

Introspecting to the Modernity of Zen and the Characters of Literati Paintings in Yuan Dynasty*

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Abstract—Since Song and Yuan Dynasties, under the stimulation and nourishing of Zen, Chinese painting had gradually formed a diluted and unconventional character of literati painting, especially represented by literati paintings in Yuan Dynasty. Later reminded by Dong Qichang, this cultural character was finally established as the mainstream of Chinese painting and had led the painting circle in Ming and Qing Dynasties for almost more than five hundred years. It can be said that the combination of Zen and literati paintings enables the literati paintings to complete its historical mission satisfactorily. Its core values, such as the pen and ink skills to write some words in painting, the expression of plain naive desires and the thoughts of "way of heaven" still have wide range of radiation and influence even in today's painting circle in China. However, it must be admitted that with the advent of the era of technology and information, the separation between man and nature has led to the collapse of traditional "harmony between man and nature". The thought of "way of heaven" indicated in literati paintings have also lost its binding force for the modern world. Literati's diluted, unconventional and lyric expression of emotion have been no longer able to profoundly express our perception of the world today. The elite nature reflected in the literati's pen and ink skill is also diluted in the mass entertainment culture. So, Chinese painting calls for new wisdom, new expression of desire and diversified ways of expression skills in the new game among "way of heaven", desire and skill.

Keywords—Zen; character of literati paintings; introspecting; modernity

I. INTRODUCTION

In the history of traditional painting, the reason why the literati paintings of Yuan Dynasty can become the most representative and most elite level of painting in China is because of its most prominent ideological content. This thinking is embodied in the fusion of Confucianism, Taoism and Zen. However in this fusion, literati paintings do not adopt the three thoughts in a balanced and mixed way but make different aspects of selection and variation in accordance with its historical identity. First of all, relying on the Confucian benevolence, the literati paintings gives the

character theme a function of enlightenment. At the same time, the golden mean in Confucianism also builds up the emotional scale of literati painting. Second, based on the natural law in Taoism, literati painting's creation theme is extended from character to landscapes, flowers and birds. Meanwhile, Zhuangzi's happy excursion and materialized thoughts respectively give the literati paintings a tour view of creation and a quiet creation status. Finally, with the help of Zen's way of spirit, literati paintings are gradually changed from showing external objects to expressing the inner world of people. Affected by the thought of "it is so" in Zen, literati paintings, especially that in Yuan Dynasty, show self desire as a desire without desire, namely the painter no longer dedicate to creating the appearance of the painting to painstakingly create a scene but begin to show a natural writing like a soul diary. This natural, gentle and diluted painting method grants the literati paintings of Yuan Dynasty a fantastic tone of surpassing and unconventional feature. Zen thoughts, , express the expression of self-desire as a no-desire desire, that is, they are no longer deliberate Creating a certain situation and painstakingly managing the picture, the painting begins to manifest itself as a kind of natural diary-like natural writing. This natural, peaceful and dilute painting style gives the literati paintings of the Yuan Dynasty a superb and clear style. It should be said that emergence of Zen makes Chinese literati paintings truly have their own independent artistic character and externalized as the concept of "unconventional" with the unique Chinese aesthetic characteristics.

However, it is right because Zen plays such an important role in the formation of literati paintings of Yuan Dynasty, Zen is often criticized and blamed when literati paintings become in the twilight in modern China. At this moment, it is not helpful to echo this saying. What needed to be analyzed and understand is: is Zen the thinking root of cause that leads to the decline of literati painting? If no, what is it? In addition, in the modern dimension where "way of heaven" has collapsed, where is the thinking boundary of the soul thought in Zen as reflected in literati painting? Restricted in this boundary, which aspect(s) of the cultural character reflected in traditional literati paintings has become untimely and which aspect(s) is still energetic? What kind of inspiration and enlightenment can Zen further give to modern Chinese painting? Those questions will be answered one by one in the following text.

*Project name: The Ministry of Education's 2017 Youth Fund Project for Humanities and Social Sciences Research — Research on the Relevance of Zen and the Transformation of Painting Style in the Song and Yuan Dynasties (17YJC760025).

II. HISTORICAL CORRELATION BETWEEN THE THOUGHT OF ZEN AND THE LITERATI PAINTINGS IN YUAN DYNASTY

For Chinese, the influence of Zen is undoubtedly far-reaching. Its soul thought has a particularly huge influence on the art of spiritual creativity. However, as a Chinese Buddhist sect, Zen is not that different from but the same as Confucianism. The identity is manifested in that they both recognize the naturalness of "Taoism". Regardless of the way of heaven in Confucianism and the natural law in Taoism, the nature of Zen as the nature of people given by God, is also the natural nature of people. The natural "Taoism" thought builds up the truth among heaven, earth and people in China and stipulates the way people should go. However for this natural wisdom, Chinese philosophers have not asked for their rationality, because in the mind of Chinese philosophers, "Taoism" is the highest truth not only natural but also self-evident so that it is not allowed or available to question it. Therefore, what people need to do is to distinguish themselves from their own desires and transcend their own desires so as to approach or lead to Taoism and further achieve the "harmony between man and nature" sage realm. This transcendental pursuit of harmony between man and nature constitutes the history of the existence of Chinese, especially the elite literati class.

It is right because of the natural attributes of "Taoism", so that Chinese thought has never placed the transcendence of human beings in the heaven or the other side of the world far away from the world, but get it firmly rooted in real existence of human beings. This makes transcendence always transcend in the original place, namely people relies on "returning" back to their natural nature to achieve the so-called harmony between man and nature. This makes the harmony between man and nature not actually the harmony in existence but in thought. In this harmony, the soul thought of Zen strengthens the possibility of the harmony: under the concept of "heart is the Buddha", people can achieve Buddhahood as long as the soul confusion is removed and the soul becomes clear. The consciousness of soul is to remove the shadow of the heart with no phase, no soul and no obsession. This is not only the way for people to get rid of troubles but also the source of the all laws.

It can be seen that in the ideological framework of the whole truth of Confucianism, Taoism and Zen, the stipulations of soul in Zen are most creative. Its concept of "its heart is Buddha" not only stimulates the awakening of literati's self-expression consciousness but also constructs literati's diluted simple soul. Here, "light" and "simple" thing refers to people's desire. The "reality" concept in Zen dilutes people's persistence in desire and makes desire become no desire. This doesn't mean that desire is lost but mean that people's attitude toward desire is changed. That is, in the concept of truthful soul, desire only exists as the desire itself. When desire is no longer a human trouble, people may return to a simple and natural nature, while Zen as a kind of life wisdom means that people can live as they are.

In this way, the expression of no expression, as the true expression in literati paintings (especially that of Yuan Dynasty), is a reflection of Zen's wisdom in painting. This

painting method gets the desire, skill and Taoism in painting maximally shown in the painting. Firstly, for the expression of desire, painter's no-self and no-desire expression in painting is not to eliminate desire but get desire surpassed from "none". This makes the desire expressed in the painting have the transcendence of Taoism, revealing the truth of human's existence. Secondly, for the skill, the no-desire natural expression in painting also fully shows the independent ideographic value of the pen and ink skills. Namely, it also highlights the human nature of the painter while highlighting the beauty of the object shown on the painting, thus creating the unique pen and ink and language style of the painter. Finally, for Taoism, the authentic desire and freehand skill highlight the uniqueness and universality of Taoism. The so-called uniqueness refers to the unique connotation of the painting, namely incarnation. At the same time, this uniqueness has also gained universality because of its roots in the source of real existence of human beings. For the first time, painting is neither a carrier of moral education nor the imagined poetic scene any longer but truly become an expression of human's experience of real existence.

However, it has to be admitted that human's experience of real existence is diversified. Although under the infiltration of Zen thoughts, the spiritual realm of "indifferent innocence" in the literati paintings of Yuan Dynasty has been universally recognized by literati of the later generations and has become the highest pursuit of their soul, it is worth of doubt that to what extent it reflects the real existence status of the painter when this indifferent soul is consolidated as an unconventional character like a golden rule. This is because different time proposes different problems to painter. In Yuan Dynasty, the "hermitage" of Wu Zhen, Huang Gongwang and other literati somewhat has relaxed and happy features due to the "having no culture other than simple nature" features of the rulers; while in Ming and Qing Dynasties, under the high pressure in thought and the heavy political situation of literary inquisition, most "hermitage" of literati is an escape and self-exile from the harsh officialdom and official career.

Especially in late Ming Dynasty, with the highly growth of commercial economy, it has become an irresistible historical trend to get passion break through the shackles of Confucianism and appeal for spiritual liberation and ideological emancipation. At this time, if only blindly using the "no obsession" concept of Zen in painting and diluting desire into "nothing" desire, it is undoubtedly to filter out the complexity and multiple aspects of human desires. Consequently, what remained in the painting is surely just the skillful pattern. Hence, the "indifferent innocence" is gradually deviated from the truth of human feelings and became the cultural symbol of the literati in Ming and Qing Dynasties in confirming their Confucian orthodoxy identity. This is not only the assimilation of diversified desires but also the obscuration of reality.

Especially driven by Dong Qichang's schism between north and south and Wang Shimin, Wang Jian, Wang Hui and Wang Yuanqi's model or pattern after ancient style, the painting circle blindly pursues the so-called "indifferent innocence" realm surpassing material. While literati

repeatedly simulates the pen and ink skill and composition of the four representative painters in Yuan Dynasty, the base for real existence in their works is taken away. Being simple, elegant and unconventional has become the paradigmatic spiritual pursuit of literati paintings of Ming and Qing Dynasties. When landscapes, bamboos and other themes are enough to indicate this type of spirit, the theme seems to have no need to be expanded and what to draw becomes inferior to how to draw. On the one hand, of course, it is the inevitable result of self-discipline development of the language in form of painting. On the other hand, it also makes the painting lose its fresh and open spirit in the process of purifying the language itself and gradually go to the pen and ink skill summarized and rigidified way. As a result, the unconventional style that Ming and Qing literati paintings deliberately pursued eventually turned to nothingness and lacked the power to return to reality.

III. ANALYZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DECLINE OF LITERATI PAINTINGS AND ZEN

The decline of literati paintings in modern times has led to numerous criticisms and introspections. For example, Xu Beihong once criticized that the decline of Chinese art was because of the more emphasis on literati painting, especially "Since Wang Wei became an idol of literary painting, many landscape painters paid too much attention to the artistic conception and spiritual charm of painting and forgot the basic styling"¹. Objectively speaking, Xu Beihong's criticizing that "Chinese painting lacks 'basic styling'" from the standpoints of Western realistic paintings such as optics, perspective science and anatomy is not appropriate. However, his view that "the narrowing of the aesthetic taste is caused by the excessive pursuit of 'artistic conception and spiritual charm' in Chinese painting" is pertinent. Under such criticism, Zen seems to be also regarded as the chief culprit of the decline of Chinese painting, because the characteristics of literati paintings in Song and Yuan Dynasties are exactly given by Zen.

However, it should be pointed out that it should not be criticized even in artistic conception and spiritual charm. This is because "artistic conception" and "spiritual charm" as a spiritual achievement of art world with richness comparable to the real world is the characteristic that all excellent art works of both China and the West must have. The expression of spiritual realm in painting is called "artistic conception" and "spiritual charm" in China or called "atmosphere" and "intrinsic spirit" in the West. In the West, it is called "ambience" and "inner spirit". Although it is described in different terms, the terms as the artistic creation of human spirit have no difference in nature. From Xu Beihong's realistic art point of view, it is known that his criticizing on literati paintings mainly points out that the artistic conception created by the painters is lack of reflection on the sufferings of people and humanistic care for reality. This is caused by the "unconventional" temperament in the character of literati which is prominently manifested in

¹ Xu Beihong. *The Art of Chinese Painting*. Beijing: Peking Publishing House. 2017, p74. (in Chinese)

the "hermitage" of the literati painting's pursuit of individual's soul cultivation and personal relief.

As such, the "hermitage" temperament is often regarded as the negative consequence of Zen's internal psychology used in painting. But if thinking a little more, it will be found that the "hermitage" temperament in the literati paintings cannot be completely attributed to the influence of Zen. Because Zen is the religion having the most secular spirit, its main idea is not to evade the world. On the contrary, its concept of "trouble is Bodhi" regards the troubles in life as the necessary and unique dojo for getting enlightenment from Buddha and its consciousness and advocating of passive retirement from the world are at opposite poles. It can be seen that the formation of the literati's "hermitage" feelings is not from Zen.

In fact, "hermitage" is precisely the indigenous thought of China. Its origins can be traced back to Chinese ancient culture. For example, the "Book of Songs" and "Shang Shu" all have records about hermits². Moreover, both Confucianism and Taoism have expressed their views on hermitage from different perspectives. For example, Confucius once said that "Being well governed, the country can be prosperous; otherwise, it'd better live like a hermit". And "if I failed, i would take a boat on the sea." Compared with the hermitage concept of Confucianism "to proceed or step back freely", the hermitage concept of Taoism is more decisive. In particular, many fables in "Zhuangzi" indicate the author's highly appreciation to and conscious pursuit of the individual freedom spirit of hermit. In "Zhuangzi Qiushui", there is an attitude of life that "I'd like leisurely live a poor life".³ This attitude implies that Zhuangzi himself is a hermit in strict sense. In this way, before Zen getting popularized, "hermitage" has become the intrinsic cultural gene of Chinese literati under the influence of Confucianism and Taoism.

In this sense, it would be more appropriate to say that under the influence of the Confucianism cultural gene of literati, Zen has been transformed into a hermitage-style zen of the educated instead of saying that literati's hermitage concept is caused by Zen thought. Ni Zan's view of "be based on Confucianism, rely on Taoism and escape to Zen" clearly indicates Chinese literati's basic attitude and standpoint on Zen. If the "based on" indicates the fundamental Confucian standpoint of literati's living in the world, "rely on" highlights Taoism's support for people's cultivation of life while the "escape to" reflects the attitude to get out of people's troubles in reality. This makes the Zen emphasizing self solution also accompanied by a sense self-adjusting passive escape.

² The "Kao Pan" in "Book of Songs Wei Feng" is a poem depicting the life in mountain forest, showing the happiness of a hermit living in a hidden place surrounded with mountains and rivers and enjoying the leisure time. The "Shang Shu Wei Zi" describes the different views on "keeping away from the society" and "entering the society" held by the Wei Zi and his teacher. Wei Zi expressed his idea of wanting to live a life of seclusion. Even in the period of the Three Emperors and Five Emperors in ancient times, there had been legends about hermit.

³ Sun Tonghai (Trans.). *Zhuangzi*. Beijing: Chung Hwa Book Co., 2007, p266. (in Chinese)

However, the hermitage temperament of the educated believing in Zen is a little weak in the painters of personalized sect in Ming and Qing dynasties. This was particularly evident in the Four Monks and Yangzhou Eight Eccentric Artists in early Qing dynasty. To disprove the fusty scent of literati's model or pattern after ancient style in Ming and Qing Dynasties, they boldly expressed their feelings in pen and ink skills that can express the soul alone. Compared with the "indifferent innocence" sense in the paintings of Song and Yuan Dynasties, their paintings show completely different secular emotions. However, the expression of erotic feeling in works of personalized painters in Ming and Qing Dynasties is a reflection of true emotion had in the specific historical environment. From the dimension of erotic feeling, they demonstrated the power of human nature and get strong emotions also reached "innocence". From this point of view, this opposite practice is actually the best carrying forward of the "immortal" spirit of Zhuangzi's Zen, and is more a creative inheritance of the spirit of literati paintings in Song and Yuan Dynasties.

From wide view of the overall artistic works of personalized painters in Ming and Qing Dynasties, it should be said that identity is always greater than originality, that is, "inheritance" is still the core. This is because the expression of erotic feeling in the paintings of Ming and Qing Dynasties has never deviated from the basic provisions of "way of heaven" in traditional thought. Moreover, in the paintings of personalized painters attached importance to sketching and life, the tendency of secularization indicated has not exceeded the basic pattern of literati paintings of Song and Yuan Dynasties and even weakened at the spiritual level. This right proves from another perspective that this style of advocating personality and pursuing for creation and change in the times of Ming and Qing dynasties have already revealed the decline of "way of heaven" and become the last glimmer of literati painting.

IV. INTROSPECTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PAINTING AND ZEN

The May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement officially ended the Chinese tradition of "way of heaven". In the "post-natural" era in which we live, the "way of heaven" has collapsed. The collapse of "way of heaven" means that the heaven of nature no longer has the highest dominion over people so that literati class in the traditional sense disappears and the basic support for literati paintings is lost. The traditional "way of heaven" has ended while opening up the way of modernity for people. As such, it is needed to rethink the significance of Zen and literati painting.

With regard to Zen, its most valuable theory of soul can solve the highest level of spiritual problems in human's life, such as realm and aesthetics and so on, but lack of necessary concern and retrospection on other things beyond soul, namely problems in basic level of human's life such as systems, laws and customs. This is because Zen requires people to achieve self-enlightenment regardless of the social system and historical process, while this properly shows the non-historical nature of Zen. The German philosopher

Jaspers once commented Nagarjuna that "From the perspective of Asia, this series of barriers is always incomplete, because there is persistence in the world. From the perspective of the West, it is right opposite and thought that this concept of barrier in Asia is regarded as being produced from the world and disappeared in the failure to access to and be transmitted". This comment also applies to commenting the thought of Zen.⁴Jaspers pointed out two different transcendence paths for China and the West: in the process of history, Westerners realize self-transcendence through self-introspection, while Chinese realizes transcendence based on no-social and no-history nothing other than fully self-will. Obviously, this transcendence will ultimately be nothing for the vast majority of people.

Therefore, Western modern thought is undoubtedly the most inspiring for the truth of our modernity. For example, Heidegger's thought of being, Freud's psychoanalysis, Marx's sociological theory and Nietzsche's superhuman philosophy all revealed the truth of existence of modern people from different aspects. In particular, the development psychoanalysis in unconscious field opened up the important ideological dimension of modernism and even postmodernism by virtue of the irrational existence of human beings and this is also the blind spot of Chinese thought.

Under the circumstance of the idea of "to get desire constrained by morality", people's desire is always in a state of being suppressed and eliminated. The complex and versatile features of human nature are all circumvented under the orthodox concept of "harmony between man and nature". Consequently, in the way of pursuing for "harmony between man and nature", people artificially create a wide insurmountable gap between the holy and the ordinary and between the sage and the ignorance, so that the wisdom of the sage becomes a fancy false lie. Similarly for traditional literati paintings, the unconventional literati characters such as calling wisdom from mountain and reminding the ancient from moon are only reflected in the pen and ink skills shown in the painting. This painting is obviously not available to show the practical feelings of people in the times of modern technology, information and consumption. In this sense, modern painting, as a game among desire, skill and the way of heaven, needs to not only understand and reflect truth, goodness and beauty but also understand and reflect false, evil and ugly natures. People may deeply understand the nature of truth, goodness and beauty to the extent that people deeply understands false, evil and ugly nature, because as the light and the dark, these two natures jointly constitute the entire body of the world of human life. Moreover for modern Chinese painters, the avoidance of the complexity and depth of human nature in painting is not realized by diluting and surpassing the desire, but face the times in which we live and get the existing truth manifested by itself on the basis of profoundly revealing the diversity of human's real desires.

In the game among desire, skill and the way of heaven in painting, skill should also be changed if desire and the way of heaven are changed. Meanwhile, skill is relevant to people

⁴ (in German) Jaspers. *The Great Philosophers*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China). 2010, p816.

and things. With respect to painting, skill is mainly reflected in the innovation of painting themes and methods. As far as the subject matter of painting is concerned, landscape has lost its meaning to us in the post-natural era that the way of heaven declines. In today's society dominated by desire and technology, landscape is no longer the carrier of nature but disclose to people the wisdom of the way of heaven which has become the object of people's desires and technology. Landscape not only becomes a place for leisure travel outside the busy life of modern people but also is a production place for people to mine, harvest and plant. Obviously, landscape has been retreated from the spiritual world of people to a secondary position. Especially in the era of modern network information, people's desires not only bring people out of the natural landscape and enter the real technical life but also enable people to go cross the boundaries of real life and create a virtual online life by virtue of technology. The interweaving and mutual transformation between desire and technology and between reality and virtual worlds constitute the theme of the times. Therefore, painting not only needs to go out of landscape to express the real life but also needs to reflect virtual life in real life, let art call out new way of being of human by interweaving of real and virtual worlds, calling for a new way of existence, this is new The birth of wisdom, hence new wisdom is raised.

As such, pen and ink skill should not become the "bottom line" that painting is adhering to on the road ahead. The so-called "bottom line" can roughly include two layers of connotation: one is the aesthetic form that has been precipitated in the development of pen and ink skill for more than a thousand years. This comes from the guidance of instrumental expression and the self-discipline nature of painting form and skill, especially represented by Xie He's "bone-like pen and ink skill"; the second is the humanistic spirit contained in the pen and ink skill, that is, the spiritual pursuit of "Taoism" in literati painting. However, those two points cannot be completely separated, because in the basic ideas of Chinese Taoism, technology is always relevant to and restricted by Taoism and there is no such pure and vocational research on skills as painting workshop system in Western Renaissance period. The aesthetic ideals of literati in using Taoism build up the basic character and cultural connotation of Chinese pen and ink skill. When talking about inheriting traditional pen and ink skills, it often means that the thought of literati is also inherited at the same time. Therefore, modern paintings should consider the limits and boundaries that traditional pen and ink skill can bear modern thought.

If pen and ink well fulfilled the duty to surpassing the spirit of literati under the provisions of natural law in the past, can the modern feelings (such as speed, change, separation, conflict and absurdity) in modern society beyond that in traditional life world still be expressed in literati's lyric pen and ink expression of emotion? Under the impact of consumption culture and fast-food culture, is the orthodox elite way represented by the bone-like center pen and ink skill still the only way out for modern Chinese painting? However, this kind of questioning is not to deny the pen and

ink itself. This is because pen and ink are only tools and language for expression in essence. The bone-like pen and ink is also the aesthetic orientation accumulated over the millennium based on the material nature of the tool. What we have to do is to return the pen and ink to the essence of tool and language, so that it can re-emerge in the modern life in a new meaning and new wisdom. When traditional pen and ink are not sufficient for taking this task, the constraints imposed on artistic expression by the material of pen and ink should be surpassed⁵.

V. CONCLUSION

Of course, the ending of traditional way of heaven does not mean the complete ending of traditional way of wisdom. As a kind of wisdom once existed, Zen still speaks to people today. After going out of the literati's thinking framework of Confucianism as the orthodoxy, the way of soul in Zen, as a kind of ideological tool that breaks troubles and grows wisdom, should present its multiple looks and possibilities and its influence on painting also needs to go out of the historical limitations of literati painting.

As far as people themselves are concerned, in the reality of infinite expansion of technology and desire, the rapid changes in the society make people face more serious crisis than in traditional society. The ubiquitous anxiety and hollowness highlights the rootlessness of the world. When the soul no longer takes natural law as the basis, it may require itself to establish a basis for itself and the basis is established on the real world in which human exists. In this sense, it is needed to re-examine the relationship between the soul and the world in a new light.

As an individualized soul, its relationship with the world is neither a fusion of the soul and the world (the so-called complete harmony) nor the separation of the soul and the world (the isolation of the self) but the boundary impacted in mutual infiltration of differences. In this mutual infiltration and impact, the soul and the world are mutually generated in conversation between them: on the one hand, the richness of the world makes the soul move from mediocrity to uniqueness; on the other hand, the creativity of the soul makes the world move from reality to possibility. Thus, for us, Zen is to not only get the conflict between people and the world transformed into a peaceful soul through enlightenment in heart but also get their silent power changed into the productivity of poetry through the impact and mutual infiltration of the soul and the world. The poetry here is not a poetic lyric. It is the soul's listening and response to the world. It is the development of Zen from nothing to wisdom. That is, artist gradually generates a free soul listening to wisdom and calling for wisdom through artistic creation activities and listening and giving response to the world.

⁵ In the "The Practical Development of Chinese Painting from the Perspective of Cultural Value System" published on *New Arts* (No. 12, 1987), Huang Zhuan expressed a similar view: "If it (Chinese painting) is against an open cultural background, it will be inevitably replaced in other way than style."

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