

Beyond Reminiscence

-- Chinese Tradition Expressed in Contemporary Art

Generally speaking, “tradition” and “contemporary” are a pair of opposite concepts about time. People always have the habit of “respecting the ancient and disdaining today”, advocating that the ancient should rule today’s events. They think that the pleasure brought by the large-scale production and the miracle of the internet cannot compare with and is less fascinating than the ancient mood such as “picking Chrysanthemum under the east fence; relaxedly seeing the south mountain.” However, what is the difference between the contemporary and the tradition besides the new social form and the material outlook brought by the prosperity of technology? In other words, are their value systems, the understanding of the meaning of life and the pursuit of the cultural spirit, totally different? By thinking silently, we can find that they are like twins that are similar and harmonious. Which period does the “tradition” refer to? Which kind of “contemporary” does the “contemporary” refer to? How many contents of “tradition” can function on the contemporary? How many “the next traditions” can the “contemporary” produce? Or, rather, are we always living in “tradition” and there’s no alleged “contemporary”? And vice versa.

In my opinion, the cross-examination between Zen and Taoism has practical significance to the prosperous development of Chinese contemporary art, because the development of more than twenty years brings the Chinese contemporary art into an exalted state of excitement (De Yi Wang Xing). “De Yi Wang Xing”, a derogatory term, means, “the pleasures of the shallow people are out of control when they gain slight success” (from Modern Chinese Dictionary). The hot status of the contemporary art ecology, the massive inflow of capital, and the enthusiastic attentions of the international perspectives force everyone involved including artists, galleries, auction houses, critics, curators, dealers, and collectors to be too busy to exercise self-restraint. In addition to the emergence of westernization, brand-names, entertainment, and fashion, the “pseudo-traditionism” and the “neo-traditionism,” that us, creating contemporary art from Chinese tradition, has seen an upsurge. It should be said that it is closely related to the issues of how to position and show the uniqueness of Chinese culture in the transformation of China’s modern society especially in the face of the enormous pressure of globalization. However, art is the wanton expression of the purest human nature. Art can really develop only by getting rid of outside limitations and returning to the origin. Thus, I think another kind of “De Yi Wang Xing” should be promoted.

Zhuangzi said, “The speakers concern the meaning. When meaning is gained, the words are forgotten.” It means the main function of language is to express emotions and meanings. When the mission is completed, whether the language or words are complete is of no consequence. Wang Bi, the scholar of the Wei and Jin periods, extended Zhuangzi’s theory to metaphysics. He regarded that “the speakers gain the meaning and forget the appearance (Xiang 象).” “Xiang” could be “image”, “weather”, “phenomena”, and “scenes” etc.; “Forget the appearance (Xiang)” means “do not deliberately care about the visual forms”. “Jin Shu. Ruan Ji” described Ruan Ji, the one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, in such a way: “...like sot; good at playing instruments; when he is happy, the body is forgotten.” The comments are admirable. It can be seen as the earliest provenance of “De Yi Wang Xing”. All of the latter generations’ pursuits, such as “vivid (Chuan Shen 传神)”, “vivid aura (Qi Yun Sheng Dong 气韵生动)”, the emphases on “heart-room (Xin Zhai 心斋)”, “sitting and forgetting (Zuo Wang 坐忘)”, and the thoughts such as “Intention is before writing”, and “Subtleness is between the similar and the dissimilar”, are from this origin and further developed and penetrated the spirit thread of Chinese classical culture and art.

Today, we cannot know the reason that “De Yi Wang Xing” gradually became a derogatory term, but the three levels embodied in its composition have great function to suggest the development of Chinese contemporary art.

The first level is of “Paoding Anatomizes Cattle (Paoding Jie Niu)” in Zhuangzi: The Principle of Nurturing Life. A chef easily chopped an ox for Lianghuiwang with rhythmic actions. Lianghuiwang asked him how it could be. He answered, “What I love is Tao through which I develop my skills.” It means the habit after years of disciplining finally can reach the status that slaughter an ox even closing eyes and ignoring its presence. It’s so proficient in technology that one can “gain its significance and forget its form.”

The second level is not only forgetting the “form” of the outside world but also forgetting one’s own “figure”, which is so-called “forgetting both the objects and the subject”. For example, Li Bai’s *Sitting Alone in Silent Pavilion Hill*: “As a flock of birds fly at their greatest height; A lonely cloud drifts idly on its own; Neither of us ever grows tired; There can only be one Silent Pavilion Hill.”, and Fan Zhongyan’s *Remarks of Yueyang Tower*: “Never be happy with the objects; Never be sad in the self.” The former is the personification of the mountains as well as the materialization of the self, while the latter is reminding people to go beyond the objects. Both of them are the embodiments stressing the “idea” and ignoring the “external”.

The final level is Tao Yuanming’s poem “*Drinking*”: “The real meaning is inside; When the illustration is intended, the words have been forgotten.” Here, this celebrity of the Wei and Jin Periods not only “gain the significance and forget the form (De Yi Wang Xing)” but also transcend the “significance (Yi 意)”. The status can only be expressed by silence, namely “gain the significance and forget the significance.”

In fact, the Chinese traditional culture distinguishes the upper and the lower among the three levels, but I think they have their own realm and interest. This Chinese name of the exhibition “Beyond Reminiscence”, literally “Gain the Significance and Forget the Form” (De Yi Wang Xing) is just inspired by the rich composition and diverse semantics of this expression. It finds the artists and works that concern the themes of “the essence of Chinese art” in the art world to present the familiar but transcendental visual space that not rigidly adhere to the expression of forms but drift in various dimensions of time. In reality, simply opposing the “tradition” to the “contemporary”, like the customary comparison between “the east” and “the west”, is an outdated perspective that is very foolish and irresponsible.

Although the spread of globalization cannot deny the geographical and political boundaries, it still quickly and silently assimilates the newborn residents of the new era. Similarly, while the “tradition” sometimes has leapt to the current stage, today’s “contemporary” has suddenly become the classic in the legend. Therefore, the status of the staggered time and the cross-culture especially needs an approach of “De Yi Wang Xing”. Whatever the level is positioned, the most important is to create meaningful spiritual wealth.

The oil paintings of Liu Wei, Ye Yongqing, Zheng Zaidong, and Zhou Chunya have commanding presences due to the joyful strokes and colors, as well as the sensory and emotional experiences, all the while revealing a variety of metaphysical expressions. The explorations of substantial or virtual paper ink of Li Huayi and Xu Longsen are different from the alleged “modern Chinese paintings”,

exploring the means by which to truly convey the spirit of the Chinese landscape from different angles. The special presentations of the day-to-day experiences of Gu Wenda, Bai Yiluo, Shi Jingsong, and Shen Shaomin express strong social concerns from different aspects. Jennifer Wen Ma's dynamic visual works of game style dramatically illustrate the subtle relations between reality and virtuality. Wei Hong's records of the socialized and interacted performances guide the audiences to experience the essence of "Change". It should be said that the greatest common denominator is the free and spiritual expression without the limitations of icons, techniques and ideas.

In short, "De Yi Wang Xing" in our view is a very relaxed state, the best way for the artistic creation to access the infinite from the finite. It can wander in any environment of any tense, without the shackles of form. It has a distinct identity as well as a generally effective significance. As long as the utilitarian is discarded and the issues are explored purely, it is the most meaningful "contemporary" art!