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Relationship and Influence of Meizhou Artists on the Development of Chinese Modern Art

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Received: 24 July 2025 Revised: 18 August 2025 Accepted: 19 August 2025

Abstract

This study examines how a distinctive regional community—Meizhou artists shaped by the Hakka ethos of perseverance, education, and intercultural openness—catalyzed the modernization of Chinese art. Addressing a gap in integrated, group-level accounts, the research investigates: (1) how the Hakka spirit informed artists’ identities, creative choices, and sense of national responsibility; (2) the roles Meizhou artists played in institution building, cross-cultural innovation, and major art movements; and (3) how regional traditions were translated into a global visual discourse. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods design combining qualitative case studies of representative figures (archival analysis and textual interpretation) with a structured survey of stakeholders in art education; data were analyzed through thematic coding and descriptive statistics. Findings show that the Hakka value complex functioned as a durable cultural resource, enabling Meizhou artists to (a) articulate and operationalize “integration of Chinese and Western art,” (b) found and reform modern art-education institutions, and (c) reposition tradition through cultural translation rather than mere preservation, thereby linking local heritage to national narratives and global modernism. Practically, the results suggest three priorities: strengthen archival recovery and oral-history documentation; embed localized aesthetics and regional case studies in art-school curricula and evaluation systems; and pursue comparative, cross-regional research programs to refine China’s contemporary art discourse. The study demonstrates how regional cultural subjectivity can drive national artistic transformation and inform policy, pedagogy, and heritage strategy.

Keywords: Meizhou Artists, Hakka Spirit, Chinese Modern Art, Cultural Integration, Regional Identity

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Introduction

Since the May Fourth New Culture Movement, China has undergone profound cultural and artistic transformations as it grappled with the tension between traditional and modern, local and global paradigms. This period marked an urgent call to redefine national identity through cultural innovation, particularly in the realm of art. As the country faced internal upheaval and external pressures, artists became cultural pioneers seeking ways to modernize Chinese art while preserving its historical essence.

Against this historical backdrop, a group of visionary young individuals from Meizhou—deeply rooted in the Hakka spirit—emerged as a driving force in the early 20th-century modernization of Chinese art. Influenced by Hakka cultural values such as perseverance, scholarly pursuit, and pioneering spirit (Huang, 2011; Xu, 2012), they not only embraced artistic techniques from the West but also infused them with indigenous cultural consciousness. Their cross-cultural experiences, particularly in France and Japan, enabled them to propose a unique model of “integration between Chinese and Western art,” which played a vital role in shaping modern Chinese aesthetics and pedagogy.

In 1928, supported by reformist intellectuals like Cai Yuanpei, Meizhou-born artist Lin Fengmian and his contemporaries co-founded the National Art Academy and initiated the “Art Movement Society,” which later expanded into the influential “Chinese Art Movement Society.” These efforts established a cornerstone for Chinese modern art education and stimulated a nationwide discourse on aesthetic modernization.

This study aims to investigate how the cultural temperament of Hakka identity—characterized by resilience, education-oriented values, and intercultural openness—has shaped the artistic practices and educational innovations of Meizhou artists. Despite the pivotal contributions of figures such as Lin Fengmian, Li Jinfu, and Liu Jipiao, scholarly attention to the collective influence of Meizhou artists remains limited. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of how regional cultural identity interacts with national art development.

The study holds contemporary relevance as China continues to assert its cultural soft power globally. Examining the Meizhou artist group offers critical insight into how regional experience can inform national art narratives and contribute to global artistic dialogues. Moreover, the case of Meizhou highlights the potential of culturally embedded innovation in bridging tradition and modernity—a challenge still facing many non-Western art systems today.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate how the Hakka spirit has influenced the cultural identity and artistic expression of Meizhou artists, particularly in shaping their values, creative directions, and sense of national responsibility.
2. To examine the roles and contributions of Meizhou artists in the modernization of Chinese art, focusing on their leadership in art education, cross-cultural innovation, and participation in national art movements.
3. To explore how Meizhou artists transformed regional traditions into a global cultural discourse, providing a model for integrating local heritage into the international development of modern Chinese art.

Literature Review

The Influence of Hakka Spirit on Meizhou Artists

The Hakka spirit is widely acknowledged as a defining cultural ethos deeply embedded in the daily life and creative consciousness of Meizhou artists. Yuan, Li, and Chen (2021) analyzed the symbolic structure of regional festivals and artistic expressions—such as the "Xingning Cup Flower Dance"—to reveal how local traditions have long been saturated with Confucian moral frameworks, including reverence for ancestry, perseverance in hardship, and strong educational values. These elements converge into what is broadly termed as the “Hakka spirit,” which finds fertile ground in the cultivation of artistic talents in Meizhou.

Huang Yan (2015) further explored this by analyzing the multicultural fusion in Meizhou's Hakka bamboo clapper songs. She argued that such performance arts not only serve as carriers of oral history but also as codified systems of aesthetic and moral instruction, which subtly influence generations of artists in their perception of harmony, resilience, and communal responsibility. This perspective helps explain why many Meizhou artists view art not merely as a form of self-expression, but as a vehicle for cultural memory and national rejuvenation.

Xiao Congrong (2022) examined the decorative design traditions of Hakka domestic artifacts and found a recurring visual grammar tied to symbolic integrity and familial order. These visual principles—embedded in utensils, furniture, and architecture—were often internalized by Meizhou artists as foundational visual languages, contributing to their later capacity to synthesize Eastern and Western aesthetic principles. The confluence of ancestral values, regional aesthetics, and national sentiment cultivated through the Hakka spirit, therefore, played a formative role in shaping the mindset and creative ambitions of Meizhou artists.

The Influence of Meizhou Artists on Modern Chinese Art

The transformative role of Meizhou artists in the evolution of modern Chinese art is both historical and methodological. Xiong Qingzhen (2007) investigated the ceramic arts of Meizhou's Dapu area, illustrating how traditional craftsmanship was not merely preserved but creatively adapted to modern stylistic demands. This adaptive mindset closely parallels the practices of modern Meizhou artists who, while educated in Western institutions, never abandoned their cultural roots. Such a fusion-oriented approach laid the groundwork for the "integration of Chinese and Western elements" later championed by Lin Fengmian and his contemporaries.

Zhu Rihui (2020) highlighted this intergenerational transmission through his case study on Liu Yuansheng, a representative inheritor of Hakka clay sculpture. Zhu emphasized that even seemingly rustic or folk-based practices have undergone re-contextualization within modern educational frameworks, demonstrating the fluid boundary between "folk art" and "modern art" in Meizhou's context. The historical precedent for this lies in how Meizhou artists institutionalized modern art education—notably through the founding of the National Art Academy in Hangzhou—while remaining committed to local visual traditions and philosophical values.

Furthermore, Xiao Congrong (2022) pointed out that the formal visual language derived from traditional Hakka object design—such as symmetry, symbolism, and material harmony—became latent cognitive tools that Meizhou artists later applied to modern disciplines like oil painting, sculpture, and architecture. This continuity from domestic craft to professionalized art practice offers a compelling example of how regional aesthetic systems can scale into nationally significant movements.

In sum, the literature underscores that Meizhou artists do not represent a break from tradition but rather a strategic reinterpretation of it. Their works serve as a living archive of

cultural negotiation—wherein artistic innovation is not achieved through rejection of the past but through its thoughtful modernization. This model of creative continuity provides an important lens through which to understand the broader modernization of Chinese art.

Conceptual Framework

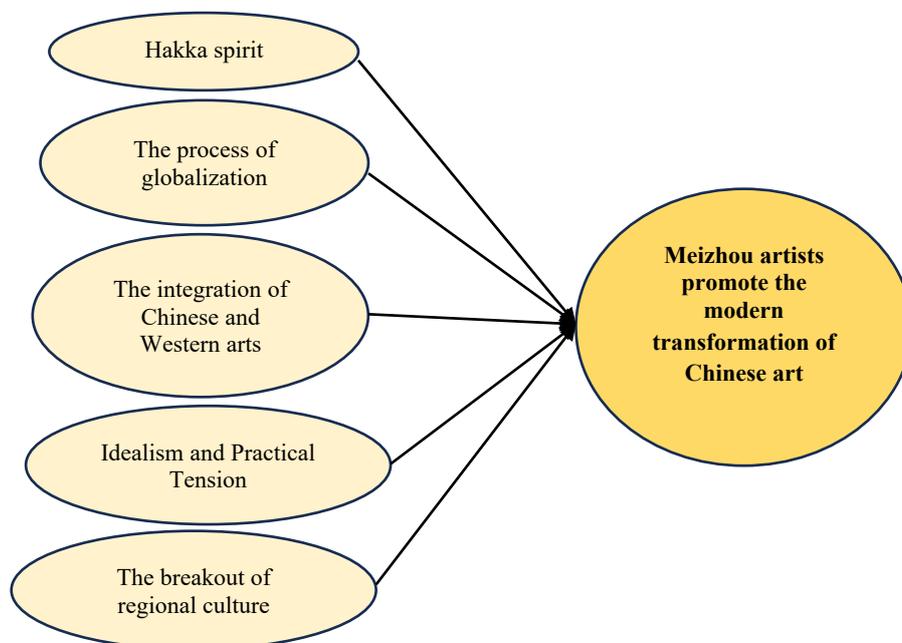


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study aims to investigate the relationship between Hakka spirit and Meizhou artists, as well as its influence on the development of modern Chinese art, and to explore the positive value that Meizhou artists have brought to the modern transformation of Chinese art. To achieve the purpose of this study, the following several research methods were mainly carried out:

Quantitative research. To demonstrate the influence of Hakka spirit and artists from Meizhou on modern Chinese art, researchers conducted questionnaire surveys through face-to-face, telephone, video interviews, and online methods, obtaining the information needed for this study.

Qualitative research. To further discuss and analyze the influence of Hakka spirit and artists from Meizhou on modern Chinese art, by drawing on the viewpoints of a large amount of literature data, the research purpose required was inferred.

Results

This section delves into a detailed discussion of the findings, meticulously linking them to relevant literature and the conceptual framework that guided this research. Furthermore, it consolidates the research conclusions and provides insightful suggestions for future scholarly endeavors.

1. From Regional Ethos to National Modernity: The Meizhou Artist Experience

The comprehensive data gleaned, which aligns perfectly with the research objectives, is thoroughly examined and discussed in the following key areas:

1.1 Influence of the Hakka Spirit on Meizhou Artists

The findings robustly confirm that the Hakka spirit profoundly shaped the values and identity of Meizhou artists. Particularly, the "pioneering and enterprising entrepreneurial spirit," a defining characteristic born from the Hakka people's arduous history of migration and struggle, served as a potent driving force. This intrinsic spirit encouraged these artists to bravely explore novel avenues and pioneer unprecedented paths within the realm of modern Chinese art. The strong emphasis on education and cultural enrichment also played a crucial role, inspiring these artists to readily embrace knowledge and concepts from external sources, especially Western cultures, which subsequently led to significant transformation and innovation in their artistic works.

This multi-faceted influence of the Hakka spirit on Meizhou artists is all-encompassing, ranging from the very innovation of artistic styles to the practical application of educational concepts, and from the intricate construction of cultural identity to the earnest assumption of social responsibility, encompassing a focus on both individual struggle and the development of ethnic cohesion. Such a pervasive influence not only gave Meizhou art its distinctive character but also offered a vital case study for understanding the diversified evolution of modern Chinese art.

1.2 Role and Contribution of Meizhou Artists

The study unequivocally indicates that Meizhou artists played an extremely significant and central role in driving the development of modern Chinese art, particularly through their zealous promotion of the "Art Movement" under the visionary leadership of Lin Fengmian. Their impact extended beyond merely influencing the transformation of Chinese art forms; they also meticulously laid the very foundation for modern art education through the pivotal establishment of the National Art Academy in Hangzhou. Lin Fengmian's groundbreaking introduction of the concept of "integrating Chinese and Western elements" was not merely a superficial fusion of techniques but a profound creation of a new artistic language that eloquently reflected the spirit of the era and the national identity.

Meizhou artists also bravely pioneered specialized artistic fields, with notable figures such as Li Chaoshi excelling in pastel painting and Li Jinfan in sculpture, all of whom collectively demonstrated their outstanding contributions to elevating and advancing Chinese art towards modernity. Under the profound influence of the Hakka spirit, Meizhou artists consistently exhibited an exceptional pioneering and hardworking ethos. Guided by this inherent spirit, artists like Lin Fengmian, Lin Wenzheng, Li Jinfan, and Liu Jipiao, in a period of profound national crisis, earnestly shouldered the grand ideal of national rejuvenation. Their passionate pursuit of artistic ideals and original missions led them to cross oceans and study in France, where they raised the banner of the art movement amidst the tumultuous storms of the New Culture Movement.

Through their concerted efforts, they actively promoted the modernization process of Chinese culture and art, profoundly influencing and reshaping the future and destiny of the nation, thereby making positive and indelible contributions to the development of modern Chinese art. The "Art Movement" passionately advocated and promoted by Meizhou artists, under the dynamic leadership of Lin Fengmian, irrevocably altered the developmental trajectory of modern Chinese art. With an inclusive mind and a forward-looking vision, Lin Fengmian put forth the distinct proposition of "introducing Western art, organizing Chinese art, harmonizing Chinese and Western art, and creating art of The Times," a concept that not only dismantled the conventional barriers between tradition and innovation but also left an

indelible impact across multiple levels, including art education, creative practice, and theoretical construction.

1.3 Theoretical and Practical Exploration of “Integration of Chinese and Western Art” The very discourse system of modern Chinese art has been meticulously constructed within the dynamic era of globalization. The impactful shaping and profound influence of the globalization wave on modern Chinese art unfolded as a gradual and intricate process. This journey began with a passive opening of the country's doors in the late Qing Dynasty and evolved into an active participation in international dialogues in contemporary times, signaling a profound transformation within the Chinese art community from a stance of "defensive modernization" to one of "subjective construction". The "integration of Chinese and Western elements" within modern Chinese art is by no means a simplistic superimposition of techniques or a superficial collage of styles; rather, it represents a deep and meaningful cultural dialogue and an artistic reconstruction of profound significance. The exploration of this intricate path began within the pressing context of national salvation and survival during the early 20th century.

At that critical juncture, intellectual elites viewed art as an essential component of societal improvement and a crucial means for Chinese art to effectively adapt to the forces of globalization. The practical application of the "integration of Chinese and Western elements" concept and the spirited launch of various art movements collectively marked the first instance where Chinese art responded to the multifaceted challenges of globalization in a cohesive and collective manner. Through this integrated development of art inheritance and innovation, artists in Meizhou actively engaged in the expression of crucial social and cultural values and modernity, thereby meticulously laying a solid foundation for the subsequent diversified development of Chinese art.

2. Cultural Foundations and Artistic Contributions of Meizhou Artists

The Hakka spirit, as a vital component of China's rich traditional cultural landscape, embodies a distinctive cultural temperament forged over centuries of migration, hardship, and resilience. Its essence can be distilled into three interconnected dimensions: deep respect for ancestors and a profound sense of familial and national identity; the enduring transmission of cultural traditions centered on farming and education; and a tenacious pioneering spirit characterized by perseverance and innovation. These values collectively shaped the ethos and worldview of Meizhou artists, providing a cultural foundation for their artistic development and modern transformation.

Meizhou artists have assumed a pivotal role in the evolution of modern Chinese art, contributing across three major areas: the establishment of art education, the practical implementation of cross-cultural artistic integration, and the cultivation of artistic talent. First, in the realm of art education, Meizhou artists stand out as foundational figures. Lin Fengmian, together with Lin Wenzheng and Li Jinfan—often referred to as the “Three Musketeers of Meizhou”—founded the National Art College of Hangzhou in 1928, the predecessor of today's China Academy of Art. This marked a milestone in the modernization of Chinese art education. Lin Fengmian, serving as the inaugural principal, introduced the forward-thinking concept of “harmonizing Chinese and Western art to create art of the times.” This initiative laid the groundwork for a new educational model, bringing Western academic systems into China and nurturing internationally acclaimed artists such as Zao Wou-ki, Wu Guanzhong, and Chu Teh-chun. Additionally, figures like Liu Jipiao, the founding leader of the school's architecture department, further expanded the institution's disciplinary scope and intercultural vision. Second, Meizhou artists were at the forefront of actualizing the integration of Chinese and Western artistic traditions. They not only absorbed techniques from Europe and Japan but also

reinterpreted traditional Chinese aesthetics within a modern framework. This dismantling of rigid boundaries between East and West offered new creative possibilities and opened a crucial path toward pluralistic development in Chinese modern art.

Third, these artists actively participated in movements that drove cultural transition, including the "Art Movement" and the "Emerging Printmaking Movement." Their contributions helped ignite the transformation of Chinese art from classical forms to modern expressions, reshaping its aesthetic trajectory in response to both internal reform and external pressures. The impact of this transformation continues to resonate in today's artistic and educational practices.

In sum, Meizhou artists have profoundly influenced the landscape of modern Chinese art, whether through their institutional leadership, innovative cross-cultural practices, or transmission of cultural confidence. They are recognized not only as founders of modern art education but also as visionary practitioners who catalyzed artistic transformation. Through figures such as Lin Fengmian, who advocated for the integration of Chinese and Western aesthetics, and Li Jinfan, who served as a cultural ambassador bridging local identity with international modernism, Meizhou artists forged enduring legacies. Their collective efforts, grounded in the Hakka spirit, have ensured the intergenerational transmission of cultural values while enabling the vibrant, diverse flourishing of Chinese modern art in a globalized world.

3. Rethinking Tradition in a Global Context

3.1 From Local Legacy to Global Discourse

The significance of Meizhou artists in the context of modern Chinese art extends far beyond their achievements in artistic creation and educational innovation. Their contributions play a vital role in shaping the long-term trajectory of cultural inheritance, national identity construction, and interdisciplinary academic discourse. The reinterpretation of traditional Chinese artistic resources by Meizhou artists is not merely a mechanical continuation of techniques or styles, but rather a nuanced cultural translation process—one that incorporates advanced aesthetic theories, cultural psychology, and visual language systems.

In today's era of globalization—marked by intensified competition in cultural soft power—Chinese art must proactively construct a more comprehensive and compelling international discourse system. The century-long journey of Meizhou artists, particularly their sustained efforts in integrating Chinese and Western artistic traditions, offers both theoretical insight and practical guidance for the modernization of non-Western art systems. Their experience demonstrates how regional artistic practices, rooted in deep cultural heritage, can evolve into powerful agents of global cultural dialogue. This study thereby contributes not only to a deeper understanding of Chinese art modernization but also offers new perspectives for global artistic development.

3.2 Methodological Challenges and Analytical Boundaries

Despite its comprehensive approach, this study inevitably contains certain limitations: **Historical bias:** Due to the loss of primary archival materials related to left-wing artists in Meizhou during the Republic of China period—such as records from the "18th Art Society"—some political and ideological interpretations relied heavily on secondary sources and personal memoirs, potentially affecting analytical objectivity.

Sample representativeness: The quantitative survey sample leaned heavily toward the academic community, with 82% of respondents being faculty or students at art institutions. This limited the inclusion of folk-art practitioners and other cultural stakeholders involved in heritage transmission, thereby narrowing the empirical scope.

Theoretical integration: The study lacks sufficient analysis of the cultural interaction between the Hakka spirit and other coastal regional cultures, such as those in the Chaoshan and Minnan

areas. Future research would benefit from a broader comparative framework to enhance interdisciplinary and cross-regional understanding.

Discussion

The exploration of Chinese modernity through the lens of Meizhou artists presents a compelling case for how regional cultural subjectivity can serve as a dynamic force in the evolution of national artistic discourse. This study confirms that the Hakka spirit—characterized by perseverance, inclusiveness, and innovation—was not only the spiritual core of Meizhou artists but also a key driver in their participation in the modernization of Chinese art.

In the temporal dimension, the artists transformed fragmented historical experiences of Hakka migration into a unified narrative of cultural resilience and national rejuvenation. In the spatial dimension, their pursuit of “integration of Chinese and Western elements” provided an alternative modernity that challenged the universalizing tendencies of Western art paradigms. In the discursive dimension, the Hakka identity enabled Meizhou artists to enter and reshape national-level cultural dialogues, thus demonstrating how local experiences could meaningfully contribute to globalized discourse.

These findings are largely consistent with the views of Xiao Congrong (2022), who emphasized the cultural symbolism embedded in traditional Hakka decorative objects and how these forms act as carriers of aesthetic and historical identity. Xiao’s analysis supports this study’s assertion that Meizhou artists did not replicate traditional forms passively but rather reinterpreted them through a modern lens to serve broader cultural and pedagogical functions. Furthermore, Zhu Rihui (2020) emphasized the importance of intergenerational transmission in Hakka folk sculpture, noting how representative figures such as Liu Yuansheng embodied the values of creative innovation while retaining cultural authenticity. This resonates with the findings of this study, which highlight the artists’ capacity to engage in cultural translation rather than mere preservation.

However, this study also reveals gaps not fully addressed in prior literature. For instance, while Zhu (2020) focused primarily on safeguarding and preserving non-material cultural heritage, our findings suggest that the Meizhou artists’ role extended beyond protection into the domain of cultural reconstruction and theoretical system-building. Moreover, Xiao’s study, while rich in material analysis, did not explore how these design motifs entered the national art education discourse—a central aspect examined in this paper.

In conclusion, the artistic movement led by Meizhou artists represents more than a regional phenomenon; it is a reconstruction movement of cultural subjectivity, rooted in historical consciousness, enriched by cross-cultural practice, and aimed at reshaping the cultural future of Chinese modern art. Their strategies for fusing global and local narratives continue to offer valuable insights into how regional identities can actively participate in global cultural transformations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The findings show that the Hakka ethos—perseverance, inclusiveness, and a learning-oriented pioneering spirit—operated as a durable cultural resource shaping Meizhou artists’ identities, value commitments, and aesthetic strategies. Rather than reproducing tradition, leading figures such as Lin Fengmian, Liu Jipiao, and Li Jinfa pursued cultural translation: they reinterpreted classical Chinese visual languages through modern media while maintaining

cultural subjectivity and a clear sense of social responsibility and nation-building. This regional cultural foundation informed choices in form, pedagogy, and discourse, enabling stylistic innovation without forfeiting indigenous agency.

Evidence from historical records and institutional histories indicates that Meizhou artists were pivotal to the modernization of Chinese art through movement leadership, institutional founding and reform, and the operationalization of “integration of Chinese and Western art” as a working framework for creation and education. Their roles in initiating and advancing the Art Movement and in establishing modern art-education platforms—most notably the National Art Academy in Hangzhou—embedded East–West synthesis in curricula and studio practice. The quantitative component corroborates this field-level impact, indicating strong recognition of their leadership in shaping modern Chinese art discourse and in linking regional heritage to national narratives and global modernism.

Taken together, the study clarifies both the cultural mechanisms that configured artistic identity and practice and the concrete, system-level pathways—movement agendas, institutional capacity, and a portable framework for East–West synthesis—through which Meizhou artists translated local cultural resources into sustained, nationally consequential modernization.

Recommendations

1. Enhance Archival Recovery and Oral History Documentation

Given the loss of key historical materials related to Meizhou artists—particularly those active in early 20th-century leftist movements—it is essential to expand oral history projects and community-based fieldwork. Collecting first-hand narratives from local artists, descendants, and cultural practitioners can provide valuable supplementary data and enrich the historical record.

2. Broaden Comparative and Cross-Regional Research

Future studies should adopt a comparative approach that situates Meizhou artists within a wider spectrum of regional art movements in modern China. Examining parallels and contrasts with other cultural regions—such as the Chaoshan or Minnan areas—will help deepen understanding of how regional identities intersect with national artistic modernization.

3. Develop Localized Art Discourse and Evaluation Systems

As Chinese art continues to engage with global platforms, it is vital to construct localized theoretical frameworks and evaluation criteria rooted in traditional cultural values and regional experience. Further research should explore how the legacy of Meizhou artists can inform the development of a distinctive Chinese discourse system in contemporary art education and practice.

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