

The Pursuit of Democracy and Science in Monster Visual Art of China in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract—Monsters are bound up with Chinese traditional culture, and have been presented via various cultural forms, such as literature, drama, New Year print and costume. At the turn of the twentieth-century, visual traditions have been re-examined through the social and political transitions, whereas the traditional monster culture as a part of the legacy faced great challenges ahead. In order to understand monster imagery's inherent values and reinterpret its imagery in contemporary Chinese visual art, this research focuses on monster imagery in the social, political and transitional context of the early twentieth-century China.

Keywords—monster visual art; anti superstition; democracy and science; aesthetic education

I. INTRODUCTION

In this research, the monster is used to define visual beings originally transformed from images of animals, plants or inorganic objects. In history, monster imagery has been inevitable and seen everywhere in Chinese culture and people's daily life, in particular, significant to the religious beliefs, folk, customs, literature and art. People projected their own feelings, images and experiences on to monster imageries. Monsters took on various symbolic meanings, which are different from the concepts of 'evil' or 'demon' usually understood as things to be feared in the West. Chinese monsters formed a complex system, and built a fascinating imaginative world which involved both the disturbing kind of monsters and the auspicious kind, such as dragons ("Fig. 1") and phoenixes ("Fig. 2").



Fig. 1. Dragon, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE), woodblock.



Fig. 2. Phoenix Motif, illustrated in Wen Xuan, Zhongguo chuantong jixiang tudian (Chinese Traditional Auspicious Pattern Dictionary). Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2010, p. 448.

Monster imagery is a living tradition. Monster images and stories has been constantly renewed and built by individuals and as such, these products reflect Chinese people's thoughts and aesthetics. The evolution of monster imagery is associated with the development of human society in China. In twentieth-century China, most visual traditions were re-examined as the country went through tremendous social and political transitions. Many of them lost their original glory. Nevertheless, monster imagery survived the tremendous social, political and cultural changes, indicating its political, cultural and historical significance.

There has been research on Chinese dynastic monster culture or a single species of monsters throughout history [1], but very few studies have been done specifically to reassess it in social, political and transitional context in the early twentieth-century China. Thus, this research intends to place it in the modern context and discussed the interaction between its traditional significance and the modern.

II. ANTI SUPERSTITION

At the turn of the twentieth century, important political, social and religious changes occurred in China. For Chinese art in the twentieth-century, it was one of the most complex and significant transition periods of art history. By this period, Gao Minglu says that “a pursuit of a new, modernized nation with a concomitant anti-tradition emerged in China in both the broader culture and in art” [2]. Changing political and ideological realities, as well as conflicting international and local identities have transformed visual traditions **and their roles**. The whole visual culture of China but also the tradition of monster imagery faced great challenges.

Since the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1912 CE) of the early twentieth century, the influence of religion and folk beliefs has gradually weakened. Chinese intellectuals increasingly referred to the concept of ‘*mixin* (superstition)’ in their debates on religion. They regarded superstition as a holdover from the old culture and a major obstacle to social progress. The term *mixin*, was taken from the Japanese, in the view of Jiang Shaoyuan (1898-1983), a prominent scholar of folklore [3]. Shen Jie finds that the term *mixin* firstly appeared in an epigraph of the Tang Dynasty, where it refers to an irrational mental state, not specifically pointing to religions [4]. According to the study of Josephson, the Japanese term *meishin* appeared on a Japanese newspaper in 1877 and this term was then employed by Japanese intellectuals to refer to “errant belief” [5]. In 1902, Liang Qichao (1873-1929) published a series of articles on *Xinmin congbao* (*Xinmin Series Newspaper*) to expound his religious ideas and introduced the word *mixin* (translated from *meishin*) to China [6]. He did not distinguish clearly between superstition and religion. According to his explanation, superstition referred to irrational religion [7]. In the following years, ‘superstition’ seemed to be a term to replace religion in China, and the slogan ‘*fan mixin* (anti superstition)’ was also employed to justify and boycott religions.

From June 1902, the newspaper *Ta Kung Pao*, published a series of articles to criticize superstition and discuss the issues it raised, in order to eradicate superstition and “open up people’s minds and change our people’s customs” [8]. Yu Zhuodai also employed the word superstition in the newspaper *Anhui Colloquial Periodical* and, in particular, considered monsters as one of ‘superstitions’ [9]. The 1906 publication of Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940)’s translation of *Lectures on Mystery Studies*, supported Yu’s perspective of superstition from the standpoint of science. Japanese intellectual Enryo Inoue wrote a book that aimed to explain mysterious phenomenon about ghosts, spirits, and monsters through a scientific perspective [10].

Cai was not merely a translator; he was more notably, a significant educator. By translating the book *Lectures on Mystery Studies*, Cai was clearly in full agreement with Inoue. He said, it was “to disperse the ominous clouds of superstition from the nation, and to help spread knowledge and virtue” [11]. In his opinion, superstition was one of the deep maladies hindering social evolution, distorting human nature and imprisoning social wisdom. In order to improve

people’s moral and mental standards, it was an important and necessary mission for the Chinese intellectuals to disperse the gloom of superstition through popularizing rational and scientific knowledge.

From the policy of Standards of Existence and Abolishment of Gods and Temples [12] published in 1928, it seemed that the government attempted to control and weaken the religious influence of monsters. In the policy, the government retained only a few religious beliefs, such as Buddhism and Taoism, while most of popular religion was to be abolished. Many temples of monsters, such the Monkey King and the Fox with nine tails, were banned. Anthropologist Stephan Feuchtwang who focuses on popular religion and politics in China, also points out that since the end of Qing Dynasty, governments have authenticated and controlled the legitimation of religious activities [13]. The repression of superstition began in reform movements of the late Qing dynasty, and intensified during the Republic of China.

III. DEMOCRACY AND SCIENCE

In order to provide context of the early twentieth century for monsters, it is necessary to briefly introduce a general outline of a complex period in history. Since the late Qing Dynasty, powerless and weak governments failed in dealing with diplomatic and domestic problems. In particular, after the failure of the First Sino-Japanese War [14], China entered a serious national crisis [15]. Chinese people started to explore ways to save the nation. With capitalist economic development and the spread of Western political ideology, the representatives of emerging bourgeois political forces began to board China’s political arena. In 1911, a national revolution – *Xinhai* Revolution – broke out and overturned the Qing Dynasty, China’s last dynasty. In the following year, the founding of the Republic of China officially ended dynastic rule lasting for two thousand years in China [16]. However, as the President of the Republic of China, Yuan Shikai and his new government still failed to resist Japan. In the meantime, he advocated developing traditional culture and attempted to restore Chinese traditional rule. Furthermore, in 1915 Yuan proposed to assume the identity of the emperor [17]. It was obviously opposed by open-minded scholars. With continuous pressure from Western and Japanese military, economic and cultural forces, Chinese intellectuals like Cai Yuanpei, Liang Qichao and Chen Duxiu, received classical educations but started to lead an anti-traditional revolt, which was known as the New Culture Movement [18]. By 1916, the year Yuan died, the traditions were on the verge of collapse. Pioneers and intellectuals urgently sought for new cultural, social, economic and political systems [19], and began a cultural revolution by taking various Western standards as models to build a new Chinese culture.

This movement reached a peak in the May the Fourth Movement [20]. On the basis of anti-tradition, the May the Fourth Movement further advocated the promotion of ‘*minzhu yu kexue* (democracy and science)’, a process of modernisation. Modernisation process firstly began in Western Europe, then spread to America and other countries

around the globe; switching countries from rural societies to the urban and industrial, by the application of science, technology and rational thinking [21]. The social orders, such as sustained economic growth, specialisation of labour, increased public education, adequate sanitation and upgrading of civic facilities were commonly associated with the process of modernisation. Although traditional religious values and cultural traits had an enduring influence on shaping the development of societies, the process of modernisation typically forms governance frameworks dominated by particular principles rather than traditions [22]. China was in a struggle between modernity and tradition. However, in comparison with the powerfulness of Western countries, traditional religious beliefs and cultures were regarded as less important than modernisation by the Chinese intellectuals of this period; to pursue modernity, they attempted to replace traditional religions with other ideas.

A. Science and Technology

In the process of modernization, science and technology were considered crucial to build the wealth and power of a nation. In order to build a modern China, it seemed that the development of science was a matter of great urgency. Under the circumstances, the idea of “kexue jiuguo (saving the nation with science)” was strongly advocated by intellectuals and scientists [23]. On the basis of reflection on China’s efforts to explore national salvation in the last hundred years, it was a progressive thought to save China from the ‘mire’ by science and technology, which reflected a discourse of national modernization. In order to promote science among the public, Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) advanced the assertion of “yi kexue dai zongjiao (replacing religion with science)”. He believes that gods, ghosts and monsters from religions were all deceptive and it was vital for the public to believe in science rather than religion [24].

B. Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education

In terms of education, it was put forward that traditional religions could be replaced by art. In 1912, Cai first introduced the term *meiyu* (aesthetic education) to China from Germany [25]. On 8 April 1917, he provided a talk on Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education at the *Shenzhou xuehui* (the Divine Land Academic Society) in Beijing. According to Cai, in the embryonic stage of the primitive society, religion referred to spontaneous Ignorant behaviours, while to the class society, religion became a tool for the ruler to deceive the public [26]. He completely denied the value of religion in China during the period of developing democracy and science. In the 1921 magazine *Young China*, he put forward a more extreme view to eliminate religion completely in China’s future [27]. Wang considers that the thought of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) had a deep influence on Cai, and Kant held that aesthetics could allow humans to transcend the material and enter free noumenal world [28]. People would not be restricted to, or emphasis placed upon, interests in the real world, and could pursue spiritual demands and ideals. Compared to aesthetic freedom, religious doctrines are often limited and excluded ‘heresy’ [29]. As an advocate of a total aestheticism, Cai attempted to separate completely traditional religion from art,

eliminating religious elements in art works. The view was partially adopted by other intellectuals, for instance, Chen Duxiu, put forward the reform of traditional opera, and stated, “do not sing ghosts and monsters” [30]. He also criticised the classical literature of gods, ghosts and monsters for not reflecting social reality [31].



Fig. 3. Lu Xun, book cover design for Chang Hong’s *Xin de tanxian (Exploring the Heart)*, 1926, printed on paper.

However, not all intellectuals underrated the value of traditional religions and monster culture. Cai’s idea of Replace Religion with Aesthetic Education was naturally resisted by religious groups. Meanwhile, scholars did not fully support his ideas at that time. For example, Wang Guowei (1877-1927), a prominent scholar contributed to the studies of ancient history, epigraphy, philology and literary theory, considered that the public could get hope and consolation from religion, thus its value could not be neglected [32]. Lu Xun (1881-1936) also affirmed values of the monster culture in literature and art; he used eight chapters to introduce the classical literatures of monsters in his published book *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* [33]. Zhong Jingwen (1903-2002) considered that this publication, generated during the May the Fourth Movement, greatly strengthened the academic status of monsters [34]. Lu Xun encouraged artists and designers to rediscover and reconstruct traditional Chinese motifs and patterns, and create works that could reflect the thoughts of a period and inherit the spirit of China [35]. Lu himself also designed book covers and logos, inspired by the motifs from Chinese clay pottery, bronze vessels, and bas-relief stone carvings. For example, in a book cover design for Chang Hong’s *Exploring the Heart* (“Fig. 3”), a simplified dragon flies with a human who is upside down on clouds. A monster with a human body, a long tail and bird’s feet and three beasts with wings soar between clouds. The images of monsters were

inspired by patterns carved on a tomb in the Six Dynasties, as Lu illustrated in the book [36]. It presented a Chinese imaginative design with monsters. Although Lu abstracted the motifs of monsters from their ritual contexts, he did not completely deny the significance of traditional religious elements as Cai and Chen did. Lu affirmed the value of monster imageries on artistic expression and imagination by his own works. He also provided an approach to integrate traditional motifs, including monsters, into graphic design, developing a strong national artistic identity.

IV. CONCLUSION

As discussed above, the issues of religion in the early twentieth century caused great controversy among scholars. Although few were as extreme as Cai Yuanpei, most scholars agreed that the impact of religion and superstition on the public had to be weakened and the religious significance of traditional monster culture eliminated; instead, through the process of Modernization, the people should be educated by science and democracy.

Traditional monster imageries with strong religious significance were associated with 'superstition'. In the first half of the twentieth-century China, traditional monster culture was transformed, in order to meet the changeable political, social and cultural needs. The religious role of monsters was undermined by degrees. Although the transformation was at first limited to intellectual classes, it was an irreversible trend of transformation the decades later.

Monster imagery in essence, embodies a particular way of Chinese creative thinking, blending imagination and reality, the traditional and the modern, even the Oriental and the Western. The transformation of monster imagery constructed a particular and typical visual discourse reflecting Chinese life in this period.

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