

From Gong Xian's Three Transformations to the Shift in Classroom Teaching

Yingjie Ma

Liaoning University of Media and Communication, Shenyang, China

Abstract

In this era of the internet, this paper aims to keep pace with the times by focusing on the three reforms of the ancient scholar Gong Xian as the research subject, exploring the operational model of classroom teaching reforms. In terms of teaching processes, it implements a three-stage instructional flow: "pre-class knowledge delivery-during-class knowledge deepening-post-class knowledge consolidation." This teaching process enhances students' learning initiative and creativity, boosts learning interest, and improves learning outcomes, ultimately forming a high-quality cycle system for continuous optimization of teaching quality. This study provides a reference for innovative teaching models in the internet age.

Keywords

Gong Xian, Change, teaching reform.

1. Introduction

In the new era of rapid internet development and transparency in China, traditional teaching methods have come to an end, prompting deep reflection in the education sector on pedagogy and related aspects. The old teaching model has become commonplace and lacks novelty. In this transformative age, higher education institutions need fresh, more efficient, and innovative teaching approaches to advance education into a stage of innovation and upgrading.

2. One The Life of Gong Xian

Gong Xian (1618-1689), with the courtesy name Ban Qian and the alias Chai Zhang, was born in Kunshan, Jiangsu and resided in Nanjing. He was a famous painter during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. He lived in a very turbulent environment at that time, in an era of intensifying social contradictions, mutual struggles among ruling classes, and severe political corruption, which marked the transition of two dynasties. When he was young, both of his parents had already passed away, and coupled with the harsh living environment, it was undoubtedly an added pain for Gong Xian at that time. Therefore, Gong Xian chose to live a semi reclusive life alone. After experiencing great physical and mental setbacks, Gong Xian chose painting and calligraphy as his spiritual sustenance. In his works, his inner feelings are naturally expressed: lonely boats, houses, grass pavilions, entire mountains or trees are silent and deserted.

Based on historical research, we have learned that Gong Xian studied under approximately 23 painters, all of whom he greatly admired and liked. Gong Xian attached great importance to learning tradition and conducted profound studies and research on the works of these 23 painters. He deeply studied and organized their brushwork characteristics, ink application, unique composition, spatial opening and closing, and other aspects of their painting. This spirit of learning from ancient masters played a crucial role in Gong Xian's great achievements in painting art in his later years. However, in addition to valuing the traditional nutrition of the ancients, he is not blindly learning from them. He also advocates that in learning the use of

brush and ink, one should not only learn from the rich experience of the ancients, but also not completely copy their paintings. Instead, one should inherit the experience of the ancients and practice sketching in reality to test and transform the knowledge they have learned. Therefore, he often goes to nature to carefully observe, understand, and depict the knowledge he has learned. Due to his learning attitude of consistently observing nature while studying, he developed different language patterns at different stages of his life. The development and changes of Gong Xian's calligraphy can be roughly divided into three periods: the "White Gong" period, the "Grey Gong" period, and the "Black Gong" period.

3. Gong Xian's Three Stages

3.1. The Style and Characteristics of the "Bai Gong" Period

In the early period of Gong Xian's painting career, known as the "White Gong Phase," which roughly spanned his 30s to 34 years of age, he primarily explored brush techniques and painting principles before the age of forty. During this phase, he was significantly influenced by artists like Dong Qichang and Zou Zhilin, adopting Dong Qichang's concept of "calligraphy and painting being fundamentally the same" [1]. He placed great emphasis on the application of brush and ink. The paintings from this period appear relatively simpler compared to later phases, characterized by central brushwork, resulting in firm and steady lines. The lines were mostly drawn with dry brush, creating a fresh and minimalist aesthetic. Taking **Sparse Forest and Thatched Cottage** (Figure 1) as an example, the composition is straightforward, with both the house and trees outlined in single strokes without additional variations. The trees are drawn from the top down, with leaves rendered through heavy ink dots while leaving the trunks blank—achieving the effect of "pushing black to reveal white." Despite the dry brush technique, the image appears neither dull nor harsh, suggesting a moderate and steady brushstroke with considerable force, ensuring the preservation of form. From a broader perspective, the dense ink sections of the leaves appear moist, creating a harmonious contrast of dry, wet, thick, and thin effects between leaves and trunks. To emphasize the rough texture of trees, he occasionally paused while outlining the trunks. Although the brushwork and ink usage were relatively restrained during this phase, they conveyed a sense of simplicity and unadorned elegance.



Figure 1. ThatchedCottageintheSparseForest



Figure 2. The Scroll of Mountain Forest and House

The painting scroll of Jiangshan Forest House in Figure 2 is a more mature work from his "Bai Gong" period. Compared with his previous works, the content has begun to increase in terms of stitching and texturing. Some parts of the scenery in the painting have been enhanced with strong highlights to enrich the layers, and nearby trees have also begun to have double hooks to increase the sense of space, but there is still no texture. The Bai Gong period mainly refers to his exploration of brushwork and composition before the age of forty. During this period, he was influenced by Dong Qichang, Zou Zhilin, and others, and absorbed Dong Qichang's painting philosophy of "painting and calligraphy are originally the same". He attached great importance to the use of brush and ink^[1]. He proposed to draw with a center forward pen and a flat and solid pen, which was a necessary path for the 'Black Gong' during this period.

3.2. The Style and Characteristics of the "Grey Gong" Period



Figure 3. Endless Stream Mountain Map, Partial

The works of the Gray Gong period are very different from those of the White Gong period, as shown in Figure 3. The painting adds brushstrokes such as texturing, rubbing, and dyeing. Most of the scenery in the painting is first hooked, and after hooking, a dry brush is used to slightly

add texturing, rubbing, and dyeing, presenting a quiet and desolate feeling. Compared to before, the use of brush and ink during the reign of Emperor Huigong has increased significantly, and the painting techniques for trees have also changed. The upper and lower forms are more symmetrical, unlike the previous tree style of a round bottom and pointed top.

The "Grey Gong" stage is a period of experimentation and exploration of images and brushwork. We can see that in the endless picture of the Three Li Creek Mountains, there are layers of stacked peaks in the middle, with houses and trees, trees with stems but no leaves. Looking at the painting, it can be inferred that the approximate time was in the late autumn or early winter season. The entire picture is mostly composed of mountains, trees, and several houses, presenting a gray tone and giving people a sense of tranquility. This painting is one of the representative works of the "Grey Gong" period. The paintings of this period were not very large in size, maintaining the lines of the Bai Gong period's paintings while also adding strokes and dots to the images. This not only enriched the layers of ink flavor, but also created a sense of rhythm, presenting a vast and expansive feeling.

3.3. The Style and Characteristics of the "Black Gong" Period

Before Gong Xian's exploration period, he slowly dug out his own path. With a little exploration, Gong Xian also proposed the "old" and "beautiful" strokes of the pen. In the "Four Essentials", he mentioned: "If the brushwork wants to be beautiful but old, if it only grows old but not beautiful, it will wither." [2] Emphasis is placed on using a pen with both strength and center, creating a sense of roundness. In this way, the brushwork will be rich, varied, powerful, and rounded. We can see from his paintings of this period, such as the Thousand Rocks and Ten Thousand Valleys in Figure 4, that there is almost no trace of him imitating or learning from others, allowing him to fully integrate into his own painting system.

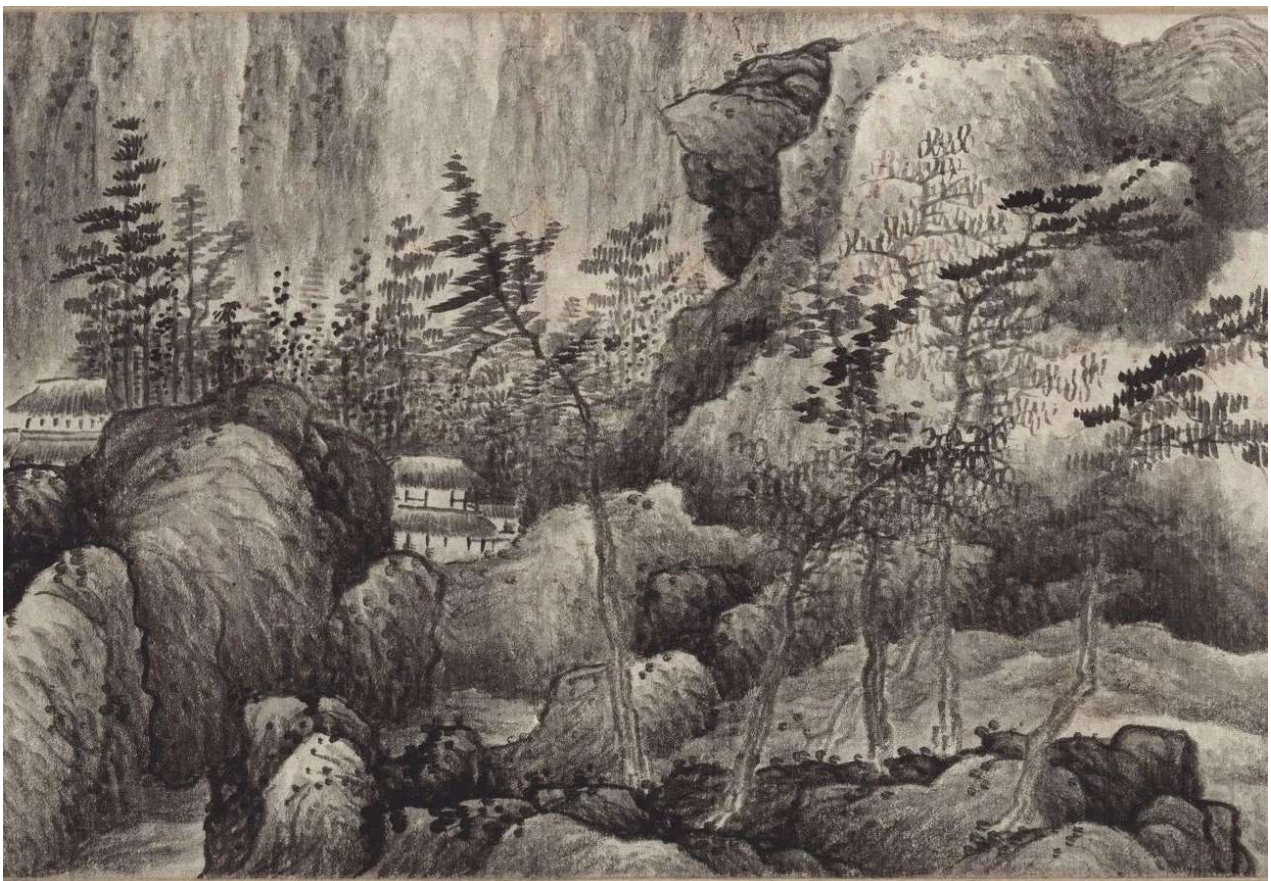


Figure 4. Partial Map of Thousand Rocks and Ten Thousand Valleys

4. Reflecting on the Existing Problems in Traditional Chinese Painting Teaching through Three Transformations

Approach 1: Reconstruct the staircase style training sequence, using the growth sequence of "White Gong period → Grey Gong period → Black Gong period" as a reference, and reconstruct the course difficulty: 1 The first stage is to imitate the "Bai Gong period" model: In this stage, the "Bai Gong" landscape style of Gong Xian's early stage is used as a model for copying and learning painting. The core is to train the basic modeling characteristics and line requirements of mountains, rocks, trees, and other landscapes in the Bai Gong period. The whole process requires the center to use a pen, and students are proficient in the basic requirements of stability and uniformity in the center's strokes.

The two main focuses of stage assessment for students are: first, the accuracy of the structure of landscape objects, checking whether the shape of trees, the texture of rocks, and the combination and arrangement conform to natural laws;; The second is the basic skill of lines: [3]The sense of power, uniformity, speed, and stability of lines to ensure that students have an accurate sense of direction when using a pen, laying a solid foundation for future progress.

2) The second stage, imitating the "Grey Gong Period" model: This stage is an intermediate stage that connects the past and the future, and is a gentle transitional stage in the middle of Gong Xian's career. It gradually increases the training of ink levels, achieving a rich transition from "single line modeling" to "combination of brush and ink". In terms of technique training, it is no longer limited to the quality of pure lines, but moderately increases the richness of the texturing method, combined with the practice of multi-layer light ink rendering, focusing on the use of dry, wet, and light strokes, and experiencing changes in the density, intensity, and lightness of the texturing method through multiple exercises.

In teaching, it is necessary to determine students' correct cognition and enable them to clearly understand the correct usage of Gong Xian's ink accumulation: "Ink accumulation is not about repeatedly painting or stacking." Each layer of ink should have its own function and structure, some should complete the structure, some should distinguish between light and dark, or form gray layers after layering, rather than stacking heavy colors. Through this stage of training, students can proficiently master the layering of ink colors and establish correct ink accumulation thinking.

3) The third stage, which is the stage of achieving great success in techniques and artistic conception, is the final stage of teaching for Gong Xian's late period, where the mountains and waters are rich and mellow, with complex layers. On the basis of ink color layering and the combination of dry and wet, deeply understand the training of multi-layer ink accumulation, strive to master the technique of multiple layers, layers, and dimensions of ink accumulation, and form a thick and clear landscape ink texture.

Approach 2: Not only imitate the works of mature periods, but also study the evolution of style.

1) In teaching, compare and analyze the works of Bai Gong, Hui Gong, and Hei Gong side by side, allowing students to see how this painter refined his brushwork and developed his style through continuous exploration and trial-and-error, rather than by innate talent. 2) Add "Evolution Exercises": Have students organize works by the same painter-White Gong's period (mountains, rocks, trees), Gong's period (mountains, rocks, trees), and Black Gong's period (mountains, rocks, trees). Submit three evolving assignments to experience the same object painted by the same artist across different periods.

Approach 3: The prerequisite for mastering nature is to excel in imitation and observation. Gong Xian studied the ancients while also observing the real landscapes of Jinling, gradually exploring and ultimately achieving the profound Jiangnan style of "Black Gong." 1) Classroom instruction should focus not only on copying but also on guiding students to observe real

scenery and mountains. From this, they can identify the layered ink accumulation in Gong Xian's art, rather than merely playing with brushwork. 2) Imitation is not the ultimate goal but an accumulation, a form of sensation, learning, and mastery. It is about understanding how to observe reality and express nature more faithfully, aligning with real-world perceptions, rather than rigidly replicating the techniques of imitation.

Approach 4: Establish a multi-faceted evaluation standard, and do not judge high or low based on the final "black and complicated" criteria. Admitting that the simple brushstrokes of mountains and waters during the Bai Gong period were also advanced forms of art, the works of simple brushstrokes at that time could also receive high scores. The evaluation value depends on the strength of the lines and the understanding of the structure, not on how thick the ink color is. Two. Pay attention to the process and content of homework, including landscape exercises and trial and error drafts in the assessment section, rather than just looking at a final finished landscape painting.

Approach 5: Infuse the concept of painting theory in the teaching process, and understand its nature better. 1. Correct students' misconceptions: the expression of aura is not created out of thin air, but is accumulated layer by layer through pen, ink, and structure, and master it. After being able to draw well, pursue the expression of artistic conception and the result of spiritual resonance. It is impossible to skip the basic skills and directly talk about artistic conception. Gong Xian also proposed the use of "old" and "beautiful" brushstrokes. In his "Four Essentials," he mentioned: "If the brushstrokes are meant to be beautiful but not beautiful, they will wither away."

5. Summary

The three significant transformations in Gong Xian's landscape painting—"the White Gong Period," "the Gray Gong Period," and "the Black Gong Period"—essentially represent a complete artistic growth path of foundation-practice-creation integration. When applied to teaching, this reveals that landscape painting instruction should not merely replicate the works of masters at their mature stages, but rather restore the path of their exploratory development: initially establishing the framework with the brushwork of the simplified period, then gradually altering and integrating learned techniques through repeated experimentation and the fusion of experience with reality. This process leads step by step to a personal style of landscapes or scenes perceived as rich, profound, and elegant. The goal is to learn from ancient masters without being confined to their works, ultimately guiding students to achieve a self-contained cycle of learning-practice-creation for their own expressive brushwork.

References

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