HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CREATIVE EXPERIENCE OF THE LINGNAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING AND OPTIMIZATION STRATEGIES FOR CONTEMPORARY THEMATIC ART CREATION IN GUANGDONG

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the artistic characteristics and practical experience of the Lingnan School of Painting, analyzing its developmental trajectory toward scientific rigor, localization, and contemporary relevance. By distilling creative principles from representative works and comparing them with major thematic artworks produced in Guangdong in recent years, the study summarizes the school's distinct models of innovation and regional traits across different eras. The research demonstrates that the Lingnan School—guided by the philosophy of "artistic innovation and practical application"—has transcended the constraints of traditional Chinese painting. It achieves a balance between aesthetic value and social significance, responding to the demands of the times through art and establishing a cultural foundation for contemporary thematic artistic creation. Based on these findings, this paper proposes optimization strategies for contemporary thematic art in Guangdong. These strategies aim to help the field remain deeply rooted in the fertile soil of Lingnan culture and preserve its unique local character, ultimately fostering the creation of high-quality works that possess both distinct regional identity and profound intellectual depth—thereby supporting the high-quality development of the Lingnan art industry and the preservation of its regional cultural heritage.
Keywords: Lingnan School of Painting, Guangdong, Contemporary, Thematic Art Creation

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INTRODUCTION

The Lingnan School of Painting is a revolutionary artistic movement that emerged in Guangdong in the early 20th century. Spanning three generations, the school adheres to the philosophy of "integrating Chinese and Western elements, and blending the ancient with the modern." By synthesizing the strengths of traditional Chinese brush-and-ink techniques, Western approaches to light and shadow, and Japanese painting styles—while focusing on the landscapes and contemporary society of the Lingnan region—the school has established a unique artistic paradigm. This study examines the school's historical development, artistic characteristics, and creative practices, thereby enriching academic research on Lingnan art and contributing to the revitalization of local artistic resources. Furthermore, by aligning with the patterns of Chinese art history and the requirements for thematic artistic creation in the new era, this research proposes an optimization framework for thematic art production in Guangdong. This framework offers practical pathways and strategies for local artists, while also serving as a valuable model for the modernization and thematic innovation of other regional schools of painting.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the application trends of thematic art creation since the Lingnan School of painting, and to explore how to improve contemporary thematic art creation in Guangdong Province from the historical development background and development trends of thematic art creation.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

1) The Creative Transformation of the Lingnan School of Painting

The Lingnan School of painting, originating in Guangdong in the early 20th century, is a significant school centered around the "Three Masters of Lingnan"—Gao Jianfu, Gao Qifeng, and Chen Shuren. Its formation and development are deeply embedded in the historical context of the clash between Chinese and Western cultures and political changes in modern times. From a historical perspective, the Lingnan School's creative experience inherited the sketching tradition of the local "Ju Chao and Ju Lian" while also absorbing foreign techniques and the spirit of the times, forming a unique artistic path of "eclecticism between Chinese and Western styles, and integration of ancient and modern."

Among these, local mentorship and sketching traditions form the foundation of the Lingnan School's creation. Ju Chao and Ju Lian opened a studio at the Shixiang Garden in Geshan, drawing inspiration from Yun Shouping's boneless painting method and creating the "collision of water and powder" technique. They advocated "finding painting materials exclusively in nature, taking nature as their teacher," and meticulously observed and sketched the scenery of Lingnan. (Chen, 2010) Gao Jianfu, Gao Qifeng, and Chen Shuren all studied under Ju Lian in their early years, fully inheriting the creative philosophy of emphasizing sketching from life and depicting everything. They continued their on-site observations of insects and plants during their studies in Japan and travels in Southeast Asia (Liu, 2023). This sketching tradition was passed down through the institutionalized teaching of the Chunshui Painting Academy and Tianfenglou, becoming a core methodology of Lingnan painting.

The integration of Chinese and Western styles and the borrowing of foreign techniques are the innovative methods of the Lingnan School of painting. Many members of the Lingnan School had studied in Japan and were influenced by the "misty style" of Takeuchi Seihō and Western realist techniques. They incorporated Western perspective, chiaroscuro, and color temperature variations into Chinese painting—for example, Gao Jianfu's *Himalayas* combines Western perspective shadows with Impressionist flat color blocks, while *Shaded Bridge* borrows from the atmospheric expression of Japanese painting (Fu & Chen, 2022). Its "eclecticism" is not a simple patchwork, but rather based on the essence of Chinese painting. The aim of "eclecticism

between East and West, and integration of ancient and modern" is to break away from the decadent imitation of the past during the Qing Dynasty and establish a new Chinese painting with a contemporary feel (Zhang, 2021). The implicit dissemination of Western realistic observation methods and watercolor techniques through the export paintings of the Thirteen Factories of Guangzhou also provided a local cultural foundation for the early Lingnan School's acceptance of Western methods (Zheng, 2023; Liu, 2015).

The realism of subject matter and the popularization of art reflect the contemporary character of the Lingnan School. The "Three Masters of Lingnan" followed Sun Yat-sen to join the Tongmenghui, advocating that "art should be popularized, and the people should be artisticized." Their creations closely followed the times—including traditional landscapes, flowers, and birds, and for the first time incorporating themes of trains, airplanes, and war into their paintings. They also founded the *Truth Pictorial* and held touring exhibitions to spread the new concept of Chinese painting to society (Chen, 2010; Fu & Chen, 2022). During the War of Resistance against Japan, the art of painting further inspired national morale and served a social and educational function.

However, scholars have also pointed out its historical limitations: the traditional scholarship of the Lingnan School of painting largely stopped at the level of Ju Lian, failing to deeply trace the Song and Yuan dynasties. Its integration of Western painting techniques mainly occurred through Japan and remained largely at the level of formal borrowing, resulting in a relatively weak traditional foundation. Ultimately, its artistic revolution was not fully realized (Chen Bing, 2010). Nevertheless, it undeniably challenged the outdated practice of imitating the ancients, providing an important paradigm for the modern transformation of Chinese painting. Its creative experience of emphasizing sketching from life, integrating Chinese and Western styles, and adapting to the times still offers valuable insights today (Chen, 2010; Fu & Chen, 2022).

2) Current Status of Contemporary Thematic Art Creation in Guangdong

Contemporary thematic art creation in Guangdong is a regional cultural product resulting from the interaction between the century-old Lingnan innovation tradition and the new China's policy of "literature and art serving the people." From a historical perspective, Guangdong's thematic creation is not an isolated contemporary phenomenon, but rather a unique creative ecosystem that unfolded within the dual context of the new China's art system and the reform and opening-up policy, with the Lingnan School's core principles of "eclecticism between Chinese and Western art, integration of ancient and modern art," and "art expressing the spirit of the times" as its guiding principles (Yang, Liu, Peng, 2019). As early as the beginning of the last century, Gao Jianfu and Gao Qifeng advocated that painting should capture the unique spirit of each era and regarded art's participation in social change as its inherent duty. This gene profoundly shaped Guangdong painters' continuous concern for thematic and realistic subjects (Zhang & Shen, 2025).

From the founding of the People's Republic of China to the Cultural Revolution, Guangdong initially established the "people's narrative" paradigm of thematic art through revolutionary historical paintings and construction-themed works. Many works, employing realist techniques to depict revolutionary memories and scenes of socialist construction, have led to Guangdong producing nationally influential works across various painting genres—oil painting, printmaking, and sculpture—a phenomenon historically known as the "Guangdong Phenomenon" in the art of New China (Chen, 2006). This balanced development across multiple genres and the continuous output of several generations have cultivated a talent pool and fostered stylistic awareness for contemporary Guangdong thematic art.

After the reform and opening up, Guangdong, as a special economic zone at the forefront, transformed its thematic art from a singular revolutionary narrative to a more diverse narrative encompassing the achievements of reform and opening up, ordinary people's lives, and local

customs. During this period, Guangdong artists were among the first to break free from the conceptualized imagery of the Cultural Revolution, introducing the depiction of the texture of life and individual emotions while maintaining the main theme, resulting in a more open thematic expression in earlier times.

Since the turn of the 21st century—and especially following the advent of the new era—the launch of a series of major national-level thematic art projects has significantly invigorated thematic art creation in Guangdong. The Guangdong Painting Academy and the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts have played a key role in organizing national-level training workshops for thematic art. A mechanism for conducting field research—grounded in the principle of "delving into life and taking root among the people"—has become a standard practice. This has given rise to a body of new works that blend traditional ink-wash techniques with the urban landscapes, ecological themes, and high-tech imagery of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. Such works have greatly enriched the dissemination of Lingnan regional characteristics, both within the Greater Bay Area and across the nation.

However, thematic art in Guangdong is currently facing new tensions and challenges. Thematic art briefly declined due to the 1985 New Wave and market impacts, but has since seen a revival thanks to national projects, resulting in a coexistence of diverse styles. How to avoid conceptualization and formulaic approaches while maintaining the main theme, and how to preserve regional distinctiveness in global and Greater Bay Area cultural dialogues, are questions that Guangdong creators continue to address. Guangdong, relying on the National Art Museum of China and provincial art museums, has curated large-scale thematic exhibitions such as "Its Destiny Lies in Innovation—A Century of Guangdong Art" and "The Great Tide Rises in the Pearl River," bringing thematic works back to the public art education arena (Wang, 2021).

A review of the literature reveals that the current state of contemporary thematic art creation in Guangdong is characterized by: a dual foundation of the innovative spirit of the Lingnan School of painting and realistic narratives of the people; the integration of local cultural symbols and modern visual language under the impetus of national thematic creation projects; and a gradual formation of a creative pattern that combines Chinese style with Lingnan charm, and historical themes with contemporary achievements. Furthermore, it continues to expand its contemporary boundaries in dimensions such as digital display and Greater Bay Area collaboration.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To achieve the research objectives, this study employs both literature review and case study methods.

1) Literature Review

This study collects and organizes books, academic papers, and exhibition documentation concerning the Lingnan School of Painting and thematic art creation. It examines the historical background and evolutionary trajectory of thematic art—tracing its development from the inception of the Lingnan School—and identifies its core creative philosophies and artistic characteristics, thereby establishing a theoretical foundation for this research.

2) Case Study

This study selects representative thematic works from various periods of the Lingnan School, alongside significant thematic artworks produced in Guangdong in recent years. Through a comparative analysis of the inheritance and transformation of visual content, the study distills key creative principles and regional characteristics, ultimately proposing practical strategies to enhance the standard of contemporary thematic art creation in Guangdong.

RESEARCH RESULTS

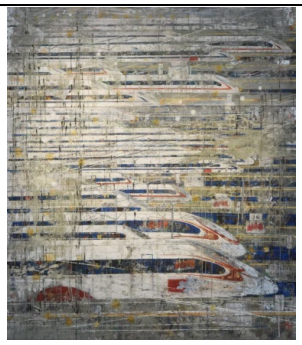
The Lingnan School of Painting has established a modern system of Chinese painting with a distinct regional character, defined by its philosophy of "integrating Chinese and Western elements, as well as the ancient and the modern"; a commitment to "engaging with reality and serving the contemporary era"; and a practice that "emphasizes painting from life while synthesizing Chinese and Western artistic traditions." Its subject matter encompasses social transformation, historical narratives, and daily life, while its brushwork incorporates Western-style realism and the use of light and shadow—serving as an exemplary model for the innovative transformation of traditional culture. Through a comparative analysis, this study summarizes the school's core creative principles and offers insights for optimizing contemporary thematic art in Guangdong, as presented in the table below:

Table 1 Case Studies of Lingnan School Paintings with Historical Characteristics

NO.1	NO.2	NO.3	NO.4
			
"The Flames of the Eastern Battlefield" Gao Jianfu	"Retreat from the City"Guan Shanyue	"The Lonely Widow Under the Iron Heel" Guan Shanyue	"New Recruits in the Mines"Yang Zhiguang

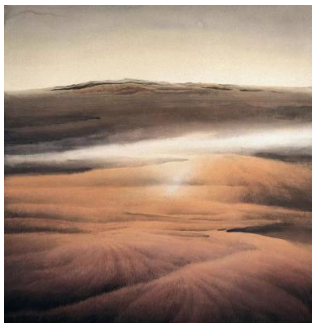
According to Table 1, from a historical perspective, researchers have found that representative works of the Lingnan School of painting collectively embody the core characteristics of "art keeping pace with the times and ink conveying the people's sentiments." Whether it was Gao Jianfu and Guan Shanyue during the War of Resistance against Japan using ruins, refugees, and the elderly to inscribe national trauma and promote the spirit of resistance, or Yang Zhiguang in the 1970s dedicating himself to the construction of New China, all these works closely intertwined individual destinies with the progress of the nation. The Lingnan School of painting has always been conscious of "its destiny is innovation," transforming traditional ink painting into a "contemporary language" that responds to reality and cares for people's livelihoods—whether it is compassionately depicting the pain of war, gently presenting rural daily life, or vigorously shaping the image of laborers, it is both anchored to specific historical contexts and transcends immediate interpretations, realizing the enduring tenet of "creating for the times and art for the people" with profound emotions and humanistic warmth.

Table 2 Case Analysis Table of Major Themed Artworks in Guangdong in Recent Years

NO.1	NO.2	NO.3	NO.4
			
"Share weal and woe" Luo Yuxin	"Twinkling stars" Xian Yifan	"China Speed·Dynamic Train" Zhang Jing	"Life goes on" She Yi

According to Table 2, Contemporary Guangdong art creation has developed a distinctive characteristic: "micro-narratives carrying grand themes, and regional roots connecting with the spirit of the times." Creators have abandoned conceptual illustrations, instead delving into local life scenes. From the warm memories of urban transformation and the tranquility of rural daily life to the celebration of ecological homes and the imagery of industrial speed, they use tangible regional landscapes and everyday details as narrative entry points, refining the "Chinese story" into the essence of Lingnan's local customs and human warmth. In terms of language, they inherit the Lingnan School's tradition of "eclecticism between Chinese and Western styles and emphasis on sketching from life," while boldly integrating diverse media such as mineral pigments, gold leaf, and modern composition. Through spatial reconstruction, textural experimentation, and color refinement, they achieve a modern expression of traditional ink painting. This practice of "seeing the big picture in small details, moving people with emotions, and excelling in innovation" not only breaks away from the homogenization of thematic creations, but also demonstrates the innovative spirit of "its mission is to be new." It vividly interprets the creative orientation of "art portraying the times and writing biographies for the people's livelihood," and provides a "Guangdong path" for major thematic creations that combines regional distinctiveness with contemporary relevance.

Table 3 Case Study of Works by Renowned Contemporary Lingnan School Artists

NO.1	NO.2	NO.3	NO.4
			

"Twilight in the Desert" Li Jinkun	"Parrot" Zhou Yansheng	"Papaya Blossoms" Wan Xiaoning	“Guangzhou Trade Fair” Fang Tu

According to Table 3, Contemporary inheritors of the Lingnan School of Painting, rooted in the century-old tradition of "eclecticism between East and West, with innovation as its lifeblood," have constructed a paradigm of inheritance that deeply integrates traditional roots with a modern perspective. In terms of language, they not only delve into the sketching tradition of the "Ju Lian and Ju Chao" and the rules of the Song Dynasty court painting style, but also actively absorb Western light and shadow composition, mineral pigments, and abstract expression vocabulary. They blend the lustrous texture of "colliding water and powder" with modern visual tension, breaking through traditional brush and ink formulas and establishing a "new Chinese painting" grammar that combines Eastern charm with contemporary aesthetic tension. In terms of subject matter, they have expanded from Lingnan landscapes and revolutionary epics to the Silk Road desert, urban life, and ecological concerns, elevating regional writing into an artistic response to the community of shared future for mankind and endowing "art for the times" with a global connotation. In terms of education, they rely on the academy system to institutionalize the transmission of sketching concepts and innovative spirit, cultivating a new generation with both local roots and an international perspective, and promoting the Lingnan School of Painting from a regional school to a cultural brand that radiates throughout the country. This practice of "upholding tradition without being bound by the past, and innovating without deviating from the fundamental principles" has not only extended the vitality of the Lingnan School of painting, but also provided a "Lingnan model" that can be learned from for the modern transformation of Chinese painting.

Table 4 Analysis of Creative Cases with Distinctive Regional Characteristics in the Lingnan School of Painting

NO.1	NO.2	NO.3	NO.4
			
"Lingnan style - kapok, lychee, plantain, plumeria" Lin Lan	"The festive atmosphere of the New Year" Dai Xiaoman	"Dragon and Dragon" Huang Zhijian	"Early Spring in Guangzhou" Li Jun

According to Table 4, In terms of regional expression, the Lingnan School of Painting has formed a unique aesthetic system that is "rooted in southern Guangdong, possessing both form

and spirit, and continuing from the past to the present." Its regional characteristics are first reflected in the locality of the subject matter. The creator always takes Lingnan's unique scenery such as kapok, lychee, plantain, and banyan trees as well as cultural landscapes such as Chaoshan folk houses as the core motif, making the work a highly recognizable "visual local chronicle." Secondly, in terms of artistic language, it inherits the sketching tradition of "bumping water and powder" pioneered by "Ju Lian and Ju Chao", focusing on expressing the moist texture and vigorous vitality in the high temperature and humidity environment of Lingnan, and the pen and ink are filled with the bright atmosphere of the tropics and subtropics. More importantly, this kind of regional writing does not stick to old interests, but constantly develops new ones with the times: from a detailed description of natural ecology to an in-depth exploration of urban modern life, folk cultural memory and regional spiritual character. The creators often use objects to describe people, transforming the majestic kapok, intertwined ancient banyan trees, etc. into symbols of tough and heroic personality, achieving a leap from "writing the shape of Lingnan" to "transmitting the spirit of Lingnan", making regional characteristics a vivid carrier that carries the spirit of the times and the feelings of family and country.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Based on a systematic review and multi-dimensional interpretation of the aforementioned 16 representative works, this paper clarifies the inherent logic of the Lingnan School of painting's "life lies in innovation" from four dimensions: historical classics, contemporary practice, the inheritance of masters, and regional characteristics. Based on this, it proposes optimization strategies for contemporary thematic art creation in Guangdong.

1) Historical Dimension: The Responsibility of Brush and Ink in the Torrent of Time. Historical works collectively attest to the Lingnan School's distinct characteristic of "art written for the times." During critical periods of national crisis and social transformation, pioneers such as Gao Jianfu and Guan Shanyue broke the traditional reclusive paradigm of literati painting, incorporating the ruins of war, the lives of displaced people, and the fate of the nation into their brushstrokes. This courage to confront reality and the innovative techniques of "eclecticism between East and West" endowed Chinese painting with the epic function of recording history, criticizing reality, and inspiring people, establishing the Lingnan school's style of "brush and ink should follow the times."

2) Contemporary Dimension: Grand Themes in Micro-Narratives

Recent major thematic creations in Guangdong have shown a significant narrative shift. The creators abandoned empty conceptual illustrations and instead delved into local life, using concrete Lingnan landscapes and everyday details as entry points for their works, ranging from warm memories of urban transformation and the rapid imagery of industrial civilization to the grand vision of ecological civilization. This practice of "seeing the big picture in the small details and moving people with emotion" successfully transformed grand national narratives into tangible visual warmth, forming the "Guangdong path" for thematic creation.

3) Inheritance dimension: paradigm reconstruction in passing on the legacy from generation to generation

The works of contemporary Lingnan masters demonstrate the vitality of cultural inheritance. They neither stick to the brushwork formulas of their predecessors nor deviate from the innovative core of the Lingnan School of Painting. From Li Jinkun's heavy color and space experiments on gold paper, to Lin Lan's modern transformation of the "Ju Chao and Ju Lian " sketching tradition, to the exploration of rock colors and comprehensive materials by young and middle-aged painters, they embody the academic consciousness of "establishing China and studying the West". This continuous reconstruction of the language system ensures the voice and vitality of the Lingnan School of Painting in the contemporary art landscape.

4) Regional dimension: spiritual sublimation after taking pictures of scenery
Works with significant regional characteristics construct a unique "Lingnan visual history". Whether it is the moistness of lychees, the strength of kapok, or the regional symbols of Chaoshan folk houses and the aerial roots of banyan trees using the "water and powder" technique, they all go beyond simple descriptions of scenery. The creator "uses objects as metaphors for people", sublimating Lingnan's natural ecology into a tough and heroic personality, making regional characteristics a vivid carrier that carries the spirit of the times and national emotions, and achieving a leap from "writing the shape of Lingnan" to "transmitting the spirit of Lingnan".
Based on the historical experience of the Lingnan School of painting, the optimization of contemporary thematic art creation in Guangdong should focus on deeply exploring the contemporary regional characteristics of Lingnan to strengthen its regional features. First, it is necessary to strengthen regional aesthetic markers, guiding creators to return to the traditional sketching style of the “Ju Chao and Ju Lian”, extracting visual symbols from Lingnan landscapes such as kapok trees, banyan trees, and arcade buildings, elevating regional characteristics from superficial background embellishments to cultural totems embodying the spirit of the times, thus breaking the "homogenization" dilemma. Second, it is crucial to deepen the construction of the "new Chinese painting" grammar, encouraging the bold integration of mineral pigments, light and shadow composition, and modern design vocabulary while adhering to the core principles of brush and ink, exploring diverse expressions such as gold-leaf painting and spatial experimentation to respond to the visual challenges of industrial civilization and technological themes. Third, it is essential to promote a deeper narrative perspective, abandoning conceptual illustrations and advocating for capturing micro-emotions from urban changes and rural revitalization, reflecting the grand era through "small but exquisite" everyday narratives, and enhancing the humanistic warmth of the works. Finally, relying on the academy and art institute system, we will improve the talent cultivation mechanism of "apprenticeship + sketching", cultivate a creative team with both local roots and international vision, expand global narrative based in the Greater Bay Area, tell Chinese stories with fine art works, and truly realize the leap from "major art province" to "strong art province".

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