

Exploring the Development of Chinese History: Take the Art Aesthetics of Wei, Jin, and North-South Dynasties as an Example

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In the process of various human civilizations' developments, the stability of the society and the fullness of the spirit often cannot be exploited at the same time, and it is precisely because one great dynasty after another gave up the so-called tranquility and pursued development and innovation that human civilization has continued to progress. The Wei, Jin, and North-South Dynasties were one of the periods like that, which were also an era of progress, transformation, disintegration, and remodeling, which brought far-reaching effects on Chinese culture from all angles. The iteration of the regime led to political leniency, which brought active thinking, and then fresh ideas, so expanding the artistic techniques to record, the coupling of culture and art is reflected in this period. This essay will summarize the connection between the creation of artworks and the cultural background through the method of literature analysis, in connection with the ideological system and artistic creation during the Wei, Jin, and North and South Dynasties, and expound on the construction of the unique artistic aesthetics of the Wei and Jin periods, as well as the unique era shaped by these arts.

Keywords: connection, esthetics, humanism, culture, spirit

Introduction

Professor Baihua Zong once pointed out that “the Wei, Jin, and North and South Dynasties were the most chaotic and socially painful times in Chinese politics, but they were indeed the freest, most liberated, most intelligent, and most passionate times in spiritual history”. Freedom, emancipation, and enthusiasm, those words that are rarely used to describe ancient China set the Wei-Jin Dynasties apart; chaos and suffering were the characteristics of the disintegration and dispersion of the dynasties, and it was precisely because of suffering that the ancient people spoke out powerfully time and time again. Extreme beauty and extreme disaster created the unique Wei, Jin, and North-South Dynasties. Without excessive political and academic interference, people developed a system of thought that better suited their lives, and people began to have a new “self-consciousness” after deep thinking and practice. In such an atmosphere, lively and uniquely humane artworks broke the confinement and added the elements of life and freedom to the serious subjects, forming a new aesthetic with more color. Thus, the author believes that evaluating the Wei, Jin, and North and South Dynasties from any single perspective is not comprehensive enough, and that culture and art complement each other in this period of history

and are indispensable. This paper will start with the three mainstream cultural characteristics of the Wei-Jin Dynasties and give examples to demonstrate the impact of these three characteristics on the art of Wei and Jin, thus showing the connection between culture and art in this period of time.

Culture Background

The Wei, Jin, and North-South Dynasties were a period of transition from the Han to the Sui and Tang Dynasties, when Chinese culture underwent rapid changes in art, religion, philosophy, and so on. In such a diverse and tolerant society, people's views were guided by mainstream thinkers and changes in the surrounding situation, and among those who followed the trend, a small group of people with deeper research and insights formed a new class, the scholars (Chen & Zeng, 2003). This is a name that has recurred in history since then but is somehow uniquely synonymous with the Wei-Jin Dynasties.

Referring to the cultural characteristics of the Wei-Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, the ideologies can be summarized into three topics:

Combining Confucianism and Daoism

Since Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty "dismissed a hundred schools and honored only the Confucians", the Confucians have gradually occupied a dominant position in the thoughts of the ruling class and the public. The struggle between the parties and the party most at the end of the Han Dynasty led to social upheaval and at the same time caused the people's cognition and concepts to collapse on both the spiritual and objective perspectives. The scholars of that time could be divided into three types: Some of them broke away from their previous perceptions and camped with the enemy, some others stood firm on their morals and finally died undefeated, and the third kind was in between, did not turn their backs on their morals, and did not defend them strongly but chose to live in seclusion and no longer worked as an official. This group of people who no longer asked questions about the current situation is usually regarded as the initial state of the typical scholarly class of the Wei-Jin Dynasties (Zhong, 1917). It should be emphasized that although these people abandoned some of the inapplicable Confucian concepts, they were still influenced by Confucianism in their underlying thinking.

Although Taoism did not have the power to compete with Confucianism at the beginning of its development, it had already exerted some influence in politics and society since the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty. At that time, wars and epidemics were raging in the country, and people were unable to bear the burdens of life and revolted. The Taoist disciples incorporated elements of sorcery, Mohism, and so on into Taoism on the basis of their ideas, and the representative Taoist sects of Taiping Dao (to create a peaceful society) and Tianshi Dao (to lead rules in the world) gained a great deal of public trust by adopting different strategies from those of the imperial court to deal with the epidemics, and although they were defeated in the end, they had a great influence on the spread of Taoism in the people. In order to have a certain extent, the later rulers saw the influence of Taoist thought among the masses and utilized its key elements of maintaining stability and uniting people's hearts to strengthen their political rule (Liu, 2010). At the beginning of the Wei-Jin Dynasties, the situation of Taoism and Confucianism going hand in hand was basically formed.

Confucianism focuses on the individual's contribution to the group and encourages the individual to contribute to the advancement of the larger society, while Taoism is concerned with the individual's physical and mental cultivation, placing extra emphasis on spiritual and material freedom. The two doctrines emerged

simultaneously in society, adding an era of intermingling to form a new system of thought, dark learning (Chinese doctrines on metaphysics). *The Book of Jin, Lu Yun Zhuan* (a book recording the history of the Jin Dynasty, Lu Yun's recording) contains the earliest record of dark learning, recounting the story of Lu Yun, who came to the capital to seek an official position and, through exchanges with the locals, discovered that dark learning had become a basic knowledge accepted by everyone (Fang, 2023). This story shows that dark learning was extremely important in the thoughts of the people in the Wei-Jin Dynasties and had become a kind of fashion to which everyone aspired.

Tour and Art Spiritual

“Travel” has a long history in Chinese culture. *The Shiji* (Book of the Annals of the Grand Historian) records that Huangdi (the original emperor of China) traveled his entire country for a year. From the Longshan period onwards, the rulers of many dynasties had already been touring their territories to proclaim their right of notification (Sima, 2023). Another definition of “travel” is that people train their minds through trials and tribulations during their journeys. Famous people such as the historian Sima Qian and the poet Li Bai have had their personalities sublimated during their journeys and have created many masterpieces in the meantime.

The “travel” in the Wei-Jin Dynasties was different from the above two, as people were infected by Zhuangzi's idea of free travel, and were keen on generating the emotions of beauty and freedom by experiencing the mountains and rivers. It was a kind of simultaneous physical and spiritual “travel” when they integrated into and enjoyed nature. During this period, many works of literature and paintings incorporated a great deal of natural elements, and various people recorded their perceptions of nature in various places, making up for imperfections or regrets in their infinite imagination. The “scholars”, who were advanced in their thinking, achieved in the mountains behaviors that were not accepted or rejected by the traditional society and thus felt great satisfaction (Zhou, 2019).

Humanism

As mentioned above, the Wei-Jin Dynasties was a period from the single respect for Confucianism to the varied schools of thought learning from each other, and in the process of fusion of diverse ideas, the “value of human beings” has always been at the center of the issues of each school of thought.

The philosophers in the Wei-Jin dynasties believed that human beings were characterized by a unique sensibility, that they would be stimulated to emotion and contemplation by what they saw and heard, and that this reaction was the basis for the progress of civilization and the development of art and literature (Liu, 2010). Because of this, the ruling class of the Wei and Jin Dynasties did not popularize hegemony or constraints from theology alone but broke the traditional secular constraints and liberated people's emotions and spirituality (Liu, 2010). As a result, people's horizons in this period were unprecedentedly broad, and in the process of constantly thinking about various things, the aesthetic consciousness was also enhanced. Therefore, complemented by the insights gained from their “travels”, and by manifesting their individual freedom in art based on their unique aesthetics, people were creating a new “cultural self-awareness” (Liu, 2010).

Summary

As repeatedly emphasized in the above three ideas, the spirit of the scholars in the Wei, Jin, and North-South Dynasties gradually transcended the world, especially those who had the ability to create art. They had more opportunities to think about the individual and society. The result was that they began to have questions about

various issues that could not be solved, and then after a long period of exploration and answers, an ultimate answer gradually emerged: “Human death is inevitable, and enjoying a limited life is the most important thing” (Zhou, 2022).

Artificial Characterization

The overall artistic style of the Wei and Jin periods focuses on the presentation of the author’s reflections, presenting a theme that esteems nature and gives more prominence to life, which belongs to the world but originates from the society without belonging to it. In short, the aesthetics of Wei and Jin is a kind of work founded on humanistic thoughts, with nature as the tone, and with rich human nature and independent consciousness.

Emphasis of History

The earliest historically documented Chinese landscape painting is Gu Kaizhi’s Mount Lushan by Gu Kaizhi of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, but both the real painting and copies of this painting have been lost. Thankfully, there are some paintings of landscapes not disappearing from this work that can still be appreciated by the world. For example, Dai Kui, a painter of the same dynasty, created the painting “Yan Mountain”, which depicts the lush green Yan Mountain in a rhythmic brushstroke technique (Figure 1). The painting is 615 centimeters long, with mountains, trees, small houses, and people living in them. The whole painting is a detailed reflection of the real hermitage environment and life in the Wei-Jin Dynasties (Dai, 2023).



Figure 1. Yan Mountain.

Life Elements

“The Book of Mermaid” (Painting of a Woman’s History) is another masterpiece by Gu Kaizhi, but now the original painting has been lost, leaving only a copy from the Tang Dynasty. It, by recounting the deeds of prominent women in history, serves to educate the morals of women in the upper class during the Wei and Jin Dynasties. As a serious painting with a didactic nature, it still contains many scenes of life, such as dressing, talking, arguing, writing, music, and so on (Figure 2). The painting also features a mountain with a variety of animals and a hunter with a crossbow ready to kill a tiger on the mountain (Figure 3). This work fully demonstrates that the art aesthetics of the upper class in the Wei and Jin Dynasties tended to be “living”, and natural elements were gradually used as the background of the paintings, as an articulated part, or even as an important part of the works.



Figure 2. Book of mermaid.



Figure 3. Book of mermaid, mountain.

Conclusion

The culture of the Wei-Jin Dynasties was a fusion of diversity towards the system, a process of establishing individual unique ideas, and a period that allowed the scholar class to go deeper into ideas and the public to understand them. Opening their homes and going into the mountains and forests, isolated from the world but mindful of the world, this emerging reclusive life not only made the Wei, Jin, and North and South Dynasties a quiet time in Chinese history but the ideas and works that erupted from them also added a lot of warmth to these fantastical dynasties. This quiet and ardent, fine work of art was brought to the present day so that today's people to feel the personality hidden between the brushstrokes, which is a meticulous and extensive carving, continuous innovation and inheritance, artistic rationality, and experience of each other's abstraction. Thus, the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the philosophy of Wei and Jin, and the aesthetics of Wei and Jin, together brought a new, independent spiritual and aesthetic system of remodeling to China's thousands of years of history.

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