

The Trap of Pseudo-abstraction: Re-evaluating Li Xiaoshan and the Ethical Crisis of Chinese Painting

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Abstract

This essay revisits Li Xiaoshan's seminal 1985 critique, *My Views on Contemporary Chinese Painting*, in the context of the forty years that have passed since its publication. Despite the passage of time, the field of Chinese painting remains trapped in a cycle of conformist mediocrity and rigid traditionalism. This study argues that the "abstraction" found in Chinese painting is a "pseudo-abstraction" lacking modern rational reconstruction. By employing Kant's concept of "purposiveness without purpose" as an analytical lens, the essay deconstructs how the traditional aesthetic of "suspension" has been alienated into a mechanism of social stasis and ethical posturing. It identifies three layers of decay within the system - aesthetic suspension, suspended reality, and the cruelty of purposiveness as control, and concludes that a radical theoretical revolution, rather than mere technical reform, is necessary to recover the spirit of freedom in Chinese art.

Keywords

Li Xiaoshan, Contemporary Chinese painting, Pseudo-abstraction, Purposiveness without purpose, Art theory, Modernity

Introduction

More than forty years have passed since Li Xiaoshan published his seminal essay, *My Views on Contemporary Chinese Painting*. In that tumultuous era, Li's famous proclamation that "Chinese painting has reached a dead end" detonated like a bomb within a closed iron room, forcing the art world to confront the existential crisis of traditional painting amidst the process of modernization. However, looking back from the vantage point of four decades later, we are compelled to admit a far more dispiriting fact: That fierce debate did not trigger a true nirvana, instead, it devolved into a prolonged, ineffective clamor [1].

In the intervening four decades, commentaries on Chinese painting have been voluminous, seminars endless, yet most have chosen the path of conformist mediocrity. The academic establishment has busied itself with constructing the false orthodoxy of "New Literati Painting", while the market has immersed itself in the capitalization of "brush and ink" fetishism. Worse still are the antiquarian traditionalists who, like vultures guarding a corpse, reject modernity in the name of "promoting tradition" - an act tantamount to publicly

reversing the gears of history [2,3].

Before proceeding, I offer a brief justification for the trenchant rhetoric to follow: When the avant-garde contests the established rules for a place in the "visible field", the "temperate language" sanctioned by those rules is rendered inherently impotent by the very fact of its admission. As for art or artistic language - perceived through direct intuition, its retreat from the signified into the signifier inevitably leads to its "cooling" or "propositionalizing" across the spectrum from the figurative to the abstract. While such propositionalizing allows room for exchange and rebuttal, it simultaneously deconstructs the intrinsic intensity of the artistic language, thereby diminishing its subjective and objective visibility. Therefore, faced with the systemic inertia of Chinese painting, what is required is not gentle reformist suggestions, but a surgical pathological analysis.

This essay attempts to transcend the technical level of the "brush and ink debate" to re-examine Li Xiaoshan's thesis from the dual dimensions of modernity and ethics. It reveals a more insidious crisis in contemporary

Chinese painting: the trap of “pseudo-abstraction” and the self-alienation of ethics.

The crisis of form: The generative mechanism of pseudo-abstraction

From the “zenith of technique” to “rigid signifiers”

Li Xiaoshan famously argued in *My Views on Contemporary Chinese Painting*: “The technical means of Chinese painting, upon reaching their zenith, have calcified into rigid abstract forms. Thus, painters have abandoned the exploration of pictorial concepts, opting instead for a monotonous virtuosity in pursuit of ‘conception’ (Yijing) - this is the most conservative element in late Chinese painting.”

The core issue here is not whether “skill” itself is excessive; Li was not blinded by the so-called “zenith of skill”. Instead, he incisively identified the first layer of decay in Chinese painting: “rigid abstract forms”.

The history of Chinese painting does not lack masters: Gu Kaizhi of the Eastern Jin established the literati tradition with his “gossamer-thin line drawing” that captured the spirit through form. Fan Kuan’s landscapes in the Northern Song visualized the Neo-Confucian Li as a sublime visual order. Ni Zan’s sparse compositions in the Yuan explored the minimalist generation of “meaning”. Even the “Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou” in the Qing dynasty attempted to deviate from orthodoxy during the incipient stages of capitalism [4]. Yet I maintain that all the above fail to escape the rut of rigid abstraction described by Li.

The essence of pseudo-abstraction: A symbolic game lacking rational reconstruction

To summarize the causality therein requires a “radical thesis”: The abstraction in Chinese painting is a pseudo-abstraction.

In the context of Western modernism, abstraction (as articulated by Kandinsky, Mondrian, or Greenberg) is a product of the crisis of modernity, it is a rational negation of representation and a self-conscious return to the flatness of painting [5]. This abstraction is founded upon profound philosophical reflection and the reconstruction of visual psychology.

By contrast, the “abstraction” in Chinese painting - the interplay of “likeness and unlikeness”, the nuances of dry and wet ink, while possessing abstract features in form, remains at its core stuck in a pre-modern “symbolic” stage. Much like so-called Chinese

“philosophy”, it often lacks reflexivity and critical rigor at the conceptual level [6,7]. This stems from a prolonged stagnation in a pre-modern social structure, resulting in a loss of holistic rational training.

Consequently, contemporary abstraction in Chinese painting no longer points toward the reconstruction of empirical structures, nor does it respond to the fragmentation of modern perceptual experience. Instead, it has degenerated into a mere “symbolic resource for identity”. The abstractness of brush and ink is no longer employed to explore visual boundaries but to exchange for “literati status” and “class taste” in the art market [8]. This abstraction is safe, decorative, and devoid of the sting of reality - a quintessential “pseudo-abstraction”.

Critique of the “national spirit” mechanism: The colonization of ethical personality

Li Xiaoshan argued that we must discard obsolete theoretical systems. I wish to expand the boundaries of his theory: What we must critique is not the ink medium, nor the paintings themselves, but the reinforced binding mechanism between “National Painting” (Guohua) and “National Spirit”.

Within the evaluation system of Chinese painting, there has long existed an “ethical-personality cultivation lineage”. This discourse dictates that painting is not merely painting, but “self-cultivation” (Xiushen), a nurturing of “noble spirit”. This rhetoric, which equates artistic practice entirely with moral cultivation, appears tender and confers high social status upon artists, but in reality, it is lethal.

It constitutes a colonization of the artistic ontology. Under this mechanism, criticism of a work is subtly transformed into an attack on the painter’s “character”, or conversely, a painter’s “virtue” is used to mask the poverty of their creativity [9]. This creates a perfect closed loop, rejecting the intervention of any external standards of modernity.

Amidst the tides of modernity and postmodernity that deconstruct all things, the world no longer permits us to remain “temperate”. When “tradition” becomes a self-validating apparatus of legitimacy, the medium loses all genuine generative power. It becomes a self-proving trap, a “suspension of purpose”.

The alienation of “purposelessness”: A Kantian pathological section

To deeply analyze the operation of this mechanism, I

invoke Immanuel Kant's core concept from the Critique of Judgment: "Purposiveness without Purpose". I do not aim to prove Kant's historical influence on Chinese painting, but rather to deploy this concept as an analytical device to name a recurring operation: How "non-utility" hardens into an "immunity", and eventually evolves into a repressive norm [10].

I once questioned the "Third Moment" in Kant's aesthetics: While the strategy of "suspending purpose" is logically sound (refusing to view form as accidental or instrumental), in practice, within the context of Chinese painting, this suspension is thoroughly alienated. This alienation manifests in three progressive pathological layers:

(1) The first layer: Suspension as an aesthetic act

Literati painting theoretically advocates extracting painting from exchangeable goals (utility, court commissions, political propaganda) and emphasizes "the use of the useless" - Xieyi (freehand expression), untrammled brushwork, spirit resonance, innocence, and blandness. Initially, this might have been a resistance against imperial power or vulgarity.

However, once the burden of proof for "de-purposing" is removed, ethics immediately enters the fray. In contemporary times, this "non-purpose" is rapidly recruited as an ethical credential. Painters perform "disregard for fame and fortune" and "disregard for formal likeness" to establish their position in the cultural hierarchy. This "non-purpose" itself becomes the ultimate "purpose" - it serves not only as a ticket into art history but as a chip for securing high premiums in the art market. "Untrammled spirit" (Yiqi) becomes a priceable commodity, "blandness" becomes a carefully rehearsed posture. Kant's "free play" here transforms into a rigid ritual of class distinction.

(2) The second layer: Suspended reality

Between the "suspension of purpose" and a "suspended reality", there lies an unspeakable abyss.

Art gains dignity through the absence of judgment, yet the system of Chinese painting converts this "absence" into a historical mechanism of evasion. Facing the violent transitions of urbanization, the pain of social atomization, and the struggle of individuals within power structures, the Chinese painting system has chosen a collective aphasia. It refuses to speak, to act, or to intervene, treating "suspension" as an eternal right to immunity.

Is this not decay in another guise? It resembles the "Donglin Faction" of the late Ming dynasty: Scholars sitting on minimalist Huanghuali armchairs, discussing the mind and the cosmos, while the economic basis of their elegance lies in the annexation of "meager fields" in the countryside and a blindness to the suffering of reality. Today's Chinese art world is rife with this "Donglin-esque" schizophrenia: On one side, the fabrication of an unworldly "desolation" and "antiquity" on rice paper. On the other side, a meticulous calculation of real-world interests and an extreme indifference to social responsibility.

(3) The third layer: The cruelty of control

This is the most insidious and cruel layer. When "purposiveness without purpose" falls into a culture of strong power and rigid norms, it easily transforms from aesthetic freedom into a mechanism of "everyday" control.

It is cruel precisely because it appears harmless, even noble. Once systematized by treatises, evaluation mechanisms, and academy education, this aesthetic begins to forcibly translate raw, vivid, and conflicted reality into "digestible forms": blandness, remoteness, emptiness, and stillness.

Reality is not negated, it is "aesthetically domesticated". Take "Spirit Resonance" (Qiyun Shendong) as an example: It evolved from a description of vital life force into a diagnostic category in art theory, and even a disciplinary tool. Any expression that does not conform to this "beauty of moderation" - anger, anxiety, desire, pain is excised as "fiery temper" (Huoqi) or "heterodox path" (Yehuchan). This is not aesthetic freedom, it is the structural castration of experience. It deprives us of the ability to confront the bleakness of life, veiling the truth of existence with a layer of sentimental culture.

Conclusion

Li Xiaoshan expressed hope forty years ago for epoch-making artists in China, but I am personally pessimistic. A reading of modern and contemporary Chinese art history reveals that we are undoubtedly at a low point in a convoluted, downward spiral.

Where has the change been in these forty years? To change the mind of a person, one must start with the intellectuals. To change the minds of intellectuals, one must transform the ancient framework of artistic culture. To change that framework, one must reform Chinese

painting. To reform Chinese painting, one must reform its theory, critique its traditional paradigms, and “slay” the fallacy of blind veneration of the past!

These are harsh words, yet both historical experience and theory suggest that over-correction is not necessarily a vice. In a system riddled with chronic illness, moderate reform is merely scratching the surface. If Chinese painting once guarded a certain spiritual dignity through “non-purpose”, the question today is: Has this dignity become a sanctuary that requires no accountability for consequences?

When we use “spirit resonance” to shroud reality, brush and ink” to substitute for problems, and “conception” (Yijing) to dissolve conflict, we are not preserving tradition; we are merely turning tradition into a pretext for stasis.

Change, change, and change again - the Chinese people have awakened through repeated revolutions, but what of Chinese art? Will it follow the path of Japan, trading the loss of subjectivity for a toy-like viewership?

Ultimately, the ‘spirit of freedom’ invoked here is not a romantic sentiment, but a rigorous epistemological rupture. It demands that the Chinese artist transcend the “self-incurred tutelage” of the traditionalist ethical order. The task is no longer to preserve the “essence” of a reified culture, but to confront the raw, unmediated reality of the present through “negative dialectics” of form. Only by dismantling the sanctuary of “pseudo-abstraction” can Chinese painting cease to be a mechanism of ethical consolation and become, instead, a critical apparatus for the construction of modern subjectivity. The path forward, therefore, is not a return to a mythical past, but a radical opening toward an unscripted, and perhaps perilous, historical future.

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Conflicts of Interest

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