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From Nationalization to Regionality: A Thematic Review of Chinese Landscape Oil Painting Studies

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Abstract

Landscape oil painting has played a significant role in the development of modern Chinese art, serving as an important site for negotiating cultural identity, aesthetic values, and spatial experience. Over the past decades, scholarly research on Chinese landscape oil painting has expanded from early discussions of nationalization to more diversified approaches focusing on expressive aesthetics, formal language, and regionality. However, existing studies remain theoretically fragmented, with descriptive analysis often outweighing explanatory synthesis. This article presents a thematic literature review of research on Chinese landscape oil painting. Drawing on representative Chinese and selected English-language scholarship, the review organizes existing studies into four interrelated research strands: nationalization discourse, expressive aesthetics and artistic conception, formal language and technical strategies, and regionality studies. Through critical synthesis, the article traces the evolution of theoretical perspectives and identifies persistent limitations, including the lack of mechanism-oriented analysis and the uneven distribution of regional research. Special attention is given to studies on Guizhou landscape oil painting as an underexplored research area. The limited and fragmented nature of existing scholarship on Guizhou highlights broader structural issues within regional landscape oil painting studies in China. Based on this analysis, the article argues for a shift from descriptive characterization toward integrative and mechanism-based approaches that link environmental experience, aesthetic mediation, and visual form. By clarifying theoretical trajectories and proposing future research directions, this review aims to contribute to a more coherent framework for understanding regional diversity in Chinese landscape oil painting and to support further interdisciplinary inquiry at the intersection of art, culture, and education.

Keywords: Chinese Landscape Oil Painting, Nationalization, Expressive Aesthetics, Regionality, Thematic Literature Review

1. Introduction

Landscape oil painting has occupied a distinctive position in the development of modern Chinese art since the early twentieth century. Introduced through Western art education and cultural exchange, oil painting in China has continually confronted the challenge of localization—namely, how an imported visual medium could express indigenous aesthetic sensibilities, cultural values, and ways of perceiving nature (Andrews, 1994; Sullivan, 1996). Within this broader process, landscape oil painting has emerged as a particularly important field, as it directly engages with representations of space, environment, and cultural

imagination.

Early scholarly discussions on Chinese oil painting were largely framed by the discourse of nationalization. Researchers focused on how Western pictorial systems could be adapted to Chinese subjects and cultural contexts, often treating nationalization as a necessary response to cultural modernity (Zhan, 1998; Wu, 1999). In this context, landscape painting was regarded as an effective medium for cultural negotiation, given the central role of shanshui imagery in Chinese aesthetic tradition and philosophical thought (Sullivan, 1973).

As research developed, scholars increasingly recognized that nationalization could not be reduced to thematic substitution or stylistic borrowing. Attention gradually shifted toward deeper issues of aesthetic logic, emotional structure, and visual perception, a turn closely associated with the influence of expressive aesthetics and artistic conception in Chinese art theory. This perspective emphasized subjective transformation and experiential depth over representational accuracy (Li, 2010; Zhao, 2012).

In parallel with these developments, research on Chinese landscape oil painting expanded toward questions of regionality. Influenced by spatial and cultural turns in the humanities, scholars began to examine how specific geographical environments, ecological conditions, and local cultural experiences shape artistic expression (Cosgrove, 1984; Mitchell, 2002). Studies focusing on regions such as Xinjiang, Northwestern China, and Jiangnan demonstrate that landscape oil painting is not merely a depiction of nature, but a culturally embedded practice formed through sustained interaction between artists and their environments (Yi, 2015; Li, 2023).

Despite the growing volume of literature, existing research remains fragmented across multiple theoretical orientations. Studies on nationalization, expressive aesthetics, formal language, and regionality are often conducted in isolation, resulting in limited conceptual integration. Moreover, regional research is unevenly distributed, with certain areas receiving extensive scholarly attention while others remain underexplored, constraining a comprehensive understanding of regional diversity (Wang, 2017).

Against this background, a thematic literature review is needed to synthesize key research strands and clarify their conceptual relationships. Rather than offering a chronological survey, this article adopts a thematic approach to examine how Chinese landscape oil painting studies have evolved from nationalization discourse toward region-oriented analysis. By integrating discussions of expressive aesthetics, formal language, and regionality, the article aims to identify dominant theoretical trajectories, highlight persistent limitations, and propose directions for future research.

2. Review Scope and Method

This article adopts a thematic literature review approach to examine research on Chinese landscape oil painting. Thematic reviews are particularly suitable for fields characterized by diverse theoretical perspectives and interdisciplinary intersections, as they emphasize conceptual synthesis over exhaustive coverage (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019). In the context of Chinese art studies, where research spans aesthetics, cultural theory, and regional studies, this approach allows for a clearer articulation of underlying research paradigms.

The literature reviewed in this article primarily consists of Chinese-language journal articles and academic monographs published since the early twentieth century, with particular emphasis on studies produced after the reform and opening-up period, when theoretical reflection on oil painting expanded significantly. Selected English-language scholarship on landscape art, cultural geography, and visual culture is incorporated to provide comparative and conceptual context (Cosgrove, 1984; Mitchell, 2002).

In terms of thematic scope, the review concentrates on four interrelated research orientations. First, it examines studies on the nationalization of Chinese landscape oil painting, which address how oil painting internalizes Chinese aesthetic values and cultural concepts (Zhan, 1998; Ren, 2015). Second, it reviews research on expressive aesthetics and artistic conception, focusing on how traditional aesthetic ideas such as xieyi and yijing are translated into modern visual language (Zhao, 2012; Qi, 2021). Third, it considers studies on formal language and technical strategies, including composition, color, spatial organization, and materiality, which provide analytical tools for visual interpretation (Li, 2019; Shi, 2010). Finally, it explores research on regionality, emphasizing how geographical environment and local culture shape landscape oil painting practices (Yi, 2015; Li, 2023).

Thematic classification serves as the primary analytical method. Unlike chronological reviews that emphasize historical sequence, thematic reviews reorganize literature according to shared research questions and conceptual concerns (Snyder, 2019). This method facilitates the identification of recurring patterns, theoretical convergences, and unresolved tensions within the field. It should be noted that this review does not aim to provide exhaustive coverage of all publications, but rather prioritizes representative and influential studies that have shaped scholarly discourse.

3. Nationalization of Chinese Landscape Oil Painting

Research on the nationalization of Chinese landscape oil painting constitutes one of the earliest and most influential strands in the field. Emerging alongside the institutionalization of oil painting in China, nationalization discourse initially focused on how Western painting techniques could be adapted to express Chinese subject matter and cultural identity (Andrews, 1994; Zhan, 1998). Within this framework, landscape painting was frequently identified as a privileged site for cultural transformation, due to its close association with traditional Chinese concepts of nature and cosmology (Sullivan, 1973; Wu, 1999).

Early nationalization studies often emphasized formal adaptation, including the incorporation of Chinese compositional principles, brushwork rhythms, and symbolic motifs. However, scholars soon began to critique approaches that equated nationalization with surface-level formal borrowing. Such critiques argued that without internalizing Chinese aesthetic philosophy, formal adaptation alone could not generate meaningful cultural transformation (Wu, 1999).

This critical reassessment marked a significant theoretical shift. Scholars such as Ren (2015) proposed that nationalization should be understood as a process of internalization, whereby cultural concepts of space, nature, and emotion become organizing principles of visual language. From this perspective, nationalization is not a rejection of Western oil painting traditions, but a reconfiguration of their expressive logic within a Chinese cultural framework.

Subsequent studies further developed this approach by emphasizing subjective experience and aesthetic abstraction. Rather than evaluating works based on their resemblance to traditional Chinese painting, researchers focused on how oil painting could generate expressive structures aligned with Chinese aesthetic sensibilities. Intentional simplification, rhythmic composition, and symbolic color were identified as key strategies through which landscape oil painting could articulate cultural meaning (Zhao, 2012; Li, 2017).

Despite these theoretical advances, nationalization research has also revealed notable limitations. Many studies remain at a high level of abstraction, offering conceptual arguments without sufficient attention to specific spatial and cultural contexts. Moreover, nationalization discourse often presupposes a homogeneous cultural framework, overlooking regional variation in environmental experience and artistic practice. These limitations have prompted scholars to seek more context-sensitive approaches, paving the way for the emergence of

regionality research as a critical extension of nationalization theory.

4. Expressive Aesthetics and Artistic Conception

Research on expressive aesthetics and artistic conception has played a crucial mediating role in the theoretical development of Chinese landscape oil painting studies. Building upon earlier nationalization discourse, this line of research seeks to explain how cultural values and subjective experience are translated into visual form through aesthetic processes. Rather than treating oil painting as a neutral representational medium, scholars emphasize its capacity to convey emotion, perception, and spiritual resonance.

The concept of xieyi (expressiveness), originally rooted in Chinese ink painting, has been widely reinterpreted in the context of oil painting. Scholars generally agree that xieyi in oil painting does not imply the imitation of ink techniques, but refers to a creative orientation that prioritizes subjective transformation over descriptive accuracy (Zhao, 2012; Zhang, 2023). From this perspective, expressive aesthetics function as a dynamic process through which artists reorganize visual elements—such as form, color, and spatial rhythm—to convey emotional and cultural meaning.

Closely related to xieyi is the concept of yijing (artistic conception), which has been extensively discussed as an aesthetic outcome rather than a fixed visual formula. Studies argue that yijing emerges from the interaction between visual structure and emotional experience, requiring both formal coherence and affective depth (Xiang, 2005). In landscape oil painting, artistic conception is often associated with compositional rhythm, chromatic atmosphere, and the overall "breath" or vitality of the image.

Recent research has further expanded the discussion by incorporating perspectives from visual perception and aesthetic psychology. Scholars such as Qi (2021) suggest that artistic conception should be understood as a perceptual process involving the viewer's engagement with pictorial space, rather than solely as an attribute embedded in the artwork. This shift highlights the experiential dimension of expressive aesthetics and reinforces the idea that meaning in landscape oil painting is co-constructed through artistic intention and perceptual response.

Despite its theoretical richness, research on expressive aesthetics also exhibits limitations. Much of the literature operates at a high level of abstraction, with limited attention to how expressive strategies vary across different spatial and cultural contexts. While expressive aesthetics provide an important bridge between cultural philosophy and visual form, their explanatory power remains constrained without closer integration with studies of place and regional experience.

5. Formal Language and Technical Strategies

Studies on formal language and technical strategies constitute an important analytical strand in Chinese landscape oil painting research. These studies aim to translate abstract aesthetic concepts into concrete visual structures by examining composition, color, spatial organization, and material techniques. In contrast to earlier descriptive approaches, formal analysis provides methodological tools for systematic visual interpretation.

Research on composition and spatial structure emphasizes the role of pictorial organization in shaping aesthetic experience. Scholars note that Chinese landscape oil painting often departs from strict linear perspective, favoring flattened space, rhythmic segmentation, and symbolic spatial relationships that resonate with traditional aesthetic sensibilities (Li, 2019). Such compositional strategies are interpreted as visual manifestations of subjective perception rather than objective spatial logic.

Color theory has received particular attention as a vehicle for emotional and cultural expression. Studies argue that color in landscape oil painting functions not merely as optical description, but as an expressive system through which artists construct atmosphere and mood (Shi, 2010). Unified tonal structures, controlled contrasts, and symbolic chromatic choices are frequently identified as key factors in conveying artistic conception.

Materiality and painterly technique further extend formal analysis into the tactile dimension of visual expression. Research highlights how impasto, glazing, and brushwork rhythm contribute to the articulation of subjective experience, transforming material processes into expressive language (Cai, 2008). These studies underscore the inseparability of technique and meaning in landscape oil painting.

However, formal language research also faces notable constraints. By prioritizing visual structure, some studies risk isolating form from its cultural and spatial context. Formal analysis, when detached from environmental experience and regional culture, may reduce complex artistic practices to stylistic patterns. This limitation suggests the need to integrate formal analysis with broader contextual frameworks, particularly those addressing geographical and cultural specificity.

6. Regionalization of Landscape Oil Painting

Regionalization represents a significant paradigm shift in the study of Chinese landscape oil painting. Moving beyond generalized notions of national culture, regional studies emphasize the role of specific geographical environments, ecological conditions, and local cultural experiences in shaping artistic expression. This shift aligns with broader spatial and cultural turns in the humanities, which foreground place as a key factor in meaning production (Cosgrove, 1984; Mitchell, 2002).

Research on regional landscape oil painting often begins with an examination of natural environment. Studies of Xinjiang landscape painting, for example, highlight how vast terrain, strong light, and arid climate influence compositional scale and chromatic intensity, resulting in visual languages characterized by openness and monumentality (Li, 2023). Similarly, research on Northwestern China emphasizes rugged landforms and historical memory as sources of symbolic and weighty pictorial structures, in which landscape becomes a carrier of collective experience rather than a purely visual motif (Yi, 2015).

In contrast, studies of Jiangnan landscape oil painting associate water networks and humid climate with lyrical spatial rhythms and restrained tonal palettes. These works often prioritize subtle atmospheric transitions and fluid spatial organization, reflecting long-standing aesthetic traditions shaped by environmental continuity and cultural refinement.

Despite regional differences, existing literature reveals several shared mechanisms in the formation of regional landscape oil painting. First, regionality emerges through long-term embodied experience rather than immediate visual observation. Artists internalize environmental characteristics through sustained engagement with place, transforming natural forms into emotional and symbolic structures. Second, expressive aesthetics function as a mediating mechanism that translates regional experience into visual language, linking environmental perception with formal decisions. Third, regionality should be understood as a dynamic process shaped by individual subjectivity and collective cultural memory, rather than as a fixed stylistic category.

While regional studies have significantly enriched the field, persistent gaps remain. Research attention is unevenly distributed across regions, and many studies remain descriptive, emphasizing stylistic features without sufficiently explaining underlying generative mechanisms. Comparative analysis across regions is also limited, restricting theoretical generalization. These limitations indicate the need for more integrative approaches that

combine expressive aesthetics, formal analysis, and spatial experience within a unified explanatory framework.

7. Studies on Guizhou Landscape Oil Painting

Compared with regions such as Xinjiang, Northwestern China, and Jiangnan, scholarly research on Guizhou landscape oil painting remains limited in both quantity and theoretical depth. Existing studies are largely fragmented and tend to appear in the form of artist-centered critiques, exhibition commentaries, or reflective essays on creative practice. While these works provide valuable descriptive insights, they rarely develop systematic analytical frameworks capable of situating Guizhou landscape oil painting within broader discussions of regionality.

Most existing studies approach Guizhou landscape oil painting through its distinctive natural environment. Scholars frequently emphasize the province's karst topography, mountainous spatial structure, and humid climate as formative factors shaping visual expression. These environmental characteristics are often associated with aesthetic qualities such as solemnity, density, or restrained lyricism, which are interpreted as visual responses to lived experience in mountainous regions (Liu, 2017). Such interpretations confirm the relevance of place in shaping artistic expression, but remain largely phenomenological.

A smaller body of research has attempted to move beyond general description by focusing on individual artists. Studies of painters such as Kong Yang examine how Guizhou's rugged terrain and ecological complexity are transformed through simplified structures, dense color masses, and symbolic spatial arrangements (Gu & Gu, 2020). Practice-based discussions similarly explore how plein-air painting and long-term engagement with local landscapes inform compositional and chromatic strategies (Luo, 2016). These studies provide important empirical observations regarding the translation of natural environment into visual language.

Nevertheless, several limitations persist. Most studies rely on single-artist case analysis, making it difficult to identify shared regional patterns. Theoretical concepts such as expressive aesthetics and formal language are often invoked implicitly rather than systematically integrated into analysis. Moreover, Guizhou landscape oil painting is rarely examined in comparative perspective, leaving its relationship to other regional traditions underexplored.

Taken together, existing scholarship on Guizhou landscape oil painting remains predominantly descriptive, lacking a shared analytical framework that connects environmental experience, expressive aesthetics, and formal language. From a broader disciplinary perspective, this limitation does not indicate a lack of research value. On the contrary, Guizhou's complex ecology and multi-ethnic cultural context offer a productive site for examining how regional experience mediates artistic expression, highlighting Guizhou as a critical research gap within regional landscape oil painting studies in China.

8. Discussion

The thematic review presented in this article reveals a progressive yet fragmented research landscape. Studies on nationalization established a foundational framework for understanding how oil painting internalizes Chinese cultural values. Research on expressive aesthetics and artistic conception translated this framework into aesthetic and experiential terms, while formal language studies provided analytical tools for examining visual structure. Regionality research further introduced spatial specificity and contextual depth into the field.

Despite these advances, a persistent reliance on descriptive approaches remains evident. Many studies successfully identify stylistic characteristics or aesthetic tendencies, yet stop short of explaining how such features emerge. This limitation is particularly pronounced in regional studies, where natural environment and visual form are often juxtaposed without

sufficient attention to mediating processes.

A mechanism-oriented perspective offers a productive direction for future research. From this perspective, regional landscape oil painting can be understood as the outcome of interactions among environmental conditions, embodied experience, expressive aesthetics, and formal language. Rather than treating region as a static backdrop, this approach emphasizes dynamic processes through which artists internalize place and transform it into visual expression.

The case of Guizhou highlights the urgency of such a shift. Existing studies confirm the influence of natural environment on artistic expression, yet lack explanatory models capable of linking ecological complexity, emotional experience, and formal strategy. Addressing this gap would not only deepen understanding of Guizhou landscape oil painting, but also enhance the theoretical coherence of regional studies more broadly.

Finally, the review underscores the value of comparative regional analysis. Examining multiple regions within a shared analytical framework can reveal both common mechanisms and distinctive variations, thereby strengthening theoretical generalization. Integrating perspectives from cultural geography, visual culture studies, and art education may further enrich such analyses, particularly within interdisciplinary contexts.

9. Conclusion

This article has provided a thematic literature review of research on Chinese landscape oil painting, tracing the evolution of scholarly discourse from nationalization to expressive aesthetics, formal language, and regionality. By synthesizing these research strands, the review demonstrates that Chinese landscape oil painting studies have gradually shifted from abstract cultural discussions toward more context-sensitive analyses of aesthetic and spatial experience.

The review also identifies key limitations in existing scholarship, including theoretical fragmentation, descriptive emphasis, and uneven regional coverage. These issues constrain the development of explanatory models capable of accounting for regional diversity. In particular, underexplored regions such as Guizhou reveal the need for more systematic and integrative approaches.

10. Limitations and Future Research

Based on these findings, several directions for future research can be proposed. First, scholars should prioritize mechanism-oriented analysis that links environment, experience, expressive aesthetics, and formal language within unified frameworks. Second, comparative regional studies should be expanded to test the generalizability of theoretical models. Third, interdisciplinary perspectives—drawing from cultural geography, anthropology, and art education—should be more fully integrated into landscape oil painting research.

In conclusion, advancing research on Chinese landscape oil painting requires a shift from descriptive categorization toward explanatory synthesis. The thematic framework proposed in this review provides a foundation for such efforts and invites further exploration of regional diversity within a coherent theoretical context.

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