

# Feminism in Contemporary Gongbi Painting: Formal Analysis Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*This study focuses on the aesthetic characteristics of female artists and the representation of female figures in contemporary Gongbi painting. Traditionally known for its meticulous brushwork and detailed expression, Gongbi painting has undergone a transformation, adapting to modern contexts by integrating contemporary aesthetics, cultural narratives, and individual expression. In recent decades, female artists have played a crucial role in reshaping the genre, infusing it with new meanings and perspectives rooted in gender awareness and personal experience. The existing literature discusses the impact of feminism and the increasing presence of women in the art world, shedding light on how these factors influence both content and style. Scholars such as Kim, Elgammal, and Mazzone argue that formal elements—such as line quality, texture, and color—can be critically analyzed to understand an artwork's aesthetic values. Building on this approach, the present study applies formal analysis to examine the works of nine Chinese female artists, highlighting their contributions to the evolution of contemporary Gongbi painting.*

**Keywords:** Gongbi painting, Feminism, Chinese painting, Formal analysis, Female artist



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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Gongbi painting, also known as “fine brush painting”, is one of the categories of Chinese painting techniques (Wang, 2021). Gongbi painting belongs to the neat and meticulous class of painting, ancient painting, advocating realism, seeking shape, is to the neat more; to Wang Wei created the ink painting method, the subject matter from life to depict nature, roughly divided into Figurative, Landscape, Birds and Flowers, and so on. Gongbi paintings are usually started with a sketch, a complete sketch needs to be repeatedly revised to finalize (Yin, 2014), and then compounded on the glue alum rice paper or silk, first outlined with a wolf-hair brush, and then with the class of the colour, layer by layer rendering, so as to achieve the artistic effect of the shape of the spirit and the spirit of the art.

Gongbi painting is modelled by line, and line is the foundation and backbone of Gongbi painting. The requirements for lines in Gongbi paintings are very strict, and they need to meet the standards of neatness, delicacy and rigor. The colour of Gongbi paintings is based on inherent colours (Mokhtar, 2023), and the colors are generally brilliant, calm, bright and elegant, with a unified tone, reflecting the rich aesthetic interest of Chinese national colors. In addition, Gongbi Painting pays great attention to the decorative nature, from the composition, line drawing, coloring to the detailed treatment of the image with a certain sense of flatness and decorative (Jiang, 2008).

In the 21st century, Gongbi painting is still blossoming with splendour (Law and Blishen, 2024). In such an era where history and modernity meet, and where tradition and modernity border, there are a group of people who, while accepting the concept of artistic diversification in the modern society, continue the classics of traditional Gongbi figurative paintings and open up frontiers that their predecessors have not yet ventured into, and the style that they display is called New Gongbi. The concept of “New Gongbi” was first put forward in 2006, when art critic Hang Chunxiao published an article entitled “Shades of Gray”, in which he refined the concept of “New Gongbi Painting” on the basis of the general order of “Emerging Gongbi” (Chen, 2023). “New Gongbi Painting” on the basis of the generalization of ‘New Rising Gongbi’. According to Gu Ping, vice president of the Art Research Institute of Shanghai University, “new brush” is a new phenomenon in contemporary Chinese painting, characterized by two main points: firstly, it tends to be the expression of the Gongbi, with changes in the “new”, which is interpreted from the tradition but is authentic new painting; Secondly, it is synonymous with contemporary Gongbi painting, where traditional techniques are coupled with contemporary concepts, distancing itself from traditional Gongbi painting (Gu, 2009).

The end of the 19th century was the first wave of the women's emancipation movement (Paletschek, 2005) and the debate centred on the demand for equality of the sexes, including equality between men and women throughout the entire course of life, i.e., the equality of the sexes, as well as the demand for civil and political rights, the rejection of aristocratic privileges and polygamy, and the emphasis on the fact that there is no difference between men and women intellectually or in terms of their abilities. The second wave of feminism began in the 1960s-1970s (Nicholson, 2010). It is believed that the second women's liberation movement first originated in the United States as well. This movement lasted until the 1980s. Its tone was to emphasize the naturalness of the division of labour between the sexes and to eliminate the phenomenon of men and women being paid differently for the same work. It called for the elimination of the view of gender differences as the basis for the subordination of women to men in the social relations between the sexes. The subfields were required to be open to the appropriate public. Another result of the second feminist movement was the rise of feminist scholarship on gender studies. As a result, there have also been various schools of feminism. The concepts that people have developed in patriarchal ideology have led them to describe the world from a patriarchal perspective and to confuse this description with the truth, which is taken for granted. Feminists, on the other hand, have challenged these concepts that people have taken for granted. Although there are many schools of thought, the basic point is to fight for equal rights for both genders at the end of life, and to completely eliminate the bad situation in which women are discriminated against, exploited, oppressed, and even mistreated.

Feminist art is a form of art created by female artists that focuses on women or reflects women's experiences (Raven, 2018). It aims to challenge and subvert sexism and prejudice in traditional concepts of art and aesthetics, and to demonstrate women's creativity and artistic value. The characteristics of feminist art are as follows:

1. Feminist art takes women as its theme or reflects women's experiences, expressing women's unique experiences, perspectives and voices. For example, Cai Guo-Qiang's installation "*The Human Tunic*" takes the real society and the human body as its theme, showing concern and reflection on the human body and society through a variety of materials and techniques, reflecting the characteristics of contemporary feminist art.
2. Feminist art usually adopts feminist theories, criticisms and methods, reflecting the characteristics of feminist thinking and movements. For example, Michelangelo's sculpture *David* features the male human body and shows the muscles and emotions of the human body through accurate perspective and changes in light and darkness, reflecting the characteristics of classical art.
3. Feminist art aims to challenge and subvert sexism and prejudice in traditional art and aesthetic concepts, and to demonstrate women's creativity and artistic value. For example, Picasso's oil painting "*Maiden of Avignon*" takes the female human body as its theme and shows female gender identity and self-expression through novel forms and colours, embodying the characteristics of modernist art.

The purpose of this study is to explore contemporary female artists' depictions of the female figure in their works, and then to analyse and explore the aesthetic characteristics of the female figurative in contemporary brush painting.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist perspectives play an important role in art. Feminism would remake society, would set up new standards, would destroy old customs (MacKinnon, 1987), would establish a new morality. It frankly sets out to do great deeds of destruction and reconstruction (Tickner 1988). Women's gender identity and particular perspectives are represented in works of art that are of some significance.

Firstly, women's artwork reflects the artist's experience and point of view (Meskimmon, 1996). Women's artwork offers a profound and intimate reflection of their unique experiences, perspectives, and identities. Through their creative expressions, female artists convey not only personal emotions and stories but also broader social, cultural, and historical narratives that are often shaped by their roles and positions in society. This artwork becomes a powerful medium through which women can challenge, question, and redefine traditional norms and expectations. By incorporating elements of their lived experiences—such as gender, race, class, and sexuality—into their work, women artists provide insight into the complexities of their inner worlds and the societies they inhabit, offering a diverse range of voices and visions that enrich the broader tapestry of art.

Secondly, the female perspective has an anti-conventional and unique presentation (Delap, 2005). The female perspective in art and literature often stands out for its anti-conventional and unique presentation, offering fresh and transformative insights that challenge established norms and traditional

narratives. This perspective tends to subvert and question societal expectations, particularly those related to gender roles, power dynamics, and identity. By drawing on their lived experiences, women often bring to the forefront issues that are marginalized or overlooked in mainstream discourse, such as the complexities of womanhood, the intersection of personal and collective struggles, and the nuances of everyday life.

This anti-conventional approach frequently leads to the creation of work that is innovative and boundary-pushing, breaking away from conventional forms, techniques, and themes. It allows for the exploration of new aesthetic and conceptual territories, giving rise to original and diverse modes of expression. The unique presentation of the female perspective enriches the cultural landscape, providing alternative viewpoints that broaden our understanding of the human experience and inspire deeper reflection and dialogue.

Finally, female characterization challenges the current discourse (Hall, 1996). Female characterization in literature, film, and other forms of media plays a crucial role in challenging and reshaping the current discourse surrounding gender, identity, and societal roles. By presenting women as complex, multifaceted characters rather than adhering to stereotypes or one-dimensional portrayals, these characterizations push back against traditional narratives that have often marginalized or oversimplified the female experience.

Through nuanced and diverse representations, female characterization invites audiences to reconsider preconceived notions about women's roles in both private and public spheres. It questions the conventional boundaries placed on female identity, allowing for more authentic and varied depictions that resonate with the real-life complexities women face. This, in turn, sparks important conversations about gender equality, power dynamics, and the need for broader representation in all forms of storytelling.

By challenging the current discourse, female characterization not only provides more accurate reflections of women's experiences but also paves the way for a more inclusive and equitable cultural narrative, one that acknowledges and values the diversity of women's voices and experiences

### **3 METHODS**

This study employs methods such as data collection and formal analysis to examine feminism in contemporary Gongbi painting.

#### **3.1 Data Collection**

In this study, nine works from a large body of contemporary Gongbi paintings have been selected for analysis. The nine works are from nine artists and all of them live in the contemporary era. They all show unique aesthetic characteristics in their works.

## 3.2 Formal Analysis

Formal analysis is a method used in the study visual arts to understand and interpret a work of art by focusing on its formal elements, which are the visual components that make up the artwork. These elements typically (Kim, Elgammal & Mazzone, 2022) as below.

1. Line: The use of lines in the artwork, including their direction, length, width, and the way they define shapes or guide the viewer's eye.
2. Shape: The two-dimensional areas or forms created by lines or colour boundaries within the artwork.
3. Colour: The hues, saturation, and value (lightness or darkness) used in the artwork, as well as the relationships between different colours.
4. Texture: The perceived surface quality of the artwork, whether it is smooth, rough, soft, hard, etc.
5. Space: The illusion of depth or three-dimensionality in a work of art, as well as the organization of objects within the space of the artwork.
6. Form: The three-dimensional qualities of the artwork, including volume and mass, especially in sculpture and architecture.
7. Composition: The arrangement of elements within the artwork and how they relate to each other and the overall structure.
8. Light and Shadow: How light interacts with the objects in the artwork, creating highlights, shadows, and the overall mood.

## 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A table is designed shown below. These are all representative works of contemporary Chinese Gongbi Paintings. Elements select lines, colours, action and facial expression, background setting and content. etc. Lines and colours are elements that distinguish traditional Chinese painting from Western painting. Action and facial expression, which is an important way of expression in figurative painting, was chosen as the element of formal analysis. The relationship between figure and space is also one of the forms which deserve to be analysed in figurative painting. In addition, the content of the artwork's expression is of concern.

**Table 1** Formal Analysis in Gongbi painting

| Artwork   | Contents  |
|---|---|
|    | <p><b>Artist</b> - Liu Haolu</p> <p><b>Line</b> - Simplified lines that characterize women's clothing through the lines</p> <p><b>Colour</b> - Strong contrast between light and dark</p> <p><b>Action and facial expression</b> - Showing a feminine and gentle side in body posture, facial expressions and emotions, skin colour</p> <p><b>Background setting</b> - The background colour and pattern is unified with the colour of the character's costume</p> <p><b>Content</b> - Situationalised presentation of female beauty</p>  |
|   | <p><b>Artist</b> - Gao Lijuan</p> <p><b>Line</b> - Having a sense of motion and showing the movement of the figures</p> <p><b>Colour</b> - Black, white and grey tones dominate, with a few accents of other colours</p> <p><b>Action and facial expression</b> - Women appear in the painting with their backs, and gender characteristics are expressed through women's movements.</p> <p><b>Background setting</b> - Large areas are flat and textured in grey</p> <p><b>Content</b> - Capturing life's moments, feeling the beauty of contemporary life, and expressing the artist's passion for life</p> |
|  | <p><b>Artist</b> - Li Panpan</p> <p><b>Line</b> - More delicate lines on ethnic clothing</p> <p><b>Colour</b> - Yellow, blue and white are dominant</p> <p><b>Action and facial expression</b> - Standing full-length portrait of a woman with elegant movements</p> <p><b>Background setting</b> - Flat Paint Solid Colour Background</p> <p><b>Content</b> - Expressed the characteristics of Chinese minority women's clothing</p>   |
|  | <p><b>Artist</b> - Wang Jinxia</p> <p><b>Line</b> - Soft and generalized lines</p> <p><b>Colour</b> - Mainly warm colors, auxiliary purple, to maintain the balance of warm and cold colours in the painting</p> <p><b>Action and facial expression</b> - Girl sitting on a chair dressing up her hair</p> <p><b>Background setting</b> - Two colours of lights and walls</p> <p><b>Content</b> - Using a hazy way to express the softness of contemporary women</p>  |



**Artist** - Xu Hualing  
**Line** - Soft and delicate lines  
**Colour** - Strong contrast between light and dark, mainly using black, white and grey colours  
**Action and facial expression** - The woman appear in back view with head bowed. Dressed in traditional Chinese clothing  
**Background setting** - Blank background  
**Content** - Combining contemporary women with ancient costumes to express the pure beauty of Chinese women



**Artist** - Zang Yuqin  
**Line** - Delicate and soft lines  
**Colour** - Dark and brown colours predominate  
**Action and facial expression** - Choosing a Contemporary Woman's Lifestyle  
**Background setting** - Background colour that matches the overall colour of the painting  
**Content** - The real-life status of ordinary contemporary women resonates with the audience



**Artist** - Zhang Yi  
**Line** - Dark coloured lines  
**Colour** - Gray-based with lighter skinned characters  
**Action and facial expression** - The people lie on the table and look at the audience, showing the slim figure of the woman  
**Background setting** - grey background  
**Content** -It expresses the artist's love of contemporary life and respect for life



**Artist** - Zhuang Daojing  
**Line** - Highly summarized figures and reduced use of lines  
**Colour** - Lighter colours are more frequent, greyed out to deal with the objects in the painting, and the intensity in the painting is echoed by the lightness  
**Action and facial expression** - The expressions of the girls are exaggerated and flattering, highlighting the Chinese facial features.  
**Background setting** - The background is predominantly blank, contrasting with the more heavily depicted figures on the left side  
**Content** - Contemporary Women Around Artists





**Artist** - Zong Xiaoli

**Line** - Subtle, soft lines

**Colour** - The figures' skin colour is white, and their hair is black, echoing the intensity while reflecting Chinese characteristics

**Action and facial expression** - Side profile portrait with a gentle gaze looking forward

**Background setting** - Traditional Gongbi painting with flowers as background

**Content** - The artist's romanticism creates a quiet and elegant beauty throughout the past and present

## 4.1 Line

The expression of line is one of the important ways of expression in brush painting, and delicate and soft line is one of the techniques used to express female character traits. Regardless of the female character traits expressed by the artist, line is similar to traditional Gongbi painting in contemporary feminist Gongbi painting in that it allows for direct expression of details and figure shapes.

## 4.2 Colour

The choice of colours in painting is quite rich, and different colours can also express different emotions. In traditional Gongbi paintings, artists always choose light and elegant colours to express a simple and ancient visual feeling. In contemporary Gongbi paintings, richer colours also appear, for example, in Liu Haolu's works, the colours of the figures' dresses are closer to the contemporary, closer to the contemporary life. On the other hand, it shows the diversity of contemporary women's life from the side.

## 4.3 Action and facial expression

As can be seen from the works of the above nine artists, the movements and expressions of women vary from one work to another, so the beauty of women in contemporary times, instead of having a uniform standard, is abundant and diverse. There are both simple and elegant female figures in Zong Xiaoli's paintings, and lively and vivid young girls in Zhuang Daojing's expressions.

## 4.4 Background setting

In traditional Gongbi paintings, the background often appears in white, and the artist more often depicts the contrast between the subject and the blankness of the background. In contemporary Gongbi paintings, with the diversification of aesthetic approaches, artists such as Liu Haolu have also appeared in the background setting, depicting some floral patterns.

## 4.5 Content

Different works of art have artistic content to express. Contemporary feminist brush painting also has content to express. Because the subjects are all female figures, all the above artists have expressed



the beauty of women's bodies from their own perspectives and expressed the richness and colourfulness of contemporary women's lives through the expression of body language.

## **4.6 Comparison**

The nine artists have something in common: they are all women, contemporary Chinese Gongbi painters, living in China. In terms of artistic expression, they are all skilful in the use of lines, expressing the gender characteristics of women using soft lines on women's bodies, facial features or clothing. Secondly, they all continue to use the traditional way of expression of Gongbi painting in the composition or background setting of their works. For example, large areas of white are left on the background. In terms of colour selection, each artist chooses the colours of traditional Chinese paintings.

The differences between the nine artists: although they all live in China, they are physically far apart geographically, and their habits and social environments vary greatly from region to region. As a result, the women display different characteristics. This is reflected in the movements and clothing of the women in the images. In the representation of the subject, there are works depicting the back of the figure, which reflects the influence of contemporary art. In terms of colour, high purity colours appear, which are innovative to traditional Chinese paintings and are expressed in the figure of the woman.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

This study starts from the perspective of feminism. With the development of the period, the social status of women cannot be ignored, and the group of female artists highlights an important role in Chinese contemporary painting. The life of female group under female perspective also has a different vivid effect. Women's softness, vivacity, brightness and other characteristics have become the focus of female artists. This also makes more viewers notice the real contemporary women's life, and more viewers feel the resonance. In addition, from the point of view of Gongbi painting, the works of female artists continue to develop the essence of Gongbi painting by using delicate and soft lines. At the same time, the emotions conveyed by Gongbi paintings are more delicate and different from the stereotypical emotions of the past, making the audience of Gongbi paintings more diversified and younger. In short, the rise of the female artist group in the field of Gongbi painting has unified the development of Gongbi painting with the development of contemporary society and has given new impetus to the continued circulation of traditional Chinese painting.

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The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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