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Original Paper

Cross-Cultural Art from the Perspective of Aesthetic Education: Cultural Exchange in Chinese Export Paintings (18th - 19th Century)

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Abstract

During the late Ming to early Qing dynasties, the great demand for Chinese export porcelain laid the foundation for the development of export paintings. From the 18th to the 19th century, a unique form of cultural hybridity emerged in the coastal area of Canton: export paintings. This paper attempts to explore the interaction, conflict, and fusion with foreign cultures within the frameworks of Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory and Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone." It examines how this cross-cultural art form manifests hybridity in materials, painting techniques, and themes.

From the perspective of aesthetic education, these paintings provide profound insights into the cultivation of aesthetic sensibilities and cross-cultural appreciation. Predominantly produced by Chinese painters and workshops, with a few contributions from visiting European painters, these artworks cover a broad range of subjects, including Chinese social life, flora and fauna, and folk customs. By examining the aesthetic value and educational potential of these works through the lens of aesthetic education, we can better understand their significance in cross-cultural art exchange. This cross-cultural art form not only holds aesthetic importance but also provides a new perspective for studying Sino-Western cultural interactions, enriching the discourse on art education and cultural exchange.

Keywords

Cross-Cultural, Chinese Export paintings, Aesthetic Education Perspective

1. Overview

In the 16th and 17th centuries, European nations such as Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and England opened sea routes to China, initiating a lucrative trade in Chinese export porcelain. This "white gold"

became a coveted status symbol among European aristocrats. The high demand for Chinese export porcelain from the late Ming to early Qing dynasty can be seen as a precursor to export painting. The popularity of customized porcelain among the European upper class and the profitable trade practices undoubtedly influenced the production of affordable export paintings.

However, unlike the bidirectional cultural exchange seen in porcelain trade, from the 18th to 19th centuries, this unique form of cross-cultural painting was produced in a specific coastal area of Canton. My analysis draws on the concept of "Arts of the Contact Zone" introduced by Mary Louise Pratt (2005), who described the "contact zone" as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other." The "contact zone" is not merely a zone of domination, but also a zone of exchange, even if unequal exchange, which Pratt terms "transculturation," whereby "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (p. 6). This theory is particularly relevant to my study, given the influx of foreigners into Canton during the period when abundant export painting was produced. Along with their request for commodities, these foreigners also brought their cultural background and histories with them.

Chinese export paintings were referred to as "foreign paintings" by their Chinese makers, while their foreign buyers called them "Chinese paintings." In the mid-20th century, the terms "Chinese export paintings" and "Chinese trade paintings" were predominantly used by European scholars. The systematic study of Chinese export art began with Margaret Jourdain and R. Soame Jenyns' 1950 publication "Chinese Export Art in the Eighteenth Century," which includes a chapter on Chinese export paintings. A later publication from Craig Clunas' "*Chinese Export Watercolors*" presents the Collection from V&A Museum and was published in 1984. "The Decorative Arts of the China Trade" by Carl Crossman also illustrates the export paintings from the Peabody Museum of Salem. Four scholars who worked on the 748 export paintings of fifteen aspects of Qing social life and customs, which were collected in the British Library, published books in 2009. These major publications provide a solid foundation for further research into Chinese export paintings, both in China and abroad.

This paper also draws upon Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" to structure the research. describes the mobile zone of interaction as the "third space," characterized by "hybridity." According to Bhabha (1994), recognition of the existence of a "third space" may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity." Given that China never entered into full colonial relations with other countries, I use the concept of "contact zones" to explore how Chinese artists of export paintings negotiated and incorporated foreign ideas into the Chinese traditions to create a new visual language within a hybrid "third space." The aspect of hybridity, or being neither Chinese nor Western, is a strong characteristic of this type of painting. They share the following characteristics: First, these paintings were produced in the "contact zone" of Canton specifically for Europeans, and thus, the vast majority are collected in European-American museums and private collectors, with very few in China. In the past two decades, Chinese scholars and museums have begun to pay attention to

these export paintings. Additionally, several Chinese museums have also begun to collect these export paintings. Second, aside from a few oil paintings, a new visual language was produced on the majority of the paintings, combine traditional Chinese painting pictorial techniques with the focal point perspective of European pictorial technique. Many were also created on imported European paper using imported paints in the early stages. The categories of export paintings include oil paintings, watercolors on paper, gouaches on paper, watercolors on pith paper, reverse paintings on glass, miniatures on ivory, paintings on the wallpaper, etc. (Wang, 2021, p. 29). Most were made by Chinese painters and workshops, with only a few by European painters visiting China. Third, the content of these paintings is broad, covering nearly every aspect of Chinese social life, flora and fauna, and folk customs of the time. Research shows that few are imaginative works; most reflect reality. Being exotic, curious, and easily transmitted, export paintings can give form and life to an aspect of history in a way that no words could before the invention of photography. Based on my findings, the concept of "hybridity" is used to discuss the cultural exchange reflected in the materials, painting techniques, and themes of these works.

2. Curiosity from Contact Zone: The Collections of Chinese Export Paintings

In recent years, thousands of Chinese export paintings, whether bound in albums, framed, or as single sheets, have been collected in European and American museums and libraries (Table 1). The Peabody Essex Museum houses two notable sets: one consisting of 100 gouache paintings depicting various street and marketplace occupations in Canton, and another set comprising 360 black and white outline paintings by Tingqua from 1830, titled "360 Professions." The British Library has the largest number of Chinese export paintings in its collection, with more than 5,000 pieces illustrating various aspects of Qing dynasty society and life. These collections originate from both the historical collections of the British Museum and the India Office Library and Records, as well as some private collections (p. 43). The V&A Museum acquired its first batch of Chinese export paintings in 1860 and now holds over 3,000 pieces. This includes two series that depict the porcelain industry (24 pages) and silk production in China. Additionally, the library of Lund University in Sweden has the largest collection on the theme of Chinese porcelain production, with a set of 50 paintings.

Table 1. Main Collections of Chinese Export Paintings in European-American Museums

Museum	Quantity and Artists	Typical Category and Themes
Peabody Essex Museum	100 (Pu Qua)	Gouache paintings on the hundred street and marketplace occupations in Canton
	360 (Ting Qua)	360 black-and-white outline paintings Entitled "360 professions"
V&A Museum	More than 3000	There is a delicate album depicting the silk industry
The British Library	More than 5000	Painting of Canton Harbour and the City of Canton; costumes

		of Emperors, Empresses, Officials and Commoners; street and marketplace Occupations in Canton; Handicraft Workshops in Foshan; Guangdong government offices, furnishings, and official processional equipment; Punishments; Gardens and Mansions; Urging people to stop smoking opium.
Lund University Library, Sweden	50	There is a delicate set depicting the porcelain industry
Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden	19	Export painting on glass

Note. Table created by the author.

It is interesting to note that after the early 20th century export paintings rarely seen in Guangzhou, their original place of creation. However, in the past 20 years, many domestic museums have begun to receive donated collections from abroad. For instance, the Guangzhou Museum received 60 Tongcao paintings donated by British expert Ifan Williams. The Guangdong Provincial Museum now has more than 100 export paintings, most of which are oil paintings intended for export. Among their collections is a set of gouache drawings from the Qianlong period, depicting the entire process of tea cultivation, processing, shipment, and sales. In 2013, the Guangzhou Thirteen Hongs Museum received a donation of 539 tongcao export paintings from Mr. Wangheng and Ms. Fengjie. Noatbly, this collection included black and white outline paintings, which were being seen for the first time. Additionally, British Chinese donor Zhao Tailai contributed more than 200 export paintings with diverse themes. These works are now housed in the Guangzhou Art Museum, Baomo Garden, and the Confucius Institute at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. These contributions (Table 2) have provided valuable resources for Chinese researchers, allowing them to further explore and understand the rich heritage of Chinese export paintings.

Table 2. Main Collections of Chinese Export Paintings in Chinese Museum

Museum	Quantity and Artists	Typical Category and Themes
Guangzhou Museum	More than 500	60 export paintings were donated by a British collector in 2000. They are the first collections owned by Guangzhou, the origin of the export paintings.
Guangdong Provincial Museum	More than 100	Most of collections are oil paintings depicting the Canton Harbor and the City of Canton, and a set with 12 gouache paintings on paper depicting the tea industry
The Thirteen Hong Museum	1412	The Thirteen Hong Museum received 539 tongcao export paintings from Mr. Wangheng and Ms. Fengjiein 2013,

		and the black and white outline paintings in this collection were the first time to be seen.
The Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan	206 pieces (set)	Pith Painting

Note. Table created by the author.

3. Hybridity Visual Language: Export Painters, the Hybridity Materials and Techniques

The following part turns to an analysis of the export paintings to discuss the ways in which both a hybrid space and the "contact zone" between the two cultures find their pictorial representation in the space of the canvas. The techniques and materials used in the export painting differ from traditional Chinese painting, and there are three primary methods by which the export painters studied European-American painting techniques (Wang, 2021, p. 41).

First, Chinese painters studied numerous copies of foreign artworks brought to China by European merchants, including oil paintings, prints, and miniatures. Second, Chinese painters learned directly or indirectly from European painters who visited China. From the mid-18th century to the 19th century, many professional or amateur European painters visited Canton and treaty ports of the later period. The most far-reaching impact on the new visual language was first introduced by the English painter George Chinnery (1774-1852) (Figure 1). He moved to Macao in 1825 from India and stayed there until his death. During this period, he achieved a top local reputation for painting beautiful portraits of Chinese *Hong* merchants, American-European merchants, and their wives. According to literary records, he also taught Chinese students directly, and he had at least one apprentice, Lam Qua (Figure 2), who started as Chinnery's assistant and became the most prominent Chinese painter working in the English manner (Crossman, 1991, pp. 72-73). Lam Qua's younger brother, Tinggua was also instructed by him in the painting with English manner and had a studio at 16 New China Street (Figure 3). In this painting, it's also interesting to note that although the works produced are in western style, the painters are holding their brushes in the traditional Chinese manner, and the painting is on the wall with European-style frames. From both aspects, we can see traces of cross-cultural influence. Third, Chinese painters went abroad in various ways to study European-American painting techniques. They learned skills such as focal point perspective, the use of chiaroscuro and shadow to create a sense of space, and image composition (Cheng, 2008, p. 45).

Figure 1. Self-portrait of George Chinnery (1774-1852), 1840, Oil on Canvas, Painting in Macau. National Portrait Gallery, London

Figure 2. Engraving after Auguste Borget, Lamqua in His Canton Studio Published in La Chine Ouverte, 1845

Figure 3. Studio of Tingqua, Canton, 1830, Gouache on Paper. Inv. AE85592. Collection of Peabody Essex Museum of Salem

In addition to adopting new techniques, the pigments used in export paintings were introduced from European and American countries, including gouache, watercolor and oil paint. However, most watercolor export paintings were created on pith paper, a unique material derived from the tongcao plant, a shrub found in China's southern provinces. Unlike common papers made from plant pulp, pith paper (Figure 4), was produced by cutting long, continuous sheets from pith rods obtained from the plant's stems and branches (Krüger, 2019, p. 5).

Figure 4. Extracted Pith Rods (Right) and Freshly Cut, Untreated Pith Paper (Left). Guangzhou Museum, Guangzhou, China. Photo by Author

Watercolor-gouache paintings on pith paper appeared brighter and created an illusion of depth similar to relief. The uniqueness of pith paper, combined with the hybrid techniques employed by Chinese painters, contributed to the cross-cultural appeal of these artworks in European and American markets.

4. Foreign Consumers' Preferences: Themes in Export Paintings

Chinese export paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries vividly depict various aspects of Chinese life and society. Based on my research, it appears that artisans, when gathering original materials, focused less on conveying personal emotions or hidden meanings and more on reflecting the realities of daily life. Additionally, these artists skillfully integrated foreign concepts into traditional Chinese motifs, creating a new visual language situated within a hybrid "third space." The themes of these export paintings can be broadly categorized into three groups: figure painting, landscape painting, and flora and fauna albums.

4.1 Portraiture and Everyday Life Scenarios

Portraiture in export painting generally falls into two categories: portraiture and depictions of life scenarios. Traditional subjects of portraiture were often nobility or religious figures, in which the depictions of figures were meticulously portrayed, and the posture was always more rigid. However, the portraiture in tongcao watercolor paintings has broken away from traditional Chinese painting's portrayal of portraits. The expressions of the figures depicted by export painters are natural, vivid, and three-dimensional (Jiang, 2007, p. 177). Additionally, figure paintings also include depictions of characters in everyday scenes, often presented as a series of continuous images. These typically illustrate the production processes of traditional Chinese crafts, such as the manufacture and distribution of porcelain, tea, and silk (Figure 5). Some paintings feature cautionary themes, such as depictions of punishments (Figure 6) and scenes urging people to stop smoking opium (Figure 7). These subjects were particularly popular among foreign customers.

Figure 5. Firing Enameled Ware in Muffle Kiln (This Painting is from a set of 24 Depicting the Porcelain Industry in China). c. 1770-1790, Inv.E.53-1910. (Illustrated from the V&A Museum)

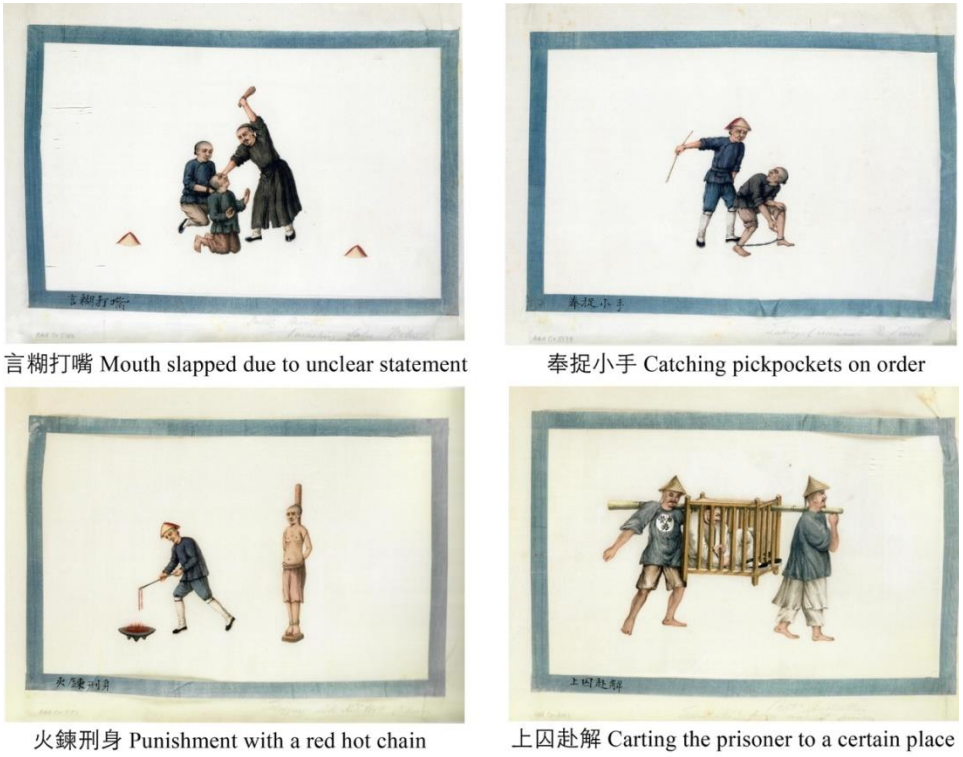

Figure 6. Paintings of Punishments, 19th Century, Watercolour on Pith Paper, H: 19.5cm, W: 30cm. The British Library

Figure 7. Mother Caning Smoker Son in Anger, Late 19th Century, Watercolour on Pith Paper, H: 35.1cm, W: 23.2cm. The British Library

4.2 Landscape Paintings: A Fusion of Chinese Tradition and Western Techniques

The landscape paintings in Chinese export art belong to the tradition of Chinese landscape painting, which later evolved into literati painting. These are fundamentally different from European and American landscape oil paintings. The landscape scenes in export paintings primarily depict the Canton harbor and the city of Canton. European and American visitors to Canton often took home images of the port. A notable example, held in the British Library, is a painting titled "Along the river during the Qingming Festival for Canton" (Figure 8). This artwork illustrates the bustling commercial port of Canton in the late Qing dynasty, spanning eight to nine kilometers. It starts from the Yellow Sands in the upper reaches of the Pearl River, west of Canton, and extends to Dashatou and East Water Battery, east of Canton City, downstream of the Pearl River (Wang, 2011, pp. 43-44). The artisans selected the traditional Chinese horizontal scroll format but incorporated fixed-point perspective techniques from European and American art. This fusion exemplifies cross-cultural art at its finest.

Figure 8. Canton Harbour and the City of Canton, 1760, Gouache on Mounted Silk, H: 74cm, W: 920cm. The British Library

4.3 Flora and Fauna: A Popular Theme in Export Paintings

The flora and fauna atlas was another popular theme in export paintings, often rendered in gouache and watercolor, which possess both high scientific and artistic value (Cheng, 2008, p. 96). Oriental flora and fauna captivated British botanists in the 18the and 19th centuries, and this enthusiasm gradually spread to the public. Foreign travellers frequently returned to their countries with paintings depict numerous species of exotic flora and fauna (Figure 9). Consequently, the decorative aspects of these paintings increased, reflecting the European and American demand for artworks that were not only investigative but also ornamental.

Figure 9. Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher, 1800-1830, Watercolour on Paper, H: 32cm, W: 41cm. V&A Museum

5. Conclusion

Foreign customers were often drawn to unfamiliar images, prompting Chinese export painters to adapt their creations to suit foreign tastes. As products of cultural hybridity, Chinese export paintings gained significant attention from European-Americans following the export of porcelain. From an aesthetic perspective, these paintings are neither purely Chinese nor European-American art forms. Instead, they represent a new hybrid art language created within a "third space."

Incorporating these works into aesthetic education provides a unique opportunity to explore cultural exchange and hybridity. By studying Chinese export paintings, students can gain a deeper understanding of how art transcends cultural boundaries and fosters mutual appreciation. This cross-cultural art form not only enriches our understanding of global art history but also emphasizes the importance of cultural dialogue and exchange in aesthetic education. Through these paintings, we can appreciate the blend of Eastern and Western artistic traditions and the innovative ways in which artists responded to diverse cultural influences.

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