

Wisdom of Leisure in Chinese Traditional Painting Theory and Its Enlightenment to the Contemporary Culture of Leisure

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Abstract

In modern times, the culture of leisure is playing a more important role in human life with rapid economic development and greatly improved life. Leisure may imply a deeper contemplation and wisdom in our life rather than merely take a rest in leisure time. But at present, there still exist many problems in human leisure life. These problems cause negative effects on people, society and ecological environment. Hence it needs to create good value-oriented leisure concepts. Painting was one of the most important ancient leisure styles in China. The ancient concepts of leisure involved in the painting theory are very rich. They can contribute a lot to the sound development of the modern society's leisure concepts.

Key words: Chinese traditional painting theory; Wisdom of leisure; Contemporary culture of leisure

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INTRODUCTION

It should learn successful experience from others in constructing leisure culture in a country or region, but more important is to unite those successful experience with own history and culture of leisure. The ancient Chinese painting theory is rich in ideas and wisdom of leisure, especially in the ideas and ways of leisure such as

mind cultivation, independent creation and eco-friendly style. These ideas and ways of leisure are significant in constructing the modern culture of leisure.

1. TRANSITION FROM OUTSIDE STIMULATION LEISURE TO MIND CULTIVATION LEISURE

In spiritual dimensions, leisure can be divided into two styles as mind cultivation and outside stimulation. The mind cultivation style is beneficial to one's physical and mental development. It returns to the original mind cultivation and is a person's moral improvement. On the opposite, leisure through outside stimulation is a kind style of leisure which departs from the life origin but relies on outside or emotional stimulation. The contemporary culture of leisure tends to the latter, and the leisure ideas and styles in the Chinese traditional painting theory prefer the former. Thomas L. Goodale and Geoffrey Godbey wrote that "Leisure is not an evading way in modern concept, but a way back, back to a state of noble and harmony. In this state, every person will truly become himself/herself and become 'better' and 'happier'." (Goodale & Godbey, 2000, p.119).

Leisure is a kind of activity but more important to be a state of mind. The Chinese traditional painting wanted to foster a relaxed attitude through training in the game. Daoism emphasizes the quietness, "without desire, then can be quiet". Confucianism also said that "Stop gives rise to be stable, being stable gives rise to be calm, and being calm gives rise to be in good condition." The quietness has a sense of origin in the Chinese culture. People in the condition of quietness are closer to their true nature. Ouyang Xiu (欧阳修) recommended painting concepts of "not to seek fame and wealth" as well as "keeping leisure and quietness". Zhuangzi (庄子) said, "All beautiful things follow the relaxed mind", which is a

complete relief to the natural realm in life. The relaxation can be also obtained from the quietness. Qin Zuyong (秦祖永) emphasized in "Tong Yin Painting Tactic" that painting should be with the quietness and he said: "The most difficult thing in painting is to show quietness. It is not quietness if a drawn line looks like flexible. It is not quietness if a drawn line intends restlessness. Completely rid off careless habit and hurly drawing then there can be floating of harmony and interesting. All of these need quietness" (Zhu, 2012).

In Chinese traditional philosophy, painting as a way for life cultivation makes an important contribution to the development of personality. The painting of "plum blossom, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum" as four gentleman styles boomed in Song Dynasty. These paintings gained favor of scholars as their images can be compared to the virtue of gentlemen. Wen Tong (文同) was a master of painting bamboos and he had written a poem, "Humble inside is different from some heavy grass. But maintain integrity to grow over those plants." Also Wang Mian (王冕) had written a poem titled "Plum Blossom in Chinese Ink", "The plum blossom in front of my house blooms by the pond. Flowers show some light ink mark. There is no need to boast the colors of flowers. But let them leave fragrance in the air." These works are good to highlight human spirit. "Xuanhe: A book on the art of drawing" had indicated that, "To set up great ambition by Dao, do things according to the moral integrity, treat others with a kind heart and play with the art. The noble people can not neglect the art though they have high moral standards. They just play with it as a game. Painting is a sort of art. When one's painting skill is very good, The Way (Dao or Tao) becomes his pursuing goal such as every art master pursues his kind of The Way." ("Preface of Xuanhe: A book on the art of drawing"; "The complete Library of the Four Branches of Literature"; 《宣和画谱·序言》, 《四库全书》本) Art is originated from Dao, and it represents "morality" and "kindness" so art and Dao can become one. Because ancient Chinese painting has the original meaning to elevate human cultivation, there exists the saying, "Painting is just a kind of art, just like the study of life." As there goes the saying, "A painter without good moral standards can not paint well." (《芥舟学画编·卷二·山水·避俗》) It is just an example of such kind of spiritual purport. In "Dong Zhuang Lun Hua", Wang Yu (王昱) in Qing Dynasty had said that:

The first step of being a good painter is to erect high standard of morality, the one who has it, naturally has an aboveboard sense from the painting, otherwise there is a corrupt sense emerging from his painting even if his paintings look like good. A text is just like the author himself, and it is also the same with painting. (Yu, 1957).

So we can find that the personality cultivation in the culture of ancient Chinese leisure is quite significant.

Chinese traditional painting stresses "cultivation of spirit", which is undoubtedly an effective antidote to

physical and mental harm brought by outside stimulation leisure. Meanwhile it is an important aspect of cultivation of life. Mencius said: "I am good at cultivating my righteousness." "Righteousness" represents Dao and is to broaden one's mind. Do things according to Dao that will lead to a noble heart. A successful Chinese painting can show the life concept of the painter who should already have sufficient experience in art creation. Shi Dao (石涛) said:

Mountains and rivers give spirit to a man, because a man since his childhood has had the ability to understand the nature, If not, how can he make a painting with marvelous scenery, like standing arches, majestic shapes, steep mountains and so on? Hence his paintings have shapes and spirit of the nature. (Zhu, 2004, p.292).

"It is an important thing that one gets cultivation in childhood." (The Meng Hexagram, *Book of Change*. 《周易》蒙卦, "蒙以养正, 圣功也") In childhood, observing the nature is the cultivation for the creation of painting, more important to breed the righteousness, Dao and life. "Cultivation of spirit" not only can be gained from observing the landscape but also can be obtained by appreciating paintings. Zong Bing (宗炳) had gotten the spirit by appreciating paintings, he said:

Live in a casual life, drink wine and harp, expand picture scrolls to look at, sit by pictures and observe landscape, appreciate natural scenery and feel the liveness in the field. Although the paintings of beauty and sage shined in a desolated era, we can observe the beauty of the landscape. The spirit of landscape merges into my mind and incurs infinite feelings and thoughts. What else do I need?" (Zhu, 2004, p.65).

2. LEISURE FROM PASSIVE SYMBOLIZED STYLE TO INDEPENDENT CREATION

Because of the spreading of massive entertainment broadcasts, modern media, films and promotional advertising, it seems that others' good experience can be copied and pasted. People in the modern society have lost themselves in vain dreams. Leisure seems to become a symbol of status and wealth, or some kind of fashion economic fast food for some of the people. Because modern people are familiar with quick rhythm, Leisure seems to have become a task or a conceptual symbol, so it is shallow and utilitarian, loses its real connotation. It gives rise to the problem of passive and symbolized leisure. Geoffrey Godbey, a professor in US studying leisure, defined leisure as "a relatively free life extricated from the external pressure of cultural and physical environment enabling individuals to act by their own favorite and instinctively felt valuable way driven by the love in the heart and providing a basis for the faith" (Godbey, 2000, p.14). So leisure is considered to

proceed in “an own favorite and instinctively felt valuable way”. Its purpose is to allow everyone to be himself in the leisure life and to enrich the life meaning rather than a replica of boring life just like old wine in a new bottle. Hence leisure should be equipped with the autonomy and initiative, and let the meaning of life be filling.

The independent creation in painting performs as breaking predecessors’ rules and creating new styles of painting. Shi Dao in *Kugua Monk’s Picture Quotations* (《苦瓜和尚画语录》) said, “What rule can be followed before a rule enacted by the predecessors? After the rule is enacted, then there is no tolerance for new rules.” He recommended “follow the ancient’s heart” rather than “follow the ancient’s track” and he emphasized “I am what I am. My existence has meaning.” It can be understood as painting is in accordance with the painter’s disposition. The problem of passive and symbolized leisure is exactly like Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) said that “It is suitable for others but not for you.” So leisure is more important to be a kind of existence, a kind of being truly oneself. Leisure should not be mandatory or like the passive drift. It should be actively creative to release its true charm. Just like the innocence and truth of a painting which are not contained by the ancients’ limitation.

Independent means creation in the meantime but independent does not mean indulgence, and creation does not mean spoof. Art will degenerate and its value will be greatly reduced when people lose their original understanding to nature of heart or lose the authentic moral belief. The creation actually has multiple meanings, but from the original meaning, I think creation can be divided into two categories: one category of creation conforms to personal nature, the other does not. Conforming to personal nature means that the subject integrates into the truth of origin in which his mind is complete free. His showing the existence is conforming to personal nature in this time. This category is characterized as presenting the truth and being completely free. A creation of not conforming to personal nature means that the creation is through a mind which is not completely free. This kind of creation departs from the truth of origin and can not present the integrated feeling of life but break the integrity of the personal nature. It is characterized as scraping together type and destructive.

Chinese painting is fastidious about the “principle”, which reflects the natural existence and personal nature. As Buyantu (布颜图) wrote in his book of “The heart law of painting”, “A painter who does not follow rules is not ruleless. Change is a principle.” This “principle” is the natural principle. The “personal nature” as a complete existing state of a human being, it can be said that the personal nature can adapt the principle to reach to “one” state. Shi Tao said, “Not to establish one rule is my principle, not to omit a method is my aim.” “Mountains and rivers are gotten from me. I was born out of the mountains and rivers.” He wanted to return the original

natural world and get its essence. Guo Xi (郭熙) said “Now the scholars from Shangdong all copy Li Yingqiu (李营丘). Painters from Shaanxi only copy Fan Kuan (范宽). In their own study, slavishly follow the predecessors ... So I think that a good scholar should not be always bounded to a school.” (《林泉高致》). “Not be always bounded to a school” so that one is not fettered by tradition and is free for creation. Pan Tianshou (潘天寿) said, “To study painting, one needs to know the ancient methods and also understand the natural rules; when he is painting, he should throw out the ancient methods and natural rules thus may be successful.” Not be fettered by tradition, nor be fettered by nature, adapts one’s own heart, such a creation could be the truly outstanding creation. As painter Yun Nantian (恽南田) in the early Qing Dynasty said “A painter should be close to break out and want to paint when he is painting. With messy vitality, he is not fettered by any methods and paints as ruleless” (《南田画跋》). So the spirit of Chinese painting is as Shi Tao said “There are rules which are born from no rules.” “There is one rule which is above other rules.” Gu Kaizhi (顾恺之) commented on the Emperor Shennong Fuxi (伏羲神农) portrait, “Spirit belongs to a untouchable world, it actually gets some of the spirit.” This is also the true spirit of independent creation. It is a full reference for promoting the contemporary leisure of independent creation.

3. THE ECO-DESTRUCTIVE LEISURE TRANSFORMS TO ECO-FRIENDLY LEISURE

Whether the leisure consumption style of resources wastes which is difficult to be curbed, or the excessive leisure consumption style which is causing industrial pollution, these leisure produce incalculable ecological damage that should not be overlooked. These problems have a close relationship with modern leisure. Such as some large bath places have extravagant consumption of water resources, animal fur products are sold widely, shark’s fins and some bird’s nests are sold as upscale food and the widespread use of disposable chopsticks have directly damaged on the environment. Human beings and the nature have a relationship for isomorphic growing. The nature is the home for human beings’ living and breeding from one generation to another. But our home has been suffering an unprecedented destruction today, and especially after entering the industrial society, there are a fast growing process of environmental degradation and massive extinction of plants and animals so ecological balance is threatened. Now human beings have been often affected by natural disaster retribution. The U.S. movie blockbuster “Avatar” is almost a reproduction of human beings damaging their home since the Industrial Revolution. The documentary “home” directed by French director Yang En—Arthur is a more distressed show for destruction situation of

this planet and deeply calls on people's conscience for the ecology. Everyone in the planet home is not a lonely island and moderns' environmental awareness has to be improved.

Unlike the thinking from Western dual treatment which emphasizes human beings conquest to the nature, the ancient Chinese wisdom is the wisdom as human is a part of nature and nature is a part of life, the nature and human should be reflected and included each other, and they are in one. "Moderation" (《中庸》) has a saying, "One is possessed of the most complete sincerity in the world. Then he can give its full development to his nature. Able to give full development to his own nature, he can do the same to the nature of other men. Able to give full development to the nature of other men, everyone can give full development to the natures of animals and things. Able to give full development to the natures of creatures and things, they can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth. Able to assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, they may form a unit with Heaven and Earth." The nature of things also is human nature and they are fundamentally connected. The natural world is the world of the human life. Zheng Banqiao (郑板桥) liked painting bamboos and his paintings have some meaning. He did not just paint bamboos for fun and his poetry said "I listen in my office to rustling bamboo; it seems to complain of its woe as people do. Petty official, I should try to play my part; to ease shivering leaf as sorrow-laden heart." Because of this kind of relationship between human lives and the natural, human treating the nature should like "the same kind of creature", "having the spring weather for things" and "respecting things' existence." The relationship between human lives and the natural world should be "Every pine and bamboo is a true friend; mountain birds and flowers are good brothers."

Chinese traditional painting has a big difference from Western oil painting. It is that Chinese traditional painting mainly focused on the natural landscape and Western painting likes painting people and events. This painting difference does not mean that Chinese national tradition did not emphasis on people, but rather reflects the wisdom of the Chinese people life and leisure. A person is a person in the nature world. He can not leave from the origin and exist independently. He can achieve a true holistic and well rounded personality only depending on the origin. Therefore, Confucius was delighted with a dream of Zeng Xi (曾皙) who said: "In the late spring, put on spring clothes; I go with five or six young men, and six or seven teenagers, to the Yishui river for a shower; blown in the wind on a ritual platform of begging rain, then sing back."

Why does a gentleman love landscape? What is his purpose? Appreciating natural landscape is a person's familiar thing. When yelling toward springs and stones, some kind of happiness often happens. When looked as if a farmer or fisher in seclusion, a kind of comfort is often felt. When apes and cranes flying and sounding, some

kind of intimacy is often loved ... But living in a place round springs and forest, and following rosy clouds only appear in one's sleep which may not be reality. Now there are excellent painters to paint flourishing landscape. One can sit in the banquet hall: looks at springs and mountains on the painting; apes and birds sounds seem to be heard; appreciates the landscape painting of dazing colors. Is this delightful? Does this go into the heart? This is original reason that people like landscape painting. (Xu, 1987, pp.285-286).

The spirit of Chinese traditional landscape painting reflects a close relationship between human and the nature. In Nan Dynasty, Wang Wei (王微) in his "Explain Painting" depicted his feelings toward the nature: "Looks at Autumn Clouds; my spirit flies; goes into the spring wind; thinks magnificently. Even if I am glad with owning gold and jade, what gladness does it like my feelings in the nature?" Human beings can feel a kind of content, open mind and ecstasy in the natural world. It is an important spiritual destination for Chinese traditional leisure.

In the history of Chinese painting, there is an important theory, "Learn from the nature. Get ideas from the heart." So there is a corresponding between inside and outside. One should involve in the natural world then paint, so that every painting will be beautiful, a natural way and showing the humanity. Human beings continually get nutrition from the natural world. The humanity also is a part of the natural world. When one gazes at natural landscape, the landscape shows humanity. In this way, if he paints the landscape, can you recognize the painting comes from inside or outside? The painting must be totally complete and include one million of factors. In his "Postscript for Guangchuan painting", Dong You (董道) had such a record for Li Cheng's creative experience, "Li Cheng has more advantages than other painters. His advantages may be that he is good at painting mountains, lakes, rivers, springs and rocks: rocks perching and valley hiding, several high mountains covered with green, some of them embedded into others. He may have liked painting since he was born. He has accumulated his like in his heart and digested his observation in a long time. He forgets what he has seen but only focuses on his spirit. He can not hide his marvelous thoughts which he has too many. Someday, he sees the mountains with one connected another and beautiful colors in the sky, he suddenly releases his painting energy and can not stop painting." Only when a person and the nature are in this compatible state, his spirit can completely return to the origin and paint the landscape with the true spirit. German scholar Joseph Pieper wrote "The man at leisure in soul is a man in harmony with the world." This is similar with the Chinese thought that human and the nature are compatible. This thought has a fundamental meaning to guide eco-friendly leisure and it is also the ideological foundation and fundamental guarantee for establishing an environment-friendly society.

CONCLUSION

Historically, the Chinese traditional painting mainly painted landscape, birds and flowers. It was important way and content of leisure for ancient Chinese scholars. It greatly enhanced the quality of their leisure life. Hence, the traditional painting theory as a theoretical summary for painting and an aesthetic improvement theory is naturally rich in ideas and wisdom of leisure. Especially, the leisure thoughts of mind cultivation, independent creation and eco-friendly style in the traditional painting theory contribute lots of inspiration to the construction of leisure culture in modern society. This construction is more of a social and government behavior, relating to reproduction of productivity as well as redistribution of resources. It pays more attention to economic benefits rather than individual spiritual and cultural needs. By the social development, the ideas and wisdom of leisure in the traditional culture and traditional painting theory will undoubtedly show more their value and charm when people clearly aware that highly developed material civilization not only bring benefits but also bring alienation to human, really care about their own happiness and the meaning of life, and elevate the concept of leisure from merely spending the spare time to seeking the true meaning of life.

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