

Between Calligraphy and Image: The Interfusion of Pictorial Text and Oil Painting in the Works of Ding Yanyong¹

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Abstract

This article examines how Ding Yanyong (1902–1978) reconstructed oil painting as a medium for Pictorial Text. In this study, Pictorial Text refers to a historically continuous yet morphologically heterogeneous formation in Chinese culture that includes prehistoric pictorial marks, pictorial signs, and the strongly iconic forms of oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions, emphasizing a continuum between image and writing rather than a fully systematized script. Through a comparative art-historical approach that combines formal analysis of representative oil paintings from the 1950s–1970s with cross-cultural comparison, the article arrives at three main findings. First, Ding did not merely quote archaic scripts as motifs, but transformed the pictographic logic of Pictorial Text into compositional principles within oil painting. Second, cultural motifs, compositional structure, and calligraphic expression were structurally integrated, allowing oil painting to function as a site of inscription rather than as a purely Western pictorial medium. Third, in comparison with artists such as Cy Twombly and Antoni Tàpies, Ding’s later works reveal a distinct cross-cultural method grounded in the principle of *li xiang yi jin yi*, through which image, brushstroke, and meaning were brought into a coherent pictorial visual system. The article therefore argues that Ding’s later oil paintings should be understood not simply as a general Sino–Western hybrid idiom, but as a culturally grounded reconstruction of modern painting through the logic of Pictorial Text.

Keywords: Ding Yanyong, Calligraphy, Pictorial Text, Oil Painting, Sino-Western Painting

Citation

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งศึกษาว่า ดิง เหียนยง (丁衍庸, ค.ศ. 1902–1978) ได้สร้างการตีความใหม่ให้แก่จิตรกรรมสีน้ำมันในฐานะสื่อของ “อักษรภาพ” (Pictorial Text) อย่างไร ในบทความนี้ “อักษรภาพ” หมายถึงรูปแบบเชิงสัญลักษณ์ทางทัศนภาพในวัฒนธรรมจีนที่มีความต่อเนื่องทางประวัติศาสตร์แต่มีความหลากหลายทางรูปแบบ ครอบคลุมตั้งแต่ร่องรอยเชิงภาพก่อนประวัติศาสตร์ เครื่องหมายเชิงภาพ ไปจนถึงรูปอักษรที่มีลักษณะเชิงภาพอย่างเด่นชัดในอักษรจารึกบนกระดูกสัตว์และอักษรสำริด โดยเน้นความต่อเนื่องระหว่างภาพกับอักษร มากกว่าการถือว่าเป็นระบบอักษรที่สมบูรณ์ บทความนี้ใช้วิธีการทางประวัติศาสตร์ศิลป์เชิงเปรียบเทียบ โดยผสมผสานการวิเคราะห์เชิงรูปแบบของจิตรกรรมสีน้ำมันตัวแทนในช่วงทศวรรษ 1950–1970 เข้ากับการเปรียบเทียบข้ามวัฒนธรรม และนำไปสู่ข้อค้นพบสำคัญสามประการ ประการแรก ดิงมิได้เพียงนำอักษรโบราณมาใช้เป็นลวดลาย หากยังแปลงตรรกะเชิงภาพของ “อักษรภาพ” ให้กลายเป็นหลักการจัดองค์ประกอบภายในจิตรกรรมสีน้ำมัน ประการที่สอง ลวดลายทางวัฒนธรรม โครงสร้างองค์ประกอบ และการแสดงออกเชิงอักษรวิจิตรได้รับการบูรณาการอย่างเป็นระบบ ทำให้จิตรกรรมสีน้ำมันมิได้เป็นเพียงสื่อแบบตะวันตก หากยังทำหน้าที่เป็นพื้นที่แห่งการจารึกด้วย ประการที่สาม เมื่อเปรียบเทียบกับศิลปินอย่างไซ ทอมบลิ และอันโตนี ตาเปียส จะเห็นว่าผลงานระยะหลังของดิงเผยให้เห็นวิธีการข้ามวัฒนธรรมที่มีลักษณะเฉพาะ ซึ่งตั้งอยู่บนหลัก li xiang yi jin yi และทำให้ภาพ พู่กัน และความหมายประสานกันเป็นระบบที่ทัศนภาพที่สอดคล้องกัน ดังนั้น บทความนี้จึงเสนอว่า ผลงานจิตรกรรมสีน้ำมันระยะหลังของดิงไม่ควรถูกเข้าใจเพียงในฐานะรูปแบบผสมผสานจีน-ตะวันตกโดยทั่วไป หากควรถูกมองว่าเป็นการสร้างจิตรกรรมสมัยใหม่ขึ้นใหม่บนฐานตรรกะของ “อักษรภาพ” ที่หยั่งรากอยู่ในวัฒนธรรมจีน

คำสำคัญ: ดิง เหียนยง, คัลลิกราฟี, อักษรภาพ, จิตรกรรมสีน้ำมัน, จิตรกรรมจีน-ตะวันตก

วิธีอ้างอิง

ซูหยวี เฉิน, จีรวัฒน์ วงศ์พันธุ์เศรษฐ์, และ เอกชาติ จันอุไรรัตน์. (2569). ระหว่างอักษรวิจิตรและภาพ: การหลอมรวมระหว่างอักษรภาพกับจิตรกรรมสีน้ำมันในผลงานของ ดิง เหียนยง. *วารสารศิลป์ พีระศรี*, 14(1), 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.69598/sbjfa281291>



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1. Introduction

Ding Yanyong, in his capacities as a painter, calligrapher and art educator, occupies a distinguished place in the history of modern Chinese art. His oeuvre not only spans oil painting, traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, but also transcends the boundaries of Eastern and Western aesthetic paradigms. In twentieth-century China, he was celebrated as the “Oriental Matisse”, a title that reflected both his admiration for Henri Matisse and his pioneering role in introducing modern Western aesthetics into Chinese painting. In the later phase of his career, as he turned to the study and practice of traditional Chinese painting, he earned the sobriquet “Modern Bada Shanren”, invoking the legacy of the seventeenth-century painter Bada Shanren (Zhu Da), whose austere and symbolic brush style profoundly shaped the aesthetics of later Chinese art.

In his oil-painting practice, Ding Yanyong placed particular emphasis on the reconstruction of formal language and the distillation of spiritual content. He did not merely imitate Western painting techniques; rather, through a profound dialogue and integration of the Chinese cultural traditions of shu (书; calligraphy), hua (画; painting) and wen (文; literary tradition), he sought to establish a modern oil-painting idiom firmly grounded in Chinese national heritage. Of particular interest is Ding’s creative rearticulation of Pictorial Text in his oil paintings, where early Chinese pictorial and inscriptional forms are reconfigured within a modern visual language. This appropriation is evident not only at the level of symbol and form but is also woven into his compositions, his use of colour and the rhythmic deployment of line, thereby engendering a pictorial tension that is simultaneously visible and “readable”.

2. Objective

This article sets out to investigate Ding Yanyong’s unique visual language by addressing the following questions:

- (1) How did Ding’s early exposure to European modernism inform his later oil-painting style?
- (2) In what ways did Ding integrate the structural logic of Chinese Pictorial Text into his imagery, composition, and line work?
- (3) How does Ding’s practice illustrate a cross-cultural reconstruction of oil painting as a medium for Pictorial Text?

3. Research Methodology

This study involves documentary analysis of existing literature and Ding Yanyong's own writings, along with visual analysis of his paintings. Following the model of comparative case analysis in cross-cultural art studies, the study juxtaposes Ding's work with both Chinese and Western art traditions. Field research included examination of Ding's artworks (reproductions and, where possible, museum originals) and organization of visual data by thematic elements.

This study analyzes a selection of Ding's paintings from the 1950s–1970s. Through a comparative lens, Ding's paintings are also considered alongside Western artists (notably Henri Matisse, Cy Twombly, and Antoni Tàpies), not simply to identify similarities and differences, but to clarify how oil painting may be reconstructed as a medium for pictorial text in a cross-cultural context. In line with Michael Sullivan's proposition that East–West art should focus on historical influence rather than pure aesthetics, the method emphasizes how Ding's artistic choices should be understood within a broader process of cross-cultural transformation.

4. Scope

This study concentrates on Ding Yanyong's oil-painting practice insofar as it engages with Pictorial Text. Chronologically, it foregrounds the phase in which Ding explicitly transposed pictographic systems into painting, provisionally defined as representative oil works produced in the 1950s–1970s, while also taking his earlier, Western-modernist formative stage into account to trace the trajectory of stylistic development. Sample sources will consist of publicly available museum catalogues, exhibition catalogues, scholarly publications, and verified private collections.

The specific selection criteria are as follows:

Works whose composition or formal design directly cite or reinterpret pictorial texts;

Works that contain seals, inscriptions, or writing-like strokes that demonstrate the translation of calligraphic brush-technique into oil painting;

Works that exemplify distinct phases of Ding's practice (early Western-influenced phase, middle period of Pictorial Text experimentation, and later stage of imagistic refinement);

The proposed sample comprises 10–15 representative works, selected to cover both thematic and technical diversity while remaining manageable for close formal and conceptual analysis. This scope aims to ensure a solid documentary basis and to systematically reveal how Ding translated the formal resources of ancient Pictorial Text into a modern oil-painting visual vocabulary. The representative works selected for analysis are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Representative works by Ding Yanyong analyzed in this study

No.	Title	Date	Medium	Dimensions	Current repository/ Source
1	Grapes, persimmons and flowers in a vase	1970	Oil on canvas	60 x 45 cm	Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong
2	Farewell My Concubine I	1971	Oil on canvas	40 x 30 cm	The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation
3	The Origin of a Civilization	1955	Oil on wood panel	60.2 x 45.5 cm	The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation
4	Tiger Head	1965	Oil on wood panel	42 x 29 cm	The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation
5	Landscape	1966	Oil on masonite	46 x 30 cm	The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation
6	Three Horsemen	1968	Oil on wood panel	60.5 x 50.4 cm	The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation
7	Vase with Flowers	1955	Oil on wood panel	50 x 45 cm	The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation
8	Fish and Sheep	1968	Oil on masonite	50.6 x 45.4 cm	Sotheby's Hong Kong
9	Hong Hu IV	1960s	Oil on wood panel	40 x 29.5 cm	China Guardian Auctions
10	Portrait of a Woman with Tiger Head	1967	Oil on canvas	58.8 x 44.5 cm	Christie's Shanghai
11	Bone Script II	1963	Oil on wood panel	60.3 x 50.5 cm	The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation
12	Xiang	1964	Oil on masonite	61 x 45.5 cm	The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation

5. Literature review

5.1 The Scholarly Background and Definition of Pictorial Text

Although no single standardized English term has been universally established as an exact equivalent of what Chinese scholarship calls *tuxiang wenzi* (图像文字; pictorial text), related discussions have long existed in Chinese academic contexts. Recent studies of image-text relations have increasingly rejected any absolute opposition between image and writing. Li (2025) critiques the traditional binary model, while Zhao (2020) emphasizes the heterogeneity and mutual permeability of image and text. At the same time, archaeological research has directly used the designation *tuxiang wenzi* for some early visual signs found in Neolithic archaeological contexts, thereby recognizing their dual status as visual forms and signifying traces rather than equating them with a fully developed writing system (Wang & Liu, 2012). Earlier still, Zhang Tianfang (1887—1966), in the preface to *In Interpreting Pictorial Texts*, treated *tuxiang wenzi* as an object requiring specific formal analysis, stressing its historical depth, broad distribution, and morphological complexity rather than leaving it as a vague label (Zhang, 1992).

On this basis, this article uses Pictorial Text as a term of art to denote a historically continuous yet morphologically heterogeneous visual-signifying formation in Chinese culture, encompassing prehistoric pictorial marks, pictorial signs on pottery, and the strongly iconic forms of oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions, as well as their modern reactivation in painting. The term emphasizes a continuum between image and writing rather than a fully systematized script. In this sense, it not only clarifies the conceptual range of *tuxiang wenzi* in relation to earlier scholarship, but also makes the term more analytically workable for examining how Ding Yanyong reorganized early Chinese visual-signifying resources within modern oil painting.

5.2 Visual Language Construction in Ding Yanyong's Early Career

Ding Yanyong studied in Japan during the 1920s, enrolling in the Western Painting Department of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. In May 1922, the inaugural Exhibition of Contemporary French Art was held in Tokyo and Osaka, at a time when European modernism was in full ascendancy (Nakagawa, 2018). The bold use of colour in Fauvism and Impressionism, the deconstruction and reconfiguration of space and form in abstract art, and the primal imagery of prehistoric pictographs all left a profound imprint on Ding's early visual language.

Henri Matisse (1869–1954) proved especially influential (Figure 1); even in Ding's later oeuvre, vestiges of Matisse's brushwork and chromatic techniques remain discernible (Figure 2). In compositional terms, Ding adopted Matisse's use of simultaneous viewpoints to construct a flattened pictorial space, yet he further assimilated principles from Chinese literati painting, such as *liu bai* (留白; the use of void) and *xushi xiangsheng* (虚实相生; the interplay between void and solid). These principles enabled him to organise space around a central focal subject while softening and dissolving the peripheries. Rather than relying on traditional linear perspective, he employed a flat and decorative schema that represents both an extension of and a distinctly Chinese reinterpretation of Matisse's spatial concepts.

Throughout this period, Ding sought a simple and childlike visual idiom, embracing spontaneity to express authenticity through rawness that resonated with Matisse's modernist ideals of formal freedom and spiritual ease. Thus, Matisse not only provided critical formal inspiration but also instigated a fundamental reorientation of Ding's artistic philosophy. Ding's training in Japan therefore laid both a firm technical foundation and the seeds of cultural heterogeneity that would underpin his subsequent practice.

After returning to China in 1925, Ding Yanyong did not follow the Western realist path as many of his contemporaries who had studied abroad did. Instead, he began to recognise the expressive potential that could arise from integrating Western painting techniques with the aesthetic principles of traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting. As he later remarked in both his teaching and artistic practice: "My views on art changed drastically. From that moment on, I no longer painted realistically; instead, I focused all my efforts on the expressive power of line." (Ding, 1932) His oil paintings did not rely on light and shadow to model form. Instead, he used line to structure the composition and applied colour to convey rhythm, establishing a distinctive paradigm for the development of modern Chinese art.

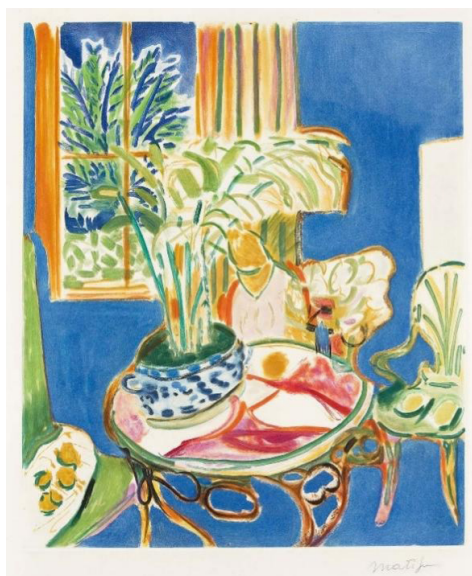


Figure 1

Henri Matisse, *Petit Intérieur Bleu* (Little Blue Interior), 1952, Color Aquatint on Arches Paper, 50.3 x 42.3 cm.
 Note. Adapt from Masterworks Fine Art Gallery (work page: Henri Matisse, *Petit Intérieur Bleu*, c.1952, ID# W-8858). (<https://www.masterworksfineart.com/artists/henri-matisse/aquatint/petit-interieur-bleu-little-blue-interiorc1952/id/W-8858>)

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Figure 2

Ding Yanyong, *Grapes, persimmons and flowers in a vase*, 1970, Oil on canvas, 60 x 45 cm
 Note. Adapt from Online Archives of Modern Chinese Art of The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation. (<https://www.tingyinyung.org/detail.php?lang=tw&id=1&id2=12&Page=2&Page2=53>).

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5.3 Integration of the Spiritual Core of Chinese Cultural Traditions

5.3.1 Ding Yanyong's Return to Chinese Artistic Traditions in the Mainland Context

Within the broader history of modern Chinese art, Ding Yanyong's development on the mainland can be understood in relation to a larger artistic effort to negotiate the tensions between imported Western media, inherited Chinese traditions, and the search for a modern cultural language. Rather than remaining within a simple framework of stylistic borrowing, many Chinese artists of the Republican period moved between international modernist vocabularies and indigenous artistic resources in order to redefine the terms of modernity itself (Andrews & Shen, 2012). Ding's early formation belongs to this context, but his subsequent return to Chinese artistic traditions gave his practice a particularly distinctive direction.

Although Ding Yanyong spent many years studying abroad, he never severed his connection to the cultural roots of China. Immersed in Chinese traditional culture throughout his life, he consistently embodied its spiritual essence in his artistic practice. From the 1920s to the 1940s, Ding Yanyong initially took part in the early Chinese movement to modernize art through Western-style oil painting, and later turned toward traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting, integrating the expressive brushwork of Chinese painting with the structural concepts of Western art. His works are infused not only with the spirit of classical calligraphy but also with a wide array of visual elements drawn from pictorial text, folk art, and other forms of indigenous imagery.

Guangdong is a coastal province in southern China, located just north of Hong Kong and Macau, and is one of the country's most populous and economically dynamic regions. It is the cultural heartland of Cantonese language and traditions, notably Cantonese opera and distinctive folk arts that helped shape the upbringing and aesthetic sensibilities of many modern Guangdong painters. Together with contemporaries such as Guan Liang (1900–1986) and Tan Huamu (1895–1976), artists of the Guangdong school, Ding grew up immersed in the visual world of ancestral halls, temples, and traditional opera stages (Figure 3). This folk aesthetic environment became deeply ingrained in his artistic sensibility, leaving what he once described as “a legacy of tradition embedded in the body.” (Cai, 2024) Even after encountering Western modernism during his studies in Japan, Ding continued to infuse his work with the ethos of folk art and literati painting. Though his oil paintings inherited the

vibrant colourism of Fauvism, they were equally animated by the *qiyun* (气韵; spiritual resonance) and *yiqu* (意趣; poetic charm) characteristic of Chinese art. His approach, which merged the vivid palette of folk art with the expressive strategies of modernism, can be understood as both a creative continuation and an elevation of tradition. It laid a foundation that would profoundly influence his later oil-painting practice.

5.3.2 Ding Yanyong's Hong Kong Years and the Reconfiguration of Modernist Practice

After moving to Hong Kong in 1949 amid the political upheavals of the time, Ding entered a new phase that marked an important turning point in his later artistic development. The artistic environment in Hong Kong, however, cannot be understood simply as an extension of earlier mainland developments, but must be situated within its own questions of cultural position, modernity, and historical circumstance (Clarke, 2001). In this new phase of life, shaped by teaching and sustained artistic reflection, he appears to have deepened his return to Chinese cultural resources. At the same time, this development also unfolded within a Hong Kong artistic environment in which the search for a modern visual language often involved both the absorption of Western modernist forms and a renewed return to Chinese artistic traditions (Zhu, 2017). Moreover, the Hong Kong context cannot be reduced to a straightforward embrace of international modernism. Recent scholarship has shown that local modernist discourse was also entangled with Chinese cultural nationalism and projects of cultural remaking (Du, 2022). It was in this context that his engagement with archaic scripts, inscriptional forms, and brush-based expression became more than a matter of formal quotation and developed into a deeper structural component of his later art.

Ding Yanyong not only studied oil painting but also delved deeply into Chinese ink painting and seal carving, mastering each discipline in its own right before allowing them to intersect and mutually inform one another. Ultimately, he achieved a synthesis in which oil painting, ink, and seal carving coalesced into a singular artistic language. This distinctive trajectory illustrates Ding's enduring reverence for traditional Chinese techniques and aesthetics, even within the realm of oil painting. He consistently sought to integrate the spirit of brush and ink into new artistic forms.

Gao Meiqing, former head of the Department of Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, observed that Ding's dual-track artistic career "rendered the spirit of tradition,

evolving into the quintessence of Chinese art.” (Gao, 1995) While he rose to prominence in his early years through Fauvist-inspired oil painting, Ding later returned to the tradition of Chinese ink painting. Throughout this artistic trajectory, he consistently maintained the spiritual essence of traditional culture. Rather, he revitalised it through cross-cultural engagement, allowing tradition to evolve and flourish within a modern context.

In sum, while absorbing the innovations of Western modern art, Ding Yanyong consistently emphasised and promoted the spiritual essence of traditional Chinese culture. He applied his mastery of the Chinese brush and cultivated artistic sensibility to the practice of oil painting. As the Belgian sinologist Pierre Ryckmans (1935–2014) once remarked, Ding “naturally integrated the unique spiritual cultivation of the Chinese painter and the brushwork technique into oil painting, combining these strengths seamlessly with the new modes of expression in Western art” (Ryckmans, 1963), thereby transcending the conventional boundaries between Eastern and Western artistic traditions.

Seen from this perspective, Ding Yanyong’s Hong Kong years should not be understood simply as a late regional episode, but as a crucial stage in the continued reconfiguration of modern Chinese art. Recent curatorial discussions have suggested that Guangdong and Hong Kong should be viewed within a shared regional history of modern art and visual culture (M+, 2025). In this sense, Ding’s later works were formed not only through his personal return to Chinese artistic traditions, but also within a wider regional history. The following section therefore turns from this historical framework to a closer analysis of how pictorial text became structurally embedded in Ding’s oil paintings.



Figure 3

Ding Yanyong, Farewell My Concubine I, 1971, Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 cm

Note. Adapt from Online Archives of Modern Chinese Art of The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation.

(<https://www.tingyinyong.org/detail.php?lang=tw&id=1&id2=443&keyword=&Page=1&Page2=24>).

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6. Research results

In many of Ding Yanyong's animal-themed oil paintings, the forms are radically simplified and the lines bear a strong decorative quality, reminiscent of the totemic exaggeration characteristic of bronze inscriptions. These works are not incidental but represent Ding's deliberate artistic experimentation, transforming the pictographic nature of Chinese characters into a visual idiom grounded in imagery. These compositions can be understood as "pictographic paintings" rooted in the structural logic of ancient script.

On one level, Ding's images draw upon the intrinsic physical features of animals; on another, they incorporate the compositional strategies and proportional relationships found in early Chinese writing. When juxtaposed with oracle bone and bronze script characters such as "fish" "tiger" or "ox", his paintings reveal a striking resemblance in outline treatment and dynamic posture. This visual resonance, which may be described as a pictorial "overlap", constitutes a reenactment of Ding's translational approach to the visual logic embedded within pictorial texts.

Table 2

Common pictorial texts representing animals in Ding Yanyong's oil paintings

	fish	tiger	horse	ox	sheep
Oracle bone script					
Bronze script					

6.1 The Specific Influence of Pictorial Text on Ding Yanyong's Oil Painting

A defining feature of pictorial text lies in its pictographic logic, through which the image simultaneously presents form and conveys meaning. These characters represent an early intersection between visual symbols and linguistic structures within the Chinese cultural system. In a parallel manner, Ding Yanyong's oil paintings frequently depart from representational depiction and move toward a more imagistic mode of visual expression. Ding Yanyong's tiger-themed oil paintings, spanning nearly two decades, demonstrate his direct appropriation and imagistic transformation of various pictorial texts, particularly the pictographic characters of oracle bone and bronze scripts. Born in 1902, the Chinese Year of the Tiger, Ding forged an enduring bond with this motif. Whether in his Hong Hu series paintings or in the seals reading Ding Hu that recur throughout his oeuvre, his deep affection for the tiger remains unmistakable.

6.1.1 Cultural Motifs

Around 1955, he began to explore this motif in oil painting, initially by rendering the incised characters on oracle bones and shells as visual forms in works such as *The Origin of a Civilization* (1955) (Figure 4), *Oracle Bone, Ox Head and Shell* (1955) and *Tiger* (1955). By 1963's *Hu*, Ding's practice had become more expansive: he depicted the tiger's full form in white linework against an orange-and-black ground, employing bold, high-contrast strokes reminiscent of primitive totemic designs. In *Tiger Head* (1965) (Figure 5), he enlarged the tiger's head and intensified the archaic ambience of the background, using oil-painting techniques to evoke the tactile patina of ancient bronze vessels.

Rather than reproducing the tiger's external likeness, Ding consciously simplified its form, constructing the composition through pure line and imagery. Through his naively vigorous brushwork, he achieved a modern aesthetic of simplification that unites the expressive logic of oil painting with the pictorial sensibility of Chinese script.

In works such as *Landscape* (1966) (Figure 6), *Ox and Horse* (1966), and *Three Horsemen* (1968) (Figure 7), he distilled figures into combinations of geometric forms and curves, shifting from realism to legibility. Facial features and bodily structures are organised according to the structural logic of pictorial writing, producing intentionally distorted head and body proportions while maintaining semantic coherence. This approach reflects the principle of omitting form to preserve meaning, allowing the images to remain pictorial yet readable as visual text. The result is a rare condition of image and text convergence within a Sino–Western hybrid idiom.

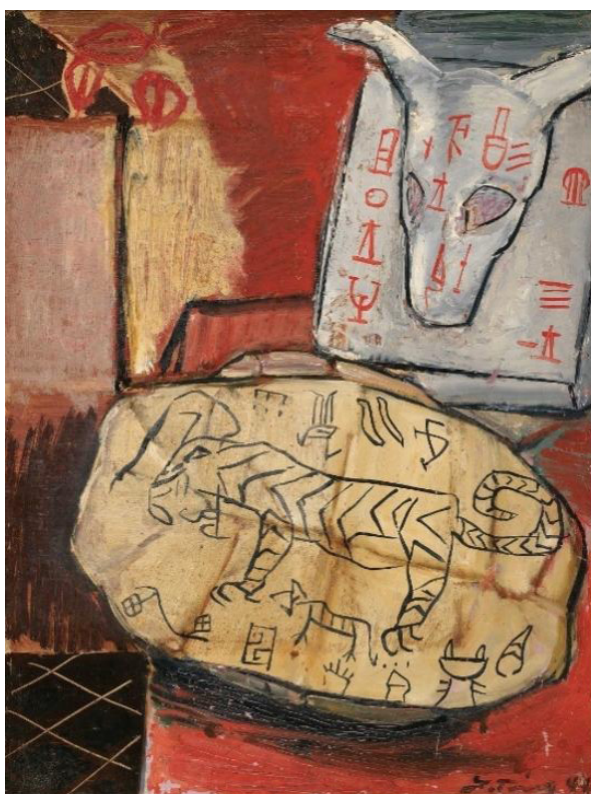


Figure 4

Ding Yanyong, The Origin of a Civilization, 1955, Oil on wood panel, 60.2 x 45.5 cm

Note. Adapt from *Online Archives of Modern Chinese Art of The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation*. (<https://www.tingyinyung.org/detail.php?lang=tw&id=1&id2=14&Page=1&Page2=5>).

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Figure 5

Ding Yanyong, Tiger Head, 1965, Oil on wood panel, 42 x 29 cm

Note. Adapt from Online Archives of Modern Chinese Art of The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation. (<https://www.tingyinyung.org/detail.php?lang=tw&id=1&id2=14&Page=1&Page2=15>).

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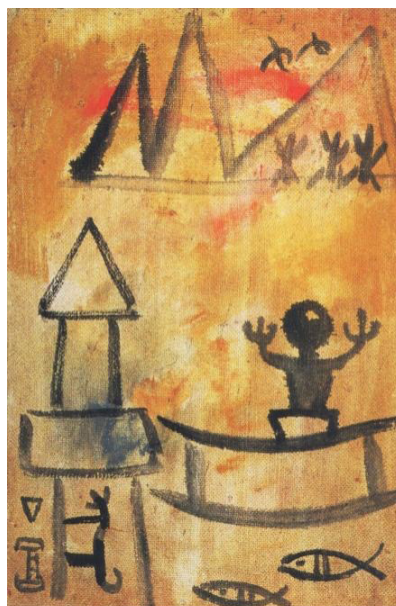


Figure 6

Ding Yanyong, Landscape, 1966, Oil on masonite, 46 x 30 cm

Note. Adapt from Online Archives of Modern Chinese Art of The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation. (<https://www.tingyinyung.org/detail.php?lang=tw&id=1&id2=13&Page=1&Page2=8>).

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Figure 7

Ding Yanyong, Three Horsemen, 1968, Oil on wood panel, 60.5 x 50.4 cm

Note. Adapt from Online Archives of Modern Chinese Art of The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation. (<https://www.tingyinyung.org/detail.php?lang=tw&id=1&id2=14&Page=2&Page2=67>).

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6.1.2 Composition

Ding Yanyong's spatial arrangement in oil painting was clearly inspired by the structural principles of Chinese pictorial text. Unlike Western oil painting, which emphasizes three-dimensional space and chiaroscuro perspective, Ding's compositions foreground planar construction and the tension between visual masses. The overall structure often resembles the symmetrical, vertically balanced format seen in seal script and stone inscriptions. In *Vase with Flowers* (1955) (Figure 8), the vase is positioned at the compositional center as the work's central focus. Intentional areas of negative space flank the motif, and discrete pictographic characters are inscribed as accents, recalling the page layout of a traditional Chinese calligraphic scroll.

Furthermore, Ding Yanyong introduced the structural principles of pictographic script and seal-carving compositional principles into his oil-painting practice, pursuing a visual expression that is both formally succinct and semantically profound. In *Fish and Sheep* (1968) (Figure 9), he renders the scene through radically simplified symbolic forms:

the subjects are outlined with bold, rounded strokes that convey a naïve yet exuberant character. The composition borrows the layout conventions of seal inscriptions, setting stark black, ink-like lines against a blue-toned field. The sharp chromatic contrast evokes the rustic beauty of a carved seal and conveys the weighty texture of ancient stone engravings. Ding was particularly drawn to the pictographic essence of the Chinese character “fish”: in juxtaposing “fish” with “sheep”, he creates the composite character xian (鲜; fresh), a fusion of form and meaning that both challenges the viewer’s imagination and underscores the imagistic potency of traditional pictographs.

He deliberately dissolved the sense of spatial depth and treated the canvas as a symbolic field, a gesture that parallels the ritual, documentary, and totemic functions embodied in Chinese pictographic texts. This planar approach does not signify a lack of perspective but articulates an alternative visual logic. Each painting functions as a “visual stele inscription,” in which the viewer does not enter the pictorial space but instead reads it as a linguistic construct.



Figure 8

Ding Yanyong, Vase with Flowers, 1955, Oil on wood panel, 50 x 45 cm

Note. Adapt from *Online Archives of Modern Chinese Art of The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation*. (<https://www.tingyinyung.org/detail.php?lang=tw&id=1&id2=12&Page=1&Page2=3>).

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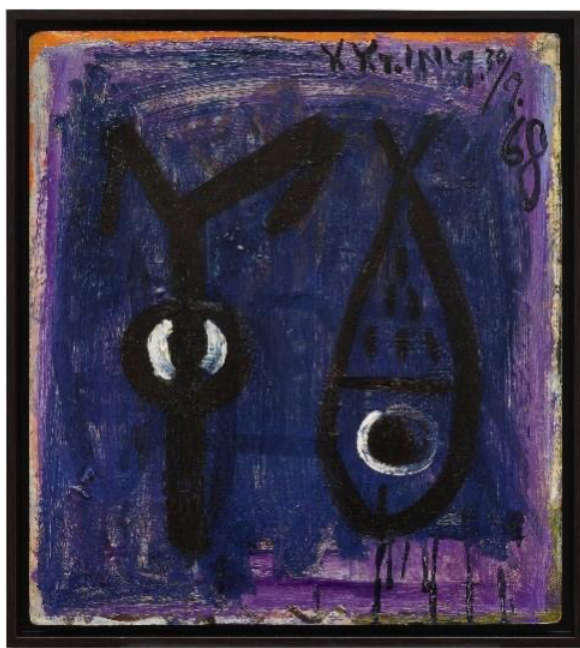


Figure 9

Ding Yanyong, Fish and Sheep, 1968, Oil on masonite, 50.6 x 45.4 cm

Note. Adapt from BidtoArt. (<https://bidtoart.com/art/ding-yanyong-fish-and-goat>).

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6.1.3 Calligraphic Expression

Ding Yanyong's brushwork lines are not merely formal elements but embody the act of writing itself. Rather than constructing form through masses, he animated the composition through the dynamic energy of line. His brushstrokes do not describe external appearances; they function as inscriptions that reveal the convergence of painting and writing. This calligraphic intent resonates with traditional Chinese writing techniques such as cantou yanwei (蚕头燕尾; silkworm-head, swallow-tail) and wulouhen zhuihuasha (屋漏痕锥画沙; roof-leak mark, awl-hammered sand), which emphasise nuanced stroke beginnings and endings.

Particularly in his use of oil paint, Ding intentionally subdued the texture of the brushstroke to emulate the fluidity of ink, creating the impression of "writing" rather than "painting" on the canvas. In his animal-themed works, the lines often display fei bai (飞白; flying-white effect) and dun cuo (顿挫; rhythmic pauses and thrusts), with perceptible variations in pressure at the beginning and end of each stroke. Such modulation of line recalls the disciplined control of brushwork characteristic of seal script (Figure 10).

By translating calligraphic brush-spirit into oil-painting line, he enacts the dynamic rhythm inherent in pictorial text: every stroke carries its own cadence and breath.

Moreover, in his figure paintings and other subjects, Ding integrated calligraphic elements and seal symbols to create a distinctly writ-like aesthetic (Figure 11). He captured his subjects' spirit with economical strokes, abandoning excessive realism; he would then inscribe running-script signatures and affix seals, fusing calligraphic energy with painterly mood. As Zong Baihua (1897–1986) remarked, “Chinese painting rests upon calligraphy... the spirit of both arises from the brushstroke” (Zong, 1996), Ding's integration of calligraphic principles into painting brought a calligraphic ethos to Western oil techniques, giving his work both cultural depth and rhythmic vitality.

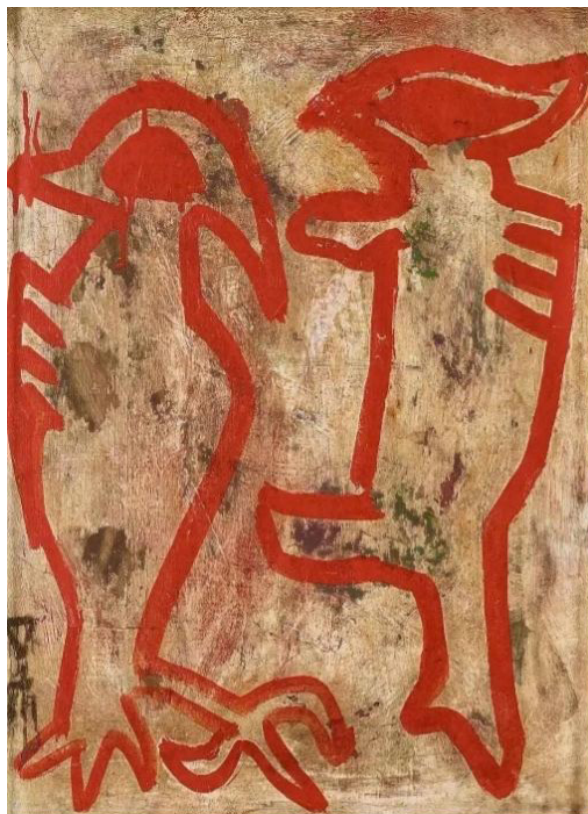


Figure 10

Ding Yanyong, Hong Hu IV, 1960s, Oil on wood panel, 40 x 29.5 cm

Note. Adapt from *China Guardian Auctions*. (<https://www.cguardian.com.hk/tc/auction/auction-details.php?id=215726>).

Copyright by China Guardian Auctions



Figure 11

Ding Yanyong, Portrait of a Woman with Tiger Head, 1967, Oil on canvas, 58.8 x 44.5 cm

Note. Adapt from Christie's. (<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6526726>).

Copyright by Christie's Shanghai

6.2 The Cross-cultural Reconstruction of Oil Painting as a Medium for Pictorial Text

Since the twentieth century, painting has undergone unprecedented cultural interchange and collision under the twin forces of modernity and globalization. As one of the most symbolically charged media, oil painting has not only carried Western aesthetic values but has also served as a primary vehicle through which non-Western artists articulate local spirit and engage in cross-cultural dialogue. Within this historical context, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary modes of practice have progressively become new avenues for artistic exploration. Cross-cultural art history emphasizes breaking mono-cultural perspectives and, through comparative inquiry, revealing the dialogues and mutual permeations between regional art traditions. As Michael Sullivan (1916–2013) argued, studies of East–West artistic exchange should concentrate on the historical significance of works and the processes of reciprocal influence rather than solely on aesthetic judgement (Sullivan, 1989).

Guided by this premise, the present chapter employs comparative case analysis not simply to identify convergences and divergences between Ding Yanyong and Western painters, but to establish a more specific cross-cultural framework for understanding how image, writing, materiality, and inscription interact in modern painting. Within this framework, Cy Twombly and Antoni Tàpies serve as comparative reference points through which the distinctive formation of Ding Yanyong's oil-painting practice as a medium for pictorial text may be more clearly understood.

6.2.1 Pictograph to Pictorial Meaning

Ding Yanyong's oil paintings are not representational works in the conventional Western sense; rather, they constitute an imagistic system that more closely echoes the ancient Chinese method of generating characters by — *yi xiang shi yi* (以象示意; to indicate meaning through imagery). The deeper basis of this shift lies in the classical Chinese aesthetic idea of *li xiang yi jin yi* (立象以尽意; to give pictorial form to phenomena). Within traditional Chinese systems of painting and writing, the *xiang* (象; pictorial form) is neither mere photographic imitation nor ethereal abstraction but a form that carries affect and communicates spiritual access. In constructing pictorial structure, Ding Yanyong did not seek the faithful replication of external detail. Instead, he employed the *xiang* as a medium to express *yi* (意; meaning), thereby formulating an artistic language that unites material presence with inner intention. In this sense, his paintings embody what Clive Bell (1920) termed “significant form.”

Western art has pursued comparable inquiries. The American abstract painter Cy Twombly (1928–2011) is renowned for his characteristic scrawled, graffiti-like gestures; many of his works are, in effect, writing within painting and painting within writing. Twombly himself also remarked that his paintings are sometimes more like writing than painting. His canvases frequently feature meandering lines and isolated words that elude literal reading yet convey an unrestrained emotional force (Figure 12). His spontaneous script-like marks evoke memory and emotion, their expressive energy resonating with the gestural vitality of Chinese calligraphy. By drawing on the calligraphic tradition to deconstruct the formal potential of script, Twombly produced communicative images that stand between graffiti and Chinese character (Figure 13).

Twombly's example is illuminating here because it brings into focus a shared concern with the threshold between image and writing, even though Ding Yanyong and Twombly approached that threshold from very different cultural premises.

6.2.2 Materiality and Inscription

In his handling of materials, Ding Yanyong often applied thick layers of pigment to create a coarse, tactile surface. Combined with his bold linear modelling, this impasto evokes the texture of rubbings taken from ancient stone steles or bronze inscriptions. Such palpable materiality reinforces the sense of inscription and historical resonance within his work. This is not a matter of chance but reflects Ding's conscious transposition of the material culture of ancient carved writing into the operations of painting on canvas or panel.

For example, in works such as *Bone Script II* (1963) (Figure 14) and *Xiang* (1964) (Figure 15), the backgrounds are roughly treated and chromatically restrained, while forms are usually rendered in flat, single-color passages and then defined by forceful linear contours. The colour is not used to create a sense of spatial depth but to emphasise the flatness of form, thereby reinforcing its function as a symbolic sign within the composition. Within this framework, Ding Yanyong's oil painting transcends the boundaries of mere pictorial practice and moves toward the realm of inscription. This shift exemplifies his transformation of the tangible tradition of pictorial text into a mode of modern artistic expression.

A comparable material inquiry can be found in the work of Antoni Tàpies (1923–2012). From the 1950s onward, he incorporated Chan Buddhist ideas and calligraphic gesture into his practice, often building heavy, multi-textured grounds and then applying incised marks and signs. He mixed natural materials such as sand, earth, and charcoal into the paint to create a rough surface, and then hand-incised letters, numbers, and crosses so that they appear carved into the ground, producing an effect in which figuration and symbol coexist (Figure 16). Critics have noted surfaces filled with incisions, abrasions, and graffiti-like marks, and Tàpies himself emphasised the inseparability of bodily gesture and making, akin to a calligrapher whose bodily movement directs the work's energetic trajectory (Chen, 2020). Tàpies is equally revealing in this respect, since his work helps situate Ding's handling of materiality and inscription within a broader cross-cultural problem of how surface, sign, and symbolic form may be reconfigured through modern painting.

6.2.3 Comparative Synthesis

The foregoing comparison indicates that, despite their different cultural premises, Ding Yanyong, Cy Twombly, and Antoni Tàpies may be brought into dialogue within a cross-cultural framework of painting. Ding proceeds from the pictographic principles of Chinese character formation to shape imagistic signs in oil; Twombly combines Western abstract expression with calligraphic impetus so that the line itself carries semantic energy; and Tàpies builds a dialogue across East and West, between matter and spirit, through dense material surfaces and incised signs. Under this framework of cross-cultural reconstruction, oil painting and pictorial text can illuminate one another and cohere into a new integrative mechanism.

This demonstrates that both Eastern pictographic script and Western abstract writing embody a common logic between image and text: lines themselves can bear meaning rather than merely serve as formal delineation. The translational mechanism employed in Ding Yanyong's paintings can thus be read not only as an artistic strategy but also as an act of cultural identification. He did not reject Western technique but embedded the most primordial visual signs of Pictorial Text from China within the structural matrix of Western form, making his oil paintings multilayered reenactments of language, culture, and history. This constitutes not only a formal innovation but also a cultural reinscription that reasserts the value of Chinese tradition within a globalised artistic discourse.

Further, it was within these historical currents that Ding Yanyong, grounded in deep Chinese tradition, absorbed the structural principles and techniques of Western modern painting and reconstructed a distinctive pictorial visual system (Figure 17).



Figure 12

Cy Twombly, *Untitled (Bacchus 1st Version II, 2004, acrylic, oilstick and crayon on wood panel, 265.6 x 200.1 cm*

Note. Adapt from Christie's. (<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6452770>).

Copyright by Christie's



Figure 13

Cy Twombly, *Six Latin Writers and Poets: six plates (Bastian 61-66), 1976, colors with embossing, 64.5 x 50.8 cm*

Note. Adapt from Christie's. (<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5615477>).

Copyright by Christie's



Figure 14

Ding Yanyong, Bone Script II, 1963, Oil on wood panel, 60.3 x 50.5 cm

Note. Adapt from *Online Archives of Modern Chinese Art of The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation*. (<https://www.tingyinyung.org/works.php?lang=tw&id=1&id2=14&Page=1>).

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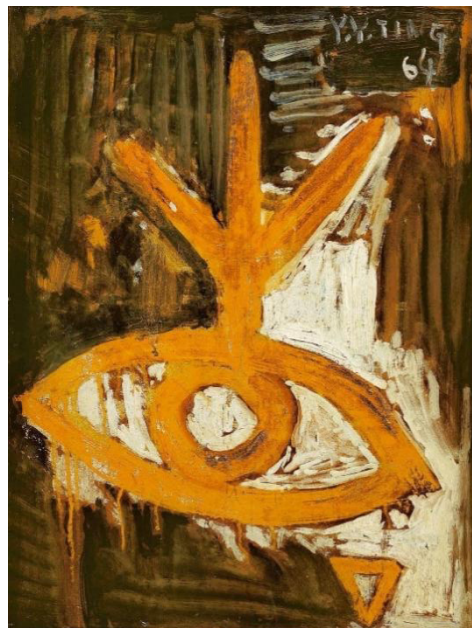


Figure 15

Ding Yanyong, Xiang, 1964, Oil on masonite, 61 x 45.5 cm

Note. Adapt from *Online Archives of Modern Chinese Art of The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation*. <https://www.tingyinyung.org/detail.php?lang=tw&id=1&id2=14&Page=1&Page2=30>.

Copyright by The Li Ching Cultural & Educational Foundation



Figure 16

Antoni Tàpies, *Cara*, 1991, Painting on Synthetic textile, 148 x249 cm

Note. Adapt from Museu Tàpies. (<https://museutapies.org/en/exposicio/antoni-tapies-certeses-sentides/>).

Copyright by Fundació Antoni Tàpies

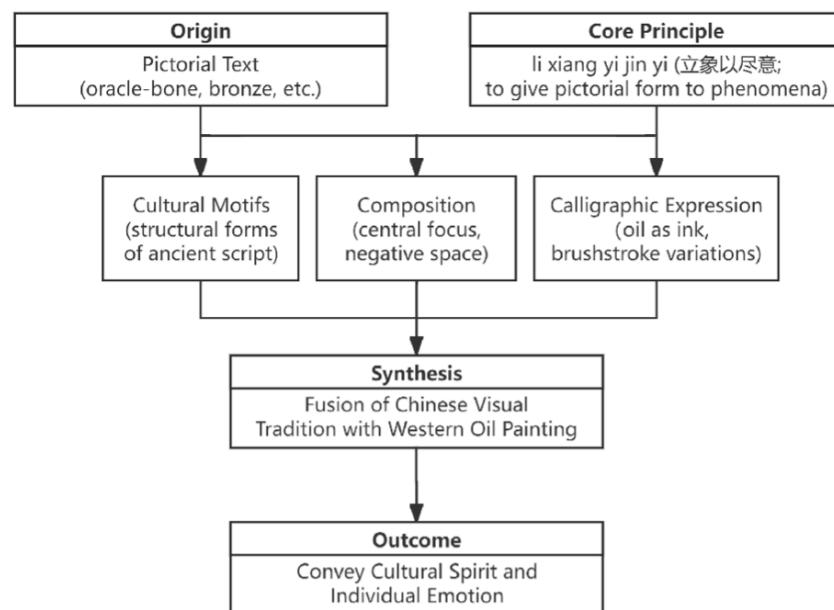


Figure 17

The pictorial visual system of Ding Yanyong's oil paintings

Note. A schematic showing the origin in pictorial text and the core principle of *li xiang yi jin yi*, articulated through three operational dimensions—cultural motifs, composition, and calligraphic expression. These converge in a synthesis that fuses Chinese visual tradition with Western oil painting, yielding outcomes that convey cultural spirit and individual emotion.

7. Conclusion

This article has shown that Ding Yanyong's oil-painting practice represents more than a formal synthesis in that it embodies a profound process of cultural rewriting. He did not seek a superficial blend between East and West, but internalized the formal logic and aesthetic spirit of ancient Chinese pictorial texts within the structural foundation of oil painting. Through this transformation, painting becomes not only a medium of visual expression but also a space for cultural inscription in which emotion and meaning are renewed. His canvases are not simply images, but visual forms in which Chinese artistic thought is preserved and reinterpreted within a modern context.

From a cross-cultural perspective, Ding's creative method differs from that of Western artists such as Cy Twombly and Antoni Tàpies. While Twombly and Tàpies approached Chinese art and philosophy as external sources of inspiration, Ding reinterpreted Western painting through a Chinese cultural lens. His pictorial visual system is grounded in the principle of *li xiang yi jin yi* and shows how brushstroke, color, and composition collaborate to generate a coherent field of visual significance. In his work, the expressive spirit of calligraphy and the material structure of oil painting were brought into a unified relation, giving this system a form that moves across cultural boundaries while remaining rooted in Chinese artistic thought.

The contribution of this article lies in clarifying that Ding's later oil paintings should not be understood simply as a Sino-Western hybrid idiom in a general sense. By approaching his work through the concept of pictorial text, this article has shown more specifically how cultural motifs, compositional structure, and calligraphic expression were structurally integrated within his oil paintings. In this sense, Ding Yanyong's pictorial text practice opens a new dimension in the study of modern art and cross-cultural dialogue. By transforming the ideographic logic of ancient Chinese writing into a visual language of modern painting, he established a model that reconciles cultural identity with artistic innovation.

Future research may expand the corpus of works under discussion and place Ding's later practice in closer comparison with contemporaneous developments in Hong Kong art and modern Chinese painting. His work demonstrates that artistic modernity is not achieved through imitation or stylistic convergence, but through reinterpretation grounded in one's own cultural tradition. Within this synthesis of reflection and creation lies the enduring value of Ding's contribution to twentieth-century art history and to the continuing study of modern visual culture.

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