

Narrative Painting in the East and West: Structural Divergence and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract: This paper examines the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western narrative painting within the contemporary image-saturated cultural context, focusing on their visual language, structural logic, and cultural functions. It traces the distinct developmental trajectories of both traditions: Western painting evolved from religious narratives to individual expression, ultimately ceding dominance to abstraction, while Chinese narrative painting, influenced by philosophical and societal shifts, developed its own characteristics, particularly a strong secular and collective focus from the Song and Yuan dynasties onwards. The comparative analysis highlights key structural differences: Western painting often employs a fixed, dramatic moment and focal perspective, emphasizing individual heroes, whereas Chinese painting utilizes a flowing, multi-perspective “scenic stroll” approach and often depicts collective scenes. The paper also explores brief historical convergences, such as artistic exchanges during the Qing dynasty, and concludes by reflecting on the potential relevance of narrative painting in countering historical nihilism in the contemporary era, where abstraction prevails. The main critique points to a need for greater academic rigor, clearer research questions, and formal citations.

Keywords: Narrative Painting; Visual Language; Cross-Cultural Context; Artistic Exchange

1 Introduction

We live in an era of images today, where images have become the primary medium of communication. This mode of communication is fast and efficient, but it is also fragmented and superficial. Various images on the Internet isolate people’s observation of reality. Traditional painting art has gradually become more Abstract with the development of the times, and it is also increasingly close to philosophical expression. In his evaluation of traditional painting, Greenberg believed: “Representation, or, illustration, as such does not attain the uniqueness of pictorial art; what does do so are the association of the things represented.” Narrative painting, as a way of representing stories, has been marginalized.

There are narrative paintings of hunting and sacrifice ceremonies in prehistoric cave murals. As a painting that appeared much earlier than characters, it carries the mission of narration from the very beginning. Hieroglyphs such as Chinese characters and Mayan characters are pictures themselves, and the record of hieroglyphs is another form of visual storytelling. Egyptian murals, decorations on Chinese bronzes, and Greek sculptures are also narrated with images. In the process of thousands of years of development, many ethnic groups have developed their own unique narrative painting. Narrative painting not only has its irreplaceable artistic value, but also is the carrier of human culture. However, throughout history, the narrative paintings of China and the West present different development characteristics. This study intends to explore the similarities and differences between Chinese and western narrative paintings in visual language, structural logic and cultural functions and their enlightenment on contemporary art creation in the context of image dominated contemporary culture.

2 The Development of Narrative Painting in the East and West

2.1 The Development of Western Narrative Painting

2.1.1 Classical period to the Middle Ages

Most surviving artworks from before the Middle Ages are sculptures and reliefs. Early artists recorded heroic tales on pottery, such as the works from the Hellenistic period, including the Laocoön, which exhibit more dramatic effects. In the Christian-dominated Middle Ages, painting no longer focused on individual images but on the stories themselves, and began to serve as a evangelism tool. Judging by the standards of Western scientific realism, painting at that time was clearly in its early stages, with inaccurate perspective and form. There were also few independent paintings, most of which were based on architecture and manuscripts. The frescoes of artists like Giotto already showed

glimpses of the embryonic Renaissance. From another perspective, the paintings of this era emphasized spiritual expression over material reality.

2.1.2 Renaissance and Baroque Periods

During the Renaissance, religious painting occupied a central position, but human consciousness had already begun to awaken. With the beginning of the Renaissance, the West entered a period of typical painting history. This is why we see many classic works centered around biblical stories. During the Baroque period, the Old Church used art to inspire believers, but it did not exclude heretical sensory stimulation. The paintings of the time exhibited a strong sense of movement and possessed a strong dramatic tension.

2.1.3 From the Age of Enlightenment to Modern Times

During the age of Enlightenment, religion, which had dominated art history for centuries, was replaced by science and rationality, and human stories replaced divine stories. In the masterpiece of neoclassicism, *The Death of Marat*, David portrayed ordinary people as if they were epic heroes. The representative work of Romanticism, *Liberty Leading the People*, which reflected on the French Revolution, also depicted the struggle of human beings. The evolution unfolded across eras: the Middle Ages avoided depicting humans, the Renaissance infused human spirit into religious themes, and the Enlightenment placed humans at the center of artistic expression. In modern times, along with Impressionism, various modernism emerged. Art became an expression of the artist's individual will—the human subject asserting autonomy. At the same time, art inevitably shifted from narrative toward abstraction.

2.2 The Development of Narrative Painting in China

2.2.1 From Pre Qin to Sui and Tang Dynasties

The influence of Confucianism can be clearly seen in narrative paintings from the pre-Qin to Sui and Tang Dynasties. Early bronze vessels were used as ritual vessels and were decorated with Abstract patterns. As ritual traditions declined during the Spring and Autumn period, secular labor scenes began to appear on bronzeware, such as the “Cai Sang Yan Yue Gong Zhan Tong Hu” marking the embryonic form of narrative painting. By the Han Dynasty, narrative painting was influenced by the Taoist thought of Huang Lao in the early Han Dynasty and the Confucian thought that was exclusively revered by the royal family in the later period. Stylistically, these paintings pursued a sense of elegance and fluidity, often depicting stories of filial sons and loyal ministers to convey moral education. Similarly, Confucian moral education was also reflected in works from the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Gu Kaizhi's “Wise and Benevolent Women” is a typical example. In the Tang Dynasty, the economy was unprecedentedly prosperous and ethnic and cultural exchanges were close. The representative works of this time, “Portraits of Periodical Offering” and “Emperor Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Envoy”, expressed the majesty of the Tang Dynasty.

2.2.2 The Turning Point of the Song Dynasty and the Diversification of the Ming and Qing Dynasties

The Song Dynasty marked both the peak and a turning point in the development of Chinese narrative painting. Compared to earlier narrative works that often incorporated portraiture, narrative paintings from Song Dynasty and later placed stronger emphasis on storytelling. The fundamental reason for the peak of narrative painting was the Song Dynasty's economic development. The booming commerce led to an increased demand for secular art, and painting began to cater to the aesthetic tastes of the common people. This trend continued into the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, influenced by foreign cultures in the Ming and Qing periods, traditional genre painting underwent stylistic transformations and incorporated Western techniques. The development of opera and novels in the Ming and Qing dynasties led to the emergence of narrative illustrations. Coupled with the popularity of woodblock New Year pictures, narrative painting gradually diversified and became more popular.

2.2.3 Modern and Contemporary Periods

In the modern and contemporary periods, China introduced Western realist oil painting and adopted Western scientific standards to “reform Chinese painting. In the 1950s and 1960s, painters created many thematic paintings that met the needs of the times. By this period, narrative painting in the West had already begun to decline. However, in China, Western-style realistic narrative painting experienced a brief period of prosperity (strictly speaking, it no longer falls within the scope of Chinese narrative painting). After the 1980s, Chinese art followed the footsteps of Western contemporary art and, although not completely, gradually integrated into the global art system.

2.3 A Phased Comparison of Chinese and Western Narrative Paintings

In the West, narrative painting evolved from a focus on theology in the Middle Ages to the awakening of human consciousness during the Renaissance, followed by a greater emphasis on human stories in the Enlightenment, and eventually diversified into various modern schools after Impressionism. In this process, art shifts from grand historical narratives to the artist's personal expression. Ultimately, narrative painting was forced to recede from history, replaced by Abstract art. A crucial factor in this process was the changing role of humans as the narrative subject, reflecting the rise and fall of divine power and human rights. Similarly, in China, for a long time, art practiced the Confucian missionary role of "promoting education and promoting human relations." In the Song Dynasty, the development of the economy brought about the aesthetic needs of the urban class, giving rise to genre paintings that met the tastes of the common people. However, in China, Confucianism and the people were not positioned as opposites. Painting has always fulfilled its social function. Classic genre paintings such as "Children Playing" embody Confucian ethical values. This understanding of painting's role persisted into the modern era. Therefore, while the West has abandoned narrative painting, narrative painting in China continues its social function.

3 A Structural Comparison of Chinese and Western Narratives

3.1 Form

Western painting is a dramatic art form. The artist freezes the moment before the drama reaches its climax, which is referred to as "the most fruitful moment" in Lessing's "Laocon". (evidently, the most fruitful moment and the most fruitful aspect of that moment must be chosen, now that only is fruitful which allows free play to the imagination. The more we see the more we must be able to imagine; and the more we imagine, the more we must think we see. [Germany] Lessing: <Laocoon>, translated by Ellen Frothingham, Dover ed, 2005, p16) This frozen image is then projected onto the canvas, freezing time in space. Western perspective is focal perspective, where the artist stands outside the painting from a fixed perspective, forming a binary relationship with the work. For instance, Jacques-Louis David's "The Intervention of the Sabine Women" depicts a fierce battle scene, divided into close-up, mid shot, and distant shots, pushing the space further away. The artist calmly depicts the scene from a fixed point. In Western narrative painting, time is frozen and the viewpoint is fixed, and this stillness and fixation often carry a noble and solemn temperament.

Chinese painting is the art of dance. As Zong Baihua noted, "The Chinese sense of space is musical. It is not measured by geometry or trigonometry, but experienced through music and dance." (Zong Baihua, *Selected Works on Aesthetics and Art*, Henan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2009, p.62) The lines in a painting resemble the flowing traces of a dancer's movement, and the viewer feels the charm of the painting as the lines flow. The perspective of wandering creates the scattered perspective of Chinese painting, combining objects seen from different angles within a single image. The "Famous Paintings Record" records that in his later years, when Zong Bing was physically unable to travel, he painted landscapes on his walls so that he could "purify his mind and contemplate the Dao, journeying while lying down." Furthermore, the unique Chinese scroll painting allows the story to unfold slowly as the scroll unfolds. The unrolling embodies the passage of time, making space temporal. The painting "Along the River During the Qingming Festival" employs an omniscient perspective, also known as scattered perspective, to place diverse scenes from different perspectives within a single image, leading the viewer from the farmland southeast of the city to the bustling Along the River During the Qingming Festival. Therefore, it can be seen that the perspective of Chinese narrative painters is that of "wandering observation." Space is space within time.

In summary, the structural difference in form between Chinese and Western narrative painting lies in their treatment of time and space. Western narrative painting follows a theatrical model, where space solidifies time, while Chinese narrative painting presents temporalized space.

3.2 Content

Both the East and the West were once in the feudal society period, and at some point capitalism emerged, with similar social structures. According to different audiences, narrative paintings can be divided into three categories: religious paintings, customized palace/aristocratic paintings, and folk custom paintings. Influenced by ancient Greek heroic epics and Christian culture, the Western narrative of hero worship,

which has been passed down from classical times, is a collective cultural nourishment. And, Western painting is an art of drama, highlighting the protagonist like a drama, and the story revolves around the protagonist. Painting often focuses on individual actors and constructs dramatic conflicts. After the Renaissance, painting emphasized the depiction of character images. Jacques Louis In David's 'The Oath of the Horace Brothers', three brothers raise their arms to form a visual focal point with their father holding a weapon. The woman in the middle scene is below the line of sight, highlighting the protagonist's heroic image.

Chinese painting, on the other hand, tends to depict collective scenes and events. Influenced by Confucian culture, China emphasizes the concept of "ruler, subject, father, son". As a qualified person, the standard is to play a good role in society, which does not encourage the expression of individuality and leads to the disappearance of individualism in collectivism. This is also the reason for the standardization of character images in Chinese painting. As the most typical narrative painting, the Qingming Riverside Scene only depicts the climax of the story without highlighting the protagonist.

The content classification of storytelling in Chinese and Western painting is roughly the same, but there are significant differences in the selection and shaping of the protagonist. Western painting tends to choose one or more protagonists, while Chinese painting, even with works such as "Qianlong's Southern Tour" featuring emperors, does not highlight the protagonists. Religious painting only uses a larger proportion of characters with high social status, and the protagonist is still in a balanced position on the plane. Western painting adopts a hero centered and typified narrative, while Chinese painting adopts a de protagonist and group image narrative, reflecting the difference between individualism and collective structure in terms of concepts.

3.3 Interaction with the audience

Wu Hong divided narrative painting into two categories: "idol style" and "plot style" based on the way the story interacts with the viewer. Idol type "is an open structure, where the theme of the image often summons viewers to participate. In addition to being the protagonist of the story, the subject of the image is also a revered idol with weak narrative and portrait like qualities. Plot based, the visual display is a closed or semi closed structure that completes the narrative independently, belonging to strong narrative. The time selection of the screen is the most fertile moment, leaving the viewer with the space they have already thought about. According to this standard, both Chinese and Western narrative painting use these two interactive mechanisms to interact with the viewer. The difference is that, as mentioned earlier, the Western hero centered system and typified narrative make Western narratives more inclined towards idol style, while Chinese narratives tend to be more plot oriented.

It is easy to understand why the most religious paintings are directed towards idols, on the one hand to showcase the solemn authority of idols, and on the other hand to arouse viewers' longing. For example, in "The Last Supper," the protagonist is in the center, with a balanced composition on both sides, facing the audience and summoning viewers. Chinese religion does not have the strong missionary intention of Christianity, and religious paintings are more used to communicate with gods rather than believers, so the size of religious paintings is relatively small.

In addition to being used as decoration, Chinese painting is often appreciated and played with by literati during their gatherings. "The Eighteen Scholars" is a commonly used theme in literati narrative paintings, with descriptions of literati appreciating paintings, making scroll paintings easier to carry. With the opening of scroll paintings, the author to slowly lead the viewer into the story, making it easier for the viewer to participate. It can be seen that Western large-scale paintings arouse viewers' longing, while Chinese small-scale works summon viewers to participate.

Narrative painting in both the East and the West focuses on different ways of communication between viewers, but actually, both have idol and plot based approaches, and the two interactive methods often appear simultaneously and cannot be completely separated.

4 Narrative transformation in cross-cultural contexts

4.1 Integration of Chinese and Western in Palace Painting

Both Eastern and Western art developed along their own veins, and the economic exchange between China and the West during the

Ming and Qing dynasties also brought about cultural exchange. Qianlong once asked the court painter Lang Shining to paint the mural “Victory of the Pacification and Restoration of the Central and Southern Regions” and create prints based on the mural. The French printmaker Charles Nicolas Cochin II was responsible for it. From these versions, we can see the fusion of Chinese story painting with Western narrative techniques and perspectives. Firstly, the fusion of Eastern scattered perspective and Western focal perspective.

The emperor requested the painter to make some slight adjustments, but overall follow the original painting, so we can roughly see the style of the original painting. Italian painter Lang Shining, who served the court, integrated different perspectives into the same painting. Comparing with the “Qianlong Southern Tour” of the same period, we will find that the marching troops depicted in the picture have already appeared in a perspective of near large and far small, but the distant mountains still appear larger than they should, which does not conform to the principle of focal perspective. This is the combination of Western realistic techniques and Chinese true stories.

Secondly, in terms of character portrayal, compared with the “Qianlong Southern Tour”, in the “Southern Tour”, the characters are integrated into the scenery and do not highlight the main subject. In the printmaking of the “Pacification of the Central Plains and the Victory of the Central Plains”, the characterization of the characters is in-depth and the facial features are westernized, which is the result of the fusion of Western narrative painting styles in character portrayal. Finally, in terms of narrative style, the work selects the climax of drama like Western narrative paintings, freezes time, while retaining the Chinese style long scroll narrative. It combines 16 independent paintings and 16 dramatic scenes to complete a complete narrative, compressing stories from different times into a cohesive narrative.

During the reign of Emperor Yongzheng and Emperor Qianlong, the painter Zou Yigui commented on Western perspective, saying, “... but there is no brushwork at all, even though it is tidy but mechanical, it is not included in the catalog of classical painting.” (trans. by author). It is difficult to say that the emperor and Chinese artists at that time accepted Western scientific realism aesthetically. The six sets of war prints independently completed by Chinese painters afterwards can prove that Chinese painters and emperors did not accept Westernized painting aesthetically. These six sets of prints have made adjustments in composition, character portrayal, and narrative perspective that are in line with Chinese aesthetic taste.

The painting ‘Pacifying Taiwan War’ showcases the decorative image of water with Chinese characteristics. The proportion of water and mountains far exceeds that of the characters, reflecting China’s emphasis on landscape scenery and the story itself, rather than depicting the characteristics of the protagonist. In another painting titled ‘Conquering the Thermobridge’, there are similar features, which use scattered perspective and integrate events that occurred at different time points into the same image. The technology used is Western, but the formal processing still follows Eastern methods. This exchange was a complete and systematic communication, becoming a model of integration between Chinese and Western cultures in terms of technical language and narrative style. At the same time, this exchange has its limitations, mainly because it is a one-way exchange and more about China’s learning of Western technology. The purpose of Qianlong’s order to make prints was to record his achievements and political propaganda, but there is no accepted evidence for narrative style and aesthetics.

4.2 The Re creation of Chinese Images by Western Art

In the early 18th century, French printmaker Bernard Picart created “Convoi funebre d’un grand de la Chine” (Funeral of Chinese Nobles). The painter adjusted Chinese objects to suit Western aesthetics, and the scenery was different from European painting style, incorporating clouds that often appear in Western landscape paintings. The characters are completely Western in appearance, and there is no prominent protagonist in the picture, perhaps influenced by the Chinese narrative style. Hermann’s “Illustrated Library of Emperors” and “Biography of Confucius” published in 1788 can also see this kind of misreading. The character images and costumes are basically westernized, adopting a Western style theatrical composition in form, freezing a certain moment of time and leaving only some Chinese style architecture.

The acceptance of Chinese art by the West has a long history, and in the 17th and 18th centuries, it sparked a craze for Chinese style art. During this period, the West not only purchased Chinese export products, but also produced artworks with Chinese style. The production of these two prints happened against this backdrop. Western artists have misinterpreted and adapted the narrative style of China, indicating that what Western audiences need is not a true Chinese narrative, but symbols that satisfy their Eastern fantasies, reflecting the author’s self projection as a Western artist and the embodiment of cultural rights. Like Chinese painter Zou Yigui’s criticism of Western painting. In the

18th century, Swiss painter Jean Etienne Liotard contemptuously evaluate Chinese painting at that time:“what gives to Chinese painting its appeal is that it is smooth, clean, and neat, even though it is made by a people having only a smattering of knowledge on art”

4.3 Narrative Fracture and Reproduction

After a brief accidental exchange in the 18th century, the art world of both the East and the West underwent earth shattering changes in narrative painting. After the end of the 19th century Impressionism, various modern art schools emerged, and painting shifted from representation to ontological exploration. “Modernism demonstrated the values of Western individualism, and individualization became the most fundamental artistic concept hidden behind the exploration of modernist art”(trans.by author) .Postmodernism attempts to repair modernism, and bring back grand narratives, leading to the emergence of new media art. These changes were rapid and disruptive, narrative paintings with rigorous logic have exited history. Western artists were beginning to recognize the value of Eastern art at a time when they are negating Western traditions. Artist David Hockney has conducted in-depth research on the scroll style and scattered perspective of China, using multiple viewpoints and collages to realize the continuity of space and the sense of time passing. In his painting “The Bigger Water Splash”, no one appears in the painting, but the water splashes in the picture indicate that people have come and time has passed, implying that the story continues. This is a unique case. Western artists’ attention to Chinese culture actually injects more Abstract spirit into their artistic works.

In China, it is a different scene. At the beginning of the 20th century, although narrative painting still existed in large numbers, the development of Chinese art was also fragmented. After complete Westernization, strictly speaking, narrative painting no longer belongs to the category of Chinese painting, but is an “improved” Chinese painting based on Western scientism (at that time, some Chinese artists and scholars such as Xu Beihong and Cai Yuanpei advocated improving Chinese painting based on Western scientific realism). It is precisely because of this so-called improvement that narrative painting in China has truly integrated Eastern and Western styles. For example, oil paintings include Xu Beihong’s “Five Hundred Scholars of Tian Heng” and ink paintings include Zhou Sicong’s “The Premier of the People”. After the 1980s, Chinese art closely followed the footsteps of Western contemporary art and gradually integrated into the global art system, although not completely. Today, Chinese art exists in two forms: officially supported thematic painting and market-oriented abstract painting, with narrative painting existing in the former. Market driven art, like the West, often appears in the form of images that are detached from narrative.

5 summary

Previously, we have outlined the development paths, characteristics, and communication between narrative painting in both the East and the West. When Western art abandoned narrative, in 20th century China, narrative painting between the East and the West achieved true integration. Nowadays, the theme creation supported by the national system in China still maintains narrative nature and plays a social function of “educating and helping people’s relationships” in some form. And more Chinese artists prefer to express themselves in contemporary forms. Contemporary art in China did not go through the process of “modernism establishing the independence of media through structural image narration” to “postmodernism creating images to negate the technicality of media”. Instead, it directly accepted contemporary art in the 1980s and gradually merged into the global art system.

In today’s globalized art world, narrative painting has been marginalized. On the one hand, this is because new media has taken over the narrative function of painting as a new narrative tool. On the other hand, abstract images completely negate concrete narrative painting. Compared with new media produced by technological processes, painting is closer to the audience due to the lack of technical barriers. As an art form with language quality, narrative painting carries strong logical attributes, and in this era of imagery, this strong logic is more likely to trigger viewers’ deep thinking. In this era of the “end of art”, narrative painting, which is closer to reality, may be able to bring art back to art.” Epic not only exists in words, but also in painting. When painting creates meaningful shapes, the humanistic images carried by the shapes will form a truly solidified and timeless visual epic”

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