imagery. The Ming Dynasty thinker Li Zhi wrote in Volume 3 of *Burned Books*, in *Miscellaneous Discussions on the Superficial Interpretation of the Law*: "Sounds and colors arise from emotions and nature...not from something that exists naturally outside of emotions and nature. "Throughout history, Chinese painters' uninhibited and expressive use of color, such as "painting with loose robes" and splashing ink and color, has been a clear act of liberating emotional color. However, in the long-standing feudal society of China, these aesthetic concepts were strongly influenced by feudal morality and the notion of color as a matter of ritual, failing to fully achieve a comprehensive spiritual awakening with the times. With the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty and the popularity of literati painting, painters mostly turned to the

literary connotations of brush and ink, and by the Yuan Dynasty, literati painting with ink as the main aesthetic tendency had clearly replaced polychromy as the mainstream of painting. To complete the color revolution in contemporary Chinese painting, it is necessary to break free from the constraints of traditional color concepts and achieve a distinct contemporary spirit and color personality for Chinese painters. The study of color relationships in painting should be the breakthrough and focus. Hegel, in his *Aesthetics*, had a prophetic judgment on the transformation caused by color: "In painting, the peak of vividness can only be achieved through color. This magic of color can eventually become so dominant that, compared to it, content becomes insignificant, turning painting into a fragrant breath, a magic of hues, whose mutual correspondence, reflection, and playful harmony begins to transcend into music, just as sculpture approaches painting in the high development of relief. "Only when colors form relationships can they create beauty, giving a sense of harmony and comfort. As the German scientist Ostwald wrote in his book *Introduction to Color*: "Experience has shown us that certain combinations of colors are pleasing, while others are displeasing or evoke no feeling at all. This raises the question: What determines the effect? The answer is: There is a certain regularity and order in the relationships among pleasing colors. Without this, the effect will be displeasing or evoke no feeling at all. We call the combination of colors that evoke pleasure 'harmony.' "Contemporary Chinese painting needs to break free from the constraints of traditional color concepts. Chinese painters should actively discover and perceive the vitality of color, truly obtaining their own artistic feelings and finding ways to express these feelings. Therefore, I believe that Chinese painting should emphasize color relationships. Rich color relationships create rich aesthetic values and tonalities, and can more fully express the conception of the interplay of reality and void.

### 3. Color relationships and the creation of aesthetic conception

#### 3.1. The aesthetic value of color contrast relationships

##### 3.1.1. *Hue contrast: the color practice in ancient Chinese painting*

Among the various types of color contrasts, hue contrast is the most fascinating. Hue contrast refers to the differences that emerge when any two or multiple colors on the color wheel are placed side by side, creating a comparative phenomenon known as hue contrast. The ancient Chinese based their understanding of color on the indirect reflected light from the five elements—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth—under sunlight. At that time, the light and color reflections from these material surfaces were considered stable and unchanging properties. Therefore, the color perception in the five-color system was dominated by pure monochromatic colors such as white, cyan, black, red, and yellow, which were regarded as the normal states of material colors. As a result, ancient Chinese painting primarily featured color relationships based on hue contrast.

The Qing Dynasty painter Dong Qing noted in his work *Deep Insights into Painting Studies* from Yang su Studio: "Ancient painters applied five vibrant colors, which is why painters from the Jin and Tang dynasties often used rich and heavy colors, with an emphasis on outlining." This shows that before the Tang Dynasty, Chinese painting focused on using various pure hues together, with black ink or gold/silver lines used to define color boundaries, creating a solemn and intense color structure on the canvas through hue contrast. People's love for color largely stems from their preference for colors with a certain degree of purity. Different levels of hue contrast help people identify differences in hue and meet their varying demands for color perception. The charm of color mainly lies in the skillful use of color contrast.

For example, a traditional Chinese folk artisans' color matching saying goes: "Red with yellow, delight the mother." This is because red is a color that expresses emotional characteristics. With the longest wavelength and the lowest frequency in the visible spectrum, red stimulates the entire body and mind intensely. Yellow, which is close to gold in hue, has the highest lightness among all chromatic colors. The radiance of yellow combined with the emotional response to red naturally creates a delightful color effect. Analyzed through modern color theory, these color choices largely align with the intrinsic color needs of human perception. In other words, the hue contrast between red and yellow expresses festive and joyful emotions, creating a cheerful artistic conception.

##### 3.1.2. *Complementary contrast: intense visual impact and emotional expression*

Complementary contrast is the most intense type of color contrast in color relationships. On the color wheel, colors that are approximately 180 degrees apart create a striking visual effect. The most typical pairs of complementary colors used by painters are red/green, blue/orange, and yellow/purple. These complementary pairs have the strongest visual appeal and can satisfy the human eye's need for a full range of hues.

Goethe, in his *Theory of Colors*, stated: "When the eye sees one color, it immediately and unconsciously demands another color to complete the sum of the color wheel. "This relationship is known as complementary contrast. For example, the murals in the Kizil Caves of Xinjiang often feature blue-green tones because the vast Gobi Desert's brownish-yellow hue creates a sense of color imbalance. To compensate for this imbalance, artists intuitively used blue-green as the complementary color to meet the human eye's need for a full spectrum of colors.

During the Five Dynasties period, the landscape painter Jing Hao wrote in his *Painting Treatise*: "Red mixed with yellow suggests falling autumn leaves; red mixed with green creates clusters of flowers. Blue mixed with purple, however, is lifeless. "The combination of red and yellow creates a warm, autumnal tone, while red against green highlights the vividness of red flowers against a green background. This perception of complementary colors also corresponds to the Tang Dynasty verse, "A touch of red on the tender green branch, captivating spring without more. "In contrast, blue and purple, being too close in hue, are considered a lifeless color combination. The *Xuan he Painting Treatise* of the Song Dynasty provided a more accurate understanding of color relationships: "Red and green in opposition are strong, like black and white...Yellow and purple are also strong, but weaker and more subdued. "The strong contrast between red and green is a rational conclusion following the intuitive recognition of "a touch of red among the green leaves." Ancient Chinese painters not only sensed the presence of this complementary color effect but also recognized its characteristics through practice. This shows that complementary color relationships are a fundamental need of human color perception.

The greatest contribution of the Impressionists was to elevate color to a scientific level, maximizing the use of complementary contrasts to create artistic conception and establish visual balance. Their works feature intense, vivid, and dynamic contrasts that evoke a sense of movement and vitality. Painters like Van Gogh, Cézanne, and Seurat used rich complementary contrasts to bring their paintings to life, achieving a vivid and dynamic aesthetic.

### 3.1.3. *Light and dark contrast: variations in color value and saturation*

Light and dark contrast is the most common type of color relationship. Value refers to the degree of lightness or darkness of a color, while saturation refers to the intensity or dullness of a color, indicating the amount of pure color present. Variations in color value and saturation can produce a wide range of artistic effects. On the color wheel, lemon yellow has the highest value, giving a sense of liveliness and vitality, and is suitable for depicting cheerful and joyful scenes. By adjusting the saturation of yellow, one can create rich and varied color relationships within a yellow-based palette.

The great Qing Dynasty literary figure Cao Xueqin, in his *Treatise on Painting*, strongly advocated that painters pay attention to the representation of light and color, stating: "In the application of color, light comes first. What is bright appears vivid, while what is dark appears dim. Where there is form, there must be shadow. How can painters ignore this?" Cao Xueqin's description of light and color reflects his intuitive understanding of color changes. Both European and Asian arts are largely based on this contrast of lightness and darkness, as well as saturation.

The general requirement for color among Chinese folk artists is summed up in the saying, "There are no strict rules in painting; freshness is key. "This phrase profoundly captures the fundamental law of color creation. "No strict rules" reflects the idea that art does not follow a fixed pattern, while "freshness is key" expresses the essential human need for vivid colors. It shows that ancient Chinese people grasped the core of color creation and discovered an ancient color rationality that integrates sensation, emotion, and imagination. For example, ancient scholars like Xie He's "assigning colors according to categories" and Liu Xie's "when the color of things moves, the heart also sways" are rational insights gained through their passionate and careful experiences of life.

The ancient Chinese basis for color was the indirect reflected light from the five elements—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth—under sunlight. In contrast, modern Western color optics are based on the spectral colors produced by the refraction of sunlight. Therefore, the Western seven-color system more fully utilizes the color-perceiving functions formed by humans under sunlight. Western artists created art forms characterized by light and dark color contrasts before and after the Renaissance. The 16th-century Dutch painter Rembrandt brought this light and dark color contrast to its peak in his easel paintings. In his masterpiece *The Man with the Golden Helmet*, light and dark contrasts form a striking expressive technique.

Leonardo da Vinci's famous mural *The Last Supper* recreates a visually realistic painting space through its structure of light and dark colors. From the artists' in-depth reflection on these light and dark colors, it is evident that they perceived the richness of light and dark colors in reality. In this process of fully understanding light and dark colors, da Vinci achieved a harmonious painting composition based on light and dark colors. He discovered that for painters, strong lighting is essential for true color. Da Vinci pioneered a painting style that reflects the visual reality of light and dark colors based on the color changes caused by light.

In ancient China, "color harmony" appeared in the form of "patterns" of colors. Confucian scholars regarded harmony as beauty. The aesthetic concept of harmony was first proposed by the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras. This means that all colors can achieve harmony if their relationships are correct.

#### *3.1.4. Warm and cool contrast: color expression of emotional change*

Warm and cool contrast is the most powerful color contrast that affects human emotions. This contrast refers to the differences in the perceived warmth or coolness of colors. Generally, warm colors include yellow, yellow-orange, orange, red-orange, red, and reddish-purple, while cool colors consist of yellow-green, blue-green, blue, blue-violet, and violet. Blue-green and red-orange represent the two extremes of cool and warm colors, respectively. However, the hues between them on the color wheel can be either warm or cool, depending on whether they are compared with warmer or cooler tones.

The great philosopher Cicero, when discussing the nature of beauty, stated: "Beauty is the appropriate proportion of the parts of an object, combined with pleasing colors." "The contrast between warm and cool colors is a fundamental color relationship that evokes touching emotional responses. In painting, the warm and cool contrast primarily relies on the simultaneous effect of two coexisting hues within the color structure. For example, in the mural *The Story of Sudhana* from Cave 257 of the Northern Wei Dynasty, the warm and cool contrast is often based on a warm earth tone as the background, which is juxtaposed with malachite green and stone green to create a striking warm-cool contrast. Combined with black, white, and gray, this forms a simple, bright, rich, and unpretentious warm tone. This warm tone contrasts with the cool tone of the central niche, creating a harmonious and balanced overall color scheme in the cave.

The Impressionist painters of the late 19th century were the first to truly emphasize the relationship between warm and cool colors in painting. The Impressionist painter Georges Seurat studied the color theories of the physicist Chevreul and advocated "optical color mixing instead of pigment mixing, a method that involves breaking down colors into their constituent elements." "Seurat's specific technique involved placing small dots of color on the canvas, allowing the viewer's eye to optically blend the colors. In Impressionist painting, the emphasis on warm and cool relationships meant that colors were not blended or smoothed out, allowing the brushstrokes to remain distinct. Additionally, the emphasis was not on the light and dark relationships of objects, resulting in a subtle and varied, almost hazy effect in the paintings.

In my own creative practice, to achieve a strong visual impact, I often use warm and cool contrasts. For example, in the work *"Red, Yellow, Blue,"* the combination of purple (mixed from red and blue) and pure yellow creates an extreme contrast in lightness and darkness as well as complementary colors. The combination of orange (mixed from red and yellow) and pure blue creates an extreme warm-cool contrast and complementary colors. Each color maintains its individuality while interacting with others, forming a harmonious and dynamic color language that enhances the visual impact of the artwork, deepens the artistic conception, and highlights the main theme of the piece.

### 3.1.5. *Color area contrast: the unity of balance and expressiveness*

Color area contrast refers to the relative color fields of two or more color blocks, which is a comparison between more and less, large and small. Colors can be combined in any size of color fields, and we need to study what amount of color is considered balanced between two or more colors, that is, not letting one color stand out more prominently. For example, in a purple block with a yellow block, if the areas of the two blocks are equal, the human eye will feel uncomfortable and overly intense. To achieve a harmonious color block contrast, the proportion of the yellow block must be reduced because yellow is three times brighter than purple. It should only occupy one-third of the area of its complementary color purple to create a harmonious and calm effect. Once the harmonious proportion is adopted, the area contrast will be neutralized. If a composition uses color fields that are different from the harmonious proportion, allowing one color to dominate, the resulting effect is expressive. For example, in Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, small areas of blue and purple are set against a large area of bright yellow, creating a strong sense of turbulence and expressiveness. Chinese painting is an art of emotion, and color is the most direct and powerful means of expressing emotion and creating artistic conception. In creation, painters should evoke their instinctive color impulses and mobilize all color sensations to express emotions. Only through active color expression can painters take the initiative in creation.



Figure 1 "Impression of Xi Shuang ban na" by Li Qun





Figure 2 "Roots" by Li Qun

#### 4. The integration of science and art in color relationships

Color is a visual symbol that can form the creator's personalized language. For contemporary Chinese painters, using color relationships to organize a composition and enhance the aesthetic conception of a work is an innovative breakthrough. Contemporary detailed brushwork painting (gong bi) is not simply about replicating nature, but discovering beauty within it, extracting touching color and spiritual symbols, and sublimating the creator's emotional world and painting language. This process not only moves the artist but also resonates with the viewer. Color has the unique ability to fully express human sensations, and the essence of color art lies in its alignment with human instinctive feelings and emotions. Contemporary painters should fully engage their color instincts and utilize the symbolic, decorative, and expressive qualities of color to blaze a new trail in the creation of contemporary detailed brushwork painting.

#### 5. Conclusion

As the ultimate pursuit in Chinese art, artistic conception has long demonstrated its unique aesthetic charm through the philosophy of "the interplay of reality and void." Traditional Chinese painting primarily employs "leaving blank" to create an ethereal and profound sense of conception. However, with the development of the times, contemporary Chinese painters have begun to explore the significant role of color relationships in creating artistic conception. Color not only directly expresses human emotions but also, through scientific application—such as hue contrast, complementary contrast, light and dark contrast, warm and cool contrast, and color area contrast—creates more expressive and touching visual effects. This exploration not only breaks free from the constraints of traditional color concepts but also endows Chinese painting with a new spirit of the times and artistic vitality.

The integration of color relationships and the beauty of conception is not only an inheritance and development of traditional Chinese aesthetics but also an innovative breakthrough for contemporary Chinese painters in their artistic practice. Through the scientific use of color and emotional expression, painters can better convey the inner spirit of their works, allowing viewers to feel the vitality of life and

boundless sentiments during appreciation. In the future, color relationships will undoubtedly play a greater role in the creation of contemporary Chinese painting, injecting new vitality into the beauty of conception and propelling Chinese painting art towards a broader realm of development.