



## REVIEW

# Interpretations of Rice Paper Watercolor Painting in Art Teaching

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### ABSTRACT

The ricepaperplant pith is also known as *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, *Akebia*, or tall *gastrodia* fruit, a kind of shrub or small tree of the *Araliaceae*. It is native to south China and Taiwan Prov., the raw material of rice paper. Extract its central tissue from the stem to make pith slices which could be made as the watercolor painting paper. It arose in Guangzhou in the 19th century, and the themes are mainly focused on reflecting the social life scenes as well as various characters in late Qing Dynasty, such as officials, soldiers, juggling, weaving, playing instrument, etc. The works are lively, vivid, and bright in colors. As the result of using western painting principles and reflecting Chinese local customs, rice paper watercolor paintings were admired by Westerners at that time. However, as pith paper is fragile, the size of painting was usually small and difficult to conserve, there are few works handed down in China. In recent years, the rice paper watercolor painting has attracted more and more concern, which is of great significance to the study of the development of early Western paintings in China.

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, the rice paper watercolor paintings have almost disappeared in China and are mainly collected in Western museums, like the Museum of Oxford in the UK, University of Cambridge Museum, the Natural History Museum of U, MIT Museum, and even the Buckingham Palace.

After disappearing for more than 100 years, rice paper watercolor painting has returned to Guangzhou through presents, purchase and other channels, and were collected by many cultural museums in the Pearl River Delta region.

These paintings, originated in the late 18th century, prevailed in the 19th century, and finally disappeared in the 1930s, showed the conditions of society, customs and

rites, as well as the leisure and entertainment of Guangzhou and China at that time. The rice paper watercolor paintings covered broad range of topics, could be called the marketplace encyclopedic image materials in the late Qing Dynasty, the most common subject of it is popular life, characters, landscape architecture, seaports, and so on, very realistic.

Camera did not enter China until 1844, before that, it was the rice paper paintings that described in detail the local customs of Guangzhou.

In the 22nd year of Emperor Qianlong's reign, Guangzhou was designated as the only foreign trade port, it become an important place for foreign trade and cultural exchanges between China and other countries.

In the 18th and 19th century, many Western painters came to Guangzhou which affected the professional paint-

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ers at that time. These Guangzhou painters, who have mastered Western painting techniques and are familiar with local customs, specialize in paintings that suit Western taste and sell their works abroad.

Since the mid- to late 18th century, there have been one store after another selling export paintings around the Thirteen Hangs on the north shore of Pearl River that specializes in Sino-Western trades.

A document from 1835 shows that there were about 30 shops selling rice paper watercolor paintings near Thirteen Hongs in Guangzhou, and two or three thousand people were employed to make these paintings.

Rice paper watercolor paintings have been the postcards of China at that time, it recorded the social conditions and natural resources of China, and become one of the ways for westerners to know this Oriental Empire.

Rice paper watercolor painting arose around 1820, and reached its peak in 1880, but soon began to decline and vanished with the popularity of photographic techniques.

In 2000, a British friend Ifan Williams donated a collection of paintings to Guangzhou Museum, after that the Guangzhou Museum did much to collect and research the rice paper watercolor paintings, this once flourished exporting painting over 100 years ago has been revealed.

## 2. Rice Paper Slices and Paints Used for Rice Paper Watercolor Painting

Tongcaozhi is called rice paper in English, however, it wasn't made from rice. Slice the natural ricepaperplant pith and use it as drawing paper, generally people extract the pith of 2-year-old ricepaperplant and cut it into slices with same thickness. Nowadays, there are a large number of people in Guiding County, Guizhou Province who master the skills of making rice paper slices, the locally made rice paper slices are mainly used to make flower diffusers exported to Japan and South Korea.

According to the current literature, the paints of rice paper watercolor paintings were made in France in the 19th century. In its heyday, there are dozens of painting shops in Guangzhou with 3000 painters making rice paper watercolor paintings. Most rice paper watercolor paintings are made by line production to ensure the quality and production.

## 3. The Characteristics of Rice Paper Watercolor Painting

The rice paper watercolor paintings described a vivid scene of the city life in the 19th century, represented the civil culture, family life, Watertown cultures, and folk

customs more than 100 years ago in Guangzhou.

### 3.1 Rice Paper Watercolor Paintings Are Vivid, Clear, Bright in Color, and Have Visual Effects of Embroidery

Rice paper watercolor painting is a kind of painting that painted with watercolor paints on a rice paper slice which made from the pith of rice paper plant, rice paper slice is light and thin, almost translucent, it appears brilliant colors with the refraction of light.

Rice paper slice has the textures of velvet, this kind of natural plant fiber makes the colors of watercolor be solid and lasting, it is low in cost, so was widely used for painting at that time. Rice paper has strong absorption and good color rendering, the color appears bright when painted with watercolor on it, because the natural uneven of "paper" as well as the refraction of light makes the painting has a sense of three dimensional.

The translucent rice paper slices, along with the characteristics of watercolor paints make the rice paper watercolor paintings look like embroidery which is not seen in other painting forms.

### 3.2 Rice Paper Watercolor Paintings Are Light and Small, Easy to Carry

Due to the limited size of the stem of rice paper plant, the rice paper watercolor paintings are normally small and light, convenient to carry for foreign merchants in the 19th century. At that time, the paper for watercolor painting mainly relies on import and the price is high, rice paper slices, by contrast, are cheap and affordable, nevertheless, it is fragile, therefore, few are preserved.

### 3.3 Name Card of China with Oriental Style

Ever since its rise in Guangzhou in the 19th century, rice paper watercolor paintings were once known as "hand painted photographs of Chinese customs", experts say that as the witness of the east-west cultural exchanges on the Maritime Silk Road, the rice paper watercolor paintings have high historical and cultural value as well as collection value, it was the name card of Guangzhou and even China in those days.

The rise of rice paper watercolor paintings was related to the close trade between west countries and China at that time, it also witnessed the historical role of Guangzhou as a major trading port on the Maritime Silk Road.

Relevant data shows that, in the 18th to 19th century, Chinese tea, silk, porcelain and other commodities are exported in huge volume, which arose a wave of "China craze", before the invention of photography technology

,westerners who came to China for travelling or business were keen to bring back what they saw and heard in the Oriental, in this demand, the rice paper watercolor paintings became carriers of reverting the beautiful and unique oriental customs.

### 3.4 Historical Records of Folk Customs and Marketplace Conditions

Characters and scenes of life have been the most commonly used subjects in rice paper watercolor paintings. The content of these paintings involved social conditions, holiday celebrations, and folk customs of all walks of life at that time. For instance:

The life of cotton, making process of tea, detailed production process and sales of silk and porcelain, etc. These paintings described vividly the culture and customs of Guangzhou.

Rice paper watercolor paintings are mostly exporting paintings customized for foreign merchants, painters are concentrated in the Thirteen Hongs area, due to high export demand, the rice paper watercolor paintings were made in large quantities and sold to merchants of all countries in the world. It played an important role in the commerce, trade, and cultural communication between China and foreign countries in the 19th century, and also served as a bridge between China and the West on the ancient maritime Silk Road.

### 3.5 Style and Techniques of Western Painting

As we know, Western painting pay great attention to the light and shade relations as well the expressions of light and shadows on objects. At that time, painters were influenced by western painting, and they painted at the request of western merchants, therefore, they integrated Western painting features into their creation. Meantime, the rice paper watercolor paintings depicted the local customs of China, the works created could be regarded as a good combination of Chinese and Western elements.

### 3.6 High Collection Value

The rice paper watercolor paintings have become a good choice for collection and gifting in the west.

In the late Qing Dynasty, rice paper watercolor paintings were in important approach for western countries to understand the customs and real life of Guangzhou. From the beginning of last century, along with the rise of photography, and the difficulty in preserving ,the production and sales of rice paper watercolor paintings reduced drastically ,it gradually withdrawn from the historical stage, at that time, most rice paper watercolor paintings were for

export, few people in Guangzhou knew it, collectors were incredibly scarce , and even rarely found in China.

Because of its rarity and special historical significance, the value of rice paper watercolor paintings was found by the collection circle. As early as in 2001, two rice paper works have been sold at auction price of 20,000 Yuan in Shanghai.

In recent years, the main reason for the market rise of rice paper watercolor paintings is that very few works remain today, and this kind of painting skills as well as painters are not common, the price of rice paper slice has displayed the trend of rising as well.

Besides, due to the limitations of the size of pith, the larger the rice paper, the precious it is. However, as the rice paper is fragile and difficult to save, the collectors should select paintings with good subject, delicate painting skills and in good condition.

## 4. The Rice Paper Watercolor Paintings in the Eyes of Westerners

In the 19th century, this kind of paintings that appeared on the rice paper slices in Guangzhou, like a camera, brought the local culture and customs of China to the world, it became the most important image recordings before the camera was popular in China.

In 2000, the Guangzhou Museum accepted more than 70 watercolor paintings donated by Ifan Williams of York University in the UK, China had the first collection of watercolor paintings involves all walks of life, such as dock scenery, street selling, production and sales of silk and tea, portraits, social conditions, drama performances, customs and festivals, which truly reproduced the former customs of Guangzhou as well as China, and became a window for countries around the world to know about Guangzhou in those days.

### 4.1 Pith Paper Painting is Called “Rice Paper Painting” in Europe

This kind of watercolor painting from Guangzhou is usually called “rice paper painting” in Europe and America. Because of its white color, westerners mistakenly think it is made of rice.

### 4.2 Persistence of Memory

In Feb.,2007, John Cole Cool, 81, from Virginia, USA, came to learn about the watercolor paintings on purpose, he also brought a few photos of Guangzhou rice paper watercolor paintings, including an old photo of a US warship docked in Hong Kong. It turned out that John Cole Cool’s grandfather was U.S. Navy., in 1884, one day when the

U.S. warship docked in Hong Kong, he came to Guangzhou, bought a few rice paper watercolor paintings and brought them back to the U.S.

In Jan. 1851, a “Chinese Repository” reported that rice paper paintings from China had been exported in large quantities, especially to South America. In recent years, a large number of rice paper watercolor paintings depicting “Spanish colonists and Peruvian customs in South America” have been found.

As a kind of export painting integrating Chinese and Western art styles, the rice paper watercolor paintings are welcomed in Asia, Europe, North America, South America, etc... It became an important “hand-painted scenery photo” to get to know about the world at that time.

### 4.3 The Rice Paper Paintings Became Documentary

The rice paper watercolor painting has not only become a precious gift loved by royalty and nobles in the west, but also been admired among common people, and it has become an art work copied and studied by westerners as well. For example, Guangzhou has collected a picture album from Edinburgh, UK, which contains 30 paintings of different materials, including a rice paper watercolor painting, it recorded the folk customs in Lingnan region more than 100 years ago.

For instance, a set of <Album of popular life in Guangzhou> that contains 8 pictures recurred the street vendors and peddlers in the 19th century, and recorded the social conditions of Guangzhou in the Qing Dynasty.

A set of <Handicraft Production Album> that contains 12 pictures described various handicraftsman such as notching ketch knife, making wooden door, weaving mat, or making cloth shoes. Each painting outlines perfectly the work, production and trading that the handicraftsman makes a life for their selves.

The special subject of theatrical troupe in Qing Dynasty includes props, costumes, expressions and actions, which contains a variety of dramatic roles that visually recorded the drama performances in Qing Dynasty. It also includes export paintings like “Romance of the Three Kingdoms”, “Mu Guiying” and other content, and some are also made as Christmas cards or Chinese New Year cards, with in English on it to sell to Western customers.

In Guangzhou in the 19th century, some people lived on boats, which constituted an important chapter of Guangzhou’s urban history. The people on board work as much as the people on the land, the water shops can also provide clothing, shoe repairing, haircut, catering and other services that are no different from those on the

land. Unlike the land shops, the water shops seek customers by changing position of moorage.

These old rice paper watercolor paintings left the colorful features of ship on the rivers of Guangzhou in the past, so that later generations can follow the boat footprints in the paintings and recall the old water city.

## 5. Other Forms of Rice Paper Paintings

### 5.1 Sola Flower

The ricepaperplant pith was originally used for curing the disease, and was later used by folk artists to make artificial flowers from the Jin Dynasty to Tang, Song, Ming and Qing Dynasties. This handicraft exists in Guangdong, Hunan, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Taiwan and other places, and are mainly be made into ornaments.

The rice paper slice takes dye well, bright in color and uneasy to fade away, its plant fiber is loose, the watercolor will penetrate when it is applied onto the rice paper, looks three-dimensional, brilliant, and even has the visual effect of embroidery, is suitable for making flowers and all kinds of ornaments.

### 5.2 3-D Rice Paper Paintings

3-D rice paper painting is 3-dimensional in composition, which creates a sense of perspective that traditional watercolor painting lacks. This kind of change from far to near is more obvious in landscape painting.

In addition to painting, the 3-D rice paper watercolor painting is made through dozens of procedures such as cutting, carving, pasting, coloring and composition, then combine the rice paper slices.

This kind of rice paper watercolor paintings have 3-D dimensional effect and even an embossed feel because the rice paper has the texture of velvet, for instance, it could be used on clothes, garments as well as birds or animal furs. When in contact with colors, the rice paper appears satin, which cannot be replaced by other paper materials.

The rice paper slices also have wood texture, easy to color, it can be used in houses, seats and other places. Therefore, it is qualified for making 3-D painting.

### 5.3 Chinese Painting

The rice paper slice can be obtained easily, it is inexpensive, tough and soft in texture. At the same time, it is easy to color and has strong permeability, perfectly suitable for soft brush and ink painting, create amazing visual effects through refraction of light.

We can keep trying new forms and expressions for

painting.

## 6. Conclusion

In a word, in a song about rice paper watercolor paintings < wind blows the sola flower, the graceful watercolor is worth painting>, it expresses the good memories of “walk all over the world in dreams”, “good names spread throughout the world” of this intangible cultural heritage in the new era of culture.

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