

The Expression and Application of Chinese Ink Painting in Ethnic Picture Books

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Abstract: This paper examines the artistic characteristics and cultural value of Chinese ink painting in its creation, focusing on ethnic picture books. It systematically analyzes the core expressive techniques of ink painting, including blank composition, line rhythm, ink color layering, and the creation of artistic conception. Drawing on representative examples such as *The Last Hundred Birds' Feather Coat*, *Peach Blossom Spring*, and *Fire Dragon*, the paper illustrates the role of ink painting techniques in enhancing the aesthetic experience and cultural heritage of ethnic picture books. A comparison of Chinese and French picture books further highlights the unique advantages of ink painting books in integrating national traditions with modern visual narratives. This research demonstrates that ink painting not only enriches the artistic language of picture books but also provides an important path for promoting national culture and constructing Chinese-style picture books.

Keywords: Chinese Painting; Ink Painting; Ink-wash Expression; Picture Books; Ethnic Culture.

1. Introduction

The ink-wash expression form of Chinese painting is a unique painting form that uses water as a blending medium and ink as the main pigment to create artistic images on rice paper or silk through the interaction of brushwork, ink color and water. Its core lies in *ink and wash are superior*, emphasizing the use of the changes in the thickness and wetness of ink instead of color, and pursuing the charm of image rather than the realism of form. Ethnic picture books refer to the use of the language, customs, traditions and other elements of a specific ethnic group as content, highlighting the cultural characteristics and traditional customs of a specific ethnic group. At present, there are many ethnic picture books on the Chinese picture book market that use the Chinese ink-wash expression form to express ethnic stories and pass on ethnic traditional culture. Regarding the application of ink-wash expression forms in picture books, Sun Xiaoguang in China's article *The Application of Traditional Ink-wash Art in Children's Picture Books* analyzes how to integrate traditional ink-wash art into picture book creation from the specific application of traditional ink-wash art in children's picture book creation in three aspects: the layout characteristics, blank space techniques, and aesthetic conception [1]. This laid the foundation for this paper to analyze the specific characteristics of ink painting. In his book *Research on the Creation Practice of Ink Painting Books*, Ren Zhihong first analyzed the background and significance of traditional painting art in picture book creation, and then, through case studies of traditional ink painting books by painters such as Liang Peilong and Xiong Liang, he elaborated on the current status of the application of traditional ink painting in contemporary picture book creation [2]. In the UK, there is *Modern Chinese Ink Painting* written by Shi Mingli and translated by Wang Yalin, which introduces modern Chinese ink painting to readers in detail [3]. These studies mostly focus on the comprehensive application of ink painting and are relatively lacking in the expression and application of Chinese painting ink painting in ethnic picture books.

2. Characteristics of Ink Painting

2.1. White Space Composition in Chinese Ink Painting

Chinese ink painting typically features simple lines and ink colors, emphasizing the use of white space within the painting and the expression of artistic conception. White space refers to the intentional blank space left by the artist within the painting. These spaces are not left arbitrarily but rather contribute to the overall artistic conception of the work. Although devoid of brush, ink, or color, they are a crucial component of the overall composition. Huang Fukang stated in *The Characteristics and Techniques of Chinese Painting*: "When white is used as black, it should not be interpreted as a void, but rather as an intangible image. Although blank, the surrounding environment creates a tangible image [4]." In ink painting, white space is often used to express elements such as clouds, mist, waterfalls, flowing water, and snowflakes. This creates a purer and more harmonious image while leaving room for the viewer's imagination. For example, the snow in *Xuejing Hanlin Tu* by the Northern Song Dynasty painter Fan Kuan, the water in *Xiaoxiang Tu* by Dong Yuan of the Five Dynasties Southern Tang, and the clouds in *Xiaoxian Qiguan Tu* by Mi Youren of the Southern Song Dynasty. The snow, water and clouds in these works seem to be blank spaces with nothing in them, but through the depiction of the surrounding environment, these blank spaces become substantial scenery. This artistic conception of treating white as black and the interplay of virtuality and reality gives Chinese ink painting infinite room for reflection, creating a "virtuality and reality interplay, black and white complement each other" painting interest and rhythm, and conveying rich connotations and meanings [1].

In addition, leaving blank space can also be used as a unique composition method to create a picture structure, making the picture simple and expressive. For example, Bada Shanren's works pay great attention to leaving blank space. His flower and bird paintings usually only depict a bird, grass, or a flower. The large amount of blank space forms a sharp contrast between virtuality and reality with the main body of

the picture, creating an infinite artistic conception through the minimalist picture. This kind of blank space composition not only emphasizes the contrast between virtuality and reality, but also enhances the artistic conception of the picture.

2.2. Dynamic and Rhythmic Lines

Western painting focuses on realism and the pursuit of likeness, emphasizing light and shadow, perspective, and color. Lines play a supporting role in the composition of the painting. Chinese ink painting, on the other hand, emphasizes the fluidity and rhythm of lines, emphasizing the virtuality and reality, density, and artistic conception of lines. It emphasizes the inherent beauty of lines, such as their interweaving, length, and density. Although influenced by different cultural backgrounds, the formal aesthetics of lines in Chinese and Western paintings differ, both are inseparable from the use of lines in artistic creation.

The use of lines to depict forms has been present in traditional Chinese painting since ancient times. For example, the long white-line scroll *Eighty-Seven Immortals* by the Tang Dynasty painter Wu Daozi, uses the line-drawing techniques from the eighteen types of *Baimiao* (traditional Chinese line-drawing techniques), such as the *gaogu yousi miao*, *qinxian miao*, *tiexian miao*, *caoyi chushui miao*, *xingyun liushui miao*, and *dingtou shuwei miao*. He skillfully uses the contrast of length and density to create a sense of rhythm and rhythm of the lines, showing the immortals' sense of elegance and making the whole picture show a strong sense of space [10]. The meaning contained in these lines is irreplaceable in other painting genres.

Therefore, regardless of how Chinese ink painting develops or transforms, it should never abandon its most fundamental and essential formal language: the line.

2.3. Colors with Ink as The Main Color and Color as The Auxiliary Color

In terms of color, Chinese paintings usually focus more on the inherent color of the object itself. With the cultural development of different historical stages, the painters' understanding of color has also changed.

Most early Chinese paintings were expressed with heavy colors. For example, *Qianli Jiangshan Tu* created by Wang Ximeng in the Northern Song Dynasty adopted the *qingliu shanshui* (blue-green landscape) technique in color setting and brushwork, mainly using mineral pigments such as stone blue and stone green, which has a certain decorative effect; there are also the famous Dunhuang murals, whose colors are bold, bright and strong, with a strong visual effect, showing the aesthetic taste of Eastern civilization [5].

Since the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, Chinese literati painters no longer pursued brilliant colors but instead used black and white ink to express colorful colors. Ink is the main raw material, and the amount of water is adjusted to produce thick ink, light ink, dry ink, wet ink, burnt ink, etc., to draw different shades (black, white, gray), and by adjusting the dryness, wetness, and thickness of the ink to achieve a vivid effect of depicting the image [6]. Emphasis is placed on the use of ink rhyme and brushwork, and the texture and vividness of the painting are expressed through the shades of ink and the weight of brushwork. Different brushwork and ink colors can produce different effects, enriching the layers and charm of the painting. Zhang Yanyuan of the Tang Dynasty said in *Records of Famous Paintings of All Ages*: "Using ink, the five colors are present." This means using ink instead of

color. Using ink instead of color is a technique often used in traditional Chinese painting, hence the saying "ink has five colors" [7].

2.4. Creating a Unique Artistic Conception

Another prominent feature of traditional Chinese ink painting is the unique artistic conception (*yijing*) created by the painting. This is the artist's fusion of his aesthetic concepts with the painting, expressing his feelings through imagery. This is an important manifestation of Chinese ink painting that is different from other paintings [5]. Ink painting often uses imagery and lyrical techniques to express the artist's thoughts and feelings about nature, life, and emotions. The artist transforms his feelings into expression through his own emotions and experiences, making the work more profound and meaningful.

The term *yijing* was first proposed by Wang Changling. Its application to painting emerged during the Wei and Jin periods, exemplified by Gu Kaizhi's painting theory of *expressing the spirit through form*. Xie He of the Southern Qi Dynasty proposed *vivid spirit and charm*, one of Xie He's six principles. These painting theories reflect that painters began to pay attention to the expression of artistic conception in their works. In the Song Dynasty, Guo Xi formally used the term *yijing* to express painting theory in *Linquan Gaozhi*. The emergence of this concept became one of the highest goals pursued by Chinese painters. This also prompted the creation of ink painting to reach a higher level and pursuit.

3. The Role and Advantages of Ink Painting in Ethnic Picture Books

3.1. Enhancing the Aesthetic Appeal of Ethnic Picture Books

Ink painting often leaves blank space, creating an ethereal yet profound artistic conception. This creates a rich space for imagination and stimulates readers' imagination and aesthetic interest. The use of ink in ethnic picture books not only enriches the expressive forms of these paintings but also positively promotes the development of traditional Chinese ink painting. It also promotes the integration of modern aesthetic concepts with traditional culture, guiding readers to reflect and explore within the aesthetic conception of the picture books, understanding and experiencing the works through their own imagination and feelings, and cultivating their aesthetic interest and artistic appreciation.

Ink painting is also characterized by its simplicity and expressiveness, capable of conveying rich emotions and stories through lines, ink colors, and blank spaces. Using ink in ethnic picture books can better convey ethnic stories and emotions, making the works more vivid and appealing.

3.2. Enhancing the Cultural Heritage of Ethnic Picture Books

Ink painting is a key form of traditional Chinese painting, carrying a rich cultural tradition and historical heritage. Incorporating it into picture book creation can inherit and promote national culture, allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding and experience of national artistic styles and emotional expressions. It can also inspire the artist's artistic inspiration and creativity, thereby enhancing the artist's cultural value.

Ink painting possesses unique aesthetic characteristics and styles, showcasing the national spirit and cultural heritage

behind it. Using ink painting in ethnic picture books can highlight the uniqueness and characteristics of an ethnic group, enhancing national identity and cultural confidence. Ethnic picture books are an important vehicle for inheriting and promoting national culture, and ink painting is a representative form of Chinese culture. Using ink painting in ethnic picture books can help readers develop a sense of national cultural identity and pride, promoting the inheritance and development of culture. Nowadays, traditional Chinese culture is gradually being influenced by Western foreign cultures. To promote the development and innovation of picture books, it is essential to preserve their inherent strengths. By drawing upon China's rich cultural heritage, creators should move beyond conservative and insular thinking, integrating distinctive historical contexts and artistic traditions into picture book creation. This will showcase the profound meaning and unique aesthetic of traditional Chinese culture to the world, creating innovative and dynamic Chinese-style picture books. This will not only create a new spiritual world for readers but also infuse new vitality into traditional Chinese culture and promote the innovation and development of traditional ink painting.

4. Case Studies of the Use of Ink Painting in Ethnic Picture Books

The exact number of contemporary Chinese ink-based picture books with ethnic themes remains unclear due to the lack of comprehensive statistical data. However, an analysis of available resources and publications indicates that in recent years, there has been a notable increase in the creation of picture books exploring ethnic subjects through ink painting.

In contemporary Chinese ink painting books on ethnic subjects, traditional ink painting techniques are skillfully integrated into modern picture book design, forming a unique artistic style. This form not only embodies the aesthetic value of traditional Chinese art but also effectively conveys the cultural connotations of various ethnic groups. The following article will explore the specific application of ink painting in ethnic picture books by analyzing three picture books of different styles and themes, as well as a comparison with international picture books.

4.1. The Last Hundred Birds' Feather Coat

The picture book *The Last Hundred Birds' Feather Coat* (Fig. 1) [8], published by Jieli Publishing in 2021, is an ethnic picture book with an ink painting style created by picture book writer A Geng. The picture book is set in a nature reserve in southwest China and is adapted from the Zhuang folk tale *The Hundred Birds' Feather Coat*. It tells the story of ninety-nine birds that died mysteriously in the nature reserve. The forest ranger boy Gu Ka and the grandmother Yi Li went into the forest to investigate and found that someone was trying to use the bird feathers to make a bird feather coat.

In *The Last Hundred Birds' Feather Coat*, the contrast of black and white highlights the magnificent scenery of the mountains and rivers, and the lines have rich expressiveness in the picture, which is used to outline the figures, the details of the feather coat and the background environment. The thickness and lightness of the lines are used to express the texture and lightness of the feather coat; the natural landscape of the Zhuang living area is outlined with soft lines, making the reader feel as if they are in an ink painting. In addition, the illustrator uses colorful pigments to highlight the beauty

and magnificence of the bird's coat under the natural color. The form of ink painting is combined with the traditional culture of the Zhuang ethnic group and the plot of folk stories, showing the mystery and emotion of the Zhuang folk legend.

The *Last Bird's Coat* also uses the technique of combining ink and watercolor to show the harmony and unity of form and meaning, creating an oriental charm [2]. Considering the specific readership of children's picture books, this work focuses on the use of the charm of ink painting, rather than simply pursuing the use of form.

In short, the purpose of this picture book is clear and concise, and the content is full of charm, which inspires readers' cognition of aesthetics and artistic imagination. It not only shows the charm of China's Zhuang traditional culture, but also presents readers with a confusing story world and a colorful artistic emotional experience through the expression of characters' emotions, the creation of painting artistic conception and the plot of folk stories.



Fig 1. *The Last Hundred Birds' Feather Coat*, A Geng

4.2. Peach Blossom Spring

The picture book *Peach Blossom Spring* (Fig. 2) [9] published by Shandong Pictorial Publishing House in 2019 is a series of works created by the painter Ju Zhanpu. The story of the picture book is adapted from Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring*, with the addition of modern elements.

Ju Zhanpu's *Peach Blossom Spring* picture book adopts the composition of the *pingyuan* method (a type of scattered perspective method) in landscape painting. Under the horizontal perspective, Ju Zhanpu achieves the visual effect of the image through the depiction of details and the treatment of light and shade.

For example, the layout of the high and low between the crisscrossing paths, the arrangement of different color blocks, the arrangement of different distances and sizes of the characters, the sharp presentation of the beams and pillars of the farmhouse in the courtyard, the creation of the atmosphere of the host and guests sitting together in the courtyard, and the outlines of the chickens, ducks and birds walking on the ground, all highlight the distinct sense of space through the delicate depiction of the thickness and size of the lines and strokes. Furthermore, the painting utilizes white space to depict elements such as clouds, sky, and flowing water, making the image simple yet expressive.

In terms of color, Ju Zhanpu skillfully utilizes subtle contrasts of light and dark, using light ink, pastel colors, and white space to create diverse lighting effects and emotional atmospheres. The subtle shifts in light and dark invite the

reader into a warm imagination, generating a hazy and gentle emotion.

Peach Blossom Spring is a philosophical literary work, and Ju Zhanpu expresses the thoughts and emotions contained within it through his ink paintings. Through his depictions of natural scenery and the portrayal of characters, he reflects the concept of harmonious coexistence between man and nature.

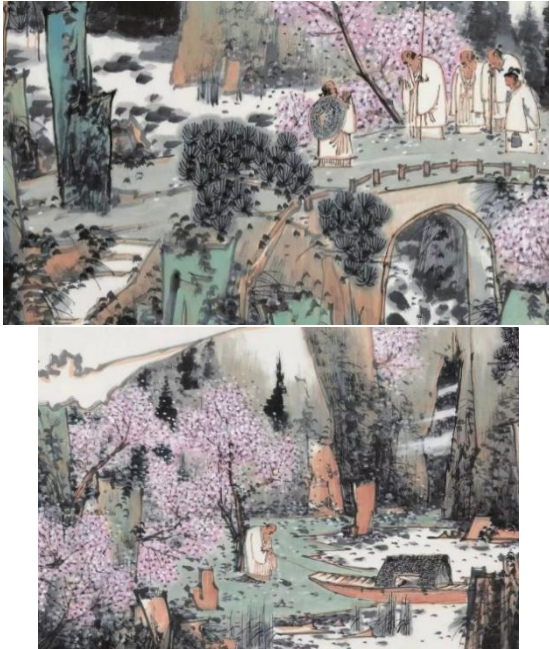


Fig 2. *Peach Blossom Spring*, Ju Zhanpu

4.3. Fire Dragon

The picture book *Fire Dragon* (Fig. 3) [10] published by Beijing Science and Technology Press in 2017 is an ink painting style picture book adapted and illustrated by the Chinese painting master Chen Jianghong based on Chinese folk legends. The story tells of a benevolent fire dragon in the heavenly realm who, to help the people pray for rain, engages in a duel with the Dragon King of the East Sea. The dragon ultimately seizes the dragon pearl but dies from the severity of its injuries.

The picture book uses a composition method with strong tension and rhythm, highlighting the details and shape of the fire dragon through partial enlargement or close-up composition. At the same time, the body lines of the fire dragon are outlined with powerful brushstrokes, and the muscle lines and scale textures of the fire dragon are expressed through changes in thickness and lightness, increasing the layering and three-dimensional sense of the picture.

As an ink painter, Chen Jianghong uses the gray and black tones of ink in his paintings and a lot of bright red, yellow and gold to depict the eyes of the fire dragon, the flames spewing from its mouth and the surrounding environment, highlighting the passion and mystery of the fire dragon, while also increasing the visual impact and expression of the picture. The dragon, a key element in traditional Chinese festivals, symbolizes good fortune, blessing, and reunion. *Fire Dragon* uses this traditional Chinese symbol to express a quest for and imagination of power, mystery, and joy, evoking viewers' love and yearning for traditional Chinese culture while also expressing praise and blessings for the power of life.

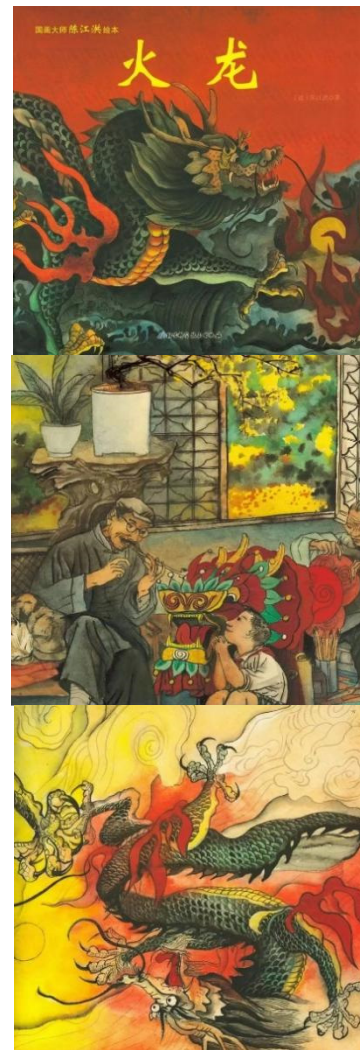


Fig 3. *Fire Dragon*, Chen Jianghong

4.4. Comparative Study of The Last Hundred Birds' Feather Coat and the French Picture Book Les Petits Lapins Pasquier

Les Petits Lapins Pasquier (Fig. 4) [11] is a series of picture books introduced from France. The picture book features a rabbit named Patsy and his family as the protagonists. Through a warm and interesting storyline, it shows readers the love and support of family and the power of friendship.

In terms of artistic style, *The Last Hundred Birds' Feather Coat* pays more attention to ink painting techniques, using traditional Chinese ink painting techniques, with elegant colors and smooth lines, focusing on the expression of artistic conception. Through the appropriate shades of ink, it shows the mystery and beauty of Zhuang culture. At the same time, there are a lot of detailed descriptions, such as flowers, birds, fish and insects in the natural landscape, giving people a poetic and classical beauty. In contrast, *Les Petits Lapins Pasquier* adopts a warm and delicate illustration style and scene description, with soft colors and rounded lines, focusing on the harmony and warmth of the overall picture.

In terms of narrative technique, the story of *The Last Hundred Birds' Feather Coat* is adapted from Zhuang folk mythology. Its structure reflects the characteristics of myth and legend, and its plot is imbued with fantasy, drawing readers into the story's artistic conception. The language and prose are concise, elegant, and poetic, complementing the artistic style of the ink painting. In contrast, the plot of *Les Petits Lapins Pasquier* is relatively simple and clear, suitable

for children's comprehension. Each short story has a clear theme and lesson. The language is also more lively and vivid, full of childlike playfulness, resonating with children's daily lives and emotional experiences.

In terms of cultural connotations, the ink painting book *The Last Hundred Bird' Feather Coat* is deeply influenced by ethnic culture. Through the story, it showcases the traditional customs and myths of the Zhuang people, conveying a reverence for nature and life. The story is imbued with mystery and fantasy, and through the legend of the *Hundred Birds' Feather Coat*, it expresses the unique cultural connotations and artistic values of the ethnic group, enhancing a sense of cultural identity. *Les Petits Lapins Pasquier* explores themes of family and friendship. Centered on the Patsy family, the story is grounded in everyday life, showcasing the love and support between family members and the cooperation and friendship between friends, conveying heartwarming family values and social values. Through Patsy's adventures and growth, it conveys universal values of exploration, courage, and friendship.

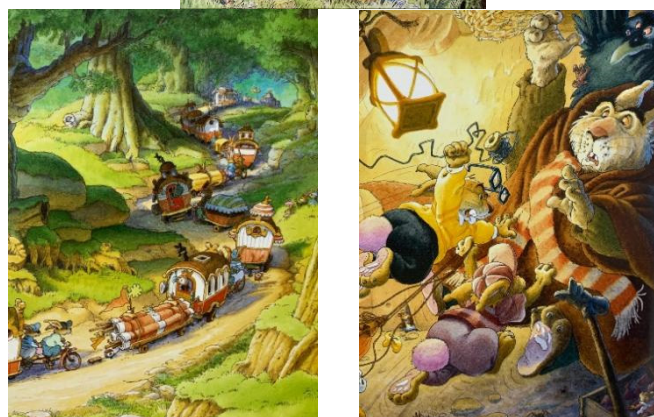
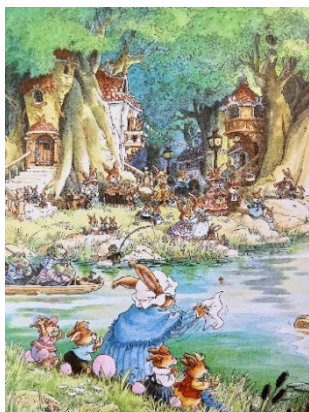


Fig 4. *Les Petits Lapins Pasquier*, Geneviève Huriot

In short, the ink painting book *The Last Hundred Bird' Feather Coat* and the French picture book *Les Petits Lapins Pasquier* each showcase distinct artistic styles and cultural connotations within Eastern and Western cultural contexts. The former, through its integration of ink painting techniques and Zhuang culture, offers readers a unique Eastern artistic experience; the latter, through heartwarming illustrations and

stories from everyday life, conveys universal values of family and friendship. While these two picture books each have distinct educational focuses, both offer readers a rich reading experience and profound educational insights through the integration of visual art and storytelling.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Chinese ink painting, with its unique artistic language of lines, blank spaces, and poetic conception, provides a powerful medium for the creation of ethnic picture books. By integrating traditional ink techniques with folk tales and cultural narratives, these works not only enrich the visual aesthetics of children's literature but also embody profound cultural meanings. Case studies such as *The Last Hundred Birds' Feather Coat*, *Peach Blossom Spring*, and *Fire Dragon* demonstrate how ink painting can effectively convey ethnic traditions, emotions, and philosophies, presenting readers with both artistic enjoyment and cultural reflection. Furthermore, the comparative study with French picture books highlights the differences between Eastern and Western visual storytelling, showing that ink-based picture books carry distinctive cultural identity while also resonating with universal values. Therefore, the application of ink painting in ethnic picture books not only strengthens cultural inheritance and innovation but also contributes to the global promotion of Chinese art, offering new possibilities for the development of contemporary picture books.

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