

Analysis on China's Image in Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's Works

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Abstract. The famous Japanese writer Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, known as wizard writer, only went abroad for once in his lifetime, and this overseas journey was 4-month journey in China in 1921. After he returned from this journey, Akutagawa carefully recorded China's image in his eyes, and published Travel Notes about China and other works. Those works reflect his pursuit for Chinese traditional culture, and also reflect disillusionment of his ideal China's image in imagination. Those travel notes still have certain reference value for knowing his misunderstanding on China at that time and knowing Sino-Japanese relation under current situation. This paper mainly carries out analysis on China's image in Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's works from 3 aspects, that is, deep love to Chinese classical culture, broken West Lake dream, and misplaced China's impression.

Introduction

As a representative writer of Japanese school of new thoughts, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa is always called as modern Japanese master in literature, and he pushes Japanese modern literature to a new height together with Mori Ōgai and Natsume Sōseki in same period. Since March 1921, employed by Osaka Mainichi Shimbun, Akutagawa started a 4-month journey in China. His first station was Shanghai, and then he traveled in Hangzhou, Suzhou, Yangzhou, Nanjing, and Wuhu, and then arrived in Hankou to visit Dongting and Changsha, went through Zhengzhou, Luoyang, and Longmen, and then came to Beijing; in the end of July, he returned Japan from North Korea. He originally intended to write travel notes and send back to Japan to be published while he visited different places; however, he gave up this idea due to bad healthy condition. After he returned Japan, he also completed some articles about China, which were published in Mainichi Shimbun and other periodicals, and compiled as Travel Notes about China. Travel Notes about China mainly consists of 5 parts, that is, Travel Notes about Shanghai, Travel Notes about Regions South of the Yangtze River, Travel Notes about Yangtze River, Notes about Beijing, and Essays. Through reading those works, we can find that to travel in China is always the wish of Akutagawa who loves Chinese traditional culture since his childhood, and those notes also provide valuable historical data for contemporary readers and researchers to know China's image in Japanese people at that time and can help us to review Sino-Japanese culture and Sino-Japanese relation.

Deep love to Chinese classical culture

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's love to China didn't started from that journey in China, but started from his adolescent time. Since childhood, Akutagawa loved Chinese classical literature very much; after he become sensible, he liked to read the work Jinpiluolishengji adapted from Journey to the West. Later, he started to widely read Strange Stories from a Scholar's Studio, Romance of the West Chamber, and other works. His reading on Chinese traditional literature didn't remain at the surface; on the contrary, he was very familiar with the characters in the literature and he especially liked the writer Pu Songling's narrative methods. Growing in Mingzhi and Dazheng period, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa had especially rich Sinology accomplishment, and those elements of Chinese literature were greatly helpful for his creation. Therefore, the accumulation of Chinese traditional elements was reflected in the course of his literary creation; in his many short historical novels, the materials of 9 novels were drawn from China. For example, as for Hero's Arms, the materials were drawn from Popular Romance of Eastern and Western Han Dynasties; as for Pipe Dream, the materials were drawn from the legend in Tang Dynasty Zhenzhongji; as for Immortal and A Story of Being

Beheaded, the materials were drawn from *Strange Stories from a Scholar's Studio*. In the work *Tu Tze-chun*, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa described the glory and magnificence of Luoyang in Tang Dynasty, which showed an illusionary scene and also reflected Akutagawa's beautiful visions on China. Since childhood, Akutagawa perceived China via Chinese classical literature, and then had extremely unique China's imagination; furthermore, Chinese classical literature also provided him with precious resources for novel creation. Ryūnosuke Akutagawa took Chinese traditional literature as materials, started from his actual demand to implement literature thoughts, and completed large batch of novels in more skilled technique, and thus the cross-cultural intertext was also formed. On that account, Chinese classical literature also became an important reference for writer to creating his own texts. His novels fully absorbed and successfully converted the texts of Chinese traditional texts, or cited and adapted them as new texts with bright characteristics; there exists mutual reference relation between them.

Broken West Lake dream

In *Travel Notes about China*, Akutagawa used great length to introduce his travel in Hangzhou. Hangzhou was his second station after he departed from Shanghai. This was not only because Hangzhou was near Shanghai, but also because West Lake played a very important role in Japanese people's ideal China. Although Akutagawa came to realistic West Lake, he was more willing to stay in imaginary West Lake which was far from realistic life, consisted of poems, paintings, and surreal atmosphere, and had artistic style in his spiritual level. However, no matter how hard he worked, the reality still relentlessly hit him. For example, the common scenes of life that Chinese people washed vegetables or went fishing along West Lake let him feel active thinking, and it seemed as if he saw the life of three brothers of Ruan family in Shijie Village in *Outlaws of the Marsh*. However, a candy vendor walked from a distance, which made him jump out of his dream world like a flea, for there was no person living on selling candies in 108 heroes. In this way, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's romantic imagination couldn't stand any things related to modern business and money; however, those things could be seen everywhere in realistic life, and it was hard for him to avoid those things in Hangzhou. Before going to Hangzhou, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa once expected that he could escape from purely market-oriented market and step into artistic spiritual world. However, his imagination was quickly disillusioned. At the exit of Hangzhou Station, there were a group of people who waved small flags, shoved advertisements, and intended to importune customers. This was not different from the scene in Shanghai; therefore, from the very beginning, a bad impression was left on his mind. Besides, Xinxin Hotel he got accommodation was also dissatisfied; what's more, several American men and women drank like a fish as they sang, and one of them even peed as if there was no one else present. American upstarts' licentious behaviors not only greatly influenced Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's ideas of romanticism, but also caused a huge blaze in his heart. As for Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, that bald American man's behavior stood for superficial and worldly business civilization. When he came to China from highly westernized Japan to seek dreams, he firstly saw vulgar and bored Shanghai; after he escaped from Shanghai, a place same as America with short history, and came to ancient Hangzhou to seek for his illusionary ghost romance, and beautiful world described by Su Dongpo and Bai Juyi, he found that this place could not elude the erosion of western culture. Therefore, when he travelled in West Lake in the next day, he saw vulgar tile buildings around West Lake, and it seemed as if he saw continuously spread big bug in scenic spots and historic sites in the regions south of the Yangtze River. He was also afraid that the drunk American people would appear in each western-style buildings at shore side of West Lake decades of years later with continuously intensified vulgarness of West Lake. The loss and indignation made originally beautiful scenery of West Lake suffer an eclipse in the writer's eyes, and he especially felt disappointed for the scene that he could see the bottom with tender shoot of cyanlotus growing through water surface; he thought that it was better to call West Lake as a large paddy field than to call it as a lake. In fact, since the late Qing Dynasty, China always had an unsteady political situation and had no time and energy to improve the environment of West Lake. The Japanese writer Naitō Konan once travelled in Hangzhou in 1899, and also mentioned the problem of low water

level of West Lake; however, although he also could see aquatic plants at the bottom of West Lake, he didn't think West Lake as paddy field or muddy pond, and he still thought that West Lake was especially beautiful. In 1918, the Japanese writer Tokutomi Sohō, who travelled in West Lake, had an opposite impression and showed unique love to West Lake; he even hoped that he could live remaining life in this place. However, when Ryūnosuke Akutagawa saw newly-built western-style buildings around West Lake, and especially when he saw that the gate of Qiu Jin's Tomb was also built with red brick, he showed his disapproval for Tokutomi Sohō's idea; he thought he was unwilling to keep this muddy pond even though he was appointed as military governor of Zhejiang province, and he preferred to live in Tokyo. It could be seen that Akutagawa was disgusted with and feared western business culture, which also greatly influenced his appreciation on West Lake. Then, on one hand, he made no efforts to let realistic West Lake corresponding to his imaginary impression of West Lake under Chinese cultural tradition; on the other hand, he felt disappointed again and again, and thus he strongly felt great gap between idea and reality. Therefore, at night before he left Hangzhou, when he felt regretful for his failure to visit Yongjin on the bed, an absolutely still spider standing on the pillow with a size of chess piece thoroughly overthrew this writer's West Lake Dream. Therefore, he rose up suddenly and shouted: this beast! Since then, he made a final conclusion on West Lake: West Lake was not a good place due to this point.

Misplaced China's impression

In Travel Notes about China, the beginning of Travel Notes about Shanghai showed the image of a stateless metropolis through global crowd with bright features – Shanghai; when the writer sought for Chinese dream in his juvenile years in Shanghai, his imagination from Chinese traditional literature was continuously and relentlessly disillusioned in cruel reality. When he travelled in Shanghai together with his friends, he saw a scene commonly seen in contemporary China: a Chinese man urinated toward a pool, and the pool around Chinese-style pavilion was instantly injected with pee. At this time, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa couldn't keep clam. The scene consisting of the man's carefree expression and recklessly behavior was absolutely not a beautiful scenery which could be appreciated, but a satiric symbol showed by a downfallen great power. Moreover, the experience about dirty opera theatre, simple and crude dressing room, and Chinese opera actors carelessly throwing snot when he watched drama performance in Shanghai let him confirm that China was not a beautiful picturesque country in classical literary works in reality, but a wretched, vulgar, mean, and even disgusting lagged country in his cognition. Before going to Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Nanjing, Akutagawa still had a great longing although he failed to realize his wish in Shanghai, which could be found in Travel Notes about Regions South of the Yangtze River; every time when he went by high residences and mansions, the white wall and bright lights would let sensitive writer fall into a reverie, and even the ghost and fox stories would appear in the writer's brain; he would imagine that a single traveler had no accommodation at night, and pleaded with the house host to let him have a night accommodation; however, after this traveler waked up in next morning, he was surprised and found that the house had disappeared and he was in ancient tomb in desolate place.

Through carefully interpreting Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's Travel Notes about China, the readers and researchers in contemporary era can find that the writer's only overseas journey, that is, a journey in China, makes him always wander between classical romance and realistic vulgarness, thus a misplacing between China's imagination and realistic scenes is formed. In the whole process of journey, Akutagawa always sought for poetic romance of Chinese classical culture; when he saw green hills and clear waters in China, he also recalled beautiful scenery of ancient China; when he came to Town God's Temple, he imagined ghost and fox stories; when he watched actors' performance, he imagined the heroes in Outlaws of the Marsh; even when he met beggars on the street, he associated the legend about Li Tieguai in 8 immortals; in all scenes he saw and heard, he always verified the imagination of ancient China formed in his juvenile years. However, Chinese classical romance with countless gifted scholars and beautiful ladies, poems, and beautiful legends was replaced by lagged and decadent China in reality. The writer greatly praised ancient China, and

also showed helplessness and despair to realistic China. Akutagawa thought that Chinese politics, economy, literature, and art quickly declined. Faced with decadent China in reality, Akutagawa frankly said that he didn't love China, but he also explained that it was hard to love China even though he wanted to love her; he even said that he felt disgusted to current China even though Chinese people didn't have a muddled soul.

Conclusion

In conclusion, due to limitation of era, Akutagawa, a famous Japanese writer living in the initial period of 20th century, still held the narrow concept of nationality supremacy and thought China as a so-called barbaric country greatly lagged behind Japan; however, on the other hand, he started with Chinese traditional culture he was obsessed with and prepared to find ideal perfect China's image in realistic China, but he ran up against stone wall everywhere so that his works were full of sense of disillusion after disillusionment of dream. Although it can be observed that Akutagawa criticized Japanese government's expansionism via carefully interpreting details of Travel Notes about China, the lagged China's image publicized in his travel notes was far away from China's image full of mystery and interests in Japanese people's impression, which objectively stimulated Japanese people's arrogance; in 1920s, with continuous expanding of Japan's aggressive ambition, those publicities inevitably provided psychological support for militarists who wanted to invade China.

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