

## **The Social Function of Chinese Painting: Inheritance and Change Based on the Background of Chinese Modern Society**

Dr. Li Yingfeng<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Chen Chongwei<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Li Yingfeng, Guangxi Arts University.

<sup>2</sup>Chen Chongwei, Guangxi Arts University.

**Abstract:** This paper tries to analyze the social functions of Chinese paintings in the narrow sense. The writer introduces the changing functions of Chinese paintings during the development process, and divides the social functions into cognitive function, educational function and aesthetic entertainment function from the perspective of contemporary and modern art.

**Key words:** Chinese paintings, Social Functions, Traditional Chinese Culture

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Chinese painting is one of the art forms handed down from ancient China. It has ushered in a new development period after China's reform and opening up, and its social functions have made innovations in order to adapt to the changes in social background. On the other hand. In the modern society of China, the meaning of the existence of Chinese painting has been constantly discussed. Some researchers believe that Chinese painting as an ancient art form, its social function has been constantly weakened, and the significance of Chinese painting itself has been diluted. In this study, literature collection and field investigation are used to obtain relevant information about the existing social functions of Chinese painting. At the same time, this study will adopt qualitative research methods for analysis and descriptive analysis for discussion. This study believes that the current development status of Chinese painting is still closely related to The Chinese society, and the social functions of Chinese painting can still provide help to the social development of China.

### **2. METHODS**

This study adopts qualitative research as the research method. First of all, in the process of field investigation, researchers interviewed Chinese painting practitioners, including market operators, Chinese painting artists, Chinese painting lovers and other groups. The content includes: the current development trend of Chinese painting, the influence of social development on Chinese painting, and the social function of Chinese painting and so on. On the other hand, according to

the existing literature, the researcher analyzed the influence of social development on Chinese painting and the reaction of Chinese painting to the social development of Chinese painting. At the same time, researchers to the ancient Chinese painting social function and modern Chinese painting social function of the relevant literature was collected and analyzed. Based on these two aspects of information, the researchers completed a descriptive analysis of the study.

### **3. Concept of Chinese Painting**

Before explaining the basic functions of Chinese paintings, we have to distinguish the broad and narrow concepts of Chinese paintings. In Chinese cultural context, Chinese paintings usually refer to traditional Chinese paintings. But Chinese paintings also mean paintings created in China, such as Chinese ancient lacquer paintings, silk paintings, and mural paintings etc. Chinese paintings, in the narrow sense, are Han<sup>1</sup> traditional paintings with a long history, using Chinese special brush to dip into water, ink or color and paint on rice paper or silk reflecting the traditional characteristics of Chinese fine arts. Chinese paintings of the narrow sense are studied in the paper.

The ancient Chinese society<sup>2</sup> divides the functions of Chinese paintings into political function, educational function and aesthetic entertainment function, the last of which is most valued by painters and people at that time. From the analysis of Chinese paintings in different dynasties, or even from their history of development, creators of Chinese paintings have been pursuing and improving the aesthetic entertainment function, so that Chinese paintings can be accepted by more people. However, modern art theories divide functions of paintings into cognitive function, educational function and entertainment function. With global cultural integration and interaction among different arts, and some integration between Chinese paintings and western as well as national paintings since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it is limited to use traditional ideas to interpret the functions of Chinese paintings, and therefore we should consider Chinese paintings a type of “art” and analyze their functions according to modern and contemporary art theories. Based on theories of ancient Chinese paintings and modern art theories, functions can be classified into three categories.

## **4. The Social Functions of Chinese Painting**

### **4.1 Cognitive Function of Chinese Paintings**

The cognitive function can be understood as that Chinese paintings depict some instantaneous images or natural states, to help people experience the lives of different nationalities in different times and regions as well as understand corresponding history or the present state of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Han nationality, one of the 56 nationalities in China, accounting for 92% of China’s total population.

<sup>2</sup> Chinese ancient times, the Chinese society before 1840 A.D.

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According to *Zuozhuan*<sup>3</sup>, author Zuo Qiuming<sup>4</sup> mentioned, the function of paintings is to help people know about ghosts and gods, so that people will not meet bad things when entering into a mountain or a forest. This is the earliest record of the social function of Chinese paintings.

During the Northern Song Dynasty<sup>5</sup> when literati paintings prevailed, Guo Xi, a creator of ancient Chinese paintings, mentioned in his work *Elegance of the Bamboo and Spring* that painting Chinese kings, ministers and scholars before the Han Dynasty can shine the hall, and help people realize this is ritual and music culture<sup>6</sup>. It can be seen that the cognitive function of Chinese paintings, once it appeared, has been noticed by the painters and scholars at the time, and recorded with short sentences in ancient books. Early Chinese painters used Chinese paintings to convey the images of gods and spirits that may not exist in religious books, which indirectly proves the cognitive function of Chinese paintings. Although related to religion and ghosts, the cognitive function of Chinese paintings in the early time still shows itself.

Among research on humanities and social sciences, there are many examples of studying history from Chinese paintings. For instance, *Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival*, painted by Zhang Zeduan in the Northern Song Dynasty, pictures the downtown bustle and hustle in Bianliang<sup>7</sup>, capital of the Northern Song Dynasty, in April. Going to the riverside at Qingming Festival is similar to today's festival assembly, when people join trade activities at a common place. The painting can be divided into three parts, spring scenery on the outskirts of Bianjing, scene near Bian River, and downtown streets. In addition to analyzing its artistic style and technique of expression, the painting is often taken as an example to study the architectural style, dressing custom, and transportation of Bianliang<sup>8</sup> during the Northern Song Dynasty. Therefore, realistic Chinese paintings have prominent cognitive function and provide good materials for historical studies. All of these indicate the cognitive function of Chinese paintings.

The cognitive function of Chinese paintings has been weakened in the modern and contemporary periods, because of the emergence of modern media devices, such as cameras and other portable photographing devices, which, to a certain extent, replace Chinese paintings in terms of recording natural or social state. But the three social functions are co-related, meaning that the weakening cognitive function will provide more room for the educational function and aesthetic entertainment function.

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<sup>3</sup> *Zuozhuan*, a famous Chinese work of ancient Sinology and literature, recording history between 772 B.C. and 468 B.C.

<sup>4</sup> Zu Qiuming, an ancient Chinese historian, living around 502 B.C. - 422 B.C.

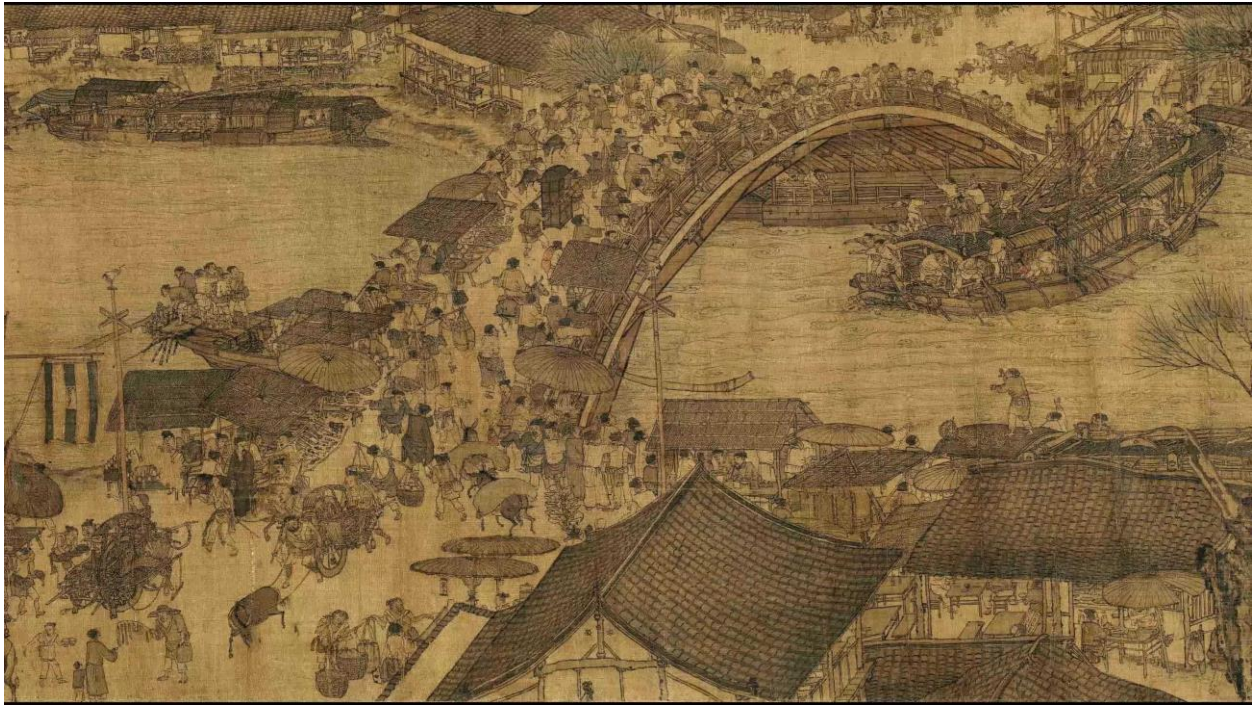
<sup>5</sup> The Northern Song Dynasty, a dynasty in Chinese history between 960 A.D. and 1127 A.D.

<sup>6</sup> Ritual and music culture, one of China's traditional cultures, spreading traditional Chinese virtues like modesty, politeness and self-cultivation.

<sup>7</sup> Bianliang, today's Kaifeng City in Henan Province, China.

#### 4.2 Educational Function of Chinese Paintings

Chinese paintings provide ideological education, moral education and political education, which means people, while appreciating the content and theme of different paintings, are influenced ideologically, morally, and emotionally, and guided to correctly understand life and establish an outlook on life and world. While some works representing the will of rulers have strong political education.



Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival (part),

Zhang Zeduan, Northern Song Dynasty

Chinese paintings have always been used as an educational tool throughout the development. Zhang Yanyuan, a Chinese painter in the Tang Dynasty<sup>9</sup>, wrote in his book *Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties* that paintings civilize people and help them improve interpersonal relations, which is the educational function of paintings. In ancient China with low level of education and high illiteracy, Chinese paintings have become an important medium and direct way for people to receive education. The following is *Admonitions Scroll (part)* by Gu Kaizhi, a painter in Eastern Jin Dynasty<sup>10</sup>, portrays a woman's exemplary deeds. In history, there are Feng Yuan protecting Emperor Yuan of Han against a bear with her body and Consort Ban refused to take the same imperial carriage with Emperor Cheng of Han to prevent the rumor that Emperor neglects affairs of state for beauties. Each painting describes the moral emotions for upper

<sup>9</sup> Tang Dynasty, a dynasty in Chinese history, from 618 A.D. to 907 A.D.

<sup>10</sup> Eastern Jin Dynasty, a dynasty in Chinese history, from 317 A.D. to 420 A.D.



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women, a strong way of lecturing. With images on the left and history on the right, such paintings are similar to moral education books in modern schools, and greatly facilitate people's understanding. Paintings like Admonitions Scroll, are quite common in Chinese painting history, aiming to spread traditional Chinese virtues and moral beliefs by depicting historical facts or directly making up stories. With the viewer's covering the majority of people in ancient China, such paintings are still one of the mainstream educational methods in ancient China, even though the spreading range is limited to the development of media technology.



Admonitions Scroll (Consort Ban refused to take the same imperial carriage with Emperor Cheng of Han), Gu Kaizhi, Eastern Jin Dynasty

Since the Tang and Song Dynasties, the function of political education has gradually emerged, as the royal family establishes art academies to spread royal political ideas. Since then the rulers demand professional painters create works with conveying royal will as the first purpose. So the paintings are auspicious and beautiful to present a false appearance of peace and prosperity and glorify rulers' accomplishments. For example, *Auspicious Cranes*, created by Emperor Huizong of Song, depicts a red-crowned crane, an auspicious symbol in traditional Chinese culture, flying and hovering over the Imperial Palace (the Forbidden City), which expresses a prosperous country under the current ruler. This is an important embodiment of the political education function, especially in the era of Chinese autocracy. Chinese paintings emphasize self-expression, but there is still feudalism in the content. Hence Chinese paintings, as superstructure, cannot be divorced from politics, which hasn't been changed since their appearance.

In modern and contemporary China, the educational function is also used by advanced class in different periods to spread political ideas. For example, during the war of resistance against Japan, some Chinese painters created art works to spread the idea of anti-Japanese war and guide more people to engage in the war, such as Xu Beihong's *Three Hundred Heroes in Tian Heng* and *The Foolish Old Man, Who Removed the Auspicious Cranes Mountains*, which, with

traditional calligraphic style integrated with western painting techniques, show their determination of dying rather than submit as well as their will as strong as fortress.

### **4.3 Aesthetic Entertainment Function of Chinese Paintings**

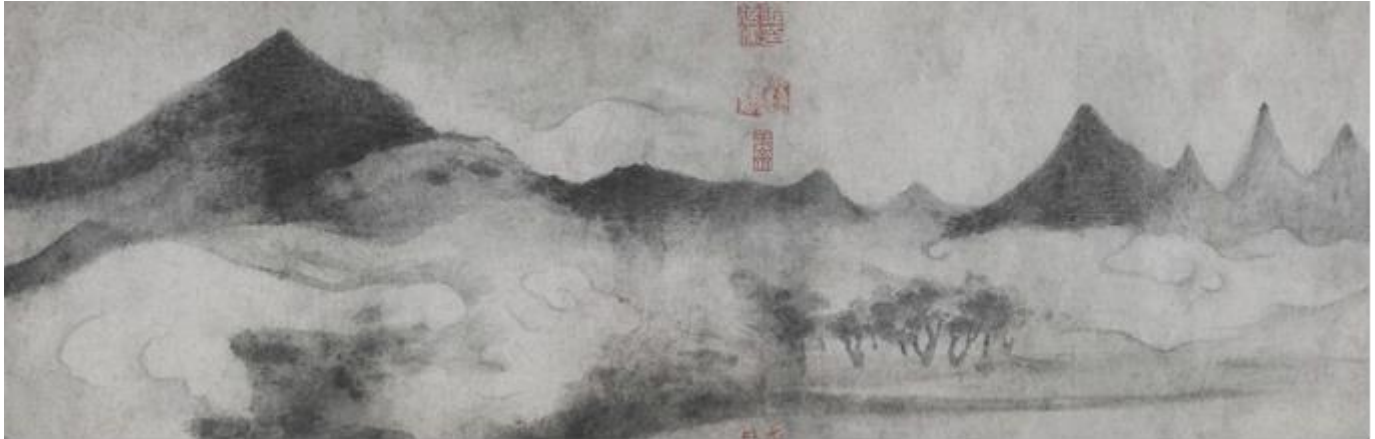
The entertainment function and aesthetic function of Chinese paintings are differently elaborated in relevant theory books. The ancient Chinese painting theory focuses more on the aesthetic function, while the modern theory includes the entertainment function into the aesthetic function. The two functions, however, co-exist in the practical application of Chinese painting function and often appear together in artworks. First, the term “aesthetic” can be interpreted as “appreciating or understanding the beauty of objects and artworks”, and the concept of “beauty” is widely understood as “everything that can make people happy, including objective existence and subjective existence”. Appreciation should be activities that can make people happy, so the aesthetic function and entertainment function of Chinese paintings should be mutually dependent and conditional.

The Period of Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties saw the beginning of landscape paintings, a type of traditional Chinese paintings, when painters like to appreciate such paintings to enjoy themselves. At this time, people, influenced by Confucianism, pursue to be joyous but not indecent, beyond the physiological state. Chinese landscape paintings created during the period reflect the “sage way”. Besides, people can get a good aesthetic experience and pleasure by appreciating them. With the emergence of literati paintings in the Song Dynasty, more social groups began to create Chinese paintings. A majority of painters paint to entertain themselves and meet their aesthetic needs, especially scholars and bureaucrats who work for government rather than paint to make a living. Their paintings focus on expressing their feelings or ideas by describing natural landscape or plants and animals, for aesthetic interest, emotion catharsis and pleasure from self-entertainment. For instance, Mi Youren, a painter and Vice Minister of Ministry of War<sup>11</sup> in the Northern Song Dynasty, has his unique style, because he proposes to include all natural scenery in paintings with simple ink in an elegant way, hoping to express his tranquil and peaceful mind. His works are very highly praised in the history of Chinese paintings, making him the first Chinese painter advocating “tranquil state of mind”.

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<sup>11</sup> Vice Minister of Ministry of War, an official position in Chinese Northern Song Dynasty, the same as today’s Vice Minister of Ministry of National Defense.

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Landscape of Xiang Jiang River (part)

Mi Youren Northern Song Dynasty

During Ming and Qing Dynasties<sup>12</sup>, Chinese paintings are more widely used as a way of entertainment, no longer only a tool for the intellectuals to seek calmness or self-comfort, but with more secular interest. Moreover, Chinese paintings have become an important way for some scholars to indirectly express their inner appeals or resentment to the rulers, the representative of whom is Zhu Da, a painter in the Qing Dynasty. Due to his special background, he cannot directly show his feelings and ideas, but create obscure poems and paintings with deformed objects, such as the fish and birds which are painted with a few touches, either with elongated bodies or curling up, in order to express his anger and frustration and seek comfort as entertainment.

Besides, a large number of narrative paintings appeared in the period, making the aesthetic entertainment function of Chinese paintings accepted by more people. Not only Chinese painters focus on the narrative paintings, but they are also enjoyed by the general public. Painters portray different customs and legends. Which express artists' Humanistic concern for the society and their inner love for life.

For example, Wang Zhong, a painter during the Ming Dynasty, describes life details with meticulous painting skills in his work-Interest in Life. The entertainment trend has been spread to modern and contemporary Chinese painters, who, insisting on the tradition of combining story and emotion in a painting, provide viewers with good aesthetic feelings and integrate the spirit of entertainment into paintings.

To sum up, during different periods of Chinese history, social functions of Chinese paintings have been changing as they are influenced by economy, humanities and politics. But during the

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<sup>12</sup> The Period of Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, a period in China's history, from 220 A.D. to 589 A.D.

development of Chinese paintings, creators have been fully using their functions, not only cultivating people's temperament and entertaining body and mind, but also widely beginning the social functions of Chinese paintings for civilization and social cognition. At the same time, the three functions are complementary and based on each other. The cognitive function and educational function are realized through the aesthetic function, and the aesthetic function and cognitive function are related to the educational function, but there may be one leading function in a work. To study the history of modern Chinese paintings, the social functions are an important part of the development of Chinese paintings, which are worth attention and of great research value.

## 5. RESULTS

To sum up, the current stage of Chinese painting and Chinese society is still closely linked. At the present stage, the social function of Chinese painting still continues the social function of ancient Chinese painting. However, due to the emergence of modern technology such as camera and network, the inherent social function of Chinese painting has been weakened to a certain extent. And the emerging function of building cultural confidence and identity gives Chinese painting new value of existence.

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