

AN EXPLORATION OF THE MECHANISMS BEHIND THE REVIVAL OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE LACQUER PAINTING AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract: The backdrop of globalization and the convergence of contemporary artistic media, Chinese lacquer painting confronts a structural tension between traditional craftsmanship and contemporary concepts, necessitating a theoretical framework that transcends binary opposition. This study aims to resolve the oppositional theoretical dilemma facing Chinese lacquer painting between tradition and modernity within the contexts of globalization and contemporary art, while revealing the intrinsic mechanisms through which traditional lacquer art and contemporary lacquer painting interact. Employing three research methods literature review, case analysis, and theoretical construction and taking representative works by artists such as Shen Kelong, Tang Mingxiu, and Zhou Jianshi as analytical subjects, this study systematically examines the pathways through which traditional lacquer art transforms into contemporary expression across four dimensions: cultural core, aesthetic spirit, technical system, and media boundaries. The findings indicate that tradition is not a constraint on innovation in contemporary lacquer painting, but rather its cultural foundation and source of legitimacy. Traditional regeneration and contemporary reconstruction form a dialectically unified symbiotic relationship: the former accomplishes the extraction and revitalization of the traditional spiritual core, while the latter achieves aesthetic translation, linguistic renewal, and conceptual expression. The study argues that the organic integration of tradition and contemporaneity that is, the contemporary transformation of tradition is the key to lacquer painting establishing cultural subjectivity and the spirit of the times. It is recommended that contemporary lacquer painting creation uphold the ontological value of natural lacquer, simultaneously advance the revitalization of techniques and innovation of concepts, and establish a pluralistic evaluation system centered on spiritual depth, linguistic precision, and cultural contribution. Supplementary data indicate that all successful contemporary lacquer painting practices retain the core spirit of traditional lacquer art, making contemporary adjustments only at the levels of medium, form, and subject matter; the incorporation of social issues has been shown to significantly enhance the contemporary value of artworks. Among the cases examined, Shen Kelong’s *Empty Mountain* series confirms the contemporary transformation of the traditional spiritual core; Tang Mingxiu’s *Urban Lacquer Shadows* series achieves the translation of traditional natural aesthetics into urban concepts; and Zhou Jianshi’s *Vessel · Image* series reconstructs the spirit of objects into contemporary spatial concepts. This study provides an actionable theoretical pathway for the modernizing transformation of lacquer painting and offers a reference paradigm for indigenous artistic media to maintain cultural subjectivity within the context of globalization.

Keywords: Chinese lacquer painting, traditional revival, contemporary reconstruction, cultural transformation, medium innovation

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese lacquer art has a developmental history spanning more than eight thousand years. Lacquer painting, as an independent artistic genre, was formally established in the latter half of the 20th century. Against the backdrop of globalization and the pluralistic integration of artistic media, Chinese lacquer painting has long confronted three core contradictions: tradition versus contemporaneity, craft versus art, and the local versus the global. Existing research has largely focused on the documentation of traditional techniques or descriptive accounts of contemporary experimental phenomena, rarely offering systematic explanations of the intrinsic connections and transformative logic between tradition and modernity, nor clearly addressing such key questions as how tradition persists within the contemporary and how contemporary innovation draws upon tradition (Li, 2016). This study adopts “traditional regeneration, contemporary reconstruction” as its analytical framework, transcending binary oppositional thinking, and examines the intrinsic mechanisms underlying the evolution from traditional lacquer art to contemporary lacquer painting across four dimensions: cultural core, aesthetic spirit, technical system, and media boundaries. The aim of this study is to refine the theoretical framework for the contemporary transformation of lacquer painting, provide theoretical reference for the modernization of indigenous artistic media, and advance the capacity of Chinese lacquer painting to achieve innovation of the times while preserving its cultural subjectivity (Cheng, 2019).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a combined research paradigm of literature review, case analysis, and theoretical construction,

thereby ensuring the reproducibility of the research process and the verifiability of its conclusions. The study begins by systematically reviewing literature from the past two decades on lacquer painting practice, theoretical achievements, and the modernization of arts and crafts, with particular reference to monographs and journal articles in the fields of lacquer art aesthetics, lacquer art history, and the transmission of traditional craftsmanship, so as to consolidate the overall theoretical foundation (Chang, 2017). It then selects, based on the principles of representativeness, practical completeness, and theoretical relevance, Shen Kelong's *Empty Mountain* series, Tang Mingxiu's *Urban Lacquer Shadows* series, and Zhou Jianshi's *Vessel · Image* series as core cases, covering four representative types: spiritual inheritance, urban expression, spatial reconstruction, and social intervention (Kou & Wang, 2025). Concurrently, a three-tiered analytical model of "traditional regeneration, contemporary reconstruction, and integrative symbiosis" is constructed, through which textual analysis, formal analysis, and conceptual interpretation of the cases are conducted across four dimensions: identification of cultural core, translation of aesthetic spirit, activation and application of techniques, and expansion of media boundaries (Jin & Li, 2026). Finally, drawing on both documentary sources and empirical case evidence, the study synthesizes the dialectical relationship between traditional and modern lacquer painting, distills the mechanisms of artistic transformation, pathways of creative practice, and directions for developmental optimization, ultimately producing a theoretically comprehensive set of research conclusions (Lian, 2024).

3. RESULTS: TRADITIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE OF LACQUER PAINTING

3.1 TRADITIONAL REGENERATION

Traditional regeneration referred to the identification, extraction, and revitalization of the cultural core of traditional lacquer art. Rather than replicating forms, artists distilled the spiritual essence from the material philosophy of "harmony between humanity and nature," the creative ethos of "technique transcending into the Tao," and the symbolic color system of "black, vermilion, and gold." Through core techniques such as lacquer application and polishing, they expressed temporality, subtlety, and spiritual vitality, thereby reactivating the traditional spirit within a contemporary context (Yang, 2025). Shen Kelong's *Empty Mountain* series achieved a restrained and profound visual effect through multi-layered lacquering and repeated polishing, affirmed the contemporary transformation pathway of the traditional spiritual core (Tang, 2025).

3.2 CONTEMPORARY RECONSTRUCTION

Contemporary reconstruction built upon regenerated traditional elements to achieve aesthetic translation and linguistic innovation. Tang Mingxiu's *Urban Lacquer Shadows* series transformed the traditional *zhangxiu* technique into a visual metaphor for urban texture, completing the translation from traditional natural aesthetics to contemporary urban concepts. Zhou Jianshi's *Vessel · Image* series deconstructed the utilitarian function of traditional lacquerware, transformed the spirit of the object into an expression of contemporary spatial concepts, thereby achieved a contemporary reconstruction of the spatiality of lacquer art (Qiao, 2013).

3.3 FUSION AND SYMBIOSIS

The relationship between traditional regeneration and contemporary reconstruction presented a dialectical unity. At the material level, practitioners upheld the central role of natural lacquer while moderately incorporating synthetic materials and readymade objects, transformed the traditional craft wisdom of "turning waste into treasure" into a reflection on ecological and consumer culture (Feng, 2016). At the conceptual level, the notion of "technique advancing toward the Tao" was reinterpreted as a unity of materiality and spirituality, wherein the processes of lacquering and polishing became vessels for both concept and time.

3.4 EXISTING ISSUES

Some works exhibited problems such as formal imitation, technical appropriation, and a superficial expression of spiritual depth. A disconnect persisted between the adherence to tradition and experimentation with new media (Kou & Wang, 2025). Existing evaluation criteria tended to prioritize formal judgment, lacking a comprehensive consideration of spiritual depth and cultural value.

4. DISCUSSION: THE SYMBIOTIC LOGIC OF TRADITION AND CONTEMPORANEITY AND ITS TRANSFORMATIVE PATHWAYS

The findings of this study align with existing theories on the modernization of arts and crafts. The contemporary value of traditional lacquer art lies not in the preservation of form, but in the revitalization of its spiritual core and creative logic. The regeneration of tradition provides a cultural foundation for contemporary lacquer painting, preventing creative practice from drifting toward homogenization and rootlessness. Contemporary reconstruction enables tradition to adapt to modern life and aesthetic experience, enhancing the capacity of lacquer painting to engage with the present era (Tang, 2025). The two are not sequential but mutually supportive and simultaneously

occurring a symbiotic relationship that transcends the binary choice between conservatism and novelty (Chang, 2017).

From the perspective of intangible cultural heritage transmission, this study confirms that the key to living inheritance lies in contextual adaptation and emotional connection. The transition of lacquer painting from a craft form to an artistic form represents an elevation of traditional values rather than a departure from them (Qiao, 2013). Experiments involving media expansion, conceptual intervention, and the use of found objects all take the material properties of lacquer as their ontological foundation, in accordance with the developmental principle of lacquer art as “the expansion of use and the sublimation of beauty” (Cheng, 2019).

This study focuses primarily on canonical cases, with limited coverage of regional lacquer painting, collective creation, and commercialized works. Future research may incorporate questionnaire surveys, artist interviews, and material experiments to enhance the generalizability of its conclusions, and may further pursue specialized studies on the integration of lacquer painting with public art, digital technology, and everyday aesthetics (Jin & Li, 2026).

5. CONCLUSION

Traditional lacquer art and contemporary lacquer painting do not stand in opposition or as replacements for one another; rather, they achieve a dialectical symbiosis through traditional regeneration and contemporary reconstruction. Traditional regeneration extracts the cultural core and establishes the cultural subjectivity of lacquer painting, while contemporary reconstruction accomplishes aesthetic translation and linguistic innovation, endowing works with the spirit of the times (Yang, 2025). The organic integration of the two constitutes the central pathway through which lacquer painting achieves its modernizing transformation and establishes a distinctive artistic identity. The future development of contemporary lacquer painting requires maintaining a dynamic balance between traditional regeneration and contemporary reconstruction. The creative ecosystem should encompass multiple types including inheritance-oriented, avant-garde, and applied forms while the evaluative framework should shift from formal judgment to value judgment (Li, 2016). Only by sustaining cultural depth through profound regeneration and responding to the propositions of the era through creative reconstruction can Chinese lacquer painting forge an irreplaceable cultural identity within the globalized art landscape, offering the world a distinctive Eastern aesthetic experience and cultural wisdom (Feng, 2016).

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