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The Localization Dilemma of Iconology in Chinese Art History Research

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the application of modern iconology in Chinese art history research, exploring the adaptation and transformation of its methods within a cross-cultural context. The study first analyzes the core methods of modern iconology and its developmental logic in the West, then examines the theoretical disjunctions and interpretive challenges encountered in local practice by considering China's unique symbolic systems and cultural traditions. On this basis, it proposes practical pathways such as establishing a local iconographic system, conducting case-specific analyses of individual works, and employing cross-media textual corroboration. The aim is to enhance the explanatory power and openness of iconology for Chinese art history research while preserving the spirit of its methodology.

Key Words

Modern iconology, methodology, localization, Chinese art history

Modern iconology, as a methodology originating from within art history, was established and developed in the early twentieth century by European scholars such as Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, gradually becoming an important tool for art history research. This method posits that artworks embody the spirit of their time and must be analyzed within their historical context to reveal their deeper symbolic meanings. They defined the nature of iconology as a science based on historical-hermeneutic argumentation and its task as the comprehensive cultural-scientific interpretation of artworks.¹ In the 1980s, with the increasing frequency of Sino-Western academic exchanges, modern iconological methods were introduced into the field of Chinese art history research, providing local studies with valuable theoretical resources and an international perspective. However, due to fundamental differences between Chinese and Western artistic systems in philosophical concepts, aesthetic values, and historical narrative modes, iconology often faces interpretive challenges and methodological limitations when confronted with the unique symbolic systems, cultural metaphors, and intellectual traditions of Chinese art. Therefore, to

effectively apply modern iconology to Chinese art history research, it is necessary to absorb its methodological spirit while also adapting it theoretically and innovating locally in conjunction with the historical context and cultural structure of Chinese art, thereby constructing more adaptable and explanatory research paths.

1. Origins and Theoretical Foundations of Modern Iconology

The early theoretical foundations of modern iconology can be traced back to the German art historian Aby Warburg and the Warburg School he founded. In 1912, at the International Art History Congress in Rome, he delivered the foundational iconological paper "Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara."² Warburg linked the frescoes of the Palazzo Schifanoia during the Italian Renaissance with cultural elements of ancient religions, sciences, and other traditions, discovering that the medieval deities of the Zodiac were actually transformations of ancient Greek

mythological figures, thereby confirming the intrinsic connection between Renaissance art and ancient Greek culture. This research pioneered the theoretical model of iconological analysis and established the basic concepts of modern iconology. The cornerstone of this theoretical understanding stems from Warburg's breakthrough interpretation of collective visual memory. He believed that artistic images not only carry the subjective expression of individual creators but also condense the collective experience and unconscious memory of a specific cultural community. Visual symbols, as the embodiment of pathos formulae, rely on their mnemonic energy across time and space to be repeatedly activated and reconstructed in different historical contexts. Through the migration, variation, and reinterpretation of symbols, images form a cultural nerve connecting the past and the present, both maintaining the continuity of tradition and promoting the evolution of meaning.³ In the later stages of his academic career, Warburg put this idea into practice by constructing a visual historical memory bank – the famous *Mnemosyne Atlas*. This trans-temporal, trans-medial visual project collected, arranged, and juxtaposed a vast number of artworks, maps, astrological charts, folk patterns, and news images from Classical and Renaissance periods, establishing a network of connections between visual materials from different cultures and eras to trace and reveal the paths of continuation, transformation, and regeneration of the classical heritage in European art and thought. This visualized cultural memory was not merely a compilation of historical materials but also a methodological practice. It emphasized images as carriers of historical memory capable of transcending the limitations of text to present the evolution of cultural emotions, mental structures, and symbolic patterns, thus laying a solid foundation for the formation of modern iconology and providing an important example of using images as historical evidence.

Subsequently, Warburg's student Erwin Panofsky inherited and developed his academic ideas, publishing the book *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* in 1936. The publication of this work marked the formal establishment of the modern iconological methodological system and promoted the transformation of iconological research advocated by the Warburg School from an auxiliary tool to a core methodological pillar of art history research. Thus, art history as a humanities discipline entered a research phase heavily reliant on iconology as a key methodology. As Michael Ann Holly observed in *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, “the major ‘event’ in the modern historiography of art was

undoubtedly the achievement of Erwin Panofsky.” In this book, Panofsky systematically explained his understanding of iconology and his method of image interpretation. He believed that iconology is the interpretation of meaning, where meaning is the implicit content within the work, requiring interpretation and inquiry.⁴ Therefore, he proposed a three-level interpretive structure for iconology: Pre-iconographical Description, Iconographical Analysis, and Iconological Interpretation. This layered structure not only clarified a progressive path from formal identification to the interpretation of cultural significance but also endowed iconology with a rigorous logical system and methodological foundation, elevating it beyond mere descriptive analysis to become an academic method with relative scientific rigor and systematicity. Within this framework, research aims not only to answer what the image is but also to reveal why the image is the way it is, thereby defining the differences and intrinsic connections between iconography and iconology in terms of research objectives and methods. Simply put, the first two levels, Pre-iconographical Description and Iconographical Analysis, can overall be attributed to different stages of iconographic research answering what the image is. They provide basic identification and summarization of meaning, progressing from intuitive recognition of the image to thematic discrimination, and then to the interpretation of symbolic meaning; advancing to Iconological Interpretation reaches the core of iconology, namely the reconstruction of meaning of the work, reconstructing the complete cultural life of the artwork within the ruptures of history.

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, with the rise of post-structuralism, deconstructionism, and cultural studies, traditional iconology began to reflect on its own theoretical foundations and methods, emphasizing the diversity of visual culture, the openness of texts, and the influence of power relations on the generation of meaning in images. Iconology gradually expanded from rigorous symbol analysis centered on art history to an interdisciplinary field concerned with broader issues such as socio-cultural context, identity politics, and gender studies, marking the rise and development of postmodern iconology. W.J.T. Mitchell was a key figure in this shift. In his book *Picture Theory*, he proposed the concept of the “pictorial turn.” This shifted the focus of iconological research from art history to the entire visual culture system, achieving a transformation from single symbol analysis to interdisciplinary, dynamic interpretation.

2. Challenges and Problems in the Localization Process of Iconology in China

Compared to stylistics, which traditionally emphasizes formal analysis of works, iconology not only focuses on the visual form of artworks but also emphasizes exploring the interactive relationship between images and multiple cultural factors such as religion, philosophy, politics, and social life within historical and intellectual contexts, thereby revealing the humanistic significance borne by images. This disciplinary attribute gives it strong adaptability and unique advantages in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research. Precisely for this reason, as an academic theory originating in the West, iconology quickly attracted enthusiastic attention and positive responses from scholars after its introduction to China in the 1980s.

When iconology was first introduced to China, domestic scholars mainly focused on introducing and translating the iconological thoughts of Warburg, Panofsky, and others, promoting its initial understanding and dissemination within Chinese academia. Journals such as *Meishu Yicong* (*Art Translations*) edited by Fan Jingzhong, *Shijie Meishu* (*World Art*) sponsored by the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and *Xin Meishu* (*New Art*) sponsored by the China Academy of Art were among the important early journals introducing iconology. Particularly, *Meishu Yicong* made significant foundational contributions to the introduction of iconology. It not only systematically translated and introduced important theoretical achievements of the Warburg School but also first published Panofsky's "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art" and Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich's "Aims and Limits of Iconology," two authoritative articles on iconology, making important contributions to its dissemination in China. After entering the twenty-first century, domestic scholars began to gradually pay attention to the development and evolution of Western iconology after Panofsky and engage in critical reflection. Liu Weidong, in his article "The Concept, Connotation, Genealogy of Iconology in Western Art History Research and Its Dissemination in Chinese Academia," revealed the dynamic developmental context/thread of Western iconology's constant adjustment and reconstruction in different contexts. Through this sorting, he not only presented the genealogical changes of iconology within the Western academic tradition but also suggested that when understanding and applying iconology in the Chinese context, one should be aware of the historical generativity and diversity of its concepts and

methodology, rather than treating it as a static, fixed research paradigm. In recent years, domestic scholars have begun the attempt to introduce iconological methods into Chinese art history research, striving to construct their own iconological theories. Many scholars have made active and beneficial attempts in this regard. For example, scholar Cao Yiqiang vigorously promoted the shift in Chinese art history research from the traditional using of texts as historical evidence to using images as historical evidence. His article "The Visibility of the Invisible—On the Effectiveness and Pitfalls of Using Images as Historical Evidence" systematically explored the value, limitations, and methodological issues of visual images as historical evidence, emphasizing the independent value of images as historical sources. Han Shilian and He Wanli, in "Iconology and Its Application Problems in Chinese Art History Research," focused on the adaptability crisis and reconstruction paths of Western iconological theory in the localization process within Chinese art history research. Liu Weidong's article "Iconology and Chinese Religious Art Research" systematically sorted out the academic context and methodological evolution of Chinese religious art research, particularly focusing on the application and reflection of iconology in Buddhist art research. Duan Lian dedicated himself to introducing iconological methods into Chinese landscape painting research. His article "Iconology and Comparative Art History" broke through the long-standing limitation of iconology being only applicable to the study of representational art, expanding its scope of application to non-representational art fields.

Although iconology has played an important role in expanding the boundaries of Chinese art history research and promoting methodological innovation, and has achieved many results in recent years, many scholars still directly apply related methods without fully understanding the theoretical connotations and applicable conditions of iconology. Coupled with the fundamental differences between the cultural traditions and visual systems underpinning Chinese art history and the Western image production model centered on religious imagery, the application of iconology in the Chinese context still inevitably encounters varying degrees of incompatibility.

2.1 Weak Iconographic Tradition: Strengthening Foundational Iconological Development

In the practice of iconological methods in Chinese art history research, one often encounters the dilemma of an unstable foundation, a key reason being China's long-term lack of a systematic iconographic tradition.

In contrast, the West's ability to establish a rigorous iconographic system was largely benefited by its religious traditions, stable image motifs, and the close integration of images and texts, which allowed artistic styles to exhibit strong linear evolutionary characteristics. Since the Middle Ages, Christian art gradually formed a standardized visual language around the *Bible*, with numerous motifs (such as the Madonna and Child, the Crucifixion, the Last Supper, etc.) recurring in different works with clear symbolic meanings. The Renaissance revival of classical mythology further continued this systematicity. Images not only served religious indoctrination and political expression but also interacted closely with texts, making their semantic systems clearly discernible. This stability of motifs and the image-text correspondence provided a solid foundation for the establishment of iconography and was also an important prerequisite for the validity of Panofsky's iconology.

However, traditional Chinese art does not possess an image motif system similar to the West's. Firstly, the developmental path of Chinese art history did not follow a single style or a linear logic from realism to abstraction, but rather resembles a dynamic process of pluralistic coexistence, archaic cycles, and interwoven styles. This non-linear stylistic evolution lacks a motif structure that can run through history with unified symbolic meaning. Secondly, China's academic tradition of emphasizing text over images led to a weak image archival system, lacking a searchable and systematically classified motif database. More importantly, since the Yuan Dynasty, Chinese painting has increasingly emphasized Spiritual Resonance and subjective lyricism, valuing concept over form. This weakened the thematic nature and stability of motifs, as visual elements served more for poetic creation and literati taste rather than constituting a fixed and repeatedly used symbolic system. Within this aesthetic mechanism where concept outweighs form, the symbolic structure of images tends to be loose, and their function is more like a medium for concept rather than a carrier of form, directly restricting the conditions for generating systematic iconographic research.

Faced with this reality, the localization of iconology in China not only requires addressing the shortcomings of the iconographic system but also demands methodological self-awareness and academic caution in the selection of research objects. It is crucial to recognize that not all traditional Chinese paintings are suitable for directly applying the analytical framework of iconology. Compared to the literati painting tradition focused on expressing individual emotions, visual types with

clear functional positioning and relatively stable motif structures, such as religious images, ritual images, tomb murals, stone reliefs, New Year pictures, and folk prints, are more suitable as starting points for iconographic research. Because such images usually serve religious beliefs, political systems, or folk customs, they possess a high degree of schematic repetitiveness and symbolic stability, facilitating the tracking of motif continuation and variation, and the construction of systematic image genealogies. Especially in Buddhist and tomb images, the direct correspondence between images and related texts provides solid support for motif identification and symbolic interpretation. Furthermore, as scholars Han Shilian and He Wanli proposed, subjects with categorical attributes in Chinese painting also contain rich value for iconographic research. Categorical attribute themes usually include two types. One type is a series of works where the same painter repeatedly depicts a certain theme, for example, Kuncan's landscapes, Chen Hongshou's distorted figures, Bada Shanren's strange birds, or Zheng Banqiao's orchids and bamboo. The other type involves different painters continuously creating works on the same theme, such as paintings of beautiful women, Water-Land paintings, plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums, etc. Although the styles of such works vary, they possess relative stability in thematic meaning and compositional habits, able to provide a relatively reliable image basis for iconographic analysis.⁵

Therefore, to promote the effective practice of iconology in the Chinese context, the primary task is to strengthen the iconographic foundation. The academic value of iconology is reflected in its structurally rigorous, logically clear, and semantically verifiable analytical framework. If one directly engages in cultural symbolism and ideological interpretation without precise identification of the image's ontological structure and motif meaning, it is extremely easy to fall into arbitrary commentary that merely uses the image as a springboard. This not only weakens the methodological rigor that iconology should possess but also causes it to gradually lose its distinctiveness and explanatory power as an independent disciplinary tool.

2.2 Generalized Interpretive Dimensions: Clarifying the Boundaries of Image Meaning

Panofsky's iconological three-level structure is actually based on the philosophical presuppositions of Hegelian historical determinism. He believed that the core of history lies in the spirit of the age or national spirit, and that art, science, religion, politics, law, morality, customs, etc., are merely different externalizations

of this spirit. From this perspective, the artwork itself possesses historical intelligibility. Thus, image interpretation is conceived as a process of gradual deepening: first, Pre-iconographical Description, which is the basic grasp of the image's appearance and factual level; second, Iconographical Analysis, which reveals the cultural context underpinning the work by identifying themes, allusions, and symbols; finally, Iconological Interpretation, which enters a deeper level to reveal the basic attitudes, thought structures, and worldviews reflected behind the work, thereby achieving the reconstruction of the work's meaning. However, this logical chain is not unassailable. As Gombrich reminded, "Meaning is an elusive word, especially when applied to images rather than statements; it becomes even more elusive."⁶ The readability of images is not as direct and clear as language, making meaning difficult to perceive as a necessarily readable, determinate entity. More importantly, the so-called Pre-iconographical Description is not an objective starting point with zero interpretation. Viewing is never neutral, and there is no so-called innocent eye that can see objective reality without relying on any experience or knowledge. When we recognize a person on horseback in an image, we have in fact already utilized existing conceptual and cultural frameworks. In other words, the first level of description in iconology is itself a cognitive activity laden with cultural presuppositions. Under this premise, Panofsky's followers often face several theoretical risks: firstly, if the image is regarded as a symbol directly corresponding to meaning, it may ignore the invisible dimensions within the work that cannot be easily incorporated into the symbolic system, such as perceptual experience, emotional expression, and intuitive visual generation; secondly, if cultural meaning is overemphasized, it can easily dilute the aesthetic complexity and formal characteristics of the artwork itself; thirdly, if artistic images are simplistically treated as visual footnotes to the spirit of the age, different works may be reduced to monotonous mappings of the same spiritual connotation, losing their individual differences and uniqueness. Panofsky himself acknowledged this concern in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, cautioning "There is indeed a certain admitted danger: iconology may behave not like ethnology as opposed to ethnography, but like astrology as opposed to astrology."⁷

In response to such issues, scholars represented by Gombrich in the mid-to-late twentieth century criticized and reflected upon Panofsky's iconology. Gombrich believed that over-reliance on textual and intellectual history resources for image interpretation could plunge

the meaning of images into subjective projection and semantic drift, ultimately blurring the visual language of the work. To avoid the danger of establishing a mysterious symbolic mode, the scope of iconological interpretation should be limited, "to bring the meaning of a work back to what the author meant to express. What the interpreter does is to determine the author's intention as best he can."⁸ He advocated returning to the historical original context of artistic creation and recreating the creative program in conjunction with the creator's intention, requiring "the iconologist to return from every one of his imaginative hunts to his starting point."⁹ On this basis, Gombrich attempted to reconstruct the program using "types first" and the "principle of decorum" based on the historical situation to determine the only provable meaning in the work.¹⁰

This is highly enlightening for Chinese art history research characterized by non-linearity and polysemy, especially the study of literati painting after the late Song Dynasty. The transmission of meaning in artworks from this period often does not rely on clear image motifs or symbolic systems, making it difficult to trace the original sources or exact intentions through iconographic research. Artists tended to use concise brushwork, unique composition, management of imagery, and the use of blank space to convey profound thoughts and emotions; the core of their painting lies in the spiritual realm of the picture that "can be sensed but not expressed in words. Mechanically applying iconological analysis to such works can easily lead to semantic emptiness, severing the real connection between the image and the artistic ontology. Therefore, when facing works in Chinese art that lack fixed symbolic systems and symbolic continuity, it is necessary to return to the cultural context of the time and carefully examine the artist's true intention during creation in conjunction with the context. "Adhere to the principle of 'specific work, specific analysis,' paying attention to the particularity and creative expression bestowed by the individual artist, rather than blindly pursuing universal cultural symbolic meaning; This point is particularly important for the analysis of 'event-based works.'"¹¹ Such works often combine the continuity of image traditions with the uniqueness of specific situations. On the one hand, they absorb existing image motifs and symbolic encodings from categorical works, giving the work a certain basis for symbolic recognition; on the other hand, they are deeply influenced by the specific historical context, occasion of creation, and patron's intentions, presenting more distinct contextualized characteristics in content construction and image organization. This dual mechanism means that the meaning carried by the work

far exceeds the visual communication of the surface image, but harbors multiple cultural metaphors, political meanings, and even personal emotions.

Therefore, when dealing with such works, researchers can flexibly draw on Gombrich's iconological methods, starting from the specific creative background, historical context, and the artist's genuine creative motivation to reconstruct the local logic of the image's meaning.

2.3 Simplification of Using Images as Historical Evidence: Promoting Cross-Media Textual Corroboration

Warburg's practice of visualized cultural memory affirmed the unique value of images in historical research, proposing that images are not only aesthetic objects but also important media carrying history and cultural memory. Contemporarily, Mitchell's proposed pictorial turn further reveals that we have entered an age of the image, where visual images have become the dominant form of information dissemination and cultural expression, not only permeating daily life but also profoundly shaping human understanding of the past, present, and future.¹² This means that images are not only recorders of history but also core forces in the production of cultural meaning and social cognitive structures.

Haskell clearly stated in *History and Its Images* that historical images possess a "dual identity." They are both "products of history," capable of reflecting the ideas, techniques, and social background of a specific era, and "shapers of history," able to influence later generations' understanding of history through visual narratives.¹³ This reminder tells us that images do not merely record and carry historical memory in a neutral, transparent manner, but actively participate in the generation and representation of history as positioned, intentional participants. In fact, any surviving historical image should be understood as a composite field of multiple intertwined discourses. It is not only constrained by stylized visual traditions and artistic conventions but also constantly projected upon by the cultural fantasies and intellectual anxieties of different eras, even shaped and manipulated by power relations. Therefore, while acknowledging the value of images as carriers of historical information, it is even more necessary to be vigilant against simplifying them into singular, objective historical documents, lest their complexity and multiplicity be obscured.

This warning is of great significance for the localization of iconology in China. In recent years some scholars, to keep up with international academic trends,

often directly apply Western iconological theories to Chinese art history research, one-sidedly emphasizing the independent value of images as historical sources, believing that visual materials alone can provide sufficient historical evidence, thereby neglecting China's rich documentary tradition since ancient times and the integrated artistic ecology of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seals. This singular perspective leads to the severing of the organic symbiotic relationship between images and inscriptions, colophons, seals, catalogues, and other documentary and artistic elements, making it difficult to fully present the social, cultural, and intellectual context of the work. The result may not only lead to misinterpretations of the work's intention and historical semantics but also weaken the uniqueness inherent in Chinese art itself. To address this issue, we might draw on the concept of establishing a dynamic "visual historiography" proposed by Haskell,¹⁴ and recognize that history is not a static objective fact, but a dynamic cognition gradually formed through the continuous interpretation, comparison, and reconstruction of images and texts. While acknowledging the uncertainty of images, those problematic evidences should be used cautiously and critically, while at the same time promoting deep interaction between art history and intellectual history, social history, and material culture research, and through cross-media textual corroboration comprehensively examine texts, images, and other types of historical materials to establish a multi-dimensional chain of evidence, thereby reconstructing and understanding history more comprehensively and accurately.

3. Conclusion

Iconology, when introduced into the Chinese context, inevitably encountered challenges of cultural adaptability due to its inherent theoretical presuppositions and analytical framework. However, it is precisely this seemingly incompatible process of theoretical adjustment that constitutes the indispensable practical exploration for the localization of iconology. In the process of localizing iconology, more and more scholars have realized that the application of iconology in the local context must not only focus on the generation of cultural meaning but also examine the boundaries of its applicability, the rationality of the interpretive process, and the legitimacy of its scholarly basis. To construct an analytical framework truly suited to the meaning-generation mechanism of Chinese images, it is necessary to deeply root it in the image

traditions, aesthetic concepts, and intellectual cultural systems of Chinese art, achieving a shift from initial passive acceptance and mechanical imitation to active digestion and reconstruction based on the ontological standpoint of Chinese art itself.

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圖像學在中國美術史研究中的本土化困境

孫彤彤

摘要：本文圍繞現代圖像學在中國美術史研究中的應用，探討其方法在跨文化語境下的適配與轉化。研究首先分析現代圖像學的核心方法及其在西方的發展邏輯，繼而結合中國藝術的象徵體系與文化傳統，檢視在本土實踐中出現的理論斷裂與解釋困境。在此基礎上，提出建立本土圖像志系統、具體作品具體分析、跨媒介文本互證等實踐路徑，以期在保持圖像學方法論精神的前提下，增強其對中國藝術史研究的解釋力與開放性。

關鍵詞：現代圖像學；方法論；本土化；中國美術史