



# Innovations in Gong Bi painting by Xu Beihong: An Iconographic Study of *Yugongyishan*

Xiaokang Wan\*, Jamarul Imran, Bin Wan, Abdullah Thani

University of Malaysia, Sarawak

\*Corresponding author, [watimran@unimas.my](mailto:watimran@unimas.my)

**Abstract:** *This study explores the transformative impact of Xu Beihong's reforms on traditional Gong Bi painting, with a focus on his renowned work "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains." Gong Bi painting, an ancient and fundamental form of Chinese art dating back 2400 years, has undergone significant changes since the 20th century due to Western art influences. Xu Beihong, hailed as the pioneer of modern Gong Bi painting, integrated Western realism with traditional Chinese techniques to create a unique "East-meets-West" style. This research employs iconography to analyze the artistic elements, themes, and ideological context of Xu's work, highlighting its contribution to the evolution of Gong Bi painting. Through thematic analysis and case studies, the study reveals how Xu Beihong's innovative approach not only preserved the essence of Gong Bi painting but also adapted it to contemporary social and cultural landscapes, thus ensuring its relevance and sustainability in modern times. The findings underscore the critical role of individual artists in bridging cultural gaps and driving artistic innovation, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on the fusion of Eastern and Western art traditions.*

**Keywords:** Gongbi painting; Xubeihong; Iconography; Yugongyishan.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the *Complete Guide to Chinese Painting Art – Gong Bi Painting* (2005), "Gong Bi painting" means "a type of Chinese traditional painting that uses neat and meticulous brushwork." Here, "Gong" is explained as "neat," and "Bi" refers to the brush. Song (2008) mentions in his article that Gong Bi painting is distinguished from traditional Chinese splash ink and abstract paintings by its precise and delicate brushwork used to depict objects accurately, focusing on detail. The earliest origins of Gong Bi painting can be traced back to the Warring States period (3rd century BC), and through the continuous changes in Chinese society, it has gradually become the most influential style in Chinese painting. Gong Bi painting remains a significant category of Chinese painting to this day, with the government-backed China Gong Bi Painting Association (China Hue Art Association) having established branches in eight provinces (source: China Hue Art Association official website <http://www.zggbhxh.cn/>).

Gong Bi typically uses brushes on rice paper or silk, There are many traditional Chinese Gong Bi techniques, but the most important one is that lines dominate the picture. (Zeng, 2004; Teng, 2011; Gu, 2016; Wang, 2019). Regarding the tools, the brushes must be made of soft materials, predominantly Langhao (brushes made from wolf hair). There are two types of brushes: fine brushes for drawing lines to outline the shapes of objects and thicker brushes for coloring. The colors are achieved using different concentrations of ink or stone color. Ink is purely black and diluted with water to control the shade, while stone color is a mineral pigment made from ground stones mixed with glue, also diluted with water to control the shade. The materials for Gong Bi painting are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** The material of Gong Bi Painting. From left to right: outline pen, coloring pen, rice paper, silk. Bottom row: ink, stone color

There are three main types of Gong Bi painting:

1. **Bai Miao (Line Technique):** This method uses only lines to outline the shape of an object, emphasizing the accuracy of its form.
2. **Dan Cai (Light Colour):** This technique outlines objects with lines and fills them with a small amount of light colors, balancing the accuracy of the form with the colors.
3. **Zhong Cai (Heavy Colour):** This method outlines objects with lines and fills them with heavy colors, focusing on the use of bold colors, including thick black ink and bright hues, as shown in Figure 2.





**Figure 2:** Left: Bai Miao, Figure theme; Right: Dan Cai, Flower and bird theme; Down:Zhong Cai, Landscape theme

Gong Bi paintings are generally categorized into three main themes:

1. **Figure Theme:** Depicts human figures (as shown in Figure 1 left).
2. **Flower and Bird Theme:** Features flowers, plants, birds, fish, insects, animals, etc. (as shown in Figure 1 right).
3. **Landscape Theme:** Illustrates landscapes with mountains and water (as shown in Figure 1 down).

The techniques used to depict these themes are flexible. For example, line drawing can represent flowers, birds, or landscapes. Similarly, light ink can be used to portray human figures. Overall, Gong Bi painting is a distinctive traditional art form in China, capable of expressing various aspects of traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. However, the 20th century brought profound changes to Chinese society, transitioning from the imperial era to the republican era. In this context, traditional Gong Bi paintings evolved into modern Gong Bi paintings, adapting to the new social and cultural landscape. This study aims to analyze the iconography of Xu Beihong's work "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains" to understand the innovations in modern Gong Bi painting.

## 2. Xu Beihong

The period between the New Culture Movement (1919) and the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (1949) was marked by significant changes in Gong Bi painting, driven by individual practitioners and progressive scholars. These practitioners were mainly scholars with backgrounds in both Eastern and Western cultures. Wei (2016) explains that in the early twentieth century, a large number of international art students brought back diverse artistic concepts and experiences from their studies abroad, which had a significant impact on the Chinese art world. This influx of ideas made the art scene in China more vibrant and diverse than ever before.

The most representative figure of this period is Xu Beihong (1895-1953), the founder of modern Chinese painting. After studying at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in France, Xu returned to China in the 1920s and became one of the most highly regarded painters in the country. Upon returning to China, Xu Beihong was appointed director of the Beiping Academy of Fine Arts in 1928. After the founding of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1949, he became its first president. Additionally, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Xu became the first president of the China Artists Association, the predecessor of the China Artists Association. Xu Beihong advocated that "drawing is the foundation of the plastic arts" and promoted the use of Western realism to transform traditional Chinese painting. His exploration of modern Chinese painting laid the foundation for modern Chinese art. Zhu (2023) points out that Xu Beihong's advocacy for the "fusion of East and West" influenced the techniques and themes of traditional Chinese painting. He broke away from the traditional

Chinese aesthetic system that de-emphasized the structure of bones and the interplay of light and shadow in figure painting. Instead, he respected the true relationship between light, volume, and the dynamic structure of figures, allowing Western realism to dominate Chinese art thought throughout much of the twentieth century.

### 3. Methodology

Maxwell (2013) explains that a theory elucidates how and why variables are related, acting as a bridge between or among the variables. This study employs Mitchell's (2012) concept of iconology, which is one of the most popular theories in art studies. Iconology, originating with Cesare Ripa's publication of *Iconology* in 1592 and reaching its zenith with Erwin Panofsky's seminal studies, is utilized to analyze images and their underlying meanings. Iconology is divided into three levels: "Image," "Text," and "Ideology."

1. **Image** (form, painting, or likeness): According to IA et al. (1994), the fundamental elements of visual arts include texture, line, shape, and color.
2. **Text** (words, thoughts, discourse, or "science"): Mitchell (2012) views this discourse as a semiotic code awaiting audience interpretation. For theme analysis, James's (1998) framework divides the text into three aspects: time, theme, and mood.
3. **Ideology**: Involves understanding the social context behind Image and Text. According to Bourdieu (1984), artworks are not only the product of genius artists but also adapt to societal aesthetic values. Thus, Gong Bi paintings are influenced by both macro-social factors and micro-level individual artists.

In summary, the theoretical framework is applied in this study as shown in the table:

**Table 1:** Iconology Theory applied in this study

Elements	Image	Text	Ideology
Detail	Texture	Time	Society
	Line	Thematic	
	Shape	Emotional	Practitioner
	Color		

This study uses qualitative research, which emphasizes the nature of the entity and the process. At the heart of the qualitative research design is an open-ended and rigorous process that properly addresses the complexity of the social context under study (Flick, 1998). Case study research is a form of empirical research that examines phenomena (i.e., 'cases') that occur in real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon being studied and the context in which it occurs are not readily apparent.

In this study, the research is limited to Xu Beihong's Gong Bi works. The researcher uses purposive sampling to select the most influential Gong Bi paintings as case studies, with "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains" being the only case. The research tools include documentation and archival data. Data analysis is conducted using thematic analysis, guided by the theoretical framework to code the data. Finally, the researcher follows the principle of comparison to analyze the traditional Chinese characteristics reflected in the selected case.

### 4. Results

In this section, the researcher analyzes Xu Beihong's famous Gong Bi painting, "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains" (Figure 3), as an example to illustrate changes in painting techniques and themes.



**Figure 3:** The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains, Xuan paper; Ink, 1943, 143 x 423cm

From an image perspective, the texture of "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains" is a silk Gong Bi painting, measuring 143 x 424 cm, drawn with brush and ink. The use of line technique is significantly reduced, blending Western traditional realism with Chinese traditional Gong Bi painting techniques. Wu (2012) states that Xu Beihong organically fused the two traditional techniques of China and the West into one in this work, creating his own 'East-meets-West' style of realistic art. This technique laid the foundation for Chinese figure painting, and subsequent reforms were based on the framework created by Xu.

In terms of the composition of shape, the painting uses horizontal composition for narrative expression, incorporating the "two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional" sketching relationship of Western painting. It scientifically reproduces the movement of the human body and the changes in muscles and bones, based on Western human anatomy.

The color of this work mainly uses traditional Chinese ink colors to show the sketch relationship between light and shadow. According to Zhu (2023), this light and darkness are expressed by the materials used in Gong Bi's paintings, the shades of ink. In terms of color, the shades are arranged according to the front and back of the figure, and the heavy and cool colors at the back are used to set off the human body at the front, so that the structure of the human body is fully displayed in the picture. However, in the traditional part, the silhouette of the figure still uses the outline of the traditional Chinese Gong Bi painting.

"The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains" is an ancient Chinese mythological tale about the persistence of the Foolish Old Man in removing mountains that blocked his way, eventually moving the Emperor of Heaven to relocate them. The painting depicts strong men digging the soil, a dialogue between the Foolish Old Man and his neighbors, and various people, including women and children, participating in the labor. Created in 1940 during an exhibition in India, the work promoted anti-Japanese activities and reflected the spirit of unity and perseverance needed in China at that time. According to Ling & Zuo (2018), During the period when China was undergoing the anti-Japanese war, the Chinese government urgently needed to raise the people's perseverance in all aspects. Xu Beihong, as a leading painter of that time, hoped that the Chinese people and soldiers would fight hard with the spirit of the Foolish Old Man in the context of the era of salvation and survival to seize the final victory.

From the ideology perspective, the painting demonstrates the social function of "enlightening the people." The subject matter contains an idea and suggestive language that inspire unity and struggle during the war of resistance. Unlike traditional Gong Bi paintings, which are usually symbolic, this improved Gong Bi painting responds more strongly and directly to social realities. Technically, it expresses thematic ideas more directly and realistically than traditional figure styles.

For individual artists, they are not only artists, but also have a social responsibility to "enlighten the people." The subject matter became the core of their expression, which dictated that the techniques used to express their work be more direct and accessible. The innovations in brush painting during this period became the framework for modern brush painting, on which subsequent explorations were based.

In conclusion, the emergence of modern Gong Bi painting was directly shaped by the social environment. During this period, art needed to take on the social function of awakening the people, so artists from new cultural backgrounds came into being, who understood the dual cultural backgrounds of the West and the East, and began to transform traditional brush painting to achieve this goal.

## 5. Conclusion

Xu Beihong's "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains" reveals the evolution and adaptation of Gong Bi painting in a modern context. Xu Beihong's integration of Western realism with traditional Chinese techniques created a unique "East-meets-West" style. This innovation not only preserved the intricate brushwork and thematic depth of Gong Bi painting but also introduced new dimensions of realism and narrative expression.

As one of Xu Beihong's representative works, "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains" holds significant aesthetic value and serves as a symbol of social reality and inspiration. The painting's realistic portrayal of resilience and unity profoundly impacted the socio-political environment of its time.

This study highlights the crucial role of individual artists in driving artistic innovation and cultural integration. Xu Beihong's reforms not only revitalized Gong Bi painting but also laid the groundwork for future artistic explorations. His legacy demonstrates how traditional art forms can adapt to changing times while retaining their core identity.

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