

The Reclusive Aesthetic in Yuan Dynasty Landscape Painting under the Concept of Sino–barbarian Dichotomy

Zhenpu Zhou^{1*}

¹ Academy of Fine arts, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an China

Email Address

fred.chiu@outlook.com (Zhenpu Zhou)

*Correspondence: fred.chiu@outlook.com

Received: 9 June 2023; **Accepted:** 22 August 2023; **Published:** 10 November 2023

Abstract:

The unification of the Yuan Dynasty put an end to the tumultuous state of the Southern Song Dynasty. However, the discriminatory policies of the Mongol rulers intensified social contradictions, causing a large number of Southern Song survivors to view the new dynasty, ruled by “foreign barbarians,” not only with their inherent “national hatred and family grudges,” but also with a sense of defense of Sino–barbarian dichotomy. In the cultural context of the time, the Yuan Dynasty ultimately failed to overcome the great Sino–barbarian dichotomy defense, but the literati of the era were fortunate to enjoy a leisurely and peaceful life, leaving behind many artistic works with a unique and clear aesthetic, reflecting the reclusive thoughts of a generation of literati.

Keywords:

Sino–Barbarian Dichotomy, Sino–Barbarian Dichotomy Defense, Literati Painting, Reclusiveness

1. Introduction

At the time of the transition from the Song to the Yuan Dynasty, the crisis of national subjugation and the humiliation of being forced to wear clothes in a foreign style worsened day by day. This was followed by unprecedented wars and casualties, the devastation of the economy and culture, and the shaking of the “legitimacy” mentality of the Song people. The great unification of the Yuan Dynasty put an end to the stormy state of the Southern Song dynasty and caused a drastic change in the mentality of the literati.

The rulers of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty governed the country with the mindset of a nomadic tribe, which was incompatible with the cultural pattern of the Central Plains at that time. Although the Mongol rulers had long recognized the superiority of Han culture and the importance of the loyalty of literati to the regime, and had taken a series of policies to Sinicize and attract Han literati to participate in politics, however, due to the incomplete implementation and the objective existence of ethnically discriminatory policies, they have not played a practical role, and the discriminatory

policies formulated have intensified social conflicts. The political situation at that time prevented literati from entering the upper class, the abolition of the imperial examinations cut off the avenues for literati to participate in the governance of the country, and the officials who were illiterate and ignorant, causing the whole society to fall into chaos. All of this caused a large number of Southern Song refugees to view the new dynasty ruled by “barbarians” with “Sino-barbarian dichotomy defense” in addition to their inherent “hatred for the country and family.” The denial and non-cooperation with the Mongol Yuan Dynasty became the mainstream consensus at that time.

The idea of loyalty to the monarch and serving the country for thousands of years suddenly lost its goal. For a while, Southern Song refugee painters were desperate and hated themselves for being “hard to fall alongside the country.” The idea of “transforming the barbarians into Chinese” in the past became an unrealistic dream in the face of cruel reality. The Southern Song literati who had always been educated by Confucianism to “strive for progress” and uphold “legitimacy” could no longer “worry about the people when they are in high positions, and worry about the monarch when they are far away” under the domination of the Mongolian race. The literati of the Yuan Dynasty who had no country to govern and no nation to serve could only obey and suffer, while regretting and living in pain.

2. The Transformation of the Concept of “Sino–barbarian Dichotomy” in Song and Yuan Dynasties

In ancient China, whether a person was considered a “barbarian” or a “Chinese” not only depended on the bloodline, it was more dependent on the culture. The so-called “Sino–barbarian dichotomy” and “Sino–barbarian dichotomy defense” are not absolute, the minority regimes historically regarded as “foreign barbarians” and “savage barbarians” such as the Northern Wei, the Northern Zhou and even the Yuan dynasty, as well as the Liao and Jin dynasties before that, all had extract the methodologies from the excellent culture of the Han and its implementation of the Han initiative also received the hearts and minds of the literati and scholars of the same era.

By the time the Song and Yuan dynasties began to alter, the literati of the Central Plains witnessed the Southern Song Dynasty being overrun by foreign barbarians in a devastating manner, and eventually became remnants of the Southern Song Dynasty themselves, living in humiliation under foreign domination. When the country fell and the society was in chaos, these remnants of the Southern Song had to rethink the relationship between the barbarians and the Chinese, and the literary arts were thus elevated to a higher spiritual level. From the Southern Song Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty, from “Chinese” to “barbarians”, the Chinese Han race experienced national oppression from foreign rulers, and the original “Sino–barbarian dichotomy” was replaced by “Sino–barbarian dichotomy defense”. While the former focused on the distinction between the two, whilst the latter shifted from the distinction to the rejection of foreigners.

The social status of the literati in the Yuan Dynasty was extremely low, which was unprecedented in the history of Chinese feudal society. The Mongolian officials in the early Yuan Dynasty did not have a unified recruitment standard: there were legacies from previous dynasties, the hereditary of Mongolian aristocrats, school selections, local nominations, and various kinds of “string-pulling”. There was neither a

standardized system nor a system of bureaucratic election in Mongolia. In the mid-Yuan dynasty, the imperial examination system was slowly restored, the dynasty's rule became more stable, ethnic conflicts gradually eased, and the awareness of ethnic differences gradually faded. There were some literati who wanted to make a difference under the influence of Confucian ideology of administrating the society, but at that time, the examinations were not held and the path to gain entry into the civil service was blocked, although the psychological implication of "Sino-barbarian dichotomy defense" gradually faded, it never disappeared. Under such a political and cultural environment, most of the literati had no choice but to be reclusive.

3. The Literati Painters of the Yuan Dynasty under the Concept of "Sino-Barbarian Dichotomy Defense"

As Mr. Ge Zhaoguang puts it, "In the second half of the 13th century, the political legitimacy of the Yuan Empire was established beyond doubt through military conquest, and with the implementation of the cultural strategies of the Mongol Yuan Empire, the political legitimacy of the dynasty was gradually recognized among the Han scholars". This is because the Mongol Yuan power holders were also quite keen to achieve "unification" and agreed with and enthusiastically promoted the Cheng-Zhu school, a common knowledge and thought that had become a common truth, and anyone who obeys this truth shall then constitute part of the clan. Although the Yuan rulers classified the southerners as the lowest class and repeatedly repressed and rejected them, yet from the starting point of the upper class, the significance attached to Confucianism was still very objective, or was it for the sake of sugaring up the authority's appearance and appeasing the people.

Overall, the literati painters of the Yuan Dynasty can be divided into three major categories. The first category includes those who held high positions in the imperial court, such as Zhao Mengfu, who carefully avoided the "Jinti (a more recent style of painting)" style of the Southern Song Dynasty but advocated learning from ancient masters in the context of "orthodox" ideology, and Gao Kegong, who was not of Han ethnicity but actively learned from Han painters and ultimately achieved success in painting. In Li Kan's postscript to Gao Kegong's "Cloud-girdled Peaks", he described Gao Kegong's landscape painting ten years ago as "having a surplus of elegance but lacking in brushwork," but now reaching a level where it "conveys the essence of aged trees and gray stones, with bright and clear sprinkles, calming and tranquilizing, leaving no room for criticism." The painters that fall into this category embodied the mutual exchange between "barbarian" and "Chinese" cultures, and adapted their own cultural underachievement with the excellency of Han Chinese culture. The second category consists of a large group of Southern Song Dynasty painters who survived into the Yuan Dynasty. These painters either expressed strong opposition to the new dynasty, just like Zheng Sixiao's painting of Orchid explicitly stated that "the land was taken by barbarians, how can we endure it?" Others, such as Qian Xuan, still exhibited traces of the "Jinti" style in their paintings, conveying a sense of stability to the viewers while maintaining distance from the new dynasty. The third category consists of a group of literati painters represented by the "Four Masters of the Yuan dynasty". They either sought seclusion to pursue their aspirations or avoided dangers and searched for security. Their thoughts were pure, elegant, and free of desires, and they did not aspire fame or fortune. Outside of their chambers, there were only mountains and rivers, and their works reflected a kind of indifferent self-restraint. This sentiment was also a unique form of leisurely and melancholy inherent to literati

in the special cultural context of the Yuan Dynasty, characterized by seclusion and avoidance of the mundane.

4. The Thought of Reclusive Leisure of the Literati of the Yuan Dynasty in the Context of “Sino–Barbarian Dichotomy Defense”

“Reclusiveness” is originally a unique temperament of Chinese literati, characterized by a quiet and inactive state of mind. However, during the Yuan Dynasty, this temperament became a constant behavior chosen as a last resort by literati who had lost their political freedom. A literati who received orthodox Confucian education persisted in his “principles” during the changes of dynasties, adhering to the belief that “barbarians with a ruler are still inferior to the falling Chinese kingdoms”, which demonstrated his loyalty and righteousness, he also believed that “a determined man's ambition never changes”, so he remained true to his beliefs until his death. This demonstrates the role of Confucian thought in the literati of the Yuan Dynasty. The literati, who were both unable and unwilling to take official positions, could not gain the appreciation of the rulers on horseback with their self-indulgent play of ink. Therefore, painting became a carrier for literati to cultivate themselves and express their emotions. By removing the softness of the Southern Song Dynasty, they combined introspection with traditional methodologies during the process of painting, diluted and extended their desires, and eliminated the complexities of human desire in the creative process. The sentiments of idleness and inclusive mindsets of the painter hence existed in the process of play with ink and brushwork. Thus, the horizontal special cultural context of the Yuan Dynasty and the vertical literati's reclusive ideology constituted a net of sentiment in the painting of the literati in the Yuan Dynasty, with the rope of the net constitute of the painters' subjective intention, and what underneath the net is the pure world of ink and wash.

Having found themselves unable to secure government positions, many literati in Yuan Dynasty therefore chose a life of tranquility and leisure amidst the forests and streams. These literati held Zhao Mengfu in low esteem for yielding his ethnic dignity to the Yuan rulers and serving the imperial court. Instead, they emphasized the importance of cultivating their own character and spent their days wandering through mountains and rivers, expressing their thoughts and feelings. During their free time, they also enjoyed the leisure and relax of musical and theatrical entertainment within tile houses (amusement and commercial distribution centres that emerged during the Song and Yuan dynasties). This unique political environment and the widespread adoption of the reclusive mindset defined the main theme of Yuan Dynasty literati painting. Their broad-minded lifestyle and lofty spiritual standards led to the creation of works that were refined and unconventional, which is a reflection of the fact that the literati, under the foreign domination and under the context of “Sino–barbarian dichotomy” and “Sino–barbarian dichotomy defense”, opened another door for themselves in their literary creation, thus bringing “lightness”, “ease”, “eliminating distractions” and “self-comfort” into the realm of their paintings.

During the late Yuan Dynasty, when the rulers failed to eradicate the great distinction of Sino–barbarian dichotomy and social unrest was rampant, a group of landscape paintings with an atmosphere of “elegance”, “simplicity”, and “purity” were produced. From the emotional fervor of the early Yuan Dynasty remnant painters to the carefree and relaxed state of mind of literati in the mid-to-late period, as well as the serene and aloof temperament, the relaxed and leisurely attitude, and the endless melancholy of literati, the literati landscape painting in the Yuan Dynasty was

greatly developed in this unique political environment. In this regard, we will briefly analyze the state of desolation and simplicity in Ni Yunlin's works. His *"Pavilion and Trees in Autumn"* depicts an entire scene that is as elegant and simple as the moonlight on Lake Dongting, reflecting the literati's sentiment of "bending around to preserve one's path" and "calming oneself to stabilize one's impulsiveness" at that time. Without existence of frost and moon in the painting, yet the feeling of frost and moon do exist in it, so Wu Xian wrote a poem saying, "The accumulated spiritual energy of a thousand years of frost and moon has been given to Ni's hand and heart. When he raises it, it immediately ascends to the heavens, leaving an indelible impression on the mortal world." This is a profound interpretation of the work. The *"Fishing Village in an Autumn Clear Day"* was created when Ni Yunlin fled his home from 1350 to 1355 during the turbulent period of the Yuan Dynasty, this period also marked the turning point of his destiny from prosperity to decline. The work emphasizes the artist's "isolation" from the world, dividing the real world and the inner world with a river and two banks, reflecting this "isolation" in the environment of the painting. Compared to the objective reality, the atmosphere in the painting manifests more of a desolate and austere feeling, which is not so much a reflection of the artist's inner desire for a tranquil state in the midst of the turmoil of his homeland under the rule of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, but rather a mapping of his internal sense of desolation. The atmosphere of desolation, simplicity, and elegance in the painting is a reflection of the artist's compromise between the inability to advance in the special cultural context of the time and the reality of being carried forward by the environment. It is a song of self-adjustment and a sense of nostalgia and sorrow, in which he "looks at the flowers and water without a care in the world, and sings freely with his aspirations." Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that the emphasis on "elegance" and the pursuit of "simplicity" in the paintings of Yuan Dynasty literati artists were influenced by the political situation, social conditions, and cultural strategies of the time as external factors, while their inner emotional needs for expression were the roots of their work, which were achieved through this common interaction of these two factors.

5. Conclusions

Although the Mongolian barbarians succeeded in occupying the Central Plains and becoming the rulers of the various Chinese ethnic groups, the brief existence of the Yuan Dynasty only served to prove the theorem that the barbarians were no match for the Chinese. In the cultural context of "Sino-barbarian dichotomy defense" the Mongolians were ultimately unable to break through the cultural barrier of "Sino-barbarian dichotomy". Nevertheless, the literati of the Yuan Dynasty were able to enjoy a life of leisure and peace, producing many works of elegant and refined quality as well as integrity and high-mindedness. In the unique cultural context of "Sino-barbarian dichotomy defense", the idyllic landscapes painted by the literati of the Yuan Dynasty have left us with the landscapes of Fuchun Mountain, great scenery of Haiyu, elegant and lofty views of Wuxing, picture of the towering and blue Bi'an Mountain reaching into the clouds, they expressed their hermit-like reclusive thoughts and their aspiration for seclusion from the secular world through their works of quiet contemplation and solitary refinement.

Today, in the almost "disordered" state of aesthetic appreciation of painting, some artists complain that the current painting style is chaotic, and their works have not received the recognition they deserve. However, I do not share this view. When we

look back at the political and cultural backgrounds in which literati of the Yuan Dynasty and other dynasties lived, we will find that there was no dynasty that was not full of clamor and bustle, materialism, and worldly desires. Only those who were enlightened were able to distance themselves from them, choose wisely, adapt, and learn from them.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] Chen, C.X. A History of Chinese Landscape Painting. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2019.
- [2] Lv, S.Q. Linquan Gaozhi: Paintings of the Four Yuan Masters. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2005.
- [3] Zhou, J.Y. Chinese Painting Theory Through the Ages. Nanjing: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2017.
- [4] Lv, S.Q. On the Aesthetic Ideas of the Four Yuan Masters. *Art Research*, 2004. 04, 73-75.
- [5] Ouyang X Y. The Contradiction of Ni Zan: The Distinction Between Barbarians and Han and the Sentiment of Remaining Subjects. *Art and Time (China)*, 2018, 02, 40-41.
- [6] Jiang, Y. The Distinction Between Barbarians and Han and Cultural Identity Reflected in Classical Literature. *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 2011, 6, 19-31.



© 2023 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)