

From Gongbi Zhongcaihua to Gongbi Hua: Conceptual Formation, 1978–1990

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ABSTRACT

Following the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, Chinese Gongbi Hua experienced a conceptual transformation from *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) to *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting). While existing studies have focused on the revival of Gongbi Hua, artists, and technical developments, little attention has been paid to how the concept of *Gongbi hua* emerged and replaced *Gongbi zhongcaihua*. This study aims to examine the formation of the concept of *Gongbi hua* and the factors that contributed to its establishment. Drawing on conceptual history and the social history of art, the study employs literature analysis, terminological investigation, and formal analysis to examine major art journals, exhibition materials, and representative artworks produced between 1978 and 1990. The findings reveal that the establishment of *Gongbi hua* was not merely a change in terminology but the result of expanding artistic practices, cultural policy adjustments, institutional reconstruction, and the reconfiguration of critical discourse. A key turning point occurred in 1983, when theoretical discussions redefined Gongbi Hua as a broader category encompassing heavy-color, light-color, *mogu*, and *baimiao* forms. The growing independence of light-color and *mogu* techniques further weakened the classificatory significance of “heavy color.” The study concludes that the formation of *Gongbi hua* reflected the restructuring of artistic knowledge and values in Reform-era China and demonstrates how artistic concepts acquire legitimacy through the interaction of social transformation, institutional change, and artistic practice.

1. Introduction

After the Reform and Opening-up, one of the major issues facing the Chinese art world was how to reinterpret tradition. Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, many previously interrupted artistic forms re-entered the systems of artistic production, education, and exhibition. The revival of Gongbi Hua took place within this broader historical context. On the surface, it appeared to be a process of restoring a traditional painting genre; in reality, it was also a process of conceptual reconstruction. Before the 1980s, works of this kind were more commonly referred to as *Gongbi zhongcaihua*

(meticulous heavy-color painting) rather than the now widely accepted term *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting). This shift was not merely a minor change in terminology. Rather, it redefined the boundaries of *Gongbi Hua* and transformed the way the genre was understood and interpreted.

The central argument of this article is that the establishment of the concept of *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) was not the result of a natural evolution within art history itself, but rather the outcome of the combined influence of the post-Reform and Opening-up political environment, cultural policies, academic institutions, critical discourse, and artistic practice. In other words, *Gongbi hua* was able to replace *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) because the existing concept could no longer accommodate the expanding range of artistic practices that emerged during the 1980s. Although heavy color remained an important component of *Gongbi Hua*, it could no longer represent the full spectrum of *Gongbi* practices. Light-color painting, *mogu* (boneless) painting, *baimiao* (line drawing), linear techniques, and works incorporating modern visual languages all required a broader classificatory framework capable of encompassing these diverse forms of expression.

This issue deserves attention because it helps us reconsider the modern transformation of Chinese painting during the early Reform and Opening-up period. Previous studies have often interpreted the revival of *Gongbi Hua* as a restoration of traditional techniques or have focused primarily on individual artists such as Pan Jiezi, Liu Lingcang, Sun Yumin, He Jiaying, and Li Kuizheng. While these studies have provided an important foundation, they remain insufficient to explain a more fundamental question, why was a term centered on “heavy color” replaced by one centered on “meticulous brushwork”? This article takes this question as its starting point and treats the change in terminology as an entry point for examining broader transformations in artistic concepts and understandings.

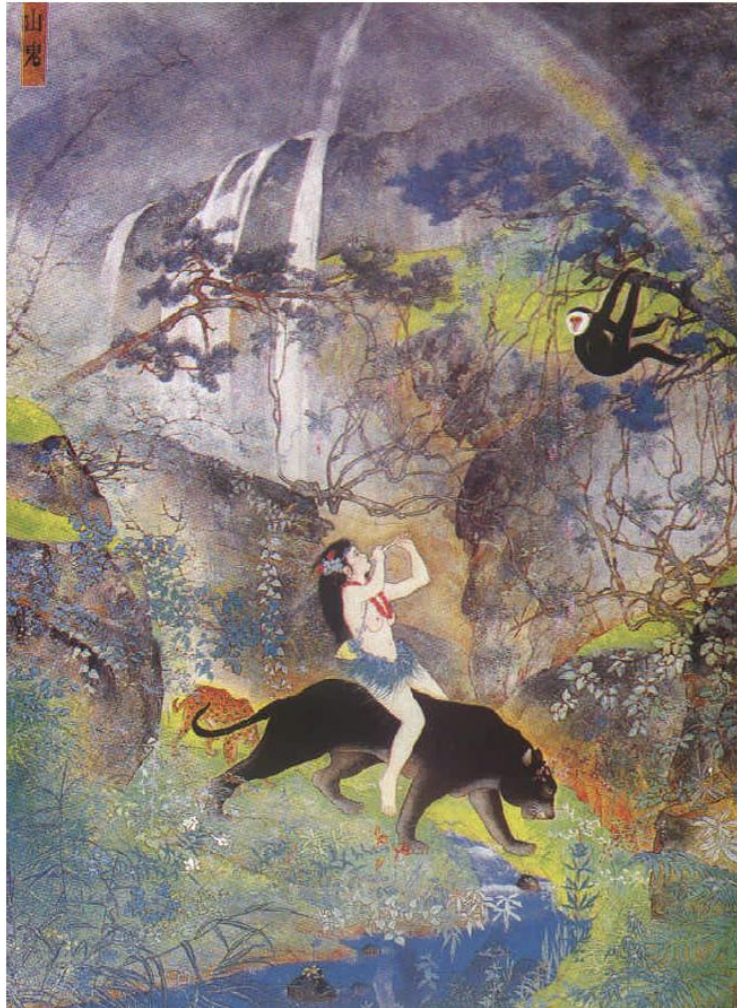
The argument of this article follows a continuous line of reasoning. It begins by examining the formation of *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) after the founding of the People’s Republic of China and explaining its historical rationale. It then analyzes how the institutional revival of the early Reform and Opening-up period created the conditions for conceptual reconstruction. The discussion subsequently turns to the role of academic discourse in 1983, when the conceptual boundaries of *Gongbi Hua* were redefined. Finally, by tracing the independent development of techniques such as light-color painting and *mogu* (boneless) painting, the article demonstrates how artistic practice drove the expansion of the concept and ultimately contributed to the stabilization of *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting). Through this analysis, the study seeks to reveal that artistic concepts are not static labels but knowledge structures that are formed, contested, and legitimized within specific historical contexts and social relations.

2. Literature Review

Regarding the origins of *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting), existing studies have largely emphasized the role of Pan Jiezi. Pan devoted much of his career to the study of Chinese figure painting and the murals of Dunhuang, integrating meticulous line drawing, mineral pigments, and realist subject matter. Through this approach, he helped establish *Gongbi zhongcaihua* as a form of Chinese painting aligned with the realist orientation promoted in the early years of the People’s Republic of China.

Scholars such as Xu Lixin (2023), Zhang Ailing (2012), and Wu Yichen (2019) have argued that Pan's reassessment of the Han–Tang artistic tradition and the Dunhuang murals provided an important foundation for the formation of this concept. These studies demonstrate that *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (Fig. 1) was not a fixed term inherited from premodern China, rather, it was an artistic concept that was rearticulated and institutionalized within the cultural context of modern China.

Figure 1: Pan Jiezi, *Shan Gui* (Mountain Spirit), Mineral Pigments and Ink on Paper, 1977, 78cm*55cm.



Source: (Art Magazine, 2002)

Studies on the transformation of Chinese painting in the early years of the People's Republic of China provide an important institutional context for understanding the emergence of this concept. Around 1949, newspapers such as the *People's Daily* carried extensive discussions on the "reform of Chinese painting," particularly in the "Literature and Arts Weekly" supplement published between 22 and 26 May 1949. Thinkers and art critics such as Cai Ruohong, Jiang Feng, and Wang Chaowen (Kang Ningmei, 2014) all emphasized that traditional painting should engage with contemporary reality and serve the people. This orientation promoted the importance of realism, narrative representation, and clearly defined social content. Because of its precise linework, vivid coloration, and concrete figural imagery, *Gongbi zhongcaihua* was particularly well suited to the cultural and artistic objectives of the new state (Chen Ming, 2011). As a

result, among the many resources of traditional Chinese painting, it acquired new political and cultural significance.

With regard to technical classification, Ye Yuchang categorized Gongbi Hua into forms such as heavy-color painting, light-color painting, *mogu* (boneless) painting, and *baimiao* (line drawing) around 1981 (Ye Yuchang, 1981). In 1983, Lei Zhengmin further discussed *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) as an independent painting genre in its own right (Lei Zhengmin, 1983). Subsequent case studies of artists such as Sun Yumin, He Jiaying, and Li Kuizheng likewise demonstrate that by the mid-to-late 1980s, Gongbi Hua could no longer be understood solely as heavy-color painting.

The problem, however, is that existing scholarship tends to treat these materials separately, some studies focus on the origins of the concept, others on policy and institutional contexts, and still others on technical transformations. This article seeks to bring these three strands together in order to explain how and why the conceptual transformation occurred, and what its significance was for the history of Chinese art.

It is therefore clear that the purpose of this study is not simply to trace when the term *Gongbi hua* first appeared, but rather to analyze why it acquired explanatory power at a particular historical moment. A term becomes a concept only when it is capable of organizing new experiences, accommodating new forms of practice, and being repeatedly adopted within institutional and academic contexts. From the perspective of conceptual history, concepts are not fixed labels; they are discursive structures that are continually redefined and endowed with new meanings through historical processes. The emergence of a new concept often indicates that existing concepts can no longer adequately explain new social experiences and artistic practices. Accordingly, the focus of this article is not the chronology of terminology, but rather why *Gongbi zhongcaihua* gradually lost its overarching explanatory status and why Gongbi hua was able to emerge as the new dominant concept.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts the conceptual history approach developed by Reinhart Koselleck as its primary theoretical framework. Conceptual history is concerned not simply with words themselves, but with how terms acquire new meanings through historical change. Koselleck argues that key concepts both reflect transformations in social experience and participate in shaping new understandings of history (Koselleck, 2004). This perspective is particularly suitable for analyzing the formation of *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting). For Gongbi hua is more than a label, it reorganized a range of artistic practices—including heavy-color painting, light-color painting, *mogu* (boneless) painting, and *baimiao* (line drawing)—under a single artistic category.

Research on conceptual evolution likewise suggests that changes in concepts are not simply changes in terminology or documentary records, rather, they involve the reorganization of semantic boundaries, classificatory relationships, and historical connections. In their discussion of conceptual evolution, Rizzolo, Velegrakis, Mylopoulos, and Bykau (2009) argue that historical research should pay attention to how concepts undergo differentiation, integration, transformation, and reconnection over time. Although this study does not directly adopt their database-based model, it draws upon their fundamental insight that concepts should be understood as entities that change in relation to historical circumstances rather than as fixed and immutable terms. From this

perspective, the transition from *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) to *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) can be understood as a process in which conceptual boundaries gradually expanded and eventually became stabilized.

This study also draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the artistic field. Bourdieu argues that art does not develop in a vacuum; rather, it operates within a field constituted by painters, critics, educational institutions, exhibition systems, and state cultural policies (Bourdieu, 1993). From this perspective, the establishment of *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) was not the result of a single artist or a single theoretical article, but the outcome of the combined efforts of multiple actors operating within the same historical context. Support from the Ministry of Culture, the establishment of art institutions, the creation of specialized journal sections, adjustments to exhibition classifications, and artists' explorations of new techniques all formed integral parts of this process.

In terms of methodology, this study primarily employs literature analysis, terminological investigation, and formal analysis. Literature analysis is used to examine how relevant concepts were employed in art journals such as *Meishu* (Art Magazine), exhibition materials, and artists' writings. Terminological investigation is used to compare the meanings of terms such as *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting), *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting), *zhongguohua* (Chinese painting), and *bohua* (silk painting) across different contexts. Formal analysis is employed to demonstrate how the actual characteristics of artworks contributed to the expansion of the concept. This study argues that only by connecting the terminology found in written sources with the formal transformations evident in artistic practice can we fully explain why the concept of *Gongbi hua* became necessary.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1 The Formation and Limitations of Gongbi Zhongcaihua

The formation of the concept of *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) was rooted in the post-1949 reassessment and selective appropriation of traditional painting resources. The artistic practice of Pan Jiezi provides a representative example. On the one hand, Pan inherited the tradition of meticulous line drawing from Chinese figure painting; on the other, he rediscovered in the Dunhuang murals the value of mineral pigments, decorative aesthetics, and grand narrative expression. Within the cultural context of the time, this artistic form could be effectively aligned with the demands of realism, as it preserved the traditional identity of Chinese painting while also enabling the clear representation of figures, narratives, and social themes (Wu Yichen, 2019).

The cultural policies implemented during the early years of the People's Republic of China further reinforced this direction. Chinese painting was encouraged to move beyond the traditional literati aesthetic and the leisurely themes of landscape painting, and instead engage with contemporary life, the working people, and socialist construction. With its clearly defined forms, vivid colors, and strong narrative capacity, *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) was particularly well suited to serving these objectives (*Art Magazine*, 1961). As a result, it acquired a high degree of legitimacy in the early PRC period and became an important pathway through which traditional Chinese painting was adapted to the demands of modern society.

However, the strengths of this concept also became the source of its later limitations. *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) emphasized two key elements. The first was *Gongbi*—a meticulous and disciplined approach that valued precise linework and careful modeling. The second was *Zhongcai* (heavy color), which relied on rich coloration and mineral pigments to create strong visual effects. In the early years of the People's Republic of China, these two elements complemented one another and jointly served the goals of realist representation and narrative expression (Wu Yichen, 2019). After the Reform and Opening-up, however, the scope of *Gongbi Hua* expanded significantly. Many works continued to employ meticulous and refined brushwork, yet no longer treated heavy color as their defining feature. Under these circumstances, the term *Gongbi zhongcaihua* could no longer adequately encompass the new realities of artistic practice.

The Cultural Revolution further interrupted the development of this concept. Traditional painting was at times regarded as conservative and detached from social reality, and many artists were unable to pursue their artistic practice under normal conditions. Although the art world gradually began to recover after 1976, the real turning point came after 1978. The intellectual liberalization associated with the Reform and Opening-up created new opportunities for the reassessment of traditional art. It was within this growing tension between established concepts and evolving artistic practices that the institutional revival of the post-1978 period became a crucial historical catalyst for conceptual reconstruction.

4.2 Institutional Revival in the Early Reform and Opening-up Period

If the stagnation of *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) during the Cultural Revolution was largely the result of political constraints, then the Reform and Opening-up created new historical conditions for its renewed development. However, the changes brought about by the Reform era involved more than simply the revival of *Gongbi zhongcaihua*. More importantly, they made it possible to reassess and reconstruct existing artistic concepts. With the liberalization of thought and the adjustment of cultural policies, artistic creation gradually moved beyond the constraints of a single ideological framework, and artists began to reconsider the value and future direction of traditional Chinese painting. In this process, *Gongbi zhongcaihua*, an important concept that had emerged in the early years of the People's Republic of China, regained opportunities for development. At the same time, however, its conceptual boundaries increasingly came under challenge from new forms of artistic practice.

After 1978, shifts in cultural and artistic policy provided the fundamental conditions for the revival of *Gongbi Hua*. Following the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, “emancipating the mind and seeking truth from facts” became a key political slogan, while the cultural sphere renewed its emphasis on the “Hundred Flowers Policy” and the diversity of artistic creation (Fan Rui, 2008). These changes enabled previously marginalized traditional painting genres to re-enter public discussion. The revival of *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) was therefore not an isolated phenomenon, but part of the broader reconstruction of China's cultural institutions and artistic system.

The establishment of the Beijing Art Institute of Chinese Fine Arts Painting in 1979 marked a significant step in the institutionalization of this revival. According to the writings of Liu Lingcang, cultural authorities provided explicit support for the

restoration and development of *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting), while artists such as Pan Jiezi and Liu Lingcang played important organizational roles in the process (Liu Lingcang, 1979). The significance of this institution lay not merely in bringing artists together, but more importantly in reintegrating *Gongbi zhongcaihua* into a legitimate academic and exhibition system. Without this institutional foundation, the conceptual debates that emerged in later years would have been unlikely to achieve a stable and lasting influence.

However, during the revival phase between 1978 and 1982, *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) remained the dominant category. Works such as Hou Changchun's *Hero of the Marshes* demonstrate that heavy-color techniques, meticulous line drawing, and light-color washes were often employed in combination (Wang Luping, 2021), yet such works continued to be classified as *Gongbi zhongcaihua*. This suggests that the prevailing system of classification had not yet undergone a fundamental transformation. While artistic practice was already showing signs of increasing diversity, the terminology used to describe it remained rooted in a framework centered on heavy color. It is therefore evident that the institutional revival of the early Reform and Opening-up period not only restored the conditions necessary for the development of *Gongbi zhongcaihua*, but also created the essential foundations for the emergence of the concept of *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting).

4.3 1983: A Pivotal Moment in the Conceptual Transformation

The year 1983 marked a crucial moment in the establishment of the concept of *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting). The significance of this year does not lie in the fact that the term *Gongbi hua* was used for the first time, but rather in the fact that it began to appear in major art journals with a clear theoretical orientation and was employed to reorganize existing artistic practices. In the fifth issue of *Meishu* (Art Magazine) in 1983, a special section entitled "Issues in the Creation of Gongbi Hua" was introduced (Art Magazine, 1983). The establishment of this section was itself a significant signal, *Gongbi Hua* was no longer regarded merely as a subsidiary technique within Chinese painting, but was increasingly treated as an independent field worthy of separate discussion and theoretical consideration.

The significance of Shen Peng's remarks lies not in his being the first to use the term *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting), but in his redefinition of the relationship between *Gongbi hua* and *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) (Art Magazine, 1983). In earlier academic discussions, *Gongbi zhongcaihua* had long been regarded as the principal representative of this mode of painting, and heavy color was often treated as one of its defining characteristics. Shen Peng, however, explicitly argued that heavy color was only one of the many forms through which *Gongbi Hua* could be expressed. According to his view, *Gongbi Hua* could be executed not only in heavy-color techniques, but also through *baimiao* (line drawing), light-color painting, and other modes of artistic expression.

This formulation effectively accomplished a reorganization of conceptual hierarchy. *Gongbi zhongcaihua*, which had previously functioned as the central concept, was repositioned under the broader category of *Gongbi hua*, becoming one of the various forms encompassed by it. At the same time, *Gongbi hua* evolved from a relatively infrequently used term into a higher-order concept capable of integrating a wide range of artistic practices.

From the perspective of conceptual history, this shift signified a change in the basis of classification. Previously, classification had been grounded primarily in chromatic form—that is, whether a work employed heavy color. Shen Peng, however, redirected the classificatory principle toward *Gongbi* itself, understood as a more stable and fundamental mode of pictorial construction characterized by meticulous brushwork and careful modeling. As a result, *Gongbi hua* acquired a broader explanatory scope than *Gongbi zhongcaihua*, providing a theoretical framework that could accommodate the subsequent development of forms such as light-color painting and *mogu* (boneless) painting.

The significance of Lei Zhengmin's article, "A Broad Road Ahead: A Preliminary Discussion of Gongbi Hua", lies in its development of this insight into a more systematic academic argument. The article not only traced the historical development of Gongbi Hua, but also incorporated line drawing, heavy-color painting, traditional painting techniques, and decorative forms of expression into the broader category of Gongbi hua (meticulous painting). As a result, Gongbi hua ceased to be merely a descriptive label for a particular type of artwork and instead became a concept capable of explaining historical developments, organizing artistic practices, and guiding creative production (Lei Zhengmin, 1983). From this perspective, the significance of 1983 does not lie in the emergence of a new term, but rather in the fact that a new conceptual framework began to acquire academic legitimacy.

However, the introduction of a new concept did not lead to the immediate standardization of terminology. After 1983, terms such as *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting), *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting), *zhongguohua* (Chinese painting), and *bohua* (silk painting) continued to coexist. On the surface, this may appear to indicate terminological inconsistency. From the perspective of conceptual history, however, it is precisely evidence that a process of conceptual transformation was underway. The older terminology retained its historical momentum, while the newer concept was gradually expanding its scope. The coexistence and competition between these terms reflected an ongoing process of negotiation between evolving artistic practices and the language used to theorize and classify them.

4.4 Technical Diversification and Conceptual Expansion

If 1983 marked the theoretical turning point, then the technical developments that emerged after 1984 provided practical confirmation of that shift. The concept of Gongbi hua (meticulous painting) was able to establish itself not simply because critics introduced a new term, but because artistic practice itself had already moved beyond the boundaries of Gongbi zhongcaihua (meticulous heavy-color painting). The independent development of light-color painting and *mogu* (boneless) painting offers the clearest evidence of this transformation.

The light-color figure paintings of Sun Yumin demonstrate that Gongbi Hua could depict everyday life through lightness, transparency, and layered washes of color, without relying on the dense application of mineral pigments. Works such as *Spring Silkworms* and *Quiet Birch Forest* retained the meticulous modeling and refined treatment characteristic of Gongbi Hua, yet their visual effects differed markedly from those of traditional heavy-color painting (Xue Yongnian, 2009). Likewise, He Jiaying's *Nineteen Autumns* and *Bathing* reveal how Gongbi Hua could establish new connections among realist representation, restrained tonalities, and the psychological depth of modern

figures. The emergence of these works made it increasingly difficult for “heavy color” to function as the defining or overarching characteristic of Gongbi Hua as a whole.

Li Kuizheng’s *mogu* (boneless) flower-and-bird paintings further expanded these boundaries. The *mogu* technique emphasizes the relationship between ink and color as well as the structural organization of forms. Lines no longer function as prominent external contours, yet the works continue to retain the Gongbi tradition’s careful control over imagery, spatial layering, and detail. By incorporating an awareness of light, color, and compositional structure, Li transformed *mogu* from a traditional technique into an important pathway for the modernization of Gongbi Hua during the 1980s (Liu Chunyan, 2014). This demonstrates that the expansion of the concept of Gongbi hua (meticulous painting) was not the result of abstract theoretical speculation, but rather a process driven step by step by the emergence of new artistic practices and specific works of art. Therefore, the central transformation that took place during the mid-to-late 1980s can be summarized as a shift in the criteria used to define Gongbi Hua. The key question was no longer whether a work employed heavy color, but whether it organized the pictorial space through a meticulous, refined, and controllable visual language. This shift enabled Gongbi hua (meticulous painting) to encompass heavy-color painting, light-color painting, *mogu* (boneless) painting, *baimiao* (line drawing), and other emerging forms. By contrast, while Gongbi *zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) could adequately account for heavy-color works, it was increasingly unable to accommodate the growing number of light-color and *mogu* paintings that appeared during this period. The eventual establishment of the concept of Gongbi hua was therefore not the result of a subjective act of naming by scholars or critics. Rather, it was a necessary outcome of the continuous expansion of artistic practice. In other words, conceptual transformation was not the cause of changes in artistic practice; it was the consequence of those changes.

4.5 Terminological Overlap and Conceptual Competition

After 1985, terms such as *bohua* (silk painting) reappeared, indicating that the process of conceptual transformation was far from smooth. Originally, *bohua* referred to ancient paintings executed on silk. However, in certain exhibition and publication contexts during the 1980s, the term was once again used to describe works that possessed characteristics associated with Gongbi Hua. This usage created potential confusion, as it placed material support, historical form, and technical characteristics on the same classificatory level (Gu Tiefu, 1972).

This terminological overlap should not be regarded simply as an error. Rather, it indicates that the art world of the time was still searching for an appropriate language of classification. On the one hand, traditional terms carried cultural authority and could emphasize the relationship between contemporary works and the heritage of ancient painting. On the other hand, *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting), as an emerging concept, was better suited to encompassing contemporary artistic practices. The coexistence of these terms reflects the dual demands faced by traditional art during the early Reform and Opening-up period, the need to demonstrate continuity with tradition while also establishing the capacity to respond to new historical and social experiences.

Therefore, terminological inconsistency should not be treated as a peripheral issue in this study; rather, it constitutes important evidence for understanding the process of conceptual formation. Before a concept becomes fully established, it inevitably passes

through a period of competition among older terms, emerging terms, and alternative designations. Only when *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) proved more effective than other terms in explaining artworks, organizing exhibitions, and structuring academic discourse could it gradually emerge as the dominant concept.

5. Discussion

As the preceding analysis has demonstrated, the transition from *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) to *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) should not be understood simply as the shortening of a term. Rather, it involved three interconnected structural transformations. First, the basis of classification changed. Whereas the earlier term placed “heavy color” at the center, the new concept shifted the focus to *Gongbi* itself. Second, the scope of artistic practice expanded. The new concept was capable of accommodating a wide range of forms, including light-color painting, *mogu* (boneless) painting, and *baimiao* (line drawing). Third, the mode of art-historical narration changed. *Gongbi Hua* was no longer understood merely as a traditional technique; instead, it became an important component of the modern transformation of Chinese painting in the post-Reform and Opening-up era.

This transformation can be summarized as a continuous process consisting of three stages: conceptual crisis, conceptual competition, and conceptual stabilization. The stage of conceptual crisis emerged in the early Reform and Opening-up period, when new artistic practices began to move beyond the framework of heavy-color painting, gradually exposing the limitations of *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) as an explanatory concept. The stage of conceptual competition occurred around 1983, when terms such as *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting), *Gongbi zhongcaihua*, *zhongguohua* (Chinese painting), and *bohua* (silk painting) appeared simultaneously. In effect, the art world was comparing the effectiveness of different systems of classification. The stage of conceptual stabilization emerged in the mid-to-late 1980s, when practices such as light-color painting and *mogu* (boneless) painting continued to expand. Because *Gongbi hua* was better able to encompass and explain these diverse forms of artistic practice, it gradually became the concept with the greatest explanatory power.

This mechanism is consistent with the fundamental logic of conceptual history. Concepts are not simple reflections of reality; rather, they continuously adjust their boundaries in response to changing historical circumstances. The concept of *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) was able to gain acceptance because it responded to new forms of artistic experience. It reorganized painting practices that had previously been constrained by the category of “heavy color,” allowing diverse techniques and modes of expression to be discussed within a single conceptual framework. In this sense, concepts do not merely describe artistic practice; they also participate in organizing and shaping it.

From the perspective of the social history of art, the establishment of a concept also depends on the combined influence of forces both within and outside the artistic field. Policy shifts create new possibilities, institutional development provides organizational platforms, journal publications offer discursive spaces, and artistic practice supplies the substantive foundation. Without any one of these elements, *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) would have been unlikely to achieve a stable position so rapidly during the 1980s. It is therefore evident that artistic concepts do not emerge naturally; rather, they are produced through specific historical relationships and social processes.

This transformation also demonstrates that the modernization of traditional art does not necessarily take the form of a complete rupture with the past. The modernity of *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) was not achieved through the abandonment of tradition, but through the processes of renaming, reclassifying, and reinterpreting it. Artists such as Pan Jiezi drew upon the artistic resources of Dunhuang and the Han–Tang traditions, while Shen Peng and Lei Zhengmin expanded the conceptual boundaries of Gongbi Hua through theoretical discussion. Meanwhile, Sun Yumin, He Jiaying, and Li Kuizheng demonstrated the necessity of this conceptual expansion through their artistic practice. Taken together, these three dimensions formed a relatively complete process of concept formation and development.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the conceptual transformation from *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) to *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) between 1978 and 1990. The findings demonstrate that this transformation was not merely a change in terminology, but a process of conceptual reconstruction driven jointly by artistic practice, cultural policy, institutional development, and critical discourse during the Reform and Opening-up era. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, *Gongbi zhongcaihua* acquired legitimacy because of its clear pictorial structure, vivid coloration, and capacity for realist representation. However, as artistic practices became increasingly diverse after the Reform and Opening-up, the concept gradually proved inadequate for encompassing emerging forms of artistic expression such as light-color painting, *mogu* (boneless) painting, and *baimiao* (line drawing).

The year 1983 marked a critical turning point in this conceptual transformation. Through the publication of special sections in *Meishu* (Art Magazine) and the theoretical discussions of scholars such as Lei Zhengmin and Shen Peng, *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) began to be discussed as a broader, higher-order concept. Rather than taking “heavy color” as its defining criterion, the new concept was grounded in a meticulous, refined, and controllable mode of pictorial construction. As a result, *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) was repositioned as one of the forms encompassed within the broader category of *Gongbi hua*. This shift marked the transformation of Gongbi Hua from a primarily technical designation into a concept defining an independent painting genre.

The independent development of light-color painting and *mogu* (boneless) painting during the mid-to-late 1980s further demonstrated the necessity of this conceptual transformation. The works of artists such as Sun Yumin, He Jiaying, and Li Kuizheng showed that Gongbi Hua could retain its essential characteristics without relying on heavy color. The expansion of artistic practice drove the enlargement of conceptual boundaries and enabled *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) to gradually replace *Gongbi zhongcaihua* (meticulous heavy-color painting) as the more comprehensive and explanatory term.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in shifting the focus of Gongbi Hua research from stylistic development to conceptual formation. Previous studies have primarily concentrated on artists, artworks, and techniques, whereas this article argues that artistic concepts themselves constitute an important object of art-historical inquiry. By examining how the concept of *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) emerged, competed

with alternative concepts, and eventually became stabilized, this study demonstrates that art history is not only a history of stylistic change, but also a history of transformations in systems of classification, structures of knowledge, and forms of discursive power.

This study also has certain limitations. Owing to constraints in source availability, the research relies primarily on published journals, exhibition materials, and artists' writings, and is therefore unable to make extensive use of unpublished archives, personal correspondence, or conference records. The temporal scope of the study is concentrated on the period from 1978 to 1990, while the subsequent development of concepts such as *Modern Gongbi Hua*, *Contemporary Gongbi Hua*, and *Xin Gongbi* after 1990 is addressed only insofar as it is necessary to contextualize the discussion. Future research could further examine how these later concepts continued to reshape the boundaries of Gongbi Hua. It may also explore the ongoing evolution of Gongbi Hua in contemporary contexts from the perspectives of the art market, audience reception, and international circulation.

Overall, the establishment of the concept of *Gongbi hua* (meticulous painting) reflects a fundamental mode through which traditional Chinese art underwent modernization during the Reform and Opening-up era. Its modernization was not achieved through the rejection of tradition, but through the reinterpretation of tradition, the adjustment of classificatory criteria, and the expansion of the boundaries of artistic practice. Examining this process not only helps us understand how Chinese painting reorganized itself in response to broader social transformations, but also sheds light on how artistic concepts acquire new meanings through historical change.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study did not require ethical approval because it involved no human participants or identifiable personal data. The research was conducted through the analysis of published sources, archival materials, exhibition records, and artworks. Consequently, informed consent to participate was not applicable.

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Conflict of Interest

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