

Shaping the Changbai Mountain School: Necessity and Possibility

-On the Discourse Surrounding the Formation of Artistic Schools

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Abstract: Artistic schools represent a theoretical paradigm in the discourse of art history and art historical narrative. While discussions on Chinese art genres and artistic schools have been prevalent in classical Chinese art, theoretical introspection regarding their existence has emerged relatively late. In recent years, there has been a growing academic debate in China about the rationality of artistic schools. Of particular interest is the assertion made by some scholars that there is no need to deliberately create artistic schools. As a duality in the realms of art history and art historical studies, does the existence of artistic schools have theoretical and aesthetic justification? What are the boundaries, and where lies their value? This paper, drawing insights from Changbai Mountain painting, combines theoretical discussions from art history to explore the rationality and limitations of the existence of artistic schools, aiming to provide a new perspective for the discourse on Chinese art's artistic schools.

Keywords: formation, artistic schools, Shaping, Changbai Mountain school

1. Introduction

In recent years, the question of the “formation” of regional artistic schools has sparked vigorous academic debates. Regrettably, nearly all researchers become entangled in the seemingly trivial issue of whether artistic schools should be artificially created, leading to diverse and often contradictory viewpoints [1] [2]. “The problem lies in the fact that these incompatible perspectives are rooted in a shared methodological and epistemological framework. The real question is, how can this framework, already deviating from the contemporary meaning of ‘artistic schools,’ accurately capture its essence?” [3].

It cannot be denied that in certain regions, there has been an overemphasis on promoting artistic schools, sometimes driven more by form than substance, leading to discrepancies between name and reality. The theoretical stance of not deliberately creating artistic schools serves the purpose of aligning fame and practice in the Chinese art scene. It also encourages substantial artistic creation by shifting the focus back to the art itself. Furthermore, artists often fear that the formation of artistic schools with fixed styles could confine them within their boundaries, stifling artistic development. This fear may affect artistic creativity and the diversity of art. However, it is essential to recognize

that the existence of artistic schools has its own specific justification.

2. Artistic Schools as a Reality in Art History

The concept of artistic schools represents an indisputable presence in the history of art. The formation of an artistic school signifies the emergence of a consistent and unified style. Regardless of the specific nomenclature, the fact remains that these schools exist in the realm of painting and have had a tangible impact on the evolution of art throughout history. It is essential to acknowledge that, while the label “artistic school” may not be historically evident in discussions of pre-Ming Chinese art history, genuine artistic schools did exist [4]. The term “artistic school” first appeared in a colophon by Dong Qichang in the “Nancun Bieshu Tuce” by Du Qiong, which reads: “Shen Heng studied painting with Du Dongyuan, and Mr. Shitian inherited his art from Henggu. Dongyuan later transmitted his art to Tao Nancun, thus this is the origin of the Wu School of painting” [5]. This colophon precisely documented the origins and continuity of the Wu School of painting, thus assigning a name to it. This act clarified the multitude of previous artistic groups and activities, giving them a unified identity, that is, an artistic school.

In the realm of traditional Chinese painting, the emphasis has traditionally been on the transmission of knowledge from master to disciple. The “Lidai Minghua Ji” by Zhang Yanyuan in the Tang Dynasty features the section “Xushizichu Nanbei Shidai,” which mentions that artists have different teachers and transmit their skills to each other, sometimes even from the open door of a hut, or without passing through the teacher’s gate, with the result being that some surpass their masters or refine their styles [6]. The characteristics of ancient Chinese traditional artistic schools generally fit into the category of “transmission of skills from master to disciple.” This feature is particularly pronounced among artists from the Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, and Yuan periods, and although the term “artistic school” may not have been explicitly used in the history of painting, genuine artistic schools had indeed appeared [7]. These schools are typically composed of innovative artists and their followers, whose influence spans a long duration and encompasses various generations, leading scholars to refer to them as “historical schools of painters” [8]. China’s vast territory encompasses diverse natural environments, climates, and geography, making it more likely that artists from the same region will share common sentiments. As traditional Chinese painting continued to develop, it gave rise to “local artistic schools formed by artists from the same region, consisting of pioneers and their successors. These are known as contemporary regional schools.” Examples include the Zhe School, Wu School, Songjiang School, and Loudong School, among others, which significantly enriched the content and variety of Chinese painting. Furthermore, even in contemporary times, various regional artistic schools remain active in the field of painting, continuing to play a significant role.

The concept and formation principles of artistic schools have been subjects of ongoing academic debate. Definitions generally revolve around the concept of “abbreviated names for artistic genres.” As one scholarly definition succinctly puts it, “An artistic school refers to a group of artists who share similar or closely related views on aesthetics, artistic concepts, aesthetic tastes, artistic styles, and creative methods during a certain stage of historical development” [9]. “Objective, natural rules governing the formation of artistic schools—such as the presence of founding figures, a lineage relationship with prominent figures, and similarities in style—have become the consensus among Chinese art historians for defining Chinese artistic schools” [10]. However, there are differing viewpoints on the concept and constituent elements of artistic schools, leading to academic discussions on whether a particular group qualifies as an “artistic school.” For example, Professor Zhou Jiyin and Researcher Ma Hongzeng have engaged in academic debates concerning whether the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics can be considered a Yangzhou School and whether the New Jinling School can establish itself as a school of art.

Undoubtedly, the perspectives of these scholars are of paramount importance in the study of artistic schools. Nevertheless, the development of Chinese art history is intricate and ever-changing, with a constant evolution of artistic styles. Furthermore, historical discussions and interpretations of artistic schools have been exceedingly concise, and contemporary definitions appear somewhat one-sided. The emergence of artistic schools has also taken new forms in response to the changing times, rendering the principles regarding their formation, as summarized by scholars, not entirely applicable to the creation of contemporary artistic schools. The 20th century witnessed significant transformations in society and culture, driven by factors such as social revolution, new approaches to art education, the establishment of Chinese painting associations, art publications, and urbanization of artists [11]. These factors led to substantial changes in traditional Chinese painting, giving rise to many new genres that are fundamentally different from the past. Painting groups, artistic schools, and painting styles like the “Four Great Masters,” the Lingnan School, Xu Beihong’s school, and realistic ink painting, as well as artists like Lin Fengmian and his ‘Western Style, Chinese Technique,’ post-Hai School painters, variations in the Southern School’s landscape painting, Beijing artist collectives, the Northern School of painting, the Chang’an School, and Northwestern Chinese painting, all entered the stage of history, marking a new era in Chinese painting.

Entering the 21st century, the formation of artistic schools transcends the confinement to historical or contemporary regional schools. The development of Chinese painting aligns with the vision of scholars such as Mr. Wang Meng, who aspired to adapt to the requirements of modernity, enrich, transform, create, and seek new vitality [12]. This has led to the successive emergence of regional artistic schools in recent years, including the Chang’an School, New Jinling School, Yellow Earth School, Li River School, Taihu School, Yellow Mountain School, Qilu School, Guandong School, Ice and Snow School, and others. Nonetheless, when artistic schools are mentioned, it often elicits surprise, as if it were an extraordinary occurrence [13]. Indeed, some scholars hold a negative attitude toward the regional artistic schools that have arisen in the new era. Some even explicitly put forth the view that “it is better not to create artistic schools” [14]. They argue that the emergence of regional artistic schools deviates from the spontaneous formation principles observed in traditional Chinese artistic schools and bears the suspicion of commercial exploitation. However, as human society has developed to the present day, new phenomena and unexpected events continue to arise. People never imagined that coins used since antiquity could now be replaced by a simple scan with a mobile phone. Similarly, the formation of a regional artistic school should not be solely judged based on whether it adheres to the spontaneous formation principles of traditional Chinese artistic schools. The principles governing the development and formation of artistic schools must evolve with the times and give rise to “new types of artistic schools formed under China’s new era conditions” to truly manifest their artistic significance [15].

Artistic schools, from ancient times to the present, whether later scholars have retroactively defined them or whether they coexisted with the artists of their time, indisputably exist in the annals of art history. They have continuously played a role and exerted an enduring influence. The nomenclature of artistic schools may differ in various time periods, but regardless of the label used, their existence is irrefutable, and they are unshakeable. No matter how far the development of the art phenomenon has progressed, true history remains an inalterable reality. Originating from the Changbai Mountain region, the Changbai Mountain School is an example of a regional artistic school that emerged under the conditions of China’s new era. “In the 1960s, a group of artists represented by Professors Wang Qinghuai (1909–1982) and Sun Tianmu (1911–2010) of Jilin Art College followed the principles of new realistic Chinese painting, using the local customs and scenery of Northeast China, especially the Changbai Mountain area, as their main themes. They employed traditional Northern School landscape painting techniques and aimed to capture a grand atmosphere through on-site sketching, thus forming a distinctive landscape painting style with regional

characteristics, known at that time as the Guandong School or Changbai School” [16]. Subsequently, through the continuous research and practice of several generations of artists in Jilin Province, a unique development path was eventually discovered, which belongs exclusively to the Changbai Mountain School. This resulted in a wealth of artistic works and had a profound impact on society. “The Changbai Mountain School is distinct from any previous artistic school. In addition to the long process of its formation and its lineage, it has a strong cultural mission and dissemination” [17].

3. The School of Painting as a Discursive Creation for Aesthetic Discussion

The concept of artistic schools is a discourse creation in aesthetics. Researching “artistic schools” entails questions about the validity of the concept, how to comprehend art history, whether we should use a “concept” to grasp art history, and whether we should solely respect “concepts” when interpreting artistic phenomena. It is imperative to acknowledge the limitations inherent in concepts. Once a concept is applied to something, it inevitably restricts or excludes certain aspects of that something. Concepts are essential tools for cognition, but like currency, they are indispensable. Concepts, in various forms, whether ancient cowrie shells, paper currency, or QR codes, must exist. Without concepts, we cannot comprehend the world. Concepts are indispensable cognitive tools that come with associated costs. Without concepts, we cannot express ourselves. We cannot write art history, much less understand it. Concepts enrich our understanding of art history; this is the role of “concepts.”

“Every scholar engaged in the study of art history has a standard for artistic schools in their minds. However, they cannot propose a ‘concept’ of ‘artistic schools’ that can be universally applied to the entire history of Chinese art” [18]. Throughout history, the reasons for the emergence of various artistic schools have differed, leading to scattered and ambiguous discussions of the concept of artistic schools. It is virtually impossible for contemporary scholars to establish a unified concept for defining artistic schools because “the concept of ‘artistic school’ is not the objective of research. The purpose of research is to facilitate the public’s acceptance, understanding, and familiarity with certain unique phenomena in Chinese art history through the overall understanding of artistic schools, including their origins, emergence, development, characteristics, and more” [18]. Therefore, the concept of “artistic schools” in the realm of art history essentially serves as a creation of discourse in aesthetics.

“Yet the principles of painting are intricate, and the field of painting knowledge is vast. It cannot be fully encompassed by individual schools and styles” [19]. As early as the Qing Dynasty, Wang Shigu recognized that discussions of artistic schools were inadequate and incomplete. Unfortunately, contemporary scholars are still struggling within the confines of concepts. Artistic schools have different origins, development patterns, and impacts at different times. Therefore, it is essential to approach the concept of artistic schools with a perspective that accounts for the dynamic nature of the field. It is crucial not to be confined by the concept itself to avoid the problem of “confusing the means with the end.”

China’s vast geographical and climatic variations between the north and south have made the northeastern region historically less inhabited by artists, and art history and art criticism have rarely discussed landscape painting in the northeastern region. This situation has rendered this fertile black soil region artistically barren. It was not until after the founding of the People’s Republic that a significant number of intellectuals and artists, including Zhang Boju and Pan Su, overcame the challenging conditions to support the comprehensive development of their homeland, rejuvenating the art of the northeastern region. “In the 1960s, during the ‘Representatives’ Meeting of Artists from the Three Northeastern Provinces’ organized by the Propaganda Departments and Literary Federations of the three northeastern provinces in Changchun, and the ‘Second Exhibition of Artworks from the Three Northeastern Provinces,’ Song Zhenting, a member of the Jilin Provincial Committee and Minister of Propaganda, and a Marxist theoretician, put forward the basic concept of

the ‘Kanto School’” [20]. The Kanto School, with the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts as its stronghold, adhered to the tradition of realism. It primarily focused on significant historical themes, aimed to promote national integrity, and showcased the characteristics of the Kanto region. The Kanto School created a series of deeply moving artworks such as “The Eight Girls Commit Suicide,” “Gadamelin,” “Division of the Grain by Wagang,” and “Jingyu Lives.” These works had a significant impact on society, playing a crucial role at that time in arousing patience, sacrifice, courage, self-reliance, and more in the pursuit of artistic labor [21].

The concept of the Kanto School, from its inception to the development and inheritance of the school, all adhered to the original mission of artistic school formation. The Changbai Mountain School focused on depicting the local culture and environment of the Changbai region. Therefore, it had certain similarities with the Kanto School in its ideals. As a result, many scholars, and even artists, confused the Changbai Mountain School with the Kanto School. Whenever the concept of the Changbai Mountain School was mentioned, it also raised doubts about the existence of artistic schools.

From a traditional Chinese painting perspective, the Changbai Mountain region is deemed inadequate in terms of its capacity to represent traditional Chinese landscape elements, as seen in various aspects. Traditional landscapes, typically comprising individual elements such as mountains, rocks, trees, water bodies, and figures, allow for a fusion and integration of these elements that contribute to the creation of artistic conceptions. In contrast, the Changbai Mountain region lacks these traditional landscape elements. The mere depiction of a single tree is insufficient to constitute a complete landscape, and the rendering of mountains and rocks does not result in distinct, independent forms. The prevailing impression associated with the Changbai Mountain region is essentially one of ruggedness, vastness, and primitiveness. However, this impression imposes significant challenges on artists in terms of exploring suitable techniques for their artistic expressions. Although many artists have undertaken in-depth studies of Changbai’s landscapes, they continue to struggle with the depiction of these original, vast, and rugged natural landscapes. In the words of Huang Binhong, they find that “creating such paintings is a laborious endeavor.” Their struggles are rooted in the difficulties of reconciling their understanding of traditional techniques and their comprehension of real-life experiences with the creative process in Changbai Mountain region painting. Even accomplished artists like Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue found themselves facing the challenge of finding an appropriate starting point for their depictions. In his reminiscences of sketching in the northeastern region, Fu Baoshi mentions, “‘Tianchi’ is the original volcanic crater. If not handled properly, it can easily resemble a ‘broken basin.’ I’ve attempted to paint ‘Tianchi’ as the main feature several times, and in an attempt to avoid creating a complete ‘elliptical shape’ on the canvas, I have tried painting the left half and the right half separately, all of which were unsuccessful. Not only did these attempts fail to capture the spirit of ‘Tianchi,’ but they also significantly undermined the grandeur of Changbai Mountain.”

Throughout its history, the artists of the Changbai Mountain School have been dedicated to forging a unique artistic path capable of fully portraying the regional characteristics of the Changbai Mountain region. Wang Qinghuai, a prominent figure who pioneered the Changbai Mountain School in the 1970s, created a landscape painting titled “Lin Hai Chao Hui,” which, for the first time, unveiled the mystique of the Changbai Mountain range. This painting utilized a simple and unpretentious style to vividly display the rugged and immense nature of Changbai Mountain, allowing people to perceive the grandeur and expansiveness of this landscape. “Lin Hai Chao Hui” was even displayed at the Great Hall of the People to emphasize its significance. Subsequently, Wang’s followers cultivated their unique artistic skills, each blossoming in their own right. In recent years, artists of the Changbai Mountain School have remained adaptable, unencumbered by the confines of traditional Chinese painting techniques, and motivated by an enduring quest to discover contemporary aesthetic expressions that genuinely reflect the region’s local culture and environment.

Whether it is the Kanto School or the Changbai Mountain School, these artistic movements may be subject to confusion or misinterpretation by the public. Nevertheless, irrespective of how these schools are understood or remembered by society, they both continue to fulfill their respective missions and demonstrate their inherent value.

4. Schools of Thought Are Conventional Forms of Discourse

The concept of art schools or “huapai” is a commonly accepted discourse in the art world, often subject to debates regarding their legitimacy. For instance, some scholars have questioned the rebranding of the “Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics” as the “Yangzhou School,” considering it a significant misnomer in the history of Chinese art [22]. However, regardless of the validity of these appellations, activities conducted under the banner of the Yangzhou School continue to thrive. A closer examination of Chinese art history reveals that art schools are conceptual constructs widely employed in the discipline, firmly entrenched in artistic conventions. One might wonder, if we were to forgo the concept of art schools in discussions of art historical phenomena, what alternative framework could be employed? Presently, we are unable to escape the concept of art schools and must instead navigate its limitations by adhering to academic conventions.

Various interpretations of the art school concept should be approached in a manner consistent with commonly accepted discourse. After all, the establishment or dissolution of many art schools throughout history serves primarily as a convenient form used by historians for the ease of discussion, with no universally consistent standards of application. However, in the context of the verb “create,” the author leans towards the perspective of Mr. Zheng Gong, who remarks, “I believe that ‘naming’ is a form of identification, encompassing historical categorization, while ‘creation’ extends beyond historical categorization and focuses more on real and future development potential, aiming for amalgamation” [23]. The formation of the Changbai Mountain School occurred through an established and customary process, devoid of personal gains or ambitions, thus warranting the simple term “naming.” Some critics have observed that artists associated with the Changbai Mountain School appear somewhat reserved, reluctant to openly identify themselves as members of this school. Ultimately, scholars maintain the view that the establishment of the Changbai Mountain School did not adhere to the natural progression of artistic development, leading to a degree of insecurity among its members. As scholars propose:

“In strict terms, the origin of art schools does not date back to the Wei and Jin Dynasties and the Southern and Northern Dynasties when paper and silk scroll paintings first appeared. To qualify as a formal art school, it should meet three criteria: first, it should possess similar or closely related artistic thoughts or creative principles; second, it should exhibit comparable brushwork forms and artistic styles; third, it should manifest a certain teacher-student relationship, with a founder, direct successors, or followers, thereby forming a closely connected group of artists, collectively constituting a single art school” [24].

Hence, Changbai Mountain’s geographical characteristics may never organically lead to the establishment of an art school. First, the Changbai Mountain region does not conform to the traditional aesthetics of painting, as historical art masters rarely dedicated time and effort to the study of this region. Consequently, no established artistic thoughts and creative principles were inherited or developed. Second, artists scarcely visited the area, leaving limited material for brushwork, artistic style, or artistic heritage. As such, the establishment of the Changbai Mountain School is unlikely to align with the so-called “self-regulation of artistic development” proposed by scholars. It is undeniable that the formation of the Changbai Mountain School was made possible through strong support from provincial authorities. In 2015, under the active promotion of the Jilin Provincial Party Committee Propaganda Department, Northeast Normal University established the Changbai Mountain Cultural Development Research Center and, within this center, the Changbai Mountain

School of Art Research Institute. This marked a significant milestone in the development of the Changbai Mountain School. From its inception to its current development, the Changbai Mountain School required external assistance to progress.

However, seeking external assistance does not imply a lack of inherent merit. The artistic development of the Changbai Mountain region began with the arrival of numerous enlightened individuals such as Zhang Boju, Pan Su, and Song Zhenting. They recognized that the region possessed unique artistic forms distinct from the Central Plains and dedicated themselves to the cultural development of the Changbai Mountain region. Their presence attracted prominent artists like Wang Qinghuai and Sun Tianmu to return to the fertile soil of Changbai Mountain, contributing wholeheartedly to the regional art movement. Through generations of tireless efforts, the Changbai Mountain School has attained its current status. Therefore, according to the customary academic discourse, it can indeed be regarded as a regional art school within the realm of Chinese art—the Changbai Mountain School!

5. Art Movements as the Current Focus of Aesthetics

Artists devote their entire lives to seeking a distinct and unique artistic style, often desiring to see their artistic style perpetuated. The emergence of art movements, especially, contributes to the continuity of such styles. Therefore, criticisms in society negating the formation of regional art movements should not deter artists from pursuing their personal styles. Although styles may suggest a degree of stagnation, art itself is, at times, a continual rebirth of style. Society cannot nullify established facts merely because of the notion that “to create or not to create art movements” is debatable. This process is indicative of the current efforts in aesthetics. We might dispense with the term “art movement,” but not with the effort to explore. We must maintain a sense of direction in our aesthetic endeavors.

The comprehension of art movements and styles has historically been multifaceted. However, artists have questioned the concept of art movements and styles from different angles. “I have always believed that art, including painting, should not be confined to movements because the essence of art is beauty, especially individual and stylistic beauty. In painting, if the works of many painters follow the same path, the same appearance, perhaps not all of them need to survive. Attention in the history of painting is often drawn to works that have unique and outstanding beauty” [25]. Some artists also assert, “The concept of creating art movements tends to be counterproductive, no matter how it is executed” [26]. They dismiss the idea of art styles and the formation of regional art movements. If this were indeed the case, how would art progress, and what would be the direction of our future efforts? The Changbai Mountain School is currently in the process of shaping its identity continually, and the perspectives of artists and critics play a significant role in guiding its future development. Avoiding stagnation and narrow artistic horizons is a primary focus for artists associated with the Changbai Mountain School.

Changbai Mountain, situated in northeastern China, is a perennially snow-covered active volcano, with a caldera lake named Tianchi at its summit. The water from Tianchi cascades down to create the world’s highest volcanic caldera lake waterfall. The Changbai Mountain range, with its continuous forests and abundant resources, has nurtured the diligent and resilient people of the Changbai Mountain region. It has given rise to a distinctive culture, which is described as “the sum of material and spiritual wealth created by the various ethnic groups in the Changbai Mountain region during their social and historical development. It is a combination of material cultures, including agricultural, fishing, and hunting cultures, as well as nomadic cultures. It is also a political culture of integrating military and political elements. Moreover, it is a unique folk culture” [27]. The artistic style and aesthetic direction of the Changbai Mountain School aim to use traditional Chinese painting to comprehensively present the rich and mysterious culture of Changbai Mountain to the world.

“The Changbai Mountain School represents the cultural consciousness and awakening of contemporary artists in Jilin Province. In the process of expressing the spirit of Changbai Mountain through their works, a group of artists has naturally formed with highly individualistic language and expressive forms. They do not merely seek to represent the local landscape, but also focus on exploring and contemplating the culture of Changbai Mountain. They do not just distinguish it from the small bridges and flowing waters of the Jiangnan region with grand mountains and trees and rich simplicity; rather, they delve deeper into the spirit of integration, magnanimity, and inclusiveness found in the culture of Changbai Mountain” [27]. The difference between the Changbai Mountain School and traditional Chinese art movements lies in their emphasis on both artistic style and spiritual style. The artists of the Changbai Mountain School are introducing the artistic style of their school into art education at universities, sowing the seeds of the school’s artistic spirit in the hearts of young art students.

6. Conclusion

Leaving aside the discussion of whether to “create” or not, we can straightforwardly determine the establishment of regional art movements by relying on historical and real-world evidence. If such movements are documented in art history, they qualify as art movements. If not, they do not. Thus, a general view that the creation of art movements is difficult may appear overly dogmatic. Therefore, for the time being, it is best to set aside such thoughts and respect discussions in art history, honoring contemporary efforts and maintaining a sense of direction in aesthetics. The validity of art movements must await historical verification.

The artists associated with the Changbai Mountain School bear an inherent cultural mission, a clear artistic pursuit, and a direction in aesthetics. They are advancing according to established guidelines. Regardless of whether the formation of an art movement is “created” or merely “named,” history will be the sole criterion to determine its validity. However, current discussions regarding regional art movements may provide an opportunity for the creation of an independent artistic discourse in contemporary China.

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