

A Study on the Image Style of the Ancient Print “Presenting the Beauty of the Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty”

ZHANG Tong-yuan

Shanxi University, Taiyuan, China (030006)

The Pingyang ancient woodblock painting “Presenting the Beauty of the Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty” is an important work that cannot be surpassed in the study of the history of Chinese printmaking. This article focuses on the characteristics of the image style of this work, and first combines the process of excavation and discovery of this work to describe its historical background; Secondly, analyze the image information such as the structure and content presented in the work; Finally, the uniqueness of the flat water version production, the distinctive content presented in the work, and the artistic composition of the work were explained, and the importance of studying the work was pointed out.

Keywords: “Presenting the Beautiful Beauty of the Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty”, image style, research

The Discovery of an Ancient Woodblock Print Titled “Presenting the Beauty of a Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty”

In 1909, Russian explorer Kozlov discovered an ancient Pingyang woodblock print titled “Elegance with the Dynasty, Presenting the Beauty of the Country” (also known as the woodblock print “Four Beauties”) during excavations in Blackwater City. Subsequently, Kozlov collected “Presenting a Graceful Beauty with the Dynasty” at the Alexander III Museum in Russia at that time, and it is now housed at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. In 1915, Japanese scholar Naoki Kano saw this work during his study tour in Russia at the Third Museum of Alexandria. He was attracted by the exquisite level and visual content of the work, and concluded that it was a masterpiece of Chinese ancient printmaking that has been passed down through generations. With the help of Professor Yifengge from the University of St. Petersburg, he took photos of the work and brought them back to Japan. Naoki Kano introduced the work to relevant experts in Japan and invited scholar Shouzo Ueda to publish an article in the third issue of the magazine “Arts and Culture” in 1916 to explain the content of the work, speculate on its time of creation, and point out its value. As a result, the ancient print “Presenting the Beauty of a Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty” has officially attracted the attention of scholars from all over the world. Around the 1930s, international articles related to this work were translated by Mr. He Changqun in China and published in the journal of the Central Military Academy, gradually attracting attention and research from the academic community in China.

Composition and Image Content of “Chinese Painting Xuanhe Costume”

The ancient woodblock print “Presenting the Beauty of a Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty” was produced during the Jin Dynasty in Pingyang, Shanxi (now Linfen, Shanxi). It measures 57cm in length and 32.5cm in width, with a vertical composition and printed on ephedra paper from southern Shanxi. The image style of this work is unique, completely different from the traditional Buddhist scripture prints of the Song, Liao, Jin, and Western Xia dynasties in China, and has an independent appreciation function. From the perspective of the structural form of the picture, this work presents a unique composition of “Chinese painting Xuanhe costume” from the Song and Jin dynasties. The style of Xuanhe costume originated during the Xuanhe period of Emperor Huizong of Song Dynasty, also known as Song style framing or Xuanhe framing. It is suitable for flat long or flat wide painting hearts and is a more complex form of framing that requires multiple colored inlays. Its specific mounting language can be divided from top to bottom into: Tian Gan, Jing Yan Dai, Tian Tou, Shi Tang, Shang Ge Shui, Jin Ya, Hua Rui, Xia Ge Shui, Di Tou, and Di Gan. Below, we will explain the relevant content and style of the work based on the composition form of the Xuanhe costume.

(1) Jingyan Belt: It is sewn or pasted with two belts on the celestial head. In the middle of the “Heavenly Head” in “Presenting the Beauty of the Country with the Morning Elegance”, two left and right separated “Jingyan Belt” are drawn. The Jingyan belt is divided into two parts: the upper part is a vertically inverted right angled triangle; The lower part is a rectangle, drawn below the isosceles sides of a triangle, representing the two sides of the “Fluttering Swallow”. The craftsman cleverly conceived and reasonably utilized the combination of rectangles and triangles, giving the viewer a sense of visual solemnity while breaking through visual constraints.

(2) Tian Tou and Di Tou: Tian Tou is the upper and lower decorative part of Xuanhe framing, decorated with auspicious patterns. The sky and earth of “Presenting the Beauty of the Country with the Elegance of the Morning” are composed of plum blossom patterns, engraved in a dark manner. The plum blossom, pine, bamboo, and chrysanthemum form the Four Gentlemen, with the plum blossom pattern depicting the sky and earth, symbolizing nobility and auspiciousness. This is a traditional interpretation of Chinese cultural integrity. Draw a pair of phoenix patterns among the plum blossoms, with the phoenix looking back at the approaching phoenix. The phoenixes look up and down, chasing and gazing at each other, matching the looks of the four beauties in the picture.

(3) Poetry Pond: The poetry pond in Xuanhe costume is the place where the work uses words to point out the meaning and spirit conveyed by the painting. The phrase “gracefully presenting the beauty of a country in the morning” is the interpretation of the poetic pond in this work. In the *Shuowen Jiezi*, there are various interpretations and pronunciations of the character “Sui”. “Sui” is commonly known as “Sui” and pronounced as “su fǐ”, referring to following or obeying. On January 31, 1956, the “Simplified Chinese Character Scheme” was officially announced in the *People’s Daily* after being reviewed and approved by the plenary session of the State Council, and began to be implemented nationwide. The character “Sui” is the traditional Chinese character for “Sui”, and the meaning of “Sui Chao” is the change of dynasties based on the development of history and time. “Shaoxing Sui Dynasty Painter” refers to the official title given to painting academies during the Shaoxing period of the Song Dynasty. “Graceful”, graceful and profound, metaphorically referring to the

beauty of a woman’s soul; Graceful and graceful, metaphorically referring to the beauty of a woman’s appearance. Beauty is called graceful, and a beautiful heart is called graceful. Li Xian’s annotation: “Graceful and enchanting appearance”, “Biography of Cao Shishu’s Wife in the *Book of Later Han*”, present “means to manifest”. “Qingguo” means that people all over the country admire and admire it. The Song of Li Yannian in the *Book of Han*: “There are beautiful women in the north, unparalleled and independent. They once looked at the city of Qingren, and then at the country of Qingren. It’s better not to know about Qingcheng and Qingguo, as beautiful women are difficult to obtain again.” The so-called “presenting the beauty of Qingguo” means showcasing the most beautiful and talented peerless women.

(4) Up and down separated by water: Separated by water, also known as “boundary”, it serves as a barrier. “Along with the morning, the graceful and graceful presents the beauty of the country” is composed of Hui character patterns, which play a role in separating the “Heavenly Head”, “Poetry Pond” and “Painting Heart” in this work, increasing the visual rhythm effect of the picture. Here, “Hui” represents the meaning of “rotation” and “turning”, with each pattern connected at the beginning and end, continuously extending. It is commonly referred to as “wealth and prosperity never end”, representing “everything never ends, everything goes smoothly”, and is endowed with the meaning of continuous and auspicious patterns. There are special “plant patterns” at the four corners separated by water on the upper and lower parts of the poem “Presenting the Beauty of the Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty”. Firstly, after investigation, this pattern appeared in a special historical period and can only be seen in some printed cultural relics unearthed in Heishui City, Western Xia, such as the “Sutra of Buddha’s Discourse on the Transformation of the Female Body”, “The Law of Tiansheng Changing the Old and the New”, and “The Board Painting of the Protector of the Divine Master of the Buddha’s Discourse on the Chang Ahan Sutra” produced during the reign of Emperor Renzong of Western Xia. Secondly, the same symbols appear in both Chinese and Western Xia scripts. The author believes that this symbol belongs to the pattern logo of Pingyang Carving Workshop in the Jin Dynasty, or the logo required for carving works, with the logo of a handmade workshop or the directional meaning of the using department.

(5) Hua Rui: The four beauties are the Hua Rui in the painting. Four beauties were drawn by the painter at the lower center of the painting. The beauties moved forward from right to left. The first beauty was Lvzhu, the artistic lady of Shi Chong during the Western Jin Dynasty. She held a jade artifact in her hand and turned her body to look back; The second beauty was Wang Zhaojun, a famous concubine during the reign of Emperor Yuan of Han. She slightly lowered her head, held a pen in her right hand, and a book in her left hand, quickly writing something; The third beauty was Empress Zhao Feiyan during the reign of Emperor Cheng of Han. She crossed her hands in her wide brocade sleeves, smiled, and looked ahead slowly; The fourth beauty was Ban Ji, a talented woman during the reign of Emperor Cheng of Han. She held a fan in her hand and gazed into the distance. The four beauties are intricately carved, with characters of wealth and status, rich expressions and movements, either moving slowly, stopping for a long distance, or bowing their heads in contemplation, presenting different emotions. The beauty is dressed in gorgeous clothes, with long dresses mopping the floor and gorgeous decorations. She wears phoenix crown jewelry on her head, especially the intricate carving of clothing and headwear. The painter carves the signature of each character next to it, with a rectangular border outside the signature, which serves both as a decoration for the signature and as an exclusive designation of the beauty’s identity.

Styles and Characteristics

(1) Production System of Flat Water Version

The ancient woodblock print “Presenting the Beauty of the Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty” is an important representative of woodblock prints in the Pingyang region of the Jin Dynasty and a significant work of the “Pingshui Woodblock” production method. Becoming an important work that cannot be surpassed in the history of ancient Chinese printmaking. Here, “ping” is not a simple geographical concept, but a stylistic concept, and its characteristics are related to the factors that shaped its history. Pingyang is located in the southwest of the mountain, south of Gushe Mountain (also known as Pingshan) and north of Pingshui, hence the name Pingyang. In the sixth year of the Zhenghe reign of the Northern Song Dynasty (1116 AD), Pingyang Prefecture was established. After the Jingkang Incident, the engravers from Bianliang City were taken captive to the Pingyang area of Shanxi Province, forming a printing base in the north. After hundreds of years of inheritance and practice, a unique “flat water plate” engraving system was formed. When carving flat water plates, craftsmen know the way of “slow cutting when encountering curves, and fast cutting when encountering straightness”. In terms of the effect of processing traces, the structure of edge knife marks on the image interface generated by the cutting speed brings a visual breakthrough in image effects from the perspective of action technology. Craftsmen pay attention to the essentials of “accurate cutting, stable cutting, and light cutting”, “vertical cutting, oblique cutting, rotating and lifting, and stopping cutting”, and so on.

(2) Unique Content and Themes

The ancient woodblock print “Presenting the Beauty of the Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty” features four beautiful women from different periods as the main subject of the painting, which is different from the content of ancient woodblock prints before the Song, Liao, Jin, and even Tang dynasties. This is unique in the existing surviving woodblock prints of the Song, Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties. The craftsman depicted four beauties from different eras, experiences, and social statuses in the same painting. All four beauties were women who existed in history and books, with different identities and life outcomes. They had a strong sense of genre painting themes. From a conventional perspective, this theme was different from the depiction of educational models and had strong imaginative space. It was completely different from the traditional Buddhist educational propaganda, which created the uniqueness of the work.

(3) The Particularity of the Composition form of Xuanhe Costume

From the perspective of the overall composition of the painting, the ancient woodblock print “Presenting the Beauty of the Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty” adopts the structure of “Chinese Painting Xuanhe Costume”, which is unique in the existing traditional woodblock prints. Traditional printmaking only produces visual effects, and if it needs to be displayed or hung, it also needs to be mounted. When the artist drew the work “Presenting the Beauty of the Country with the Elegance of the Morning”, they directly created the effect with mounting characteristics, which not only increased the depth of interpreting the image but also strengthened the visual effect. This is a significant feature that sets this work apart from other printmaking forms.

Conclusion

The ancient printmaking “Presenting the Beauty of the Country with the Elegance of the Dynasty” is an extremely important printmaking work in the history of Chinese printmaking. It is an important symbol of the transition from traditional Buddhist printmaking to traditional secular printmaking in China. The study of this work is helpful in exploring the secularization development of Chinese ancient printmaking and the development of its propaganda function, which is of great significance.

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