

Cultural Background and Philosophical Connotation of Chinese Landscape Painting

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Abstract. As an important category of Chinese painting, Chinese landscape painting reveals cultural background and philosophical connotation peculiar to China through description with Chinese ink painting, i.e. the traditional Confucian ideology and culture of “syncretism between heaven and man” and the ideological connotation of nature worship in Taoist school. Therefore, the author discusses origin and development status of Chinese landscape painting in this paper, states philosophical connotation of Chinese landscape painting according to thoughts of Chinese traditional culture, and points that Chinese landscape painting is deeply influenced by Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist thoughts and cultures, and that Chinese landscape painting gradually becomes a cultural and artistic type with Chinese characteristics.

1. Preface

As a country with an ancient civilization and long history, China has deep-rooted culture. Moreover, Chinese culture has a huge effect on Chinese landscape painting. In fact, Chinese landscape painting has already become rare art treasure in the Chinese art treasury. It has full-bodied atmosphere and philosophical connotation of Chinese culture, and goes through baptism. A sort of vitality is embodied. Therefore, Chinese landscape painting is the essence of Chinese traditional culture. Besides, it has philosophical connotation, and it is a brilliant star worthy of promotion in the palace of Chinese arts.

2. Cultural Background of Chinese Landscape Painting

2.1 Cultural background of Taoist thought

The earliest landscape painting in China is an independent type of painting separated from figure painting in the Period of Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties. Its cultural background is mainly rooted in literary thoughts of Taoism in the Taoist school. In Han Dynasty, the social background at that time required to destroy other schools and to respect Confucianism thought only. Therefore, Taoism failed to have great influence and action in political and economic fields in China under that historical and cultural background. Even so, Taoist ideology and culture still have a deep influence on scholars and the literati-official class in the historical development for thousands of years. As a result, many things in the cultural level are of certain Taoist culture more or less.

Therefore, Chinese landscape painting is an important form of painting art. Both its birth and development process can not be separated from Taoist culture and thought. It can be said that such Taoist philosophical thought is penetrated everywhere in Chinese landscape painting. In fact, Chinese society was extremely unstable at the end of Han Dynasty, with turbulent social phenomena everywhere. Therefore, some standards and models established in Han Dynasty are damaged and violated to some extent. Additionally, Han Dynasty at that time was invaded by other nations. Therefore, intersection and integration of many ideological trends can be found in Chinese society at the end of Han Dynasty. Taoism is transmitted and focused to some extent. The reason for such focus is that severe destruction of various guidelines and cultural rules at the end of Han Dynasty leads to emptiness of thought and spirit for people in that time as well as further liberation of their thoughts and spirits. Moreover, people began to worship immortals at that time, resulting in certain deviation of the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius. Moreover, people at that time began to

worship the doctrine of Taoism. They think that people should pursue for a kind of free, easy and detached view of life

Under such historical and cultural background, the development course of Chinese landscape painting should be like this way: landscape painting in the Period of Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties is relatively recessive and indifferent. The reason is that the social status is relatively free in that period. People's life is relatively leisurely and comfortable, thus resulting in many hermits among men of literature and writing. In practice, their landscape painting is a sort of painting style developed and separated from the original figure painting. In most cases, figure paintings at that time are named by landscape and similar words. Therefore, we can clearly see that understandings of men of literature and writing at that time toward landscape are usually contained in figure painting. Moreover, such understandings are frequently used to express spirits of figures in figure painting, so as to explore for the essence of the nature and create the nature. As these ancient men of literature and writing found that it is not direct enough to use figure painting to create the nature, they changed the style and strategy of painting, and began to use landscape painting to directly create and describe the nature. To this end, Chinese landscape painting officially becomes an important carrier of spreading of Taoist culture and thought in China. Moreover, Chinese landscape painting is served as direct medium and language expression of Taoism to explore for secrets of the nature and the universe.

2.2 Cultural foundation of Neo-Taoism thought

Besides Taoist culture and thought above, another important cultural background for the origin of Chinese landscape painting is Neo-Taoism in China. Neo-Taoism is served as spiritual catalyst of the development of Chinese landscape painting. Actually, so-called Neo-Taoism is a sort of new thought formed by ideologists He Yan, Wang Bi and others through integration of traditional Confucianism to some extent based on the doctrine of Taoism. As the main foundation of Neo-Taoism thought is the doctrine of Taoism, the life-style in deep mountains and forests is also worshiped, resulting in many hermits. Many hermits are men of letters suffered from life setbacks. Under deep influence of Taoism and Neo-Taoism thought, they began to attempt to live a leisure and reclusive life, for instance, well-known Tao Yuanming. Words and phrases about landscape painting can be found in his works. Under the guidance of Taoism thought, these men of literature and writing suffered from life setbacks began to get rid of realistic living conditions, place their emotions into the nature, and thus find their emotional homes. Essentially, this phenomenon is served as concentrated reflection and profound reflection of the thought of "syncretism between heaven and man" in Taoism. In that period, hermits' explorations for the nature are actually deep reflections on and continuous explorations for self conditions. That is to say, hermits at that time basically expressed their self-exploration implications through explorations for the nature.

Therefore, they often replace the original thoughts through superficial entertainment and emotional sustenance in the process of landscape painting, and change main object of painting from figure to landscape. The doctrine of Neo-Taoism based on Taoism has great influence on Chinese landscape painting. According to someone, landscape in Chinese landscape painting is to allow people to realize impalpable Neo-Confucianism thought and philosophy while appreciating landscape by revealing Taoism through appearance. Therefore, main function of Chinese landscape painting is to let people to appreciate the mental shackles of integration among heaven, earth, man and history under the appearance of landscape. It is served as spiritual presentation of Taoism. Landscape painting at that time is not greatly influenced by political or economic status of scholars. No matter officials or poor people, they would create landscape painting for some natural doctrines, so as to give expression to their spiritual pursuits or spiritual confusion. Viewed from this aspect, both Taoism and Neo-Taoism have great influence on landscape painting in China, promoting landscape painters to attach more importance to self improvement and innermost experience, and boosting the development of Chinese landscape painting.

3. Philosophical Connotation of Chinese Landscape Painting

3.1 Development track

Chinese landscape painting is a cultural product of traditional Taoism and Neo-Taoism thoughts in China as well as specific presentation and concentrated reflection of these traditional cultures in the art of painting. Therefore, landscape painting is provided with distinct color of philosophy since the date of its birth. Chinese landscape painting gradually develops as an independent type of Chinese traditional arts. Moreover, Chinese landscape painting is provided with its development rules, and such rules will not be controlled by religion or certain ideological trend. In fact, traditional academic culture plays a significant leading role in the development course of Chinese landscape painting. Landscape painting in the Period of Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties is only a conceptual form in the mind of some scholars and officials, and it is not really presented. To Sui Dynasty, landscape painting really develops to a new stage, for instance, the earliest landscape painting in that time – Zhan Ziqian's A Happy Spring Outing. In the painting, the relations between landscape and figures are properly processed, with coordinative scale of distance, thus making the artistic expression of this painting to be quite precise. Wang Wei and other ink landscape painters in Tang Dynasty made innovations to the style of landscape painting. Wang Wei is quite familiar with doctrines of Buddhism. Therefore, he can express a sort of unconventional artistic conception while creating landscape painting, and integrate poems into landscape paintings. This is another unique painting presentation. That is, he integrates poem, calligraphy and painting together, and establishes a traditional mode of Chinese landscape painting. In the later development process, landscape painting in Tang Dynasty is also penetrated by academic culture. Dong Qichang pushed such penetration to another symbolic development stage. That is, he distinguished the essence between painting of man-of-letters and commercial painting. Therefore, Chinese landscape painting always develops and inherits along traditional cultural background and ontic academic culture.

3.2 Philosophical connotation

China is a country with an ancient civilization. Its art of painting is served as unique culture heritage. Landscape painting is an important topic of Chinese painting, and it has unique cultural background and deep philosophical connotation. In landscape painting, natural scene is taken as main object of description. Superficially, it should belong to an objective expression. In fact, many landscape paintings include lofty spiritual realm of “syncretism between heaven and man”. It allows people to realize profound philosophical meaning through external appearance of landscape. Although many western people have insufficient understandings of philosophical thought of Chinese landscape painting, one of conditions for birth of landscape painting is non-anthropopathic natural philosophy. Such natural philosophy is one of typical examples of western philosophy. However, western landscape art is killed at its birth, and it is developed again till the Renaissance. One advantage for the development of Chinese landscape painting is that Chinese natural philosophy is widely accepted and stably developed. Chinese people always worship such thought of “syncretism between heaven and man”. This is a kind of philosophical concept treating man and the nature as integrity, thus providing favorable conditions for both birth and development of Chinese landscape painting. Then, people often feel a sort of aesthetic experience in Chinese landscape painting. Such aesthetic experience is served as concentrated presentation of the creative thought of “telling doctrines with form”, integrating beauty of the nature with beauty of human nature. Moreover, compliment for landscape is used to express the pursuit for ideal personality of human.

Chinese landscape painting also adheres to a sort of overall orientation thought, so as to turn people's spirits from worship of immortals into promotion of Confucianism and Taoism. Confucian philosophical thought system plays an indelible role in emergence and development of Chinese landscape painting. According to Confucian thought view, the nature is closely correlated with human. People can see their dynamic moral traits in image of water and static moral traits in image of mountain. Therefore, the nature and human beings are interlinked. They are just like two

substances with the same form and structure. In the development course of Chinese landscape painting, many painters made detained exploration for and analysis on dependence relationship between the nature and men. Chinese landscape painting is also deeply influenced by Taoism. It worships the nature, and visually expresses the nature. According to Taoism, integration of subjective & objective bodies between the nature and men is the highest realm of landscape painting. Such philosophical thought becomes the source of creative concept of Chinese landscape painting. Hence, many landscape painters began to observe and analyze everything in the world from the concept of Taoism, to realize clever and mystery of the nature through practice and to surpass all spatial limitations through imagination. Moreover, they also attempted to realize inspiration and transmission of Taoism, letting their landscape paintings to have more philosophical connotations.

While highly praising visual feature of the nature, Chinese landscape painting is also influenced by Buddhist philosophy of Zen. In fact, Zen, Taoism and Confucianism are influenced and penetrated mutually. Zen is more visual than Confucianism and better than Taoism. Zen can realize secrets of the universe and life, and appreciate mystery. Essentially, Zen is a kind of life experience. According to Zen, people should indulge in landscape and thus obtain unique enlightenment. Zen symbolizes absolute freedom, and it provides infinite possibility to landscape painters. Moreover, Zen also advocates creating everything with heart, so as to let landscape painters to pursue for simple and optional writing techniques in the creation process, and allow painters to become direct expression of their feelings.

4. Conclusion

Chinese landscape painting is a brilliant star in Chinese traditional painting art. It has unique cultural background and philosophical connotation. Besides, main cultural and philosophical foundations of Chinese landscape painting are Taoism and Neo-Taoism. Integration between the nature and human is advocated in Chinese landscape painting, letting human to integrate into the nature, so as to obtain cognition of the nature through experiences of the nature, express ideal pursuits for self emotions, and attempt to find the home of emotion and spirit in landscape. In fact, such cultural background and philosophical connotation are served as crystallization of collective intelligence of Chinese nations. On the basis of inheritance, modern landscape painters also make innovations to spatial consciousness, reform traditional techniques and abstract patterns, and make certain innovations to painting materials, so as to allow life observation & experience in landscape painting, the nature and “spiritual” essence of universe method to be preserved in landscape paintings for ever.

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