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CHINESE PEASANT PAINTING (NONGMINHUA): HISTORY MILESTONES AND MAIN PRODUCTION CENTERS

Stylistic transformations of Chinese peasant painting *nongminhua* is inextricably linked with changes in the political life of the CPR. In its development this folk craft passed through three stages, the first of which fell during the “Great Leap Forward” period (1958–60). During this time *nongminhua* existed in the form of works of naive propaganda painted as wall murals and later on paper. In the second stage, which coincided with the later years of “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (1966–76), *nongminhua* was produced in the form of political posters in socialist realist style. The ongoing third phase, which began during “Reform and Opening Up” period of the 1980s, is characterized by the rejection of politicized content and focus on folk art. The author of the present article traces the history of some of the most important centers of *nongminhua* production, which emerged in different periods.

Earlier, we had already made a prone study of the largest *nongminhua* production center in Huxian county (Shaanxi Province), and in this article we will focus on the history and style of other regions. The latter were chosen for the following reasons: Shulu (Hebei Province) and Peixian (Jiangsu Province) are important for our research as origin areas of *nongminhua*, Jinshan (Shanghai) is of interest as a centre of the formation of the modern style, and Longmen (Guangdong Province) is examined as one of the largest *nongminhua* production centers at present. Unfortunately, the size of the article does not permit to explore a larger number of important centers, so our study will be continued in subsequent work. Refs 10. Figs 5.

Keywords: China, 20–21st centuries, Chinese Peasant Painting *Nongminhua*, Artistic Crafts, Chinese Peasant Painting Production Centers.

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ОСНОВНЫЕ ЭТАПЫ ИСТОРИИ РАЗВИТИЯ И ВАЖНЕЙШИЕ ЦЕНТРЫ ПРОИЗВОДСТВА КИТАЙСКОЙ КРЕСТЬЯНСКОЙ КАРТИНЫ НУНМИНЬХУА

Трансформации стилистики китайской крестьянской картины *нунминьхуа* неразрывно связаны с переменами в политической жизни КНР. В своем развитии это народное ремесло прошло три этапа, первый из которых пришелся на период «большого скачка» (1958–1960). В эти годы *нунминьхуа* представляла собой пропагандистские стенописы и картины в наивном стиле. Второй этап, совпавший с поздними годами «культурной революции» (1966–1976), был отмечен тягой к социалистическому реализму и эстетике политического плаката. До сих пор продолжающийся третий этап, наступивший в период «реформ и открытости» 1980-х годов, характеризуется отказом от политизированного содержания и сосредоточенности на мотивах народного искусства. Автор статьи прослеживает историю наиболее значимых центров производства *нунминьхуа* разного времени возникновения.

Ранее нами уже было подробно рассмотрено крупнейший центр производства *нунминьхуа* в уезде Хусянь, и в данной статье мы сосредоточимся на изучении истории и стилистики других регионов. Последние были выбраны по следующим причинам: уезды Шулу (пров. Хэбэй) и Пэйсянь (пров. Цзянсу) важны для нашего исследования как районы зарождения *нунминьхуа*, уезд Цзиньшань (г. Шанхай) представляет интерес по причине формирования в нем современной стилистики крестьянской картины, и, наконец, уезд Лунмэнь (пров. Гуандун) был отмечен как один из крупнейших центров производства *нунминьхуа* в настоящее время. К сожалению, формат статьи не позволяет рассмотреть большее число значимых центров, но их изучение будет продолжено в последующих работах. Библиогр. 10 назв. Рис. 5.

Ключевые слова: КНР, XX–XXI вв., китайская крестьянская картина *нунминьхуа*, живописные ремесла, центры производства китайской крестьянской картины.

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Nongminhua (農民畫, peasant painting) is a young unique Chinese genre of folk art, which first appeared in 1956–58. During the “Great Leap Forward” (1958–60) campaign the authorities for the first time began to encourage peasant amateur talent activities in which farmers drew propaganda slogans and paintings on the walls, and later on paper. This activity has got its highest span in the counties of Shulu (束鹿, Hebei prov.), Peixian (邳縣, Jiangsu prov.), Huxian (戶縣, Shaanxi prov.), etc. It temporarily stops as a disastrous famine broke out in the beginning of 1960s, but resumed after the proclamation of the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (1966–76). *Nongminhua* popularity reached its peak during the campaign final period, when the authorities came to a decision to put the peasant amateur painting in the forefront of the new art. At that time Huxian has become the most popular peasant painting center. *Nongminhua* changes dramatically during the “Reform and Opening Up” period of 1980s: it dismisses propaganda content and thrust for realism, and incorporates methods and techniques from various genres of folk art. The most famous center of this period was Jinshan (金山, Shanghai), the creative style of which was later taken as an example for Huxian and other centers. Currently, the PRC authorities support the peasant painters by arranging competitions, establishing special ranks, and so forth. The peasant painting is usually sold in tourist markets and via the Internet.

Thorough study of *nongminhua* major production centers history requires drawing close attention to the structure of Chinese peasant painting. Modern traditional style pictures of China’s rural residents are usually attributed to this genre. Similar phenomena exist in other countries, school of I. Generalić (1914–1992) in Croatia as an example. Chinese peasant painting style emerged from naive amateur art of 1950s and retained most of its features: clear outlines of depicted objects, bright local colors, rejection of life drawing, simplified forms, tendency towards complete depiction of objects without overlapping and finally free flow of creative process when the painting, according to Russian artist E. Volkova, “draws itself” [1, p. 133].

The author refers *nongminhua* to the craft painting. In Chinese studies [2] *nongminhua* is placed among several genres of craft “peasant painting” (*nongmin huihua* 農民繪畫), which have rather wide span of specialization.

Currently in China there are about forty peasant painting production centers. Modern *nongminhua* is painted in bright saturated colors in the local primitive style and illustrate rural life in idealized way. *Nongminhua* has beautiful rhythm, expressed in a variety of small repetitive elements (fruits, figures of people or animals, etc.). Works which belong to various regional centers often resemble each other, the pictures from ethnic minorities regions boast the most bright personality. Unfortunately, it is impossible to discuss them in this article due to its limited format. *Nongminhua* always contains motifs from folk art (production and decoration of textiles, carpet making, all sorts of painting, papercuts, etc.). These paintings are produced both by amateurs and professionals, both types can work in one center.

Nongminhua modern style emerged in the 1980s, and the majority of its regional production centers appeared at the same decade. Early centers were formed in the late 1950s, their style passed through the following stages:

- 1) naive art: paintings are drawn by non-professional artists for political campaigns (1950–1970s);

- 2) politicized art, tendency towards realistic style and professional propaganda poster imitation (1970s): with professional instructors assistance peasant painting style became more smooth and glossy (it is known that artists, who worked at peasant painting courses corrected or even repainted their students works [3, p. 181].);
- 3) modern *nongminhua* (since 1980): peasant painting modern style is formed by infusion of various folk art genres elements.

It should also be noted that some of the earliest centers didn't pass on the last stage, unable or not willing to adapt their art to the "Reform and Opening Up" period spirit, and therefore ceased to exist.

Nowadays *nongminhua* is a truly folk craft. Currently, these pictures rarely come out in one piece, the repetition of the same work in a large number of copies is widely practiced. As a rule, *nongminhua* that have been published in catalogs or have received prestigious awards are repeated. Often they are redrawn not by the author, but by assistants and students. The copying is sometimes even produced by special printers — in my collection there are paintings with distinctive stripes on the reverse.

According to the first version, *nongminhua* first appeared in 1956, when Zhang Kaiyang (張開樣), a farmer from a village of Changli (陳樓), Peixian county, founded an art group of six members. In summer of 1957, Zhang Yourong (張友榮), a farmer from the same village, for the first time created a mural of critical nature using ash and other improvised means. A little later, in 1958, Shule campaign declared an "Every Family Sings and Write Poems, in Every Yard the Pictures are Drawn; Everyone is an Artist" campaign, during which the ground for the future development of local peasant art has been laid. Other counties soon have joined the campaign. According to another version, *nongminhua* first appeared in 1958, when China declared a campaign of inscribing poems and drawing pictures on walls. In addition to Huxian, Peixian and Shule, it was also supported by Qingyang (慶陽, Gansu prov.), Fuyang city (阜陽, Anhui prov.) and so forth. [4, p. 5–6].

For our study it is important to trace peasant painting history in its first famous centers — Peixian and Shulu, which have received massive publicity in September-October 1958 [4, p. 9]. The author of the present article managed to get an antiquarian edition, dedicated to the creative activity in Peixian (Peizhou 邳州). In accordance with information of this source, the first murals in the county appeared in 1955, and not in 1956 [5, p. 7]. The earliest local picture on paper is called "Old Yellow Bull Moan" (*Laohuangniu gaozhuang* 老黃牛告狀, Fig. 1). Criticizing the local livestock farm workers, it caused sensation among local residents. This painting was made by the above-mentioned Zhang Yourong and Zhang Kaiyang. Amateur art rapidly gained popularity in Peixian which had about 2000 amateur artists by 1958. It is estimated that in only two days (from 8 to 10 April 1958), in just one of the district towns the number of murals increased from 4000 to almost 27000 [5, p. 121]. Each courtyard had murals, painted by ash, red soil, carob juice and other available materials. "People's Daily", PRC main newspaper, dedicated a whole editorial to Peixian artists, which brought them national fame. They had an exhibition in Beijing, a number of books was written about them, the most prominent of which was published in 1958 in Shanghai [5]. Peixian artist were shown in TV news in China and abroad. A representative from Peixian was received by Premier Zhou Enlai on August 13, 1960, at the Third National People's Congress. The next important milestone of Peixian peasant painting development was their participation in the 1988 exhibition

held in the National Art Museum of China (Zhongguo Meishuguan 中國 美術館) in Beijing [6].



Fig. 1. Zhang Yourong, Zhang Kaiyang. “Old Yellow Bull Moan”

The author of the present article is inclined to believe that between 1960 and 1980 some professional instructors held art courses in Peixian, as it was widely practiced in other centers. This hypothesis is supported by the fact of a striking changes that have occurred with local *nongminhua* in 1970s and which are characteristic for other *nongminhua* centers. Paintings of this decade are similar in style to the political poster, as they tend to copy socialist realism in their subject and artistic solution (“Young Plants Inoculation” *Jiajie xinmiao* 嫁接 新苗, author unknown, Fig. 2), while the earlier works can be sharply defined as primitive art (“Our Commune’s Noodle Production Factory” *Gongshe fensichan* 公社粉絲廠, author unknown, Fig. 3).

In 1980-s Peixian artists managed to change their painting style in accordance with the new trends — contemporary works from this center have a typical dark background and numerous small details. They usually show a large number of people engaged in any kind of work, attracting viewer’s attention by considerable detail. However, Peixian peasant painting art is now under extinction threat, as a county resident, a painter on the third generation, writes in the Internet. The authorities support is not enough, and paintings are sold in very small quantities [7].

Shulu county was disbanded in 1986, and within its boundaries the county town of Xinji (辛集) was founded. These places are famous for women’s peasant painting since Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. In 1950s. a new surge of creative activity occurred here — as in other areas, local farmers produced propaganda murals. A large group of peasant painters was assembled here in the 1980s. Local *nongminhua* was many times exhibited abroad, they were featured in major TV channels and newspapers including the “People’s Daily”.



Fig. 2. Unknown Author. "Young Plants Inoculation"



Fig. 3. Unknown Author. "Our Commune's Noodle Production Factory"

Xinji painting was strongly influenced by paper-cuts, wall ornaments, blue and white printed fabrics, local opera and so forth [2, p. 45]. Its style is diverse: each painter creates individual works. In general, this *nongminhua* is more atmospheric than Shulu picture: it focuses mainly on nature than on characters.

The most famous and successful among the oldest centers is the county of Huxian, the story of which is rendered in our other works [8; 9], so we will not concentrate on it in this article.

An important contribution to the *nongminhua* modern style formation was made in the 1980s. by a newly formed Jinshan county centre artists. The local exquisite style was apparently influenced by the Shanghai school of *gohua*¹ painting. In the 1980s-reform period Jinshan became a top competitor for overly politicized Huxian. This tendency was clearly manifested at the Peasant Painting National Exhibition (Beijing, 1983), where Shaanxi center works didn't take any first prize. A key role in Jinshan peasant painting activity was played by Wu Tongzhang (吳彤章, b. 1933) — a Shanghai art instructor who works in *guohua* style. Jinshan *nongminhua* absorbed elements of local crafts, mainly from fabrics decoration and textile articles production. Modern *nongminhua* typical features as decorativeness and folk character appeared in them for the first time. Shanghai center first generation most successful artists were female, as they have traditionally been engaged in working with the textiles [6, p. 153–156].

In the early years of CPR existence Chinese folk crafts were not highly rated: the country focused on economic development, in which all the able-bodied peasant population has been involved. Jinshan *nongminhua* appearance was predestined by female embroidery group formation in 1974 which was a significant step toward traditional local crafts practice restoring. Local *nongminhua* was first presented to the public in 1980 at China National Museum of Art exhibition in Beijing. Their unusual and at the same time truly national style drew the spotlight, allowing Jinshan to declare itself as a new center of outstanding peasant paintings. Today Jinshan peasant painting is included in the “Shanghai Suburbs Hundred Treasures” list. A number of this county paintings were acquired by museums — in 2010 Chinese national art collections included 391 works [2, p. 139–140].

As mentioned above, Jinshan *nongminhua* style is strongly influenced by folk crafts, such as embroidery. Thus, about 1982 an embroiderer Cao Jinying (曹金英, b. 1935) created the painting called “Fish Pond” (*Yutang* 魚塘, Fig. 4.) — the first Jinshan painting which became widely known. Blue and white colors, stylized forms, emphasized planar perspective, typical ornamentation — all of this was directly borrowed from the traditional local decorative textiles and bears little resemblance to realistic painting, which was characteristic of the “Cultural Revolution” era peasant painting. It is important that in Jinshan *nongminhua* for the first time there was a tendency to show a serene material welfare of the peasants, without a hint of any class struggle. The least was replaced by countryside idyll: there are few rich harvest scenes in Jinshan painting, local artists would rather depict the abundance and joyful moments of rural life.

¹ *Guohua* (國畫, lit. “(our) country painting”, “national painting”) — a term introduced in the late XIX — early XX century to set Chinese painting apart from Western painting (*xiyanghua*, 西洋畫). Used to describe the works produced with traditional Chinese ink and water color on silk or paper. Some researchers use the term “*guohua*” only concerning XXth century Chinese painting.



Fig. 4. Cao Jinying. “Fish Pond”

A significant role in Jinshan style shaping was played by a female artist Zhang Xinying (張新英, b. 1933), the wife of Wu Tongzhang. Together, they have also become the first researchers of local *nongminhua*.

The history of how Zhang Xinying first joined local art activity is described in the introduction to their joint album with Wu Tongzhang [10]. The artist was born in Fengxian (奉賢) the rural district of Shanghai, worked on the spinner factory throughout her life and began to paint *nongminhua* only after retirement. At present her paintings are widely exhibited in China and abroad, winning numerous prizes. For example, in 1989 her work “Kitchen Chaos” (*Nao chufang* 鬧廚房, Fig. 5) received the second prize at the First National Genre Competition [10, p. 6–14]. The painting depicts a crowd of well-fed cats playing in the kitchen with a towering typical local painted stove. In general, the works of Zhang Xinying are traditional and modern at the same time. They associate with the contradictory art styles such as for example Chinese cloth toys and works by K. Malevich and P. Mondrian.



Fig. 5. Zhang Xinying. “Kitchen Chaos”

Along with Huxian and Jinshan top three most developed *nongminhua* centers include Longmen (龍門, Guangdong prov.). This county, which is the namesake of the famous cave monastery in Henan province, is famous for its natural health spas. *Nongminhua* was at first time introduced here in the 1970s, when a large art group numbering 300 people was founded here. During the “Cultural Revolution”, its members were engaged in the creation of critical works that combined elements of soldier, worker, peasant and the New Year painting [2, p. 373].

Chinese authorities tend to stimulate development of art among the peasants. Chinese peasant paintings, with their awareness and stylistic homogeneity, demonstrate a wide range of regional variations. In this article, the author was aimed at demonstrating this diversity.

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