

Materiality and Cultural Identity in Chinese Mixed-Media Painting after Western Neo-Expressionism

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Abstract: This paper explores how Chinese mixed-media painting developed materiality as a means of constructing cultural identity after the influence of Western Neo-Expressionism. While artists such as Anselm Kiefer demonstrated how materials could convey history, memory, and trauma, Chinese artists transformed this approach within their own cultural context. Materials including ink, xuan paper, mineral pigments, soil, ash, fabric, and industrial debris became more than technical tools or visual effects. Through layering, burning, cutting, and recontextualization, they express cultural memory, regional experience, modernization, and social change. The paper argues that Chinese mixed-media painting shifted from “material as technique” to “material as meaning,” forming a local visual language that connects tradition, modernity, and contemporary Chinese identity. It also warns against formal imitation, technical display, and superficial cultural labeling.

Keywords: Chinese mixed-media painting; materiality; cultural identity; cultural memory.

1. Introduction

Since the late 1970s, Chinese art has been transformed by intensified contact with international artistic languages. China’s reform and opening-up not only reshaped economic and social life, but also created new conditions for artistic exchange, allowing Chinese artists to encounter Western modernism and contemporary art within a compressed historical period. Paul Gladston argues that contemporary Chinese art since the late twentieth century cannot be understood outside this complex interaction between local artistic transformation and global art discourse [1]. Within this context, painting was no longer understood only through inherited categories such as oil painting, ink painting, or printmaking. Instead, artists increasingly questioned the material boundaries of painting itself.

Western Neo-Expressionism provided one important stimulus for this shift. In contrast to the dematerialized tendencies of conceptual art and the formal reduction of minimalism, Neo-Expressionist painting reasserted gesture, surface, scale, material density, and historical affect. Among its most influential figures, Anselm Kiefer demonstrated how painting could carry cultural memory not simply through imagery, but through matter. His use of lead, straw, ash, dust, and other unconventional materials turned the painting surface into a field of historical sedimentation and symbolic tension [2]. For Chinese artists searching for new visual languages after the dominance of Socialist Realism and inherited academic conventions, such material practice suggested that painting could move beyond representation toward a more tactile, historical, and conceptual mode of expression.

However, the development of Chinese mixed-media painting should not be explained merely as the reception or imitation of Western Neo-Expressionism. To describe this development only through “influence” risks reducing Chinese artistic practice to a secondary response to Western models. It also overlooks the specific cultural and institutional conditions through which mixed-media painting became meaningful in China. In the Chinese context, mixed-media painting did not simply reproduce the Western category of

“mixed media”; rather, it gradually took shape as a painting-oriented field that retained a concern with painterliness while expanding the function of materials. Zhao argues that Chinese mixed-media painting developed as a relatively distinct category through the crossing of material and technical boundaries within the broader framework of painting [3].

Materials such as paper, ink, mineral pigments, soil, ash, fabric, old objects, industrial debris, and local craft substances began to operate not only as technical resources, but also as carriers of historical memory, cultural identity, regional experience, and contemporary social transformation. In this sense, materiality should not be understood as a purely formal or technical issue. Li Jing emphasizes that material language in mixed-media painting participates in the production of artistic meaning rather than simply supporting visual form [4]. This shift is crucial for understanding how Chinese mixed-media painting moved from experimentation with surface and texture toward a deeper engagement with cultural identity.

The central question of this paper therefore concerns how materiality in Chinese mixed-media painting shifted from formal experimentation to the construction of cultural meaning. Kiefer and Western Neo-Expressionism opened a space for rethinking material density, surface, and historical resonance, but Chinese mixed-media painting gradually redirected this material impulse toward local concerns. Its significance lies not in the simple adoption of Western textures or expressive surfaces, but in the way materials are selected, transformed, and recontextualized to articulate Chinese cultural memory and identity. This paper argues that after the encounter with Western Neo-Expressionism, Chinese mixed-media painting developed materiality as a means of negotiating between global artistic language and local cultural subjectivity. Material is thus not merely a technique, surface, or visual effect; it becomes a site where tradition, modernity, memory, and identity are actively reconstructed.

2. Western Neo-Expressionism and the Emergence of Chinese Mixed-Media Painting

Western Neo-Expressionism reopened the question of painterly materiality in the late twentieth century. After the rise of minimalism and conceptual art, Neo-Expressionist painting reasserted gesture, surface, scale, emotional intensity, and historical imagery. It did not simply return to painting as a traditional medium, but redefined painting as a physical and expressive field. Large-scale surfaces, rough textures, bodily brushwork, and the incorporation of unconventional materials enabled painting to regain a strong material presence [5].

Anselm Kiefer is particularly important in this context. His works show how materiality can exceed formal effect and become a carrier of history, memory, and cultural reflection. Through lead, straw, ash, sand, earth, plaster, scorched surfaces, and book-like forms, Kiefer transformed the painting surface into a dense field of historical sedimentation. His materials are not merely decorative or technical devices; they carry associations with trauma, mythology, destruction, mourning, and postwar memory. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao notes that Kiefer's works employ materials such as lead, straw, plaster, seeds, ash, and soil, producing a solemn and monumental visual language [6]. For Chinese artists seeking new forms of expression in the 1980s and 1990s, this material strategy suggested that painting could move beyond image-making and become a site where matter itself produces meaning.

However, the rise of Chinese mixed-media painting cannot be explained simply as the imitation of Western Neo-Expressionism. Since the 1980s, Chinese artists encountered Western modern and contemporary art through exhibitions, catalogues, translated writings, art journals, and academic exchanges. This encounter occurred while artists were questioning the limits of Socialist Realism, academic realism, and the fixed division between oil painting, ink painting, printmaking, and other media. Clark argues that the "85 New Wave" reflected Chinese artists' desire to engage with Western modernism while searching for artistic languages suitable to China's changing cultural situation [7]. In this atmosphere, Western Neo-Expressionism offered an external stimulus, but it did not determine the direction of Chinese mixed-media painting.

In the Chinese context, "mixed-media painting" developed as a specific painting-oriented category. It is not identical to the broader Western concept of mixed media, which may include installation, video, performance, assemblage, or other cross-media practices. Chinese mixed-media painting usually remains connected to easel painting, surface construction, and painterliness, even when it expands the use of materials. Zhao defines Chinese mixed-media painting as a form of easel-based practice that crosses the boundaries of established painting genres by integrating heterogeneous materials and techniques [3]. This shows that Chinese mixed-media painting was formed not only through Western influence, but also through local painting traditions, art education, national exhibition systems, and institutional recognition.

Therefore, Western Neo-Expressionism provided an important model for expanding the material possibilities of painting, especially through Kiefer's transformation of material into memory and historical signification. Yet Chinese mixed-media painting gradually developed its own local logic. Chinese artists absorbed the stimulus of Western material

experimentation while also turning to ink, paper, mineral pigment, soil, ash, fabric, old objects, industrial materials, and craft traditions. In this process, materiality became a means of negotiating between global artistic language and Chinese cultural experience. The emergence of Chinese mixed-media painting should therefore be understood not as a passive result of Western influence, but as a local artistic formation shaped by both international encounters and China's own traditions, institutions, and cultural concerns.

3. Materiality: From Technical Innovation to Meaning Production

The development of Chinese mixed-media painting cannot be understood merely as the expansion of materials or the accumulation of technical methods. In its early stage, material experimentation was often discussed in relation to texture, collage, surface thickness, visual impact, and technical novelty. Artists introduced heterogeneous materials into painting in order to challenge the flatness of traditional pictorial surfaces and to break the fixed boundaries between oil painting, ink painting, printmaking, and other established media. In this sense, materiality first appeared as a technical issue: how to enrich the surface, how to create tactile depth, how to combine different media, and how to produce a stronger visual effect. Liu Wei argues that the physical properties and structural characteristics of materials provide an important basis for generating the visual language of mixed-media painting [8].

However, if materiality is understood only as a matter of technique, the deeper significance of Chinese mixed-media painting will be reduced. Material is not simply something added to a surface; it participates in the production of meaning. A crack, stain, burn mark, layer of soil, piece of paper, or industrial fragment may carry traces of process, time, use, destruction, and memory. These traces cannot be fully replaced by painted images alone. Therefore, the maturity of Chinese mixed-media painting lies not only in the use of more diverse materials, but also in the transformation of materials from technical devices into meaningful agents. Li Jing emphasizes that material language in mixed-media painting is not merely a renewal of medium, but also a way through which artistic intention and spiritual reflection enter the structure of the work [4].

This shift may be understood as a movement from "material as technique" to "material as meaning." When material is treated mainly as technique, its value is judged by formal effect: whether the texture is strong, whether the surface appears fresh, whether the combination of materials is unusual, or whether the work creates visual shock. This approach was important because it allowed artists to move beyond single-medium painting. Yet it also created a risk. If material experimentation remains at the level of effect, it may become a decorative method or a formal habit rather than a critical artistic language.

By contrast, material as meaning emphasizes the cultural, historical, and experiential dimensions of matter. Paper, ink, xuan paper, mineral pigment, glue, and silk are not neutral substances in the Chinese context. They are connected to traditions of writing, painting, calligraphy, mural practice, and craft techniques. When these materials enter mixed-media painting, they do not only enrich texture; they also activate cultural memory. Chen Guanzhong argues that the contemporary use of ancient Chinese materials such as

mineral pigments, foil, and glue is not simple retrospection, but an attempt to reactivate traditional material resources in a modern context [9].

Other materials produce meaning through their relation to time, place, and historical trace. Soil, ash, stone, wood, and old objects often evoke sedimentation, erosion, decay, regional memory, and the passage of time. Their significance does not lie only in an aged or weathered visual effect. They may suggest the persistence of memory, the instability of history, or the relationship between human experience and material remains. For example, loess and earth-based materials can refer not only to natural substance, but also to cultural origin, regional identity, and collective memory. Chen Lihong interprets the use of loess in Zhang Guolong's work as exceeding physical materiality and becoming a symbolic representation of cultural origin and life source [10].

Industrial materials, waste objects, and architectural fragments introduce another layer of meaning. Unlike traditional materials, which often suggest cultural continuity, these materials point to modernization, urban transformation, ecological crisis, and the fragmentation of contemporary life. Metal sheets, concrete fragments, discarded wood, packaging materials, or construction debris can bring the reality of modern society into the painting surface. They also complicate cultural identity, because contemporary Chinese experience is shaped not only by tradition, but also by urbanization, industrial production, and rapid social change.

Handmade and folk materials further expand the cultural function of materiality. Paper-cutting, fabric, embroidery, woven objects, and regional craft materials connect mixed-media painting with everyday life and local experience. These materials are meaningful not simply because they appear "Chinese" or "folk," but because they carry modes of making, touching, using, and remembering. Jiang Hongye argues that folk paper art originates from lived experience and carries emotional memory and symbolic value, allowing it to be transformed into culturally expressive mixed-media works [11].

The distinction between material as technique and material as meaning is therefore crucial. Technique asks how a material is used; meaning asks why a particular material matters within a specific cultural and historical context. The most significant Chinese mixed-media works do not combine materials only for novelty. They allow materials to produce relationships between tradition and modernity, locality and globalization, physical surface and cultural memory. Ding Yang's discussion of burning and layering xuan paper shows that even destructive techniques can transform a traditional medium into a contemporary conceptual language rather than simply display its cultural identity [12].

Therefore, the development of Chinese mixed-media painting should be understood as a gradual redefinition of materiality. Materials first helped artists challenge the technical boundaries of painting, but they later became central to the production of cultural meaning. The maturity of this field does not depend on the quantity or novelty of materials used, but on whether materials can generate memory, identity, historical reflection, and local experience. Materiality is thus not an external supplement to painting; it is one of the core mechanisms through which Chinese mixed-media painting constructs meaning.

4. The Construction of Cultural Identity: Material as Local Visual Language

The construction of cultural identity in Chinese mixed-media painting should not be understood only through visible "Chinese elements," such as calligraphy, landscape imagery, folk motifs, or traditional symbols. These signs may create cultural recognition, but they do not fully explain how identity is formed in material-based painting. A deeper form of cultural identity emerges through the selection, transformation, and recontextualization of materials themselves. Material is therefore not a neutral support for visual form, but a local visual language through which artists negotiate tradition, memory, modernity, and contemporary experience.

4.1. The Contemporary Transformation of Traditional Materials

One important strategy is the contemporary transformation of traditional materials. Paper, ink, xuan paper, mineral pigments, glue, foil, silk, and hemp cloth are closely connected with Chinese painting, calligraphy, mural traditions, and craft culture. When these materials are introduced into mixed-media painting, they bring historical and cultural associations into the contemporary pictorial field. However, their value does not lie in a simple return to tradition. If traditional materials are only placed on the surface as cultural signs, they may become decorative symbols. Their contemporary significance depends on whether they are reworked into new visual structures and conceptual relations.

Zhao argues that Chinese mixed-media painting expands the expressive possibilities of painting by crossing the boundaries of established materials and techniques [3]. This boundary-crossing allows traditional materials to move beyond their original functions. For example, ink and paper are traditionally associated with brushwork, rhythm, literati taste, and spiritual cultivation. In mixed-media painting, however, they may be cut, layered, burned, torn, soaked, compressed, or combined with other substances. Their traditional identity is not simply preserved; it is activated through transformation. Similarly, mineral pigments, glue, foil, and mural-like textures may evoke ancient wall painting or Buddhist visual culture, but in contemporary practice they are reorganized within new artistic contexts. Chen Guanzhong argues that the use of ancient Chinese materials in contemporary art is not simple retrospection, but a way of reactivating traditional material resources in a modern context [9].

4.2. Historical Traces and Cultural Memory

A second strategy is the use of historical traces and cultural memory. Mottled surfaces, cracks, peeling layers, ash-like textures, weathered marks, and repeated accumulations often appear in Chinese mixed-media painting as signs of time, rupture, and memory. These formal qualities may recall Western material practices, especially the dense and damaged surfaces associated with Anselm Kiefer. In Kiefer's work, ash, lead, straw, and scorched surfaces are connected to German history, trauma, mythology, and postwar memory. Arasse observes that Kiefer's materials carry strong historical and symbolic weight, especially in relation to memory and spiritual loss [13].

However, similar material effects in Chinese mixed-media painting should not be read only as borrowed Western forms. In the Chinese context, cracks, stains, ash, erosion, and layered surfaces may be reconnected to local historical experience. They may refer to social transformation, the disappearance of traditional environments, the memory of rural life, the ruins of modernization, or the tension between cultural inheritance and contemporary change. A weathered surface can suggest not only visual age, but also the pressure of collective memory. A burned or torn material can suggest destruction, but also renewal and transformation.

This is important because cultural identity is not always stable or harmonious. It may involve loss, interruption, displacement, and reconstruction. Mixed-media painting is especially suitable for expressing this condition because its surfaces are often built through layering, covering, scraping, damaging, and repairing. These processes resemble the formation of cultural memory itself: accumulation, erasure, survival, and reinterpretation. Material does not merely represent memory; it performs memory through its physical condition.

4.3. Local Materials and Contemporary Experience

A third strategy is the use of local materials and contemporary experience. Soil, old wood, fabric, industrial materials, urban waste, construction fragments, and found objects connect mixed-media painting with specific places and social realities. These materials differ from traditional artistic media because they often carry traces of use, labor, environment, and everyday life. Soil may suggest locality, land, origin, or ecological relation. Old wood may evoke domestic memory or rural architecture. Fabric may connect to the body, labor, and daily life. Industrial materials and architectural debris may point to modernization, demolition, urban expansion, and social change.

Such materials are significant because contemporary Chinese cultural identity is not shaped only by ancient tradition. It is also formed through urbanization, migration, industrial production, ecological pressure, and changing relationships between people and place. By bringing local matter into the painting surface, Chinese mixed-media painting can connect cultural memory with contemporary reality. Wu Hung emphasizes the importance of ruins, sites, and material remains in visualizing China's changing historical and urban conditions [14]. This perspective helps explain why found materials and architectural fragments are not merely formal devices, but signs of lived transformation.

Local and folk materials also deepen the connection between material and identity. Handmade paper, cloth, embroidery, weaving, clay, and regional craft substances bring bodily labor, touch, local technique, and everyday memory into contemporary painting. Their value lies not only in their "Chinese" appearance, but in the lived experiences and modes of making they carry.

Therefore, cultural identity in Chinese mixed-media painting should be understood as a material construction rather than an iconographic label. It is not enough for a work to contain Chinese motifs or traditional signs. What matters is how materials are selected, processed, damaged, layered, combined, and recontextualized. Through these operations, material becomes a local visual language that connects tradition with modernity, historical memory with contemporary experience, and global artistic methods with

Chinese cultural subjectivity.

5. Problems and Reflections: The Risks of Constructing Material Identity

Although materiality provides an important path for constructing cultural identity in Chinese mixed-media painting, it also involves several risks. Materials can activate memory, locality, and cultural meaning, but they may also become formal routines or decorative labels. Therefore, the value of material practice should not be judged only by texture, technique, or the visibility of cultural symbols. The key question is whether materials can generate deeper reflection on local history, contemporary reality, and cultural position.

The first risk is formal imitation. Western Neo-Expressionism, especially Anselm Kiefer's material language, offered Chinese artists a powerful model of heavy surfaces, ruin-like imagery, ash-like textures, and scorched visual effects. However, if these features are adopted only as style, they may remain disconnected from Chinese cultural experience. Thick texture, dark colour, broken surfaces, and damaged forms can create an appearance of historical depth, but this does not necessarily mean that the work has produced local meaning. Morgner warns that the absorption of foreign artistic paradigms without sufficient theoretical awareness may lead to formal imitation and cultural misalignment [15].

The second risk is the technicalization of material. Mixed-media painting often attracts attention through tactile surfaces, collage structures, layered textures, and strong visual impact. Yet when material use is limited to burning, scratching, pasting, layering, or combining substances, materiality may become a display of technical skill rather than a form of cultural thinking. Li Jing emphasizes that material language should participate in artistic meaning rather than merely support visual form [4].

The third risk is cultural labeling. Traditional materials such as xuan paper, ink, mineral pigments, Dunhuang-like textures, folk motifs, or handmade craft elements may help construct cultural identity. However, if they are used only for visual recognition, they may reduce cultural identity to a surface sign of "Chineseness." Chinese culture is not a fixed collection of symbols; it includes historical change, regional difference, social conflict, and cultural transformation.

Therefore, materials do not automatically produce cultural depth. Effective material practice should not merely display identity; it should examine how identity is formed, interrupted, transformed, and reconstructed.

6. Conclusion

Western Neo-Expressionism provided an important reference for Chinese mixed-media painting by expanding the material possibilities of painting. Its emphasis on gesture, surface, scale, historical imagery, and unconventional materials encouraged Chinese artists to reconsider painting as a material and cultural practice rather than only a form of image-making. Anselm Kiefer's use of lead, ash, straw, and scorched surfaces was especially significant because it showed how material could carry memory, trauma, and historical weight.

However, Chinese mixed-media painting is not a simple continuation of Western Neo-Expressionism. Although Western material practices opened a space for experimentation, Chinese mixed-media painting gradually

developed within its own local context, shaped by Chinese painting traditions, art education, exhibition systems, and changing cultural conditions. Its development shows a shift from material as technical innovation to material as a means of constructing cultural identity.

Materiality in Chinese mixed-media painting is therefore more than texture, collage, or visual effect. Materials such as ink, paper, xuan paper, mineral pigments, soil, ash, old objects, and industrial fragments connect painting with tradition, modernity, local experience, and cultural memory. Through selection, transformation, layering, and recontextualization, material becomes a local visual language.

At the same time, material identity construction must avoid formal imitation, technical display, cultural labeling, and institutional formula. The value of Chinese mixed-media painting lies not simply in the diversity of materials it employs, but in its ability to transform material practice into a critical reflection on cultural memory, contemporary experience, and local visual subjectivity.

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