

From Life Experience to Artistic Representation: On the Experiential Logic and Imagery System of the "People's Nature" Narrative in the Huangtu Painting School

Mengnan Xia

*School of Chinese Language and Literature, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, China
605573364@qq.com*

Abstract. As an important school with distinct regional characteristics in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese art, the Huangtu Painting School takes the Loess Plateau in northern Shaanxi as its cultural field and people's life as the narrative core. Adhering to the artistic tenet of "understanding people, emphasizing form, valuing brush and ink, and pursuing innovation", it has constructed an artistic expression system of "people's nature" with realistic warmth and humanistic depth. The formation of its narrative structure not only originates from the theoretical tradition of "taking the people as the center" in Chinese literature and art, but also is deeply rooted in the unique natural ecology, agricultural civilization and red revolutionary cultural context of the Loess Plateau. Through field sketching practice, thematic structure of parallel realistic and historical narratives, and painting language integrating realism with brush and ink, the Huangtu Painting School embodies the subjectivity of the people in visual images, forming an imagery system with regional symbolism and contemporary spirit. As an important part of Chinese realistic art, the Huangtu Painting School has not only promoted the modern transformation of figure painting in traditional Chinese painting, but also undertaken the important social and cultural functions of recording the times, uniting values and shaping collective memory.

Keywords: Huangtu Painting School, people's nature, realism

1. Introduction

As a painting school with distinct regional characteristics in the field of modern and contemporary Chinese art, the Huangtu Painting School takes the natural landscapes, human customs and the life of working people on the Loess Plateau in northern Shaanxi as its core creative themes, featuring a simple and profound style and sincere emotions. In the development of the school, "people's nature" has always been regarded as the core criterion for creation. Through brush and ink language, it records people's lives, conveys their emotions and highlights their dominant position. This people-centered narrative concept has not only endowed the Huangtu Painting School with a unique artistic style and cultural value, but also made it an important benchmark for Chinese realistic art creation.

2. Theoretical origin and cultural foundation of the people's nature narrative

In the study of the artistic creation and narrative practice of the Huangtu Painting School, "people's nature" is a core theoretical category running through, providing fundamental guidance for the school's creation with clear value orientation and aesthetic principles.

2.1. Theoretical origin: from people-oriented thought to realism

The Confucian concepts of "valuing the people" and "stabilizing the people" have laid a deep ethical structure for "the people as the foundation" in Chinese culture. Although this people-oriented thought is different from the modern sense of "people's nature", it has provided a profound cultural soil for the formation of "people's nature" in Chinese art creation.

The proposal of "people's nature" is related to the rise of the 18th-century Enlightenment. Initially, it was a theoretical term generated on the basis of the concept of nationality and directly equivalent to nationality. From the 1820s to the 1830s, through the theoretical interpretations of Pushkin, Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov and others, "people's nature" was finally separated from nationality and gained its own theoretical certainty. Among them, Chernyshevsky's theory of "beauty is life" states: "Everything that shows life as we understand it should be is beautiful; everything that reveals life or reminds us of life is beautiful" [1], emphasizing that art should reflect real life and pay attention to the fate and sufferings of the people. Engels advocated the authenticity of creation and put forward "the truthful depiction of real relations" [2], indicating that literary and artistic creators should present people's lives as truthfully as possible. They believed that art is an important part of social ideology and a product of human spiritual production, and the people are not only the subject of material production, but also the subject of spiritual production. Lenin further put forward the assertion that "art belongs to the people" [3], emphasizing that art must take root among the working people. He believed that art should be understood and accepted by the broad masses of working people and become part of their spiritual life.

Since the 20th century, the thought of "people's nature" has been introduced into China and combined with China's revolutionary practice. During the May Fourth Movement, intellectuals advocated "civilian literature", emphasizing that literature should face the broad masses of civilians and reflect their lives and sufferings. The League of Left-Wing Writers promoted the "popularization of literature and art" movement, advocating that literature and art should go deep into the masses, create in languages and forms understandable to the masses, so as to propagate revolutionary ideas and arouse the awakening of the people. They actively created popular literary works, such as street poetry and reportage, which had a wide impact among the broad masses. In this process, the connotation of "people's nature" has been continuously enriched and developed. From emphasizing that literature and art should reflect the people's lives to emphasizing that they should serve the people and the revolution, "people's nature" has gradually become an important guiding ideology for Chinese literary and artistic creation. The First National Congress of Literary and Art Workers held in 1949 established the guiding position of Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art". In the "Talks", Mao Zedong elaborated on the thought of "popularization of literature and art": "We must go to the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers wholeheartedly, unconditionally and for a long time" [4], and concluded that "the question of for whom literature and art are produced is a fundamental and principled question" [5], clarifying the direction that literature and art should serve the broad masses of the people, first of all, the workers, peasants and soldiers. Since then, the Party and the government have attached great importance to literary and artistic work, formulated a series of literary and artistic policies, and provided clear guidance for the "people's

nature" of art creation. Entering the new era, the assertion that "the people are the mother of literature and art" not only inherits the value direction of literature and art, but also emphasizes that people's nature is the resource foundation for literary and artistic innovation. Guided by literary and artistic policies, artists of the Huangtu Painting School have actively participated in the tide of socialist construction, creating a large number of works reflecting people's labor and life and eulogizing the achievements of socialist construction, becoming models of practicing the creative concept of "people's nature".

2.2. Cultural field: from life experience to value standpoint

The generation of the people's nature narrative of the Huangtu Painting School is deeply rooted in the unique natural environment, agricultural civilization and red cultural genes of the Loess Plateau. In terms of the natural environment, the rugged terrain and vast loess land of the Loess Plateau have nurtured a powerful and simple regional temperament, shaping the tenacious and resilient character of the local people. The cave dwellings in northern Shaanxi, as an architectural form adapted to local conditions, are not only the crystallization of the people's wisdom in adapting to the natural environment, but also a visual symbol of the harmonious coexistence between man and nature in the school's narrative.

From the perspective of agricultural civilization, the long history of agricultural production in northern Shaanxi has enabled the people to form a deep emotional bond with the land, which has become the foundation of life and spiritual sustenance. This reverence and love for the land have become the core emotional source of the school's people's nature narrative. The numerous depictions of agricultural labor scenes in the works are an intuitive presentation of the people's working spirit and enthusiasm for life. At the same time, northern Shaanxi, as a revolutionary sacred place, carries red cultural genes. From the Land Revolution to the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the Liberation War, northern Shaanxi has always been an important base for the Chinese revolution. The Communist Party of China has led the people here to form the great Yan'an Spirit, and the revolutionary literary and artistic tradition of "serving the people" has provided direct ideological guidance for the school's people's nature narrative. During the revolutionary war years, literary and artistic works such as *The Yellow River Cantata* and *Defend Yan'an* inspired the people's revolutionary enthusiasm and laid the ideological foundation for the school. The tenacious, simple and hardworking spiritual qualities formed by the local people in long-term practice have become the core content of the school's narrative. Through deepening into life and empathizing with the people, artists have transformed the people's life experiences, emotional worlds and beautiful aspirations into vivid artistic images, highlighting the dominant position of the people in the historical process.

3. Characteristics of the people's nature narrative of the Huangtu Painting School

The dynamic evolution of the concept of "the people" determines the contemporary nature and expansibility of the characteristics of the people's nature narrative of the Huangtu Painting School. Before the establishment of the Communist Party of China, pioneers such as Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu explored the concept of "the people", laying the foundation for the subsequent theoretical deepening. After the reform and opening up, the class attribute and struggle implication of the concept of "the people" have gradually faded, and its diversity and inclusiveness have been significantly enhanced. This evolution has promoted the Huangtu Painting School to construct a

multi-level and three-dimensional people's nature narrative system from theme selection to painting language.

With "the people" as the core, the painting themes of the Huangtu Painting School form a dual narrative dimension of "realistic themes focusing on daily people's livelihood and historical themes highlighting the people's strength", which not only inherits the spiritual core of people's nature in the historical context, but also delves into the realistic texture of contemporary people's lives.

3.1. Realistic themes: concrete presentation of people's lives

After the founding of New China, "the people" became the core object of art creation. The realistic theme creation of the Huangtu Painting School takes the life of the people on the Loess Plateau as the entry point, showing their living conditions and spiritual outlook through the shaping of typical characters and scenes. Liu Wenxi's *Four Generations of a Family* is a foundational work of the school's realistic themes. Initially titled *Generations After Generations*, it aims to "show the life of farmers, who are the creators of history." [6] With a low perspective and a monument-like composition, the work portrays four generations of farmers—elderly, middle-aged, young and children. They are carefully selected by Liu Wenxi during his long-term sketching in rural areas, and the image characteristics of the characters are highly representative. From 1958 to 1962, in addition to completing his teaching tasks, Liu Wenxi spent a lot of time going deep into rural areas in northern Shaanxi, living and eating with local farmers, and sometimes staying in a village for 3 to 5 months. Thanks to the long contact time and numerous available images, he was able to select the most typical characters of all age groups. By depicting their faces, postures and expressions, it shows the tenacious vitality of the people in northern Shaanxi in the long historical process, and has become a model of the school's narrative of "taking the people as the subject".

Other members of the Huangtu Painting School have also continued this narrative tradition. Wang Youzheng's *Whispers* created in 1979 uses realistic techniques to depict a scene where a little girl holding a homework book leans against her grandfather's ear and talks happily, showing the simple friendship between people through daily life details. Chen Guangjian's *Train to the West* created in 1984 takes three generations of people going to develop the northwest as the objects of expression. The characters in the picture are full of energy, showing the enthusiasm of the people in the new era to respond to the call and build the motherland. He Rongmin's *Snowy Plateau* created in 1994 depicts the funeral customs of the people on the Loess Plateau, further showing the local customs and traditions. The listed works are only part of the works by artists of the Huangtu Painting School selected in previous national art exhibitions, which shows the rich emotional dimensions of the people's nature narrative of the Huangtu Painting School.

3.2. Historical themes: historical writing of the people's strength

As a core genre of modern Chinese art to express society, write history and explore grand narratives, few national historical paintings can vividly engrave the century-long struggle track of the Communist Party of China like modern Chinese art. Although the Huangtu Painting School focuses on regional reality, some of its works show the people's participation in revolutionary history by looking back, highlighting their dominant position in the historical process, and eulogizing their sacrifices and contributions to national liberation and national construction. Essentially, it is still the writing of "people's strength" and "people's feelings", which together with the people's themes focusing on daily life constitute a complete expression of "people's subjectivity", echoing the core

pursuit of historical paintings to engrave the struggle track and highlight the people's value through images.

The creation of historical themes of the Huangtu Painting School started with Liu Wenxi, and his historical paintings are divided into three types. First, the shaping of idealized images of leaders, including works such as *Dawn in Yan'an*, *Chairman Mao and the Shepherd Boy*, *By Chairman Mao's Side*, *Chairman Mao's Works* and *Joy Together*. Second, the concrete presentation of real historical events, including works such as *Chairman Mao Arrives in Northern Shaanxi*, *Foundation Ceremony*, the series *Marching Through Northern Shaanxi* and *Course*. Among them, Liu Wenxi created *Foundation Ceremony* in 1977, which themed on the "foundation ceremony" where the Shaanxi-Gansu Detachment of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, after the Long March, gathered in the Shaanxi-Gansu Soviet Area in November 1935, successfully resisted the Kuomintang's "encirclement and suppression" three times, and established the revolutionary headquarters of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in the northwest region. Third, the vivid depiction of the living scenes of leaders in the new period, such as *The East* completed in 1993, which portrays the scene of four founding leaders of New China—Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De—chatting happily in Beidaihe. The four characters are vivid in both form and spirit, showing the confidence and boldness of the Communist Party of China in founding New China.

4. Value of the people's nature narrative of the Huangtu Painting School

The people's nature narrative of the Huangtu Painting School is not only an important practical achievement in the field of Chinese realistic art, but also undertakes a dual mission in artistic innovation and social and cultural construction. Its value is concentrated in two dimensions: artistic contribution and social responsibility, providing a practical paradigm with both technical reference and spiritual guidance for the development of contemporary art.

In terms of artistic style and techniques, centered on "people's nature", the Huangtu Painting School has realized the in-depth integration of realistic creative methods and traditional Chinese brush and ink, promoting the modern transformation of figure painting in traditional Chinese painting. Guided by Liu Wenxi's artistic tenet of "understanding people, emphasizing form, valuing brush and ink, and pursuing innovation", the school combines the rigorous realistic modeling system of the academic school with the regional cultural characteristics of the Loess Plateau. In character shaping, it pursues realistic skills of both form and spirit, capturing the tenacious and simple spiritual temperament of the people in northern Shaanxi. In the use of brush and ink, it retains the charm of traditional freehand brushwork, and at the same time integrates the texture of the rugged Loess Plateau, forming a unique style of "simplicity and depth, sincere emotion". For example, Liu Wenxi's linguistic exploration from fine brushwork to "a combination of fine brushwork and freehand brushwork" reconstructs "people's subjectivity" through brush and ink narrative; Wang Youzheng depicts rural daily life from a "natural" perspective, and Guo Quanzhong explores the freehand expression of "rural ink wash", all deepening the connotation of people's nature in linguistic innovation. This exploration has not only made realistic art get rid of the limitations of a single theme, but also endows it with distinct regional characteristics, injecting a vivid sample of "loess temperament" into the diversified development of Chinese realistic art.

In terms of artistic inheritance and school construction, relying on Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, the Huangtu Painting School has formed a clear context of "academic school", constructing a set of inheritable and practical methodology of people's nature narrative. From Liu Wenxi leading members of the school to go to the countryside for sketching more than 100 times to the subsequent

members continuing the creative tradition of "taking root in life", the school has transformed "people's nature" from a theoretical orientation into a specific practical path. It accumulates life materials and emotional resonance through field investigation-style creation of "living, eating and working together with the people"; covers daily people's livelihood and contemporary memory with the dual narrative of "people's themes + historical themes"; balances public aesthetics and artistic depth with the linguistic system of "taking realism as the foundation and brush and ink as the soul". This systematic practice has not only made the Huangtu Painting School a highly recognizable regional school in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese art, but also provided a referenceable "loess experience" for other regional schools on how to combine local culture and practice people's nature.

In terms of value guidance and spiritual communication, the people's nature narrative of the Huangtu Painting School has always practiced the purpose of "art serving the people", conveying positive values through works and stimulating the emotional resonance and conscious action of the public. The school's works focus on the people's fighting spirit—whether it is the will of the army and civilians to unite in *Spinning Threads*—the Yan'an Great Production Movement, or the labor enthusiasm during the autumn harvest in *The Golden Wind*. At the same time, they highlight the people's dominant position, such as *Electing a Village Official* placing voters at the core of the picture, and *The Yihai Alliance* emphasizing the key role of the people in the historical process. With sincere emotions and simple language, these works allow the public to feel the power of the people in aesthetic experience, enhance their identification with local culture and confidence in the development of the times. They not only inherit the tradition of Yan'an literature and art of "educating the people and uniting forces", but also provide an artistic carrier for promoting patriotism and collectivism in the new era.

5. Conclusion

People's nature is the soul of the Huangtu Painting School and the core driving force for its continuous development through the times. From Liu Wenxi's first trip to northern Shaanxi to take root in life to generations of members of the school adhering to the creative original aspiration of "going deep into the people and depicting them", the Huangtu Painting School has constructed a profound and vivid people's nature narrative system through diversified theme selection, innovative language expression and systematic practical paths. This narrative has not only enabled the Huangtu Painting School to form a unique style of "loess temperament" in art, becoming an important branch of Chinese realistic art, but also undertaken the social responsibility of recording the times and guiding values, becoming an important link connecting art and the people, and regions and the country.

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