

## Reclusive Thought on Figure Painting of Arhat in Red in Yuan Dynasty

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**Abstract:** The Yuan Dynasty was a period of special significance in the history of China. The rulers of Mongolia and Yuan Dynasty came to Central Plain and became new masters of China. Because they were good at riding and shooting, believing in conquest by force and were keen on Tibetan Buddhism, Confucianism was no longer revered alone, the system of imperial examination for selecting officials had been stopped or abolished for a long time. The official career of the Han scholar-bureaucrats was very slim. The nomadic culture of Mongolia and the farming culture of Central Plain mixed together, they conflicted and blended. The Literati paintings represented by Zhao Mengfu emphasized that calligraphy and painting had the same source and drawing in a calligraphic way. Arhat in red was a representative work of Zhao Mengfu. Painting as the Voice of the heart, in the turbulent era of alien national rule, one of the life ideals of literati was to retire to the countryside, hiding from politics with a way of poetic life.

### 1. Introduction

In the Yuan Dynasty, the ethnic contradictions under the mongolian-han dual political system were extremely sharp. The Mongolian nomadic culture and the Central Plain farming culture often have conflicts. For example, the Yuan Dynasty practiced a “Four-level system” with strong racial discrimination. First, the Mongolians, including the Mongolian tribes, such as the Zhalaer, the Merkit people and the Tatar Tribes; Second, the semu people, including the nationalities of the western regions, northwest China, Central Asia and Eastern Europe; and third, the Han people, they mainly referred to the people of the former Jin Dynasty, including the Han, Jurchen people, Khitan people, Bohai and Goryeo nationalities, as well as the people of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, which were conquered by the Mongols. Fourth were southerners, who generally were the people of the former Southern Song Dynasty (Jiangzhe, Jiangxi and Huguang provinces) who were finally conquered by the Yuan Dynasty. They were scornfully called “Barbarians” by the rulers of Yuan Dynasty and three classes who were known as Northern people [1].

The ethnic oppression of the Yuan Dynasty was cruel. According to the Yuan History, “When the Mongols fought with the Han, the Han could not retaliate against them, but could take their case to the court.” If the Han killed, the Mongols would be beaten fifty-seven times and pay for the funeral expenses. While the Han killed the Mongols, they would be executed, the main criminal paid his family property, and the rest had to pay burial costs.

The sinicization of Yuan Dynasty was very slow. Among the emperors of the Yuan Dynasty, Only Renzong and Yingzong were more confucianized, at the same time, they still believed in lamaism. The Mongol and Yuan rulers were good at riding and shooting, and emphasized martial arts over literature, and abolished the imperial examination for many years. According to scholars, there were no imperial examinations in the North for 80 years, and no imperial examinations in the South for 40 years. It was not until the time of Ayurbarwada Buyantu Khan, Emperor Renzong of Yuan that the imperial examinations were restored, and they were held only once every three years. By the time of the death of the Yuan Dynasty, only 16 times were held, with more than 70 people at each time, of which only half were southerners. In the Yuan Dynasty, the official selection system favored the Mongols and Semu people. Yao Sui, a scholar in the mid-Yuan Dynasty, recorded that

among the official ranks, The Palace Guard accounted for 10%, Clerical staff accounted for 85%, Confucianism accounted for only 5%. The Han Confucian scholars could go up to six hundred people on the way to official career, and a lifetime of sinking down to the bureaucrats, that was the embellishment and decoration of the Yuan Dynasty. The Yuan Dynasty discriminated against Confucian scholars, there are three historical materials. The first historical material was what Fangde Xie said: the Yuan Dynasty System, people were divided into ten grades, officials and clerical staff were the first and second classes, who were valued and beneficial to the country [2]. Seventh artisans and eighth prostitutes, ninth scholars and tenth beggars, it was of no benefit to the state to treat those who were inferior. The second historical material was history of the heart by Sixiao Zheng [3] the third historical material was notes in Yuan Dynasty on a beginner's anthology. They both had similar records of the low status of Confucian scholars. Literati and officialdom expected that since there was no hope of becoming an official after the completion of their studies, they had no choice but to engage in literature and art according to their own expertise, or devoted themselves to literati painting, officialdom or seclusion, they were not only to retain traditional national integrity, but also to achieve personal value [4].

## **2. Literati painting emerged**

In such a background of the Times, the Yuan Dynasty Literati Painting stressed the unity of painting and calligraphy. Zhao Mengfu once wrote a poem on paintings, saying that calligraphy and painting had the same origin [5]. A painter should have literary accomplishment, the combination of poetry, calligraphy, painting and seal makes Chinese painting more literary and more Chinese. Zhao Mengfu was a leading figure in the painting circles of the Yuan Dynasty. In order to avoid being caught in the dilemma between painting and calligraphy in the Song and Yuan Dynasties, it was wise not to mention the Song and Yuan Dynasties in painting and calligraphy, He advocated study on paintings in Jin and Tang Dynasties, painting techniques to restore the ancient, with the ancient as a standard of judgment [6]. Zhao Mengfu's figure painting was highly valued by the world for its emphasis on both form and spirit. Wang Zhongxu, a scholar, pointed out that from the schematic point of view, Zhao Mengfu did not choose the 16 or 18 Arhats pictures popular from the late Tang Dynasty to the Song Dynasty. Instead, he chose a single statue of Buddha sitting under a Arhat tree, which not only corresponded to Annona Squamosa's "Ancient idea" of becoming a Buddha, but was also related to his own experience of meditation, the understanding of Zen and the emotion of the scholars are projected into the Buddhist paintings[7].

## **3. The meaning of the Red Arhat**

Arhat in red, also known as the picture of the monk in the western regions in red, was a typical representative work of Zhao Mengfu's figure painting, which was made in 1304. It is now in the collection of the Liaoning Provincial museum, picture shows a monk in a red robe sitting cross-legged on a slope stone under the Jia tree. The monk had a halo on his head, a high nose and deep eyes, a pendant earring, a beard, a dark complexion, and a vivid image of a monk from the western regions. Under his seat was laid a vermilion felt, beside which was a pair of red monk's shoes. The red monk had a smile on his face, a calm and kind look on his face, and his left hand was flat, his palm facing up, seems to be preaching. Signed on the Left, eight years of Dade, early spring, Zhao Mengfu from Wu Xing made a drawing, following the tradition of realistic painting in the Tang and Song Dynasties, Zhao Mengfu painted the Arhat, using the "Monk of Tenjiku" as a model. He also chose the painting method of painting in the Tang Dynasty, in which cassocks, cushions and shoes were painted in a slightly different vermilion color, set off by ochre tree trunks and Turquoise sloping stones, very dazzling, but dignified and beautiful, not out of the ordinary. Arhat's face was depicted in fine detail, while the outline of his clothing lines was elegant. The large trees in the background were tall and straight, with vines winding around them, and the hills and rocks were stacked in a neat and steady way, it was Zhao Mengfu's genius to incorporate the highly developed techniques of landscape painting from the Song Dynasty into his meticulous portraits of

the Tang Dynasty. According to the research of scholars, the hero in the painting should be the monk Daba Lama who died in the western regions the year before. The real object of Zhao Mengfu's attention was Zhao Xian, the young emperor of the Southern Song Dynasty who was the Abbot of Sakya Monastery at that time. Through "Ancient meaning", without offending the Yuan Dynasty, Zhao Mengfu was able to express his grief for the Song dynasty, and returned to his own cultural birthplace. As Mr. Hong Zaixin said, The red-clad monk in the western regions painted by Zhao Mengfu in the eighth year of Dade, ostensibly in memory of Daba, the emperor of the Sakya sect who died years ago, actually referred to the late Emperor Gong of Song, who was the chief Abbot of the Sakya Monastery, in order to express the painter's deep sorrow [8].

#### **4. The thought of literati reclusion**

In the turbulent times, the ideal of the Chinese literati was to retire to the countryside. The pictures in Zhao Mengfu's rolling horse were meticulous and vivid. Besides the lines, the horse's structure mainly used the method of rendering, inheriting the Tang style of Pommel horse paintings, the pommel horse paintings in the Tang style, in a sense, enabled Zhao Mengfu to avoid the predicament of directly representing the Mongolian Pommel horse [9]. Because Mongolia was a nomadic people, the heart of a good horse was natural, and so was the painting of a pommel horse. Zhao Mengfu replaced the Pommel horse painting tradition of the Jin Dynasty, which was popular in the Yuan Dynasty, with Tang style pommel horse painting, it was also a symbol of the culture of the Han intellectuals and the descendants of the Song Dynasty. In 1295, Zhao Mengfu had resigned from his post in Jinan. In 1297, the Yuan government appointed him governor of Fenzhou, but he did not accept. On the eighth day of the first month of the second year of Dade, Zhao Mengfu drew a small portrait of himself. In 1299, Zhao Mengfu was in charge of Confucianism in the region of Jiangzhe, a term of 10 years. For Zhao Mengfu, it was a decade of idleness [10]. On the one hand, he avoided all kinds of political risks in the dynasty, at the same time in Zhejiang and other places with literati painting contacts, poetry and wine singing. He also entered a flourishing period in artistic creation [11]. As the scholar Ye Jing pointed out: Zhao Mengfu may not create a figure painting, but to find a spiritual sustenance [12].

#### **5. Conclusion**

In a word, the third year of Dade was the turning point of Zhao Mengfu's official career. It was also a year when he gradually adapted to the official life and changed his mind. He turned from political frustration to being an official, though his thought of being an official was more clear. This was the background of his portrait. Even those who hold a lot of stereotypes about his Surrender to the Yuan Dynasty, such as Yu Kan, Dong Qichang, Emperor Qianlong and so on, had to admit that there was a deep and touching power in the broad mind and the plaintive sentiment in the poem. Facing the complex situation of the conflict and mixture of Mongolian nomadic culture and Central Plain farming culture, the Confucian system of selecting scholars for the imperial examination was abolished for a long time, the official career of the Han scholar-officials was uncertain, the Literati paintings represented by Zhao Mengfu especially emphasized the inheritance of the Chinese context, insisting on the homology of calligraphy and painting, painting with calligraphy. In the turbulent era of alien nation, one of the life ideals of the literati was to stay away from politics, retire to the countryside and live a poetic life.

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