

The Features and Educational Value of Labor Theme in Ancient Chinese Literati Paintings from the Perspective of Image Narrative

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Abstract

With the advent of the era of image reading and the expansion of the path of educational socialization, the educational value of image narration has attracted more and more attention. The narrative of labor theme in ancient Chinese literati paintings shows the characteristics of the combination of the beauty of pursuing noble aspirations with the beauty of labor, the beauty of labor with the beauty of countryside nature, and the beauty of labor with the beauty of daily life. It is of great value to expand the social path of labor education.

Keywords

Ancient Chinese literati painting; Labor theme narration; Image narrative; Educational value.

1. Introduction

In the history of Chinese and Western paintings, although it is not uncommon to paint laborers or scenes of labor, the characteristics of traditional Chinese society, which was dominated by agricultural civilization, made traditional literati who grew up there become far more familiar with the agricultural life of the countryside than the Western literati, thus making it the obvious source of labor theme narrative in ancient literati paintings. In particular, during the Tang and Song dynasties, when ancient Chinese literati paintings were produced, China's agricultural economy flourished, the imperial examination system gradually matured, and the farming culture reached a new height. Reading during leisure time, farming during busy time, half farming and half reading, simultaneous farming and reading became the daily life of most ancient literati. Even for those hermits in the mountains and forests who were far away from worldly affairs, they did not avoid the preference for this theme of narrative. However, previous knowledge of ancient Chinese literati paintings has focused mainly on aesthetic character and aesthetic education, while not enough attention has been paid to the narrative theme of depicting laborers or labor scenes, and their educational function through communication. There are two reasons for this: on one hand, the stereotypical image of traditional literati as self-pitying and self-congratulatory has given people a preconceived view of the tone of literati paintings as negative and world-avoiding. This has obscured the grassroots sentiment of traditional Chinese literati who were concerned with the hardships of people and ignored their ideal personality pursuit behind the wild and elegant style of painting. On the other hand, in the appreciation of images, people tend to focus only on labor scenes in the images or aesthetic presentation of the works, but lack awareness of the deeper meanings of image narrative in the works, and sometimes even ignore them. It is even less possible to consciously advocate for educational purposes through appreciation activities.

2. Review of Thematic Image Narrative Research

Image narrative refers to using images as a carrier for meaning and information transmission, with the help of imagination and visual thinking to link spatially juxtaposed content into a sequential whole, such as taking images as a medium to convey the essence and meaning of events to others in a storytelling way. [1]

Since the 18th century, when the famous German aesthete Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) regarded painting, sculpture and other image-based media as "spatial media" different from "temporal media" such as spoken and written words, scholars have conducted a lot of research on their social communication functions. Especially in recent years, scholars at home and abroad have been making new progress in the research of the internalization of image narrative and the mechanism of social communication as well as propaganda. In the book named *Mirror of Morality: Chinese Narrative Illustration and Confucian Ideology*, American scholar Julia K. Murray argues that "Another important feature of narrative paintings is their social function, that is, how they influence or attempt to influence the appreciators. Just as storytelling can achieve different purposes, narrative paintings also have various intentions such as proving, indicating, informing, educating, inculcating, proselytizing, propaganda, or amusement." [2] French media scientist Régis Debray noted that "Images transform abstract ideas into perceptual materials, bringing concepts and principles to life. Images are the tools favored by legends that play the mobilizing role." [3] According to British educational scholar Amy Scott Metcalfe, "the limits of words and things" are the beginnings of visual methodology, from which people personalize and necessarily create the meanings of the visual world through images. [4]

In China, as an increasingly significant educational resource for entering the image society, the educational function of image narrative has also gradually attracted the attention from educational academia. Li Zhengtao (2004) noticed the educational function of image narrative at an earlier stage. He held the opinion that the educational value of images is their ability to construct or recall visual imagery, their thinking ability, and their language ability. [5] Wang Huaiping (2012) points out that in the traditional culture education of the "image era", it is necessary to take advantage of the strong influence of ancient image resources in the field of people's cultural acceptance and ancient image resources in the visual commission of cultural forms and connotations.....open the paths and channels to deepen the practice of traditional culture education. [6] Li Yunxing (2019) holds the opinion that, compared with words and language, images as symbolic modalities contain immediate and open characteristics, and have unique nurturing values and meanings, which are confirmed and supported by cognitive psychology research, therefore, education beyond images should be implemented. [7] Scholar Yang Lu (2021) points out that image forms with corresponding visual, three-dimensional, and close-to-life characteristics, fit the public's psychological preference and their cognitive approach from "seeing" to "thinking", so that they can generate in-person experience in the process of viewing, which will trigger emotional resonance and bring the knowledge into their cognitive scope like a spring breeze. [8] According to the above-mentioned scholars, the appreciation of image narratives in essence is an observational and experiential education approach. This approach is accompanied by the complex coordination and action process between the psychological subjective feelings as well as emotions, and the objective world; the isomorphic communication between internal and external psychological worlds is realized in the personification of external objects, [9] so that the mind of appreciators actively enter the artistic space and living world created by the images. In the visual world and life space constructed by the paintings, people's mind and body are acculturated. In this process, the educational function of image narrative is effectively exerted.

3. Narrative Characteristics of Labor Themes in Ancient Chinese Literati Paintings

Exploring the emergence of ancient Chinese literati paintings and their evolution, it is evident that under the narrative perspective of thematic images, ancient Chinese literati paintings, while being fond of mountains, rivers, forests, rocks, flowers, birds and fishes, attached importance to the inclusion of ordinary laborers or their life scenes in their paintings, presenting a strong narrative color among different objects. This not only added spirituality and simplicity to the metaphysical images, but also revealed subtle eulogy and appreciation of laborers and their life scenes, and more profoundly presented painters' deep concern for the secular world and wonderful desire for a better real life, conveying to the appreciators a compassionate sentiment for the world through visual art. These paintings reflect three main characteristics.

First is the combination of the beauty of pursuing noble aspirations with the beauty of labor. Take Wei Xian's *The Carriage at the Gate* as an example, the main content of this painting is the ragged servants. However, in the restaurant with "colorful building and cheerful gate" on the right side of the picture, some rich and powerful people were vaguely seen feasting, setting off the busy and hard work of the flour mill. Another example is Zhao Gan's *Early Snow on the River* and Guo Zhongzhu's *River Journey at the End of Snow*, both of which elaborately portray the difficult living conditions of fishermen, reflecting the painters' recognition and pursuit of the noble qualities of working people. At the same time, most literati paintings were not departed from the narrative tradition of "combining farming with reading", and even the peasants engaged in fishing, woodcutting and weaving had a certain elegance, which was obviously an objectification of the painters' noble character. Especially at a time of dynastic change and world chaos, literati were often unable to realize their lofty aspirations and were disinclined to pursue their careers, so they incorporated their noble aspirations of not being part of the world into their depictions of laborers.

Second is the combination of the beauty of labor with the beauty of countryside nature. Ancient Chinese literati painters' depiction of the beauty of countryside nature began around the time of Jing Hao, who first portrayed laborers and their labor scenes in detail against the background of towering peaks and woods in a panoramic view. This tradition obviously influenced subsequent generations of painters, and almost every literati painting presented a detailed depiction of mountains, water, rocks, trees, smoke, fog, and other scenery, which almost become narrative carriers for painters to convey their messages. The portraits of people, mainly laborers, were embellished with scenes of misty rain, strong wind and snow, and precipitous mountains and rocks. This style of painting figures, in which laborers were "placed" in a secondary position, not only set off the meteorological and poetic variations of the natural beauty of the countryside, but also spoke in a silent language about the hardships of ancient Chinese laborers who worked hard with calloused hands and feet, objectively promoting the portrayal of laborers and the labor theme in literati paintings.

Third is the combination of the beauty of labor with the beauty of daily life. If the literati before the Ming and Qing dynasties still mainly expressed their eulogy of the beauty of labor through indirect support, by the time of the Ming and Qing dynasties, this appreciation became more intuitive. The series of paintings on the theme of "fishing pleasure" by painters from Ming Dynasty were almost a direct expression of the painters' pursuit of the pleasure of labor itself. For example, in the painting *Frost Pool Returning to Fishing* by Tang Di from Yuan Dynasty, although three fishermen returning home were carrying heavy fishing gears and were not necessarily fully loaded, it is not difficult to feel the painter's praise and longing for a happy fishing life from the fishermen's attitude of looking forward and smiling. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, Shen Zhou, Lu Zhi and the "Su Song School" painters changed the implicit expression

of the narrative of labor theme in literati paintings, and painted farmhouses and farming scenes directly, showing the beauty of labor through the narrative of daily life. Beauty is incomparable. The depiction of rural landscapes and the portrayal of farming events are not the dividing line between elegant and secular narratives on the theme of labor, but a signal of the literati's initiative to integrate into the reality of social life under the rapid changes of modern society.

4. Conclusion

At present, the advent of the image era makes people's life wrapped by the image forms of visualization, three-dimensionality and concretization. The abstract cognition way can no longer meet the needs of the public, and they prefer to know the world through the way of viewing. This not only breaks the bound of time and space, but also satisfies the sensory experience, which is conducive to reinforcing the educational practice in the new era. However, images as symbols for conveying meaning are good at depicting the external appearances of things, but they are difficult to present the deep structure and characteristics of things, and also difficult to express the abstract meaning and time process of objects. In particular, under the traditional cultural custom of "left picture and right history", the mutual evidence of pictures and words can often reflect the true mind state and interest of creators more comprehensively, enabling appreciators to deeply grasp the connotation and profound meaning of traditional culture. This also explains why the understanding of literati paintings should not be limited to the layout and content of a single frame, but should be comprehensively grasped from the content of the subject, the inscription and the seal, and even related poems. Absolutely, whether labor education or aesthetic education is only one aspect of cultivating a well-rounded personality and "creating a well-rounded person". In essence, it can only be a kind of education that cultivates people's organic and holistic response manner. After all, the appreciation of paintings is only a way to obtain the appreciators' psychological identification with the theme conveyed in the narrative of the images, and it is difficult to achieve the direct transmission of practical activity experience. Therefore, labor education and aesthetic education in the new era need not only the enhancement of subjective awareness, but also should be put into practice. Only by appreciating the aesthetic of labor in the world and the people can true integration of labor and aesthetic, and mutual education of labor and aesthetic be achieved.

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