



## Comparative Study on Cultural DNA of Chinese and Western Sketch

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Received 18 September 2014; accepted 15 October 2014  
 Published online 26 December 2014

### Abstract

In this paper, according to the analects of “Lunyu”, we try to interpret in concept of sketch. Depending on the clue of the development process for sketch, we contrasted western sketch with Chinese in order to analyze completely different points in their cultural DNA. Based on the conclusion, we still reflect Chinese modern sketch and put forward the idea that we should observe, think and explore for innovation in the field of sketch based on our own cultural DNA, eliminating the distractions and impetuous feeling in study of culture.

**Key words:** Art history; Sketch; Cultural DNA

Qiu, Y. (2014). Comparative Study on Cultural DNA of Chinese and Western Sketch. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 10(6), 117-120. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/5740>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/5740>

### INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that sketching is a necessary way of enhancing the capacity of shaping for beginner, so we can use it as a basic practice of all kinds of paintings. Nowadays, for Chinese painters, the concept of general significance of “sketch” comes from Western theory, for which is always regarded as starting courses of painting. But if we studying related literature in Chinese history, we can come to know the earliest concept of sketch, which is called “Chinese own unique sketch”. Tracing this clue of sketch, we study the difference between Chinese and Western, from theory to practice, from idea to style, through a concrete analysis deeply. In the course

of analysis, we contrasted culture and cultural DNA, and make a conclusion that different cultures are the most important factors for the show of Chinese and Western sketches, through a long development history. Based on the above background, this paper still studies modern development of Chinese sketches from the time of Opium War to 1980s in order to understand how the “multiple” exploration process experienced in the field of Chinese modern sketch. Finally, we call for “Do not lose the soul of our culture”.

### 1. INTERPRET CONCEPT OF SKETCH

#### 1.1 Sketch Is a Description of Monochrome

As is known to all, sketch is a description of monochrome which is made by simple painting tools. If we do some sketching, we often focus on certain objects which are in a certain space with specific image, scale, texture, quantity, dynamic, pattern and composition. In the practice of sketch, sometimes we can still use the way for materials collection. Sometimes it is a way for the draft or local practice. So sketch is called “foundation of fine arts”. When we sketch, we often describe imperceptible gradual changes in light and shade of objects with gradual transition layers formed by all kinds of lines carefully in order to show painter’s feelings or emotions, without considering hue of light or total view. This idea is widely regarded as the means of traditional Western sketch, which Chinese sketch followed the Western mode from modern enlightenment era, so this kind style seems inclined to western cultural DNA.

#### 1.2 The Earliest Concept of Sketch in the World

Then, is there indigenous “sketch” in China before the modern enlightenment era?

From the viewpoint of the generalized concept of sketch, we come to know China also has its own unique sketch in fact, though studying deeply. Tracing history

of Chinese Art, we can find a record of the painting and drawing in Chinese ancient books. As far back as three thousand years ago, the analects of “Lunyu” of Confucius pointed out that people could colour drawings or patterns basing on a very brief outline sketch what was just only plain drawing. This can be regarded as the earliest basic theory of sketch. The similar description of sketch which was in Europe is about two thousand five hundred years later. It seems that the analects of “Lunyu” showed the earliest concept of sketching in the world. From the definition of sketch, “traditional Chinese sketch” should include ancient sketch and line-drawing draft, which are all belonged to the scope of “very brief outline sketch”.

## 2. CHINESE AND WESTERN SKETCH CAN SHOW DIFFERENT CULTURE

### 2.1 Culture and Cultural DNA

Nevertheless, how different cultures do Chinese and Western sketch can show?

First of all, we should understand what the culture is. Generally we believe that the forms of human being rather than a natural material and non-material forms are culture. And Chinese style sketch also to have Chinese cultural DNA compared with Western sketch.

Cultural genes usually refer to the manners which can be acquired by the bodies mainly in the fields of values, beliefs and habits, etc, actively or passively, consciously or unconsciously. For individual, the education and environment which widely accepted in a certain place will deeply affect or edify un-consciousness cultural DNA of people. Deeper are affects, fitter with their minds. So, they can become more confident and more wisdom for choosing the best way in order to enjoy the tranquility of mind, and finally getting “diversity” of developments.

### 2.2 China’s Culture and Sketch

Mr. Zhang Dainian put forward that the basic spirit of Chinese traditional culture which is neutralization and morality, which emphasis on natural and energetic feature. So the concrete manifestation are “tea culture”, “wine culture”, “kung fu culture” and “taiji culture”, and etc..

Compared with Westerners, Chinese people have very different cultural DNA. That is amazing for Western people, for, Chinese people view of things with the overall view and partial view together. In this process, they widespread use modes of metaphor, abstraction and analysis to understand the complicated things around the world. Especially, they apply ordinary specific objects for conveying abstract truth. So the traditional Chinese painters (including painters of Chinese sketch) pursuit aesthetic experience of simple, flexible and hazy things, which can leave a person rich imagination. Therefore, we often find there is nothing in some place of traditional Chinese painting. Here, the “nothing” means “more

and more views” which the viewers can image as far as possible.

Under the influence of Chinese culture DNA, Chinese traditional style of sketch has experienced a long history of development. Having studied the decorative design on utensils of sleek pottery in primitive society, wall paintings and bronzes decorating in Spring and Autumn period and Western Zhou dynasty and the paintings on the silk in pre-Qin period, we can find an indisputable fact that the basis of Chinese painting is widespread use of all kinds of lines, through which show the image of the objects. And the way of line had been widely used for a long time ago. Therefore, sketch history of China is just the history of Chinese traditional line-drawing or ink-drawing. The developmental course of traditional Chinese painting has three important stages of which include ancient immature period stage, realistic period stage and freehand brushwork period stage. The age from prehistoric to Qin and Han dynasties was in ancient immature period stage, which drawings were nearly a brief, abstract symbol. During the second stage, painting of Art separates from the natural objects. But in Weijin, Tang and Song dynasties, the style was in “realistic” period, in which phase art often showed natural objects by ink vividly. This led to the evolution process of painting concepts and performance techniques, which changed from the external form of expression to deep inner spiritual temperament. The realm of painting theory put forward a remarkable insight such as vivid portrayal. As a result, Chinese sketch put the perfect combination of realistic express and decorative forms into emphasis. In Yuan, Ming and Qing era the style was freehand brushwork. After the peak of realistic style of Tang and Song dynasty which is difficult to get beyond, artists in this stage try to seek innovative consciousness by means of “freehand brushwork”. They pursue the subjective spirit rather than objective nature, abandoning the realistic pursuit for outstanding image in order to obtain some thoughts and ideas of freedom. The Chinese traditional sketch and ink painting followed the ancient character line of art, coming to a new form of development, and getting to the extreme. The concept and form of Chinese traditional sketch is unique among art world, which gives us a substantial wealth and inheritance, and is worth us to study deeply for carrying forward continuously.

### 2.3 Western Culture and Sketch

From a map of the world, we can see Western society from west to east, from the United States, Britain to Russia. Before the modern era, we can find authoritative God of the Jewish and god of Christ with feature of mercy, and we still know the rationality of Greek and strict order of Rome. All of the factors can interact with the background, which can construct the first set of Western cultural DNA by the concepts of “only one” and “real”. That is the “real thing is worth pursuing”, and “it’s just the only one”. In

16th century, religious reform damaged the harmonious relations about rationality and belief for Westerners which led to the collapse of the feudal and the wars lasting for a long time. As a result, rationalism with optimistic quality came into being in France and empiricism with pessimistic utilitarian in the UK. The former paid attention to introspection and pursuing of equality. But the latter emphasizes the observation and reflection for pursuing freedom. These factors construct the second group of Western cultural DNA. The same point of the last two kinds of cultural DNA is “the only real”, which they insist on for more than 2000 years. And that tended to make them more extreme, absolute and exclusive. The dispute of empiricism and rationalism evolved into a national struggle between British and French. Under the interaction of mentality during that time, national character, historical background and a variety of opportunities, empiricism and liberalism in the UK become the mainstream in the western world gradually.

Driven by the concept of “the only true”, the western sketch was inclined to more realistic, of course, which is the majority of people believed generally. In fact, it is only a form of western painting from 14 century to 19<sup>th</sup> century, only lasting hundreds of years.

When we try to trace the development of Western art and culture, we can find a common thread throughout the spectacular history. The shaping way of western prehistoric sketch is surreal, ornamental, with lines and pieces, such as in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. At that time, painters used lines to show contour in a sketch in which they can express a concept with realism. On the other hand, imitation and reasoning are the characteristic points of the ancient Greek which have the overall shaping language formed by beautiful and fluent line, lively and dynamic, to make realistic style combined with adornment way. To the middle age, painters of sketch emphasized the form of two-dimension and stiffness of the contour line, returning to Europe early features of geometric method which has been replaced by a new concept. Instead, all of these are similar to the concept of Chinese paintings.

During the Renaissance, sketch discipline laws were established, which is a significant milestone in the history of western sketch. It is just the “masters of the Renaissance” who laid the foundation of drawing rules. The rules as Scientific and rigorous form are contributed to the basic idea and understanding method, which are still seen as the sketch shaping of the common laws in nowadays. At that time, the painter named Giotto di Bondone strived to lead from two-dimensional drawings to three-dimensional ones, which promoted the evolution of a sketch from forms to concepts. Gradually theory of sketch became strict discipline system, including scientific principle of geometry, optical theory, three-dimensional projection, perspective and the application of anatomy, thus promoting major development of arts quickly.

Francisco Pacheco once said that sketch was a course which needed extreme efforts to understand, even though the tenacious struggle to master. The period marked the western sketch coming into the phase of mature. Then, Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael were known as three masters of the Renaissance. A lot of paintings of them were delicate, skilled with unique composition. They expressed characterization of figures with implicative and deep way, which showed powerful inner tension in terms of the human body’s structure and the rules of body movement. Then, in the late 17th century, French painter called Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres founded the precise model of neoclassical sketch; in 19th century French painter named Paul Cézanne further laid the foundation of modern sketch by theory of geometrical structure, which had a profound influence on modern art. In Germany, two prominent masters appeared on the stage of sketch. One is Adolpyh Von Menzel who ran for pursuit of highly realistic style, with vivid and exquisite skills. The other is Käthe Kollwitz with powerful passion for proletariat, whose line is full of sincere emotion and strongly appealing. In the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, representative of the Russian sketch school had developed the realistic tradition tracing from the Renaissance, to make sketch more scientific and systematic. After that, a group of Russian realist painters such as Ilya Yafimovich Repin, Surikov, Vasili Ivanovich came onto art stage, who contributed greatly in the field of sketch.

The Western sketch of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is called modernist school of sketch. During this period, styles of sketch alternated fast. Many masters paid attention to the subjective psychological activity and innovation expression, such as Pablo Ruiz Picasso, Kandinsky Wassily, Salvador Dali, Piet Cornelies Mondrian, and etc, discarding completely classical sketch of realistic idea.

### 3. DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE MODERN SKETCH

Gate of China which had been closed for a long time, was forced to be opened roughly by Opium war. Just in that era, Western cultures were taken together with the war. Therefore, western fine arts education was introduced and popularized in China. In this way, China’s modern sketch carrying the Western scientific spirit and flourished. The great era was called the modern enlightenment era.

Traditionally, the method of Chinese painting inclined to copy image simply, which emphasized on the especial feeling from heart, so they mostly adopted the way of impression or symbol type. But after the Opium war, a lot of scholars with smart insight introduced Western art ideas. The painters of this period adapted to the demand of social culture, and came to spread knowledge and communicated information to cultivate people’s self

confidence and self appreciation ability bravely. Mr. Xu Beihong, who is a famous painter, put forward the theory of “new seven methods” of sketching, and further promoted to the height of philosophy and aesthetics, after his studying Chinese national painting spirit and European sketching means deeply.

In the 1950s, there were three factors which laid solid cultural foundation of aesthetic qualities, such as sketch of realism style represented by the central academy of fine arts in China, the revolutionary popular aesthetic practice of liberated areas and sketch teaching system of the former Soviet Union. In practical training, the sketch artists did their best to pursuit of rational spirit and rigorous attitude towards studying, concentrating on some basic, key and essential points of shaping theory.

In the 1980s, diversified thinking will expand drawing theory, from the modern art concept to design sketch, and injecting of new awareness of the Chinese national shaping means. The “multiple” exploration process is constantly changing, from realism to freehand brushwork in traditional Chinese painting, from concrete to abstract, from the complicated to the brief, from object to subject, which shapes the reform in forms and ideas of sketch continuously.

In the flow of dynamic model, of course, we should always keep reflection calmly, such as the negative resulting from the introduction of Western realistic painting sketch, completely negative attitude towards traditional Chinese and the simple negative attitude to reappearance, and so on.

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## SUMMARY

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In the history of painting, representing the realistic objects and subjective performance come from two different concepts and forms, which develop and change alternately. Chinese sketch represents of objective image intuitively in the Jin, Tang and Song dynasty era, which form is descriptive. Chinese sketch represents subjective mood with the way of freehand brushwork in traditional Chinese form in the Ming and Qing dynasty era, which form is of lyricism. The former seek for describing with the vivid way artistically. At that time, painters were in search for creative true with amazing way. The latter made great importance to the ink, which pays attention to the unique form. For example, in northern Song dynasty, “Xishan travelled figure”, which is a masterpiece of ancient

Chinese landscape painting in black and white, was drawn by a painter named Fankuan in the highly realistic way, which also deeply expressed the painter’s mood. He applied the model called Cun of pale ink together with the Cun of raindrop, which cannot only show the texture of objects, but also push the aesthetic form of Chinese painting to the extreme. Under the level of descriptive, author’s emotions were expressed in a richer, subtler way. It was expressed in a direct way that it can come into hearts of audience for ever.

Realistic sketch is the result of which art colleges and universities in our country studied from Western. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Western art came to key turning point, which changes from imitation of nature in ancient to the modern subjective performance, near traditional art in the east. At the same time, Chinese modern art changes to reproduce from ancient freehand brushwork, coming near the West. They are both led by the laws of self-discipline of inverse phenomenon and infiltration with each other at the same time. It shapes the trend of the heterogeneous isomorphism and result of the objective law of boom-bust which makes the world art system appear close to each other.

There are a lot of enviable achievements in the field of western sketch, which are the result of multiple causes that are called the unique cultural DNA under specific historical conditions. So we should observe, reflect for innovation based on our own cultural DNA. Otherwise we will lose the earlier and motive power which will only form the “empty nest” of culture. A famous writer and scholar, named Fengjincai, called for “Do not lose the soul of our culture,” he stressed that “We should eliminate cultural distractions and impetuous feeling which are now widespread, which is our responsibility.”

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