

Penetrating into the Eye of “Power”

--- *Scientific Discipline* and Artistic Revolution in May 4 Period

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Abstract

Taking a wide view on modern arts history, we may find that Chinese arts had changed the most in the period of the May 4 period. Furthermore, Chinese arts in the whole 20th century tillered from the parent body of the arts of the May 4 period. This paper, from the perspective of the eye of power by Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, examines the arts in the period, introduces the conception of scientific discipline and tries to analyze the sociological reasons why realistic transformation of Chinese paintings grew up to be the discourse power and the internal operation mechanism when it conflicts with the non-power discourse.

Keywords: Discourse power, Scientific discipline, Realistic transformation of Chinese painting

The May 4 art revolution is an issue talked about by the historians devoting to the research of the twentieth century modern arts. Great works and numerous short articles carried on the newspapers or magazines can be broadly divided into two categories. One stresses the description of the May 4 Revolution on the basis of historical data; the other focuses on the examination of the influences from it. The later can be roughly divided into two. One affirms that the May 4 art revolution had contributed a lot to the progress of modern Chinese arts; the other pays more attention to the negative effects. Some people are for it, some deny it. Some people have pessimistic attitudes to it, some have optimistic attitudes. There are even some people who are against and for it at the same time. I try to abandon those opinions and apply Foucault's discourse-power method, put the May 4 Art Revolution in the background of the Enlightenment to study the sociological reasons why Realistic Transformation of Chinese Painting becomes the power of discourse.

1. The emergence of “Scientific Discipline” in the May 4 period

Discipline is from the book of *Discipline and Punishment* written by Foucault and published in 1975. It was a new term created by Foucault to refer to a special modern power technology. Standardization was the cardinal feature of the technology. Foucault talked about in the book the Bentham's prison of panoramic view. He thought it would be gradually expanded like a plague, and permeated into every cell and every corner of the society. Every one would be under the invisible surveillance and every one had the right to exercise the monitoring function. Thus the operation of power became more convenient, rapid and effective. He proclaimed the arrival of the era of a "disciplinary society". Since power is everywhere, then it is difficult for discourse to avoid the restriction of power. In Foucault's view, on the one hand, discourse was produced and disseminated by power, and its function was to provide the so-called proper norms for the power operation; on the other hand, the production and dissemination of discourse again gave new birth to power. All intellectuals of humanities, including scholars, teachers and students would be involved in the construction of this power system and the operation of the control system. So there was no universal truth, and the truth was just the result of the construction of the discourse power. Foucault's theory provides a new perspective for us to examine the problem. The May 4 period in China was also undoubtedly a typical era of discipline. And science played a leading role in the era.

The May 4 era experienced the odd situation that had never been emerged in the last three thousand years. The challenge of Western civilization did not only economically and technologically dwarf the Chinese empire lagging behind, but also deeply shook the authority of value and culture of thousands of years. “The disintegration of the traditional system may lead to social psychological decadence, which in turn calls for new identity and loyalty.” (Huntington, 1989, p35). The loss of traditional authority resulted in the desire for new authority psychologically. And "science" had been rapidly developed in the modern Western society and brought

tremendous impacts on Chinese society. Modern Chinese intellectuals found its magic power, considered it as a good medicine and brought it to China. "Mr. Science" received unprecedented respects. In 1923, Hu Shi once said, "in the past thirty years, a term has been put in the status of supreme dignity in China. Whether those who understand it or not, whether those who are conservatives or reformers are afraid to openly express contempt or insults to it. That term is 'science'." (Hu, 2003, p196). Although in this period, there were almost no results of scientific research in China, more than seventy journals were named after science and hundreds of publications were involved in this thought trend. The word of "science" became most popular during this period. The controversy of science and metaphysics, starting from the lecture by Zhang Junli in Beijing University in 1923, highlighted the universal status of the authority of "science". Although this controversy did not form a final rational conclusion, as far as the lineup, the momentum and the reasoning and logic are concerned, the school of science was in absolutely overwhelming position. The school of science firmly believed that China's progress depended on "science". Life philosophy could not be away from "science" and scientific methods could control life attitudes. If China wanted to be strong, she must take "science" as a teacher, and use "science" to guide everything. "Since then, it will be prosperous in Chinese academic forest and will function for the mortal beings. It is only science that can undertake the mission!" (Note 1). Thus, the concept of "science" got rapidly spread in the debate and was rooted in the heart of the people. "Science" was talked about on any convenient occasions, which seemed to be fashionable. Science became a special power of technology, and the "scientific discipline" in academic circle in May 4 period had already come into being.

2. The generation discourse power of the arts: "realistic transformation of Chinese Painting"

In an era, the formation of mainstream art style does not depend on the law of art itself. It is the result selected by the dominant social thought. Similarly, in May 4 period, words of such thinkers as Kang Youwei, Chen Duxiu and Cai Yuanpei, etc. directly promoted the transformation and generation of "scientific discipline" in the art circle. That is the "realistic transformation of Chinese Painting". It is an important concept-oriented factor for the traditional arts in a changing period of hesitation, wandering and blindly-seeking remedy.

Kang Youwei, in 1917, in *Prelude to the Contents of the paintings of Grass Hall*, cried that "modern Chinese paintings have declined utterly". He put forward reforming Chinese paintings by turning to the ancient times and opening the new era by combining Chinese and Western paintings. In his book of *Save China with Material*, from the perspective of the relations between arts and material civilization, he highly recommended the form method of European paintings. Chen Duxiu in January 1919 clearly proposed that "if we want to improve Chinese painting, the first thing is to get rid of the royal painting for if we want to reform Chinese painting we can not adopt the realistic spirit of the Western painting". Cai Yuanpei, the president of Beijing University, who advocated replacing religion by aesthetic education, proposed that national people of cultural progress must especially popularize the artistic education since science education is implemented". (Cai, 1987, p57). And he elevated the scientific arts to the height of the new educational curriculum and believed that arts "can not exist without the spirit of science."

Making a calm analysis, we may easily find that Kang advocated the realism with the purpose of "statecraft for practical use". Chen Duxiu recommended it based on his admiration to the spirit of entering the world of the modern European realism, while Cai Yuanpei gave the task of replacing religion with aesthetic education to "scientific art"(Can ethereal and indifference in Chinese Paintings better reflect the religious significance?). All these were the ways of speech in the intellectual circle derived from "scientific discipline". The dominant power of the discourse directly resulted in the formation of the discourse power in artistic circle, that is "realistic transformation of Chinese painting". And Xu Beihong is undoubtedly the most active advocate and practitioner.

Early in the summer of 1918, when drawing with the students from the Brushwork Association of Beijing University at West Hill, he finished the picture of "Old Pine Tree on West Hill". It employed some approaches of the Western pencil sketch to express the sense of three-dimensional images. In 1919, Xu went to study in France and began to learn from the great masters of realism, such as Flamenco and Dagnan, etc. He put what he had learned about the human anatomy and his understanding of the painting method about the human body structure into the creation of Chinese paintings. Since then, Xu Beihong held high the banner of realism. He became "unique and radical". In his book of "The artistic problems in current China", he clearly stated that "artists must have the same spirit of seeking truth as the scientists have. Studying science, people should take mathematics as the basis; and arts studying must be based on pencil sketch... Since the artists have the spirit of seeing the truth, they must take expounding the natural beauty as their duty (not just the obligation) ..."In his eyes, the essences of arts and science were the same. Both expressed the truth of the objective world. Xu Beihong's realistic paintings are vivid in the form and precise in science. His viewpoint is no doubt completely in line with the requirements

of "scientific discipline". Thus it grew up to be the power discourse, which is no longer a tree without root or water without source.

3. The discourse conflicts in artistic circle in the context of "scientific discipline"

Foucault believed that any words of any age are not the fruits of individual creation and imagination but of the power. Power, through a series of complex procedures and means, controls, selects and spreads words. Then, specifically speaking how did the different discourses in the May 4 period game in the context of "scientific discipline"?

3.1 Realism vs. traditionalism

Such scholars as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Chen Duxiu and Lu Xun etc, who advocated reforming Chinese painting, criticized the traditional painting of the late Chinese feudal society. Especially they took the impressionistic paintings of men of letters and those by "Four Wangs" School as the main target of revolutionizing Chinese painting. Against their bitter criticism and total repudiation of "literati painting", Chen Shiceng once wrote an article of "value of literati painting", which gives a more systematic exposition to the noble and independent spirit of ancient and modern fine "literati paintings". He was "the first person who clearly affirmed theoretically the value of literati paintings in the 20th century". (Liu, 1996, p742). Subsequent to the climax of the controversy between realism and the traditional school in the north part of China, the old-and-new disputes in Guangdong artistic circle began to be gradually intensified, which finally led to the debate between "Lingnan school" and "Chinese painting research association. Thus a great debate of Chinese painting began and became a major event, which can not be ignored, in modern Chinese art history.

standing on today's horizon to look back, as far as art and its nature are concerned, Chen Shiceng clearly surpassed Kang Youwei, Chen Duxiu and Xu Beihong. The paintings of two Gaos and one Chen made praising difficult. However, why didn't the traditional school occupy the dominant place of the artistic circle at that time while the realism alone occupied the leading position? This forces us to turn to scientific discipline in the May 4 period.

What Chen Shiceng insisted on is the value reason of traditional painting, while realism focused on the instrumental rationality of "science". The concept of "science" and its application in practice directly resulted in the powerful and wealthy Western countries, which is a fact accepted almost universally by Chinese people in modern and contemporary times. But when the way of thinking behind "scientific" concept and the spiritual connotation are released, especially when "science" is regarded as a philosophy or world view, the difference between it and the traditional Chinese culture will be immediately visible. And at the same time, it gradually deviates from the specific content of practice and becomes a tool to be sufficient to destroy traditional culture and value system and life faith. Therefore, in this sense, the result of the discourse conflicts can be predicted.

Furthermore, if the traditional school was defined as "conservatism", it could not get rid of the so-called fate of conservatists by F.A. Hayek, "as for the nature of conservatism, except the only way shown by conservatives, there is no other way to choose. As for reducing unnecessary developments, conservatism is likely to succeed in defending against the trend of times. However, because conservatives can not point another direction, it can not stop the flow tends to continue developing. So the conservatism is always involuntarily following the times. The seesaw game between conservatives and the progressives can only affect the speed of the development of modern society but can not change its direction..." (Gombrich, 1987, p7)

3.2 Realism vs. modernism

In 1929, Ministry of Education of the KMT government held the first National Art Exhibition. In this period, the influential artists such as Xu Beihong, Xu Zhimo, and Li Yishi etc. launched a tit for tat debate. Such articles as "Confusion", "I have doubts," "Incomprehensible confusion" "I am not confused", etc. were published, which made the controversy of realists and modernists sensational.

Although it seems today that Xu Beihong has a narrow understanding of Western modern art, his radical words undoubtedly mean that the power discourse is defending its position of authority. "Realistic transformation of Chinese Painting" is Xu's consistent artistic view. So in the article of "confusion", he did not only apply the realistic criteria to evaluate a number of ancient Chinese painters, but also named the landscape paintings of Cezanne, Matisse and four Wangs as "artificial group". He spared no effort to point out that Cezanne had "strong desire, but is short of ability emotionally". Here "ability" refers to the realistic capacity required by Xu Beihong.

In addition, the modernist art, which once reaches its peak in the twenties and thirties of the nineteenth century, had not got further development, which resulted from many factors. One reason is that some modern painters were lack of strict training. Enthusiasm and passion could sometimes lessen their discernment so that their

creation only remained on the surface of plagiarism. The second reason is that controlled by the "scientific discourse", and in the conflicts of the collective consciousness of enlightening national salvation and personal awareness, the contradiction of "science and freedom" emerged. Thus the modernist art highlighting freedom and individuality must be in the status of non-mainstream discourse.

3.3 Realism vs. expressionism

Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmin both advocated reforming Chinese painting. But on this difficult journey of exploration, they opened up two different paths. In Lin's opinion, artistic language and ideas of the post-modern impressionism, expressionism and other Western painting schools and the traditional Chinese ink painting were different in approach but equally satisfactory in result. Therefore, he showed great interests in experimenting the integration of Chinese ink painting and the Western painting and tried to find a suitable way from "the Western and Chinese methods".

Compared with Xu Beihong's realistic ink printing of great spectacle, Lin Fengmian had a lonely exploration. The reason lies in the essential differences. Xu reflected his "collective consciousness", while Lin displayed his "individual consciousness." Varieties of social diseases in the first half of the 20th century and Xu's life experience stimulated his strong suffering consciousness. Therefore, after deeply exploring the Western arts and experiencing the real life, he demonstrated more moral sense of that "every one has a duty to his country". His opinion on arts of "realistic transformation of Chinese Painting " more clearly expressed his compassion of saving the mortal beings from the troubles. In the context of the salvation and Enlightenment, the scientific spirit the scientific approaches of "realistic transformation of Chinese painting" could be easily put into practice. Thus, it firmly controlled the discourse power and Lin Fengmian's opinion on arts, which stressed the personal feelings (emotion), was ignored, becoming the appropriate marginal discourse.

Finally, it should be noted that the reason why "realistic reform of Chinese painting" becomes the discourse power lies in that it was in line with the "scientific discipline", and it had strong duplication. "Realistic system" had educational "reason" to follow. In a short period, a large number of ordinary talents could be trained to do the practical work. And the audiences were many. This directly resulted in, in the changing context of the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, the establishment of new China, that "realistic transformation of Chinese painting" started to reproduce its own unique power of discourse. Namely, the realism art, socialist realist art were in the leading position.

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