

“Mono-no-aware ” in Two Cities

A Study of Kawabata Yasunari and Zhu Tianxin's Namesake Novel “The Ancient Capital”

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Abstract—Zhu Tianxin is a famous contemporary female writer in Taiwan. Her novel with the same title as the masterpiece of Kawabata Yasunari's, “The Ancient Capital” which was created at the end of 1990s also made a great flutter in the literary world. For the theme of the novel, it is deeply influenced by the traditional Japanese spirit of “mono-no-aware” in the works of predecessors and shows such features as mourning for lost beautiful things, empathy for objective things and sincere affection. Moreover, Zhu Tianxin has not been confined to the original pattern of Kawabata Yasunari in the creation of this namesake novel. Instead, she has rebelled against the traditional concept of “mono-no-aware” by such means as obvious post-modern narrative strategy, fuzzy image and fervent concern about politics and then established its unique literary value.

Keywords—Kawabata Yasunari; Zhu Tianxin; *The Ancient Capital*; *Rebellion*

I. INTRODUCTION

Zhu Tianxin (1958-) is one of the leading contemporary female writers in Taiwan. She bounded into fame with *Ji Rang Ge* in senior high school. Many subsequent works such as *Days on Ark* and *When I Was Young Yesterday* aroused wide attention of the critics once published. *The Ancient Capital* (1997) is a medium-length novel created by Zhu Tianxin at the end of the 20th century, which extends the theme about memory and death in her last work *Miss Brothers in My Village for Dependents* and is one of her most outstanding works. The work has the same name as a novel created by famous Japanese writer Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) in his later years. It is an intentional act of Zhu Tianxin rather than a coincidence. She has quoted the original text of Kawabata Yasunari's namesake work for multiple times in her novel and showed her relationship with the predecessor. “Mono-no-aware” between the lines of Kawabata Yasunari's work has produced great influence on her. However, *The Ancient Capital* of Zhu Tianxin is not an imitation or extension of Kawabata Yasunari's work.

II. THE ORIGIN OF “MONO-NO-AWARE ”

Just as its name implies, “objects” refer to everything in nature and “sorrow” means sadness. Being sad when seeing something and thinking of its owner is its direct explanation. “Mono-no-aware” is the subject of aesthetic consciousness of Japanese people. The sentiment of sadness has been

carried since the most ancient historical literature *Kojiki* in Japan. Artistic lyric poetry in the earliest collection of poems—Manyōshū chanted the trouble of love and sadness of life and became a “literature singing various emotions such as happiness, sadness, sorrow and attachment based on individual subjective world—personal virtue” (Saigo Nobutsuna, 1978: 25). National studies scholar in Edo period, Motoori Norinaga summarized “mono-no-aware” theory when commenting *Genshi Monogatari*, that is, “in terms of various emotions of human, only suffering, sadness and depression, i.e. unlucky things are most moving”. Meanwhile, he emphasized that “things such as happiness and fun can be called as ‘sadness’ instead of its original intention” (Nisida, 1979: 119-122).

Kawabata Yasunari said in his speech in the award ceremony of Nobel Prize in Literature, “the beauty of changing seasons contains everything in the nature and the beauty of human emotions in Japan, which has its tradition.”^[1] This sentence not only shows the long history of “mono-no-aware”, but also makes the best explanations for it. He also emphasized, “Literary pursuits and ‘mono-no-aware’ in the Heian age become the source even the course of beauty in Japan.... The word ‘melancholy’ is interlinked with ‘beauty’.” (Quoted from Ye Weiqu, 2000: 537). As time passes by, the tradition of “mono-no-aware” has entered the in-depth cultural psychology of Japanese people and become the most basic aesthetic consciousness of Japan. Japanese national studies scholar Motoori Norinaga considered its spirit as the most important feature of Japanese ancient literature. It has penetrated into each field of art and spread up to now as time goes by. It is still valued by many Japanese artists. Kawabata Yasunari was one of the writers sticking to its beauty in literary creation. It can be said that the success of his later novel *The Ancient Capital* is closely linked with “mono-no-aware” in his works.

III. “MONO-NO-AWARE ”: EMOTIONAL INTERCOMMUNITY OF TWO “ANCIENT CAPITALS”

The *Ancient Capital* of Kawabata Yasunari and that of Zhu Tianxin do not have complicated plots. The former tells such a story: Twin sisters—Senjusi and Naico, who were born and grown in Kyoto, while due to the poor family, their

^[1] Kawabata Yasunari. *I Am in Beautiful Japan*, in Ye Weiqu's *Biography of Kawabata Yasunari*. Beijing: New World Press, 2003.

parents had to give the elder sister, Senjusi, to a better family. As time goes by, they were encountered outside the country yard near Kyoto, Senjusi witnessed a series of bitter experience of her foster parents such as family decline. Therefore, this young girl was faced with many troubles from family, family affection and love. The leading character in Zhu Tianxin's novel was elder: a female growing up in Taipei and having strong feelings for this city missed the Taipei in her school days in her dialogue with herself when she was 40 years old. Then, she made an appointment with her high school friend who has emigrated to visit Kyoto. After her friend failed to keep the appointment, she returned to Taiwan and found herself unable to understand Taipei where she was born and grew up. Then, she decided to wander in this city so as to have a new understanding of this city.

A. Mourning for the Loss of Beautiful Things

Even have the same title—The Ancient Capital, but they are obviously different in story-telling, while with the distinct and common key word “memory” in, they can be distinguished apparently. In other words, Kawabata Yasunari and Zhu Tianxin express their yearning for lost beautiful things in minds through their novels.

The Ancient Capital of Kawabata Yasunari shows the lamentation for sighing with feelings for the world in both superficial and deep senses. Seen from the outside, this novel shows a story about a pair of separated twins. After knowing the existence of each other, they could not give up the ties of blood. They met each other for several times and a sense of happiness about family affection arouse spontaneously between them. However, such happiness did not last long. Naico knew that an insurmountable gap existed between them and finally rejected the request for reunion made by her elder sister. Meanwhile, Senjusi could only “touch the lattice door and see her go far away” due to objective limitations such as revitalization of her family property. In the deep sense, Kawabata Yasunari showed his worry and helplessness for traditional Japanese cultural loss in the novel. Ethical concept plays a vital role in Japanese historical culture. Senjusi and Naico expected to shoulder their responsibilities. However, they finally had to go separate ways. The relationship of twins came to an end between them. However, the lack of ethics between them is obviously not the real embodiment of their will. This symbolizes that Japanese traditional ethics starts to be weak and marginal in front of the reality of the modern society. Besides ethics, kimono business of Taikiqi will collapse and traditional customs such as Kyoto Gion Festival and Obon Festival can't arouse the interest of young people. Kawabata Yasunari was always devout to Japanese traditional culture like religion. With its fate of going down the wind, his sadness is naturally manifested between the lines of The Ancient Capital.

The beauty of Zhu Tianxin and that manifested by Kawabata Yasunari seems differently. However, beauty was not maintained completely in her The Ancient Capital and the author also fell into sadness. Words at the beginning of the novel: “Doesn't your memory be count and realized? ...”

brought the memory to the softest past. In subsequent paragraphs, Zhu Tianxin used “in those days” for seven times and described the lost time rapidly and clearly. The beauty admired by her is “memory” in fact. Memory is not an intentional act for her; instead, it is an “object” depositing in her mind and specific images for friends, childhood and city. So many memories were produced by her through specific sensitivity of an educated middle-aged woman to life. Faced with those “memories” lost gradually, she felt sad and even confused. She could only sigh “why is it still here” and then burst into tears[2].

B. Emotional Expression of Sympathy for Objects

“Mono-no-aware”, just as its name implies, definitely has close relation with “objects”. As the traditional principles of Japanese aesthetics, the feeling of “Melancholy” is usually caused by “Objects”. The Ancient Capital of Kawabata Yasunari has well inherited the tradition of “mono-no-aware” of using natural scenery to show the mood. As two natural sceneries with most efforts of the author, herb violet and cedar ran through the whole work. It can be said that they have integrated with the mood and fate of the character beyond their own existence. The first chapter of the novel - “Spring Flower” started with the blossom of herb violet in the yard of her living place, also her hometown-Kyoto. There were two herb violets in her yard, which grew there quietly since she was young. They were about a foot away from each other.[3] This made the young girl wonder “if they can meet each other and if they know each other.” Such herb violets which made Senjusi “sometimes deeply touched and sometimes lonely” occurred for multiple times then. Its process ranging from the blossom in spring and summer to leaf fall in autumn and winter implies their fate of sad separation after happy reunion for multiple times. Then, cedar implies Naico's simpleness and integrity with its firmness and beauty and inner beauty of elegance and carries their love and mourning for their natural father who has passed away.

Zhu Tianxin did not write the novel as Kawabata Yasunari who made two natural things run through the whole work. Things involved in her novel are as complicated as natural history. There is an immense number of “objects” in The Ancient Capital, but these objects are not disorganized and can be categorized into “building” and “plants”, such as “Qingshui Street”, “Roosevelt Road” and “Red Tower”. The author wrote many old streets and buildings in Taipei in the novel. In her opinion, these places are not only the background in life, but also a vessel filled with the past and emotions. Buildings give people a feeling of time freezing. Therefore, the leading character expected to make herself believe that these memories haven't gone far away through these buildings. Just due to this expectation, Zhu Tianxin manifested various plants in the city tenaciously. In her opinion, they always stood there with memories like buildings.

[2] Zhu Tianxin, *The Ancient Capital*, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2012.

[3] Kawabata Yasunari, *The Ancient Capital among Proses of Kawabata Yasunari*, translated by Ye Weiqu, Beijing: China Radio and TV Press, 2000.

C. Sincere and Intrapersonal Emotional Expression

“Mono-no-aware” is always inseparable from another cultural concept in Japanese literature, such as “true” and “sincerity”. “Mono-no-aware” is not a stiff feeling. It requires artists to show their sincere feelings in their works. Both novels do not have ups and downs of plots and are more like a prose. They both show the most sincere emotion of author. Before creating *The Ancient Capital*, Kawabata Yasunari has visited Kyoto for multiple times. This ancient capital of Japan has been gradually covered by tall buildings. As many Japanese traditional cultures, it is losing its elegance. How could Kawabata Yasunari, who said “my remaining years do not belong to myself, but are the manifestation of the tradition of beauty in Japan”, be indifferent? *The Ancient Capital* is a work in which the author directly faced the loss in his mind.

Zhu Tianxin’s sadness for weak memories also has an origin. Born and growing up in the village for dependents, she has witnessed the occurrence and intensification of the issue of ethnic groups in Taiwan. After the war of liberation, as a descendant of “mainlanders”, she could not stay in the mainland firmly like the last generation. She followed the step of the elder generation and meanwhile yearned for integrating into Taiwan in her mind. She was always faced with problems of “home” and “status” identification. The instability of these problems directly influences her memory. After 1990s, she felt the loss of memories. As she said, she wandered like an “old soul”. On the other hand, “mono-no-aware” is not an immoderate flow of emotions. It expects to touch the mind of readers with emotions in the novel. However, it is not open in the common sense. Texts in *The Ancient Capital* of Kawabata Yasunari have inherited his characteristics without too many rhetorical flourishes. It is just like a bowl of clear water. Even when writing that “Naico left decisively”, the author only added a few details. Such sad scene is expressed so clearly. Though *The Ancient Capital* of Zhu Tianxin is not so clear and has no thick and heavy colors, we can see the background of these “objects” and her attitude towards memory from her texts, but cannot see such direct and unrestrained comments in other works of the same category.

IV. REBELLION AGAINST “MONO-NO-AWARE” IN THE ANCIENT CAPITAL OF ZHU TIANXIN

Though *The Ancient Capital* of Zhu Tianxin has the same name as the work of Kawabata Yasunari and has directly quoted its original text, it is an independent work with its unique expressive force. This work presents a scene greatly different from the preceding work. She has an original style in terms of the beauty of “mono-no-aware”. Her rebellion against and inheritance of “mono-no-aware” are mainly manifested in three aspects:

A. With the Form of Postmodern Narration

The concept of “mono-no-aware” does not have too many requirements for the form of the article. However, the influence of different forms on article style is self-evident. *The Ancient Capital* of Kawabata Yasunari did not use skills

of modern literature, but he did not make stream-of-consciousness theory shine; instead, he hid techniques in western modern novels behind Japanese literary tradition in allusion to national aesthetic habits. Zhu Tianxin’s bold experiment in novel form was not restrained in *The Ancient Capital*. In particular, the postmodern narration feature in the novel has made a profound impression.

The Ancient Capital of Zhu Tianxin gave up traditional linear narration. Its three parts include a lot of remembrance narration with time-space cross. Such narration form breaks the integrity of time and makes the article disorderly. Readers feel the unsmoothness of emotional exchange with the narrator when facing such narrative strategy. In fact, her novel is often in the tune of multiple-phony in writing. She does not take emotional expression as the only or ultimate goal, additionally, in the narration of *The Ancient Capital*, Zhu Tianxin used a lot of fragments of other’s articles with “Polyphony in novel writing”[4]. The whole novel has formed polyphonic voices narration and gives people a noisy feeling through the direct quotation of literature and history. Traditionally, “silence” is always one of the important pursuits of the beauty of “mono-no-aware”. The bustle in her novel is just like that in the downtown of a city. Various kinds of people come in and go out freely. This has a great gap with “silence” obviously.

B. Image: Multiple Meanings and Instability of *The Ancient Capital*

Refer to the ancient capital, such as in Japan, which were written by Kawabata Yasunari undoubtedly came to mind instantly should be Kyoto and has pure and simple imagery. As the ancient political and economic center of Japan, Kyoto is always the place with most centralized Japanese traditional culture. Therefore, he used Kyoto as the background of the novel and told a vivid character story on its unique picture of cultural customs. Readers can understand the emotion reflected by the author through the development of story in *The Ancient Capital* of him. The symbolic meaning of the old capital in Zhu Tianxin’s novel is not as simple as that in the preceding work and its imagery meaning becomes little bit faint. Images of the old capital that can be recognized by readers directly at least include the following: firstly, the realistic Taipei. The imagery of the second old capital and that pursued by Kawabata Yasunari coincide. Moreover, the old capital is Kyoto, Japan that “you” visit in person. It has lost the glory in the second image in “your” mind. In addition, the old capital is also the image of “Shangri-la” for the understanding of Zhu Tianxin; moreover, she always endeavored to build the image of the “Ideal State” in mind. It represents her attitude of yearning for solving the increasingly severe problem of ethnic groups with integration method. The instability of image makes it difficult to see through *The Ancient Capital* of her like that of Kawabata Yasunari. Positive interaction between sensibility and reason is required. In terms of emotional experience, *The Ancient Capital* is only a mussy draft without the reorganization in the mind of readers. The

[4] (Japanese) Hamada Maya, *The Ancient Capital of Zhu Tianxin and Aesthetics of Hu Lancheng* (vol.9), *Liyun Journal*, Academy Press, 2009.

internal texture of the article can appear in constant adjustment only with the reading process. Similar to “silence”, “clarity” is also one of the basic pursuits of the beauty of “mono-no-aware”.

C. Thought: The Fervent Concern on Politics

Kawabata Yasunari did not show strong enthusiasm for politics in literary works. It is not that he did not have independent opinions. His introspection on politics gradually crossed the boundary of politics and turned into thinking on national traditional culture, therefore, his opinions on politics finally aimed at “people”. On this basis, he always tried to hide politics in literary works and turned to emphasize the expression of emotions of “people”. This is interlinked with the beauty of human feelings concerned by traditional spirit of “mono-no-aware”. Hu Lancheng once said: “Zhu Tianxin has King-Air-Style in literature”^[5]. “King-Air-Style” in literature means she is not confined to remorse, but lives in the society with ease. Her writing style seems light sometimes, but her articles are filled with the concern about politics. The Ancient Capital of her has not only listed political things, but also described important political events in the modern and contemporary history of Taiwan. These details with political atmosphere run through the whole novel and actually reflect her unwillingness to regard the breaking of memory as emotional fluctuation and her expectation to see the background in-depth reasons through such sadness. Problems about “memory” encountered by her contemporaries also had close relation with the politics of Taiwan. After 1980s, the rising of native consciousness in Taiwan directly touched the soft nerve of the first descendants of “mainlanders”. They existed between two “identities” and felt nothing to follow. Though failing, she always attempted to find the appropriate solution from political perspective.

V. CONCLUSION

Since she decided to use *The Ancient Capital* as the topic, Zhu Tianxin inevitably made the shadow of Kawabata Yasunari projected in this work. The one most protected is her inheritance of the profound spirit of “mono-no-aware” in the novel of Kawabata Yasunari. However, while finding a place for enjoying the cool, she did not expect to be neglected by others. Therefore, there is a dialectical relation between them. Her final breakthrough is just “mono-no-aware” in which she has been influenced most deeply.

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