

The Aesthetic Embodiment of Modernity in Chinese Literature in the 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

Chinese literature in the 20th century, especially since the May 4th Movement, has been referred to as modern Chinese literature by academics. In recent years, scholars have been questioning the idea that Chinese literature in the 20th century has the characteristics of modern times but no characteristics of modernity, and that literature in the period of "May 4th Movement" pursued and affirmed modernity but does not criticize it, and does not acquire literary modernity. This study makes detailed discussion in relation to the sociality and aesthetic modernity embodied in modern literary works.

Keywords: *Modern literature, Modernity, Aesthetics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern literature expresses the thoughts, feelings and psychology of modern Chinese in modern literary language and form. Modernity is a tension structure full of contradictions and paradoxes. Enlightenment modernity, with the spirits of reason, science and evolution as its core concepts, has greatly advanced the process of civilization in social history. However, when scientism turned man into a slave to technology, technological rationality led to the alienation of man himself, and the rapidly developing mechanical civilization led to the deterioration of the living environment and the loss of man's spiritual freedom, literature would consciously take on the important responsibility of resisting alienation in order to defend man's freedom, reveal the ultimate meaning of life's existence and seek the aesthetic transcendence of man himself. The concrete form of modernity at the reflective-transcendental level is commonly known as aesthetic modernity, which is mainly embodied in artistic self-discipline and its pursuit of freedom and transcendence on the spiritual level of the human being.

2. THE CONCENTRATED REFLECTION OF MODERNITY IN MODERN LITERARY WORKS

The three collections of short stories in "Series of New Chinese Literature (1917-1927)" were the main objects of study. The "Series of New Chinese Literature (1917-1927)" was divided into three categories according to the Literary Research Association, the Creation Society and other societies. The "First Collection of Novels", edited by Mao Dun, mainly contained the works of the Literary Research Association; the "Second Collection of Novels", edited by Lu Xun, contained the works of writers from literary groups other than the Literary Research Association and the Creation Society; and the "Third Collection of Novels", edited by Zheng Boqi, contained the works of writers from the Creation Society, analyzing the concentrated embodiment of modernity.

2.1 "First Collection of Novels"

"First Collection of Novels" contained 58 works by 29 writers, of which Bing Xin and Ye Shaojun had the most, five works each, and Wang Tongzhao had four works. The works collected were mainly those of writers from the Literary Research Association. According to the introduction, Mao Dun outlined the basic attitude shared by the

members of the Literary Research Association: "The time for regarding literature and art as a pastime in times of pleasure or in times of disillusionment has now passed." This attitude was understood as that "literature should reflect social phenomena, express and discuss some issues about life". From this standpoint, his analysis of the selected writers' works was mainly conducted from the perspective of "being for life", such as, the problematic consciousness displayed in Bing Xin's "A Man Alone" and Lu Yin's "The Old Friend on the Beach", Ye Shaojun's sober look at life and his objective portrayal of a humble grey life, and the "unique" outlook on life expressed in Luo Huasheng's works — "he is somewhat sceptical about the ultimate meaning of life, but he is not pessimistic and does not approve of empty thinking".

As a critic who attached great importance to the sociality of literature, Mao Dun endeavoured to outline the social concerns of writers in the first decade, the changes in the subject matter of their works, and the in-depth social psychological analysis, and grasped the changing situation of literary trends from the macro perspective of the "literary world as a whole". His comments were often harsh. He criticized the large number of novels on the subject of love between men and women in the period of May 4th Movement, which focused only on the lives of individuals and lacked the expression of social phenomena as a whole. In his view, new literature of the first decade "did not seem to have blossomed with romanticism, nor did it bear the fruits of realism", and Mao Dun sought "epic" works that reflected the historical changes in Chinese society, so he expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the early works rarely reflected "the full view of social institutions".

According to the selection and evaluation of works in "First Collection of Novels — Introduction", Mao Dun's literary ideology of "expressing life and guiding life" was the criterion of criticism, and at the same time, Mao Dun was influenced by the "revolutionary literary outlook" of the 1930s, attached importance to the development of the socio-historical significance of the subject matter. In addition, the distance between the subject matter and the "centre" of the times was used to determine the significance and value of works.

2.2 "Second Collection of Novels"

The "Second Collection of Novels" edited by Lu Xun was exemplary in its attention to the outlining of the threads of literary history and the exploration of the potential significance of literary phenomena, which showed the unique vision of literary historians and had exemplary significance.

The writers in this collection were in wide range. From the perspective of catalogue, it was roughly ranked according to the chronological order of the emergence of novel writers, and appropriately according to their respective societies or schools. Most of the selected works could reflect the artistic personality and had a certain influence. Lu Xun summarized the main artistic characteristics of each group in his introduction, outlined the general picture, and then introduced the achievements of the main writers one by one, summarizing their overall styles concisely and precisely mostly in a few words, or citing one or two representative works to reveal their charms and styles. For example, as for the works of Misa Society, Lu Xun said, "the scope of feeling the society was quite narrow. People couldn't help but feel the small joys and sorrows around themselves, and saw these small joys and sorrows as that of the whole world." As for the works of Heavy Bell Society, Lu Xun said, "a heart-broken song that suffered a lot was not clear enough." Lu Xun's commentary on the phenomena was not simply positive or negative, but sought to distil and show the process of the transition from the old to the new in the field of fiction writing. His views often became public opinions at the drop of a hat, and some of which had been quoted in various works of literary history.

Some writers had no obvious groupment, and there was no specific group background. Lu Xun, for the first time, positioned their combination of vernacular life and new cultural thought as "native literature", which was a classic concept that established a distinctive literary genre for modern Chinese literature. The introduction to "Second Collection of Novels" edited by Lu Xun was a classic work of scholarship in literary history, and together with "A Brief History of the Chinese Novel" and "The Outline of Chinese Literature", they constructed Lu Xun's unique view of literary history.

2.3 "Third Collection of Novels"

The "Third Collection of Novels" mainly contained the works of the Creation Society, with 37 works by 19 writers. Zheng Boqi's comprehensive assessment of the Creation Society in the Introduction was an extremely valuable assertion of the nature of this literary society. At its inception, the Creation Society introduced itself as follows: "We have no constitution, no organ, and no delineated doctrine. We were together at random by a few friends. What we do is simply to engage in literary activity in accordance with the demands of our hearts." And this principle of "being in line with our demands" revealed the attitude of this group of writers towards creation. Zheng Boqi also generalized the reasons why the members of the Creation Society had a Romantic tendency predominantly, and analyzed the literary phenomenon of the Romanticism of the Creation Society's exposure to the genres of the "end of the century" from the very beginning. Most writers of the Creation Society had studied in Europe and the United States, and were naturally influenced by foreign literary ideas. After a long stay abroad, they felt sad and nostalgic. When they returned to China, their ideas and programs for reforming society failed again and again, and they were bound to feel sad, angry and disappointed. This group of young people, who were deeply influenced by foreign literary ideas, had a tendency to create works that contained a mixture of the genres of the end of the century, showing a phenomenon of hurried selection, jumble and overlap. However, the Symbolists, the Futurists and the Expressionists were all "ideologically related to Romanticism"; and "its Romanticism was always rich in the spirit of revolt and destruction; in the new terminology, it was revolutionary Romanticism".

Zheng Boqi also evaluated the style and creative characteristics of the writers representing the Creation Society. Although the main tendency of the Creation Society in earlier stage was Romanticism, each of them had their own individual characteristics. For example, "Guo Moruo was most influenced by the German Romantics, who revered nature, respected the self and advocated resistance". "Yu Dafu gave people the impression of decadence, but in fact, it was only Romanticism painted with the color of the end of the world." "Although Cheng Fangwu was also influenced by the German Romantics, he embraced the theoretical ideas of the Life School and felt the

charm of the Symbolists and Neo-Romantics in works."

3. MODERNITY IS MANIFESTED IN THE EMPHASIS ON THE INDEPENDENT STATUS OF LITERATURE

Chinese "literary revolution" in 20th century, as a modern phenomenon, was a product of the pursuit of modernity, and its aim was to establish a modern "new literature" that was completely different from the ancient "old literature", and the distinctive features of the new literary theory in the May 4th Movement were its compatibility and hybridity. [1] The formation of a modern view of Chinese literature also involved the establishment of a modern concept of pure literature and the acceptance of the concept of artistic self-discipline. In the criticism of May 4th Literary Revolution on the traditional literary concept of "conveying truth with writings", the literary concept of artistic self-discipline had been clearly highlighted. A distinctive feature of modern Chinese literature was the independence of literature from its traditional subordination to the scriptures, being placed in a central position. [2]

Tracing back to its origin, Liang Qichao's "Three-Worlds Revolution" could be considered the beginning of the literary revolution in 20th century. However, it was Wang Guowei who first proposed the concept of "pure literature" and was the first to stress the value of literary independence and affirm its independent character. Wang Guowei saw literature as a pure knowledge that was free from utilitarianism, and that literature had an independent aesthetic value apart from the utilitarian value of society. At the beginning of the literary revolution, Chen Duxiu also emphasized the independent value of literature: "using literature as a means and an instrument, it must be attached to other things in order to survive." [3] His aim was to sharply refute and liquidate the traditional idea of "conveying truth with writings", which was undoubtedly an expression of aesthetic modernity. During the period of May 4th Movement, especially with the emergence of new literary societies such as the Literary Research Association and the Creation Society, literature took up the task of social reform, the idea of "pure literature" with its independent aesthetic value was never extinguished, and the definition of "literature" in the modern sense was always an urgent and

conscious demand for the construction of literary theory during the period of May 4th Movement.

The new literature's pursuit and achievement of literary independence was first reflected in the introduction of the concept of "beautiful articles". Zhou Zuoren pointed out that there was a so-called essay in foreign literature, which was divided into two categories: one was critical and academic, and the other was descriptive and artistic, also known as beautiful essay. This kind of pure literary prose, which pursued art and lyricism, was a "bridge between poetry and prose", self-centred and advocated the expression of one's own emotions, which would give people great spiritual enjoyment. Since then, he took literature and art as "his own garden", away being from politics and passion and maintaining a peaceful state of mind. Due to the mission of the country and the nation, the literature in the period of May 4th Movement was full of strong enlightenment utilitarian. The emergence and popularity of beautiful articles showed the traces of literature's efforts to pursue self-development, independence and freedom under the strong discourse of enlightenment.

Literary independence was also expressed in the promotion of formal exploration. For example, Wen Yiduo said that poetry should have the beauty of music, painting and architecture. The beauty of music lies in the syllables, the beauty of painting lies in the words, and the beauty of architecture is in the chapters and sentences. Wen Yiduo, Xu Zhimo, Zhu Xiang and Rao Mengkan had weekly poetry meetings, discussions, recitations, research or experimentation. Their experiments injected fresh blood into the new poetry, and it continued to mature. The works were summarized in three schools: the school of free verse, the school of metrical poetry, and the school of symbolic verse. These schools all made valuable explorations of poetic expression and achieved fruitful results, which not only gave a strong impetus to the development of new literature, but also preserved a right and possibility to explore the identity of new Chinese poetry itself beyond the realistic utilitarian purpose of modern new poetry.

4. MODERNITY IS MANIFESTED IN THE FUNCTION OF LITERATURE SURPASSING REALITY

As a spiritual activity, literature inevitably has an impact on people and society, and this is also its social function. From an objective point of view, literature is the reproduction of real life at the

realistic dimension; from a subjective point of view, literature is the expression of the subject's thoughts and feelings at the realistic dimension. There are limits to the grasp of world because of the limitations of human reality in existence. Reality is not just a current concept relative to the past and future in the general sense, but refers to the form of human existence, which is relative to the unrealistic and surreal. As an aesthetic experience, literature is a transcendental grasp of social life, which overcomes the limitations of realistic experience and achieves a self-consciousness of existence. As a transcendental experience, literature is a critical consciousness, which criticizes reality from the height of freedom. [4]

Lu Xun positioned the works of a group of young people who were in Beijing, influenced by the new culture, but remembered and described his hometown as "native literature". The "native literature" is a combination of the life of the countryside and the ideas of the new culture. In terms of aesthetic approach, local novels take rural customs and natural landscapes as their main objects of description, showing writers' profound criticism of patriarchal rural culture, as well as their questioning of modern urban civilisation and their celebration and construction of traditional humanistic ideals. For example, in works such as Fei Ming's "Tales from the Bamboo Grove", he depicted the rural world of the countryside that had not yet been saturated by modern civilization in a light and simple tone, expresses his admiration for the pure virtues of "human beings with primitive colors". And this return to nature shows a detachment from and an escape from the modern form of human existence, and can undoubtedly be seen as a manifestation of literature transcending reality.

The heaviness and pressure of real life inevitably led some of the new literary scholars to aestheticism, in order to transcend reality. Starting from the expression of "nature and spirit" of the ancient China, Zhou Zuoren argued that literature should express a kind of sentiment, and in the process of such expression, one could achieve self-satisfaction and amusement. He believed that literature had a special role to play in the human spirit, allowing people to settle down and achieve a modest degree of liberation. This relief is in fact a concern for the ultimate meaning of life. Yu Dafu summed up four major features of the modern prose aesthetic: individualism, breadth of scope, the reconciliation of human sociality and nature, and a sense of humour. As Zhou Zuoren advocated for

beautiful essay, Yu Dafu's emphasis on these aesthetic qualities reflected an aestheticist tendency. Yu Dafu's novels likewise reflected aestheticist pursuits. In "Sinking", the hero suffered from depression. And the decadent tone of "Sinking" echoed with the Western modernity that was essentially characterized by a rejection of reality. Yu Dafu's reflections on the current state of China's youth were expressed in the aesthetic style of "decadence", achieving a critical effect on reality to a certain extent. Decadence became a growing aesthetic trend after the publication of Baudelaire's "The Flowers of Evil", and became an expression of aesthetic modernism. The sense of decadence leads to an inner unease, a kind of self-examination and an isolation of the self from reality in order to be able to criticize it and transcend it. This critique and transcendence eventually lead to a major renunciation of reality, that is, a negation of reality. Often, decadence is linked to concepts such as decay, twilight, autumn, ageing and exhaustion, and organic decay at a deeper stage. At the same time, it is also linked to the usual antonyms of these concepts such as rising, dawn, youth, budding, etc. This is why people get hope and look forward to the future in "Sinking". Decadence is a style that favours the unrestrained expression of aesthetic individualism, a style that demands the abandonment of traditional authoritarian requirements such as uniformity, hierarchy and objectivity. This style coincides with Yu Dafu's talented personality. Yu Dafu sought self-congratulation, rebelled against tradition, sought individuality, and abhorred authoritarianism. These pursuits achieve a fit in the decadent style of lyricism. In some of Yu Dafu's works, the concepts of progress and decadence are so closely encompassed that people could even draw a paradox: progress nourishes decadence and decadence represents progress.

5. CONCLUSION

"Literature in the period of May 4th Movement" provides vibrant modern resource for Chinese literature in 20th Century, calling for and celebrating modern science and democracy, and criticizing feudalism as a positive response to enlightenment modernity. At the same time, modern Chinese literature's appeal to its aesthetic modernity dimension cannot be ignored.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Yinghong Sheng wrote the paper, and Xiaowen Lin was responsible for the paper revising and collection of data.

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