

## Aesthetic Psychological Change on Fine Art Creation in the New Period

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### Abstract

This paper mainly discusses the aesthetic psychology on fine art creation in the new period of China. This paper considers aesthetic psychology to contain both historic aesthetic heritage and present aesthetic practices. The main logic lies in that: based on the historic heritage after the “Cultural Revolution”, new aesthetic psychology has been generated and developed to trigger present confrontations; secondly, consequences caused directly by the aesthetic change make aesthetics no longer a political game. Aesthetic subjects began to abandon the pervious political point of view, and reflect on their aesthetic attitudes and aesthetic positions by aesthetic practices.

**Key words:** Fine art in the new period; Aesthetic psychology; Aesthetic change

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### INTRODUCTION

Fine art in the new period is also known as fine art of “new enlightenment” or “thought liberation”, etc.. These terms interpret the characteristics of fine art in the new period from one perspective—there was a disruptive change in history. This change is not confined to people’s material life and spirit, but is also a comprehensive change from social structure to aesthetic thought. Discussions of this change, primarily and essentially, are based on the

understanding and grasp of aesthetic psychology. The article does not intend to discuss specific activities and works in the new period, but focus on the fundamental reasons of the development for fine arts in the new period. If we do not pay close attention to the aesthetic psychological mechanisms of the new period fine arts, it will be difficult to understand the social values and aesthetic values of fine art works in the new era.

### 1. AESTHETIC PSYCHOLOGY AFTER THE “CULTURAL REVOLUTION”

As a preceding culture of new periodic fine arts, it is necessary to recognize the “Cultural Revolution” as a whole. The “newness” of the new period fine art is opposed to “Cultural Revolution”, and shows the trails of reproduction, introspection and breakthrough of “Cultural Revolution”. Therefore, the study on the aesthetic psychology of art creation in the new period should start from the history after the “Cultural Revolution”.

As a kind of political aesthetic mainstream, the most outstanding feature of “Cultural Revolution” is its “god making” culture. This culture reflects the aesthetic paradigm of the time and responses to the aesthetics and would outlook consistent with the paradigm. The outstanding performance of the “Cultural Revolution” aesthetic paradigm of art lies in the “red and light” color, “tall, big and perfect” modeling, as well as the “three prominent” aesthetic ideas. Such a rigid aesthetic paradigm reflects the strict political order of that era. We can find the similar aesthetics in *Li Dai Di Wang Tu* by Yan Liben at the flourishing period of Song Dynasty, and the natural shape of “main mountain towering among the surroundings” in the landscape paintings of Song Dynasty – regardless of the depiction to “people”, description to “nature”, “human order”, or “natural order”, the aesthetic paradigm reflects the intent of creating a “center.” The center of the landscape paintings of Song Dynasty is the

towering mountain, and the fine art center in “Cultural Revolution” is the “deified” man. The aesthetic paradigm centering on deified man is to arrange “real scenes” of life in order like boxes, and then put “typical” images into them. “Real scene” has become the only carrier of aesthetics, but this “reality” of “real scene” does not refer to “life” in epistemology, nor rational “real world”, nor “eternal reality” in religious sense, but an “emotional reality” generated by the impacts of political ideology. Due to the exclusion of non-emotional rationality and objective reality, this “emotional reality” rejects the realist art in the true sense. Careful observation and empirical analysis of real life scene is a rational realistic creation method, which tries to make emotion yield to real scenes, characters, and events. Although realistic option is also dominated by specific emotions, the emotions are generally inclined to be “rational” instead of “frantic”. So when “Cultural Revolution” ended, political reality crushed the good images established in people’s mind, the people who once acted frantically began to realize the previous innocence of conscious self-neglect, and took the initiative to reject the previous center with changes of political situation and breeding of new cultures. Therefore, relationship between people began to be restored, and the world where people live in was to be calmly rethought. This is rapidly germinating thinking on people and the world in the new period confirms Karl Heinrich Marx’s words, “all kinds of liberations are to return human world and human relations to human themselves.” (Marx & Engels, 2009, p.355)—an aesthetic practice developed around human world and human relations in the new era, always around human proposition.

From a historical perspective, the starting point of Chinese contemporary art is in October 1976. When the catastrophe-ridden 10-years of “Cultural Revolution” came to an end with the fall of “Gang of Four”, China’s political ideology suddenly changed with this incident. Unexpectedly, aesthetic context was still shrouded the previous strong ideology. Although this was in line with the expectation of a part of the “leftist” artists, in their view, the demise of “Cultural Revolution” could only lead social situation back to the state before “Cultural Revolution”, but the truth that art serves politics should not waver—As the party’s propaganda tool of “beauty”, art is the most effective tool of the party’s leadership during the development and modernization of China, which can only obtain the value of presence as the “propagandist”. However, to another part of artists, the crushing of “Gang of Four” meant the demise of the political ideology of “Cultural Revolution, and literary and artistic creations would enter a new realm of freedom, but what they firstly felt was a great historical aesthetic inertia. Aesthetic context of that time- in addition to the prostrated spirit left by the “baptism” of “Cultural Revolution”, art creation was still haunted by the ideology

of the old regime. At that time people had not much chance to think about freedom and real world except the god making culture, and were pushed by a powerful historical aesthetic inertia to find the new “god” in their own world. Additionally, with the historic psychological accumulation, rectification to the prior history was also in a superficial, irrational level.

However, a new history was started after all. In spite of the existence of historic aesthetic inertia, historical development inevitably brought new aesthetic ideas. The so-called “newness”, at that time was mainly reflected as the retro aesthetics of the older generation of revolutionaries—although it still manifested the aesthetic paradigm of “Cultural Revolution”, it returned to an amiable state more acceptable to the mass from the transcendent majestic manner, and real, life-oriented, amiable revolutionary characters gradually emerged. With the end of “Cultural Revolution”, although a large part of artists who still upheld the concept that “art should serve politics” and proposed to go back to “Cultural Revolution” and the Soviet realist art period which had far-reaching influences, they also suggested that the responses to political theme should have been more personal and humanitarian. When the cultural awareness of two countries in clashes in their aesthetic consciousness, a more eclectic aesthetic idea will be naturally generated—it should not only keep up with the development of the times, but also uphold the concept that aesthetics services for politics. Therefore, in the collision of two countries’ cultural awareness, a large number of “revolutionary” and “life-oriented” characters emerged in the beginning of the new period.

Old and new aesthetic ideas encountered in the early new era. Although art was built around “new god” and “theme determinism” still guided art creation of that time, people’s thinking on the “reality” of art creation began to appear in a sporadic way. This suggests that artists began to talk about the human relationship in the field of social consciousness, and talk about aesthetic realism in the field of practice. Although the “reality” here was not the kind of frantic “emotional reality” in “Cultural Revolution” period, it did not yet come down to rational reality. It shows that artists began to observe with their eyes and think about the issues of “reality of people” and “real people”. Traditional aesthetic paradigm of “human God” began to come down to “human”, and “hero carol” began to come down to “ordinary world.”

## 2. TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL AESTHETIC PSYCHOLOGY

For the fine art in the new period, the key to get rid of the aesthetic context of “Cultural Revolution” is the opening of the third plenary session of the eleventh central committee. Its denial to “Cultural Revolution” and redress

of “April 5<sup>th</sup> Tiananmen Incident” freed people from extreme depressed and aggrieved psychological state, and then set off a climax of art creation.

On the other hand, the discussions about the “criterion of truth” in the whole society made a part of artists be aware that the previous “truth” is a misunderstanding of the sentence in *To Ma Hankins*. The letter wrote, “Realism means, in addition to the truth of details, a true representation of typical characters in typical environments.” (Ibid., p.221) Obviously, the “truth” was fundamentally distorted by “Gang of Four”. The distorted “truth” must have its inherent false ingredients, and once they are exposed, the concept of “truth” is bound to return to the rational level. Therefore, fine art in the new period began to think about realistic creation in the true sense.

“Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth” is one of the basic principles of Marxism, and in the context of social transformation, this principle has become the most effective norm in the ideological and cultural fields of the new period. Marx said, “Whether there is an objective truth in people’s thinking, this is not a theoretical question but a practical question, and should be proved in practices...” (Ibid., p.314); Mao Zedong had a similar view in *On New Democracy* and *On Practice*, “There is only one truth, and discovery of truth does not rely on subjective exaggeration, but relies on objective practice. Only the revolutionary practice of millions of people is the measurement for testing truth. The criterion of truth should be social practice only.” (Xing, 1999, p.609) It should be noted that “practice is the sole criterion for testing truth” brings people the direct consequence of ideological emancipation, but the core of ideological emancipation is to respect individual freedom and safeguard human basic rights in social transformation, and individual freedom and basic human rights are manifested as the freedom of art creation in aesthetic practice. Hu Qili said, “Literary and art creation must be free. This freedom is reflected as the full freedom to select themes, topics and art expressions, and the full freedom to express people’s emotions, passions and ideas.” (Qiu, 1998, p.359) If this statement has been made based on the understanding to art characteristics, the art groups in the new period faced a problem, namely, how to combine creation freedom with national interests. Hu Qili holds that, on the one hand, the country should provide conditions for artists’ free creation, on the other hand the artists “must make best efforts to recognize the interests of the country and people, recognize the law of social development and changes... so as to truly enter the realm of free creation.” (Ibid., p.359) It can be seen that ideological liberation movement during social transformation advocated to return freedom to people and artists, and advocated the prerequisite of obeying national interests and will in art creation. Under the impacts of ideological emancipation and new constraints, fine art creation of the new period

carried out aesthetic reform and put forward new demands on aesthetic ideas.

However, the confrontation between these two forces gradually developed unevenly—after a decade of ideological imprisonment, aesthetics would naturally tend to the calls of art and human in the context of social transformation. Although in the first conference of the representatives of literary and art workers in late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping proposed that “literary and art are an important part of socialist ideology” (Deng, 1983, p.211), this proposition was apparently weakened under the impacts of ideological liberation. At this time the art circles began to be more concerned about their own problems and topics. This phenomenon was embodied in two aspects: The first is the reflection and criticism to history; the second is the gradual growth of emotional factors in art creation.

At this time, people began to re-recognize the art works of the revolution period and those reflecting the theme of class struggle. Although political theme was still the mainstream of creation, more artists tended to focus on the personalized art ideas of past disputes and political ideology, thus led to a tendency of criticism and reflection. At the same time, not just the masses, but also the art groups who experienced “Cultural Revolution” in the new period, especially a group of young artists, began to re-examine and reflect on the “alienation” phenomena between human and world, human and themselves created by “Cultural Revolution”, and tried to reconstruct aesthetic ideas from the perspective of “truth, goodness and beauty”. With this point of view, fine art creation in the new period presented strong criticism and reflection, and was more involved in the reaction to “truth” compared with the aesthetic ideology after “Cultural Revolution”. There was a more obvious tendency to “tear the purity, sincerity, loveliness and sadness of this generation of youth to show to the world with colors and stark realities” (Lu, 2006, p.704).

Therefore, a popular and generalized “human” consciousness quietly awakened, but this “human” was closer to the human written by Max Burckhardt, “he is only a member of a race, an ethnicity, a political party, a family or a community, and has been recognized in a general sense.” (Burckhardt, 1997, p.125)—He does not have a clear self-consciousness, but only a reaction to the previous group consciousness. Nevertheless, this desire to show people’s aesthetic appeal still became the new “source of power” of art creation in the new period. This phenomenon had some similarities with the discussions on *1844 Economics—Philosophical Manuscripts*, namely, drawing lessons from young Marx’s supra-class humanitarian enlightenment. Meanwhile, as some people misunderstood Marx’s “human is the sum of all social relations” (Marx, 1979, p.49), as that human is a collection of no personality, individualism was still subject to

group consciousness in the underlying psychological mechanism, and a tendency of overcorrection emerged consequently. At this time the human in individualism was still not human-centered. We can identify the Italian humanists' psychological mechanism under Burckhardt's pen, that is, a collection of perfectionism, a high degree of freedom and a mindset of strong aggression. By reading these distinctive characters, we can naturally understand that the humanity of this period was not the "selfish" humanity of the early Renaissance, but the "philanthropic" and "equal" humanity of the late Renaissance. The creations themed by equality and philanthropy were the mainstream at that time, and the fierce, indignant and shouting type of emotion was gradually transformed to be an unseen, graceful, self-talking type of emotion—This is what to encounter inevitably during the reflection and criticism on previous history—Artists' positioning to themselves and restoration can only be achieved through art salvation in intense and brutal political realities. But art has its intrinsic developmental law and cannot just act as a political catalyst. When society begins to take a new shape, when art serves not just as a political tool, and when ordinary people revert to the aesthetics of normal life, people will start to look upon themselves and produce a new inner aesthetic dilemma caused by facing the world independently.

## CONCLUSION

From the historical view of Western civilization, the Renaissance hundreds of years ago was to reduce the entire Western thought and life to secular human spirit and

world, so the ideological liberation in China's new period shoulder a similar historical responsibility in a sense—to build a new social life and cultivate a new aesthetic taste on the basis of humanity, and let free art creation become the artists' conscious needs of the times. People not only found personalized survival pleasures in the ideological emancipation, but also made the whole society turn into a kind of secular and civilian aesthetic taste. Aesthetics was no longer a political game. Aesthetic subjects began to depart from the previous political sense, and found their own aesthetic attitudes and aesthetic positions on the basis of introspection on aesthetic practices.

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