

The Development of Chinese Painting-Style Photography

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the developmental trajectory and evolutionary characteristics of Chinese pictorial photography. The study begins with theoretical origins, analyzing the aesthetic propositions of Western pictorial photography and its localization process in China, while examining the aesthetic differences and intrinsic connections between Chinese and Western pictorial photography. Following a chronological approach, the thesis traces the development of Chinese pictorial photography from the late Qing Dynasty to the contemporary era: first, it investigates how traditional literati painting aesthetics permeated early photographic creations after the introduction of photography to China, and how figures like Chen Wanli and Liu Bannong achieved theoretical awareness of the transition from "technique" to "art"; second, it analyzes how Lang Jingshan's "composite photography" borrowed compositional principles from traditional Chinese landscape painting, employing darkroom synthesis techniques to create an artistic effect of "vivid energy and rhythm," while exploring the era's impact of this model and its international dissemination status; finally, it examines the decline and reflection of pictorial photography under the impact of documentary photography from the late 20th century to the present, as well as how contemporary artists like Yang Yongliang and Yao Lu have reconstructed urban landscapes through digital technology and repurposed traditional motifs for social critique, achieving a transformation from aesthetic pleasure to the ideological core of social narrative. The research reveals that Chinese pictorial photography, as a unique art form, continuously redefines itself through the collision and fusion of Chinese and Western cultures, maintaining cultural confidence and innovative vitality in its developmental patterns.

Keywords

Chinese pictorial photography; pictorial photography; development of photography; artistic integration; photographic creation

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Photography was introduced to China in the late Qing and early Republican periods after its technical maturity in the West. Amid social transformation and ideological tension, it was initially valued as a documentary tool but gradually integrated into traditional visual culture. Influenced by calligraphy and painting, Chinese photographers moved beyond Western realism, developing expressive styles aligned with traditional aesthetics. This shift elevated photography into an art form. By the 1920s, pictorial

and fine art photography flourished in cities like Shanghai and Beijing. Its development reflects the interaction of Chinese and Western visual cultures and highlights the localization, evolution, and role of photography in shaping modern Chinese artistic identity.

1.2 Research Objectives and Significance

Chinese pictorial photography combines Western techniques with the aesthetics of traditional Chinese painting, forming a cross-cultural artistic practice. This study traces its evolution from imitating classical painting to integrating philosophical ideas and brushwork spirit, shaping its unique identity. While prior research focuses on figures

like Lang Jingshan, there is limited analysis of intergenerational development. By examining Lang Jingshan, Yang Yongliang, and Yao Lu, this study outlines a lineage of technical and conceptual inheritance, highlighting the fusion of Chinese and Western art. It also argues that transforming traditional aesthetics can inspire contemporary innovation and strengthen the cultural identity of Chinese photography.

2 Theoretical Origin of Pictorial Photography and Chinese and Western Context

2.1 The Birth and Aesthetic Proposition of Pictorial Photography in the West

In the mid-19th century, the spread of Daguerreotype and

early photographic techniques made image capture widely accessible, but also triggered debates over photography’s artistic status. Initially seen as a mechanical tool lacking emotional expression, photographers sought to overcome this limitation by adopting principles from traditional painting. This led to the emergence of pictorial photography, which emphasized composition, lighting, and dark-room manipulation to create images resembling paintings. Techniques such as superimposition and tonal control allowed photographers to treat negatives as creative media rather than mere records. Influenced by movements like Pre-Raphaelitism, Western pictorial photography developed through artists such as Oscar Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson, whose works gained recognition in salon exhibitions and helped establish photography as an art form.

Table 1. The Core Schools and Aesthetic Propositions of Western Pictorial Photography

stage of development	Core Schools/ Groups	Time of rise	representative personage	core aesthetic proposition
germination origin stage	High Art Photography	1850s to 1880s	Oscar Reiland, Henry Robinson	Drawing on the narrative structure and composition principles of classical painting, pursuing moral implications and artistic beauty, and imitating painting creation through multi-layered splicing, it advocates that photography should be ranked among the ranks of pure art.
systematic development stage	Chain Association	1890s	Alfred Stiglitz, Edward Steichen	The author thinks that photography should get rid of imitating painting technique, emphasize the characteristics of photography itself, advocate photographers to replace mechanical recording with personal artistic expression, and promote pictorialism photography to become an independent artistic trend.
peak diffusion phase	photographic separation school	Early 20th century	Alfred Stiglitz, Paul Strand	He advocated to break the shackles of salon painting and explore the purity and artistic expression of photography, which not only continued the artistic pursuit of pictorial photography, but also laid the foundation for the transformation of modernist photography.
Stage of style extension	Impressionist pictorial photography	Late 19th century to early 20th century	Robert DeMarci, Frank Eugene	Drawing inspiration from the impressionist painting's hazy light and atmosphere, this technique employs soft focus and paint smearing to soften sharp textures, aiming for an artistic portrayal of fleeting light and ambiance.

2.2 Localization Definition and Connotation of the Concept of "Pictorialism" in China

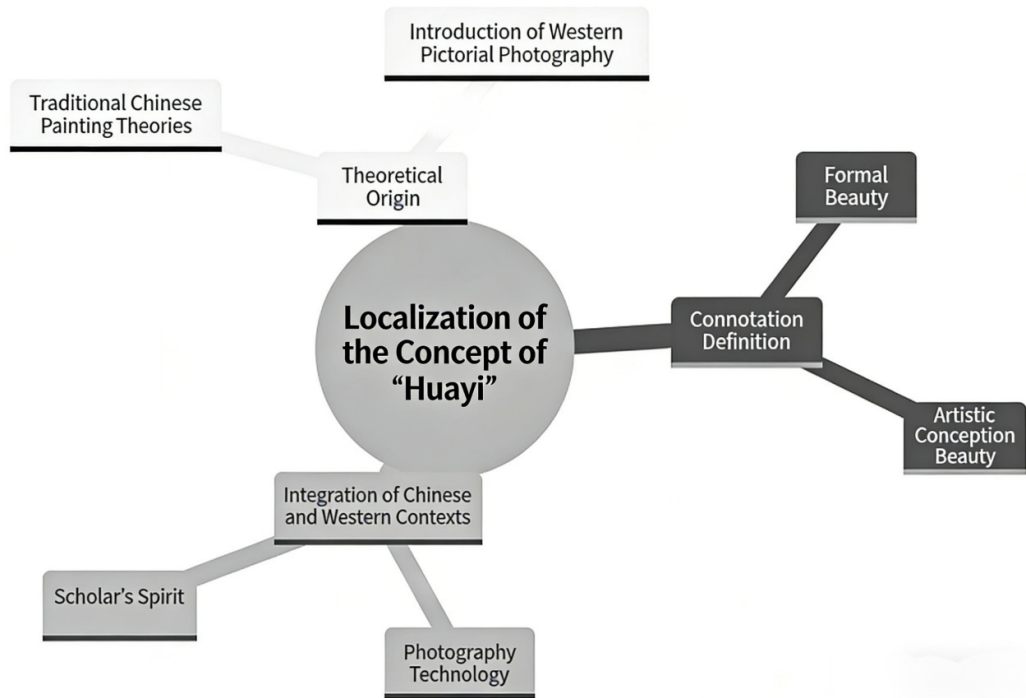


Figure 1. Localization Definition and Connotation of the Concept of "Pictorialism" in China

The definition of the connotation of local "painting" is the premise of sorting out the evolution of Chinese painting photography. Different from the imitation of painting in the west to strive for the legitimacy of art, the core of Chinese painting photography lies in the three aesthetic cores of "artistic conception", "vitality" and "brush and ink interest", which frame its artistic boundary by constructing the scenery beyond the image, transmitting the rhythm of life and transforming the texture of writing through the lens.

In the early period, Lang Jingshan reconstructed the artistic conception of landscape painting through collage photography, aligning with traditional painting. In the contemporary era, the focus shifted to capturing Eastern philosophical insights from reality, internalizing pictorial

meaning as a mode of observation and expression, thereby achieving an aesthetic advancement from technical imitation to spiritual internalization.

In contrast, Western pictorial photography emphasizes the replication of painting techniques and visual forms to establish its artistic status, later achieving independence through the Separation Movement. China's approach has always been rooted in traditional aesthetics, focusing on artistic conception and spirit to evoke spiritual resonance. While the two differ significantly in expression and content, both strive to transcend the documentary nature of photography and pursue artistic aesthetic value. Ultimately, in rejecting mechanical reproduction and projecting subjective emotions, the two art forms achieve a deep spiritual resonance [6].

Table 2. Comparison of Aesthetic Differences and Intrinsic Connections between Chinese and Western Photographic Art

Contrast dimension	Chinese pictorial photography	Western pictorial photography	intrinsic commonality
core aesthetic pursuit	The Artistic Creation of the Unity of Man and Nature and the Poetic Expression of the Forgetfulness of Self and Object	Emulating the formal beauty of classical painting, pursuing artistic visual harmony	All of them aim to break through the attribute of documentary photography and pursue the artistic aesthetic value of photography

Contrast dimension	Chinese pictorial photography	Western pictorial photography	intrinsic commonality
1. The Source of Creative Thought	The aesthetics of traditional Chinese literati painting are influenced by Taoist and Zen philosophy.	The Aesthetic of European Romanticism Influenced by the Academic Painting Concept Before Impressionism	Absorbing the Artistic Language of Traditional Painting and Exploring the Expressive Power of Photography
composition language features	The layout of the virtual and the real with the blank space as the core, following the spatial logic of 'treating the blank space as the black space'	Adhering to the perspective principles of classical painting, it emphasizes a complete composition with the subject prominently featured.	They all draw on the experience of painting composition and break away from the documentary nature of documentary photography.
path of emotional expression	Expressing Emotion by Scenery, Pursuing the Subtle Expression of the Realm Beyond the Image	Conveying meaning through form, emphasizing the emotional impact of visual presentation, and expressing ideas relatively directly.	The core of the works is emotional expression, which is opposed to the pure mechanical recording attribute of photography.
media treatment	Use soft focus and darkroom stacking to simulate the effect of ink wash, pursuing the charm of brush and ink	Soft-focus lens with brush effect simulates oil painting texture, perfecting the painting quality	All through post-processing to adjust the visuals, actively creating artistic effects that meet aesthetic standards.

Chapter 3 The Sprout and Early Exploration of Chinese Artistic Photography (from the Late Qing Dynasty to the 1930s)

3.1 Introduction of Western Photography and the Formation of Early Local Photography Groups

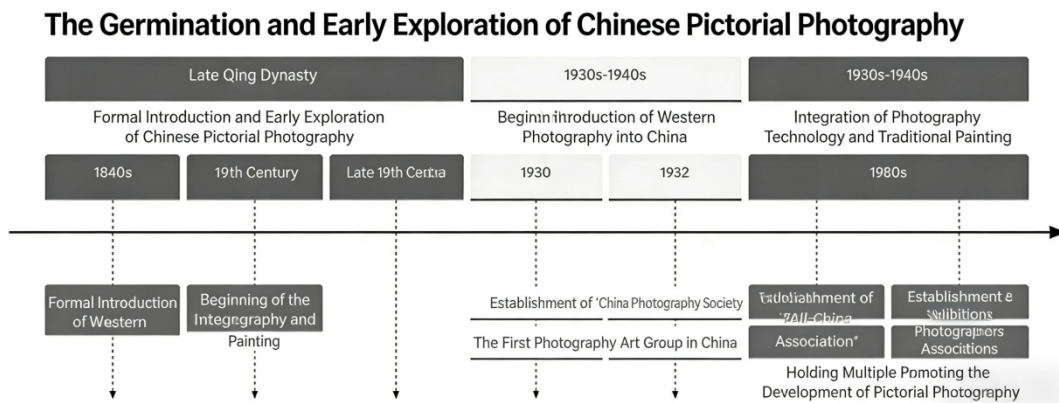


Figure 2. The Sprout and Early Exploration of Chinese Artistic Photography (from the Late Qing Dynasty to the 1930s)

In the mid-19th century, the Opium War broke out, and China's treaty ports were subsequently opened, allowing photography to penetrate inland from the coast with foreign personnel. Early photography relied on mechanical imaging and was used for portrait preservation and landscape exploration, impacting China's traditional visual arts. A group of Chinese scholars began to contemplate the artistic attributes of photography after mastering the technology, laying the groundwork for the emergence of picto-

rial photography in China. During the late Qing and early Republican periods, the evolution of printing technology and the spread of new cultural trends brought photography into the public cultural sphere, with a group of intellectuals dedicating themselves to the localization of photography. From the 1920s to the 1930s, Chinese photography entered its first phase of vigorous collective development, with the establishment of photography groups such as the Beijing Light Society, the Chinese Photographic Society,

and the Black and White Photography Society. These groups comprised diverse core members who organized photography exhibitions and discussions, leading to a small peak in the development of pictorial photography. The core practice of early photography groups was essentially the localization and re-creation of Western pictorialist photographic aesthetics. The pioneers, deeply influenced by China's classical poetry and painting, keenly captured the painterly and formal beauty of these traditions. In their creations, they employed techniques

such as scattered perspective to construct visual order, breaking through the limitations of photographic mechanical reproduction. Thus, Western photographic theory was successfully localized and introduced, and the aesthetics of creation were incorporated into academic discourse. Under the dual impetus of practice and theory, photography gradually became an independent art form, laying a solid foundation for the formation and enlightenment of China's pictorialist photography school.

Table 3. Development of Main Local Photography Groups in the Incipient Stage of Chinese Photo-painting from the Late Qing Dynasty to the 1930s

Group name	founding time	Location of establishment	Core Founder	The main practice direction of pictorial exploration
Chinese community	1928	Shanghai	Lang Jingshan, Hu Boxiang	Drawing on the Chinese painting composition and ink art, exploring the early experiments of the photo collage, and promoting the combination of photography and traditional literati aesthetics
China Photographic Society	1927	Shanghai	Chen Wanli, Huang Zhenyu	Advocate the artification of photography, advocate the absorption of the spirit of Chinese painting, hold the exhibition of photography to popularize the idea of painting
Beijing Guangshe	1923	Beijing	Liu Bannong, Wu Yuzhou	The earliest amateur art photography group in China was the first to propose the idea of aligning photography with traditional Chinese aesthetics, setting a precedent for the parallel exhibition of photographic works and Chinese paintings.
Guangzhou Photography Research Society	1926	Guangzhou	Panda Wei, Li Song	Combining the Aesthetic Taste of Lingnan Painting School, Exploring the Painting Realm Expression of Landscape Photography and Promoting the Spread of Poetic Photography in Southern China
Black and White Photography Studio	1931	Shanghai	Chen Chuanlin, Lu Shifu	Continue the direction of Chinese painting exploration, expand the expression of artistic conception in the theme of humanism, publish a collection of photographic works to expand the influence of painting and photography

3.2 The Influence of Traditional Literati Painting Aesthetics on Early Photography

From the late Qing Dynasty to the 1930s, photography with its European realist tradition was introduced to China through the opening of treaty ports, resonating spiritually with the aesthetic system of literati painting. Early creators were mostly from the scholar-official class, equipped with the aesthetic filter of literati painting, and

their lens perspectives were influenced by their social status, leading to the rapid localization of photography as a new medium carrying traditional aesthetics. Instead of focusing on scenes of treaty ports or portraits of people, the creators chose landscapes, plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemums, recreating the spiritual core of traditional literati who expressed their emotions through nature. They avoided utilitarian orientation and

used their lenses to capture the charm of nature, making mechanical devices a flexible carrier of traditional aesthetics. This choice of subject matter was a natural extension of the traditional literati spirit onto the photographic medium, aligning with the traditional natural philosophy of harmony between heaven and humanity. In composition, early photographers avoided the Western realist obsession with filling the entire frame, using mountain mists and clouds to create a sense of void where reality and illusion coexist, echoing the spatial philosophy of literati painting that "counts white as black." They projected individual emotions onto light and shadow, infusing photography with localized genes, freeing it from the constraints of European paradigms and endowing it with distinct national aesthetic characteristics.

3.3 Chen Wanli and Liu Bannong: Theoretical Consciousness from "Technology" to "Art"

In the late Qing and early Republican era of China, the technical attributes of photographic documentation were emphasized, while artistic value was overshadowed in utilitarian practices. Early explorers led by Chen Wanli criticized creators who blindly imitated Western painting techniques and were confined to formal aspects, pointing out that the core of photographic creation lies in the subjective emotional projection of the creator. He stepped out of the darkroom, promoting the shift of photography from mechanical reproduction to the creation of artistic conception, laying the theoretical foundation for localized photographic art and redirecting the creative logic from focusing on physical parameters to pursuing aesthetic spirit.

Table 4. Comparison of Chen Wanli and Liu Bannong's Theoretical Exploration of Chinese Painting and Photography

Contrast dimension	Chen Wanli	Liu Bannong
Core identity	Pioneer of Photography Practice / Researcher of Epigraphy and Painting	Literary figure and advocate of photographic theory
Core Proposition	Emphasizing that photography should transcend pure technical documentation and integrate the aesthetic realm of traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting, advocating that "beauty lies in nature".	To clearly define photography as an independent art category, systematically distinguish between "freehand" and "freehand painting" photography, and construct a theoretical framework for Chinese painting-inspired photography.
practice approach	To practice the concept of "artistic photography" by taking photos in the field, integrating the traditional literati's elegant interest in sightseeing into photography creation, and emphasizing "real scene to create meaning"	Focusing on the theoretical summary and the guidance of the creation classification, it promotes the identity of photography from "technology" to "art", and advocates the transmission of literati interest through creation.
stage contribution	Breaking the Limit of Photography "Technique Only" and Completing the Preliminary Turn of Chinese Painting Photography from Technical Record to Artistic Expression	To realize the theory consciousness of Chinese pictorial photography, to clarify the aesthetic core and artistic attribute of Chinese pictorial photography, and to lay the foundation for the development of the discipline
representative works	"Great Wind Collection" and "Photography Discussions"	"Ban Nong Talks about Shadows"

Liu Bannong classified photography into three types: photographic reproduction, non-reproducible artistic photography, and studio photography. He advocated for artistic photography, believing that Chinese painting could help photographers create visual forms of lightness, distance, void, and emptiness to achieve "images beyond images."

4 The Maturity and the Summation of Chinese Artistic Photography-Take Lang Jingshan as an Example

4.1 Lang Jingshan's Artistic Life and the Proposal of "Photo Collection"

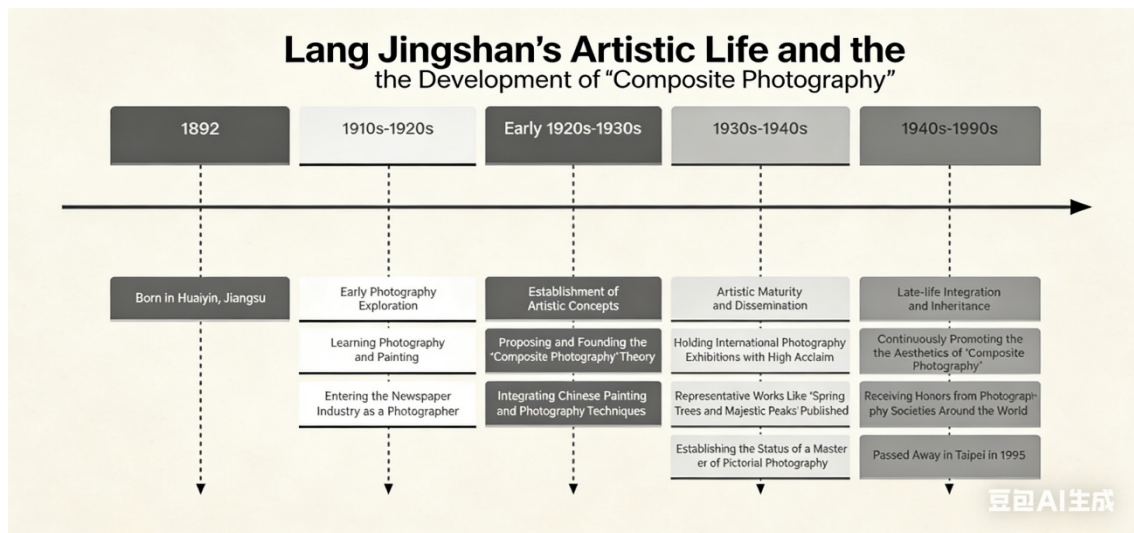


Figure 3. The Artistic Life of Lang Jingshan and the Development of "Collection Photography"

Lang Jingshan, hailed as the 'Father of Asian Photography,' is a trailblazer in Chinese pictorial photography. Trained in poetry, calligraphy, and painting from childhood, he later studied in Shanghai where he encountered Western photographic equipment and realistic concepts. His dual cultural background drove him to explore the convergence of Eastern and Western artistic expressions. In the 1930s, Lang Jingshan proposed the aesthetic concept of "composite photography," advocating the use of photography to restore the artistic conception and aesthetic purpose of traditional Chinese painting. The core principle was "collecting the best from a hundred schools," selecting and reconstructing materials based on aesthetic imagery. "Collage Photography" is the crystallization of the fusion between Western darkroom techniques and China's traditional aesthetics. It transcends the inherent nature of

mechanical reproduction in photography, drawing on the compositional principles of traditional painting. Through techniques such as multiple exposures, it assembles image materials, preserving the unique texture and rich layers of silver salt materials while reconstructing the perspective relationships in the image. This creates the distinctive aura and spatial sense characteristic of Chinese painting, ultimately endowing photography with an independent artistic attribute of subjective lyricism.

4.2 The Borrowing of "Photo Collage" from the Composition Rules of China Traditional Landscape Painting

Lang Jingshan's "composite photography" reconstructs multiple negatives using darkroom techniques, creatively translating the compositional principles of traditional Chinese landscape painting.

Table 5. Analysis of the Borrowing of Composition Rules from Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting in Lang Jingshan's Photographic Collection

The Composition Rules of Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting	core content of rule	The Specific Practice of Lang Jingshan's Collection of Photography	artistic effect
three distance composition	To construct the landscape space with three kinds of perspective levels: level distance, high distance and deep distance, to break through the limitation of single point perspective and create the artistic conception of living and traveling.	In the work "Morning Breeze and Waning Moon", the flat riverbanks and high mountains are integrated into a multi-perspective composition through a collage technique.	In line with the aesthetic perception of Chinese traditional literati towards landscape space, it presents a distant and expansive artistic conception.

The Composition Rules of Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting	core content of rule	The Specific Practice of Lang Jingshan's Collection of Photography	artistic effect
White Space Layout	Replace the real with the virtual, create a space with flowing atmosphere through the blank space, and leave the space for the imagination of the viewers	In the artwork "Pine and Crane in Eternal Spring," a large blank area is reserved at the top of the canvas to simulate cloud formations, while the pine and crane scenery is placed only at the bottom, creating a contrast between the solid and the void.	Responding to the Chinese painting concept of "counting the white as black", it creates a refined and elegant atmosphere of literati.
Opening and closing	Following the rhythm logic of 'introduction-development-transition-convolution', the narrative structure of the picture is constructed through the arrangement of dense and sparse scenery.	The work "Cloudy Mountains and Distant Peaks" begins with the nearby trees in the lower left corner, transitions through the misty hills in the middle, and concludes with the distant peaks in the upper right corner, forming a clear rhythmic flow through its composition.	Make the picture order accord with the rhythm of traditional Chinese art, avoid the confusion caused by the splicing, and realize the overall spirit of the connection.
false or true complement	The real brush is used to draw the foreground and the real scene, the virtual brush is used to draw the distant view and the virtual scene, the contrast between the real and the virtual is used to shape the space hierarchy, and the philosophy of Taoism of "the existence and non-existence are generated" is reflected.	In his collection of works, Lang Jingshan skillfully combines sharp foreground rocks with soft, blurred distant mountains and clouds, creating a striking contrast between the tangible and the intangible.	It not only enhances the depth of the image but also integrates the philosophical connotations of China, endowing photography with the characteristics of Eastern culture.

The "negative space composition" embodies the Chinese painting aesthetic of "treating white as black," serving as a core element in Lang Jingshan's curated works to regulate rhythm and catalyze artistic conception. Through exposure control and blocking techniques, Lang Jingshan eliminates redundant backgrounds while preserving clouds or blank areas, creating a contrast between the subject and the void to establish visual focus and leave ample room for viewers' imagination. He also emphasizes the coherence of landscapes, meticulously arranging the proportions of figures and mountains, as well as the interplay of hidden and revealed elements like pines, rocks, and clouds, achieving a harmonious balance between primary and secondary el-

ements with flowing energy. This creative reinterpretation of traditional compositional principles elevates photography into an artistic medium embodying Eastern philosophy, marking a profound exploration of the localization of photographic form and language. His work "Morning Water Drawing from the Clear River" vividly captures the essence of Chinese painting imagery without chiaroscuro. The stark contrast between the misty central bank and the branches below creates an expansive bird's-eye view and a sense of distant space, showcasing exquisite aesthetic qualities [4].

4.3 Technical Means and Artistic Conception: The "Vivid Vitality" in Darkroom Compositing

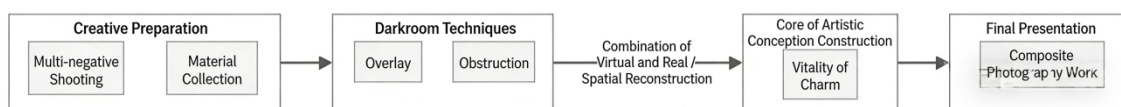


Figure 4. Technical Means and Artistic Conception: The "Vivid Vitality" in Darkroom Compositing

Lang Jingshan redefined photography through advanced darkroom techniques, constructing composite images that transcend single time and space. By selecting and layering negatives, and controlling density, contrast, and depth, he achieved visually coherent compositions beyond mechanical recording. His work reflects traditional Chinese aesthetics, particularly the concept of “qi and rhythm,” using light and shadow to emulate ink painting and create atmospheric depth. Through simplifying forms while preserving spirit, he shifted photography from objective representation to subjective expression. This integration of technical precision and artistic sensibility established a unique Eastern visual language that surpasses the limits of conventional photography.

4.4 The Era Influence of Lang Jingshan's Model and Its Status in International Communication

Lang Jingshan’s “Jijin Photography” reconstructs photographic images through darkroom techniques, transforming mechanical records into compositions guided by traditional Chinese painting principles. This model offered a new creative path for photographers and redefined photography’s artistic value. His work also enabled cross-cultural exchange, aligning with Western aesthetic expectations while expressing Eastern sensibilities. Between 1931 and 1948, his photographs were widely exhibited in international salons, marking China’s shift from importing photographic technology to exporting cultural expression. Compared with contemporary pictorial photography, which faces fragmented standards, Lang’s practice established a clear international paradigm, positioning him as a key bridge between Eastern aesthetics and Western photographic techniques.

5 Modern Transformation and Conceptual Reconstruction of Chinese Photo-ism (from the End of the 20th Century to Now)

5.1 The Silence and Reflection of Pictorial Photography under the Impact of Documentary Photography

By the late 20th century, China’s rapid social transformation reshaped photographic art. Influenced by ideological liberation and realist trends, documentary photography evolved beyond mere recording, emphasizing social re-

sponsibility and humanistic concern. Focusing on marginalized groups and urban–rural realities, it became the dominant discourse. In contrast, pictorial photography, centered on aesthetic expression and traditional brushwork, faced identity crises and was criticized as detached from social reality. As resources and attention shifted, it declined into marginalization, especially after 1949 when photography served political purposes, though it persisted in regions like Taiwan and Hong Kong. However, this decline prompted reflection, highlighting its value in formal experimentation, aesthetic innovation, and the reconstruction of modern photographic concepts.

5.2 Yang Yongliang: The "New Artistic Conception" in the Digital Age and the Reconstruction of Urban Landscape

Yang Yongliang uses digital image processing to shift pictorial photography from formal imitation to the reconstruction of artistic conception and spiritual essence. As a key figure of “New Pictorial” photography, he employs digital technology to reinterpret traditional aesthetics in a contemporary context. Focusing on urban architecture, he transforms cityscapes into ink-wash–like landscapes through long exposure and post-processing, blending geometric order with poetic atmosphere. His works, such as the *Mirage City Landscape* series, integrate modern life with classical visual forms. By merging traditional landscape aesthetics with contemporary urban themes, Yang expands the scope of pictorial photography and revitalizes its expressive potential in the digital age.

5.3 Yao Lu: The Appropriation of Traditional Schema in Conceptual Photography and the Critique of Contemporary Context

Yao Lu, a conceptual photographer, reinterprets Chinese pictorial photography through postmodern deconstruction and reconstruction. Drawing on classical landscape and gongbi painting, he uses large-format photography and digital processing to recreate traditional textures and color systems, establishing a visual link to Eastern aesthetics. However, his subjects—urban fringes and construction waste—introduce sharp contemporary critique. By transforming debris into seemingly traditional landscapes, he replaces literati ideals with critical realism. His *China Landscape* series uses “artificial mountains and waters” as a metaphor for environmental crisis, creating a striking

contrast between classical form and modern reality while redefining pictorial photography’s conceptual depth.

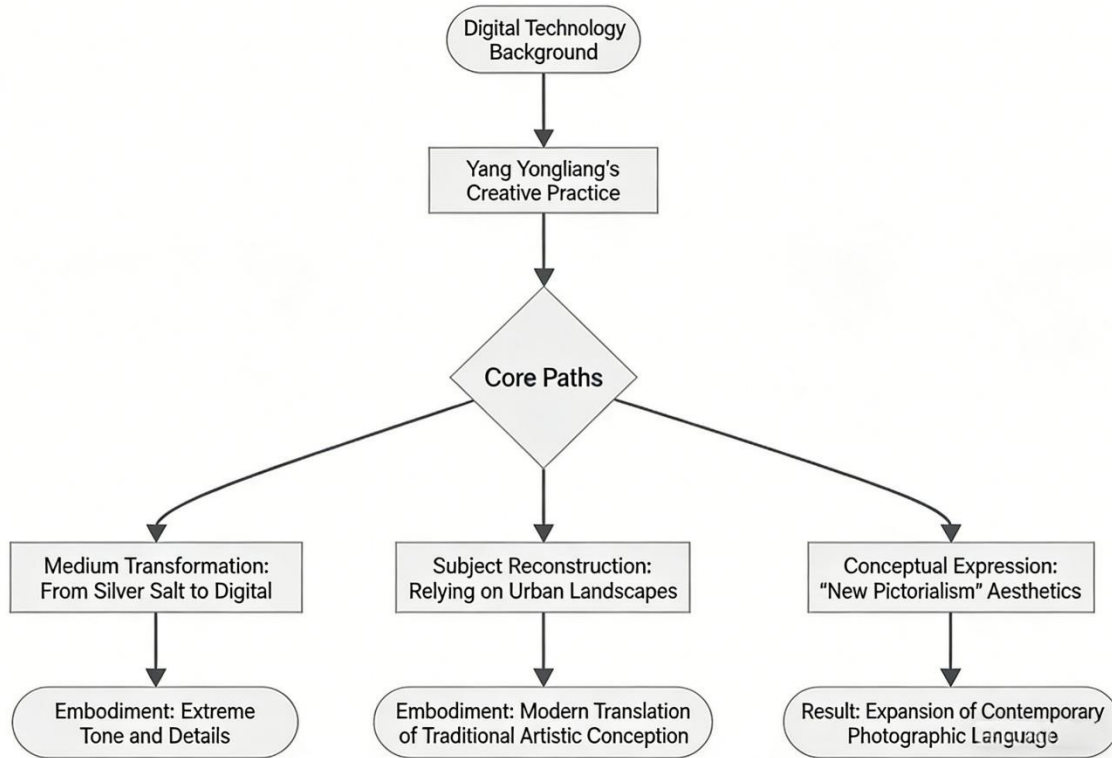


Figure 5.

Table 6. Analysis of the Appropriation of Traditional Schema and the Dimension of Contemporary Criticism in Yao Lu's Conceptual Photography

Analysis dimension	content of traditional schema appropriation	critical orientation of contemporary context	Case Studies	transformation value
reconstruction of visual language	Misappropriation of the Composition Paradigm and Color System of Traditional Chinese Green-and-Blue Landscape and Literati Vertical Scroll	Critique of the Erosion of Traditional Natural and Humanistic Space by Construction Waste in the Process of Urbanization and the Disintegration of the Traditional Aesthetic Imagination of "Mountain and Water Dwelling"	The "Eight Scenic Spots of China" series	Breaking the Single Pursuit of the Aesthetic Form of Traditional Pictorial Photography, Translating the Traditional Image with Appropriation
conceptualization and transformation	Misappropriation of Traditional Painting Motifs such as "Elegant Gathering" and "Mountain and Water Tour"	Reflection on the Hollowing out of Cultural Symbols in Contemporary Landscape Consumption and the Contradiction of Visual Culture in the Development of Modernization	The "Yao Family Landscape" series	Promoting the Modern Transformation of Chinese Painting Photography from "Aesthetic Imitation" to "Conceptual Criticism"
cultural identity construction	Misappropriation of the Aesthetic Core of Chinese Painting: "Taking the Bone with Ink and Transmitting the Spirit with Rhythm"	Responding to the Western contemporary photographic discourse system, constructing a Chinese photographic identity that combines traditional roots with contemporary consciousness	The "New Landscape" series	It has realized the organic integration of traditional pictorial resources and contemporary conceptual photography methods, and provided a sample for the conceptual reconstruction of Chinese pictorial photography.

Yao Lu's creative practice breaks through the early purely aesthetic constraints of Chinese pictorial photography, expanding its engagement with and reflection on real-world issues while extending the localized connotations discussed in Chapter 2.2 into contemporary contexts.

5.4 From Aesthetic Pleasure to Social Narrative: The Transformation of the Core of Contemporary Pictorial Photography

From the late 20th century to the present, the social structural upheavals in China have transformed the core of pictorial photography, shifting its creative focus from "aesthetic pleasure" to "social narrative." This transformation does not sever traditional aesthetics but advances the theoretical proposition of "technique" evolving into "art," providing a contemporary interpretation of Lang

Jingshan's traditional collage photography paradigm and reconstructing its relevance in the modern era. Creators no longer replicate ancient paintings but explore visual metaphors to critique reality. The themes of their works have expanded from landscapes and flowers to abandoned industrial zones, demolition ruins, and the living spaces of marginalized groups, shifting from literati allegories to visual memos of societal transition, capturing slices of society. Yang Yongliang's practice exemplifies this shift, wrapping modern urban elements in classical imagery and prompting viewers to reflect on the contradictions of modernity through tonal adjustments, using the shell of traditional aesthetics to question contemporary living conditions.

Table 7. Comparison of the Core Changes of Chinese Pictorial Photography Thought from the End of the 20th Century to Now

Contrast dimension	The Core Orientation of Traditional Chinese Painting and Photography	The Core Features of Contemporary Chinese Painting and Photography
Core objectives	Pursuing aesthetic pleasure, taking the creation of traditional literati artistic conception as the core, emphasizing the photographic language to reproduce the aesthetic paradigm of Chinese painting, and serving the poetic expression of the creator's personal feelings and aspirations	The social narrative, on the basis of retaining the poetic aesthetic framework, focuses on the issues of contemporary social reality, and carries the observation and reflection of the times through the pictorial aesthetic.
Topic selection	It focuses on the themes of landscape, classical garden, ancient costume, traditional folk custom and so on, which are in line with the traditional aesthetic paradigm, and tends to create idealized aesthetic scenes that are not realistic.	It extends to the urban change, ecological dilemma, identity, cultural memory and other contemporary social issues, and realizes the integration of traditional aesthetic framework and contemporary life themes.
Creator's stance	The aesthetic of contemplation that leans toward transcendence, pursuing spiritual liberation beyond the mundane world while maintaining a certain distance from social reality	The expression of intervention is biased towards the world, and the humanistic care intervenes into reality, reconstructs the contemporary social experience through pictorial aesthetics, and transmits the creator's thinking on social reality.
value orientation	With the inheritance of traditional aesthetic spirit as the core value, it focuses on satisfying the cultural emotional needs of the public for traditional Eastern aesthetics.	On the basis of inheriting the aesthetic tradition, it undertakes the function of cultural criticism and social construction of contemporary photography, and promotes the modern transformation of pictorial photography.

The ultimate pursuit of artistic creation has evolved from crafting aesthetic illusions to addressing social critique and humanistic concerns. In her "New Landscape" series, Yao Lu constructs mountainous compositions with archi-

tectural debris layered over green nets, appropriating Song Dynasty landscape composition techniques to satirize the environmental degradation and superficial prosperity behind urbanization. This transforms traditional aesthet-

ics into a sharp blade piercing through false prosperity. Aesthetic pleasure serves as a medium to engage viewers, guiding them to confront the core of social issues and highlighting the contemporary role of pictorial photography in reality. This conceptual shift from "transcendence" to "engagement" preserves an unwavering commitment to formal beauty while imbuing the work with profound historical texture, establishing its unique discourse in the contemporary art field.

6 Conclusion

Chinese pictorial photography is an important practical direction for the localization and aesthetic translation of photographic art, driven by the need to break through the boundaries of mechanical reproduction technology, integrating the traditional Chinese painting aesthetic system into photographic creation. It goes beyond superficial replication, promoting the deep restructuring of cultural spirit, requiring creators to internalize the logic of classical painting theory and achieve a harmony between technique and spirit. By employing specific techniques to construct an imagistic field, photography shifts toward the expression of subjective mood and Eastern philosophical thought. Tracing its development from pioneering explorations to contemporary diverse experiments, it maintains dynamic tension between technological iteration and aesthetic traditions, demonstrating that the creative system must engage in dialogue with the spirit of the times. The continuous coupling of traditional aesthetics and modern technology reflects the return and reshaping of cultural

confidence, proving the interpretative power and vitality of traditional aesthetic resources. The fusion of Chinese and Western elements generates a unique artistic language, contributing value to global photography and cross-cultural visual studies.

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