An Indirect Approach to Tradition

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Ink painting is one of China’s most important traditional arts. Today, however, some observers see this art as facing a crisis in the land of its origin. In a rapidly modernizing China, what role can the traditional arts play? Amid changing times, they preserve the old while giving rise to new creativity.

When I look at my native China from abroad after an absence of more than ten years, a number of things are clear. In ink painting as practiced in China, especially in the teaching of beginners, there is a strong tendency for the old ways to be not only preserved but entrenched. To ensure the faithful transmission of techniques, students begin by copying, and the effects of this approach are often visible well into their artistic careers.

However, it is not always possible to express the present with old techniques alone. In my ink painting classes in the Cartoon Course, I tried an experiment by setting the students to work with ink painting materials without teaching them the fine points of technique, in order to see what they would produce. (Of course, the students already had a basic training in painting.) The results included many very interesting works, which I found very stimulating as an ink painter myself, and I expect they would have a similar impact on practitioners in China. I hope to further explore the potential for flexibility in the traditional art of ink painting as practiced in China by drawing on this experience in my own work and in my research.