



The View of Artistic Function before and after the “Art Revolution” Theory (1917-1921)

Wenjing Zou

Minzu University of China, Beijing 100081, China

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Abstract: At the beginning of the 20th century, the collision of diverse cultures gave rise to a debate on the “Art Revolution” centered around LA JEUNESSE. On the surface, the debate revolved around topics such as new thought or old view, revolution or reform, but in essence, it was about different understandings of the artistic functions. Starting from the view of artistic function, this article describes and evaluates the representative figures and artistic concepts before and after the “Art Revolution” theory.

Keywords: “Art Revolution”; New Culture Movement; View of artistic function; Social function

1. Overview of artistic function

The recording of artistic theories occurred after the emergence of writing and the formation of class society. Therefore, this concept itself is obviously ethical and utilitarian, and the artistic function existed before art itself. But the artistic function is not only manifested in the personal consciousness of its creators, but also requires social perception and mastery of it, which is an interactive relationship.”[1] A work of art has different cultural values due to its different application, and its artistic function is also different. It is inevitable that the function of beauty satisfies a certain need of human beings. When people perceive and reflect on a certain object, they always first perceive and reflect it as a useful object related to their survival. The artistic function is not a static concept that remains unchanged, but rather changes with the different artistic concepts of the times, and the requirements of the times for art change its function. As an important component of human culture, art has played an irreplaceable role in the practice of adapting and transforming the environment, while also playing an extremely essential role in the continuous enrichment and improvement of human beings themselves.

2. The rise of the “Art Revolution”

Around 1919, it was a revolutionary era. With the introduction of modernity, anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, advocating for “democracy” and “science”, and the practical thinking that emerged from the tradition of worrying about the times and saving the world, a comprehensive and profound revolutionary movement was carried out on the land of China in terms of politics, society, culture, and ideology. In 1918, a letter titled Art Revolution written by young scholar Lv Cheng to Chen Duxiu was published in the magazine LA JEUNESSE, which sparked a vigorous Art Revolution Movement during the May Fourth period. As one of the components of the New Culture Movement, like the “Poetry Revolution”, “Drama Revolution”, and “Literary Revolution” at that time, it was a part of cultural salvation and an important part of political revolution. The “Art Revolution” during the May Fourth Movement was more like an ideological and social revolution of naming art, which was an extension and reflection of the patriotic trend of intellectuals in the field of art at that time.

3. Representative figures and artistic concepts of the “Art Revolution” theory

Lv Cheng had a unique understanding of the drawbacks of traditional Chinese painting, and he was impressed by countrymen’s learning of western painting and put forward the idea of “revolution”. This initiative is very useful in the eyes of Chen Duxiu, who firmly believed in the theory of evolution and aspired to a “comprehensive revolution”. In addition, the views on painting of Chen Duxiu have already included “art” in his revolutionary plan. In his subsequent publication Art Revolution: A Reply to Lv Cheng, he said, “If we want to improve Chinese painting, we must first reform the fate of Wang Painting.”[2] Chen Duxiu believed that Wang Painting is a representative of the old culture in the art industry, characterized by a lack of creativity and a tendency to focus solely on abstract writing without seeking practicality. Chen Duxiu, who came from a family of calligraphy and painting, aspired to learn from the West after failing the rural examination. Although his cultural concepts gradually became more radical westernization, he ultimately did not break away from old learning in terms of underlying emotions, and become the “cultural contradiction” of that era.[3] It can be seen from this that Chen’s resolute

attitude towards Wang Painting is more due to his political demands of “completely opposing tradition”. “Chen’s cultural criticism has a clear political direction and purpose, and the ethical and literary revolution is primarily a means of maintaining peace as a political purpose.”[4] To improve Chinese painting, it is necessary to adopt the realistic theory of Western painting, that is, to use scientific thinking methods and painting techniques to create art works that reflect social reality and embody personal creative ability, it perfectly aligned with his pursuit of “science”. Kang Youwei was the first to criticize traditional Chinese literati paintings in the preface of *A Catalogue of Chinese Paintings at Wanmu Thatched Cottage* in 1917. As a representative of the political reformists, Kang raised the reform of Chinese painting to the Chinese ethics about the patriarchal concept of “Di” and “Shu”. Among them, the thought of improving Chinese painting is also an extension of his political thought. Chen and Kang’s view on the artistic function in political revolution does not judge cultural issues based on the intrinsic value and laws of cultural development, but rather on the political goals achieved. This approach can easily erase the original cultural and artistic traditional spirit, deviating not only from the humanistic value and ontological laws of art as a part of national culture, but also from the rational analysis of excellent factors in traditional culture. But it is worth affirming that “science” is necessary for the times and closely related to the needs of the people, the country, and democracy. “Politicization is the boundary between modern art and classical art, and it is also the beginning of the construction of modernity through the combination of politics and aesthetics.”[5] Since the May Fourth Movement, politicization has become one of the necessary conditions for the emergence of modern art. From the Art Revolution to later Yan’an Art, Resistance against Japanese Aggression Art, and even New China Art, political function has always run through it.

The entire article of Chen Duxiu advocated realism, but does not mention specific solutions. Lv Cheng provided his own ideas on the problems in the art world at that time, pointing out that there are four “ways of revolution”: “Clarify the scope and essence of art”; “Elucidate the origin and principles of painting, sculpture, and architecture since the Tang Dynasty”; “Elaborate the changes in European and American art, as well as the essence behind the various new schools of art that exist today”; “Using the theory of the true essence of art to verify various forms of art, old and new, and to determine their true nature, so that those who aspire to art can seek their own destination and invent a wide range of art.”[6] From the comparison, it can be seen that Lv’s theories were all aimed at addressing the practical problems in the art world at that time. Emphasizing the promotion of the concept of “art” and the relationship between painting and social moral order aims at ethics. It is a kind of thinking that is beneficial to the essence of art, calm, and objective, and consciously applies modern art concepts and Western art theory knowledge for criticism. Cai Yuanpei, as an educator, persisted in education and aesthetic education throughout his life. In 1917, he clearly proposed the artistic salvation plan of “replacing religion education with aesthetic education”. “Although this plan ended in failure, it undoubtedly played a leading role in the value reconstruction and functional transformation of art.”[7] In 1921, Chen Duxiu elaborated on the value of traditional literati painting from a modern perspective in *The Value of Literati Painting*, stating that literati painting does not focus on form, but contains the noble character of literati themselves, and his aesthetic education theory aims to cultivate talents with noble thoughts and personalities. Chen Duxiu studied in Japan for eight years and had extensive knowledge of Western art theory. However, despite the turbulent trend of “Western learning”, he still compared Chinese and Western painting with an objective mind, maintained the value of traditional culture, and upheld cultural confidence. The views on aesthetic education function of Lv, Cai and others is multifaceted, and is a concept of “Art Revolution” proposed after careful consideration based on the history of art development in both the East and the West, including reflections on the essence and function of art, as well as conscious construction of disciplinary theories. It is easier to view the development of art from a rational perspective, which is more conducive to the construction of the subject’s personality. This was a means of enlightening national thought and a beneficial weapon for intellectuals to save the country and transform national public in the society at that time.

Xu Beihong was deeply influenced by Kang Youwei and advocated the use of Western realism to improve Chinese painting in his 1918 essay *On the Improvement of Chinese Painting*. In 1926, Xu Beihong put forward the proposition that “adopting European realism can make Chinese idealistic painting shine brightly in the world”. With frequent social interactions, he keenly captured that the general public was the main audience of art exhibitions, and called for the importance of realistic painting, which was in line with the trend of the times and what society needed at that time. Art no longer belongs only to the upper class intellectuals, but should also benefit the masses, that is, the majority of the proletariat in society. Represented by Xu Beihong, social function observers discover and create their own value through comparison when the people face national crises and hope to solve all cultural problems that are falling, uncivilized, and realistic. This makes the relationship between Chinese art and social reality closer, exuding a sense of the times and vitality.

4. Conclusion

Although the “Art Revolution” is a trend and phenomenon of artistic transformation, it is also an reflection of political

ideology and patriotic sentiments in the art field. Everything has its natural laws, and the development of art is closely related to social change and political movements. However, we cannot ignore the laws, regulations, and instinctive consciousness of seeking novelty and change. Different cultural attitudes do not mean that they have no commonalities in specific historical issues. While we carefully understand individual ideological tendencies, we also need to distinguish subtle differences, which together constitute the rich connotations of art development during this period. The representative figures advocating for the transformation of art, although the specific methods and measures implemented in the journey of Chinese painting transformation are not the same, have all opened up new directions for traditional Chinese painting. They represent different well-educated members with different value orientations based on their corresponding social status and different understandings of the art function. The viewpoints and ideas of various schools of thought have similarities or blends with the needs of art function, forming a diverse and rich phenomenon. Although their artistic theories and styles are different, they are all based on a sense of social responsibility for the country, the nation, and for changing the political and social positions of China.

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