

On Language Revolution of Chinese Avant-garde Novels(1984-1989)

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Abstract—The Chinese avant-garde novel refers to the writing practice of a group of literary men in south China from 1984 to 1989. These literary men include Ma Yuan, Hong Feng, Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Bei Cun, and so on. They had initiated the “language revolution” of Chinese new period literature, and soon abandoned their revolutionary attitude, returned to the routine work of writing. This is always a mystery to be solved in the Chinese Contemporary Literature. According to Foucault’s archeology of knowledge as the theoretical framework, our work carry on the analysis of the related historical facts, draw the following conclusion: First of all, the writers resist the influence of ideology through “language revolution”. Therefore, the literature can break away from politics and power gradually. Next, these avant-garde novelists redefine “truth” through “language”. They replace the “truth of external depiction” in literature with “the truth of internal feeling” in ridiculous texts. As a result, the creation of novel acquires unprecedented freedom.

Keywords-Chinese Avant-garde Novels; Discursive Practice; Language Revolution

I. INTRODUCTION

“Avant-garde” can also be translated as the “vanguard”. It originates from French and belongs to military terminology originally. It refers to the patrol in front of the main force. In the middle of the 19th century, Baudelaire used the word in a derogatory sense for the first time. The word “avant-garde” was introduced to literature through the term of “avant-garde literati” and “avant-garde literature”, etc. Half a century later, the word “avant-garde” was recognized and accepted in the world of arts and critics. Then, it was used to refer to the artists with the spirit of innovation and practice in each period. Thus, it can be seen that the word “avant-garde” should correspond to “normalcy”. Its essence is rebellious. Its state is flowing and open. Its existence starts with the betrayal and transcendence of the mainstream. The “avant-garde novel” we are talking about today refers to the writing practice of a group of writers, including Ma Yuan, Hong Feng, Su Tong, Yu Hua, and Bei Cun, and so on, in south China in 1984-1989. According to Foucault’s archeology of knowledge as the theoretical framework [1], our work carry on the analysis of the related historical facts, expect more discoveries.

II. THE CONTEXT OF THE EXISTING OF CHINESE AVANT-GARDE NOVEL AND ITS DILEMMA

A. Different Cultural Contexts of Avant-garde Novel Writing in China and the West

If the May 4th new literature movement was the first language revolution in the history of Chinese modern literature, the appearance of “avant-garde novels” meant the second rebellion against the form of literary language. Seen from the linguistic aspect, if the first revolution was deliberate and explicit, the second revolution was spontaneous and implicit. This rebellion began with the context of “the trend of misty poetry” at the end of “the Great Cultural Revolution”: The magazine *Today* that appeared in February, 1978, and the consequent “trend of misty poetry”. The “Stars Art Exhibition” held in Beijing and the mural of a nude female in the Capital Airport in 1979. The two “Experimental Theatres”, *Absolute Signal* and *Station*, were performed in Beijing People’s Art Theater in 1982, and so on. All of them transmitted the signal of avant-gardism. In 1982, the poet Xu Jingya used the word “avant-garde” to comment the “misty poetry” in his term thesis *The Rising Poetry Tribe* for the first time. He said that their theme tone was consistent with the most avant-garde art in the whole literary world at present [2]. The poet Luo Yihe wrote a poem titled as *Vanguard* directly, which highlighted the rebellious and the determined attitude of avant-garde.

In the field of literature and arts, if heresy is orthodox, then rebellion is the normalcy of literature. The “new narrative discourse” of “avant-garde novels” is a way of “internal resistance”. The writers had turned to “how to write” from “what to write” highlighted in the external resistance directly. As a result, the “creation” gave way directly to the “writing”. Meanwhile, the thinking of “how to write” was originally established on the direct graft of western resources. “The ‘avant-garde novel’ that was popular in the Chinese literary world since the mid-1980s was once heavily influenced by the Western realistic literature and postmodernism literature. Above all, it was impelled by the ‘magical realism’ in Latin America [3].”

If the western “avant-garde” consciousness originates from its doubt and negative about itself and has strong initiative, the Chinese “avant-garde” consciousness began with the external society. At the same time, the revolutionary consciousness of language in Chinese “avant-garde novel” in the new period derived from the reflection

on the “Great Cultural Revolution” and traditional culture. In the process of operation it was treated by the intimate borrowing of the existing western consciousness and concept. “In fact, Chinese ‘avant-garde’ became a kind of novel mixture. It was a type of hybrid. On the one hand, it came into being in China and had Chinese traditional personality, emotion and consciousness. On the other hand, it was transplanted from the west and had no the historical and cultural foundation of the western society. Thus, it was a mixed blood with Chinese descent and western heterogeneous civilization.” [4]

Specially, the context of China and the West is different. Western modernism confronted the struggle for existence, urbanization and the dissimulation to people brought by the mechanized massive production in the era of capitalism. However, the avant-gardes in China were eager to liberate literature from political constraints after the Cultural Revolution. Their main purpose was trying to construct a new culture and a new self (subject consciousness) by the text form and cultural theory of the West. The “avant-gardes” in the West aimed to “destroy” and gained a new life through the destruction of their own culture. What’s more, they refused to become “classic” or be identified. However, the “avant-gardes” in China were quite on the contrary. They took “construction” as their ultimate ideal. Moreover, they wanted to be “historicized” and “classicized”, so as to gain recognition and achieve success. As a result, in this sense, the “avant-gardes” in China just wanted to be rescued at the place of fall. They tried to find rescue in desperate circumstances. Thus, they were passive “avant-garde”. As Ma Yuan said, the emergence and development of avant-garde literature were a kind of helpless choice after the literature had gotten into trouble. It was not for the sound development of literature at all. Because of the passiveness they were afraid to have transgressions in the aspects of politics and moral, thoughts and feelings. As a result of all above, the “language revolution” of avant-garde is superficial and not thorough. Moreover, it is departed from the true “avant-garde” spirit, which forebodes the inevitability of “retreat”.

B. *The Limitations of Language Exploration in Chinese “Avant-Garde Novel”*

The language revolution of “avant-garde novelist” can also be seen as “language revolt”, that is, through the recombination of narrative discourse it takes the way of asking “what is not literature” to exclude the non-literary element—political power from literature. Thus, it can maintain the independence of literary discourse, which is their original literal expectation. Some people thought that this kind of “form revolution” was specious. Actually, it was also a misunderstanding. Yu Hua et al. had repeatedly emphasized to find essential truth through “hypocritical form”. Their writing turned to the truth of inner feeling from the truth of external depiction, which implied the redefinition of “truth”. Many avant-garde writers admitted boldly that their original “form revolution” was intentional and compulsive.

As a form, language keeps consistent with literary contents that have transcendent spirit. The writers resorted to a more unique and appropriate narrative discourse to convey their profound life experience, particular aesthetic feeling, and poignant reflections on life. However, in order to achieve the goal, it was extremely necessary to transform the current language form. Only in this way can discourse better convey the literary “self” that is hidden deeply in the discourse impurities. Therefore, the importance of language was obvious to be seen. “There is no form that only includes form itself and there is no content that only includes content itself. Each component simultaneously undertakes the function of being form as for the content subordinated to the form and another function of being content as for the form that ranks higher than the content.” [5] The writers firstly realized the importance of language form for writing, so the emphasis of telling stories is placed on “telling”. However, most writers ignored the other problem: the profundity of thinking and the wisdom of narrating should lie behind the newfangled narrative discourse. Only the transcendence of the subject can make the form have an unparalleled character. When they indulged within the labyrinth of their own narration, the corresponding relation between the uniqueness of form and the uniqueness of ideology was usually disregarded. They divulged the paleness of the subject itself when their language experiment reached an exquisite degree. The original language defiance was changed into a kind of language game. The limited accumulation of modern Chinese language also led to the replacement of the original rebellion and revolution by the superficial language game.

From the perspective of external acceptance, the rebellion voice at that time had the same “fragmentation” feature with that of the May 4th Period. But it was not immediately identified and understood. There are two reasons: one reason is the “aphasia” of critical world. Before the traditional academic discourse being changed, the avant-garde novelists had begun their revolution. However, critics did not arrive to offer criticisms until 1989 when the avant-garde novels draw to a close. This is a deserted revolution. However, the turbulence after the revolution deserves to be pondered deeply. Secondly, the pioneer spirit of “Language Revolution” does not make avant-garde novels going more deeply down in history. This language revolution seems to be a technological revolution due to its lack of ideological revolution as the foundation. It is difficult for critics to understand the language let alone the common readers. The reading barrier brought by language became more difficult to overcome, which resulted in the writers’ collective abandonment of form exploration. Certainly, there were still a few writers continuing the language revolution all the time.

Critics confirmed that avant-garde novels retreated from language revolution in 1989. The writers began to weaken the textual form experiments and stop playing language games. They took the initiative to lay emphasis on the realistic life. Besides, after undergoing various writing experiences, The writers were capable of expressing their own unique master of the reality in a simple form. Yu Hua created his kungfu novel “*Blood and plum blossom*” in this

year. He adopted the method of “zero degree writing” to guarantee the objectiveness of the story without any evaluation and guidance. The ending of the story was not informed in advance. All value judgments were given up. However, the paradox of story and language themselves still embodied the subversion of avant-gardism. The subsequent “*Drizzle and Shouting*” described an isolated life experience of Kong Shaolin who was the son of a peasant. The family trap weaved by Kong’s cruel father; insidious grandfather and treacherous brother made the young juvenile endure hardships of life like a mature man. This novel expressed the author’s concern for the painful experience of an individual’s survival. “*Being Alive*” is regarded as Yu Hua’s complete deviation from avant-gardism. This novel is a realistic work written completely from a folk standpoint and it conveys the theme of suffering and salvation. The protagonist Fu Gui was still living stubbornly after suffering countless inhuman troubles and unfortunate fate. He struggled against hardships with his indomitable willpower. The avant-garde writers retreated back into the realistic world from the beginning of Su Tong’s “*Rice*” and Yu Hua’s “*Shouting and Drizzle*”. They began to pursue the depth of sense rather than dispelling the meaning. From the positive perspective, the avant-garde writers became calmer after a manic form game. They made more reflections on the mishaps of survival instead of praising monotonous forms. The center of telling a story was shifted from the process of telling to the story itself. The writers explored the ultimate meaning of life and observed human’s spirit and the probable hardships from the essence of daily life. They had higher introspection consciousness. This tendency can be viewed as an abandonment of excessive form experiments. It also showed that writers had begun to understand their imaginative “literature itself” again.

III. SUMMARY

Through five years of exploration, the avant-garde writers realized that form was both forceful and restricted. Form itself was unable to rescue literature. Therefore, some

writers chose to compromise with the public when they gave up the exploration of form. They kept their eyes on the market. The temptation of material benefits directly led writers to stop their unfinished exploration and began their “vulgar” route in order to meet the needs of market.

However, be regression or withdrawal, in this language revolution without arguments, “avant-garde novels” had already left the “trace of wings” in the history. Firstly, the revolution is an internal revolution of literature which makes use of special historical context and language to separate literature gradually from the constraint of political influence and power. Thus literature masters the power of autonomy. Secondly, the discourse practice of avant-garde writers redefines “reality”. It substitutes the “inner real feelings” in the literary text for the “external real depiction”, which makes the creation of novels become unprecedented free. Based on this, the imagination of writers receives the deserved respect. The avant-garde writers recover the literary imagination through the “language challenge” of “martyred type”. In the process of underlining “how to write”, the exploration of the novel’s form had indelible pioneer spirit. Nevertheless, when the pioneer spirit was acknowledged by the public, it necessarily became a song that would never be sung and remain in the Writing Annals of the history of literature.

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