

Modern Mazu Paintings: Idealized Analysis and Educational Literacy from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates traditional Mazu paintings' history, development, and current status, focusing on their idealized aesthetic analysis and potential for modernization within the framework of intangible cultural heritage protection. Employing developmental research methods, including aesthetic theory, literature review, and field investigation, the research presents its findings through artistic works and descriptive analysis. The results reveal that Mazu culture, with its profound historical roots, is deeply embodied in Mazu paintings, which serve as vital carriers of this cultural tradition. As societal contexts evolve, Mazu has transcended her role as a sea goddess to become a symbol of traditional Chinese customs and heritage. However, existing approaches to Mazu paintings need to address the goddess's aesthetic ideals and the new social and educational roles attributed to her. This study underscores the necessity of modernizing Mazu painting practices to align with contemporary aesthetics and educational needs. It further explores how integrating modern Mazu painting creation into academic curricula can foster student engagement with this art form, ensuring its inheritance and innovative development. By emphasizing government and academic collaboration, the study provides valuable insights into the dissemination and educational promotion of Mazu's intangible cultural heritage in modern society.

Key words: Modern Mazu Painting, Educational Literacy, Idealized Analysis, Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection

INTRODUCTION

Mazu belief, a revered figure in Chinese culture, traces its origins to the life of an actual individual named Lin Mo, born in 960 in the coastal region of Fujian, China. Her name, Lin Mo, reflects the extraordinary circumstances of her infancy—she neither cried nor wailed during her first month of life, an occurrence considered auspicious and extraordinary (Zhou, 2013). Renowned for her compassion, generosity, and ability to predict people's fortunes and misfortunes, Lin Mo became a prominent figure in her community. Over time, she gained a reputation as a witch or spiritual figure with supernatural abilities. Tragically, it is believed that Mazu met her demise at the young age of 28 while heroically attempting to rescue fishermen from a shipwreck.

Following her death, the legacy of Mazu's life and deeds continued to grow. Beginning in the Song Dynasty, the belief in Mazu expanded rapidly, becoming a cornerstone of spiritual and cultural life in the southern coastal regions of China. Over centuries, this belief system transcended regional boundaries, establishing itself as a critical element of the global Chinese diaspora's cultural heritage. Today, Mazu culture encompasses many traditions, including religious

practices, folk customs, and traditional art forms. The belief in Mazu is a testament to her historical influence and reflects a profound reservoir of Chinese historical and cultural heritage. In 2009, this cultural tradition was recognized internationally when Mazu's beliefs and customs were inscribed on the UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage List (UNESCO, 2009). The international impact of Mazu's legacy is undeniable, with an estimated 300 million followers worldwide who uphold her teachings and values.

Mazu painting is an integral aspect of Mazu's cultural legacy, which serves as a vital medium for expressing the faith, beliefs, and customs associated with Mazu. These artworks represent devotion and provide a visual narrative of Mazu's life, teachings, and spiritual significance. However, in the modern era, the inheritance and preservation of Mazu paintings have encountered numerous challenges. The rise of contemporary cultural influences and shifts in aesthetic preferences have created a complex environment for traditional art forms like Mazu painting. Consequently, the need for innovative approaches to creating and interpreting these works has become increasingly urgent. Integrating modern techniques and perspectives into the artistic traditions of Mazu painting and incorporating these innovations into

educational frameworks offers a practical solution to ensure the survival and evolution of this vital cultural expression. This modernization preserves Mazu's cultural heritage and fosters its continued relevance and resonance in a rapidly changing world.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study examines traditional Mazu paintings' history, development, and current status, analyzes their modernization in line with contemporary aesthetics, and explores strategies for preserving and integrating Mazu culture into education. Combining aesthetic theory, literature research, and field investigation, it seeks to support Mazu paintings' sustainable development and educational literacy as intangible cultural heritage.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is a fundamental research project employing developmental research methods, centering on exploring Chinese Mazu painting as a significant cultural and artistic form. The research utilizes a dual approach to data collection, combining literature research to understand historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts with field investigations to gather firsthand insights into the current practices and representations of Mazu painting. The primary focus is applying aesthetic concepts to idealize traditional Mazu paintings, examining their inherent artistic and cultural values, and reinterpreting them through modern aesthetics to create contemporary Mazu paintings that resonate with current societal and artistic expectations.

The study is grounded in the core principles of "aesthetics" and "educational literacy," aiming to enhance the artistic dimensions of Mazu paintings and explore their role in cultural education and heritage preservation. Researchers conducted creative work, producing modernized Mazu painting prototypes and descriptive analyses to document and critically evaluate the outcomes. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of how traditional Mazu aesthetics can be harmonized with modern design principles to address contemporary cultural needs. Ultimately, this research contributes to the sustainable development and transmission of Mazu painting, offering insights into its integration within educational frameworks and its potential for broader cultural dissemination.

RESULTS

Historical Evolution and Cultural Significance of Mazu Painting

Mazu painting was born in the Song Dynasty as a portrait style Mazu portrait. Mostly appearing in printmaking, these illustrations are mainly used by believers to worship and post at home to ward off evil spirits in their homes. They are called "divine symbols" or "paper horses" and are extremely common in the Fujian Taiwan region. Wooden printing is often used for creation because its production cost is relatively

low, and it is convenient for large-scale printing and replication, which maximizes the efficiency and purpose of creating Mazu-style illustrations and has become the primary creative technique for Mazu portrait-style illustrations.

In addition to printmaking, portrait-style Mazu illustrations often appear as statues. Along with the rise of Mazu temples, Mazu statues have been extensively shaped and promoted based on Mazu temples. There are many techniques for making Mazu statues, including wood carving statues, clay sculpture statues, ceramic statues, stone carving statues, paper paste statues, soft-bodied statues, etc. These types of statues have different characteristics and features due to their production techniques and materials, greatly enriching the expressive techniques of portrait-style Mazu illustrations (Wang, 2021).

With the development of printing technology, the artistic expression form of illustrations began to appear in the novels and readings of the Ming Dynasty, namely the Expression style Mazu portrait. Due to limitations in carving techniques, the initial prints of Mazu images often had simple and natural lines, with a few vivid and lifelike strokes. With the vigorous development of the printing industry in the Qing Dynasty, the content depicted in it also became more dynamic and prosperous with the development of printing technology. The number of Mazu paintings also showed explosive growth with the development of the printing industry, which led to prominent pattern characteristics in this type of Mazu painting, manifested in a high degree of overlap in picture composition and story selection. At the same time, in addition to the initial printmaking, new creative methods such as silk painting and mural painting began to emerge in the expression style Mazu portrait, greatly enriching and promoting the development of the Mazu belief.

The Idealized Explanation of Mazu Painting

The characters drawn by painters should be more beautiful than those drawn by modern artists (Zhu, 1980). Taking the shaping of images of goddess as an example, the idealization in aesthetics believes that when shaping the image of goddess, it is often not a one-to-one restoration, but rather an idealized beautification and optimization based on the needs of society for goddess at that time, combined with the status of goddess and the aesthetic preferences of people at that time, to create an ideal and perfect image that conforms to the aesthetic preferences of society at that time.

For example, Kant believed that the "ideal of beauty" is also the "standard of beauty," and standards always involve objective rules. Kant first pointed out that aesthetic judgment does not involve concepts, while objective rules must be defined through concepts. Therefore,

there are no objective rules in aesthetic taste. However, this universality of feelings (pleasure or disgust) still does not involve concepts. In the consistency often shown in the perception of certain things at all times and in all nations, we can still find an empirical standard for aesthetic taste. This standard is confirmed by examples and based on something deeply rooted in all people (i.e., common sensory ability). The empirical standard comes

from the common identification of certain objects or works by most people. It is exemplary but cannot exist in examples because aesthetic taste requires originality, and “the imitator of examples only expresses aesthetic taste as a critic of this example. (Zhu, 2003, pp. 7-9)

The Mazu culture was born in the Song Dynasty and has experienced many dynasties. People in different times have different needs for Mazu, giving Mazu different social statuses and functions. This, in turn, has given Mazu different stereotypical images. So, the Mazu paintings in different periods have different characteristics.

The social nature of the idealized interpretation of Mazu paintings

Aristotle said that art is an organic whole, with parts closely connected to the whole. Art reflects reality, but it must be idealized. When the Mazu painting was created, it was not simply a pursuit of restoring the image of the young fisherwoman when Mazu sacrificed at the age of 28; it was also influenced by Mazu’s social status and the social functions assigned to her in different social periods.

Kant analyzed two factors in the ideal of beauty: the “aesthetic normative image” and the “rational concept,” which specifically refers to the need to conform to social morality and is dependent on beauty.

In ancient China, there was a strict hierarchy, and people of different social classes had strict rules and norms for wearing clothing. Therefore, although the original Mazu was a young fisherwoman of 28 years old, after being officially enshrined as a goddess, her image changed from that of a fisherwoman witch to one that matched her enshrined position. Her wearing of a crown and other items conformed to the state of being a goddess.

Her age also increased with the promotion of her position. By the Qing Dynasty, Mazu’s image had changed from that of a young woman to that of a middle-aged woman. At the same time, influenced by the aesthetic of the male-dominated society in ancient China, people generally believed that a masculine image was more dignified and intimidating and more suitable for the upper class. Therefore, in the Qing Dynasty, especially in statues of the Qing Dynasty, Mazu paintings generally present a dignified face and body close to middle-aged men and have entirely departed from the original image of young women.

These phenomena prove that the aesthetic of Mazu’s paintings depends on beauty and is influenced by social views. The beauty of Mazu’s paintings is idealized and dependent on society’s perception of Mazu’s divinity and priesthood. This idealization is born from society’s perception of Mazu’s divinity and priesthood. Kant said that aesthetic judgment does not involve concepts, but objective rules must be defined through concepts.

The artistic interpretation of Mazu paintings as idealized representations

Aristotle believed that art reflects reality but must be idealized and imitated as things should be. Subjective ideals

should conform to objective laws. As a deity, Mazu is portrayed in paintings as the perfect image in people’s minds. However, people of different times and different ethnic groups have their unique aesthetic standards. Kant analyzed two factors in the ideal of beauty: the “aesthetic normative image,” and the “rational concept.” The artistic quality of Mazu’s paintings aligns with the “aesthetic normative imagery,” which is an average impression derived from experience and imagination. This ideal explanation is empirical and relative. The overall characteristics of Mazu in different times of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties not only conform to the idealized interpretation given by society but also to the understanding and aesthetic of the perfect ideal image of goddess in different dynasties.

For example, in the Song Dynasty, Mazu statues mostly had oval faces, full and open foreheads, plump and tight cheeks, and round noses. Compared to later dynasties, their eyes were noticeably more rounded and realistic, and their lips were more fleshy, with an upper lip M and lower lip W shape and a slight smile on both corners of the mouth. Compared to the magnificent aesthetic of the Tang Dynasty, the aesthetic of the Song Dynasty is simpler and more elegant. The facial features of the Mazu statues in the Ming Dynasty showed diversity, and their clothing also began to vary and have different styles. However, some standard planar features can still be seen through line comparison analysis. The eyes of the statues in the Ming Dynasty were all elongated, with round heads, tapered ends, and thick, round eyelids. Compared to the round and fleshy nose of the Song and Yuan dynasties, the nose of the Ming Dynasty was more delicate and small, with a straight bridge, presenting the facial features of an older adult. In the Qing Dynasty, Mazu’s image became increasingly masculine and elderly as she was recognized by the government in order to fit better the idealized understanding of people’s idealized understanding of the image of a supreme deity who wields power (Figure 1) (Fang, 2022).

The aesthetic of a nation in different periods is also influenced by social development, so it is impossible to completely separate Mazu’s paintings from society for pure aesthetic appreciation. Mazu’s paintings have always depended on beauty, an ideal beauty influenced by society and morality.

With the changing times, the idealized explanation of Mazu as a deity can no longer keep up with the progress of the times. In modern society, Mazu is not only a deity but also a bridge for cultural exchange and a carrier for cultural dissemination. Society and the state have endowed Mazu with more social functions. With Mazu now a national symbol associated with cultural identity, its divine characteristics are no longer evident. However, the reduced diversity has created a robust and secondary identity (Ke, 2022). Nowadays, the pursuit of perfect and idealized aesthetics can no longer meet the increasingly expanding social functions of Mazu. Therefore, there is a need for more aesthetics that are more in line with modern art and contemporary art to be incorporated into the creation of Mazu paintings so that Mazu paintings can achieve more diversified development and Mazu culture can be promoted and disseminated in a way that is more in line with contemporary aesthetics.

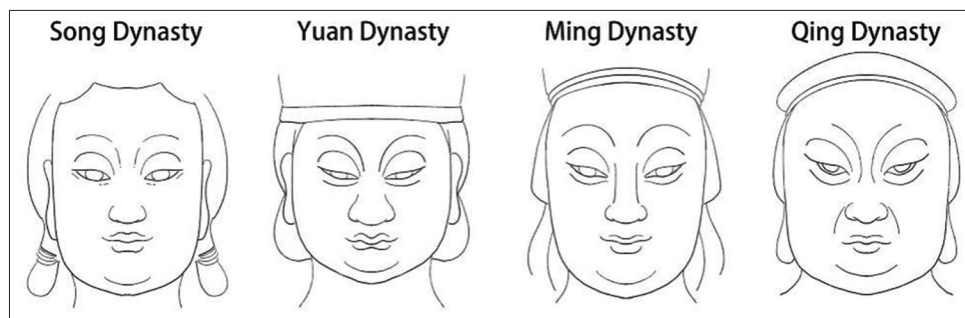


Figure 1. The evolution of the Five Senses of Mazu Statue in Fujian Province during the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties

Source. Painted by Zhou Fang, 2024

Modern Mazu Painting Creation

Nowadays, as a world cultural heritage of belief and custom and a goddess of peace, Mazu's social functions are no longer limited to the sea goddess but are endowed with cultural dissemination and exchange functions. As the sea goddess, he is noble and perfect, but as a messenger of cultural communication, the overly perfect image of the sea goddess does not meet the aesthetic and needs of modern people. With the development of modern aesthetics, the belief in Mazu has shown a steep decline, and young people are still interested in Mazu's beliefs and customs. To fit the expansion of Mazu's spiritual functions in modern society and meet the aesthetic needs of Mazu as a carrier of different functions, combining different aesthetics to create Mazu paintings better to promote the development and inheritance of Mazu paintings. Here, the researchers (creators) choose post-impressionism in modern art as the creative style to make new creative attempts at Mazu paintings.

At the end of the 19th century, Impressionist painting emerged in France, and its name originated from Claude Monet's work «Impression, Sunrise.» Impressionism seeks truth, rejects pretentiousness and hypocritical idealism, advocates uniqueness, and demands that paintings have character and personality. Impressionist painters wanted to paint people who were indeed in the environment, not people who posed falsely or pretended to be in a disguised state (Ping, 2024).

Post-impressionism is an art phenomenon in French art history after impressionism, which was proposed by the British critic Roger Fry. Post-impressionist painters were also profoundly influenced by impressionism their early years. However, they had different ideas from impressionism. Post-impressionist painters were not satisfied with the blind pursuit of light by impressionist painters, who emphasized subjectivity and pursuing the authenticity and uniqueness of art. In terms of composition, post-impressionist painters place greater emphasis on the relationship between the elements of a painting, believing that the image of the painting should be different from the objective object and that the artistic image should be different from the actual natural object, expressing a subjective interpretation of the objective (Wang, 2024).

Researchers (creators) choose post-impressionism as their creative style because post-impressionism requires the

subjective personal understanding and thoughts of the creator while not being able to exist separately from reality. It is very suitable for creating Mazu-like themes that require a lot of imagination space and have many researchable literature materials. At the same time, post-impressionism, as a representative artistic style of modern art, also meets the needs of researchers (creators) who want to combine modern aesthetics with traditional Mazu aesthetics for inheritance and development.

The words used in this study are from the original series of works "Mazu" by the researcher (creator). The series comprises 22 pieces, each measuring 60×80CM. The drawing tools used are the iPad and Procreate. The researchers (creators) independently conceived and created the works from 2023 to 2024 and completed all the drawings in 2024.

Educational Literacy of Mazu Paintings

Educational literacy refers to inheriting long-forgotten and neglected cultural content through education, which means that ancient culture will continue to develop. It also refers to the inheritance and continuation of cultural spirit and wisdom, the re-understanding of life forms, and the overall re-examining of the integration of human content and rational interpretation.

Educational literacy is a cross-disciplinary field that covers history, anthropology, education, cultural studies, and other disciplines. In the first half of the 20th century, research on educational heritage mainly focused on anthropology, the educational methods of primitive tribal societies, and traditional cultures, such as the research of scholars such as Bronisław Malinowski and Margaret Mead. From the mid-20th century to the present, the study of educational heritage has gradually expanded to encompass broader domains, including ethnic education and cultural identity. With the development of educational research, the study of traditional culture has gradually expanded to include broader areas such as national education, cultural identity, and intangible cultural heritage (Qiong & Sirisuk, 2024).

As an essential part of the intangible cultural heritage of Mazu beliefs and customs, Mazu paintings must be studied for better creative teaching methods to educate and inherit Mazu culture. In the long-term historical development process, there are various ways of inheriting Mazu paintings,

among which the most representative traditional education inheritance modes are:

Folk teacher-led apprenticeship

The traditional sense of apprenticeship refers to a teaching activity maintained through contractual relationships between teachers and apprentices who are not blood-related.

Culturing inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage of Mazu beliefs and customs is a relatively direct and effective method. The apprenticeship-style education is limited to certain Mazu beliefs and customs skills, and there are certain limitations regarding the number and breadth of knowledge of talent cultivation.

Education related to universities

Nowadays, many universities have also launched educational courses on Mazu culture, and they are not only related to Mazu painting education but also include subjects such as religious studies, history, sociology, anthropology, folklore, journalism and communication, literature, etc. The research directions of these disciplines involve Mazu culture, and the research process is also a learning process and mentorship for talent cultivation. However, there are also certain limitations. College education is an elite education, and the number of talent cultivation needs to catch up with the demand for disseminating Mazu culture.

Mazu organizes subtle and imperceptible education

Mazu organization refers to a non-profit social group or organization established by natural persons or legal entities who believe in Mazu or identify with Mazu culture and take it as their responsibility to promote and develop Mazu culture, following the principle of voluntary organization (Ke, 2022). The cultural education of the organization in Mazu painting is mainly reflected in cultural and creative products (from now on referred to as cultural and creative). Taking the Mazu Ancestral Temple on Meizhou Island as an example, Meizhou Island, the birthplace of Mazu, is a 5A-level scenic spot in China. The development of its cultural and creative products mainly revolves around the theme of Mazu. These products are sold in cultural and creative stores on Meizhou Island, at the entrance of scenic spots, and in five cultural and creative stores about Mazu on Taobao. The products are mostly made with various Mazu images in the modern Mazu painting style as the core, such as phone cases and water bottles printed with Mazu paintings (Wu, 2020). However, the main production areas of Mazu cultural and creative products in Fujian and Taiwan face the dilemma of most cultural and creative design products needing more cultural connotations, which is also the current predicament of cultural and creative products (Zhan, 2018). At the same time, subtle talent cultivation is spontaneous and unconscious, making it challenging to show obvious results. Therefore, China needs to cultivate talents in both quantity and quality to disseminate Mazu culture.

DISCUSSION

This study examines Mazu paintings' historical evolution, cultural significance, and artistic transformation, positioning them as a vital component of intangible cultural heritage. Rooted in the Song Dynasty and influenced by shifting social, religious, and aesthetic contexts over centuries, Mazu paintings exemplify a dynamic tradition that has continually adapted to changing cultural and artistic paradigms. The findings highlight the interplay between tradition and modernization, incorporating post-impressionist aesthetics and illustrating how traditional forms can integrate contemporary cultural expressions. This synthesis not only preserves the authenticity of Mazu paintings but also enhances their relevance in a globalized cultural landscape. Mechanisms such as traditional apprenticeships, academic programs, and community-led initiatives emerge as pivotal in fostering creative and cultural literacy, ensuring the continuity of this heritage for future generations.

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain, including the superficiality of modern cultural products and declining engagement among younger generations. The study identifies the need for innovative digital platforms, updated educational approaches, and experimental artistic practices to revitalize interest in Mazu culture. By addressing these challenges, Mazu paintings can serve as both a bridge for cultural exchange and a means of preserving cultural identity in a rapidly changing world. Ultimately, this research offers valuable insights into harmonizing traditional practices with modern frameworks, contributing to the sustainable development of Mazu painting as a dynamic and evolving art form with enduring cultural relevance.

CONCLUSION

Mazu's painting has a long history and development and is an essential way of visualizing Mazu's cultural beliefs and customs. The traditional expression of Mazu paintings and their inability to meet the new functions bestowed by the times on Mazu beliefs and customs require more modern aesthetics to be incorporated, and more attempts and inheritance should be made to create modern Mazu paintings. Through the practice and analysis of post-impressionist style Mazu painting creation, the modern Mazu painting creation method is integrated into the creative practice of college students. This attempt can not only provide a reference for better integrating modern aesthetics into Mazu painting and creating more diverse Mazu painting art but also provide assistance for the teaching and education methods of traditional Mazu painting creation and provide protection and practical reference for the education and inheritance of Mazu's intangible cultural heritage.

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