

# *Research on the Impact of Western Art upon Chinese Artists Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-ki in the 20th Century*

Cheng Cheng \*

Kingston University

**Abstract:** World War II led to a reallocation of many countries' political roles. Some nations got stronger after the war while others lost their past advantages and became less powerful. During the post-war period, many genres of art schools were established, first in Europe followed by America and then Asia, resulting in a collision between China and the West as Western art served to inspire Chinese art. This study examines the works of Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-ki and discusses how post-war Western art had influenced Chinese art and what changes had been brought to artistic styles of Chinese art.

**Keywords:** post-war, Chinese art, Western art, Wu Guanzhong, Zao Wou-ki

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.19873/j.cnki.2096-0212.2021.01.0010>

## **Introduction**

From the angle of world history, World War II led to a reallocation of many countries' political roles. Reflecting the history of art, many genres of art schools were established at that time. The European artists were the earliest group to launch their movement. Leading artists like Francis Bacon and Joseph Beuys had a significant impact on this endeavor. Following was the dominant influence from America. Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko were two of the most influential American artists who were active in this period. During the

---

\* Cheng Cheng, Department of Art and Design, Kingston University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cheng Cheng, Department of Art and Design, Kingston University, London. E-mail: [c31590@126.com](mailto:c31590@126.com).

20th century, the development of Chinese painting art experienced a transforming process from a classic traditional style to a free modern style. Some Chinese artists who studied abroad welcomed the impact of post-war Western art and became the leading influencers in the trend. After returning home, they inspired many domestic teenagers who were interested in art, becoming the pioneers and initiators for many local Chinese artists to enter the realm of modern art. Two outstanding artists who reached the top levels of artistic skills were Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-ki and are now recognized as representatives of Chinese artists. Wu Guanzhong was born in 1919 in Yixing, Jiangsu province, China. Zao Wou-ki was born in 1921 in Beijing, China. During the New Culture Movement (1915-1923), some Chinese artists tried to introduce and promote Western modern art in China. The findings of this investigation reveal the fact that Western art influenced the pioneers of Chinese art based on the aspect of environment. Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-ki were considered to be pioneers of Chinese art who had significant influence on Chinese contemporary art after studying abroad in France.

This paper analyses the works of Chinese artists Zao Wou-ki (Chinese-French) and Wu Guanzhong who were active during the post-war period and their experiences in France as well as the influences of their teachers and families, and discusses how post-war Western art had influenced Chinese art and what changes had been brought to artistic styles of Chinese art. It is evident that many aesthetic ideas and innovative concepts have influenced Chinese modern and contemporary painting in ways of evolving art style, artistic geopolitics, and social background.

### **The Impact 20th Century (especially the post-war period) Western Art upon Chinese Art**

Although Italian historian Benedetto Croce pointed out that all history is contemporary history (Pan, 2014), the term “contemporary” in “contemporary art” is a different concept. It cannot simply be applied to a type of art which is on-going or has evolved in the contemporary era. It should be defined within an apparent time range. In the language system of Western art, art historians often describe various art forms, starting from Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys which are different from realism and expressionism, as contemporary art (Cong, 2019). As the development of Chinese painting experienced the transforming process from the classical traditional style to a free modern style, there is no doubt the value orientation in the language system of Western art had shocked and impacted Chinese art. Not only China, but the Asian art circles at the time also began to make significant contact with Western art from 1950 to 1980, causing mutual shared influences.

After the Industrial Revolution and the rapid development of science and technology, Western societies entered a period of highly developed material civilization in the early 20th century. Technological advancements such as realistic presentation techniques generated by the development of photography, pushed many artists away from realism and toward modernist paintings. Contemporary Western art moved away from many past artistic rules, emancipating art from its functions in literature, narratives, and imitation towards emphasizing independence and the display of the subject's will, spirit, and emotions. At

the time, most modernists' creations began with self-awareness, and they generally emphasized the sense of layout. Painting was no longer "what to paint" but "how to paint," which implies that the focus was turning from content to modality.

At the beginning of the 20th century, modernist art schools such as Western Beastism, Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, and Expressionism emerged, opening new chapters in the history of Western art development. Facing these new genres of modernist schools, Chinese students studying abroad were deeply affected, and many of them boldly chose to introduce Western modernist painting trends and art to China, trying to establish and expand this new stage of art in China. As a result, two artistic styles started to spread and evolve in China. One was the realistic painting school which conformed to the "scientific" spirit and was accepted by most people. The other was the modernist painting school which was passionate about expressing personal emotions and modality exploration.

Thus, modernist art exploration, focusing on pure modality, appeared in China through individuals and small groups. Vital, active groups following the examples of Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, and Surrealism contributed to the promotion and growth of modern art in China. Artists keen on modernist painting styles included Lin Fengmian and Pang Xunxuan. The active period for these groups was from 1927 to 1937, starting with Lin Fengmian who returned to China in 1927 after traveling in France. Although expanding for a decade, the early modernist painting schools eventually collapsed due to the general disapproval, incomprehension, and rejection of modern art by both the public and the experts of the times. This is completely understandable given the circumstances of the times, especially with World War II raging and Chinese citizens facing the urgent reality of national survival, modern art was eclipsed by this grim reality. As a result, during the period of the War of Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, China's modern art groups gradually became silent. The significance of the initial introduction of Western modernist art by the pioneers cannot be denied. They played an essential role in promoting, learning, and imitating modernist art and its artistic concepts for the Chinese art environment. Its fresh expressionist style, together with realism, introduced variety which greatly enriched the face of Chinese art.

When western modernist art in Europe was first introduced to Chinese international students, many were influenced by this emerging trend and were eager to join the movement. While the realism painting groups, which included Xu Beihong and Wu Zuoren were funded by the National Academy of Fine Arts, the modernist painting groups were accessing and learning Western modernist art through alternative means. Many chose to attend art shows and exhibitions and then imitated the new styles in a free, emotional, and eclectic way. This gave the appearance that members of the modernist groups lacked the necessary skills and the proper professionalism required by the realism school but many members of the modernist groups, such as Lin Fengmian and Pang Xunxuan, also received official academy training and exhibited the requisite skills for creating realistic paintings as well.

The prevalence of modern art outside the National Academy of Fine Arts prompted Chinese students to move from perception to practice. Parisian art and its various fresh artistic concepts and schools greatly influenced international students. The artistic atmosphere of the Paris Art District was very active,

attracting young artists from all over the world, including many Chinese students, such as Chang Yu, Pan Yuliang, and Wu Dayu. These students were all from the Académie de la Grande-Chaumière and were differentiated from the realistic groups whose members were mainly from regular colleges. The development and spread of modernism in China mainly advanced through concept guidance in teaching and the promotion of Western painting community activities as modernism was not a fixed model, but rather something that inspired conception over technique. During the early 20th century in China, the first oil painting group with modernist styles was the China Academy of Art led by Lin Fengmian who was a strong advocate for modern art concepts. When he presided over the Hangzhou National Academy of Art in the period from 1928 to 1937, he practiced inclusiveness and advocated for the educational philosophy of “harmony between China and the West” (Zheng, 2016). Lin Fengmian embraced the various schools of Western modern art and required students to lay a good foundation for painting. On this basis, students were given freedom of expression and were guided to think and practice independently.

During his time at the Hangzhou Art Academy, Lin Fengmian, together with Wu Dayu, Fang Ganmin and other famous painters, cultivated many talented young artists, such as Zao Wou-Ki and Wu Guanzhong who were inspired by Western art and had studied abroad and were active during the post-war period. Researcher Li Chao commented on the significant contributions of Lin Fengmian and the Hangzhou Art Academy stating that Lin Fengmian’s enormous influence on Chinese modern art was due to his introduction of Western modernist art forms to China, thus creating the expressionist system of Chinese academics (Li, 2007, pp. 87-169).

### **How Were the Pioneers of Chinese Art Who Had Travelled to France Influenced by Western Art?**

French historian Adolphe Taine said that the formation of works of art depends on three elements: race, environment, and time. Among these, environment is the most critical because it is the only element that an aspiring artist can control. Choosing a particular living environment means choosing an artistic path. When studying at the Hangzhou Art Academy, Wu Guanzhong, Zao Wou-Ki, and others, under the guidance of the comingled Chinese and Western teaching philosophy and the famous teachers who were familiar with Western art, cultivated a keen interest in modernist Western styles.

In the late 1940’s, Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-Ki traveled to France. Wu Guanzhong studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris for three years. Although Wu Guanzhong stayed in France for only three years, the influence of Western art is deep in his mind.

When Wu Guanzhong arrived in France, he intended to study Western classical art but his keen sense of touch, unique creativity, and the varied forms of Western contemporary art attracted him to the modernistic styles and in his second year he transferred to Professor Jean Souverbie’s modernist art studio to study oil painting. Professor Souverbie was a famous modernist painter at the time and an awarded academicien of the French Academy. The subjects of Professor Jean Souverbie’s paintings mostly involved ancient Greek myths and extolled human nature, and this expressionist technique was

very modern. His works are profound and timeless, and the visual effects of his paintings are majestic and massive. This combination of classical and modern expression techniques along with the styling structure and color intensity of Souverbir's work gave Wu Guanzhong great inspiration. According to Wu's memory, Professor Souverbie was serious and responsible in class, open in concept and unique in teaching methods. His artistic conceptions greatly influenced Wu Guanzhong; for example, the object of observation emphasizes feelings, and when he talked about the issues of "pretty" and "beauty" in art he was saying that small art entertains, and elegant art impresses. During this period Wu Guanzhong also came into contact with various modern schools such as Cubism and Abstract, and he felt that his vision expanded and benefitted because of these exposures.

During his time in Paris, Wu Guanzhong devoted himself to his studies and had extensive exposure to the world's outstanding artists. He particularly liked the bright and vibrant colors of Impressionism and worshipped Cézanne's heavy structure and loved the elegant mourning in the works of Utrecht. Regarding Van Gogh, Wu Guanzhong said, "I have a strong desire to understand their flesh and blood and I want to get into their hearts, especially Van Gogh; I would like to hear his daily breathing" (Wu, 1982).

Three years of study abroad helped Wu Guanzhong recognize the essence of Western art, especially modern Western art. Considering the transformation of Western art from classical to modern, Wu Guanzhong believed that some of the ambiguous and absurd hustle and bustle in Western modern art was certainly not desirable, but he did believe the novelty of its visual experience, the sensitivity of its artistic sense, the diversity of its expressive techniques, and the commonality of its abstraction forms combined to create the essence of Western modern art. He thought this was the significant reason for Chinese artists to visit the West to study at the time (Wu, 1997). Professor Jean Souverbie said of Wu Guanzhong at his farewell that Wu was the best student in his class, who was diligent and progressive, always absorbing new information. As art is a career related to feelings, it seems right for Wu to decide to return to China and try his best to inspire new developments based on Chinese paintings from and before the 17th century.

Wu Guanzhong's experience in France not only broadened his artistic vision but also enhanced his artistic understanding and helped him to form his artistic style. Wu Guanzhong paid attention to painting languages with the study of point, line, plane, and black, white and grey colors. He emphasized that Chinese and Western paintings should be complementary and put forward the idea that oil paintings should be nationalized, and Chinese paintings should be modernized (Zhang, 2007). He applied the concept of color, block, and light from the oil paintings to the creation of Chinese paintings and applied the artistic conception of Chinese paintings to the creation of oil paintings.

When Wu Guanzhong returned to China after studying in France for three years, his personal experiences were affected by the founding of the People's Republic of China and his artistic style was mainly related to his life experiences. Compared to Wu Guanzhong, Zao Wou-Ki was more influenced by the West, and he was primarily active in the Western art system. Compared to Wu Guanzhong, the influence of Western art on Zao Wou-Ki was more enduring and was reflected in Zao Wou-ki's different periods.

Like Wu Guanzhong, Zao Wou-Ki graduated from the Hangzhou National Academy of Fine Arts.

Zao Wou-ki always believed that to draw abstract things, artists must have excellent basic skills and the solid foundation of realism so that when painting abstractions the works could have meanings. During his Hangzhou National Academy of Fine Arts period, Zao Wou-ki recognized and was influenced by the works of Paul Cézanne, William Matthews, and Pablo Picasso through various publications. His teacher, Lin Fengmian, who appreciated Zao's style, encouraged him to explore European art. Zao Wou-Ki arrived in Paris with his wife, Xie Jinglan, who was a talented dancer and the young couple with wealth and talent soon entered the upper-class society in Paris. They met great artists such as Picasso and Joan Miró and were familiar with people from literary circles such as the poet Henry Michaux. Just like Picasso, Zao Wou-ki's artistic style also experienced a process from figuration to abstraction. In his 1945 painting "Untitled (tennis player)," the tennis court in the center of the picture seems to be suspended in the air and filled with green and yellow "clouds." At the two ends of the court, two simplified "little man" images of a man and a woman are holding a racket against the net, one dressed in black and one in red. The sloping tennis court is sandwiched between a pavilion in the lower-left corner and a house in the upper right corner. The three different viewing angles do not conform to the principle of the widely applied line perspective. This painting reveals the artistic inclinations of Zao Wou-Ki in his early years. The processing of the spatial relationships in the picture and the use of colors to create a dreamy sense are reminiscent of the pioneers of Western modern art such as Mark Chagall. During this period until the end of the second year of Zao Wou-ki's stay in Paris, his works were more figurative, and there was also Picasso's style applied inside his works. Although the lines became more concise than before, there are still relatively clear images. After Zao Wou-ki came to Paris, he deliberately rejected Chinese ink painting, switching to charcoal, watercolors, and oils to fit in with Western art. He did not want to be regarded as a short-term gold-plating foreigner. He went to a private art school, Académie de la Grande-Chaumiére, to study and started from drawing sketches of the human body.

The 1950s and 1960s were the key period for Zao Wou-Ki during which time he explored and established his own "sentimental abstraction" personal art style. He dismantled shapes and transformed between tangible and intangible, and developed a completely centerless, surroundings-filled composition, or a structure that gathered toward the center and left, making the whole work stronger and more prosperous. This is also the period of Zao Wou-Ki's creative process, which is regarded as the most ethereal and free abstract expression and impressive to the audience. Later on when Zao Wou-ki travelled to Switzerland, he met Paul Klee's work, and the symbolic language in Klee's work had a strong impression on Zao Wou-ki. Picasso and Braque had influenced Klee in his early years, but after visiting Tunisia in 1914, his colors became completely free and were no longer bounded by specific things as Klee turned completely to an abstract style (Sheng, 2017).

In 1951, an engraving by Zao Wou-Ki named "Flore et Faune" fully reflected the significant influence of Klee during this period. In this engraving, Zao Wou-Ki follows Klee's belief of "walking with lines" and he uses geometric figures to outline the flora and fauna of the landscape and the contours around the picture. Paul Klee, whose paintings were full of lines and symbols, succeeded in assisting Zao Wou-ki to graft the Western art world to his spiritual Chinese heritage and to continue with his freehand lines

and lyrical abstractions. Zao Wou-ki believed that Klee had penetrated the ancient Chinese text which had inspired him to follow the inner self and return to the original heart, thus successfully becoming an abstract artist. Inspired by Klee, Zao Wou-Ki also began to simplify the scenes in the painting into pictograms, and his style started to change. In 1954, he began to create the “Oracle series” based on traditional Chinese characters.

Some critics thought that the lines, colors, textures, and tones in Zao Wou-ki’s paintings in the early period of Zao’s French life were all imitations of Klee. Zao Wou-ki found some Chinese symbols from ancient bricks, bronze, oracle, and other old characters to replace Klee’s animals and symbols. The colorful backgrounds in Klee’s paintings took Zao’s lifetime to imitate, so at that time, some art critics called him a “boring Klee.” During this time, Zao Wou-ki, represented by the Pierre-Matisse Gallery, did not sell one single piece in two years. Zao Wou-ki was commercially and personally defeated, because in a market economy, the price also represents respect and recognition. After 1958, Zao Wou-Ki no longer named his paintings. Although his works approximated the “abstract expressionist style,” they tended to be “impressionist” concepts.

Starting in 1954, Zao Wou-Ki gradually came out of the shadow of Klee and began to form his own abstract style. He regarded “Vint” created in 1954, as his first abstract work in the real sense. Although we can clearly see the impact from Klee in “Wind,” “Hommage à Chu-Yun,” “Water Music” and “Red, Blue, Black” (Rouge, Bleu, Noir), the characters and shapes of unknown meanings, drawn by black lines of varying thickness, these symbols are softened by the deep red and blue background, which produces unique contours and rhythms.

Although critics and the public are always looking for Chinese culture in Zao Wou-Ki’s works, especially the imprint of traditional ink painting, Zao Wou-Ki has a negative attitude towards traditional Chinese ink painting (Zhou 2012). He believes that the traditional ink paintings of the Tang and Song dynasties gradually became rigid and fixed, and that there is no possibility of further development. In his early artistic exploration, he also consciously deviated from the Chinese tradition, using oils as his primary expression medium. However, this is not to say that the training of Chinese paintings and calligraphy that Zao received when he was very young did not affect his art (Zhou, 2012). Some may be unconscious, such as the oil painting “Paysage à Hangzhou” in 1946, which has the shadow of a traditional Chinese ink painting while others are conscious. When he studied printmaking techniques in Paris, incorporating an excessive amount of water into the ink gives the picture a blooming effect, and in the paintings such as “Vint,” there is an appearance of ancient Chinese characters like Oracle.

In the 1960s, with the gradual maturity of Zao Wou-ki’s personal abstract style, the characters in his pictures disappeared, but the overall presentations had a stronger oriental beauty. Art historian Pierre Schneider described Zao Wou-Ki’s paintings in this period as “the ripples in the water.” In his 1965 painting “05.03.65” (after 1959 he no longer named his works, but used the date of their creation), the sapphire blue, cobalt blue and navy-blue smudged pictures. It seems that as the “whirlpool” in space wanders, it stirs up chaos on the “water surface” of fantasy. It reminds people of wind and waves under Turner’s brush and the misty mountains of Shi Tao (a famous Chinese ink painting artist). However,

the elements that make up the picture are not the impressions of Impressionism, nor the techniques of traditional ink painting, but the abstract language of Zao Wou-ki.

In an interview in 1961, Zao Wou-ki summed up the development of his artistic style, “Although the influence of Paris in my art training is irrefutable, I am sure that with the strengthening of my personal style, I once again discovered Chinese culture. In my recent paintings, the influence of Chinese culture I have received is manifested intrinsically. Paradoxically, I attribute my return to Chinese tradition to Paris...” (Zhu, 2013).

Critics believe that Zao Wou-ki's work has always been at the stage of imitation. Zhang Daqian created a splash painting method in 1956. During his meeting with Picasso in France, Zhang Daqian was influenced by Western Impressionism and abstract art and combined these with China's splashing ink to create his splashy landscapes. In the critics' view, after the commercial failure, Zao Wou-ki turned his imitation eyes from the West to the East. After the 1960s, Zao Wou-ki painted Zhang Daqian's splashing landscape with oils. Zao Wou-Ki's oil painting began with Zhang Daqian's oriental style which is not in Europe and America. This information asymmetry has helped Zao Wou-ki in the European and American markets. Therefore, the critics concluded that Zao Wou-ki was still struggling between Klee and Zhang Daqian in the 1960s and 1970s.

From 1948 in Paris until around 1957, nearly a whole decade for Zao Wou-Ki's artistic career, is the second period after his school years, namely the period of exploration and selection. The early 1920s to the 1960s was the period when European and American abstraction, expressionism, and abstract expressionist paintings prevailed. Amid this great trend in Western art, Zao Wou-ki was not unaffected, and the emergence of conceptual art opened a new aesthetic field, especially in design, architecture, and urban sculpture.

Abstraction entered the works of Zao Wou-ki a few years after he arrived in France. During the first few years of his stay, he painted figurative paintings and also some lithographs with Chinese tastes. However, these works seemed to be extremely contradictory. On the one hand, he painted something concrete, but on the other hand, he did not like it when people were talking about his paintings using the word “landscape” which was taught for hundreds of years in Chinese college painting in Zao Wou-ki's point of view. He was familiar with Chinese traditional ink techniques, Chinese painting, and calligraphy and was afraid that others would think that his paintings expressed “Chinese tastes.” He arrived in France with the cultural genes of the Chinese, but he did not want to acknowledge his heritage in his work. This mentality and his rejection of Chinese culture continued for many years.

After arriving in Paris, Zao Wou-ki eagerly visited the Louvre to view and study the works of the masters of Western painting. Original works of Da Vinci, Botticelli, Matisse, Picasso, Courbet, Corot, Rembrandt, Raphael, and many others were now available to him. He particularly admired the works of Rembrandt and Goya, the wild colors of Fauvism and the great approaches of Cubist. Analysing movements, splitting the plane, and deconstructing the real space. After years of consideration, he decided to pursue abstract painting as his style. In 1951, Klee broke into Zao's world for the first time. Klee's means of expression, colored graphics, a variety of abstract and semi-abstract symbols, a freely moving

pen, and his use of small scale, inspired Zao Wou-ki. Klee's symbols seemed to have had a connection with the calligraphy Zao Wou-Ki learned as a child. While studying Klee's work, Zao Wou-Ki was determined to find something that came from within himself. That was a painful process, his attempts were criticized, and for two years his paintings did not sell. However, Zao Wou-ki was loyal to his original obsession and eventually symbols resembling ancient Chinese characters and geometric figures began to appear. These characters and figures are simple and thin and carefully placed on the canvas or cleverly concealed in the carefully created background.

Zao Wou-ki described this period of his career saying he wanted to find themes that reflected daily life, maybe a ship, a still life or a landscape that he could use to create an atmosphere, show a moment, or express an emotion. He said his painting should enable people to look at things from another perspective, to see things from a new perspective. To do this, Zao Wo-ki believed that he needed to create a language that was not bounded to the subject matter, and around the end of 1957 his painstaking efforts produced results. He started expressing his feelings and emotions in his work and his paintings started to come alive with movement and vivid colors that he had previously not dared to use. He included fewer and fewer symbols and no longer titled his works. He considered this to be the end of one stage of his career but more accurately, it was the beginning of a new phase which was irreversible. He started to draw things that are invisible, for example the aura of life, the wind, power, the forms of life, the development and integration of color. Zao completed approximately five hundred paintings in this period and some of them are massive. During this period Zao Wou-ki implemented his own personal artistic style and applied his personal passions and emotions to the canvas. Standing in front of Zao Wou-ki's works from this period can instill feelings of wonder and delight. There are no stereotypical worlds in Zao Wou-ki's paintings, where everything is moving, or hesitating, always presenting life in vagueness. This period continued after the 1980s but there was less fierceness and turmoil in the pictures. There was a little more blending and dialogue which was like the outbreak of natural forces, life and order gradually formed, and everything in the new order was in place. The works of Zao Wou-ki's mature period have a profound artistic conception and high artistic value. Chinese art historian Zhang Chao believes that the term "artistic conception" was formerly a term used in Chinese painting theory and is appropriate for describing Zao Wou-Ki's oil paintings.

When Zao Wou-ki first arrived in Paris, he was ambivalent about Chinese traditional culture. The reason could be that he wanted to fit in with Western cultural circles as if he were a native Frenchman. That did not work, of course, because in the eyes of the French, he was and would always be Chinese. He chose abstract painting as the direction for his future, likely because of its influence on the art trends of the time, and because abstractions would allow him to express feelings and emotions that the realism style would not. He was strongly influenced by Klee as he saw something familiar in Klee's works, the atmosphere of Chinese and Eastern culture. Klee's approach of transforming subjects into symbolic images was undoubtedly a revelation to Zao Wou-ki. Chinese paintings are rich in subject matter, and every era has different styles, but in general, Chinese painting is intrinsically inspiring. Klee's painting often use image symbols composed of abstract lines and color blocks to provide identifiable details

and essential features of natural objects, giving the viewer hints for imagination. This abstract factor is similar to Chinese classical expressionist painting and Western abstract painting. The depiction of similar and real spatial levels has never been the highest aim pursued by Chinese paintings. Because of the potential role of abstract factors in Chinese painting and the subjective demands of abstract painting, the influence of objective Western art trends confused Zao and caused him to hesitate before deciding to follow abstract painting and study Klee. However, Zao was inevitably called “Second Klee” because his work so closely followed Klee which was contrary to the principle of artistic creation in Western society that emphasizes individuality. Although Klee’s inspiration allowed Zao to make a step forward, it did not allow him to establish his own artistic style. Ultimately, Zao Wou-ki’s success was based on his ability to combine Chinese and Western culture, and the most important factor was that he ultimately arrived at a fundamental turning point and recovered his Chinese cultural spirit (Huang, 2002). As his confession articulated, he was born in China’s land which enabled him to spiritually return to Chinese culture. From refusing to be recognized as a Chinese artist to admitting his achievements were based on Chinese culture, Zao Wou-ki endured a long and profound process. Apart from praising Chinese culture and traditional paintings in his mature period, Zao Wou-ki also criticized traditional Chinese paintings as being over conservative and fixed. He thought Chinese painting lost its creativity after the 16th century and those that followed were just copying the prodigious tradition of the Han and Song dynasties that applied absolute rules for the movement of the hand and the operation of the pen which left no space for imagination and change.

There are various abstract factors in traditional Chinese painting, but there has never been any entirely abstract painting in the history of China. But the theory of Chinese painting is profound and long lasting, and it has enough broad space to allow Zao Wou-ki to create a new style that transcends all traditional forms of painting. His abstract, expressionist painting, is one kind of abstract with the spirit of Chinese traditional culture as its essence. By using Western materials, the color and light effects in Zao’s paintings created a fusion of Chinese imagery and Western techniques expressing a combination of sentiment and the spirit of academic excellence.

### **The Shared Features of Zao Wou-ki and Wu Guanzhong and the Differences Between Them**

Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-ki shared many similarities in their early lives. They both studied at the Hangzhou National Academy of Fine Arts, and Chinese Modernist master Lin Fengmiao greatly influenced their work. They both developed a keen interest in Western art during their school years and both went to Paris in the late 1940s to access the latest trends in Western art. But Wu Guanzhong returned to China in 1950, and the personal experiences of these two artists developed in opposite directions as they formed completely different artistic styles (Bao, 2018). Wu Guanzhong’s paintings are extraordinary in terms of skill and artistic expression. He wrote many articles expressing his work and motivation. From the perspective of the large-scale modern art community of the 20th century, Wu Guanzhong’s works are

very traditional, and more realistic than Zao Wou-ki's paintings. Although Wu has some abstract things, it is not the abstraction of Western modernist art. They should be considered as freehand paintings which is a bit different from the traditional type. In discussing the formation of an artist's artistic style, the ultimate result of the picture is only his constant pursuit of form and external representation. Hence, art historians cannot ignore the impact of personal experience. All outer forms are only the resonance of inner experience (Shui, 2001, p. 213). To do an in-depth study of the process that forms an artist's painting style, it is necessary to understand how he matured and integrated with his environment. The following part will present Wu Guanzhong's artistic life after his return to China and discuss how he brought Western influences with him.

When Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-Ki were in Paris, they were enthusiastically engaged in their studies of Western art, but the living environment was different. Wu Guanzhong was living as a student supported by the Chinese government, while Zao Wou-ki was born in a wealthy family and had access to the advantages that wealth affords. Wu Guanzhong was not used to the daily life in France, and he was often discriminated against because of his Asian look. He was homesick and fearful that the Western modernist art he was exposed to would not be understood and recognized by the people of China (Wu, 1995). After three years of studying in Paris, Wu Guanzhong chose to return to China to continue his painting career.

Soon after arriving in France, Zao Wou-ki and his wife joined the upper-class society of Paris, made friends with artists and celebrities, including Picasso and Miro. These connections provided access to influential people and resources within the Western art community in Paris, which was the center of modern art in the early 20th century. In 1957, Zao Wou-ki traveled to New York with French artist Pierre Soulages. The trip enlarged Zao Wou-ki's vision and earned him more influence in the art field. Soon after, he signed with the Kootz Gallery in New York city and was also represented by the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York city. In the 1950s Zao Wou-ki was well placed in the modern art communities of Europe and America while Wu Guanzhong was attempting to introduce modern art to China.

Wu Guanzhong's art and art theory had important learning and reference significance for art students in China especially during an era with limited access and information regarding Western art. Although Wu Guanzhong only studied in France for three years, he is still considered to be a significant artist in Chinese art history and a representative of artists who have travelled and studied abroad. After he returned to China, he introduced numerous new concepts and fresh theories that made significant contributions to art education in China during the last half of the 20th century. Throughout his artistic career, Wu Guanzhong used aspects of Chinese and Western art to form his unique style.

Wu Guanzhong entered the Hangzhou National Academy of Fine Arts at the age of 17 and afterwards went to study in Europe. After returning to China, he taught at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Department of Architecture of Tsinghua University and Central Academy of Arts and Crafts and unreservedly shared the lessons he had learned in Paris with his students and put forward his artistic ideas of stylization and the need to learn the concept of block composition in Western painting. He also encouraged his students to establish self-awareness and a personal style in art creation (Zhu, 2007). Wu

Guanzhong took his students to the National Palace Museum to appreciate Chinese paintings, applying the Western art style composition rules to analyze and discuss the picture arrangement and modality features of Chinese paintings. He showed Western art books to his students, promoting more modern art theories such as illusions and passions. But his style and teachings were not recognized or accepted at the time due to resistance from the established artistic community, so he turned to watercolors as his first step for experimenting with the combining of Chinese and Western art. He put the knowledge acquired in Paris together with his practical painting experience and wrote several articles discussing topics including the innovation of ink and brushes in traditional painting, the beauty of art forms in painting, and the beauty of abstract art. These artistic innovation ideas led to a strong response in the art circles of the time. At first, Wu's artistic ideas and opinions were not widely recognized, and were often criticized. He did not succumb to this criticism and refused to follow the standards of figurative art at the time, so he turned to landscape painting to place his emotions in natural scenes. For an extended period, Wu Guanzhong's art was considered pointless, but he did not give up on his opinions. Starting from the mid-1950s, Wu Guanzhong carried his oil painting box to remote mountains, country sides, and riverside towns to do sketches. He even mocked himself saying that some old ladies living in poor remote villages thought he was packing a box of eggs to sell. Wu Guanzhong followed his sketch life for over 30 years and worked hard to nationalize Western oriented oil painting.

His paintings, combining the Chinese and Western styles, ultimately achieved great success and he became an important artist in 20th century Chinese painting circles.

Wu Guanzhong required his painting art to be accepted and appreciated by both the general public and the domestic art experts. This requirement formed his ultimate goal and his art theory of "Kites should be connected close to the line" that he later proposed.

Wu Guanzhong believes that in art creation, the material and feelings gained from real life in artworks are abstracted into an absolute art form by the artist using subtraction, division or other approaches, but there is still a clue that links the source of the work and real life. The line should be connected close to the kite so the artist will be able to grasp the communication between the audience and the works. Wu Guanzhong did not apply the depiction of natural reality in his work "Soul of a Pine Tree." He expressed the feeling and dynamics of the pine tree through simplified shapes and extremely exaggerated lines, showing the intrinsic characteristics of pine trees, which are implicit, heavy, and dry, and represent the soul of pine trees. Although Wu Guanzhong did not depict the specific details of the pine tree in his work, it was more potent than the figurative pine tree because he did not merely copy from real life.

The art theory of "Kites should be connected close to the line" represents an essential aspect of Wu Guanzhong's conception of art creation. In some articles, Wu Guanzhong agreed with Professor Michael Sullivan of Oxford University who was an expert of contemporary Chinese art (Wu, 1995). Sullivan analyzed two extraordinary conceptions which are "abstract" and "without image." The "abstract" is picked from natural real objects. Paintings of traditional Chinese artist Zhu Da (1626-1705), Zao Wou-ki's oil paintings and Wu Guanzhong's work *The Root* could be included in this genre. The "without image" concept did nothing relevant to the natural object which is a geometric and pure form such as Piet

Mondrian's abstract paintings. Based on this analysis, Wu Guanzhong had stepped forward and pointed out that "without figure" is the kite disconnected from the line, as when the line connected to real-life breaks, the means of communication between artists and audience had been closed. Wu Guanzhong showed respect to Mondrian for his exploration and contribution, but he did prefer "the kite which is connected with the line."

In terms of artistic goals, Zao Wou-ki's paintings show his profound Eastern cultural cosmology. Wu Guanzhong pursues beauty of form which is more dexterous. Unlike Wu Guanzhong, Zao Wou-ki's efforts are not to integrate Chinese and Western art but to break the barriers of culture and combine both of them. Zao Wou-ki established his studio in Paris in the early 1960s, and only painted in his studio with abstraction expressionism to display the profound traditional spirit of landscapes. Wu Guanzhong did not have a studio for more than 30 years after he returned to China. There was rare acceptance and praise for Wu Guanzhong, so he packed up his painting supplies and walked across China using the country as his studio.

Compared with Wu Guanzhong's painting standard that aimed to be appreciated by both public and experts, Zao Wou-ki's paintings were more difficult for the general audience to understand, but his paintings did evoke memories of glorious Chinese traditions. The term "abstraction" is only a form of contemporary painting styles. Abstraction excludes the narratives related to reality and directs our observation to the existence and perception of ideas. Concepts can come from either the present or the past, but within the frame of the painting, any abstraction must be expressed in terms of shape and color. The rhythm, structure, color, pen and other essential elements of the picture are the fundamental skills that a painter cannot avoid, so whether it is abstract or figurative expression, the different artistic explorations by Zao Wou-Ki and Wu Guanzhong will both bring great enlightenment to the audience.

## REFERENCES

---

- Bao, L. (2018). Zao Wou-ki and Wu Guanzhong, Different career with same education, Comments on review, Artron News. Retrieved from <https://news.artron.net/20171213/n952439.html>.
- Collection (2019). Was Zao Wou-ki been over-valued. Retrieved from <http://collection.sina.com.cn/plfx/20130506/0810112490.shtml>.
- Cong, W. (2019). Re-thinking of Danto's "The End of Art" --- Based on 20th Century's Exchange of Western Art. *Art Observation*, 9.
- Huang, R. (2002). Zao Wou-ki And China. *Journal of Zhongzhou University*, 1.
- Li, C. (2007). *History of Modern Chinese Oil Painting*. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature & Art Publishing House, 87-169.

- Liu, A. (1999). Review On Mr Zao Wou-ki's 1985's lecture. Northwest Finearts, 1.
- Pan, X. (2014). Landscape on paper—20th Century Chinese Landscape's expansion of freehand brushwork and theoretic opportunity. China Painting and Calligraphy, 9.
- Sheng, X. (2017). The Most Complex Artists in 20th Century. Retrieved from [http://www.sohu.com/a/212027224\\_684450](http://www.sohu.com/a/212027224_684450).
- Shui, T. (2001). History art and people. Nanning: Guangxi Arts Publishing House, 213.
- Wu, G. (1982). Searching East and West. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House.
- Wu, G. (1995). Wu Guanzhong: Notes on Literature and Art. Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House.
- Wu, G. (1997). Painter's prose. Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Zhang, J. (2007). Observation on Wu Guanzhong's Art Achievement. Beauty & Times, 9.
- Zheng, C. (2016). A Restless Heart: Biography of Lin Fengmian. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Zhou, R. (2012). Chinese—French painter Zao Wou-ki's Rediscovery of China in Paris. National Humanity History, 7.
- Zhu, D. (2007). Contemporary Western philosophy of art. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press.
- Zhu, S. (2013). Zao Wou-ki brought back abstract art to China—Used to be classmate with Wu Guanzhong. Yangcheng Evening News, 5.

*(Editor: Gerald)*