

An Interpretation of Art Features in "Literati Painting" from the Perspective of "Xiehe's Six Principles"

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Abstract—Literati painting is distinctive in color style, containing both impressionistic lyricism and light color as well as a black and white ink spirit distinguished with a green landscape, re-color character paintings; it replaced the center position of green painting in the Tang and Song Dynasties, and became the mainstream of the paintings in China's late feudal society. Under the influence of Chinese philosophy and based on the basic theoretical system of painting in the "Six Principles of Xiehe", Chinese painting will become the most conspicuous spot in oriental painting with the actively enriching and expanding the content of "Six Principles"

Keywords—Six Principles; literati painting; painting identity; sub-colored ink

I. INTRODUCTION

Qi Xiehe, who lived in The Southern Dynasties, commented on twenty-seven painters' paintings since the Three Kingdoms to XiaoLiang (as long as 300years) in his book "*Guhuapinlu* (A recording of ancient paintings)". He proposed "Six Principles", saying: "what are the Six principles, the first one is vivid; second, using pen with bone spirit; third, pictograms; fourth, endowing color with the class; fifth, operating position; sixth, imitating." In the era of Xiehe, paintings were mainly portraits, and, as such, "*Guhuapinlu*" served as a creative and testing guideline for portrait painting and established a model for the criticism of paintings not only in its time, but also for later paintings. "Six Principles" proposed a preliminary and complete theoretical framework for painting - from the performance of the inner spirit of the object and painter's emotional expression and evaluation of the object, to the pen usage while portraying the objects' shape, structure, and color. It additionally articulated the art of composition and depicting works, etc. In short it summarized all aspects of the creation and spreading it. Ever since the "Six Principles" was put forward, the ancient Chinese painting entered a period of theory consciousness.

Literati painting was produced in the Tang Dynasty, raised in the Northern Song Dynasty, matured in the Yuan, and reached a peak in the Ming and Qing dynasties; Literati painting is distinctive in color style, with black and white ink

spirit is distinguished with green landscape, re-color character paintings. Modern literati painter Chen Shi once made a brilliant exposition: "What is literati painting? It is painting with intellectual spirit, fun intellectuals without containing the skill of art; so-called literati painting means paintings with the intellectuals thought." To sum it up, the literati painting is a carrier of emotion and a kind of talent cultivation for fun; Literati painting expresses its abstract spirit with impressionistic lyricism and light color as well as black and white ink. Over the long-term development, the literati painting not only replaced the central position of the green paint in Tang and Song Dynasties, but also became the mainstream method in the late feudal Chinese painting. Today it influences people's view about "Chinese painting".

Xiehe's "Six Principles" is a theoretical guideline for portrait painting and critiquing in Southern dynasties. It also works with literati painting, as the fundamental reasoning is derived from Chinese philosophy such as Confucianism, Taoism, Xuan, Chan. Thus literati painting follow the "Six Principles" in that its basic theoretical principles from its development process meanwhile enrich and develop the theory.

II. "VIVID" – ADVOCATING SUBJECTIVE PERFORMANCE OF MEANING AND RHYME IN PAINTING

The spirit of "Establishing lively and concrete images to express abstract meaning" in the *Book of Changes* and "Obtaining meaning while forgetting speech and image" of Chuang Xuan has had great influence on Chinese art. "Theme then writing" and "being based on conception" become an important tradition of Chinese painting. In the Song Dynasty, "advocating meaning" which omits similarity in shape gets the supreme status in "literati painting". It is what they call "causal painting without seeking similarity in shape", "Painting is to convey meaning and casual painting is believed to be excellent", and "Seeking rhyme instead of similarity in shape and all the stumps of flowers and trees are planted by my five fingers".

Xiehe lists "vivid rhyme" as the first principle of appreciating and judging a painting. Firstly, Xiehe extremely

emphasizes the “spirit”, requiring painters to “vividly” display the spirit, style and features of people and objects. He connects “spirit” with “energy”, so there is the saying of “energy”, “bold spirit” and “full of spirit and energy”. Besides, Xiehe pays much attention to “rhyme” as well. “Rhyme” refers to the superior beauty of elegance and the implicit and virtuous beauty with rich feelings. His “romantic charm” and “rhyme” come down in one continuous line with “high rhyme”, “heavenly rhyme”, “spiritual rhyme”, “natural rhyme”, “great rhyme” and “romantic rhyme” in *A New Account of the Tales of the World*. Under the condition of holding both “spirit” and “rhyme”, emphasis on “spirit” is inclined to the beauty of masculinity and emphasis on “rhyme” is inclined to gentle beauty. In Xiehe’s eyes, “rhyme” is more precious than “spirit”.

Literati painting pays great attention to will and spirit, emphasizing “Obtaining meaning while forgetting shape”, and it takes “vivid spirit and rhyme” as the highest standard of appreciation. But, whether there is spirit and rhyme in painting or not depends on the moral quality of painters, while moral quality depends on the comprehensive literacy of painters, such as personal knowledge, talent and ability, morality, experience, virtue and so on. Actually, spirit and rhyme in painting are the injection and display of painters’ personality, idea, talent and ability. Guo Ruoxu says “Rhyme of painting comes from heart and vividness of it comes from use of pen”; Mi Youren says “Painting is also heart depiction”; Shi Tao says “Painters follow their heart to paint”. Painting comes from heart and rhyme is about heart, so painting is the depiction of the heart. Therefore, when appreciating works of literati painting, we should surpass similarity in shape and take spirit and rhyme as the first principle. Using similarity in shape to judge a painting is regarded as the viewpoint of the laymen, so art appreciators are required to have talent and ability that surpasses ordinary people.

Ordinary people take similarity in shape as the standard of judging paintings. However, literati painters have an inspirational and sensational mental state and emphasize the rhyme and the artistic conception of painting instead of judging by similarity in shape. They also emphasize the significance of pen and ink. Dong Qichang says “In terms of strangeness, painting can’t do better than mountain; in terms of subtlety and delicacy of pen and ink, under no circumstances can mountain and river do better than painting.” A pen and ink have unique significance in the appreciation of landscape painting as they decide whether a painting is successful or not. Although spirit and rhyme come from the heart, since a high spirit grows in the use of a pen, painters have to obtain some pen and ink skills in order to create delicate paintings. Diligent learning and painstaking practice are needed to achieve refined and delicate use of pen and ink. As to Guo Ruoxu’s “Spirit and rhyme can not be learned from teachers”, Dong Qichang says “We can obtain them somewhere”, namely “Read thousands of books and travel thousands of miles”. Reading thousands of books is early education and traveling thousands of miles is life. Scholars have rich life experiences and they are good at

writing. As to this point, ordinary craftsmen and painters are no match for scholars. Therefore, Chen Hengke says that “Literati paintings possess great power due to literati painters’ various kinds of literacy and knowledge.”

III. “WRITING WITH BONE SPIRIT –IDENTITY OF PAINTING AND CALLIGRAPHY

It is a long-standing tradition that Chinese painting emphasizes the use of a pen in calligraphy; Chinese painting is therefore referred to as an “art of lines”. Guo Ruoxu uses the story of Wang Xizhi loving geese to vividly demonstrate that there is a similarity between use of pen in calligraphy and painting, “It’s said that Wang Youjun loves geese. Geese turn their neck just like writers turning their wrist to put an end to writing, and it is similar to use of pen in painting. So many people say: good calligraphers are usually good painters due to use of pen with turning wrist in unlimited fields.” Earlier in Wei and Jin Dynasty, connection of use of pen in calligraphy and painting had become a conscious pursuit. In Xiehe’s “Six Principles”, “use of pen with bone spirit” follows “vivid spirit and rhyme”. Xiehe requires that use of pen in painting should have the same “bone force” as in calligraphy. He praises “using pen with great force” and “painting creation”, which display “vivid spirit and rhyme” in paintings. Description and expression of emotions with the use of a pen in calligraphy are truly realized and achieve great success in literati painting.

Since the formation of the style of advocating meaning during the Song Dynasty, calligraphy has gotten rid of the strict rules of the Tang Dynasty, greatly encouraging the use of a pen in painting. It made literati painters realize that using a pen in painting also had the possibility of expressing emotions and advocating meanings in infinite ways. In Su Shi’s *Deadwood Bamboo Stone Painting* and Mi Fu’s *Coral Copybook*, the use of cursive in painting to express emotions is obviously presented. In earlier Yuan Dynasty, Zhao Mengjia clearly puts forward “the same use of pen in painting and calligraphy”: “Use cursive writing style in stone painting, use seal script style in woods painting and use the eight-stroke order of Chinese character “Yong” in bamboo painting. If someone understands the relation between painting and calligraphy, he definitely knows the same use of pen in painting and calligraphy.”

Literati painters emphasize “painting identity”. Besides learning the form of writing style used in calligraphy, they pay great attention to individual writing from the heart in calligraphy. The fashion of advocating meaning during the Song Dynasty mostly displays images from the heart. Spots of inkblots are like the “electrocardiogram” of painters, and Guo Ruoxu calls entering painting from here “koan”. With imprinting from the heart, what calligraphy or painting works reflects is the artist’s idea, concept, quality and sentiment, and what the works expresses is always the throb of the artist’s love, hatred, worry and resentment. For instance, Xu Wei uses cursive in painting to express his sincere feeling of surging and implacable misery; Zhao Mengjia uses eight-stroke order in painting to display his full satisfaction and unsolvable regret and the difficulty of finding a bosom friend in his tortuous life. Having no home

to return to, Shi Tao uses regular and clerical script with wild and simple calligraphy style in his painting “Searching for All Strange Peaks to Prepare a Painting”, alluding to “being abandoned upon birth” and the resulting in free, easy and rebellious excited passion.

Literati painting’s emphasis on description should also include the perfect unity of poem, writing, painting and seal. As the major representation of China’s traditional painting, this is where literati paintings are different from green landscape and western painting. It is also a comprehensive reflection of literati painters’ emphasis on knowledge, quality, temperament, character, morals and strong scholarliness.

IV. “PICTOGRAM”-- EXPRESS EMOTIONS THROUGH THINGS

Xiehe’s “pictogram” refers to the idea that a painting and the depicted object should be similar in shape or appearance. To painters, pictogram refers to depicting shapes and the appearance of objects. As to this point, painter Zong Bing had formerly mentioned this in “painting on the shape and color” earlier than Xiehe. In Six Principles, pictogram is put in the third place, demonstrating the importance of similarity in shape and authenticity of a depicted object in painting aesthetics in the Northern and Southern Dynasties. However, pictogram is put behind rhyme and bone spirit, demonstrating that artists of that time had deeply mastered the relation between art and reality, external manifestation and internal manifestation.

Literati paintings are more subjective in “shape”, paying more attention to making heavenly principles according to the heart and expressing emotions instead of pursuing a similarity in shape. A subjective idea of literati painting is the motive of creation, and so impressionistic lyricism definitely becomes the unique form of expression for literati painters. They express emotions through objects and make paintings according to happiness, amusement, worry, sadness, love and hatred in their heart. They reveal emotions through objects. Painters tag a moral to an object, which resonates the closest to them or which has the same aspiration as them, taking the object as the subject and revealing themselves through the object in a straightforward manner. During the process, due to the object’s insufficiency in outside shape or color or its insufficiency in displaying spirit (specifically, the manifestation of the painter’s inside spirit and emotion), painters surpass the external shape and color to display essential internal spirit. Namely, when the shape of an object is unable to display the painters’ inside emotion, painters have no choice but to surpass the representation of “physical appearance” to achieve the “authentic” revealing of emotion. The “authenticity” of “physical appearance” is diminished or twisted and more attention is paid to the “manifestation” of “emotion”. Most of the shape of object in painting is created by painters subjectively. “Shape of object” is just a carrier to express emotions. As long as it does not hinder manifestation of emotions, whether the shape of the object is real or not is unimportant. Most of the objects in literati paintings are unrealistic. Painters use “fake object” to express emotions in their heart during painting. Although this kind of “fake

object” is unrealistic, the emotion expressed through it is more vivid. The artistic method of using object to express emotions becomes another important part of literati painting’s artistic and aesthetic features.

V. “ENDOWING COLOR AS THE THINGS”--BLACK AND WHITE INK

Calligraphers attach great importance to black and white ink. Since painters are calligraphers at the same time, literati painting also emphasizes black and white ink. It’s not just that calligraphy and painting share the same material. It’s more because that literati painting is required to express heartfelt feelings. Literati paintings are the expression of a lonely life and the exposure of a phantom in the heart. The content of literati painting decides its form, so it’s not the general “endowing color with the class”. Seeing from its philosophical basis, the color of literati painting is simple and elegant. “Black and white ink” is the combination of Chuang, Xuan, Chan and Confucianism, namely the ontology color in philosophy, and it is a form of transcendence from the “colorful world” to a “colorless world”. Black and white ink is a kind of special hue. Ink represents hydration and it is the soberest color, including rich level changes with infinite possibility, just as Lao Zi’s “Xuan”.

Since the period of Wang Wei, the literati paintings have pushed forward with the method of black and white ink. New appreciation of beauty formed, such as “excellent painting color with use of little ink”, “casual use of ink to reveal innocence” and so on. The transition from “emphasis on color” to “emphasis on ink” is the result of literati painting’s development, whose highest tenet is description. Literati paintings convey no actual color of objects or added color. The purity of black and white ink reveals the painter’s feelings in a more vivid way. The “sub-colored ink” in ancient painting refers to ink having the five hues of dry, wet, dense, light and clear. Namely, literati paintings pursue hue change in ink and reflect the essence of an object by a changing of shades. This importantly does not mean it does not pursue color. Although it doesn’t use multicolor, inside the essence of the object is manifested more vividly, reflecting the painter’s spirit. Painters put away outside hues and pay more attention to researching the inner essence of the object. The free creation of subjective will is more convenient for the spiritualization and idealization of the object, thus further displaying the artistic conception outside the painters and objective images, achieving spiritual conversation between painters and images. Therefore, the pursuit of color by emphasizing black and white ink instead of multicolor is another important feature of literati painting.

VI. “OPERATING POSITION” -- “COMBINATION OF NIHILITY AND REALITY”

In “operating position”, the original meaning of “operating” is to make and build. Jing refers to measuring and planning and Ying refers to scheming. Xiehe uses it as an analogy to arrangement and composition of a painting at the initial stage of painting. As a noun, “position” refers to the place of people or objects; as a verb, it refers to an

arrangement or schedule. In “It is difficult to compare position management to something similar”, which was said by Xiehe to Mao Huiyuan, the “position” here means arrangement. In Tang Dynasty, Zhang Yanyuan read “operating position” as a whole and “position” was gradually regarded as a noun in the verb-object construction. He said that “Operating position is the scheme of painting”, regarding composition as the outline of painting. Position needs management, namely, painters should think about the arrangement of the composition attentively, regarding composition, operation of thought and conception as a whole.

Composition of literati painting is very rigorous and careful, and there should be a “well-thought-out plan” before painting. Here, we will discuss expanding and extending of “operation position” in literati painting, namely the following Chinese philosophical idea that is put into works: “emptiness and vacancy”, leaving a lot of blank space in painting. “Rare voice of big sound and intangible large object”(Lao Zi), “quiet in mind and sitting in oblivion”, “wisdom comes from a free mind”(Chuang Tzu), and the words from Zong Baihua -- “The part of painting without pen and ink is full of the painter’s concentrated attention and it becomes a heavenly creation which achieves the state of dimly discernible nature realm.” “Chinese people feel that the deep part of the universe is formless and colorless emptiness, which is the source of all things on earth; as to the endless creation which is the foundation of all things’ move, Lao Zi and Chuang Tzu name it as ‘Taoism’, ‘nature’ and ‘emptiness’, Confucianism names it as ‘heaven’, and Chan names it as ‘emptiness’. Every phenomenon on earth comes from and goes to inanity. Therefore, the blankness in a painting is the genuine basis of Chinese painting.” There is tacit agreement between this kind of blank black and white ink and Chinese people’s universal awareness a long time ago. The blankness isn’t the real space of substance with boundaries, but the unsubstantial noumenal emptiness. Therefore, what literati paintings demonstrate is no longer natural universal theory, but spiritualized humanistic ontology.

“Imitating” refers to copying works and imparting techniques and has something in common with other drawings. One point that must be explained is that, due to the influence of material on literati painting works, there should not be excessive requirements on “shape” in “imitating” and there should be much learning and understanding of the “spirit”, “meaning” and “state” of works.

VII. CONCLUSION

Xiehe’s “Six Principles” is a theoretical system of painting formed under the influence of Chinese philosophy and it becomes the standard to judge the quality of paintings for painters of later generations. Under the circumstances of social turmoil, unrecognized talent, depression and without seeking fame and wealth while embracing sincere feelings of misery etc., scholars, calligraphers and painters comprehend the ideas and viewpoints of “Chuang, Xuan, Chan and Confucianism”. In order to display themselves and get emotions off their chest, they use, enrich and expand the connotation of “Six Principles” and infuse the universal ideology of “Taoism”, “emptiness”, “heaven” and “color”

into their work, making it the most stable and most inclusive principle of China’s ancient fine arts theory and providing a full display of Chinese philosophical ideas and mainland national features.

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