

Abstract Expression and Emotional Embodiment in Artworks from a Sino-Western Fusion Perspective: Focusing on Modern Master Zhao Wuji

Mingyuzhuo Liu Xialing Zhang

College of Art Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua China,321004;

Abstract: Every time I see Mr. Zhao Wuji's mature works, I feel familiar with them. This familiarity seems to be imprinted in the depths of my soul, and is an attribute that Chinese people bring with them. Although I have seen these works for the first time, I feel as if I have known them for a long time. It is often said that art has no borders, but in the eyes of European and American art masters, the ancient and mysterious East has always carried a mysterious veil. They want to learn and explore this mysterious oriental meaning, but it is difficult to succeed. However, as a native of Peiping, Zhao Wuji had an advantage that none of them had - the Chinese. It is this identity and cultural influence that makes Zhao Wuji's works perfectly blend Western expressive painting with traditional Chinese cultural connotations.

Key words: ZhaoWuji; mysterious oriental meaning; Western expressive painting

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1. Introduction

Throughout history, art in China has often served religious and political purposes, traditionally existing as an exclusive pursuit of the elite. Activities such as composing poetry over wine or performing refined music with instruments like the qin and se were privileges reserved for nobility and high-ranking officials. Moreover, due to the profound influence of Confucian cultural traditions, nude or openly expressive art forms faced significant societal resistance. Consequently, art remained largely inaccessible to the common populace during China's feudal era, a legacy that persists today, as art—and particularly abstract art—continues to struggle for widespread acceptance.

Although Chinese artists began engaging with Western abstract pioneers like Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich in the 1980s, the conceptual framework of "Chinese abstract art" only gained traction in contemporary discourse. This evolution owes much to the groundbreaking efforts of modern masters such as Zhao Wuji (Zao Wou-Ki), Wu Dayu, Zhu Dequn, and Wu Guanzhong, whose cross-cultural explorations bridged Eastern philosophy with Western abstraction.

2.A Brief Discussion on Zhao Wuji's Life and Artistic Journey

Zhao Wuji (Zao Wou-Ki), a Chinese-French painter, was born into an affluent family in Beijing, China, and was notably traced as the 31st-generation descendant of Emperor Zhao Kuangyin, founder of the Song Dynasty. Immersed in Chinese cultural traditions from childhood under his grandfather's tutelage, Zhao was further nurtured in an environment rich with artistic and intellectual influences. His father, Zhao Hansheng, a banker and avid collector of cultural artifacts and calligraphy paintings, provided both financial stability and a profound aesthetic upbringing.

In 1935, at the age of 14, Zhao enrolled at the Hangzhou National College of Art (now the China Academy of Art), where he later held his first solo exhibition upon graduation. With the guidance of his mentor Lin Fengmian, Zhao and his first wife, Xie Jinglan, relocated to Paris in 1948. During this period, his artistic style underwent a transformative shift under the influence of neighbors like Pablo Picasso and the Cubist movement. By merging Western abstract oil painting techniques with traditional Chinese aesthetics, Zhao achieved international ac

claim, revolutionizing abstract art.

Following his divorce from Xie Jinglan in 1957, Zhao experienced a prolonged creative hiatus marked by melancholy. His artistic resurgence coincided with his marriage to his second wife, Chen Meiqin, whom he regarded as his "true love." This phase, often termed his "Wild Cursive Script Period," yielded prolific and commercially celebrated works. After Chen's untimely death, Zhao entered a contemplative late-life chapter marked by existential reflections—having endured the Japanese invasion of China, his father's tragic demise, Lin Fengmian's hardships, and personal losses. His marriage to Françoise Marquet offered solace and companionship, grounding his later works in serene introspection. These final creations, imbued with tempered emotional depth, invite viewers into meditative stillness, embodying the wisdom of a life weathered by turbulence.

3.Chinese Aesthetic Connotations in Zhao Wuji's Abstract Works

Encountering Zhao Wuji's mature works, one is struck by an uncanny familiarity—a resonance that seems imprinted in the collective soul of Chinese cultural identity. Though viewing these pieces for the first time, they evoke a sense of timeless kinship, as if reconnecting with ancestral memory. While it is often said that art transcends borders, the enigmatic "Oriental essence" has long eluded Western masters, who sought to unravel its mysteries yet struggled to authentically embody its depth.

As a native of Beijing, Zhao possessed an innate advantage inaccessible to his Western counterparts: his cultural DNA as a Chinese artist. Steeped in the philosophical and aesthetic traditions of his heritage—from the fluidity of ink-wash painting to the cosmological principles of yin-yang—Zhao achieved a singular synthesis. His works seamlessly merge the gestural vigor of Western expressive painting with the contemplative spirit of Chinese literati art, creating a visual language that is both globally modern and profoundly rooted in Eastern sensibilities. This cultural duality allowed him to reinterpret abstraction not as a rejection of form, but as an expansion of the ancient Chinese pursuit of *yijing* (artistic conception)—where brushstrokes breathe with the rhythm of nature and voids resonate with metaphysical presence.

3.1."Dao Wuji (The Infinite Dao)": The Boundless Painting Philosophy

The name "Wuji" (无极, "Infinite") in Zhao Wuji's identity originates from a passage in Laozi (Tao Te Ching)—"Be the model of the world, uphold eternal virtue without error, and return to the state of the Infinite (wuji)"—chosen by his grandfather. This patriarch systematically instilled classical Chinese learning in the young Zhao, planting the seeds of Daoist philosophy deep within his worldview. Over time, Zhao came to realize that depicting nature should transcend superficial representation to embody spiritual freedom and uninhibited purity. This conviction materialized in his bold, sweeping brushstrokes that channeled raw emotional liberation.

His 1966 work *16.5.66* exemplifies this philosophy. Dominated by earthy brown and luminous white, the painting's compositional structure echoes the Taiji (Yin-Yang) symbol at the intersection of hues. Sparse yet potent black-and-white strokes pulsate with the rhythmic interplay of complementary forces, evoking an ethereal rhythmic beauty. The work masterfully balances dynamic stillness and still dynamism—a visual metaphor for the Daoist ideal of harmonizing motion and tranquility. Here, the void is not emptiness but a pregnant silence, resonating with the *qi* (vital energy) that flows between brushstrokes, embodying the Infinite through finite forms.

3.2.Traditional Chinese Aesthetics of Yin-Yang (Dualism) and Xu-Shi (Void-Solid)

Where there is solidity (*shi*), there must be void (*xu*); where there is shadow (*yin*), there must be light (*yang*). The interplay of these complementary forces permeates all existence, crystallizing a cornerstone of traditional Chinese aesthetics. As the adage states: "Dense enough to block the wind, sparse enough to let horses gallop through"—a poetic encapsulation of yin-yang and xu-shi dynamics. Zhao Wuji's works elevate this dialectic to sublime heights, offering visual symphonies of cosmic harmony.

His monumental painting *June 10, 1985* (10 meters long and 2.8 meters wide) immerses viewers in an aurora-like radiance, its awe-inspiring beauty defying verbal description. To stand before it is to confront an eruption

of traditional Chinese aesthetics—a rainbow piercing darkness, dissolving sorrow into dust; a mythical realm of warmth emerging from winter's chill. Created during Zhao's "Boundless Period" at age 64, after his marriage to his third wife Françoise Marquet, this work reflects a lifetime weathered by war, emotional turbulence, and existential contemplation. Unlike the tempestuous brushwork of his "Wild Cursive Script Period," these later works exude tranquil stillness, their surfaces calm yet containing multitudes.

In June 10, 1985, Prussian blue dominates the lateral and lower sections, punctuated by ethereal cyan luminescence reminiscent of ink-wash spontaneity. The central expanse dissolves into hazy ochre, where void coalesces with form and shadow dances with light—a masterclass in xu-shi composition. Here, Zhao channels the Daoist wisdom of wuwei (non-action), allowing pigments to breathe with the rhythm of cosmic forces. The painting becomes a meditative field where personal history and cultural memory converge, proving that true abstraction in Zhao's hands was never a departure from tradition, but its most profound reaffirmation.

4. Abstract Expression and Emotional Embodiment in Zhao Wuji's Works

It is often said that abstraction and emotion are intrinsically intertwined, engaged in a symbiotic dance. The torrential release of emotion births abstract compositions where colors collide and forms dissolve, while the artist's inner turmoil or ecstasy reverberates across the canvas to resonate with the viewer. In my view, abstract art is first conceived in the mind—a primal response to intense ideological ferment and explosive emotional states. The artwork, already fully formed in the psyche, demands materialization onto the canvas as an act of cathartic expression.

This aligns with Wilhelm Worringer's seminal assertion in his 1908 treatise *Abstraction and Empathy*:

"True art has, at all times, satisfied a profound psychological need rather than the mere instinct for imitation, that playful delight in copying natural prototypes. The mystical aura surrounding the concept of art—the ecstatic reverence it has commanded across epochs—can only be explained psychologically. For it is evident that art arises from, and fulfills, a fundamental human psychic necessity."

Zhao Wuji's oeuvre epitomizes this dialectic. His "Wild Cursive Script Period" paintings, for instance, translate visceral emotions—the euphoria of newfound love, the anguish of loss—into kinetic brushstrokes that oscillate between chaos and control. Yet even in his later "Boundless Period," where compositions attain meditative stillness, emotion persists as a subterranean current. The expansive voids and whispering gradients in works like 04.05.64 do not negate feeling but distill it into a universal language of existential contemplation. Here, abstraction becomes a vessel for transcending individual sentiment, channeling what Worringer termed the "metaphysical disquiet" of the human condition.

4.1. The "First Love" and Zhao Wuji's "Oracle Bone Script Period"

Zhao Wuji's works served dual purposes: they channeled his emotional catharsis while fulfilling viewers' aesthetic yearnings—a testament to how his art and personal life were inextricably intertwined. As a teenager, under his father's ardent support, Zhao enrolled at the Hangzhou National College of Art (now China Academy of Art), where he met his first love, Xie Jinglan. Born into an intellectual family like Zhao, Xie moved to Shanghai at seven before settling near West Lake in Hangzhou. At 14, her exceptional musical talent secured her admission to the same institution to study vocal performance. Though initially strangers, the two connected through familial ties, kindling a romance that culminated in marriage six years later.

In 1948, with mentor Lin Fengmian's encouragement, Zhao departed for Paris, unaware this journey would sever ties with his father and ultimately his beloved wife. Xie, a fiercely independent intellectual, refused to subsume her identity within their marriage. As Zhao thrived in France's art scene—embracing influences like Pablo Picasso's Cubism—Xie felt increasingly isolated and misunderstood. By 1957, she initiated a divorce that left Zhao heartbroken and disoriented. "Young couples grow old together as companions," he lamented, struggling to reconcile the loss of their 16-year bond forged through shared struggles and youthful passion.

The years 1954–1958, termed Zhao's "Oracle Bone Script Period," bore witness to this emotional harmony b

efore the rupture. Inspired by Xie's pioneering work integrating Chinese calligraphy into modern dance, Zhao abandoned his earlier Western mimicry. Works like *Horse Racing* (1952) pulsate with primal energy—galloping steeds rendered in strokes echoing oracle bone inscriptions. In *Small Bridge, Flowing Water* (1955), bridges materialize as hieroglyphic forms amidst azure rivers and crimson lanterns, blending landscape poetry with archaic symbolism. Tragically, this creative zenith proved fleeting. Xie's departure in 1957 plunged Zhao into physical and emotional turmoil, stifling his output.

Yet it is precisely such visceral emotional currents—love, loss, existential dissonance—that forge transcendent art. As the Surrealist poet Guillaume Apollinaire remarked of his muse Marie Laurencin: "Her work, simple, resolute, and bold, attains the highest praise in grace and elegance. In terms of aesthetic sensibility, only Picasso rivals her." Laurencin's six-year romance with Apollinaire ignited her most prolific phase, mirroring how Zhao's union with Xie unleashed his 甲骨文-inspired renaissance. Great love gifts artists wings of inspiration, carrying their souls toward uncharted realms—a truth resonating equally for Zhao Wuji, Marie Laurencin, and all who channel life's tremors into timeless form.

4.2. The Advent of "True Love" and Zhao Wuji's "Wild Cursive Script Period"

This phase marked Zhao Wuji's artistic zenith—a period of radical stylistic transformation known as his "Wild Cursive Script Period," during which his works gained immense market acclaim. This metamorphosis was inextricably linked to his second wife, Chen Meiqin, whom he encountered serendipitously and fell passionately in love with. Unlike the steady companionship of his first marriage, this relationship burned with primal intensity, igniting a creative firestorm.

The paintings from this era—characterized by unrestrained brushwork and volcanic color clashes—visceralize Zhao's emotional tempest. Abandoning descriptive titles, he began dating works like 19.7.63 (1963), 25.09.69 (1969), and 11.12.70 (1970), liberating viewers from semantic constraints into pure visual meditation. These canvases erupt with "mountain ridge-like" crests of pigment, where centrifugal strokes collide in chromatic ecstasy. One senses Zhao's euphoria: the shadows of his first marriage dissolved, replaced by artistic rebirth.

Viewers often describe an uncanny familiarity when confronting these abstractions—a subconscious recognition of their embedded Chineseness. Torrential rivers seem to cascade from the frames; mountain mists cling to the viewer's face; dawn light fractures into prismatic shards. Zhao transmuted passion into painterly syntax, embedding emotion within abstraction's paradox—formless yet charged with existential gravity.

Wilhelm Worringer's thesis in *Abstraction and Empathy* illuminates this phase:

"Abstract lines not only eradicate the last vestiges of dependence on nature, elevating art to pure intuitive creation, but also forge an absolute form—a non-natural form born of inner necessity. This form embodies a primordial, fundamental law of aesthetics, attaining transcendent beauty."

For Zhao, the "Wild Cursive Script Period" epitomized this "inner necessity." Each stroke became hieroglyphs of desire—an absolute formal language inseparable from his volcanic love. Without Chen's catalytic presence, these masterworks of chromatic alchemy might never have materialized. Here, abstraction ceased to be a style; it became the seismograph of a soul in sublime upheaval.

4.3. Serene Mentality and Zhao Wuji's "Boundless Period"

Zhao Wuji once remarked on his enduring fascination with water's ripples and stillness—a pursuit manifest across his oeuvre. Yet it was during his union with his third wife, Françoise Marquet, that he truly breathed life into aqueous abstraction. Having weathered the storms of Chen Meiqin's tragic suicide and a lifetime of upheavals, Zhao found solace in companionship's quiet constancy. The works from this "Boundless Period" (1980s–2000s) shed the tempestuous brushwork of his "Wild Cursive Script" phase, embracing instead expansive planes of color where intersecting lines dissolve into meditative horizons.

Paintings like *Untitled* (1981) and 03.12.86 (1986) epitomize this transformation. The latter, a personal favorite, bathes viewers in an endless seascape: pale flesh tones merge with iridescent lavender sands, bisected by a

deep blue band that evokes distant oceanic depths. The upper expanse of cerulean stretches limitlessly, its surface unrippled yet charged with latent vitality. To stand before it is to inhabit a coastal liminality—salty breezes caressing the face, granules of sand shifting beneath imagined feet. Here, Zhao's octogenarian psyche reveals itself: a heart weathered to serenity, its rhythms synchronized with the tides.

In our 21st-century art world, where pluralism reigns and "content" often cedes to formal bravado—jarring textures, chromatic collisions, and visceral immediacy—abstract art remains paradoxically marginalized. Public comprehension lags, echoing early 20th-century struggles when abstraction faced bourgeois ridicule and proletarian indifference. Today, as then, its language speaks primarily to cultural elites. How many in contemporary China truly grasp abstraction's lexicon? This paper, through interdisciplinary analysis and cross-cultural perspective, seeks to illuminate how artists like Zhao Wuji transmute emotion into abstract form—a dialogue between Eastern philosophy and Western modernism that continues to redefine artistic boundaries.

5. New Visions of Eastern-Western Abstract Art Revealed in Zhao Wuji's Works

If Zhao Wuji's synthesis of Chinese artistic ethos and Western expressive oil painting marks a pinnacle of cross-cultural abstraction, it necessitates revisiting the origins and evolution of global abstract art. The concept of abstract painting emerged with Wassily Kandinsky, initially denoting the distillation of figurative subjects—evident in Piet Mondrian's *Tree* series—before shedding representational anchors to embrace pure chromatic and formal composition. Yet from a cosmic perspective, abstraction is inherent to existence itself: primordial chaos, mountain ranges, celestial bodies—all are abstract in essence. As Zhao asserted, "One need not seek 'beauty' in art or fret over sociopolitical allegories." His works radiate an unpretentious reverence for nature and an authentic embodiment of Chinese aesthetics, bridging millennia of cultural memory.

Paradoxically, China's engagement with abstraction predates Western modernism by millennia. The semi-abstract fish, avian motifs, and geometric patterns adorning 5,000-year-old Majiayao and Yangshao painted pottery attest to an ancient abstract lexicon. Yet without systematic preservation, these proto-abstractions faded into obscurity. Zhao's genius lay in resurrecting this heritage through his "Oracle Bone Script Period," fusing archaic inscriptions with oil painting—a revolutionary act that compelled Chinese artists to re-examine their cultural DNA.

While 20th-century Chinese abstraction absorbed Western influences, its core resonated with indigenous concepts like *yijing* (artistic conception) and *qiyun* (spiritual resonance). Conversely, Eastern philosophy profoundly shaped Western modernists: Joan Miró's biomorphic forms, Paul Klee's calligraphic lines, Willem de Kooning's gestural dynamism, and Jackson Pollock's drip paintings all betray dialogues with Asian aesthetics.

Zhao Wuji stands as a linchpin in this cross-cultural exchange. By channeling Daoist cosmology through Western media—vibrant oils, impasto textures, and chromatic veils—he forged a transcendent visual language. Works like *04.05.64* (1964) oscillate between explosive energy and meditative stillness, their swirling forms echoing cosmic nebulae and ink-wash spontaneity. Hailed as "the standard-bearer of lyrical abstraction," Zhao redefined abstraction not as formal experiment but as spiritual cartography.

He once predicted it would take fifty years for China to comprehend his art. Yet today, audiences worldwide immerse themselves in his chromatic cosmos—a testament to Chinese abstraction's accelerating evolution. From initial skepticism to growing acceptance, public engagement with abstraction mirrors societal progress. As Wang Huangsheng noted at Zhao's 1999 retrospective: "Back then, abstract art held little resonance with the Chinese public." Zhao's perseverance in "expressing inner realms through individuality and soul" (his own words) opened a portal for China's abstract renaissance.

In this Sino-Western integrative horizon, Zhao Wuji's legacy endures as both a bridge and a beacon—proving that the most radical innovations often emerge from the deepest cultural roots.

6. Conclusion

In the ever-evolving landscape of contemporary art, the phenomenon of Sino-Western fusion has grown increasingly pervasive. Against this backdrop, we must remain anchored in the traditional artistic ethos of our culture.

al heritage while dynamically integrating Western artistic philosophies and conceptual frameworks. As exemplified by Zhao Wuji's oeuvre, the true power of abstraction lies in its capacity to synthesize these dual legacies into a harmonious whole—one that expresses China's traditional artistic ethos and profound cultural rootedness through abstract forms.

Zhao's legacy serves as both a compass and a challenge: to transcend binary oppositions between "Eastern" and "Western," and to reimagine abstraction not as a borrowed language, but as a living dialogue between millennia-old aesthetic wisdom and modernist innovation. In this interplay, the brush becomes a bridge, and pigment a medium of cultural alchemy—transmuting tradition into universality, and individuality into collective memory. As global art continues its metamorphosis, Zhao's vision reminds us that the most resonant abstractions are those that pulse with the heartbeat of their origins, yet breathe freely in the boundless sky of human creativity.

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