

Paradigm Convert of the Design History Writing in Modern China

An Baojiang*

** Academy of Art and Design, Tsinghua University, boyjamin@163.com*

Abstract: Until now, understanding of ancient design is more confined in arts and crafts. Chinese ancient design has long history and is worthy to bring deep study, valuable achievement can be carried out. Now as the modernization carried on, design is used in many areas, the historical research should re-examine the former angle of view the history and the writing paradigm of Chinese ancient creating history, transform the arts and crafts of traditional society into design grow in modern society and adapted to people in modern time. In the thesis, five portions were divided to discussing these problems. The main parts are as follows: first, history of ancient design is not record and retrospect of the past times, it is rediscovery of understanding and inspiration of the ancients. History of design is history of life, history of thought, history of culture and also history on human. Furthermore, China has a short time of modern industry, more or less, understanding of design comes from arts and crafts in traditional society. General paradigm of design history writing cares more on the precise features of the object and less on why ancient designed in that way. To modern design, researches of this paradigm are basis of further study, new methods of investigation and study may bring new explanations hiding behind the history. Thirdly, the Chinese history has different periods of time with different aspects of society. It provides typical cases to verify the interactive of design and human in different social background. Each class also has abundant design practices, especially the literati who possessed high level creativity of culture. Therefore, starting point of investigation of design history should lay basis on design of present. The writing method represents methods of research, as design develops in China, these new methods may bring different cognitions to design. Research of arts and crafts brings guidance to design of the present.

Key words: *Design History, China, History Writing, Paradigm Convert*

1. Introduction

Expectations to design determine the comprehension of design, so is the design history. The history is not just collection of the old objects, it is a complicated ensemble of many social layers of a society. In 1987, Daniel Miller, an anthropologist, published his *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* which opened a new field of the design history research. The alteration is not just a longer period of time and more complex subjects, it means the evolution of the comprehension on design. For a long time, China is left far behind the west countries, with not much mass production systems, which limits the understanding of design. In a time, to many researchers, design is thought to be equal to crafts. Once the understanding surpasses the framework, realizes that design is innovation

based on certain technology, which may initiate more creations, creations of the ancients are meaningful to modern design. Research of the history can therefore produce references and lessons.

The current writing paradigm of Chinese design history is now somehow obsolete, and should be converted to a diversified phase. Chinese has a long history of design, with a too long history of traditional era and a short history of modern era. This situation deeply influences the writing paradigm of Chinese design history.

2. Value of the Design History

The writing of history is not just organization and investigation on the materials of history, it implies cognition of writer on the value of the design history. Reviewing the history, investigation on the design history is not merely discovering more details and shuttling all kinds of pictures and words or characters, trying to rebuild history and discover some disciplines. The history could also serve the presents with its peculiar value and provide experiences and lessons, which is why the Chinese ancients were so interested in the history writing. History possesses such value based on the assumed condition that based on different technical foundation the human invent various appliances adjust to same requirements, tendencies, and satisfaction. Invisible nonmaterial appeals embed in visible physical forms that modern design also wants to discover and to satisfy, which the ancient had made plenty attempts of. Which is more important is that comparing to design in ancient time, history of modern design is so short and insufficient to afford a broad overall background to the research on human-society-design of certain life. Because of its intrinsic features, history could make up the deficiency. No doubt, as the technology develops the ancient and modern society share different material products, investigations on the history are also not to replace modern with the past but to discover elements do not alter with time changes.

Tracing back the development of technology, from the Iron Age to the Industrial Revolution, for 2000 years, the main social formation did not change ultimately. [1]In that world, ancients constructed wealthy or frugal spaces to fulfill certain requirements with resources of that technological foundation. In investigating, if we bring the class, gender, culture and the social change into which to carry out a matrix analysis, a Four-dimensional picture can be established. Investigations in connection with specific issues are put into the model, when certain prerequisites or hypotheses vary, further verification can be obtained.

After all, the history is the past, not the present, history that the investigation based on is not the materials of the past, and it is human being in history. We can say that it brings anthropology into history, people under the investigation live in the past world that we have rebuilt. It is historical anthropology. Pure history cares more about what the truth of history is, investigation on human wants to know why they do it. If the research is about to serve the present, and find solutions, obviously, the why in history could provide more than the what. Historical research is instrument not the aim, the objective of design history translates into focuses on human and significance to the present while the former Chinese design history writings were inclined to pay too much attention to discover and describe what certain object is.

Therefore, to design history writing, as looking for the truth accomplished to a certain degree, for using become an urgent part of the historical study. Historian Benedetto Croce said that all history is contemporary history, he also said that "Romans and Greece lain in the grave, until the European Renaissance renewed at maturity and wake they up." [2]According to the history of history study, since 1920s, The New History replaced the Ranke Historiography and dominated the main stream of history writing methods. Comparatively speaking, in China, the

design history writing method fell behind the general history method and should turn to the New History and The New Cultural History, carry out new research and produce new discovery. To design history, that would provide more reliable help to design practices.

3. Design History Writing and General History Writing in China

Now in China, the writing methodology of design history more or less lay the base on the methods initiated by Leopold von Ranke and the Chinese traditional methodology, such as “Ming Wu Xue”(名物学) and sphragistics(金石学). These two methodologies share familiar interesting on finding out direct relations between name and specific objects. Researchers may focus their attention on the relation of lifestyle and objects, but all researches are confined to ancient time but not related with the present. For this reason, modern design is hard to benefit from achievements of these researches. Researchers also seldom create thoughts between modern and the past. Design in history is just remains of the old time, with not much relation to modern design behavior. Researches of the traditional design pay more attention to physical aspects and less to culture. A critical point to this paradigm is that as time changes, the technique get development, the former ways of making also transform, but the conception, values, and the ethical principle will not change much. The traditional design is container and carrier of those connotations, that is the real part that the modern design can beneficial from. Obviously, methodologies above can not offer responses to that.

Because of the tradition, design history, firstly, center attention on the objects, and then making technique or craftsmanship, the craftsman, when referring to the literati who influence the craftsmanship or making that would be some person who had really made some objects, for example Li Yu(李渔) and his Occasional Record of Leisure Feelings(《闲情偶寄》). Researches always confined to the level of objects, not more, in order to find some cultural factors that embodied certain cultural symptom of special times. Weakest point of this is that it neglected the value of human, persons involved are the people in the old time, different from the modern. Only referring to objects Value of these persons emerges. If researches come to the relations of human and objects, elements of objects contain factors of human, investigation on objects is in fact on human. We can take part in some persons' life of nowadays, how can we take part in the past life? That would be all kinds of objects that can rebuild life. Throughout the transformation, carry investigation on ancient culture, design theory, and other DO or DON'T, the cultural tradition can be grasped.

Analyzing the causes, it may be under the influence of at least two factors: traditions of textual criticism research since the Qing dynasty and "Ranke historiography" came from the overseas. As the Qing government executes cruel policy to the literati, literati of that time turned their academic studies to textual research, received unprecedented results. Ancient objects, antique design, from the perspective of sphragistics, are also suitable for this method of study. Study of historical materials, prosecute a search of ancient books become a common paradigm of research, The Miscellanea about the Antique(《骨董琐记》) wrote by Dong Zhicheng(邓之诚) is work of this paradigm. Ranke Historiography affected the formation of Chinese modern history. Basic idea is to focus on original material, finding material of the same period or similar time, and bring profound analysis to materials, analysis of identification is very strict. Historical research is based on real, reliable historical materials. Since the late Qing dynasty, western culture was introduced into China, the two historical methodology, both the thinking and the inner pursuit, correspondence is found in. Wang Guowei(王国维), on this basis, made his view

the Double Evidence Method(二重证据法), which is also the basis of design history study of nowadays. Historians of that time, like Fu Sinian(傅斯年), Luo Zhenyu(罗振玉), Chen Yinke(陈寅恪), and so on, shared similar viewpoints, as Fu said that “historiography is science of historical data”. “Methods advocated by Fu Sinian and Li Ji(李济) brought breakthrough to Chinese historian circle of that time, which drew most attentions was the Double Evidence Method of Wang Guowei” [3]

On evaluating of the academic history of that period, on one hand, Because of the promotion of this academic method, promoted scholarism and scientificity of the historical study, helped a lot to restore historical truth. On the other hand, the methodology focus more on “what”, such as what is the real appearance, and “how”, how was the ancient operated it. To “why”, why the ancient designed the instrument? And why the final appearance was this not that? Less attention is paid. That is to say, when the requirements get beyond the scope of history, for more inquiry, weakness of the methodology appears. Request on why also reflects the awareness of researchers. The matter always assumes certain forms, appearance, body measure, size, structure, components, color, design, and composition, and so on, are visible, the space constructed by articles, invisible, is also a part of design, limits behaviors of people. Furthermore, it is culture, conception, life, custom and tradition. How can we design for now and with traditional temperament, it lies on how we comprehend the ancient design.

4. Value of Ancient Chinese Design History

In China, the traditional design is described as art and crafts, not design. Design is thought to be paradigms originated from the western culture which means the concept about design is limited in a narrow category. It circumscribes both the designer and the design history writers. The designer treats design paradigm as modern design. The inner connection of modern and tradition is not comprehended by many writers.

Design is a kind of way to make things follow the needs of human, it connects with culture, nation, fashion, and so on, but the most important things is that design is made by and for human. The modern design can find a lot shared by all the human beings and learn from traditional design. Chinese culture mould traditional design, and it is reflection of the model of Chinese thinking, the core value, that would help modern designer to create things for Chinese of nowadays.

From the constitute of design history all over the world, Chinese ancient design history is classic representative in Asian, with long history, providing inspection and verification for many kinds of assumptions. Multinational, multicultural, multilevel components provide possibility of carrying on research with various angles and ways which has been proved by the general historical researches. From the angle of design history, characterized by creating that interacted with time, culture, group and the class, design thinking of Chinese ancient design left worthy reservations for the offspring. China, even starting with Shang dynasty, has a history of nearly 4'000 years. In these thousands of years, dozens of changes of dynasties, the society went through several cycles of fully-destroyed, revival and corruption. Different societies bring about different social material culture which is representations of human creativity and initiative in building adaptive self-defined space. In the cycle of no more than 300 years, just like Meng Yuanlao(孟元老) of Southern Song dynasty who was born in peace to drifted into war in oldness, like Yan Zhitui(颜之推), born in Northern and Southern Dynasties, period of war over 300years, like Zhang Dai(张岱), familiar with Meng Yuanlao, life through wealthy to stricken-poverty, reminisced the golden past in aged days. [4]Without the life experience of that, it is hard to comprehend the feeling, comparing to

the whole course of design, modern design has to catch deeper understanding of the present through ancient experiences.

Chinese ancient design history is abundant in sociality, because of different social components, design itself also has some divisions. The ancient design, in accordance with users, can be divided into four divisions: design for nobleman, with character of luxurious material and ingenious craftsmanship; Folk design, with simple material and austere style of making; Design for literati, selection of material and making are of high cultural quality, the aesthetic conceptions is elegant and cultural richness; Design for the religious, the style follows the specific user.

In the former design history writing, determined by the writing methodology, besides the historical factors and the describing on glories, great dignity and loyal splendor, researchers' choice, decision and emphasis are absent. That means they can not bring out advices, proposals, or motions for design practices.

Divisions above are represents of three class, three tastes, and three lifestyles. Design of each is constituent of material and spiritual, a material reflects on the basis of technical conditions in that time. The technology may be advanced or out-dated, the materials may also be rare or ordinary, and meanings of life and expectation on living of human are not limited of time. About beauty, fortunateness, kindness, the spirit of deep heart, is different for each person, for the whole ethnic group, nation, the human beings, is similar. In the contemporary world, as technology develops, life of everyone will change a lot, thought of people will also alter much, but about life that one really anxious to live, it does not depends on the mater. We can also make a judgment that meaning of life is more about spirits and less about mater.

Ultimate character of design is the creativity. How and what is the most important thing should design learn from the history? In China, that would be designs for literati. Getting beyond the function, design must monitor spiritual characteristics of people. For spirit, in molding specific character and moral, significance of culture is hard to replace. About the literati, the Chinese literati keep contacts of most classes, as a peasant at this time, and became governor at that time, and made cultural creation for every classes. They lived lives of middle level, not too high, or too low, therefore, they had the loosest conditions to invent and create. Creativity can be based on any conditions, somehow, certain constraint may motivate to create, but in general, abundant support will initiate more creativity. For literati, the cultural literacy is the most prominent feature of this group, to design, that is just the biggest resources of creativity. To modern design, about the biggest feature of design, design for literati has great reference value. Factors in history also prove that, in ancient Chinese design history, from the Song dynasty, as political and social status of literati raised, they became the most important forces of the society, and in the field of design, embodied the deep feeling of culture. Literati did not have to get into the design practice, their appraisalment, judgment, and criticism may play more important and more significant in design.

To the design history research, not confined in the literati who design, but the appraisalment, judgment, direction, and criticism and so on, these exercises bring attentions to the interactivity of culture and design. Ji Cheng, landscape and garden designer in Ming dynasty, his success was based on his artistic attainments, cultural literacy, and also the landscape painting of ancient Chinese literati. That is the point, relationships between the literati and design is not just practice, structure, and principles of making, painting, and some other rules. It is the cultural paradigm which is the embodiment and materialization of certain culture.

5. Conclusion

For modern China, as the social economy develops, beyond the basic living needs, to physical and mental development of the individuals' is paid more attention, they have intrinsic needs to live a luxury life. Although the life level can not catch up with the ancient literati, interaction between their life and objects can still provide worthy experiences and references. For the ancient design and creation, they embedded forms of culture. Form, function, cultural symbol analysis, and elucidations on the book-phrase about design are hard to display the complexity of culture. "As a person live in the society, for living, he should come to understand the history of how the society survive and develop, in order to find references from the history for his living, and a better life." [5]On how to fuse traditional culture with modern design, practices of ancient model it directly.

Chinese ancient design has long history and is worthy to bring deep study, valuable achievement can be carried out. But until now, understanding of ancient design is more confined in arts and crafts. Now as the modernization carried on, design is used in many areas, the historical research should re-examine the former angle of view the history and the writing paradigm of Chinese ancient creating history, transform the arts and crafts of traditional society into design grow in modern society and adapted to people in modern time.

6. Citations

- [1] *More discourses on the influence of technique to design, exploratory of the ancient based on the technology at that time can be found in my published paper: An Baojiang(2011) Pre-Modern Design Under the Technology in Pause* , Jiangxi Fine art Press, 2nd issue, pp16-20.
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- [4] "When I talked about the prosperity of the past, the young growth did not believe and agree with me." Meng Yuanlao(1982)*Introduction of DongJingMengHuaLu(《东京梦华录》)*, Dong Zhicheng annotate, Zhonghua Book Company, pp4.
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