

A Review of Research on “Image”: Methodology and Reflection

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Abstract—At present, the academic circles are rich in the research on the source, creation and construction, and connotation of image, case studies of imagery, history of imagery, and comparison with artistic conception. However, the research is insufficient on the aspects of the history of image criticism, the relationship between image and Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, the relationship between imagery and traditional literary theory, and the modern interpretation history of image. At the same time, the current method of imagery research is in a state of "aphasia", which deserves reflection from the academic circle.

Keywords: *image, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, aphasia, reflection*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the field of traditional Chinese aesthetics and literary criticism, "image" is one of the important categories. However, so far, there has been no consensus on the discussion of "image", such as "what is beauty" and "what is art". This situation is mainly related to the complexity of the ancients' use of the term "image", the infiltration of western literary and artistic theories into Chinese literary and artistic theories since modern times, and the influence of ideology in different periods. Different scholars have very different conclusions based on different methods when they study the "image", which are even in the opposite. Therefore, the research on "image" has produced various controversies, and this situation is worthy of reflection.

II. RESEARCH RESULTS OF IMAGE

Since modern times, the study of "image" has achieved a lot of results. The papers alone have reached an astonishing number of 39,439 articles (Title search of CNKI. The deadline is December 30, 2019. The following data are based on this time point.). Among them, there were 2994 doctoral dissertations, 2886 master's dissertations, 108 doctoral dissertations, and 1255 literary dissertation. It can be said that the study of "image" has achieved a "prosperous" situation. In the field of Chinese literature research, the study of "image" has achieved the following results to this day:

A. *The connotation, creation and construction, characteristics and origin of image, that is, "what is image"*

On this point, the more representative are the older generation of literary theorists such as Zhu Guangqian, Zong Baihua, Wang Yuxiong, Hu Xuegang, etc. The contemporary generation mainly includes Ye Lang and Zhu Zhirong. In particular, Zhu Zhirong has focused on the study of "image" in recent years. He has expounded "image" in a large number of works such as "Chinese Aesthetic Theory" and "Introduction to Chinese Literature" and published a series of articles to explain it. Mr. Zhu Zhirong said, "The common thing I and Mr. Zhu Guangqian, Mr. Ye Lang, and Mr. Wang Yuxiong in the use of the image is that everyone has inherited the tradition to a certain extent, but we have not copied it. Every one of us has our own definition in our specific works." [1] At present, the definition of the connotation of "image" in the academic circle can be said to be quite rich. At the source of "image", it is basically agreed that "image" originate from "Zhouyi", "Laozi" and "Zhuangzi". In terms of poetics, there are also works by Yuan Xingpei, Chen Bohai, Jiang Yin, etc. Although there is a deviation from the attention in the field of aesthetics, they have more in common in interpretation and will not be discussed here. However, it is regrettable that the creation of "image" should be based on the traditional Chinese "image" thinking, or the construction of scholars' individual aesthetic systems seem to have failed to reach a consensus, thus creating a kind of status quo of "everyone is saying his own words", which is worthy of reflection by academic circles.

B. *Case studies on image*

This point should be said to have the most research results at present, mainly in the form of a single dissertation and individual chapters in the works of literary history. Searching on CNKI under the title of "image", searching only Chinese literature, there are as many as 23,108 articles, of which there are 11,926 research articles in the field of Chinese literature and aesthetics. These articles can be divided into the following types according to the author's research:

- The "image" interpretation of a certain poem;

- The "image" interpretation of a certain writer's poems, and words;
- Research on a certain type of "image" in ancient poetry;
- Comparative research on "image" created by different writers;
- Research on someone's "image" theory.

This type of articles can be said to have made certain research on the image in the field of Chinese literature and aesthetics, and achieved certain results, but they lack systemicity and cannot grasp the Chinese "image" theory as a whole.

C. Study of the history of imagery in ancient China

At present, the academic circle's investigation of the history of "image" is slightly inadequate, but it has also achieved certain results. For example, Wang Yuxiong's "Image Origin" [2], Hu Xuegang's "The Development of the Image Category" [3], Chen Bohai's thesis "The Evolution of the Imagery Art of Pre-Tang Poetry" [4], as well as a doctoral dissertation on the "History of Chinese Classical Image" by Zhao Tianyi of Southwest University in 2012 and a doctoral dissertation of "Zhuangzi's Image Theory" by Yang Zhouxian of Harbin Normal University in 2019. There are also some theses of other scholars, which will not be listed here. The above treatises more or less organize the traditional Chinese "image" history. Whether or not they completely restore the true appearance of the ancient "image", they have made their contribution.

D. Comparative analysis of "image" and "artistic conception"

Compared with "image", the connotative characteristics of "artistic conception" are more elusive. Many people regard image as artistic conception, but more scholars point out that there are differences between the two, so they conduct a comparative study. For example, Ye Lang's "On Artistic Conception" [5], Zhu Zhirong's "On the Relationship Between Imagery and Artistic Conception" [6], Jiang Yin's "Verbellcon, Object, Image, Artistic Conception" [7], Tao Wenpeng's "My View on the Relationship Between Image and Artistic Conception" [8], Xin Xiaoling's "On the Distinction Between Artistic Conception and Image" [9], etc., and there are many other articles, which will not be enumerated here. Although the views are different and the positions are different, these studies are all comparing "image" and "artistic conception". As to which scholar's view is more accurate, assertions cannot be made freely. The criteria for judgement should be based on the traditional Chinese literary theory and aesthetic viewpoint, and based on the literature. It will be persuasive and valuable without taking the words too literally.

In general, the current study of "image" is more about the history of ancient literature in terms of subject affiliation, and there is less research on ancient literary theory and aesthetics. It can be said that "delight" and "regret" coexist.

III. THE PERSPECTIVE OF IMAGE RESEARCH

Although many achievements have been made in the study of image, just as "a poem cannot be interpreted to its exact meaning", the study of image can be further developed:

The first is the continued research on the history of "image" in ancient China. The category of "image" has existed in ancient China, and modern and contemporary scholars' researches on image focus on the construction of their own aesthetic system, but lack of research on the traditional Chinese "image" history. The study of Wang Yuxiong's "Image Origin" mainly focuses on the history of Pre-Qin to Wei and Jin Dynasties; Hu Xuegang's "The Development of the Image Category" and Zhao Tianyi's "On the History of Chinese Classical Image" are talking about image from Pre-Qin to Qing Dynasty. However, Hu Xuegang's "The Development of the Image Category" is mainly focused on the study of the "image" theory of the ancient minority. There are certain shortcomings in the literature, so it cannot fully reflect the ancient "image" theory; Zhao Tianyi's "On the History of Chinese Classical Image" and Hu Xuegang's works have similarities and overlaps, but the second half of the thesis is mainly about the "image" theory of the ancients about poetry, painting and calligraphy, lacking theoretical explorations of words, tunes, and novels. Therefore, aspects of the ancient "image" criticism history can still be explored.

The second is the further study of the relationship between ancient "image" theory and Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Since the Han Dynasty, the Confucian literary and artistic thought represented by "Prefaces of Mao Poetry" has had a huge impact on ancient Chinese literature. Therefore, Mr. Liang Qichao had a saying that "the people who want to study the 'Book of Songs' must first comprehensively study 'Prefaces of Mao Poetry'." [10] The truth is that "Prefaces of Mao Poetry" is "a sacred and inviolable book". The theories of unification of feelings and aspirations, starting with feelings and stopping with the morals, beautified sarcasm, and allegorical advice in "Prefaces of Mao Poetry" had a great impact on later literary creations. Therefore, the Confucian outlook on literature and art has never been abandoned from Pre-Qin to Qing Dynasties. Therefore, the relationship between the "image" theory and Confucianism is worth studying. At the same time, since the introduction of Buddhism into China, especially the emergence of the local Buddhist denominations represented by Zen Buddhism, the Buddhist thought has influenced Chinese literature and aesthetics since the Wei and Jin Dynasties, of which the most obvious are the phenomena of poet monks in the Tang Dynasty, Jiao Ran's "Poetry Style", Yan Yu's "Canglang Poetry Talk", Li Zhi's "Children's Heart Theory", Wang Shizhen's "Spirit Theory", Yuan Mei's "Spiritual Theory", etc. The infiltration and criticism of Buddhist thoughts in literary and artistic creation are obvious, so the relationship between "image" and Buddhists is also worth studying. The existing research results mainly study the relationship between image and Taoism, and lack of research on the relationship with Confucianism and Buddhism. At the same time, the study of "image" in the

current academic circle is biased towards art and philosophy from the whole, and the interpretation of "image" has been paid less attention to historical and cultural aspects. It is worth thinking about why "image" and the criticisms have different faces in different periods in history. Therefore, the influence of historical culture on image is worthy of further study.

The third is a comparative study of the "image" theory in ancient China and other terms in the field of literary theory and aesthetics, such as the theory of "beautified sarcasm and bi-xing", the theory of "strength of character", the theory of "enlightenment", etc. Some of Zhu Zhirong's articles concern the relationship between analogy, rising and image. In his opinion, analogy and rising are important means for the subject to "build an image to express the connotation", and an important way of thinking in image creation [11]. So it is feasible to study the relationship between image and other terms. In ancient China, there were rich terms of "poetry theory" and "word theory". Although not all terms can be related to image, this has undoubtedly left people a wealth of excavable resources.

The fourth is the study of modern research on "image". Since modern times, especially since the birth of modern disciplines, the academic circle has studied "image" from different perspectives. Therefore, the modern interpretation of "image" itself is worth studying. In this regard, the researchers study their research angles, value discussions and things like that, on which mainly focus on the related research on the "image" views of representative figures in ancient Chinese literature (including literary criticism) and aesthetics. Of course, the interpretation of "images" can be studied from a certain angle, such as acceptance aesthetics, phenomenology, etc. Many scholars in modern and contemporary studies of "image" often draw on foreign literary theories, which makes this point of research cannot be ignored.

IV. METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE IMAGE RESEARCH

At present, the academic research method of ancient Chinese literary theory and aesthetics can be said to be "all flowers blooming together". However, due to the particularity of the research object, some research methods are not suitable for a particular research object. Otherwise, it will cause misinterpretations and misunderstandings, thereby obscuring the truth. There is a huge difference between Chinese and Western cultures, "When calling old things with new nouns, it is feasible for the material things because they are the same; it is infeasible for the humanistic things because they look the same but actually different from each other". [12] Therefore, to study ancient Chinese literary theory and aesthetics, it will be a must to abandon the thinking of carefully borrowing Western literary theories, let alone be dominated by them, or it could be wrong from the source. Mr. Huang Kan once said, "When learning Chinese knowledge, it is necessary to accept new materials without accepting new theories." [13] Mr. Cao Shunqing also straightly pointed out: "What is the most serious problem in

the study of literary theory today? My answer is: The aphasia in literary theory!" In this regard, Mr. Cao explained: "The so-called "aphasia" does not mean that there is no set of rules of discourse in modern and contemporary literary theory, but that it does not have a set of rules of discourse of its own, not of others. ... It does not have a unique discourse system of its own, but merely inherits the discourse system of Western literary theory." [14] Mr. Cao's views have aroused heated debate in the academic circle, and scholars such as Ji Xianlin, Luo Zongqiang, and Huang Weiliang have all agreed with his views. In fact, Chinese academia has also committed "aphasia" in the study of "image". The study of image is full of western literary terminology, such as "subject", "activeness", "existence", "utility", etc. This is a phenomenon worthy of vigilance. So how do the researchers get rid of this bad situation and avoid making Chinese theoretical thoughts a footnote of Western thought or materials to verify the correctness of their views? In this regard, Mr. Cao Shunqing pointed out a path: rebuilding the discourse system of Chinese literary theory. The specific method is: "First of all, the exploration and arrangement of traditional discourse can make the traditional Chinese discourse's speech style and cultural spirit clear. Then it is to make it realize its modern transformation in the contemporary dialogue and use. And finally it is to realize the reconstruction of discourse in the wide-ranging collection." [15] So the first thing that is necessary to do now is to abandon the research method of "explaining the Chinese by the Western" and use traditional Chinese discourse to study image. Therefore, the research method of "image" deserves reflection from academic circles.

V. CONCLUSION

Although the "image" research has achieved certain results, there is still room for continued development. However, the current research method of image in academic circles deserves reflection. Mr. Cao Shunqing pointed out: "The rise and fall of the concept of 'image' in China's critical circles is quite a bit of 'export to domestic sales', which symbolizes weaknesses that we respect others rather than ourselves, and emphasize on developing in theory rather than practice." [16] The "image" theory belongs to the category of traditional literary theory. "Traditional literary theory is a theory that has already passed. From the perspective of broad history, it has become history. If it is history, then the research should be based on a historicist attitude, and it should be returned to its old-fashioned respect. It is regarded as a true academic study. Otherwise, it would become a free interpretation of contemporary history instead of objective academic research." [17] Therefore, the study of "image" should first be based on traditional literary theory, and academic circles should reflect on this status quo.

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