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Evolution of Technique Theories in Traditional Chinese Ink Painting: A document analysis

Huang Xiaolian, Elis Syuhaila Mokhtar*

** Corresponding Author*

Department of Art, Sustainability and Creative Industry,
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

puhui4511@gmail.com, elis.mokhtar@fskik.upsi.edu.my
Tel: +601127650878

Abstract

This study explores the historical evolution of technique theories in traditional Chinese ink painting. The findings review that the development of these theories has been profoundly influenced by Chinese sociocultural context, while also reflecting the impact and integration of Western artistic concepts in the modern era. Through document analysis, this paper constructs a systematic framework to comprehensively understand the trajectory of technique theory in ink painting. The research deepens the understanding of traditional Chinese ink painting techniques and provides both theoretical support and practical reference for contemporary artistic creation and art education.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP); Technique Theories; Document Analysis

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1.0 Introduction

Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP) is one of the most representative art forms in the East Asian artistic tradition, known for its distinctive technical aesthetics and long-standing cultural heritage. Existing studies have extensively discussed its aesthetic ideals, philosophical foundations, subject matter, and stylistic developments. However, research that systematically examines the historical evolution of TCIP technique theories remains limited. This gap makes it difficult to clearly understand how technical concepts were formed, transmitted, and transformed across different historical periods. Therefore, this study aims to address this issue by analyzing key theoretical texts from ancient to modern times, with the goal of tracing the developmental trajectory of TCIP technique concepts.

The technical thought of TCIP is reflected mainly in several influential theoretical works, including *Ancient Paintings* (*gǔhuà pǐnlù*, 古画品录), *Notes on Brushwork* (*bǐfǎ jì*, 笔法记), *On Landscape Paintings* (*huàquán*, 画筌), and the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (*jièzǐyuán huàzhuàn*, 芥子园画传) (Siren, 2021; Da, 2018; Wang et al., 2024). These texts provide foundational insights into brushwork, ink application, coloration, and compositional methods. More importantly, they show how technical ideas were shaped by changing artistic values and cultural contexts. By examining these treatises together, the present study seeks to build a clearer understanding of how TCIP technique theories evolved and how they inform contemporary artistic practices.

This study employs a document analysis approach to examine major Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP) theoretical texts. The primary aim is to construct a chronological framework that reveals the historical evolution of TCIP technique theories. Through a

systematic review of key treatises, the study maps the structural shifts in technical concepts, identifies their developmental characteristics, and explores the contextual factors that shaped these transformations.

To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To construct a chronological framework that outlines the historical evolution of TCIP technique theories.
2. To identify and analyze the distribution and key technical features of these theories across different historical periods.
3. To examine the cultural and artistic factors that shaped changes in TCIP technical thought.

By addressing these objectives, the study provides a macro-level understanding of the evolution of TCIP technique theories and offers theoretical support for contemporary art education, traditional skill transmission, and creative practice.

2.0 Literature Review

To clarify the significance of this research, it is first necessary to provide an overview of Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP). By examining its origins, stylistic evolution, and theoretical foundations, this section establishes the historical and cultural background needed to understand the technical thinking embedded in the TCIP tradition. Building this foundation is essential before reviewing previous studies and identifying the research gaps that shape the direction of the present work.

2.1 Overview of Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP)

Regarding the origins of Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP), there is no scholarly consensus. The mainstream view holds that TCIP can be traced back to the silk painting art of the Warring States period, during which painting already exhibited early forms in subject matter, line work, and composition (Childs-Johnson & Major, 2023; Miller, 2022; Yang, 2021). Meanwhile, some scholars argue that Gu Kaizhi of the Eastern Jin dynasty was a foundational figure in the Chinese painting tradition, suggesting that the formal and spiritual essence of TCIP began with him (Yang, 2021). Additionally, research has indicated that Chinese painting originated from calligraphy traditions, with both sharing commonalities in brushwork and aesthetic theory (Chen, 2021). These multiple origin perspectives collectively illustrate that the formation and development of TCIP is a complex process of cultural integration and gradual evolution.

As a major branch of traditional Chinese painting, TCIP gradually established its techniques, styles, and artistic status through historical evolution. It began forming as an independent artistic system in the landscape paintings of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) (Yang, 2021; Hu, 2023; Xiao, 2024). During the Song Dynasty (960–1279), TCIP flourished, with increasing emphasis on personal emotion and individual artistic expression (Liu, 2024). By the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), TCIP integrated poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving, becoming the most culturally influential art form of the time (Zeng & Feng, 2022). In the Ming and Qing periods (1368–1901), ink painting further diversified, giving rise to multiple artistic schools (Xu, 2024; Lin & Zhang, 2024; Xu & Yang, 2023). This historical evolution established an important foundation for the development of TCIP techniques and theoretical frameworks.

Although many studies have examined the development of TCIP—including its artistic thinking, cultural background, and stylistic evolution—relatively few have focused specifically on how technical ideas were formed and transformed in historical painting treatises across different eras. Therefore, the next section reviews existing scholarship to highlight current research directions and the gaps that this study aims to address.

2.2 Previous Studies and Research Gap

As a significant component of global art history, TCIP has attracted extensive scholarly attention. Previous studies mainly address three areas:

1. the evolution of aesthetic and stylistic schools,
2. case studies of individual artists, and
3. modernity and cross-cultural reinterpretations of TCIP.

Despite this breadth, systematic research on the historical development of TCIP technique theories remains limited.

Regarding aesthetic philosophy and school formation, existing studies mainly emphasize philosophical ideas, brush-and-ink spirit, and cultural symbolism. Some scholars examine the influence of Daoism, Confucianism, and Chan Buddhism on TCIP aesthetics (Prieto & Donas, 2023; Wang, Abas, & Wu, 2023). Others analyze materials and techniques, showing how brush-and-ink language conveys humanistic and technical values (Liu et al., 2024), while cultural semiotic studies highlight the symbolic meanings of motifs such as pines, cranes, and rocks (Guan, 2024). Although these works enhance understanding of TCIP's aesthetic dimensions, they offer limited analysis of its technical structure, operational terms, and the historical transformation of technique concepts.

A second research direction involves examining individual artists to trace stylistic and conceptual transformations across periods. For example, Prieto and Donas (2023) analyze Wang Wei's *Wangchuan tu*, suggesting that cultural and philosophical meaning had already been integrated into early ink painting. Sernelj (2024) views the Qing artist Shitao as a reformer who challenged traditional norms with his idea that "brush and ink should follow the times." In more recent contexts, Cheung (2024) argues that Gao Jianfu introduced modern visual strategies—such as new approaches to color and composition—to revitalize ink painting in the early 20th century. These studies illuminate artistic innovation, yet they remain centered on style and ideology rather than tracing the evolution of technique theories themselves.

In the contemporary era, research has expanded with globalization and digital influences. Studies explore shifts in style, aesthetics, and contemporary creative expression (Xing, Razak, & Noh, 2023; Shan & Sontai, 2025; Zuo, Rohitasuk, & Wongsarot, 2025). Others examine connections between TCIP and new technologies (Dong & Dechsubha, 2024). These contributions show that TCIP continues

to evolve within modern artistic and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, they do not address how the underlying technical theories developed historically.

Although previous studies have examined TCIP from various perspectives, including stylistic traditions, individual artists, and contemporary adaptations, few have systematically traced how its technique theories evolved over time. Existing literature tends to emphasize aesthetics, cultural meanings, or stylistic features, leaving the technical dimension insufficiently explored. To address this gap, the present study analyzes major theoretical texts to clarify the historical development of TCIP technical concepts and to construct a coherent framework explaining their evolution across different periods. This reconstruction strengthens the link between past scholarship and the current study while providing a clearer understanding of how technical ideas shaped TCIP as a complete artistic system.

3.0 Methodology

To investigate the developmental trajectory and structural evolution of technique theories in Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP), this study adopts a document analysis method. This approach is suitable because TCIP technique concepts have been primarily preserved and transmitted through classical treatises and written theoretical records. By systematically reviewing and comparing key texts from different historical periods, the study constructs a chronological framework that outlines how TCIP technique theories were formed, transformed, and reinterpreted over time. Through this process, the research identifies the distribution of technique concepts, their core features, and the cultural and artistic factors that shaped their development.

3.1 Research Design

This study divides the development of Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP) into four major historical periods based on its evolutionary characteristics: the emergence of technique concepts in the pre-Tang period (before 618 CE), the formation of brush-and-ink language during the Tang and Song dynasties (618–1271), the systematization and pedagogical expansion in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (1271–1840), and the theoretical transformation and cross-cultural fusion in the modern period (after 1840). These four stages are illustrated in Figure 1.

For each historical stage, theoretical texts and technique-related materials were systematically collected and reviewed. The analysis involved identifying and organizing technique concepts across the four periods, followed by selecting the most representative treatise from each stage based on its influence, clarity of technical description, and relevance to later theory. These texts were then examined in detail to clarify their historical context and conceptual structure. By synthesizing findings across periods, the study constructs a coherent interpretation of how TCIP technique theories developed and transformed over time.

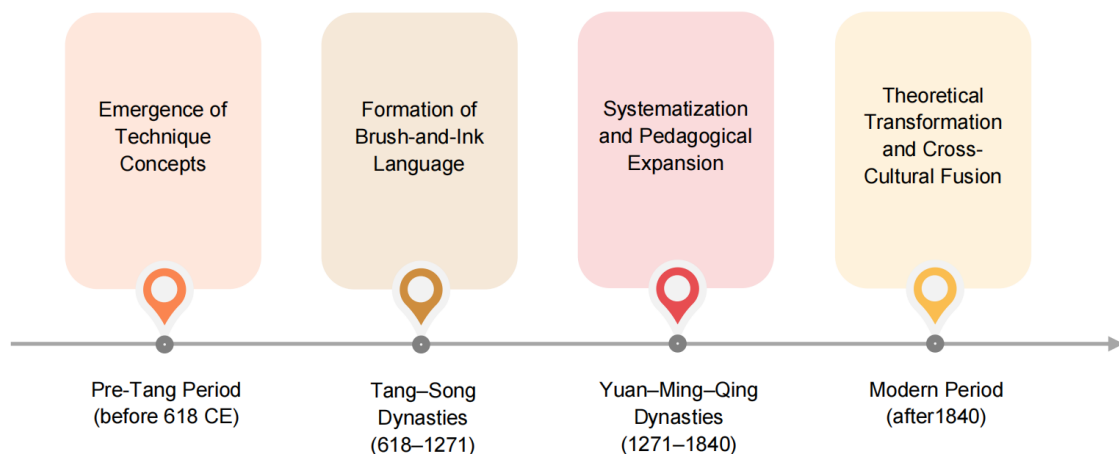


Fig. 1: Historical periods of TCIP technique theory development
(Source: developed by the researcher)

3.2 Research Methods and Limitations

This study mainly uses document analysis as its method, focusing on reviewing the timing and meaning of the texts. The materials include old painting books, technique guides, scholarly books, and related journal articles. Special attention is paid to how the texts are organized, who wrote them, how widely they were spread, and their impact in academic circles.

Although this study tries to cover the main theoretical materials well, there are some limits because of how available and well-preserved the old documents are. Some texts might have unclear dates, limited copies, or be too short to analyze properly. Also, since this research looks mainly at how technique theories have changed over time, it doesn't go deeply into each text, which would need more study later on.

This research uses a time-based approach to follow how TCIP technique theories have changed and developed over history. It tries to set up a basic framework for future work in art theory and creative practice. The next part shows the main statistical results and features of key theories, then analyzes them in their historical and cultural backgrounds.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

This section presents the main results of the document analysis and provides a detailed discussion of how the technique theories of Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP) have changed over time. It highlights the major theoretical features that emerged in each historical period and interprets them within their broader historical and cultural contexts.

4.1 The Emergence of Technique Concepts in the Pre-Tang Period (Before 618 CE)

In the pre-Tang period, approximately six texts relating to painting techniques were identified, indicating the early formation of technical ideas. At this stage, Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP) had not yet developed into an independent system, and painting was still closely connected to calligraphy and other visual arts. The most influential text from this period, *Ancient Paintings* by Xie He (479–502), introduced a foundational evaluative framework that later became central to TCIP theory.

This period reflects the initial emergence of technical thought, when basic ideas about painting methods began to take shape. Although brush and ink had not yet developed into an independent expressive language, the appearance of early evaluative criteria shows a growing awareness of artistic process. Theoretical discussions tended to focus more on aesthetic and philosophical considerations than on concrete techniques, revealing a stage when artistic practice was still intertwined with broader cultural and moral concepts.

4.2 The Formation of Brush-and-Ink Language during the Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1271)

This stage yielded around 23 texts concerning technique theory, marking the establishment of TCIP as an independent art form. Brush and ink became central expressive tools, and a distinctive artistic language began to take shape. During this period, TCIP developed a clearer identity, with brush-and-ink recognized as its core expressive medium. *Notes on Brushwork* by Jing Hao (c. 870–930) made a significant theoretical contribution by emphasizing the interdependence of brush and ink, elevating ink from a supportive role to an essential expressive element. Additionally, this era saw the emergence of early art-historical treatises, indicating increasing theoretical maturity.

The strong economy and rich culture of the Tang and Song dynasties helped TCIP grow. More art was made, more scholars got involved, and the idea of personal style in painting started to develop. Writing about theory during this time not only set down technical rules but also showed a growing sense of artistic freedom, laying the foundation for the brush-and-ink system that defines TCIP.

4.3 Systematization and Pedagogical Expansion in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties (1271–1840)

During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, approximately 40 treatises related to TCIP techniques were identified, indicating the flourishing of ink painting and the expansion of a rich and systematic body of theory. During this period, TCIP became the dominant form of artistic expression, and its theories became increasingly systematic and pedagogically oriented. Notable examples include *On Landscape Paintings* by Da Chongguang (1623–1692), which compiled and commented on historical landscape painting theories, and *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* by Wang Gai (1654–1710), Wang Shi (1649–1737), and Wang Nie (c. 1662), which served as a structured manual for teaching painting techniques.

Even though there were many political and social troubles during this time, TCIP kept growing, partly because many artists chose to live away from official life. When they stepped back from government jobs, painters used landscapes to express feelings and think about philosophy. This turn inward increased the need for clear technical explanations, which led to many new theoretical writings. Theories then focused not just on artistic skills but also on moral growth, helping to organize and pass on TCIP techniques through teaching.

4.4 Theoretical Transformation and Cross-Cultural Fusion in the Modern Period (After 1840)

Compared with the extensive writings of earlier periods, the modern era produced only about fourteen major texts on TCIP techniques, reflecting a time of significant transition in artistic theory. Since 1840, China has experienced political upheaval and increasing encounters with Western culture, leading to major debates about the direction of ink painting. During this period, theoretical discussions were marked by tension between the adoption of Western artistic concepts—such as perspective, anatomy, and realism—and the preservation of traditional brush-and-ink aesthetics. As a result, TCIP theory entered a stage in which tradition and modernity, as well as Chinese and Western visual languages, intersected and redefined each other.

Representative texts from this period further demonstrate these theoretical shifts. *Wanmu Caotang Painting Collection* (*wànmù cǎotáng huàjí*, 万木草堂画集) by Kang Youwei promoted a reform-oriented view, advocating for the integration of Western methods to modernize Chinese painting. In contrast, *Essentials of Painting Methods* (*huàfǎ yàozhǐ*, 画法要旨) by Huang Binhong emphasized the structural power of traditional brushwork, tonal layering, and the cultural spirit embedded in ink painting. Together, these works reveal the dual direction of TCIP theory in the modern period: innovation through cross-cultural fusion and reaffirmation of classical brush-and-ink values.

A summary of the representative theories across the four historical periods is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The Evolution Framework of TCIP Theories

Period	Numbers	Features	Representatives
Emergence (Before 618)	About 6	Initial emergence, yet to reach maturity.	<i>Ancient Paintings</i> (<i>gǔhuà pǐnlù</i> , 古画品录) by Xie He

Formation (618–1271)	About 23	Independent, emphasis on brush and ink techniques.	<i>Notes on Brushwork (bǐfǎ Jì, 笔法记)</i> by Jing Hao
Systematization (1271–1840)	About 40	Systematization and pedagogical expansion.	<i>On Landscape Paintings (huàquán, 画筌)</i> by Da Chongguang <i>Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting (jièzǐyuán huàzhuàn, 芥子园画传)</i> by Wang Gai et al
Transformations (After 1840)	About 14	Influenced and challenged by Western art.	<i>Wanmu Caotang Painting Collection (wànmù cǎotáng huàjī, 万木草堂画集)</i> by Kang Youwei <i>Essentials of Painting Methods (huàfǎ yào zhǐ, 画法要旨)</i> by Huang Binhong

(Source: developed by the researcher)

4.5 Discussion

The analysis of TCIP technique theories across four historical periods shows that technical discourse in ink painting has always been shaped by broader cultural and intellectual conditions. Instead of forming a fixed set of methods, technique concepts developed in response to changing artistic values, evolving from early aesthetic judgments to more explicit systems of brushwork, ink control, and instructional guidance. This pattern suggests that technique theories functioned not only as practical guidelines but also as reflections of each era's artistic priorities.

At the same time, comparing texts from different periods highlights how shifts in expressive goals, cultural beliefs, and scholarly attitudes influenced the structure of technique discourse. The findings refine existing scholarship by emphasizing the internal logic and continuity of TCIP's technical development rather than treating each treatise as an isolated work. This perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of how technical ideas were transmitted, adapted, and reinterpreted, offering insights that support both historical interpretation and contemporary applications of ink-painting methods.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study analyzed approximately eighty key texts to trace the historical development of technique theories in Traditional Chinese Ink Painting (TCIP). By organizing these materials into four major periods, the research identified a coherent progression from early aesthetic principles to more structured pedagogical systems and later to modern reinterpretations shaped by cultural exchange. The study's main contribution is the establishment of a historical framework that clarifies how TCIP technique concepts were formed, transmitted, and transformed across different eras.

Despite its broad scope, the study is limited by the incomplete preservation of some historical texts and the need to prioritize general patterns over detailed analysis of individual treatises. The framework developed here may offer useful reference points for teaching and creative practice, helping link classical techniques with contemporary artistic needs. Future research may explore lesser-known theorists, compare TCIP with other East Asian ink traditions, or examine how classical technique theories are adapted within digital and modern studio contexts.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study adds to art theory by providing a timeline framework to understand how technique theories in TCIP have changed over time. Instead of just looking at style or aesthetics, it focuses on technical ideas. The timeline and structure analysis here can serve as a base for future research, both in history and in creative practice with Chinese ink art.

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