

An Exploration of the Application of the Traditional “Master-Apprentice System” in the Inheritance of Chinese Painting

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Abstract: The traditional mentoring system has lasted for thousands of years in China’s fine arts education, which has trained a large number of artists and enabled China’s excellent traditional fine arts skills to be inherited and developed. However, with the development of modern education, the traditional mentoring system has been gradually replaced by other educational models due to its low efficiency. Today, when the inheritance of Chinese painting was re-examined, we can find the outstanding contribution of this traditional mentoring mode. It can be said that it is an indispensable talent training mode for the inheritance of Chinese painting. In this regard, this paper analyzes the traditional “mentoring system” in the inheritance of Chinese painting, discusses the teaching law of this mode, and hopes to find a complementary path with the modern education mode, to lay a solid foundation for promoting the inheritance of Chinese painting.

Keywords: Chinese painting; Traditional mentorship; Education model

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1. Introduction

Chinese painting has a long history, dating back thousands of years, and is a core component of Chinese culture and art. Before the emergence of modern education in China, the traditional “master-apprentice system” has been an important way for the inheritance and development of Chinese painting for thousands of years. Under the model of the “master-apprentice system”, there have been competing masters of various schools and styles^[1]. It can be seen that the development of Chinese painting did not lose the power of continuous innovation in the training mode of “mentoring,” which also shows that traditional “mentoring” has a certain rationality and superiority for the inheritance and development of Chinese painting.

2. The historical evolution of traditional mentoring education

In primitive society, the rudiments of master-apprentice education have already appeared in art activities. Witches or Wizards spread culture and art. They are the earliest “masters” in art education. In the early stage of slave society, private schools appeared, which spread knowledge, culture and art mainly through family inheritance and teacher teaching. In the pre-Qin and Han Dynasties, Baigong art education was passed down from father to son and taught by teachers and apprentices. In the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, landscape painting in Chinese painting began to emerge, culture and art developed vigorously, and a large number of outstanding literati and painters emerged. At that time, both folk art and literati art exerted great importance on education and inheritance, so a relatively clear lineage of teachers was formed at that time. Chinese painting took Cao Buxing and Zhang Seng as heads, forming a clear system of masters. It is recorded in the Fourth Lower Shizu in the Book of Wei: “The modern system started from the Five princes and their descendants all accomplished Taixue. All their descendants should follow the practice of their father and brother. Private schools are not allowed. If the teacher dies, the master will be punished.” Strict laws and regulations made literati education and artisan education maintain different inheritance methods ^[2]. In the Sui and Tang dynasties, father and son inherited, hereditary occupations, and learned each other skillfully, forming a “line.” At that time, the craftsmen were concentrated in the city according to the types of work, forming the scene of “the people in the city, all skillful.” In the Sui work Lang Du Bao compiled “Records of Luoyang City of Sui and Tang Dynasty” there is a record: Luoyang Fengdu city, “its 120 lines, more than three thousand premises.” Painting is an important part of the community at that time, to ensure the stability of the industry, the formation of an organized relationship between teachers and apprentices, and the education mechanism of teaching skills and teaching methods in the painting industry ^[3]. After the Tang and Song Dynasties, although other forms of art education such as painting academies also appeared in traditional Chinese art education, the inheritance of master and apprentice was still the main one. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was especially popular, and there were many colorful schools of Chinese painting. It can be said that the traditional “mentoring system” is the reliable pillar of Chinese painting passed down from generation to generation. Relying on this model, Chinese painting has maintained a relatively stable state of development, with a large number of famous artists and orderly inheritance ^[4].

3. The characteristics of the traditional master and apprentice system

The purpose of studying the traditional mentoring system is to clarify the inheritance law of Chinese painting, and at the same time provide ideas for the development of Chinese painting in modern education. Therefore, it is important to clearly understand the characteristics of the traditional mentoring system, and have a deep understanding of its advantages and disadvantages.

3.1. Genealogical mentoring relationship

There is a strict distinction between superiors and subordinates in mentoring relationships, which makes the relationship stable. At the same time, most of the mentors and apprentices are members of the same family or relatives, so they are related to each other, which further increases the stability and the dignity of the mentoring relationship. In order to ensure the stability of inheritance, some special industries strictly exclude foreign family names and other teachers and disciples. But at the same time, mentoring relationships without kinship also exist ^[5] widely. This ensured the wide spread of Chinese painting and played an important role in the development and growth of Chinese painting. In addition to the educational role of Confucianism in traditional Chinese culture, the

“teacher” assumed the role of “father” at the same time, so the teacher and apprentice have deep feelings, which also reflects the characteristics of “parent-teacher unity”. The teacher-apprentice relationship is an important clue to the study of the origin of painting, because in the teacher-apprentice relationship, researchers can find the obvious summary of the teacher’s method and the imitative teaching of the model, and can find the continuity of the inheritance of the brushwork technique and the painting technique.

3.2. Teach students according to their aptitude

In the traditional mentoring system, due to the small number of students, a master usually leads one or a few apprentices, so that students can be taught according to their aptitude. Reasonable, direct and effective communication between teachers and students will greatly benefit students’ progress. However, this mode of teaching is relatively casual, and cannot create a collective teaching environment. The group scope of skill teaching is relatively narrow, and the relationship between teachers and students is easy to develop into a sectarian relationship, thus forming family views and the closed nature of skill teaching^[6]. Zhang Yanyuan’s “Famous Paintings of the Past Dynasties” said that “when there is a formula, people do not know”, which more accurately described the characteristics of private teaching of family law at that time. This kind of “formula” effectively ensured that the skills could not be passed on to others and could not be obtained without personal teaching. In the late Ming Dynasty, the commodity economy continued to develop, the social division of labor became more obvious, and the competition between industries intensified to keep the foundation of their careers, folk artists kept secrets in teaching their skills. This stifled the innovation of fine arts and made Chinese painting lifeless.

3.3. Attaching importance to the teaching of copying

Copying is the main way and method of learning Chinese painting. In the study of Chinese painting, people always emphasize “visit the ancient” as the first, that is, “learn from the ancient people,” which is to learn from others. In the home of the exposition, find a suitable one for themselves, copy, view and play, familiar with it for a long time, but cannot be confined by the previous path, to develop their artistic style^[7]. The ancients have a saying: “If you do not learn the ancient like walking at night without candles, there is no way to enter, so learning must come to the ancient first.” Chinese painting has a high degree of formality, the uniqueness of tools and materials, the skill of brush and ink and even its artistic style, which all need to be taught by copying. All the recorded painters in the past dynasties were based on copying. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with the improvement of printmaking skills, the publication of painting books such as *The Biography of Mustard Seed Garden* provided great convenience for copying. Different from the ideological origin of “imitating reality” in Western painting, although Chinese painting emphasizes realism, it always regards “lively atmosphere” as the first criterion of evaluation, while the reproducibility of “following the shape of the object and giving color with it” ranks second. This evaluation standard is still in use today, reflecting the freehand and ideational nature of Chinese painting.

3.4. The combination of painting techniques and calligraphy

The teaching content of the traditional master-apprentice system is not only limited to the teaching of techniques but more importantly, the cultivation of traditional painting theory. In the traditional mentoring system, the relationship between teachers and students is closer, which is more beneficial to the inheritance of Chinese painting. Students can not only learn painting skills from Master but also inherit the ideas and spirit of Chinese painting under the influence of the Master’s ideas and values^[8]. The inheritance of skills and spirit is the guarantee of the quality of Chinese painting. The traditional painting theory is also related to the history of

Chinese thought, the history of philosophy and the development of aesthetics, involving many aspects of Chinese painting education. It is a Chinese painting theory integrating “principle,” “Fa,” “quality” and “enlightenment.” It has important guiding significance for mastering the techniques of Chinese painting and understanding the aesthetic consciousness of Chinese painting and has a great influence on students’ world outlook and aesthetic perception. It can deepen the knowledge and understanding of Chinese painting^[9].

3.5. Attach importance to the sense of inheritance

Traditional Chinese culture always pays attention to etiquette, and so does the mentoring system. “Burning incense,” “offering tea,” “worships heaven and earth” and “exalting ancestral master” and other rites of worship are passed down from generation to generation. These “ritual sense” things invisibly strengthen the “spirit of contract,” form an invisible constraint on disciples, let disciples retain a sense of mission for the skills they have learned, and enhance the internal motivation of learning. Under the influence of this spirit of contract, the Master will also carefully teach his apprentices, and a “community” will be formed between them.

4. New thinking on the education mode of Chinese painting

4.1. Strengthen teaching according to students’ aptitude

Thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative, the mentoring system is flexible, direct and effective, and will effectively implement the concept of teaching students according to their aptitude. This has given modern education an important inspiration. The traditional “mentoring system” is very close to the modern “tutorial system,” but the “tutorial system” is rarely used in undergraduate education practice, mainly in the training stage of master and doctoral students with high-quality requirements. However, with the expansion of the scale of undergraduate education, the role of “tutorial system” in undergraduate education has gradually been put on the agenda, and the construction of “tutorial system” in the undergraduate teaching system is also a topic being discussed in various colleges and universities. “Small class teaching” is produced in such an environment, that it has a certain reference value for the inheritance and innovation of the “mentoring system” of Chinese painting in contemporary universities^[10].

4.2. Attach importance to teachers’ explanation and demonstration

Under the traditional mentoring mode, in the stage of “learning from the ancients,” students develop a taste in Chinese painting, learn how to write and how to mix ink from tracing, and master guides and interprets. The stage of “teaching the ancients” has a profound influence on the students’ aesthetic appreciation and the cultivation of Chinese painting techniques. This enlightens modern education to strengthen teachers’ demonstration work. Under the background of the development of education information, a large number of video courses and online teaching have also appeared in the teaching of Chinese painting. To carry out Chinese painting education through online video courses, teachers should not only guide students to carry out full thinking and exploration but also strengthen guidance and explain the key points and details^[11]. For example, how to draw with a pen, how to color, what techniques, etc., will depict and imitate the object for detailed analysis, and effective guidance to students. This is more efficient than students watching video courses on the aesthetics and techniques of Chinese painting in their own field. It can be said that the teacher’s explanation and demonstration are an indispensable part of the teaching of Chinese painting. In this process, the teacher imparts his years of experience to the students, reduces the cost of trial and error for the students, and allows them to stand on the shoulders of their predecessors.

4.3. Pay attention to innovation

Under the traditional mentoring model, “teaching the ancients” requires the apprentices to learn methods and skills from the ancients, and to continue the aesthetics and thoughts, but it also requires the students not to stick to the methods created by the ancients. It can be seen that the mentoring system focuses on making the apprentices innovate. The implication of this for modern education is to pay attention to students’ innovative thinking^[12]. Art is naturally imaginative and creative. Cultivating students’ innovative thinking in the course of Chinese painting is in line with the characteristics of art education, and also helps students to establish the correlation between art learning and imagination, avoid students’ thinking being confined to a specific space, and help them create rich artworks that reflect their aesthetic habits and express their true emotions. This creative process is also a process for students to improve their artistic literacy^[13]. Based on the training goal of innovative thinking, teachers must pay attention to students’ learning subjectivity, and encourage students to imagine, design and express, and students will have greater freedom in art activities, broader creative space and more active thinking, so that students can gain more creative sense of achievement and satisfaction, and lay a foundation for students to build artistic creativity. At the same time, teachers should also guide students to examine and understand art works from multiple dimensions, so that students can form a personalized aesthetic taste, and this aesthetic taste is an important component of fine arts accomplishment.

4.4. Focus on the cultivation of responsibility

In the traditional mentoring system, the “contract” formed between master and apprentice, that is, the responsibility and mission to win honor for the master, makes the apprentice dare not be too bold in practice and profession. The enlightenment for modern education is to attach importance to cultivating students’ sense of responsibility. Under the background of the new era, the sense of responsibility has become an important component of personal moral accomplishment and one of the core elements affecting personal development. Students are in the critical period of the initial formation of values and norms of behavior. At this time, it is particularly important to cultivate students’ sense of responsibility and make them devote themselves to inheriting Chinese painting and carrying forward traditional art^[14]. This sense of responsibility encourages them to study hard and take the initiative and responsibility to inherit Chinese painting in the future. In the education of Chinese painting, teachers can cultivate a sense of responsibility and mission, make students realize the development process of Chinese painting, realize the cultural and artistic value of Chinese painting, guide them to take the responsibility and mission of inheriting Chinese painting and contribute their strength to the development of Chinese painting.

5. Conclusion

History and practice have proved that the traditional “mentoring system” plays an important role in the inheritance of Chinese painting. Therefore, modern Chinese painting educators must reflect on the traditional “master-apprentice system” and formulate and explore an education model suitable for the current inheritance and development of Chinese painting. The teaching of Chinese painting in colleges and universities is the main force in the development of Chinese painting. If optimization of the teaching system of Chinese painting through the mentoring system can be continued, it is believed that the future development of Chinese painting will step into a virtuous circle and continue to bear fruit in the development of Chinese painting.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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