

The Theme of Laborers in Contemporary Chinese Painting: A Study of Historical Mission and Artistic Expression

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Abstract

Since the founding of New China, the image of laborers has always been one of the important themes in Chinese painting creation. It is an artistic expression of Chinese political thought and the life of the Chinese people. Shaping and praising laborers has become an important historical mission of contemporary Chinese artists. This study aims to examine the differences between laborer images in modern and contemporary Chinese paintings by analyzing works from the 7th National Youth Art Exhibition and the 13th National Art Exhibition. The study draws three conclusions: In terms of subject matter, the new labor and production relations have updated and enriched the connotation of Chinese contemporary figure painting; In terms of narrative features, it is manifested in the transformation from the grand narrative to the individual narrative; From creation, The technique is manifested as multiple aesthetic orientations based on realism. The ultimate purpose of the article is to try to show that Chinese painting with the theme of labor is an integral part of contemporary Chinese painting, reflecting the development, success, and confusion of contemporary Chinese painting in the evolution of the times. Most importantly, it records and reflects the times in an artistic way on the surface, but in essence, illuminates social life with a humanistic spirit.

1. Introduction

The image of laborers has appeared in Chinese artworks since ancient times. For example, in the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) bronze pot now in the Palace Museum in Beijing is engraved with fishing and hunting patterns to reproduce the labor conditions of ancient society; In the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Xuan (about the 8th century AD) depicted the labor scenes of women washing, ironing and sewing clothes in his most famous figure painting "Dao lian Tu"; During the Five Dynasties, Dong Yuan(? - about AD 962) depicted a group of fishermen working in his landscape painting "Xiaoxiang Tu" These cases all prove that labor has a long history as a painting subject. In addition, there has always been such a tradition in Chinese painting, that is, the continuous praise of the four figures of fishing, woodcutter, farming, and reading. But it should be noted that these four characters who seem to be laborers hide a more important identity. They are intellectuals who take off their robes and return to the mountains and forests. Therefore, they cannot be regarded as pure labor. After the Song Dynasty, Chinese art history was mostly written by literati painters, and the landscape became the main subject of painting. Because most of the literati painters in the feudal society did not care about the common toilers,

paintings depicting laborers became scarce, which had a lot to do with the class concept of the Chinese feudal society.

Therefore, although there are many expressions of laborers and labor scenes in the history of Chinese art, the creative trend of thinking that takes laborers as the center of creation and conveys class consciousness, national policies, socialist ideas, and political views to the public through artworks, It only became mainstream after the founding of New China and expressed a new spiritual outlook that was completely different from the old ritual culture of feudal society. The painting on the theme of laborers in New China is an art creation established under the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. In his doctoral dissertation "Seventeen Years of Labor-themed Painting Research in New China", Xiao Long analyzed the background of labor-centered painting in New China in detail. He believes that modern Chinese painting focuses on depicting the image of laborers, and the theoretical root is the fundamental direction established by Mao Zedong in his "Speech at the Yan'an Symposium on Literature and Art" in 1942. Mao put forward the view that literature and art are subordinate to politics and in turn influence politics, and that revolutionary literature and art serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers [1] From Mao's speech, Chinese art began to tirelessly portray workers in all walks of life. It should be pointed out that since the founding of New China, although the most important theme of laborers in Chinese figure painting has not changed, the artistic language and composition of his works in different periods not only obey and serve the needs of the times but are also affected by political power, The production system and the influence of ideology.

From the founding of New China to China's reform and opening up, the themes of laborers in Chinese art are mainly reflected in aspects such as class struggle, national defense, industrial and agricultural production, national unity, and labor competition. The painting style at this time was almost entirely shrouded in realism. From the 1980s to the present, Chinese art has moved to the contemporary era, and the creation of Chinese paintings with the theme of laborers has taken on a new look. "With the rapid development of China's economy for many years, the continuous urbanization process has led to an increasingly refined social division of labor. The materials and perspectives of artists' art creation about laborers are also increasingly diversified. Driven by this diversification, labor themes. The contemporary connotation of artworks has been deeply and meticulously excavated, and the image of laborers has also undergone new changes. "Labor dignity", "craftsman spirit" and "good life" have become new features in the thematic artworks of contemporary laborers, and they can be used to recognize contemporary laborers. The meaning of labor value [2].

The study of laborer images in Chinese paintings not only provides a visual manifestation of the social, political, and economic changes that have taken place in China, but also serves as an important reflection of the evolving artistic aesthetic, values, and spirit of Chinese artists. As laborers constitute a significant proportion of society, their representation in art through various periods is crucial to understanding the development of Chinese art and its connection to broader social transformations. The image of laborers in modern and contemporary Chinese paintings reflects the transformation of Chinese society from a primarily agricultural one to a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing nation. Moreover, it showcases the shift in artistic focus from serving solely the interests of the ruling class to expressing the struggles, aspirations, and dignity of the working class. This research aims to deepen our understanding of the evolution of Chinese art within its social and historical context, as well as provide insight into the representation of laborers as a subject in Chinese art.

Specifically, this study aims to explore and analyze the representation of laborers in modern and contemporary Chinese paintings, with a particular emphasis on their themes, narratives, and creative techniques. It seeks to identify the key differences in the portrayal of laborers in modern and contemporary Chinese paintings, including their imagery, style, and spiritual connotations, and investigate the underlying reasons behind these differences, such as the influence of political, social, and economic factors, as well as the evolution of artistic aesthetics and values. By contributing to the existing body of research on the representation of laborers in Chinese art, this study provides a foundation for future research on the subject and deepens our understanding of the evolution of Chinese art in its social and historical context.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to compare the differences between the image of laborers in modern Chinese paintings and contemporary Chinese paintings, and to explore the reasons behind these differences. Specific research questions include the themes, narrative characteristics, and creative techniques of laborers in contemporary Chinese paintings. Descriptive analysis methods will be used in this study, analyzing excellent Chinese paintings with laborer themes from the 7th National Youth Art Exhibition and the 13th National Art Exhibition, comparing the differences between the image of laborers in modern and contemporary Chinese paintings in terms of imagery, style techniques, and spiritual connotations. The samples are excellent Chinese paintings from the 7th National Youth Art Exhibition and the 13th National Art Exhibition, and image resources will be collected through the online exhibitions of these two events, and laborer-themed works will be selected

and organized. Descriptive statistical analysis methods will be used to compare and analyze the differences between the image of laborers in modern and contemporary Chinese paintings, and the results will be presented through tables, charts, and text to reveal the reasons behind these differences and the spirit and creative concepts behind them. The limitation of this study lies in the possibility of bias in sample selection and data collection methods, which needs to be further improved and refined in future research, and the scope and limitations of the research results should be clarified.

3. The Current State of Creation

Entering the 21st century, China's social transformation and industrial structure upgrade have made the labor production environment more complex. New production relations and emerging laborers have become the focus of Chinese figure painting, enriching the connotation of laborer-themed paintings. Reflected in the works, Chinese figure paintings that can clearly feel the theme of contemporary laborers have shown many new changes in terms of expression language, narrative characteristics, and value orientation. The technique gradually broke through the barriers of realism, and the narrative features shifted from a grand narrative to an individual narrative, and the aesthetic values also tended to be diversified.

3.1 Theme update: new labor and production relations update and enrich the connotation of contemporary Chinese figure painting

The researchers made statistics to illustrate the proportion of labor-themed Chinese paintings in contemporary Chinese art. Taking the two most important exhibitions in the Chinese art world in the past three years as an example, the proportion of laborer-themed creations in these two important exhibitions exceeded one-fourth or even reached one-third. Although it seems that this number is not very large, the creation of this theme alone is equivalent to the proportion of landscape or flower and bird paintings (the most important themes of Chinese painting are landscape, flowers and birds, and figures).

This was unimaginable in ancient China (landscape and flower-and-bird paintings were the mainstream when scholar-officials paintings occupied the entire painting circle). The researchers conducted statistics to illustrate the proportion of labor-themed Chinese paintings in contemporary Chinese art. Take the two most important exhibitions in the Chinese art world in the past three years as an example, the proportion of creations with the theme of laborers in these two important exhibitions exceeded one-quarter or even reached one-third. Although this number does not seem to be very large, the number of creations on this subject alone is equivalent to the number of landscape or flower-and-bird paintings (the most important subjects of Chinese painting are landscapes, flowers and birds, and figures). This was unimaginable in ancient China, At that time, scholar-officials paintings occupied the entire painting circle, landscapes, flowers and birds were the mainstream, and the number of figure paintings, especially those of laborers, was very small.

Table 3.1: *Labour theme featured in two major exhibitions*

Exhibitions	period	Number of outstanding Chinese paintings	Number of labor-themed works	Title	Artist	laborer
The 7th China Youth Art Exhibition	2022	80	23	Cultural Chinese Year	Ni Chunlin	farmer
				Catch goats	Peng Jian	herdsmen
				Drinking morning tea	Shen Chang	ordinary citizen
				The Song of Xinjiang to Get Rich	Shen Linfeng	minority farmers
				Every day, every meal	Tan Zhiruo	ordinary citizen
				Daughter of the sea	Wang Rong	fishermen
				Tong Dizhou portrait	Yu Hongda	scientist
				Fans	Zhao Bingyu	ordinary citizen
				Mazhuang image	Liang Yu	farmer
				Sun in july	Shen Xiaoming	new industrial workers
				In the spring	Sun Tao	ordinary citizen
				The beautiful An Hai Bridge	Wang Yixuan	fishermen
				Early Spring Market	Chen Yongjin	ordinary citizen
				Distance	Du Zhengkun	fishermen
				Satisfied	Dan Vo	ordinary citizen
				Little rider	He Mengqiong	herdsmen
				pray	Huang Xinmiao	herdsmen
				Gang Rinpoche	Jiang Kangjian	herdsmen
				Andor man	Li Fang	herdsmen
				Fisherman's song	Li Gang	fishermen
Pick book	Liu Yadong	ordinary citizen				
We are all dreamers	Luo Hongjun	new industrial workers				
Silk Road Music	Luo Xiaoshan	farmer				
The 13th National Art Exhibition	2019	12	4	Rush hour for lunch	Chen Zhi Wu Xin	chef
				Mission	Li Yuwang	Firemen
				All are hot-blooded	Wang Ke	Soldier
				Support African Medical Team	Zhang Xiaolei	army doctor

From the statistical results, we can also find two differences from Chinese modern figure painting:

The first point: the images of workers such as cooks, firefighters, and new industrial workers (migrant workers) have appeared. On the one hand, these images reflect the wider concern of contemporary painters to society, and on the other hand, they also reflect the social changes that contemporary China is going through. Industrial innovation and economic restructuring have led to the emergence of many unprecedented occupations in China. For example, in the statistical results not listed in the above table, it is found that the role of the courier is not uncommon in contemporary Chinese figure paintings, but before 1990, such images of workers were not found in Chinese paintings. There are also new industrial workers (peasant workers) who

have a similar role. This is a humble social group hovering between the city and the countryside in the contemporary Chinese economic wave. They have also become the objects of contemporary Chinese art.

The second point: the above table has many themes of ordinary citizens, and these themes are generally expressed as pictures of comfort, happiness, and warmth. The artist depicts the daily life of these ordinary working people from a microscopic perspective. This kind of subject is also not seen in modern figure painting. In general, the images of laborers in contemporary China are more in line with the characteristics of populism, rather than the heroic images that often appear in modern figure paintings.



Figure3.1: Shen Chang "Drinking morning tea" Workers-themed paintings based on ordinary citizens

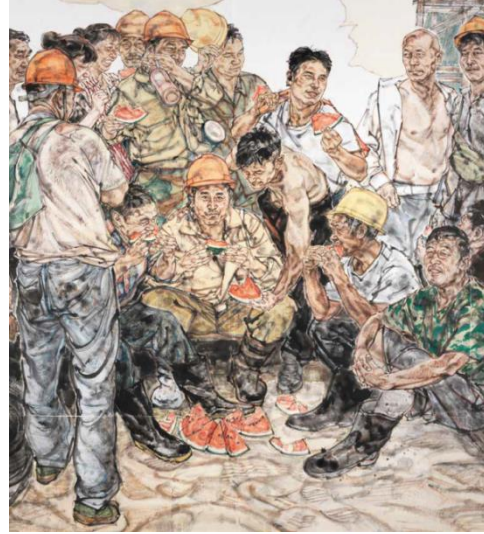
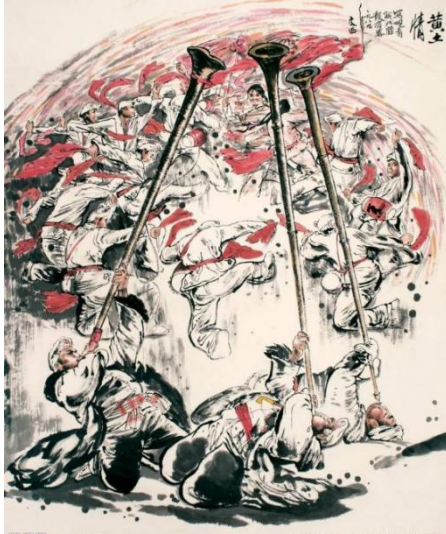
3.2 Narrative characteristics: from grand narrative to individual narrative

Compared with the works of the previous century, there is a very obvious change in the narrative characteristics of the current Chinese figure paintings when they shape the images of laborers. This change is to no longer pursue the kind of grand narrative that deliberately strengthens the meaning of the theme, and no longer excessively exaggerates and beautifies the characters to achieve the purpose of fitting the theme. The artist examines the living environment of the characters from the perspective of life itself and uses the description of individual life feelings to explain the relationship between workers and society, and between the artist and the object of expression. From the writings of contemporary artists, we can often experience such a habit of thinking. The relationship between the artist and the object of performance is not the relationship between the audience and the actor or the director and the actor and does not observe the depicted object from the opposite side. Contemporary painters often communicate with their subjects by looking at them directly, neither showing excessive sympathy nor paying homage to them. The creation often creates an atmosphere that invites the audience to be shortlisted.

For example, Shen Xiaoming's "Scorching Sun in July" depicts the scene of migrant workers resting. The author did not evade the fact that the life of the workers at the bottom was hard. The vicissitudes of life and the stains on their clothes proved that they were engaged in heavy manual labor. At the same time, the author did not aggravate their humility with a kind of God's sympathetic look, and even from their tenacious expressions and faint smiles, they could feel their optimistic attitude and beautiful vision for the future life. From such works, it is not difficult to perceive the artist's equal attitude towards migrant workers and even vaguely convey this meaning: everyone is a laborer, and the artist is also an ordinary laborer. "Looking at the development of Chinese portrait painting, from all ideologies that serve politics to the reflection on history in the 1980s, to the return to reality now. The images of farmers and workers are gradually separated from traditional cultural definitions, and these images no longer exist for the purpose of symbolizing social symbols, Rather, it is much higher than the actual existence of 'I' as an individual life, which breaks the conceptual processing of images and at the same time makes the image of this group more three-dimensional and full. This is the embodiment of humanistic feelings, but also the respect for the value of personal life [3].

Table 3.2: Comparison of modern laborer painting and contemporary laborer painting

Artwork	Yellow Earth Love"	July Sun
artist	Liu Wenxi	Shen Xiaoming
Era	1989	2022



theme	farmer	Migrant Workers
Technical characteristics	Looking up from the perspective, the dynamic shape, and the exaggerated brush and ink render the dramatic picture effect, creating a grand visual experience.	The head-up perspective, the simple shape, and the narrative-like line drawing technique focus on depicting the real and natural state of the characters.
theme tone	Acura and praise	Plain narrative

3.3 Creation techniques: multiple aesthetic orientations based on realism

Under the premise of the establishment of the theme, how to match the appropriate form to express the image and temperament of laborers is the most concerning issue for contemporary figure painters. This is not only about painting itself, but also about the responsibility of painting to carry and reflect the times and social criticism. Through the reading and analysis of a large number of laborer-themed Chinese paintings, it is found that contemporary laborer-themed paintings have the following two characteristics in their creative techniques. Feature 1: The realistic painting style is still mainstream. Chinese painters have always held a cautious attitude when creating figure paintings. No matter what major changes are made in the form, most of the figures are relatively realistic, and there are very few deformations and abstract techniques. Especially when working with laborers as the subject, the painter seems to prefer realism. This is related to the tradition of modern Chinese figure painting, the theme appeal of the works, and the appreciation habits of Chinese audiences.

Feature 2: Although Chinese paintings with the theme of laborers tend to be realistic, the painters show different orientations in terms of specific forms. Different from modern figure painting, which mainly combines sketch modeling to realize the innovation of Chinese painting, contemporary painters take more diverse methods. Methods such as ancient Chinese murals, traditional New Year pictures, plane composition, decorative arts, and grafting of other types of paintings have all provided more references for the painting forms of laborers. Paintings on the subject of contemporary laborers have become a state of multiple aesthetics. Of course, such an attempt also caused the risk of losing the purity of Chinese painting.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the Chinese painting with the theme of laborers is a part of contemporary Chinese painting, reflecting the development and change, success, and confusion of contemporary Chinese painting in the evolution of the times. The most important thing is that on the surface it records and reflects the times by means of art, but in essence, it illuminates social life with a humanistic spirit. With the innovation of science and technology, some laborers will eventually be buried in history, but the works of art have left their shadows, paying attention to life, staying close to reality, affirming the value of life, and pursuing the emotional appeal of truth, goodness, and beauty, this is the laborer. The meaning of subject painting can always exist.

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