

Chinese Peasant Paintings in the new Century

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Abstract

Chinese Peasant painting, produced in the 1950s, is the product of the combination of traditional folk art and red art. On the one hand, Chinese peasant paintings inherit the traditional Chinese folk art elements, on the other hand, they are strongly influenced by the mainstream ideology. Its strong emotional color and exaggerated means of expression have always made it popular among the masses. But with the changes of the times, Chinese peasant paintings began to fade out of people's vision. In this paper, we will analyze the future development of Chinese peasant paintings by analyzing its circumstances and reasons in the new century.

Keywords

Chinese peasant painting; Red Art; Grand narrative; Collectivism.

1. Introduction

Chinese Peasant paintings (In the following paper, abbreviated as peasant painting) are a kind of popular paintings, which are mostly paintings made and appreciated by farmers themselves. They have peculiar styles and exaggerated techniques, and have the reputation of "Oriental Picasso".[1].The peasant paintings are usually quite imaginative. The portrayal of characters is vivid and colorful. Its content mostly comes from rural production and daily life. It usually has strong folk traditional elements and has high artistic value.(as show in Figure 1)



Figure 1. Chinese peasant painting

The peasant paintings are a special form of art which is organized by the government, guided by experts and created by peasants. It is a very unique combination of these three forces in order to promote the rural publicity of new China with red culture characteristics[2].The development of peasant paintings was under the guidance and constraints of government cultural departments and professionals, and it has unique artistic characteristics, artistic values and artistic laws. It can adapt to the changes of historical and cultural situations through

continuous self-renewal. Peasant paintings have made great contributions to the cultural movement and the development of cultural propaganda in New China[3].

It is about in the middle of the 20th century when China came into contact with western contemporary art, and it is relatively late. Before that, China had just ended half a century of war and the baptism of the cultural revolution. Social production and economy were relatively backward, and art education was also relatively in the same situations. The whole art field in China needed developing. During this period, in order to publicize and enrich the cultural and artistic life of the working people, our country presented many works of art with a socialist flavor to the working people, especially to the farmers with relatively low art and education levels, so that they could appreciate and understand the works of art. Peasant paintings are one of the most prominent form. Most of these works are colorful, vivid in form, and close to life in content. They are loved by the people.

Peasant painting itself is a unique form of Chinese socialist culture. It is composed of three parts: government organization, professional art practitioners' guidance and peasant creation. On the one hand, under the guidance of the government, there is a strong flavor of red culture. At the same time, the professional guidance of artists also enables those farmers' painting creators who have not received art education to transform their artistic expression demands into actual works of art, and at the same time, they can serve production and construction.

In 1955, Zhang Kaixiang, a farmer in Pixian County, created a painting called "An old ox's complaints"(as show in Figure 2) because of the behavior of some members of the commune. The cow in the picture complained to the leader of the commune about being deprived of food, and was accompanied by a doggerel poem. This personification technique is very popular among the people. The pictures are vivid and interesting. It is also easy to spread and sing the doggerel poems, which is easy for the common people to understand. This picture not only reflects Zhang Kaixiang's personal creative will, but also serves the purpose of publicizing collectivism and criticizing profiteering at the expense of public interests.



Figure 2. Zhang kaixiang (1955) An old ox complains

This picture is considered to be the earliest creation of peasant paintings. However, according to his personal memories, the paintings that were later publicized have been modified and beautified by professionals, which makes the painting not exactly the same as his original creation. It can be seen that the official organization and guidance have both advantages and disadvantages for the creation of peasant paintings. The advantage is that through the guidance of professionals, the large number of farmers can express their feelings about production and life in the form of art, while the disadvantage is that it is easy to restrict the form and content of creation, and it will have a certain political meaning and propaganda function.

Peasant painting itself has experienced several development periods since its birth in the 1950s. The first one was accompanied by the Great Leap Forward when a large number of murals and propaganda paintings, as well as the critical painting appeared during the cultural revolution in the 1960s. Later, the creation of peasant paintings in Huxian County, Shaanxi Province and Jinshan, Shanghai brought prosperity to peasant paintings in the early 1970s and the late 1970s respectively. However, after the end of the cultural revolution and beginning of the reform and opening-up, western contemporary art had a great impact on people after it entered China. It is undeniable that western contemporary art itself was mature and the system was perfect. Its emphasis on human love and the liberation of personality was also very easy to resonate with art creators, which was of positive and progressive significance at that time. As a result, many art creators and lovers began to have a great (even blind) worship of western contemporary art, while the painting creation with red theme has too much political meaning, which runs counter to the advocacy of individuality advocated in contemporary art. For a while, both grand narrative and peasant paintings were marginalized by mainstream art and entered a low ebb.

Since the 21st century, the state has gradually increased its attention to the art field. On the one hand, it has encouraged a large number of creation of major historical themes, such as "art creation of major historical themes", "national theme art creation", "art creation project of Chinese civilization and history", and a series of large-scale art theme creation and related exhibitions. On the other hand, more and more attention has been paid to the support and develop peasant paintings which is the combination of traditional folk art and red art. Many regions, such as Jinshan in Shanghai, Pizhou, Dafang and Wuxi in Jiangsu, Huxian in Shanxi, have begun to take peasant paintings as their own business cards in the cultural field. At the same time, while making great efforts to publicize peasant paintings, they are also trying their own way of marketization and commercialization of peasant paintings.

But at present, the future development of peasant paintings still faces many problems.

First of all, the creation of peasant paintings was initially guided by official organizations. However, at present, although many local governments are vigorously supporting the development of peasant paintings, most of them combine them with agritainment, tourism and other industries. There is little propaganda on their own historical significance and artistic value, and there is a trend that peasant paintings gradually change to folk handicrafts. Painters have gradually turned into individual craftsmen, and their works have gradually become homogeneous and commercialized.

Secondly, peasant paintings need professional guidance. The creators of peasant paintings basically have no professional art education, which they also need: both in techniques and concepts. Although most of them use instinctive sensibility and simple expression to combine their vivid real life with their own imagination, and use bright colors and simple modeling techniques to create the world in their hearts and express their understanding of life. But art itself is constantly developing. If they cannot keep pace with the times, they will eventually fall behind. The creators of peasant paintings generally lack sufficient artistic height and foresight, so they need more advice and guidance from excellent art professionals. Otherwise, the creation of peasant paintings will only fall into a blind state without theoretical guidance: "when peasant paintings develop to a higher level of visual painting art, the creation of peasant paintings

mistakenly enters the cycle from practice to practice due to the lack of theory, and the theoretical lag restricts the development of peasant paintings." [4] It is mainly because of the lack of a large number of professionals in the field of mass art and the lack of guidance from excellent professionals that peasant paintings have developed very slowly in the past half century. A large number of creations still have the shadow of duplication, and the contents and concepts of the new era are not reflected in the creation.

Finally, the characteristics of peasant paintings determine that their authors are farmers without professional training. In the 1950s, farmers' education level was very low, and their artistic accomplishment was also very limited. At that time, some simple, vivid and colorful artistic creations were not enough in artistic expression, but they were easy to resonate with the public because they came from the production and life of farmers. It is also easily accepted by the public. However, more than half a century has passed, and the education level of the working people has developed a lot. At the same time, networking gives everyone the opportunity to easily get the most popular art content and forms of art expression. In this case, it is difficult to attract people's attention if we still rely on the traditional painting mode and immature expression techniques.

Grand narration and collectivism is used in contemporary art, which is on the opposite side of liberalism and individual liberation. They believe that it is not feasible to try to explain the world with one principle or one voice. As a product of a specific period, peasant paintings not only have a strong color of collectivism, but also have the political meaning of red culture. However, the most fundamental character of peasant paintings is the spontaneous artistic creation of farmers (especially those who lack art education). Although the content and form are limited, it still makes many people realize their creative ideals and creative desires. We cannot deny it completely in art because of the particularity of the times in which it belonged to. At present, we need to give farmers' paintings more attention and development space, provide more professional art guidance, and make efforts to promote and publicize this art form, so that more people can realize the historical significance and artistic value of farmers' paintings.

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