

# Lost Artistic Legacy: Liu Dezhai and the Rise of Watercolor

## Education at Tou-sè-wè

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**Abstract:** From 1880 to 1912, Liu Dezhai served as director of the Shanghai Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop for thirty-two years, leading it to its most brilliant period. An important educator of early Chinese watercolor, he left behind a body of work that was almost entirely lost or scattered. He inherited Western teaching methods, introduced Pierre Vignal's watercolors, trained Xu Yongqing, and, through contacts with Shanghai-school painters, integrated Western sketching into traditional Chinese painting. Although his watercolors are lost, his contributions to Western art education and the dissemination of watercolor are significant. As a key figure in the rise of Chinese watercolor education, he left a pedagogical legacy and cross-cultural influence that had a lasting and profound impact on Chinese watercolor.

**Keywords:** Liu Dezhai; Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop; watercolor education

In his early years, Liu Dezhai (1843–1912) studied at St. Ignatius Academy (Xuhui Public School) and the Jesuit novitiate, where he was influenced by the rector, Angelo Zottoli (1826–1902), and wrote a novel entitled *The Revenge of the Candle*. In 1867, with Lu Bodu (1836–1880), he entered the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop, where “he first learned Chinese painting, then turned to Western painting, becoming known for his watercolor landscapes”[1] (Zhang Wei, 2017). During this period, he also studied oil painting under Nicolas Massa (1815–1876) and integrated the techniques and aesthetic sensibilities of Chinese ink-wash painting into his Western works. After the Xujiahui Art School moved to Tou-sè-wè in 1872, Liu Dezhai served as the workshop's deputy director, responsible for watercolor instruction. In 1880, he formally took charge of the workshop and remained its head until his death.

During his tenure at the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop, Liu Dezhai placed special emphasis on watercolor teaching. He introduced the watercolor works of the French painter Pierre Vignal (1855–1925) for students to copy, trained Xu Yongqing, later hailed as “the father of Chinese watercolor”, and his art also exerted a positive influence on the Shanghai School of painting. As head of the workshop for thirty-two years, he trained approximately 150 students. He often took his students outdoors to sketch and maintained close contact with Ren Bonian and Ren Xun. Historical sources record that “he frequently took his students to visit Ren Bonian, learning Chinese painting from him”[2] (Shanghai Library Institute of Historical Documents, 2013). However, almost all of Liu Dezhai's own watercolor works have been dispersed. According to Zhang Hongxing, “In 1911, Liu Dezhai published the novel *The Revenge of the Candle*, and on its frontispiece there was a watercolor print titled *Saint Margarita Receiving Ruiersong into the Convent*”[3] (Zhang Hongxing, 1991).

The original painting is untraceable. The loss of Liu Dezhai's watercolor works stands in stark contrast to the crucial role he played in the education and dissemination of early Chinese watercolor painting. It is precisely this paradox (lost works but lasting influence) that drives this study.

## 1. Sino-Western Fusion in Liu Dezhai's Artistic Creation

### 1.1 The Indigenized Translation of Religious Images

Liu Dezhai's oil paintings for Sheshan Marian Basilica (*Our Lady of the Presentation of the Faith*) and for Dongjiadu Church (*Guardian Angel, St. Ignatius, and St. Anne*) were predominantly copies or imitations, reflecting the tradition of the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop. More noteworthy is his creative work, *Chinese Madonna and Child* (Fig. 1). Scholars still debate the painting's authorship, although most attribute it to Liu Dezhai. The painting was designated as the "Standard Chinese Madonna" at the First Chinese Catholic Council for China in 1924 [4] (Liu Ping, 2014). The original is lost; only reproductions remain.

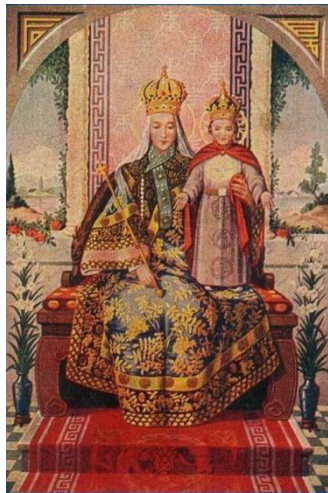


Fig. 1 Chinese Madonna and Child, by Liu Dezhai, late 19th to early 20th centuries.

The painting depicts the Madonna, dressed as a Qing-dynasty empress, seated on a Chinese-style chair. In her right hand, she holds a scepter, while on her left lap she cradles the Christ Child, who is dressed in a dragon robe. Both figures wear European-style crowns, and their facial features are Western. The Madonna gazes downward with a solemn and dignified expression, while the Child looks straight ahead with his hands open. Porcelain vases and flowers are positioned on either side of the composition, and behind them, a screen bears the seal-script character *shou* (longevity). The floor is covered with a dragon-patterned carpet, and in the distance, a pagoda, a lake, and mountains are visible. The upper right and upper left corners display the characters *huang* (emperor) and *hou* (empress), respectively. These elements collectively integrate Chinese auspicious culture, court culture, and Christian iconography. The painting employs Western perspective and the principle of "distant void, near solid", depicting the figures at full length.

Li Chao describes its style as a "flat application of color", "language of linear modeling", and "tendency toward planar decoration"[5] (Li Chao, 2004), with the

linear being most prominent. Heinrich Wölfflin notes: “The linear style is a style of clear, plastic feeling. The uniform, firm, and clear boundaries of solid objects give the viewer a sense of security, as if one could touch those boundaries with one’s own fingers”[6] (Heinrich Wölfflin, 1987). The flat application of color to forms delineated by lines reflects a grasp of objective truth. Overall, the *Chinese Madonna* and *Child* is not merely a repetition of Western sacred images but a revision and variation of Western sacred art as transplanted into a Chinese context.

## 1.2 Cultural Fusion in Family Instruction Images

The illustrations in *Daoyuan Jingcui (The Essence of the Way)* (published by Tou-sè-wè Cimu Press in 1887), as well as those in *Illustrated Explanations of Ancient History* (1892) and *Illustrated Explanations of Modern History* (1894)—both credited to “Drawn by the Painting Studio of Tou-sè-wè Cimu Press”—were produced collectively by Liu Dezhai and his students. Many of these illustrations depict the instruction of women and children. Although *Image of Instructing the Young* in *Illustrated Explanations of Ancient History* has no signature, Liu Dezhai later revised it multiple times, suggesting it was his work. *Admonishing the Family* at the end of *Illustrated Explanations of Modern History* is a reworking of *Image of Instructing the Young*. It bears the signature and seal of “Liu Bizhen”, along with Liu Dezhai’s Western name “S. Lieou S. J. del” in the lower right corner, and includes an inscription emphasizing the principles of “revering God, fearing sin, knowing the scriptures, and understanding religious doctrine”[7] (Shanghai Library Institute of Historical Documents, 2013). In 1911, Liu Dezhai’s novel *The Revenge of the Candle* (Fig. 2) was published by the Tou-sè-wè Printing House, and its cover displays a five-color chromolithograph by Liu depicting a scene of family instruction.

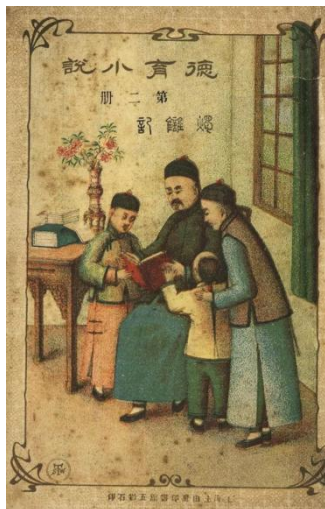


Fig. 2 Cover illustration of *The Revenge of the Candle*, by Liu Dezhai, 1911

Liu Dezhai often painted such “family instruction images”, showing his focus on “strict family precepts” and “self-cultivation as the primary virtue”. The tradition of Chinese family instruction has a long history, and in the late Qing and early Republican period, under the influence of Western learning, new variants emerged that incorporated Western ethical concepts. Against this backdrop, Liu Dezhai’s

“family instruction images” represent a hybrid approach to Christian imagery. He employed linear drawing techniques and the method of leaving blank space (liubai) to reshape the pictorial context, with Jesus Christ appearing in the background haloed and with open hands, indicating divine presence. The cover of *The Revenge of the Candle*, by contrast, depicts a purely Chinese-style family instruction scene without Catholic elements. Artistically, it abandons linear modeling in favor of light, shadow, and three-dimensional form. The figures are highly simplified and generalized, giving them an archaic and rustic look.

Liu Dezhai’s works achieved a deep integration of Western religious spirit and Chinese tradition in terms of subject matter, style, and cultural concept, manifesting an indigenized consciousness that transformed “Western imagery” into “Chinese expression.” Beginning with the “Liu Dezhai era”, Tou-sè-wè painting broke with the convention of merely copying Western models, thereby laying the foundation for later indigenized creation and the autonomous development of Chinese watercolor art.

## 2. The Inheritance and Expansion of Liu Dezhai’s Pedagogical System

The pedagogical system of the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop dates back to 1852, when the Spanish Jesuit Joannes Ferrer (1817–1856) founded the Xujiahui Art School (L’École des Beaux-Arts) in Shanghai. Later, Faustin Laime (1825–?) introduced the Western model of art education and was acclaimed as “a pioneer of Western art education in China”[8] (Zhang Wei and Zhang Xiaoyi, 2012). In 1872, Lu Bodu moved the school to Tou-sè-wè, where he established the Drawing Department of the Tou-sè-wè Orphanage Craft Workshop (i.e., the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop), continuing the systematic teaching model. After Lu Bodu’s death in 1880, Liu Dezhai became director and advanced the pedagogical system to a new stage.

Liu Dezhai compiled several art textbooks, including *Huishi Qianshuo* (*A Concise Introduction to Drawing*) (Fig. 3), *Qianbi Xihuatie* (*A Copybook for Pencil Drawing*), and *Huaguan Jilüe* (*Brief Account of the Art Workshop*). Of these, *Huishi Qianshuo* (*A Concise Introduction to Drawing*) and *Qianbi Xihuatie* (*A Copybook for Pencil Drawing*), published by the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop in 1907, were the relatively comprehensive introductory drawing manuals of their time.



Fig. 3 *A Concise Introduction to Drawing*, Vol. 2, 1907

*Huishi Qianshuo* (*A Concise Introduction to Drawing*) consists of two volumes. The first volume outlines foundational methods of drawing instruction, including

introductory techniques, brush handling, proper posture, and line-drawing methods. It emphasizes that: “students of painting should first practice line drawing, just as students of calligraphy begin with brushstrokes. Lines may be horizontal, vertical, or curved. One should first master horizontal lines, then vertical lines, and only afterward curved lines. Practice should continue until lines of varying thickness, spacing, and inclination are rendered in balanced proportion and curves can be executed with ease ...”[9] (Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop, 1907). In its discussion of line drawing, the text further notes that “horizontal lines should first be mastered, followed by vertical and diagonal lines, before proceeding to curved lines ...”[10] (Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop, 1907). The book also states that “For a painter, copying occupies a lower stage, whereas creation represents a higher artistic attainment. Mere imitation relies entirely on the thought and skill of predecessors; mechanically reproducing established models cannot produce genuine originality.”[11] (Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop, 1907).

The second volume focuses on figure drawing, covering facial structure, the depiction of eyes and noses, and proportional methods. It observes that “in drawing the human figure, one must understand anatomical structure as well as the principles of light, shadow, and spatial orientation. External appearance is grounded in skeletal form, while lighting, viewpoint, depth, and distance each vary accordingly; all accomplished artists working from life understand these principles.”[12] (Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop, 1907).

*Qianbi Xihuatie (A Copybook for Pencil Drawing)* is divided into three interconnected volumes: the first presents examples of lines and decorative patterns; the second, studies of individual body parts; and the third, portrait studies. Organized according to a progressive pedagogical sequence, the series was compiled primarily for students of the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop and is regarded as one of the earliest modern drawing copybooks in China. Through these teaching materials, Liu Dezhai transformed the traditional model of oral instruction and imitation-based training into a standardized pedagogical framework grounded in sequential instruction and theoretical explanation, thereby further systematizing the teaching system of the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop.

Another significant expansion of the pedagogical system introduced by Liu Dezhai was the formal introduction of the works of French watercolorist Pierre Vignal (1855–1925) into classroom instruction. Liu attached great importance to the development of watercolor painting, and his students’ works received numerous international awards. Extant records indicate that Liu discovered Vignal’s works in the French illustrated magazine *L’Illustration* and, recognizing the great impact of Vignal’s style on Western watercolor, “followed contemporary artistic developments by collecting Vignal’s watercolors as they were successively published in the magazine, making them available for pedagogical study and copying practice”[13] (Chen Yaowang, 2015). Zhang Chongren later recalled: “Vignal was the principal channel for the introduction of Western watercolor into our country; all of us were his students.” Thus, Vignal’s watercolor works took on a central position in the teaching at the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop.

Vignal was a highly influential French watercolor painter of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly known for plein-air painting. He adopted Impressionist methods for color observation, emphasized contrasts of light and shadow, warm and cool tones, and chromatic transparency while maintaining decisive brushwork without repeated reworking. His technique bore a strong resemblance to the *mogu* (“boneless”) technique in Chinese painting, which facilitated its rapid reception and adaptation among Chinese painters. (Fig. 4)

Through Liu Dezhai’s efforts, Vignal’s watercolors became one of the earliest models of European watercolor painting formally adopted in China, providing watercolor instruction at the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop with a clearly defined stylistic and technical framework. Liu Dezhai, Zhou Xiang, Xu Yongqing, Zhang Yuguang, Zhang Chongren, and Yu Kai were all influenced by him. After Liu’s death, his successor, Pan Guopan (Xavier Coupe, 1886–1971), who had studied in France and was deeply influenced by Vignal, continued to promote the circulation of Vignal’s watercolors. Vignal’s influence thus extended from Tou-sè-wè watercolor painters to subsequent generations of Shanghai-school watercolorists, including Yan Wenliang, Pan Sitong, and Ha Ding, a phenomenon later known as the “Vignal Effect.”

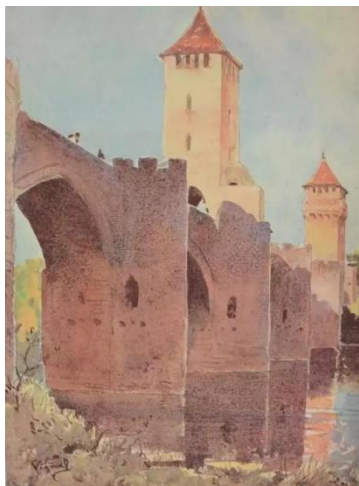


Fig. 4 Ancient Bridge and Bell Tower, watercolor by Pierre Vignal,n.d.

### **3.The Continuation and Dissemination of Tou-sè-wè Watercolor Painting**

#### **3.1 Xu Yongqing: Pioneer in Disseminating Tou-sè-wè Watercolor to Society**

Xu Yongqing (1880–1953) was a native of Sijing, Songjiang, Shanghai. In 1893, he entered the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop and studied painting under Liu Dezhai. During his five years at the workshop, his academic performance was consistently top-ranked, and he received numerous awards. Liu Dezhai often gave him private lessons, making him one of his most accomplished disciples. In 1898, Xu stayed on as a teacher at the workshop for seven years, directly participating in Liu’s pedagogical practice. In 1905, Xu joined the Commercial Press, embarking on a journey to disseminate Tou-sè-wè watercolor to the wider society. Over the next two decades, he established an art training school, opened a watercolor studio, directed the pictorial department of the Commercial Press, and taught at the Shanghai Fine Arts School, training calendar poster painters such as Hang Zhiying and Jin Meisheng. In 1930, he founded the Art Friends Society. In 1937, he moved to Hong Kong and established the Yongqing Art

Association. In 1946, he relocated to Qingdao, where he continued to teach students. His textbooks, *A Copybook for Pencil Drawing for Middle Schools* and *The Method of Sketching Watercolor Landscapes from Nature*, followed the same pedagogical lineage as Liu Dezhai's teaching materials. Through these efforts, Xu brought the systematic teaching model of Tou-sè-wè into the public sphere and made significant contributions to early Chinese watercolor education.

Xu Yongqing achieved outstanding recognition in watercolor art. Hu Huaichen observed: "There were two early figures who introduced Western painting to China. One was Xu Yongqing... the watercolor painting that later flourished in Shanghai can be said to have begun with Xu"[14] (Hu Huaichen, 1933). In 1910, his *Squirrel and Landscape* won the Super Prize at the Nanyang Industrial Exposition, and in 1915, it also earned distinction at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. Zhang Chongren commented on Xu Yongqing's watercolors, stating that "every dot and stroke, whether central or oblique brush tip, surpassed what European watercolor painters had achieved"[15] (Dong Xingmao, 2005). The characteristics of his works are as follows:

First, the pursuit of realism in art. He attached great importance to the foundational training in drawing, categorizing drawing into forty types of lines and emphasizing: "Scribbled sketches, even if they fill dozens of sheets, are less valuable than a single meticulously executed work"[16] (Xu Yongqing and Guo Xiu, 1928). His representative work, *Mountain Shadows and Rippling Light* (Fig. 5), employs blocky brushstrokes to reproduce an autumn park scene, with distinct layers of distance, middle ground, and foreground, and full, substantial forms. This painting marks a shift from Liu Dezhai's "linear" method to a "painterly" style that aims at "representing things as they appear to the eye"[17] (Heinrich Wölfflin, 1987), signifying an evolution in the visual conception of Tou-sè-wè watercolor. *Boating on the Lake* depicts the joyful scene of two modern women rowing a boat on a lake, reflecting women's emancipation and the transformation of urban lifestyles.



Fig. 5 Mountain Shadows and Rippling Light, watercolor by Xu Yongqing, 1921

Second, the integration of the Chinese brush-and-ink tradition. Xu Yongqing had close ties with Ren Bonian and Wu Changshuo, and the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop's transmission of traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting also influenced his artistic orientation. Zhang Chongren noted: "Xu Yongqing, having studied painting at the Tou-sè-wè mission in his early years, absorbed nourishment drawn heavily from the achievements of the finest foreign painters of the late nineteenth century, and also

frequently associated with Ren Bonian and Wu Changshuo, thereby gaining a profound understanding of Chinese painting...”[18] (Zhang Chongren, 1962). In terms of brush-and-ink concepts, Xu emphasized that “if a natural scene has light and dark tones, the painter should render those tones on paper.” He paid great attention to the mood and artistic conception of his paintings, requiring his students to study the subject before sketching: “One must have a clear idea of what mood to express and what method to use in which part.”[19] (Huang Shulin, 2013). These qualities are evident in works such as *West Lake in Hangzhou*, *Mountain Shadows and Rippling Light*, and *Jichang Garden in Wuxi*.

Third, the commercial dissemination of watercolor. Chen Baoyi commented that Xu Yongqing’s watercolors display “quite fresh and elegant brushwork, and as a style of Western-style painting of that period, they were sufficiently interesting to attract a new audience”[20] (Chen Baoyi, 1942). In the early twentieth century, he produced dozens of cover illustrations for *Novel Times and Women’s Times*, focusing on female students and fashionable women, using linear contours, bright colors, and flat gray washes. He painted calendar posters (yuefenpai) for about twenty years, collaborating with Zheng Mantuo to pioneer the “brush-wiping watercolor” technique (cabi shuicai). At the time, it was said, “Zheng’s figures, Xu’s landscapes”, thereby elevating watercolor from religious imagery and pedagogical models into popular visual culture.

### **3.2 Zhang Chongren: An Artist from Tou-sè-wè to the World**

Zhang Chongren (1907–1998) was a native of Qibao Town, Minhang, Shanghai. After losing his mother at the age of four, he was sent to the Tou-sè-wè Orphanage Craft Workshop. In 1921, he joined the photo-engraving department of Tou-sè-wè, where he studied photo-engraving, French, oil painting, and watercolor under Brother An Jingzhai, and studied calligraphy and classical Chinese under Ma Xiangbo. During his time at the workshop, he first copied *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, then learned pencil drawing, and later copied Vignal’s watercolors. Brother An often took him outdoors to sketch, deepening his understanding of color changes in natural light. He also frequently sought advice on watercolor techniques from Xu Yongqing.

After completing his training, Zhang left Tou-sè-wè in 1928 and, through his outstanding watercolor works, earned the opportunity to study abroad. In 1931, he was admitted to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Brussels. Upon graduation, he received the King Albert Gold Medal of Belgium and the Gold Medal of the City of Brussels. He also assisted the cartoonist Hergé in creating *Tintin in the Far East: The Blue Lotus*. In 1936, Zhang returned to Shanghai and founded the Chongren Studio, training numerous young artists. In 1985, he moved to France, where he died in 1998. Zhang Chongren’s watercolors were deeply influenced by Vignal, with still life and landscape as his primary subjects. His work exhibits the following characteristics:

First, the inheritance and deepening of Vignal’s watercolor style. While studying at Tou-sè-wè, Zhang mainly copied Vignal’s works, making Vignal his formative influence. Zhang believed that “the characteristic effect of watercolor painting is

transparency, fluidity, lightness, and conciseness, which are also the highest standards of watercolor technique”[21] (Zhang Chongren, 1964)—a belief aligned with Vignal’s artistic ideals. He never used Chinese white, stating that watercolor “is not suitable for repeated alterations, as that would cause it to lose its transparent and fresh qualities”[22] (Shanghai Zhang Chongren Art Research and Exchange Center / Zhang Chongren Memorial Hall, 2007). In 1935, during his European travels, Zhang created works such as *Tower Shadows and Rippling Light* and *Morning Light in a Humble Alley*, which display a strong “Vignal style.” These works employ direct painting techniques, with multiple colors embedded in a single brushstroke, and use the distribution of color patches to express spatial depth and light-dark contrasts, showing a tendency toward flatness and compositional structure.

Second, the conscious choice at the intersection of Chinese and Western cultures. After returning to China in 1935, Zhang retained European watercolor techniques while incorporating Chinese painting methods. In subject matter, he chose objects closely related to his living environment, demonstrating a realist sensibility. *Fish and Scallions by a Basket* (1942) depicts a common home-style dish in Jiangnan towns, reflecting the simple lifestyle and “Chinese” culinary taste of ordinary people. *Shanghai City God Temple* (1938, Fig. 6) portrays the daily life of a Shanghai street market: a fashionable young woman in an elegant qipao emerges from the ancient temple, her refined bearing contrasting with the old architecture behind her, while street vendors enthusiastically beckon customers. The colors are bright and lively, incorporating the brushwork of Chinese freehand painting to create a warm and vibrant atmosphere. Zhang Chongren remarked: “No watercolor artist in China can avoid the influence of Chinese painting techniques”[23] (Shanghai Zhang Chongren Art Research and Exchange Center / Zhang Chongren Memorial Hall, 2007). In composition, he admired the “blank space” (liubai) of Chinese painting, believing that “leaving the background unpainted is better than painting it, as it increases conciseness and condensation”, allowing “the viewer to use his own imagination to compose the scene in his own mind”[24] (Zhang Chongren, 1964). Regarding materials, he used British Whatman watercolor paper and Winsor & Newton pigments. For brushes, he chose a custom-made deer-and-weasel-hair calligraphy brush from Rongbaozhai in Beijing—a tangible testament to his cultural choice.

Zhang Chongren developed an artistic philosophy that can be expressed as “taking Eastern spirit as the essence and Western material as the instrument”[25] (Yan Youren, 2007). If Xu Yongqing brought Tou-sè-wè watercolor into the commercial and mass communication sphere, Zhang accomplished a deeper fusion of Chinese and Western watercolor languages. Through his Chongren Studio, he trained successors such as Wu Yiqing, Wang Hui, Ha Ding, and Fei Shengfu, ensuring the continued transmission of the Vignal style. He was both the culmination of Tou-sè-wè watercolor education and a bridge that carried this tradition to the international stage. In addition, Zhou Xiang, Zhang Yuguang, Yu Kai, and others were all shaped by Tou-sè-wè watercolor teaching and the Vignal style.

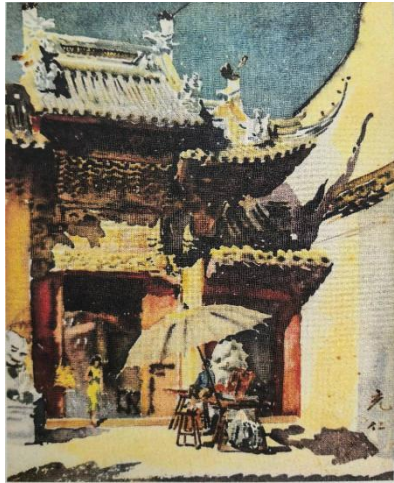


Fig. 6 Shanghai City God Temple, watercolor by Zhang Chongren, 1938

#### 4. The Artistic Association between Liu Dezhai and Ren Bonian and Its Influence

In the late nineteenth century, Liu Dezhai forged close ties with Ren Bonian, a painter of the Shanghai School. Under Liu's guidance, Ren Bonian studied drawing, adopted Liu's preferred 3B pencil, and also followed Liu in sketching. Shen Zhiyu noted: "Liu's foundation in Western drawing was solid, which had a certain impact on Ren Bonian's practice of sketching. Whenever Ren went out, he always carried a sketchbook and used a pencil to capture any scene that caught his eye. This habit of pencil sketching was not unrelated to his association with Liu." [26] (Shen Zhiyu, 1961). Zhu Boxiong and Chen Ruilin believed that the Shanghai-school painters, "because of the influence of foreign painting... dared to assimilate the western expressive methods into their painting techniques, making their works appealing to both refined and popular tastes." [27] (Zhu Boxiong and Chen Ruilin, 1989). These examples show that Ren Bonian's sketching and drawing were shaped by Liu Dezhai and Western-style art instruction at the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop.

Ren Bonian's adoption of Western methods can be observed in two aspects. First, drawing and modeling. This is particularly evident in his portraiture. *Zhao Xiaoyun's Sitting Alone in a Bamboo Grove* (1883) and *Portraits of Grandfather Zhao Dechang and His Wife* (1885) employ chiaroscuro at the turning points of facial features to shape volume and structural characteristics. The costumes are outlined in ink and then colored with washes, while the backgrounds utilize the principles of perspective to create three-dimensional space. Second, watercolor's color and language. Ren Bonian's bird-and-flower paintings adopt the "boneless" (*mogu*) method, applying both ink and color with bright and vivid effects, closely resembling Vignal's watercolors. Works such as *Hibiscus and Lilac* and *Ten Thousand Years of Heavenly Sons* display rich color gradations, with multiple color variations within a single brushstroke. The French painter Dagnan-Bouveret commented: "How lively the spirit in these vivid watercolors, how subtle the harmony!" [28] (Li Chao, 2004). Furthermore, Ren Xun was commissioned by the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop to produce the oil painting *Xu Li Discussing the Way*, indicating that the interaction between Shanghai-school painters and the Tou-sè-wè workshop was not uncommon.

## 5. Conclusion

Liu Dezhai served as director of the Tou-sè-wè Art Workshop for thirty-two years, guiding it to its historical zenith, yet almost all of his watercolor works have been lost. Liu's tenure marked a decisive transition in Tou-sè-wè painting from imitation to independent artistic creation. By compiling textbooks and introducing Vignal's watercolor works, he transformed Western-style painting instruction into a systematic pedagogical program. Through his students and his artistic association with Ren Bonian, his influence extended into commercial art, broader urban society, and the Shanghai School painting circle. He was a pivotal figure in the localization and systematization of Western-style painting education. The localized creative approach, the systematic pedagogical framework, and the networks of artistic transmission he pioneered constitute his core artistic legacy. The early development of Chinese watercolor painting was shaped through the continuation, adaptation, and expansion of this legacy, gradually giving rise to localized expression and independent artistic creation.

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