

# Re-encoding Tradition: The Cross-cultural Reconstruction of Contemporary Ink Art in Digital Contexts

Yuxian Zhang<sup>1</sup>, Xueqi Jia<sup>1</sup>, Tianying Zhang<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, Hebei Academy of Fine Arts, Shijiazhuang, China

\*Correspondence: Tianying Zhang

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## Abstract:

Against the backdrop of burgeoning global digitalization and intensifying cultural interconnectedness, ink art has begun to transcend its traditional confines of Xuan paper and brushwork, progressively integrating with digital interfaces, interactive installations, and immersive technologies. This study examines how contemporary ink art achieves artistic self-innovation and morphological reshaping through the mechanism of “re-encoding”.

## Keywords:

Contemporary Ink Art, Ink Symbols, Digital Media, Cross-Cultural, Re-encoding

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## 1. Introduction

As the world enters a stage of comprehensive digital transformation, cultural inheritance faces dual pressures: technological advancements have fundamentally redefined the logic of image generation, while disparities in discourse systems within cross-cultural dialogues have led to cultural alienation. As a vehicle for traditional culture, Chinese ink art—rooted in a unique contextual system and emphasizing the logic of imagery and symbolic brushwork—is showing signs of a “secondary growth of marginal culture” against the backdrop of digital media. This phenomenon is partly due to the formal innovation achieved by combining traditional ink expression with digital media, and it also reflects the renewal of meaning for specific cultural symbols under a global gaze.

“Encoding”, as a specialized term, can be traced back to the field of information and communication research. The model established by Shannon and Weaver demonstrates that encoding constitutes a structural transformation of form during the transmission of information. From the perspective of cultural analysis, Stuart Hall innovatively proposed the “Encoding / Decoding” theory, positing that the transmission of meaning in cultural products allows for fluidity—it is a dynamic negotiation of meaning between the encoder and the decoder. The concept of “re-encoding” adopted in this study refers to the systemic rearrangement of existing visual expression systems at the framework level as ink art navigates the transition between different media and cultural contexts. This process entails not only technological advancements but also the transformation of traditional concepts and the fundamental reshaping of cultural identity.

## 2. Ink Art as a Philosophical Carrier of Cultural Metaphor

Ancient Chinese cosmology posits that the world originates from an indivisible whole: “In the *I Ching* (Book of Changes), there is the *Taiji* (Great Ultimate), which generates the two polarities (*Yin and Yang*); these two polarities produce the four images, which in turn generate the eight trigrams...” This schema not only symbolically manifests the philosophical ideal of *Tian Ren He Yi* (the Unity of Heaven and Humanity) but also reveals the cosmic law of reciprocal transformation between *Yin* and *Yang*. It elevates the binary of black and white—a dialectical unity of visual simplicity—to the supreme status as the “source of all colors.” Zong Bing further integrated Daoist and Buddhist thought through concepts such as *Cheng Huai Guan Dao* (Clarifying the heart to contemplate the Dao), *Yi Shen Fa Dao* (Following the Dao through the spirit), and *Fu Shi Ruo Xu* (Handling the substantial as if it were void), injecting profound philosophical depth into ink painting. This worldview naturally steered the evolution of Chinese painting, establishing ink art, with black and white as its primary expressive media, as a cornerstone of Chinese artistic form. Consequently, ink painting is not merely a carrier of unique cultural connotations; it establishes its distinctive aesthetic value at the very source of culture, serving as a vital mode through which traditional Chinese culture perceives and articulates the world.

The principle of “using ink as color” (墨当彩) became a pivotal expressive mode. Zhang Yanyuan asserted, “When ink is applied such that the five colors are all present, it is called achieving the essence (*deyi*). If the mind is fixed on the five colors themselves, the representation of the object will become estranged.” In the intellectual tradition of Chinese literati, the highest realm of painting lies not in the mimesis of natural objects, but in the creation of objects through one’s own spirit. Ink art requires no external pigments; through its internal variations alone, it manifests the *Yijing* (artistic conception) envisioned by the artist—a quality Laozi termed *Xuan* (the profound or mysterious). By manipulating the gradations of ink, artists achieve a richness of chromatic effects. In this era, *Mofa* (ink technique) emerged as a systematic linguistic category equivalent to *Bifa* (brushwork), allowing “form” and “color” in Chinese painting to find their respective ontological foundations and becoming the fundamental elemental expression of traditional ink art.

The historical trajectory of Chinese ink art is, in itself, an evolutionary history of continuous “internal translation.” From Wang Shen and Li Cheng of the Northern Song to Huang Gongwang and Ni Zan of the Yuan Dynasty, ink art underwent a persistent transition from representation to expression at the levels of technique, aesthetics, and concept. The rise of literati painting marked a shift from the representation of nature toward a process of “subjectivization,” expressing the artist’s internal emotions. In this process, innovations in metaphorical expression and technological refinements revitalized ink art. The diverse variations of ink tones, the fluidity of line, and the strategic deployment of *Liubai* (negative space) serve not only as visual techniques but as unique cultural strategies for Chinese art to navigate cultural shifts and external influences.

In the current era of relentless information technology innovation, ink art has gained a more open intellectual receptivity and opportunities for expressive transformation during this period of media transition. The language of ink has transcended the limitations of paper and the painting table, infiltrating interdisciplinary zones such as contemporary installations, digital art, and AR (Augmented Reality) spaces. This

transition goes beyond superficial morphological imitation; it represents a systemic attempt to construct new hermeneutic frameworks for cultural language within cross-cultural dialogues.

### 3. The Semiotic Translation of Ink Art: From Traditional Formulae to Modern Signs

Through semiotic construction, ink art achieves a more condensed transmission of connotation, thereby extending the scope of the viewer's imagination and interpretation. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel proposed that the exploration of art should be grounded in semiotic analysis. He argued that the essence of the symbol lies in evoking external associations that transcend its physical form; symbols possess materiality, yet the more the meaning is intensified during interpretation, the less conspicuous their material basis becomes. Within the current social context, the "signage" function of art has become increasingly prominent, facilitating the integration of collective identity. By evolving from individual objects into symbolic signs, ink art has entered a stage of symbolic representation. The contemporary aggregation of ink elements serves as a visual manifestation of the innovative development of traditional art.

In 1993, the concept of "Experimental Ink" (Shiyan Shuimo) was formally introduced. The construction of Experimental Ink began with the deconstruction of *Bimo* (brush and ink), selecting new media, materials, and expressive means to explore the visual imagery of ink art. For instance, the works of Gu Wenda and Xu Bing during the 1990s exemplify this initial phase of "re-encoding." Gu Wenda's use of pseudo-characters and non-traditional media dismantled the semantic stability of the ink tradition, detaching the brushwork from its role as a carrier of specific literary meaning. Similarly, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* (Tian Shu) deconstructed the readability of the Chinese character itself, forcing the viewer to engage with ink as a pure visual and symbolic system. By stripping away the text's communicative function, these artists completed the first radical "re-encoding" of ink art, moving it from a literary-based tradition to a conceptual-based visual language.

The renewal of technical and instrumental concepts exerts a significant influence on artistic ideas and styles. [1] Alongside this exploration of media transition, Experimental Ink fused indigenous ink symbols with Western conceptual art, giving rise to diverse forms such as abstract, conceptual, installation, and performance ink art, thereby establishing a unique system of visual linguistic representation.

The deconstruction of *Bimo* inevitably necessitates the abstraction and reconstruction of *Tu-shi* (schemata). To discuss *Bimo* is better preceded by a discussion of the schema; without the guidance of the schema, *Bimo* is but a pile of meaningless remnants and rotting flesh. [2] The schema is the foundation of an artist's creation—a mode of artistic narrative established through the medium, manifested as an artistic subject-image imbued with specific information and allegory. In Experimental Ink, artists are no longer confined to traditional expressive modes; instead, they treat ink symbols and traditional cultural motifs as innovative schemata that can be freely deconstructed and reorganized. At this juncture, *Bimo* is no longer merely a vehicle for technique and sentiment; it exists within image processing as a pure material creative presence, forging a new logic of material creativity, artistic relationships, and linguistic expression.

This evolution highlights a fundamental logical shift between the “material experimentation” of the late 20th century and the “digital experimentation” of the present era. In the 1990s, the primary strategy of re-encoding was material subversion—artists challenged the cultural authority of ink by physically manipulating its tools, paper, and textures to expose the “meaningless remnants” of the tradition. Conversely, the current digital re-encoding focuses on algorithmic synthesis. While the 90s experiments sought to break the physical frame of the brush, the digital era seeks to translate the very “spirit” (Qi) of that brush into computational parameters and real-time logic. The transition is from a physical deconstruction of the medium to a systemic reconstruction of the aesthetic logic itself.

#### 4. The “Re-encoding” Mechanism of Ink Art in the Digital Context

The infusion of digital technology has birthed a new visual paradigm. It does more than just display art; it fundamentally reconfigures the relationship between the observer and the image. As media theorist Lev Manovich argues, the essence of the digital image lies in its “programmability.” Under this logic, a work of ink art is no longer a static relic but a dynamic, generative entity—a living script fueled by real-time computation. The traditional “*Bimo*” (brush and ink) has shed its physical weight, transforming into a fluid set of parameters. This is not merely a change in tool; it is an ontological shift in how art is conceived. Moreover, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Generative Art has shifted the locus of re-encoding from human gesture to algorithmic autonomy. By training neural networks on historical corpora of ink masterpieces, artists can now synthesize ‘*Qi-yun Sheng-dong*’ (rhythmic vitality) through purely computational logic. These systems treat the fluidity of ink and the tension of lines as a series of probabilistic distributions, effectively realizing the concept of ‘parameterized ink.’ Here, the algorithm does not merely replicate the visual style of tradition; it re-encodes the creative process itself, allowing the ‘spirit’ of the brush to manifest as a generative script capable of infinite variation.

This “re-encoding” acts as a liberating force. It allows Chinese ink art to transcend the boundaries of traditional iconography and establish itself as a vital bridge for global discourse. In the collision of disparate cultures, ink art is evolving from a “passive object of cultural consumption” into an “active agent of cross-cultural dialogue.” As Arjun Appadurai suggested, cultural identity is now a “deterritorialized” concept—an “imagined community” shaped within the global digital mesh. Here, the aesthetic of the brush becomes a universal syntax, allowing for new forms of shared understanding.

A definitive example of this transition is teamLab’s interactive installation, *Kanshu* (Spoken/Empty Script). By integrating wrap-around projection with high-definition rendering, the work creates a seamless resonance between digital strokes and the physical environment. These “digital traces” are not fixed; they breathe and fluctuate according to the spatial layout and the presence of the audience. The system uses precise spatial geometry to embed the flow of ink—its gradations, rhythms, and gestures—into a three-dimensional reality. The result is a profound “immersion.” Whether a viewer stands in silent contemplation or moves through the space, the visual output adapts, creating a feedback loop between the human and the code.

Parallel to this, the extension of ink art into Virtual Reality (VR) and spatialized immersive environments fundamentally reconfigures the viewer’s phenomenological experience. In these three-dimensional ‘digital voids,’ the ‘physical involvement’ of

the observer becomes the catalyst for the artwork's unfolding. As the body moves through the spatialized ink, the traditional distance inherent in two-dimensional contemplation dissolves, transforming 'Yijing' (artistic conception) from a framed representation into an inhabited atmosphere. This immersion necessitates a new hermeneutic of 'void' (xu) and 'substance' (shi), as the spectator's movement dictates the temporal and spatial rhythm of the ink, effectively turning the act of viewing into a performative engagement with a re-encoded cultural space.

This is the ultimate aim of re-encoding: it doesn't just imitate the past; it builds a new hermeneutic framework. It proves that the core spirit of ink art—its emphasis on energy and void—can find a powerful, renewed resonance in the age of the algorithm.

## 5. Discussion: Cross-Cultural Reception and Critical Reflections

The globalization of digital ink art necessitates an analysis of audience psychology. When Western viewers encounter "digital ink," they often navigate a tension between the "Orientalist Gaze"—viewing the work as an exotic artifact of Eastern aesthetic—and a "Universal Digital Syntax." Digitization significantly mitigates the 'Cultural Discount' (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988) [3] typically associated with traditional ink art. By translating the esoteric brushwork of the literati into the familiar language of the screen and interactive interface, the entry threshold for non-Chinese audiences is lowered. However, this accessibility is a double-edged sword. While it facilitates a shared visual experience, it risks a "semantic flattening," where the profound philosophical underpinnings of ink are overlooked in favor of the universal appeal of digital aesthetics. The challenge remains: does digitization truly lower the threshold for understanding Zen or Daoist philosophy, or does it merely create a new form of digital misreading?

From a critical perspective, the transition to parametric ink raises questions regarding Walter Benjamin's concept of the "Aura"—the unique existence of a work of art in time and space. In traditional ink art, the "Aura" is bound to the singular, irreversible stroke of the brush on paper. When ink becomes a set of infinitely reproducible and dynamically calculated parameters, the physical "tactility" and "uniqueness" of the medium appear to dissolve. The "Here and Now" of the artist's gesture is replaced by the "Anywhere and Anytime" of the algorithm.

Furthermore, as Guy Debord warns in *The Society of the Spectacle*, the world has moved from being to having, and finally from having to appearing. In the digital re-encoding of ink art, there is a risk that the brush's spiritual essence will be commodified into a mere visual spectacle, leading to a 'spectacular' but hollow aesthetic experience. (Debord, 1967) [4], where the sensory stimulation of immersive technology overshadows the contemplative depth of the ink tradition. If the "re-encoding" process focuses solely on visual impact, the art form risks losing its philosophical soul, becoming a kitsch display of technological prowess rather than a meaningful evolution of a thousand-year-old tradition.

## 6. Conclusions

The "re-encoding" of contemporary ink art is not a mere migration of media, but an ontological restructuring driven by the dual forces of digital technology and cross-cultural contexts. By transforming traditional "Bimo" into programmable parameters, ink art transcends the material confines of Xuan paper and physical experience, entering a digital syntax defined by continuous generation and real-time computation.

This restructuring represents a “secondary growth” of the ink semiotic system during its digital transformation, marking a leap from a closed literati context to an open, global narrative space.

This process is neither a rupturing abandonment of tradition nor a blind subservience to technology; rather, it is a creative translation of “Qi-yun” and “Yijing” within a digital framework. As demonstrated by interactive practices like teamLab, digital technology endows ancient art with “dynamic life,” enabling a subjective co-construction between the artwork and the viewer through algorithmic drivers. In this process, ink is distilled into a universal visual logic, which, while mitigating cultural discounts, provides a brand-new hermeneutic framework for cross-cultural dialogue.

However, while embracing digital convenience, we must remain vigilant against the risk of semantic flattening within the “Society of the Spectacle.” The future of ink art lies not in becoming a mere visual spectacle, but in preserving the “uniqueness” of its philosophical core amidst the “infinitude” of algorithmic generation. Through continuous “re-encoding,” ink art will cease to be a mere visual footnote to Chinese traditional identity; instead, it will function as an active, speculative contemporary language, achieving the dynamic continuity and meaningful reshaping of cultural genes within a globalized context.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

## Author Contributions

Zhang Yuxian: Conceptualization; Writing – Original Draft Preparation; Formal Analysis; Data Curation; Validation; Jia Xueqi: Methodology; Investigation; Case Study Analysis and Basic Data Analysis; Visualization; Validation; Zhang Tianying: Writing – Review and Editing; Resources; Supervision; Project Administration

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