

Exploration Into the Embodiment of Literariness in Modern Chinese Painting

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Abstract

Literariness has been embodied in Chinese painting for a long time. Characters are the basic elements of literary works. Chinese characters themselves are a type of ideographic characters developed from pictograph, describe and depict concrete objects, and are exactly the same with the depiction of specific object images in the way of expression and drawing process. Therefore, there are various, countless, inherent and close ties between literary works made up of Chinese characters and Chinese traditional painting. For this reason, the embodiment of literariness in Chinese painting exists naturally. Today, on the social and realistic background of worldwide cultural diversification, Chinese painting is continuously affected by external factors and, thus, is changing quietly in creation pattern, painting style and artistic conception of painting etc.. However, in the process of development and change, only the ongoing and timeless literariness remains the same. Since the ancient times, painters and men of letters have been mutually unified and inseparable; nowadays, Chinese painting and literature foil each other and develop jointly. Later generations inheriting the cultural treasure of ancestors can make the art of Chinese painting unailing in the continuous development of world culture only by completely inheriting and reserving the characteristic of literariness in Chinese painting.

Key words: Modern Chinese painting; Literariness; Consciousness embodiment

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INTRODUCTION

Conscious embodiment of literariness in Chinese painting appeared from ancient times. When evaluating paintings, the ancient people had three bests in “poetry, calligraphy and painting” long time ago. The so-called three bests namely mean that we need to evaluate the quality of a Chinese painting from three different angles. First, to judge the advantages and disadvantages of verse written in a painting; second, to appreciate the calligraphic essential skills of a painter; third, to analyze the color matching, composition, layout, painting skills and other aspects in a painting. That is to say, actually the poem is the first to be judged in a Chinese painting. As an art, the Chinese painting has the tradition that the painter writes a poem on the painting since the development in the flourishing Tang Dynasty. A poem in a painting can not only let the poem and the painting to foil each other but also sublimate the lasting artistic conception between a poem and a painting, so a poem is the finishing touch of a Chinese painting and also the earliest embodiment of literariness in the Chinese painting. As for this, Wang Wei, a poet in the Tang Dynasty had the opinion of “painting in the poem and poem in the painting”, certainly emphasizing the close relationship between the “painting” and “poem” in the Chinese painting. The ancient people emphasized the close time between the “painting” and “poem” in a Chinese painting, and so do the modern people. In today’s society, after the complete collapse of feudal dynasties and the establishment of new China, the Chinese painting also develops and changes quickly along with the change in social system, the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy and the continuous collision and integration of diversified culture in the world. However, regardless of the external replacement, the inheritance and reform the modern people make in the Chinese painting and the changes in painters’ states of mind, the embodiment of literariness, as the primary characteristic and essential attribute of

Chinese painting, is renewed with times and gets more energetic and valuable.

1. CLOSE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHINESE PAINTING AND LITERATURE

The Chinese painting can embody the literariness; namely, there is an inseparable relationship between the Chinese painting and literary works. As for its internal cause, as two essentially different artistic forms, both the Chinese painting and literature shoulder the significant historic mission of reflecting the social life and understanding the current social formation to the masses, so each traditional Chinese painter should be clear that the embodiment of literariness in Chinese paintings are extremely necessary. A Chinese painting without the embodiment of literariness is just like a cup of boring, tasteless and lifeless water.

1.1 Chinese Paintings Themselves Show the Aspect of Literariness

At first, the viewpoint that calligraphy and painting have the same origin appeared in the ancient times. In the *History of Past Famous Paintings: About the Origin of Painting*, Tang Daiyuan summarized as follows:

In the legend, Cang Jie had four eyes and often looked up to observe the changes in weather and stars. Then, he decided the shapes of characters according to the lines of the turtle. After he successfully created characters, secretes of the world cannot be hidden anymore, so there were millets falling down like raining in the daytime. Ghosts and monsters could no longer get them hidden so they cried and howled at night. Then, calligraphy and painting are not divided and the pictographs were just created and brief so they cannot express the meaning sufficiently. For this reason, the calligraphy was created accordingly. As the pictographs failed to express the images, so the painting was created.

Namely, painting and characters share the same origin, are closely correlated and supplement each other.

Secondly, according to the Chinese nation's history of literature and the history of painting for thousands of years, literature and painting are always a combination of integrating narration and emotion expression. In the process of continuous development, literature has affected painting and provided a steady flow of inspirations to paintings; meanwhile, painting sublimates the essence in literary works and fully reflects the spirit in literary works. The two influence, promote and improve each other.

For instance, Zheng Banqiao in Qing Dynasty wrote a poem in his painting, *Bamboo and Rock*: "Between broken rocks striking my root deep, I bite the mountain green and won't let go. From whichever direction the winds leap, I remain strong, though dealt many a blow." In the painting, a piece of bluestone and several personalized bamboos not only depict the external scenery but also show the painter's insights on life. For another example, in the *A Lady Holding a Round Fan in Fall Wind* drawn by Tang Yin, a beautiful woman with hidden bitterness

and depression shown in her expression holds a round silk fan, leaning to her side and watching the distant place. There is a poem on the upper left part of the painting: "As the fall wind blows, we should put our fans away. Why does the beautiful woman feel down? Please clearly learn the fickleness of the world. Everybody hails the rising son." The painter used the literary quotation that Consort Ban, an imperial concubine of Emperor Cheng of Han, was no longer favored by the emperor after she got old, and detailedly told a round fan's tragic fate of being laid aside in the fall, denouncing the fickleness of the world and manifesting Tang Yin's unfortunate experience in life. Thus, it can be seen that an important function of Chinese painting is to "narrate events and objects, express profound meanings through objects and show emotions". This function is also an important indivisible part in the literary works.

1.2 There Is the Same Embodiment of Social Consciousness Between Chinese Painting and Literary Works

To trace their sources, both literature and painting are people's inevitable spiritual pursuits after the society develops to a certain degree. Such a spiritual pursuit is a subjective reflection made by human after long-term observation and conclusion of the objective external environment and reflects all sorts of social lifestyles in the ancient and modern times, expresses human's various emotions, perceptions, thoughts and interests etc., is an inevitable social product formed by human in the material production process, and is also an embodiment of social consciousness generated subjectively by human.

The Chinese painting and literature, which are two similar ideologies, not only reflect the objective reality and show the creator's thoughts and emotions, but also shoulder the specific responsibility for influencing the general thoughts, emotions and fashion trend of the social mass. Thus, compared with philosophy, sociology and other social ideologies, they are highly applicable and easily acceptable. Since the ancient times, most excellent paintings also love literature and most men of letters also are proficient in painting. Painters enhance the connotations of their paintings through the embodiment of literariness while men of letters regard painting as an important part to improve their own cultural attainment. Thus, the harmonious combination of Chinese painting and literature helps readers to better-rounded thoughts, perceptions and aesthetic joy.

2. SPECIFIC EMBODIMENT OF LITERARINESS IN THE MODERN CHINESE PAINTING

The embodiment of literariness in the Chinese painting is often shown in the paintings of modern traditional Chinese painters, who outline grasses, trees, people and scenery in the world with just a few lines by virtue of their flexible techniques of painting and also incisively and vividly express their moods and perceptions at that time. If such

Chinese paintings are expressed purely with words, they will certainly be intriguing literary works. Therefore, Chinese paintings which are rich in the literariness are just like savory and strong crusted wines, which lead people to endless aftertastes.

2.1 Embodiment of Literariness in Zhang Daqian's *Nine Tunes of Qu Yuan: Meditation*

The *Nine Tunes of Qu Yuan: Meditation* was drawn by Mr. Zhang Daqian in the winter of 1939. At that time, Mr. Zhang Daqian didn't go to Dunhuang to copy the murals and the line paintings of Meng Zhaofu, a great master of the former dynasty, influenced Mr. Zhang Daqian's figure painting images. However, the predecessors only affected the techniques in traditional Chinese realistic paintings and, layout and color selection in Mr. Zhang Daqian's paintings. The thoughts and emotions expressed in paintings vary with each individual and differ widely.

The poem in the *Nine Tunes of Qu Yuan: meditation* is from Qu Yuan's *The Songs of Chu: The Fisherman*:

After being exiled, Qu Yuan wandered at the bank of Yuan River and sang when walking around the pool, with a haggard face and dried-up appearance. Seeing him like this, the fisherman asked: "Are you the minister of the State of Chu? How do you lead such a life?" Qu Yuan said: "I kept clean while the whole world was dirty and I kept awake while everybody was drunk, so I was exiled."... Then, the fisherman sang: "The clean azure water can be used to wash my hat and the dirty azure water can be used to wash my feet." Then, the fisherman left without saying anything more to Qu Yuan.

There are some words signed on the painting:

I recently obtained the book of *Nine Tunes* from Zhao Wenmin. Dong Shengdao liked the book when seeing it so he asked me to copy this painting. However, I deeply feel that I haven't learned enough so I cannot copy the painting well.

Thus, it can be seen that the painting, *Nine Tunes*, is just a copy from a famous painter but Mr. Zhang Daqian conveys his understanding of Qu Yuan's mood at that time from his inner heart in the painting from his rigorous angle of a scholar.

In the painting, Qu Yuan is submissively standing at the riverside, looking into the distance. He looks dignified and serious without any indignation in her expression. We can only feel his suffering and misery of "singing when walking at the riverside" from his eyes with slight depression, so the painting is extremely vivid. People can be pleased physically and mentally by chanting poetry and painting pictures. As an art, the Chinese painting itself is a window for painters to express emotions and desires. As for this point, there is no difference between Chinese paintings and literary works. Each piece of great works by a famous painter is an excellent poem with a magnificent artistic conception through all ages and each excellent poem with a magnificent artistic conception is a good deeply touching article. Therefore, each piece of excellent

Chinese painting shows the deeply touching literary charm.

2.2 Embodiment of Literariness in Qi Baishi's *Tumbler*

Mr. Qi Baishi painted many pieces of *Tumbler* in his life, but the images of "tumblers" in his paintings are largely identical with only minor differences, that is, the image of clown official in black gauze cap and embroidery clothes and with a fan in his hand. "Tumbler", originally just the image of a kind of official, is painted by Mr. Qi Baishi as the typical representative of a kind of person in reality. The irony from the humorous scene painted by Mr. Qi Baishi is more interesting and profound than directly drawing the image of a corrupt official and is more thought-provoking. This is exactly Mr. Qi Baishi's thinking of literariness in the painting process.

Mr. Qi Baishi's pieces of *Tumbler* concentratedly show his humor and astuteness, so they can be called very representative classic creations in the history of Chinese painting. "A solemn official with a black gauze cap and a white paper fan stands there firmly because he is half made of mud. If we break it suddenly, we will find that there are no hearting and liver inside." It satirizes cruel officials' non-benevolence. "The autumn fan is white on both sides, but the bright and clear official robe is black wholly. He laughs at that you don't dare to break it and there is no ink in the confident chest." It reveals the officials' seeking nothing but profits, regardless of people's life and death at that time.

The tumbler looks cute because it can be played and you don't need to help it up because after it was stricken down. The black gauze cap on its head is very black and the official has an official rank even though he has no heroic spirit.

This poem easily reveals the ugly appearance of corrupt officials with low ability with a joking attitude. This is just like those mentioned in Mr. Lu Xun's *Wrongly Published Articles*:

The two persons can encourage the existing civil and military officers but will make the former surrenders and escapers feel ashamed. I doubt that these stories are written on the publications for the high-ranking officials but are wrongly published on juvenile books for an unknown reason. Otherwise, the author can never be so weak-minded.

This sentence takes the common stories of Yue Fei and Wen Tianxiang in juvenile books for examples to humorously satirize the ugly behavior that the officials under the reactionary government act belie their words, and to deeply lash their severe crimes such as surrender and betraying our country in order to get high positions. The connotation is thought-provoking but the sentences in the article are extremely humorous.

It is thus clear that the combination of irony and humor, the way of seemingly relaxed and humorous expression and the expression technique of subtle but powerful sarcasm and attack to surrounding people and

events, are often embodied in both Chinese paintings and literary works and are finally led to the same destination, which is thought-provoking and enlightening.

2.3 Embodiment of Literariness in the Chinese Painting *Immersed in Love* Winning the Gold Award in the 12th National Fine Arts Exhibition

The Chinese painting *Immersed in Love* winning the gold award in the 12th National Fine Arts Exhibition can yet be regarded as a work of art having strong embodiment of literariness. In the painting, a family of five members unites together with happiness, expressing modern people's eagerness for family affection and praising the thousands of years of Chinese traditional virtues of respecting the old and cherishing the young as well as benevolent fathers and filial sons.

The main scene in the painting shows the living room of an ordinary household, the calendar on the cabinet, the noted date when children "got back home"; the hot handmade noodles cooked by the mother are placed on the left side of the table, implying "long-time gathering and short-term separating"; fruits and nourishments taken back by children for their parents when they got back home are placed on the right side of the table, embodying children's love and devotion to their parents; under the table is a leather suitcase taken back by children who haven't had time to tidy it up; the daughter-in-law cannot wait to let her mother try on the new sweater; although the father is in poor health, he is telling fairy tales to his little granddaughter effusively as people are in high spirits when involved in happy events; the son is reading the *News Tonight* with a smile on his face, embodying his satisfaction with the existing happy life.... The familiar scene reflects the ordinary life of thousands of households. The scene is represented with the realistic narrative technique, revealing both the strong characteristics of the current times and the full-bodied flavor of life, not only grasping the emotions of characters perfectly but also creating the images of beautification, not only laying emphasis on harmony of colors but also maintaining the elegant style of the painting; everything, from static to

dynamic and from background to characters, shows deep affection between grandparents and grandchildren, father and son, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

CONCLUSION

As a typical example of thousands of ordinary families in contemporary China, the harmonious family in the painting is not only the reflection of the reality, but also beyond the reality, just like a scene described in a long narrative novel where people can, just from a scene before their eyes, learn countless ordinary and precious things happened in the past, present time and future in the family before their eyes; this is the fullest embodiment of literariness in Chinese paintings.

Throughout the ages, in the process of material selection, many Chinese paintings take existing literary works as their blueprints and bases, achieving the maximum embodiment of literariness in Chinese paintings. Although Chinese paintings and literature differ widely in the form of expression, they can fit and set off each other on a piece of painting paper, fully reflecting the exclusive cultural connotation and aesthetic experience of the works. Thus, literariness is indispensable in Chinese paintings, which are a strong comprehensive art requiring "poetry", "calligraphy", "painting" and "seal cutting" skills of painters. Therefore, an excellent Chinese painter must possess very comprehensive learning and cultivation. In order to express the theme and transmit the painter's thoughts, emotions and creation conceptions, Chinese paintings must embody their characteristic of literariness.

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