

A Study of the Chinese Image of American Writer Peter Hessler

Starting from "Pathfinding in China"*

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Abstract—In American literature, there are many works that depict China or Chinese, and the image of China is diversified with the development of American national literature. At present, the research of China or the Chinese image in American literature is productive, most of which concentrated on the study of the representative writers and works before the new century, such as the series of Sai Zhenzhu, overseas Chinese writers Fu Manzhou, and Charlie Chan, etc. Using native American writer's literature in the new century as the research object, and American travel writer Peter Hayes's work "The Pathfinding China" as the breakthrough point, through the way of observing China of the documentary travel literature, this paper describes the new look of Chinese images, analyzes the pattern of manifestation of the othering of China and the Chinese images in American literature in the new century, and expounds the mutual conversion process of the relation between otherness and ego, and bidirectional nature of the self-image construction, expecting to have a positive impact on self-awareness and self-construction of China's images.

Keywords—American literature; Chinese image; othering; comparative analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Peter Hessler, Chinese name He Wei, served as a correspondent in Beijing of the New Yorker in the United States, and in more than ten years after he came to China in 1996, he created and published "China's trilogy": "Jiang Cheng", "Oracle", and "Pathfinding in China". He was called "one of most thoughtful western writers focuses on modern China" by The Wall Street Journal. In his literary works, he adopts non-fiction creative writing style, and his works have a stronger sense of reality than pure novels. Hessler was in China as a reporter, which would limit the crowd and social class that the viewer in a foreign country could contact, but even so, Hessler still travelled to some cities in China by train, by ship, and by other modes of transport, and taking life for ordinary Chinese as the main object, without

subjective salience of criticism and prejudice, he has compiled what they had seen into the development history of common people's lives in the big background of Chinese society, which from a different perspective, with exquisite, fluent writing objectively told about modern China in the eyes of a western travel writer. China, which is the presented in Peter Hessler's pen is lively, depicting the familiar picture of the lives of Chinese people. However, the picture makes the Chinese have strange feeling, because it is produced under the background of foreign experience in a foreign writer, which is a sense of distance, and it can make the Chinese readers find the things in the familiar defamiliarization, which were paid little attention to or neglected in the past, and can cause corresponding attention and thinking.

"Pathfinding in China" is the last work among Peter Hessler's China's three marks of documentary literature, and previously he published "Oracle", in which a famous Chinese poet, oracle expert Chen Mengjia was made as the main object. The story tells an intellectual's tragic encounter in the special historical period and all kinds of people's life experience, such as the fighting girl, old Beijingers, and Xinjiang merchants for their life and mission, integrating China's macro narration into the interweaving between the history and the modern society. Among Hessler's "Trilogy of China", "Jiang Cheng" describes the relevant human geography, "oracle" describes the social history, and "Pathfinding in China" is about China's economy and development, in which the huge development of China in the new century, and at the same time the change of the Chinese people's life are both especially reflected. In the Works, with his observing China's attitude and perspective the author observes and understands the change of Chinese society with the change of the ordinary Chinese people, receives, and strongly shows the great changes in Chinese society and Chinese people with a low profile view. Different from note-oriented travel records in "Jiang Cheng", "Pathfinding in China" is a more hierarchical and layout narrative and its skills are more mature and thoughtful. Because in his works, Hessler doesn't only narrate with alienation type and criticize China's social phenomenon just with exotic people identity. After more than 10 years' experience in China, Hessler has been beyond the border limitation. Not only does he observe

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objectively and calmly from the perspective of his eyes, but he also thinks about China's future through the relationship of human concern and the feelings of compassion. The future of China will more emphasize the important role of economy, and people will have a richer life. The Chinese who have solved the problem of food and clothing have also set foot on the road to the pursuit of wealth, as if the Chinese and Chinese people in the new century are in the net of the invisible economy. The ten years spent in China by the author just witnesses the ones when China's economy has boomed. The development of economy must bring social change, from rural areas to urban areas, from farmers to merchants, and other aspects have also displayed China and its people have changed quietly and dramatically. "Pathfinding in China" retreats the main status of political discourse and gives it to economic construction. It is the ordinary people who promote the development and progress of Chinese society.

II. THE CHINESE IMAGES IN "PATHFINDING IN CHINA"

"Pathfinding in China" is divided into three parts: the wall, the village and the factory. From the eastern coast road west, along the way to the west the author drove into the western roads and sparsely populated areas in western China along the Great Wall, and the "wall" refers to the Great Wall, representing the ancient history, and symbolizing the lost civilization and the submerged past in a time of great change. Seeing big things through small ones, based on the change of a common farmer's family, the author tells of a village that has been transformed by the rapid development of the automobile industry, reflecting the change in China is fundamental, universal and even thorough. One of the most representative manifestations of the strength of national economic development is that the industrial development level "factory" must be an indispensable part of China's social economy and development in the new century. Hessler describes a miniature of China's industrial development in the context of a small industrial town in south-eastern China. As a result, this phenomenon of the Chinese and the Chinese society--- from the farmer to the worker to the businessman is the inevitable trend of development since the reform and opening up, and is also one of the most important symbols of China's development. Although the author is seemingly discussing the core issue of China's grandness, his point and the object of his description are still keen to ordinary people's ordinary life, simple and clear explanation of the phenomenon, but thought-provoking. In his works we seem to see clearly: the distinct development blueprint in complex China's landscape. The pace of development, however, failed to draw Chinese people's attention to the problems in development. Between the lines of the story, the author shows the concern and hope for the incongruity between China and the Chinese people in specific national conditions. The economy and development of contemporary China is the main melody of this book, but there is a certain transmutation process.

In "Jiang Cheng" Hessler voiced the feeling of China ---it is "everything is fraught with uncertainty, there is always danger of missing steps", and this kind of feeling in his book

"Pathfinding in China was further strengthened, and the reason for that is developing too fast. "Everything is changing quickly in today's China, few people dare to boast their own knowledge enough, people will face new situation at any time, and need to understand thoroughly ". However, new situations have appeared before identifying the direction; considering thoroughly, so there is no point in having a long term plan. It is urgently needed to live with passion, pursue the wave of reform, and make great strides forward. The era trend leads to regional development imbalances---partial advance and partial lag. Therefore, disorder or unplanned development leads to abnormal, irrational and uncoordinated development. Hyssler, for example, rented a car in Beijing and embarked on a seven-year journey of self-drive in 2001, when China happen to be a period of booming auto industry, and at the same time the road traffic infrastructure, such as rules and regulations and so on also should support and promote the development of the industry. Nevertheless, the reality is that the road is fixed, but the map has not been updated, and the system is not perfect. There is a metaphor in the author's lines: "Sometimes, the speed of constructing things seems to be faster than drawing out the things ", which will cause people to ignore social norms in the life, because the rules and regulations itself have not adapted to the requirement of new things, and then, the butterfly effect of chain is the increase of illegal and irregular phenomena, and the social security problem is frequent. And this seems to have no effect on the lives of ordinary people. People cling to a "basic truth" with the mentality of taking a chance: it is much easier to forgive later than to do it beforehand. The author also once pointed out that China's biggest anxiety is not the great changes in political collectivization, but modern challenges of inherent individualization, which is a challenge to the past experience, because to get people to deal with the upheavals of modern society in the light of their usual survival experience is like walking on eggshells. Of course, in fact, China is not completely dark or hopeless. Hyssler expresses the possibility and the hope that problems can be cured with relaxing and humorous words. The uncivilized civilization and modern vulgarity shown by the Chinese people who he met are welcomed. Because Hessler doesn't look at China and the Chinese from the identity and perspective of a specific country, but it's just a nuanced observation of people. Just as Chai Jing concludes: "Just life flows through the people as a trickle first, but then bursts into the river, turning circle, so he couldn't help watching for it, which also causes the author to stay in a village to describe the people and things that happened there in has self-driving journey.

In this part of the "village", the author, Hessler mainly describes the life and change of Wei Ziqi, a suburban farmer and records the changes of Wei's life from the details of life--from poverty to well-off life. One of the reasons for the change is the inevitable connection with the car. Driven by the automobile industry, the lifestyle in the city changes, and with material abundance, people begin to enjoy life. The suffocation of the city and the leisure of the countryside drive the development of new tourism industries such as self-driving tour and agriculturally. Wei Ziqi also grabbed the wheel of modern life and by running agribusiness; it raised

income levels and owned a car as a symbol of wealth and status. The policy of the countryside to the countryside increased the number of rural cars, which led to the construction of rural roads, thus promoting the prosperity of the economy. For Sancha Village where Wei Ziqi lived, most of his contemporaries had left their land to find a way to get rich, however, Wei Ziqi, a large, unambitious farmer with a low level of education, can only stay in his hometown for monotonous farming or assembly lines due to various limitations, but he still has faith in the future and the village. With life getting better and better, the life of Wei's family was managed in layers of network in the joint efforts of husband and wife and his family has a certain prestige and status in the village. The author put together a shrinking countryside and a growing picture of urbanization, using the details that were observed in the village. However, no matter what rapid development, all cannot cover the poverty that the rural areas in China had, which was like the phantom of the haunting, who always emerged in different places, in different forms, and at different times. For example, Wei Ziqi's mentally disabled brother is the victim of not enough food. The contract of the land contract preserved by Wei's family was the product of the old and weak society, and only by leaving could he change his own poverty. China towards modernization is bound in history; those who have been out of the country life, with a rural background got back to the countryside, to fill the nostalgic feelings, but in the end had to return to the modern society. The change of Chinese people in the new century was not only a tentacle visible material life, but the loss of the inner spiritual homeland also made the nostalgia and homeland feelings of the great migration era. Most Chinese are forced to survive far from home, but for the sake of life, they were also willing to stay in the foreign land, no matter how difficult the living environment was, it would not change its normal. In the author's opinion, Chinese people's attitude towards life pressure is to be appreciated by him, which is a trait of extreme endurance of Chinese people. There was the hope for an urgent change behind this patience, the city's rows of department stores and a wide range of goods were all chasing the desire of farmers and the development level of relatives and friends was the driving force for self-advancement, and wealth became the symbol of status. "Sometimes they seem to instinctively grasp the worst of the two worlds: the worst of modern life, the worst of conventional wisdom," Hessler concludes.

III. PETER HESSLER'S PATHFINDING IN CHINA

Peter Hessler wrote "Trilogy of China" through his ten years of life in China, whose brush strokes and work itself received wide recognition of Chinese and western readers. Chinese images shaped in his works eliminated past stereotyped images of China in western works. "Trilogy of China", especially "Pathfinding in China" created a good situation for writing on the Chinese theme of American literary circles in the new era. Hessler took a bystander position reviewing the development of Chinese society, and the development of Chinese social culture has been deeply analyzed and thought. In the process of discovery, the work reflects the experience of Chinese and western culture

collision, the realization of communication, and the integration process.

Through the analysis of the Chinese images in the work of "Pathfinding in China", it is obvious that the author's description of China and the narration of the Chinese image inevitably have certain prejudices. In other words, it is hard to escape the different constraints of ideology. But it would be appreciated Hessler could use the development view to see the development and changes of China, and objectively and fairly recorded the changing and dynamic China. In his work, the rapid development of China's economy is confirmed and meanwhile, it has also turned humanitarian attention to the people living on the fringes of society, recording the life experiences of the common people in the rapid development of society, which is a good reminder of the bad effects of the rapid economic development on society.

IV. CONCLUSION

Whether China in American literature, or the United States in China's works, representing their own culture and ideology determines the image of the actual cognition and literary imagination to the other party. The binary opposites of self and his and the mutual transformation between subjects and objects are determined according to the choice of the view, and the image of each other as the main body is shaped by the image of each other, which is independent and exists in itself. The othering of foreign works for China and the Chinese image, should not be the assumption and fictional imagination, and also should not correct cognition in the foreign literature, primarily based on the perspective of China itself, but should be set up on the basis of in-depth understanding of each other, using the exotic image to serve their own literary creation, reflecting himself on the image of the man who is molded. In short: the ego corresponds to the person, and the person reacts to the self.

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