

Brief History of Painting in Modern China*

ZHANG Pei, CHEN Huiping, ZHOU Shanrong
Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China

Dianshizhai Pictorial, originated in 1884, is the first pictorial of news and current affairs in China's modern history. Its elegant and prevailing expression forms greatly broadened the audience range of the publication and became an important graphic material for studying the transformation of social life in the late Qing Dynasty of China. This paper claims to give a brief account of the "history of painting" in modern China and provides a spacious research perspective for the above studies.

Keywords: *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, painting history, brief introduction

Preface

Taking *Dianshizhai Pictorial* as an example to observe the changes in social life in modern China, we need not only to make a scrupulous case study of the pictorial itself but also to track it back to its macroscopic background. Therefore, the author will briefly describe the social and cultural arteries behind the rise and development of *Dianshizhai Pictorial* from the perspectives of modern art history and the development of modern pictorials.

Brief Introduction to Modern Art History

At present, historians divide the period of modern Chinese history into the period from the 1911 Revolution to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. During this period, the Chinese community form changed from a traditional feudal society to a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, and saving the nation from subjugation and securing its survival became the theme of the times. There are extensive conflicts, cooperation, and integration between China and the West in politics, economy, culture, and other aspects. For this reason, the modern art concept pursues more political and social significance, to transform society, enlightening people's wisdom, and propagating struggle, rather than just aesthetic value.

* This paper is the periodic research result of the research project: Planning of Philosophy and Social Sciences in Guizhou Province in 2018-Individually Listed Studies of Chinese Ancient Civilization (贵州省 2018 年度哲学社会科学规划国学单列课题阶段性成果), Research on the Compilation and Publication of the Anthology of Special Collections of the Works of Scholars of Song Dynasty in Song and Yuan Dynasties (宋元时期宋人别集的编纂与刊刻研究, Serial Number 18GZGX25); The Expressive Practice of Urban Media in the Late Qing Dynasty: On the Cognition and Expression of Gender Ethics in *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial* (1884-1898) (晚清都市媒体的表意实践——论《点石斋画报》(1884-1898)对性别伦理的认知与表达, Serial Number 202010015034); Research on the Artistic, Modern Communication and Publishing of *Dian-shi Zhai Pictorial* (1884-1898) (《点石斋画报》(1884-1898)的图文艺术性、现代性传播与出版研究; Serial Number Eb202008).

ZHANG Pei, Ph.D., Post-doctoral of Law, Associate Professor, Master Instructor, Department of editing and publishing, School of Journalism and Publication, Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China.

CHEN Huiping, Undergraduate, Department of Editing and Publishing, School of Journalism and Publication, Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China.

ZHOU Shanrong, Undergraduate, Department of Editing and Publishing, School of Journalism and Publication, Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China.

Hu Man, a well-known art theorist, divides the history of modern Chinese art into “contemporary Chinese aesthetic educational thought and various schools of art”, “revolutionary art movement”, “art of the War of Resistance Against Japan”, and “the trend of new Chinese art”.

The thought of aesthetic education in contemporary China was first put forward by Yuan-Pei Tsai, the president of Peking University at that time: “Academic openness, freedom of thought, and the compatibility of the display school and the ideal school of literature and fine arts”. As a firm advocate of the New Culture Movement, Yuan-Pei Tsai fully affirmed the same important position of aesthetics and science in human growth and advocated that aesthetic education and intellectual education should supplement each other. It is also intended to break people’s feudal superstition by utilizing aesthetic education and guide people to attain advanced, scientific, lively, and practical culture and art.

Art is a great reflection of social reality. In the late Qing Dynasty, the government was faced with troubles such as official corruption at home and aggression from abroad; especially after the Opium War, the governing rule of the Qing Dynasty was in jeopardy. In the meantime, the small-scale peasant economy gradually disintegrated, and the national capitalist economy developed rapidly. Western Civilization Forcedly Breaks into the Vision of Eastern Culture by Means of Hardship and Cannon, seized the cultural living space, and accelerated integration and mutual promotion among civilizations. Therefore, the art at the time of social transformation has the following characteristics: First, traditional palace art and literati art are in a weak state. Second, the citizen art and the modernization of traditional art are in the boom.

The paradox of history lies in that the more turbulent era is, the more heroes emerge; the more chaotic the situation is, the more classics can be created—modern China is facing a major change which never happened in the past century; the contention of many ideas, the contention of different traditional culture, and the conditions of the generation of talents have created many distinctive art schools in this period, which have affected so far.

There are so many famous art schools in the history of modern painting including the School of Sea Painting, the School of Lingnan Painting, the School of Jinling Painting, the School of Beijing-Tianjin Painting, and the School of Chang’an Painting.

In the mid-19th century, Shanghai as a trading port of economic and cultural exchanges frequently attracted a group of painters. And these painters gradually formed the school of Maritime painting. “Maritime Three Ren” (Ren Xiong, Ren Xun, Ren Yi) is a representative figure of it. Its painting style integrates traditional Chinese painting and western painting art, reflecting the atmosphere of public life, and enjoying both refined and popular tastes. The painting content is mostly flower and bird painting, followed by characters, landscape paintings, and other types of subjects.

Developed after the Maritime Painting School, Lingnan Painting School is mainly composed of Guangdong painters whose representative figures are “Gao Jianfu, Gao Qifeng, Chen Shuren” and Guan Shanyue, Yang Shanshen. And its painting content adopts Lingnan characteristic landscapes, learns the realistic style of Western painting schools, and learns from others.

Jinling School of Painting has the differences between the old and the new. Jinling Painting School generally refers to the one that arises in the late Ming and early Qing dynasty in Nanjing area art whose representative figures are Gong Xian, Gao Cen, and so on. And its painting content is mainly about Jiangnan landscape with magnificent style. The New Jinling School refers to the Jiangsu School of Painting, which was born in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Its main representatives are Xu Beihong, Zhang Daqian, and Fu Baoshi. The New Jinling Painting School and the Jinling Painting School are similar in the human geographical

environment, and both have unique feelings for the ink expression of natural landscape. But making a comparison between the Jinling Painting School and the new one, the latter developed and matured in the background of the new China, with the traditional pen and ink to write realistic landscape, showing the new era style (such as: Fu Baoshi's "to be detailed Jiangshan painting" and "Yan'an Baotashan") while the former is at a time of social unrest in the replacement of dynasties and its landscape paintings reflect the traditional Chinese literati feelings (such as: Zhu Da's "Skylight Cloud Map" and Shi Tao's "Jinshan Longyou Temple Map").

The Beijing-Tianjin Painting School originated from four groups of traditional Chinese painting, namely, Xuannan Huashe, the Chinese Painting Research Association, the Lake Society Painting Association, and the Songfeng Painting Association in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China. Its purpose is to "study ancient laws and learn new knowledge" and its main representatives are Xiao Junxian, Chen Shizeng, and Li Keran.

Chang'an School of Painting was born in the late 1950s to the early 1960s, which is active in Xi'an, Shanxi Province and its representative figures are Zhao Wangyun, He Haixia, Huang Zhou, and so on. Chang'an Painting School's works depict the natural scenery and customs of Shanxi area, which enrich and innovate the form and content of Chinese painting.

The five major art schools have their own characteristics, and they compete.

The failure of the Revolution of 1911 gave a deep introspection and understanding to the group of intellectuals that China could not be fundamentally saved by utensils and institutions alone. The subsequent launching of the New Culture Movement and the May 4th Movement not only widely enlightened the people's wisdom, but also imported scientific Marxist Ideological into China, and the proletariat began to gradually mount the center of the historical stage. More and more people began to pay attention to the working class. In the meanwhile, the artworks expressing the life of the populace and revolutionary movements were the trends of this period.

The September 18 Incident in 1931 broke out and the local Anti-Japanese War officially began. In the July 7th Incident in 1937 Japan invaded China in an all-around way, which opened the prelude of the National War of Resistance Against Japan. The whole of China was shrouded in the shadow of national subjugation and extinction. As a result, propaganda paintings such as exposing Japanese military atrocities against China, uniting the revolutionary anti-Japanese war united front and inspiring morale were quite popular during this period. At the same time, modern art fully absorbs the unique features of western art form, light, shadow, color, shape, and integrates the characteristics of oriental art emphasizing internal freehand brushwork. The continuous integration and innovation of the two have given rise to new vitality and created many distinctive works of art.

Brief History of Modern Pictorials

"The ancient scholars important in learning, set the picture on the left and set the article on the right. Plain image in the picture, plain reason in the article." (Zheng Qiao 《Notification • Atlas • Image》). The left picture and the right history are the customary traditions of Chinese historians, and the historical origin of pictorials. The invasion of Western civilization has broken the closed and independent social environment bred by China's agricultural society for thousands of years. Collaborative and efficient mechanized large-scale production pursues a broader market space. The demand and sensitivity for market information are much higher than that for seasonal climate and other information in the small-scale peasant economy. Under different social

forms, the great differences in politics, economy, culture, and other fields have stimulated more Chinese people to appreciate Western civilization. The maturity of papermaking techniques, lithographic printing technology, and movable type printing technology has provided technological support to meet the above-market needs. The unstable political environment objectively reduced certain institutional barriers, and the development of industry and the participation of Chinese and Western talents laid an economic and professional foundation for the establishment and development of many pictorials.

When concerning the specific form of pictorials, most scholars such as Huang Tianpeng and Jiang Yinen believe that *Dianshizhai Pictorial* is the first pictorial in modern Chinese history, but Wu Guozhong believes that before the modern pictorial was formed, there was a gestation period of about 10 years from 1874 to 1884. So, it is *Children's Monthly* that should be acknowledged as a starting point. *Dianshizhai Pictorial* and *Enlightenment Pictorial* in the late Qing Dynasty and *World and Truth Pictorial* in the Revolution of 1911 period appeared in turn, next, *Good Friend Pictorial* and *Popular Pictorial* in the 1920s and 1930s, *Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei Pictorial* and *United Pictorial*. During the Anti-Japanese War, there is *People's Pictorial* and it is *People's Army Pictorial* that developed during the War of Liberation as well as *Shenbao*, *Times*, and other major newspapers and many comic magazines in the later period.

However, from the perspective of image creation technology, Chen Yang believes that the publication of modern pictorials has undergone two visual changes: "The first one is represented by lithographic pictorials, which opened the era of image cognition through lithographic pictures and provided people with visual materials to understand the outside world. For the second time, it is represented by photographic pictorials. It leads people to the society of watching by means of truth-seeking or entertainment through photographs, which brings about the popularization and routinization of video" (Chen Yang. *Visual modernity: Modern pictorial publishing and visual change* [J]. Chinese publishing, 2015 (14): 62-65). The quality of pictorial content and the overall quality of readers' reading level and aesthetic interest are interrelated. The pictorial realizes the enlightenment of readers' knowledge with vivid graphic materials, meanwhile, readers' pursuit of knowledge, attention to social events, and participation in current affairs and politics reacts to the improvement of the content quality of the pictorial. At first, the pictorial targeted readers with middle and lower levels of knowledge, so the content, especially its image itself, is more inclined to novel and interesting social news. In addition, the main purposes of the early posters were to entertain the public, break the feudal superstition, and learn to promote advanced Western cultural technology. For example, the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, founded by the British Meicha in 1884, aims at selecting novel and interesting events, which is created or copied by Chinese painters as images for readers to verify or add pleasure. The *Enlightenment Pictorial*, founded in June 1902, was committed to enlightening children and paying attention to their growth and education. The *Picture Daily* founded in 1909 openly said: "The establishment of the museum, in order to open up the social atmosphere, the growth of national intelligence, and no heart of trade" (Codification Committee of Shanghai Art Records: *Shanghai Art Records*. Shanghai: 2005 edition of *Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Press*, p. 413).

However, due to the differences in economic level and the ability to understand images, not all readers can understand the content of the image, even if there is an explanation attached. So, the actual reader group of pictorials is different from the expected reader group-readers with higher educational levels and stronger economic ability that have a stronger willingness and actual action to buy pictorials.

The prosperity of modern pictorials is not only the result of the blending of Chinese and Western cultures and the maturity of printing technology but also the epitome of the economic development of modern Chinese cities (especially the early trading port cities). With its rich and easy-to-understand image materials and vivid and concise text explanations and comments, it fully demonstrates the new knowledge and development achievements of education, literature, fashion, entertainment, science, and technology at home and abroad under the development of the times, as well as the prosperous life of citizens, and has made important contributions to the transmission of advanced life concepts, the elimination of feudal superstitions, and the emancipation of the mind.

With the deepening of reform, the maturity of the newspaper media, and the improvement of the quality of the pictorial readers, the pictorial began to play its role as mass media, and became a soft weapon for various political parties and classes to elaborate ideas, unite the masses and encourage struggle. For example, the *Truth Pictorial* founded in 1912 is a famous news photography revolutionary pictorial in modern Chinese history. It takes the art form of realistic painting, news photography, commentary, historical painting, art painting, and comic painting, points out the current disadvantages, explores the truth for the people, and influences the current situation with public opinion pressure. The *Liberation Pictorial*, founded in 1920, aims at promoting women's liberation.

In addition, some comprehensive newspapers and periodicals pay more and more attention to the selection of pictures and texts, and play their respective advantages with traditional painting newspapers, which has become a major epitome of modern urban culture. More famous are *Friends Pictorial* and *Shenbao*, among them *Shenbao* is regarded as the beginning and symbol of modern Chinese newspapers, which has the longest distribution time and wide social influence in modern China, and is known as the "encyclopedia" of modern Chinese history.

Although "left picture and right history" has always been the tradition of Chinese historians, the study of images has long been dependent on the study of characters, as an auxiliary of the latter, which is dispensable. The pictorial narrative mode of Chinese pictorial has broken away from the previous text-based news construction mode and gradually developed into an independent media form. With the development of news historiography and the study of visual culture in the 1990s, the study of pictorials gradually rose and became a hot spot in the study of "the spread of Western learning to the East", which provided an important source of information for interpreting the social and cultural changes in the social transformation period of the late Qing Dynasty.

References

- Chen, P. Y. (2018). Left-to-right history and western learning eastward—Late Qing Dynasty pictorial studies. *Reading*, 40(11), 182.
- Chen, Y. (2015). Visual modernity: Modern pictorial publishing and visual transformation. *Chinese Publishing*, 38(14), 62-65.
- Hu, M. (1951). *Revised edition of Chinese art history*. Shanghai: New Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Huang, X. G. (2017). From "left graph and right history" to modern pictorial. *Shanghai Art Review*, 31(3), 92-94.
- Lai, Q. L. (2016). Space of modernity: Social life in Shanghai in the Late Qing Dynasty (Master's thesis, Central University for Nationalities, 2016).
- Li, A. Y., & Huang, G. (2006). On the spirit of "landscape realism" of the new Jingling painting school. *Journal of Liaoning Normal University: Social Science Edition*, 29(6), 107-109.
- Liang, X. (2015). Research on image evolution and narrative paradigm of "*Dianshizhai Pictorial*" (Master's thesis, Jiangnan University, 2015).

- Lin, S. Z. (1981). Painting fairs, painting schools and painters in modern Shanghai (I). *Journal of Nanjing University of Arts: Fine Arts and Design*, 4(4), 42-50.
- Lin, S. Z. (1981). Painting fairs, painting schools and painters in modern Shanghai (II). *Journal of Nanjing University of Arts: Music and Performance*, 5(1), 41-46.
- Lost name. (2006). Five painting schools of modern art. *Faren Magazine*, 3(1), 102.
- Peng, X. C. (2008). The background and characteristics of the maritime painting school. *Literature and Art Research*, 9, 2.
- Su, Q. Y., & Song, Y. F. (2010). Review on the study of modern Chinese painting history in the past decade. *Journal of Guizhou University: Art Edition*, 24(1), 10-20
- Tao, H., & Li, M. (2018). Language graphic intertextuality in modern news and pictures. *Friends of Editors*, 38(6), 91-97.
- Tao, Y. P. (2021). Evolution from “Jinling school” to “new Jinling school”. *Ethnic Art Studies*, 32(4), 109-120.
- Wang, B. M. (2014). A focus on the staging of modern painting history—Comment on Shanghai painting. *Northwest Fine Arts. Journal of Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts*, 33(3), 54-58.
- Wang, F. (2021). Reference and absorption of watercolor techniques at Lingnan painting party. *Beauty and Times*, 13(12), 44-45.
- Wang, H. W., & Pu, Y. (2015). Origin and staging of the maritime painting school. *Art Exploration*, 29(6), 6-10.
- Wang, X. (2018). *History of Chinese art*. Liaoning: Liaoning Fine Arts Publishing House.
- Wang, Z. W. (2010). The writing mode of modern Chinese art history. *Literary and Artistic Contention*, 25(24), 77-78.
- Wu, G. Z. (2017). *History of left and right pictures and words in pictures: Research on modern Chinese pictorials (1874-1949)*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Xiao, P. (2010). New Jinling Painting School—The brilliant painting world in three hundred years. *Calligraphy and Painting Art*, 25(6), 4.
- Xu, J. R. (2000). Origin of maritime painting school. *Journal of Nanjing University of Arts: Art and Design*, 3, 2.
- Xu, P. (2013). The cultural turn and value of modern pictorial research. *International Press*, 53(3), 124-134.
- Xu, Y. Z., & Yu, Z. X. (2003). New exploration on the problem of the limitation of modern world history. *Historical Monthly*, 53(1), 55-60.
- Xu, Z. H. (2002). Value and history of marine painting school. *Shanghai Artist*, 1(4), 66-68.
- Xue, Y. N., Zhu, J. S., Zhao, Q., & Hang, C. X. (2006). On Jingjin painting school. *Chinese Calligraphy and Painting*, 4(8), 100-102.
- Yang, B. W. (2003). The influence of Chinese painting on the development of modern Japanese southern painting from the perspective of Nagasaki school. *Journal of Liangshan University*, 5(3), 157-160.
- Yi, S. B. (2016). Art in social transformation: The school of marine painting in Late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China. *Art Exploration*, 30(3), 35-37.
- Zou, D. H. (2006). The artistic status of “Li Ze” school in the history of modern ceramics. *Ceramic Research*, 22(3), 25-27.