

The Construction of Chinese Image in Hessler's Works

Taking River Town as an Example*

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Abstract—Peter Hessler, Chinese name He Wei, has been praised as one of the most thoughtful western writers that pay close attention to modern China. Hessler's non-fictional literary creation has described the reality of current China. By contacting people around him and feeling the surrounding environment, he vividly reproduced the earth-shaking changes in China after the reform and opening up. As "the other", he inevitably has the color of "Orientalism" to represent China and Chinese.

Keywords—Hessler; "the other"; "Orientalism"

I. INTRODUCTION

Hessler has ever served as a reporter for *New Yorker* in Beijing, as well as a contributor to the media, such as *National Geographic*, an internationally renowned magazine. Hessler's travel literature on China has won the best travel writing award in America for many times. *River Town* was awarded the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize once it was published. The publishing road of *River Town* was full of frustrations. The writer has sent books to major publishing houses for several times and were rejected for several times. One of the publishers said, "your books are good, but we don't think Americans want to read these books about China".^{[1] P5} With author's perseverance, Harper and Collins agree to publish these books eventually. To the publisher's surprise, these books have been in the US bestseller list for more than ten years and will continue to be popular among the public. In *River Town*, the writer pays attention to the natural and humanistic environment of the traveled cities, and through the life of the ordinary people, he truly felt surrounding people and things which brought him touches and collisions.

II. BACKWARD AND CROWDED FULING

The French scholar Baron believes that "image" is "the sum of foreign views in the process of literature and socialization", which "comes from the self consciousness in the relationship between self and 'the other', motherland and foreign land".^{[2] P155} In 1996, Hessler, with the identity of

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"American and Chinese friendly volunteer", came to Fuling to teach in China. When he arrived in Fuling, he felt this inland town was backward. "With no railway, Fuling has always been a poor area in Sichuan. The road is very bad. Wherever you go, you have to take a boat".^{[1] P3} The teachers and students in Fuling Normal College (now changed to Changjiang Normal University) treated foreigners hospitably, which made He Wei and his companions be at ease at the beginning. In a growing understanding of the city, He Wei felt that Fuling, same as other small towns in China, was noisy, busy, dirty and crowded. Vehicles run along winding road, and pedestrians jostled one another on the way. With no traffic lights, drivers were constantly honking their trumpets. Trees on both sides of the road were devastated and dust-covered leaves were gray. The same gray and white covered the whole city. He Wei always felt good when he had a bird's eye view of the downtown area of Fuling on the balcony of the apartment where he lived. "I often gaze at the labyrinth streets and stone steps on the other side of Wujiang River, listening to the noise of the city's day-to-day life, thinking about the hidden mysteries of the city by the riverside".^{[1] P68} When he walked into the city with the mood of exploration, "it isn't well. It is dirty and noisy. The noise and pollution of downtown area are quite unbelievable. The noise problem is more serious, and it mainly because of trumpets of vehicles".^{[1] P69} He Wei found that, the drivers were particularly willing to press their trumpets, once they met pedestrians or other vehicles, overtake other cars or be overtaken by other vehicles. "If there are no pedestrians crossing the road, but the driver felt that someone may cross the road, they should honk the trumpets. If no one is crossing the road and no one wants to cross the road, they also honk the trumpets once an idea of overtaking other cars or being overtaken flashes through the driver's mind".^{[6] P70} When Clem, schoolmate of He Wei, came to Fuling to see him, he was also amazed at the trumpet in the town. In the 15 minute drive from the school to the pier, they noted that the driver had been honking 566 times, 37 times a minute. After living here for a year, He Wei found that the city was slowly changing. Fuling was not as messy and noisy as it used to be.

III. DILIGENT AND FRIENDLY INTELLECTUALS

The school arranged Mr. Kong and Mrs. Liao to teach He Wei to learn Chinese. Mr. Kong taught ancient Chinese

literature in the Chinese Department. He was very kind and always with smile on his face. Mrs. Liao taught modern Chinese in the Chinese Department. She doesn't laugh as well as Mr. Kong. Mr. Kong and Mr. Liao were all very polite. "Only 2/3 of the amount of labor got payment in the first year they taught me Chinese. Worse still, they worked seven hours a week, and the job was very dull and frustrating. They didn't get enough payment. ^{[1] P76} In contact with Mrs. Liao, their relationship has also changed slowly. They were not only teacher and student, but good friends. In the course of all this, He Wei always felt that the relationship with Mrs. Liao was somewhat complicated. Once upon a time, He Wei took part in the basketball championship on behalf of the English Department. His excellent performance in the competition turned the English Department into a strong team. Finally, it became a game of the Chinese team to the American team. As soon as He Wei touched the ball, the whistle would ring, and He Wei had to withdraw from the match with repeat whistling. After the match, in teaching him Chinese, Mrs. Liao criticized He Wei's way of dribbling. He Wei argued: "the referee is a pure foreigner hater, and he doesn't know basketball at all." ^{[1] P83} Mr. Liao told him that you can't dribble like you do in the US. That's the problem here. You were used to playing American basketball. He Wei continued, unconvincedly: "basketball is an American sport. We make rules. I understand rules. The referee doesn't like foreigners". ^{[1] P83} From He Wei's refutation, it is not difficult to find that he wants to get rid of the stereotyped impression that the West has made to China for a long time, but as soon as he meets the practical problems, the Western culture he received reveals him beyond doubt. "The Chinese image of the west, no matter how pure or irrelevant, actually plays a certain ideological role in the Western colonial expansion, showing the formidable structure of the implicit cultural hegemony in the Chinese image". ^{[3] P33} In class with two teachers, He Wei often discussed with them on a problem. Mrs. Kong's temperament was relatively easy-going and there is no fierce debate. In the course of class with Mrs. Liao, the two people discussed the question about democracy, and they were not happy again. Later, He Wei understood Mr. Liao's impatience with how foreigners look at China. "To some extent, I can't blame her. The American media always describes China rather negatively". ^{[1] P158} with the deepening of contact, He Wei gradually enjoyed Mrs. Liao. She was a very traditional Chinese woman. She was the most representative Chinese I knew in Fuling. She did not want foreigners to condescend to her because she had a strong sense of self-esteem. She is also polite and very respectful of tradition. At first, He Wei was somewhat annoyed at Mrs. Liao. Now, he will always cherish the memory of this woman's silent self-esteem and perseverance, and she becomes admirable or even at easy-going.

IV. HARDWORKING ORDINARY PEOPLE

In the process of modernization, the quality of life of the people has been greatly improved in China, and the living environment has been gradually improved. He Wei takes the family of Huang Xiaoqiang, a migrant worker, as an example. Huang Xiaoqiang comes from a remote mountain village in Sichuan, which implies arduous and difficult life in mountains and canyons. Reform and opening up allow those who live at

the bottom to have the courage and confidence to go out. Huang Xiaoqiang once left Sichuan to find a way to get rich in Xinjiang, but the cold climate there made him unable to adapt. He left Xinjiang. Frustration cannot stop Huang Xiaoqiang's pursuit of happiness, and he returned to his hometown. At the east of river in Fuling, he purchased a noodle restaurant only a street apart from Fuling Normal College. He named it "Restaurant for Students". His parents and wife were all devoted to the noodle restaurant. They worked hard for seventeen and eight hours a day, and quickly merged into the local rhythm of life. He Wei noted that one of the characteristics of socialism with Chinese characteristics is that small businesses like Huang Xiaoqiang managed can basically follow the market economy without any restrictions. At first, he estimated that his monthly profit was one thousand yuan, and correspondingly he paid one hundred yuan of tax a month. The net profit of the noodle restaurant is between two and three thousand yuan, and the tax is the same anyway. This is very inspiring for Huang Xiaoqiang's family. They were very satisfied with the life at present. Originally the family with five members had been squeezed in the noodle restaurant as their living house. After more than a year of efforts, they had a five-bedroom house and the household appliances were all set up. They have won the respect of the local people with their diligence, kindness and generosity. Their world is small, but they care carefully. Because China was once extremely poor in history, Chinese people attached great importance to money. But they were very generous. At Huang Xiaoqiang's restaurant, once a student was present, He Wei learned to pay the bill in advance, because the student always paid the teacher's account before he checked out. Feng Xiaoqin (Huang Xiaoqiang's wife) said, "you are their teacher. They should respect you and treat you. It is our tradition". [1] P280 Feng Xiaoqin herself is also very generous. He Wei often ate here without payment. He Wei has described the kindness, enthusiasm and generosity of Chinese people many times. On the way to Xinjiang by train, in order to get in touch with the ordinary people's life, he chose to sit in the ordinary hard seat carriage. The people in the train learned that he was teaching Chinese English in China, they respected him and brought all kinds of delicious food to him. When he visited the Terracotta Army in Xi'an, the staff had also given him great consideration after knowing his identity. He Wei himself has regretted that even though my body has many problems, I feel satisfied with my life here.

V. CULTURAL SITES OF A LONG HISTORY

As long as He Wei had leisure time, he would visit Chinese historical relics in his leisure time. He is not only obsessed with the thousands of kilometers of the Great Wall, but also has an interest in Flag Mountain with historical origin. Flag Mountain was originally named Peach Flower Mountain. The green mountain is located at the junction of the Yangtze River and Wujiang River. In the early spring, peach flower blossoms all over the mountain, and makes it pink, so people call it Peach Flower Mountain. Nowadays, few people in Fuling call it Peach Flower Mountain again. In the Nineteenth Century, the greatest general of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Shi Dakai, led 100 thousand men into Fuling. He and his soldiers climbed up this mountain along the steep slope and inserted the flag of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. With such a short

time, the wheel of history made Fuling so close to the core of Chinese historical events. More than a century passed, standing on the top of Flag Mountain, every inch of useful land has been developed and used: the top is an orchard; a large area of cropland on the hillside, and along the slope built stairs, extending to the flat ground at the foot of the mountain. He Wei's attention to Chinese history also reflects the internal consistency and continuity of the western thinking way, image tradition and discourse system on Chinese image. It also reveals certain common features of the west on Chinese image in the history, which tends to type or prototype and forms a cultural program.

VI. CONCLUSION

He Wei saw China's economy and social development from his own experience and the real life and mental state of local groups. He Wei stressed the reality of Chinese social context, giving "China" more subjectivity. As an independent society, China shows the significance of her vitality and self development. However, it is also difficult for He Wei to avoid the "stereotyped impression" of the West which has long been formed in the West. He narrated the historical relics, such as "the Great Wall" and "Flag Mountain" in the way of literature, and inadvertently mythed the Chinese Empire, depicting the distant east as a utopian image. When conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures occur, the condescending cultural hegemony of "the other" is revealed completely. Therefore, in the face of this new contemporary "Chinese image", Chinese readers need to keep a calm and objective attitude. We shall not only read the positive meaning from it, but also better understand contemporary Chinese society and Chinese people with the help of a Western perspective. But, be on the alert. This "Chinese image" still comes from the western discourse, especially influenced by Western Sinology and contemporary western thoughts. It accords with the value identity and reading needs of Western intellectuals and middle-class readers. The contemporary "Chinese image" constructed by He Wei has a positive reference to China's external communication of Chinese image, and combines China's national conditions with specific survival. While accepting the favorable elements from the Western perspective, we should also actively build our Chinese image from China herself.

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