

The Factors Behind the Transformation of Modern Chinese Literature

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Abstract :

The modern transformation of Chinese literature has its specifically real reasons and epochal dynamics; the transforming process still receives the influence of the traditional Chinese literature. The declining development of ancient literature and the pressure of the forceful radical reforms of the linguistic environment in late Qing culture prepared the adequate conditions for the most early surge of literary modernity. The modern transformation of Chinese literature is, in the midst of a social transformation period, a kind of reflection of the Chinese nationals' renewed assertion of a value-oriented and spiritual quest. But literary forms have their national characteristics, they are generally closely connected with the development and history of the national culture, the traditional characteristics of national literature, and the trends of national aesthetic psychology. Therefore, Chinese modern literature after all is unable to get rid of the ancient influence of Chinese literature, it also is unable to break through the national forms of Chinese ancient literature.

Starting in 1840 until today, when it comes to understanding the transformation of ancient Chinese literature into modern literature, in the eyes of Chinese academic circles, there are no small differences between the two. While some scholars have questioned pegging the starting point of modern literature to 1840, this year was demarcated due to political influence [1]. They believe that the basis for segmenting literature should not be influenced by historical events or societal factors. Instead, the basis should lie with the actual essence of the literature itself. Some scholars believe that modern Chinese literature is simply a reversion of ancient Chinese literature. In terms of literary properties as a whole, this so-called "modern" period has unique ideological characteristics and historical conceptions. The creation of this period of literature history is not based on the existence of one kind of essential difference between ancient literatures. Instead, modern literature has relatively independent and heterogeneous elements [2]. There are also opposing viewpoints that hold that modern Chinese literature is very similar to ancient literature and in fact, it is simply ancient literature in pursuit of modernity [3]. The main reason for the "ambiguous status" of modern Chinese literature is that the essential difference between the two genres has had a long term controlling effect on modern Chinese literature research. In other words, this causes modern Chinese literature research to lack subjectivity. It should be considered that modern Chinese literature not only symbolizes the end of ancient literature, it also marks a new beginning. When looking at the evolution of Chinese literature, particularly the transformation from the ancient sphere to the modern sphere, modern Chinese literature has a unique position and holds a vital relationship in the whole process. Therefore, it is important to carefully examine the factors that contributed to the birth of modern Chinese literature.

1 · The Practical Reasons for the Birth of Modern Chinese Literature

The developmental decline of ancient literature was an intrinsic trigger for the transformation of modern literature. The progression of Chinese classical literature

stretched until the late Qing cultural context. At this point, there were clear, irreversible signs of decay to the point that the vitality of self-transformation was lost. As a result, it had to give way to the progression of the new modern era. Ancient traditional Chinese literary genres such as poetry composition, Ci and Qu etc., developed until the mid-Qing dynasty. There were many genres including novels, poetry, essays, lyrics, drama etc. While there were many writers and an equivalent amount of works and different schools of literary styles competed with one another, they all lacked new and modern content. These old art forms exhibited increasing decline and soon their continued existence was threatened. Taking poetry as an example, pre-Tang poetry grew "naturally" and exhibited a unique style; Tang poetry was like a "yell", a natural and direct expression of the poet devoid of external decorative trappings; Song poetry was "thought out", it emphasized intelligence; post-Song poetry was "faked out", it was like a blind imitation [4]. This is quite revealing.

Strong pressures of change were echoed again in the late Qing cultural context, where ideal conditions that fostered the initial surge of modern literature existed. The national crisis brought on by foreign invasion prompted modern scholars to reflect on creative works of literature. As the wind from the West blew gradually to the East, the views of modern intellectuals were broadened and they were given intellectual weapons such as Rousseau's Social Contract. As a result, the government could not suppress the intellectuals from reflecting and questioning the corruption of the absolute monarchy. There was unprecedented criticism, self-reflection and an anti-traditional nature projected towards the dynastic system. Western learning affected modern Chinese literature on many different levels. From creative subject, literary concepts, literary themes, style structure and language forms to modes of transmission, audience groups etc.: all were affected in varying degrees. It was the influence of Western culture (including Western philosophy, Western literature and Western literary theory) along with the internal transformative factors that were inherently present in Chinese literature at that time that propelled the literature to make the jump from classical to modern [5].

Chinese literary theory utilized ideas from a multicultural worldview to progress to the next level of literature. Strong involvement of Western culture, particularly the introduction of Western philosophy, played a significant role in promoting the transformation of modern China: firstly, the shackles of conventional thinking that restrained people were broken, people awakened to the currents of change, a strong current of social change was formed within the public opinion; secondly, Western ideological influence provided contributions that formed the core of Chinese society's reform movement: Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen and others were inspired and influenced by Western philosophy; thirdly, it provided direct theoretical guidance for the political struggle that was happening at the time: for instance, Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People was heavily influenced by Western thought. Of course, when you look at the combination of the role played by Western philosophy, the realities of Chinese society and the progression of Chinese thought at the time, the result was clearly not developed in isolation. However, the overall effect of Western thought should not be overstated. Overall, the root cause of China's social reform lay in Chinese society itself. Western philosophy was adapted to fit the reformation process of Chinese society. It was introduced into China in this way and thus manifested a practical role.

The modern transformation of Chinese literature was a reflection of the recreated values and spiritual needs of the Chinese people during the societal upheaval at the time. Japan's Meiji Restoration impacted China's social transformation. To a certain extent, the Meiji Restoration was able to speed up the transformation of Chinese literature. Similar to the Meiji Restoration in Japan, China's modern society was the result of a transition from an ancient society to a modern one. It was both the end of antiquity and the birth of the modern period. During the societal transformation, the spiritual content, modes of thought, ways of expression and function of classical literature no longer suited the constructs of the new society. The shift in literature was completed with the absorption of Western culture. The new mode of literature was different from other previous reformations of Chinese literature; for example, there were elements of adaptability, radicalism and openness etc. [6]. Many patriotic poets wrote about the historical events of the Opium War in their poetry. The reason for this may be related to the European and American literary trends of realism. Realism had a profound impact on Chinese literature after the May Fourth Movement. However, the seeds of realism had already been sown within modern fiction long before.

Western missionaries had a very important influence on modern Chinese literature through their Chinese writings and works [7]. The new modern literature mainly utilized a type of Europeanized vernacular that was different from the vernacular used in ancient times. Literature that used this type of Europeanized vernacular had already emerged as early as the 19th century. Its origins were from the poems, essays and novels that were written by the Western missionaries. Western missionaries were the earliest promoters of the Mandarin policy. This united national vernacular movement shared a developmental path with the late Qing vernacular movement and the May Fourth vernacular movement. When the late Qing "new novel" movement and the "literary salvation" theory of the Western missionaries are taken into account, it can be said that Western missionaries had a very significant influence on the transformation of modern Chinese literature. Previously, this influence may have been underestimated by us and as a result, neglected. Therefore, we must adjust our field of vision when conducting research on modern literature [8].

The confluence between the East and the West resulted in the tireless efforts of modern pioneers to come up with innovative ideas. This was the main source of inspiration that formed modern Chinese literature. During this period of modernization, China was experiencing a "triple fracture" phenomenon --- cultural fracture, linguistic fracture and epistemological fracture. To a certain extent, this phenomenon contributed to the transformation of modern Chinese literature. For example, the abolition of the imperial examination system, founding of new schools etc., were all new and unprecedented changes. Many of the social upheavals caused the new shift in modern Chinese national spirit. Modern Chinese literature clearly reflects this new change. By the same token, the new changes of the modern Chinese national spirit promoted further shifts in modern Chinese literature. Modern Chinese national spirit and modern Chinese literature have transitive limitations [8]. The continuous introduction of Western aesthetics gradually weakened traditional Chinese literature, thus serving as an impetus for the gradual evolution of modern literature.

The special circumstances of the modern historical crisis forced scholars to take "enlightening the people" as their main theme when writing popular literature. They

did this in hopes that their political ideals could be achieved. Each generation has its own destiny and experiences. Each generation will also have its own theme. Joys and sorrows are closely linked with the generational period. However, the evolution of that generation sometimes exceeds the expectations of the people. Modern scholars adapted to the social changes of the times and were impacted heavily with pressures of life. Instead of producing works for the sake of artistic creation, they had more utilitarian needs to meet. They used this pressure as an impetus for creating literary works and they produced these works in an effort to get by. From creating passive literature for the people, they started engaging in active creations. These authors' initiatives finally transformed literature from a pursuit previously reserved solely for the upper class to something accessible by ordinary citizens [9]. From this, it can be seen that the transformation of modern Chinese literature is related to the influences of Western culture. At the same time, it was also closely related to traditional literature, politics, ideology and culture.

Modern mass media had an evolutionary role on the way Chinese literature was propagated. Modern China's most outstanding propagandist, Liang Qichao founded the Qing Yi newspaper and used mass media to transmit the revolutionary ideals of modern literature. These qualities are encapsulated in the phrase: "Open the new body of the essay, kindle the people's underlying passions". These qualities were fully utilized and expressed in mass media, thus becoming an initiating and organizing factor in the transformation of literature. Mass media played a reformatory role in many literary genres such as poetry, fiction, prose etc. It also played a positive role in the transition of literary language into the vernacular [10]. Modern mass media translations of Western literature brought with them stylistic changes in modern Chinese literature. For example, Wang Guowei was able to effectively introduce the cultural resources of Western scholars such as Schopenhauer. This brought about the establishment of modern Chinese aesthetics and paradigms of literary criticisms that touched on independent aesthetics, aesthetics and life, literary criticisms of Wang Guowei's "theory of realm" and other such aesthetic concepts [11].

2) Impacts of Tradition on the Transformation of Modern Chinese Literature

In the end, modern Chinese literature could not escape from the profound influence of ancient Chinese literature. Ideologically, the ideas of modern Chinese literature were utilized in serving the various agendas of the political struggle. Ignoring the unprecedented political, economic and cultural environment, modern literature was basically a replica of ancient literary propositions and genres. Since ancient times, Chinese literature has emphasized "ideals expressed through poetry", "morals expressed in writing", "social change through teaching" and other such themes that had major social functions. There was an emphasis on the perfect unity between politics and art which formed the ideal tradition of public service expressed in the saying "those with ability must serve the greater good". These facets were clearly present in modern literature. Therefore, the development of modern Chinese literature faced many adverse conditions and its transformation, from the start, was mired in a cultural dilemma. Comparing the old genre to the new, the old style is unable to break through because artistically, it lacks self-conscious effort to revolutionize and transform. Passive cultural choices, the stagnation of the traditional mindset and "pretending to be Western" was the best it could do [12]. The national form of ancient Chinese literature had crystallized into a net that modern literature

could not break through. Modern Chinese literature became a kind of traditional genre of literature with its own standard. It exemplified features such as a state of constant flux, the value of diversity, inherent tension and conflict, exploration and creation [13]. The creative and destructive tension of different literary concepts formed an ecological balance in the development of modern literature. This mainly includes the Chinese and Western literary concepts of conflict and integration, the new and old literary concept of coexistence and repulsion, the collision and mutual restraint of conservatism and radicalism, and the confrontation and combination of aestheticism and utilitarianism [14]. These interplays formed the diverse landscape that characterized modern Chinese literature. However, the new literary form contained the essence of China, the history of China's ethnic-cultural development, characteristics of traditional Chinese literature and the intimate association between national aesthetics and psychology. Therefore, the essential nature of modern literature lies chiefly in the modernity of its content and not in how "Westernized" the work is.

The core changes in modern literary language can be seen in the clash between classical prose and the vernacular. This struggle is in fact a continuation of the reformation of ancient Chinese literature. It originated from the time of the Tang dynasty when the official written language was declared as the new vernacular. A thousand years before modern times, even though classical and vernacular were the same in written Chinese, in the refined realm of literature, the vernacular did not enjoy an equal chance in the struggle. Classical (or literary) Chinese enjoyed a preferential position whereas the vernacular was mainly relegated to the realms of short novels and drama. This was how the clash between the two scripts started. The late-Qing vernacular-classic movement aimed to eliminate the struggle between the classical and vernacular. It tried to improve the status of the vernacular but due to strong support for the classical script, the movement failed. The reigning political ideology still exercised control and as a result, the hierarchic conflict between the vernacular and the classical script remained unchanged. Contrarily, during the intellectual discourse of the Chinese Enlightenment, the vernacular script became synonymous with the lower-class peasant population.

The new literary form was full of national character and was closely linked with the historical development of ethnic culture, characteristics of ethnic literary traditions and ethnic aesthetic-psychology trends. Modern Chinese literature inherited and developed elements of realism and romanticism from the traditions of ancient literature. Many reformist and revolutionary writers further developed realism and romanticism. This is particularly evident in the realism found during the conscious literary creative movement. Lin Changyi, Chen Yingchang, Bei Qingqiao and Huang Zunxian were all writers whose works embodied this feature. Liang Qichao influenced many of the motives and ideas of the "Poetic Revolution". He also inherited and carried forward the enlightenment tradition of ancient Chinese literature. This echoed with the ancient literary "Poems Expressing Wills" tradition, the tradition embodied by the phrase "Poems can arouse, observe, bring people together and express dissent" Zhuzi's persuasive essay tradition and literary approach of "poetic justice" which focused on satire and allegory to praise justice and criticize the dark decay of education [13]. This was well reflected both before and after the transformation of modern Chinese literature.

3) Conclusion

Modern Chinese literature is found on the bridge connecting ancient Chinese literature and contemporary literature. It can be said that modern Chinese literature transitioned from the category of feudal literature to the category of bourgeois democratic literature [14]. Of course, some scholars believe that the spirit of modern literature advocates respect for the individual. It explores and focuses on characteristics of the self. These are some of the existing similarities that it shares with contemporary literature since it is an intermediary between the mid-century and the present generation. However there are also scholars that believe that so-called modern literature (literature from the period of 1840 to 1919) should not be inserted as a bridge between ancient literature and contemporary literature. They hold that the period starting from the Opium War in the 1840s until the late nineteenth century was a clear and separate historical stage where new literary heights were reached [15]. I believe that the essential substance of the modern culture can be summed up by the word: "change". If there were no culture of limitless development, then neither would there be such unprecedented innovation. Chinese literature could not help but change in the modern cultural environment. At the same time, it could not escape the deep-rooted influence of traditional culture. Many elements of ancient Chinese literary culture still exhibited a far-reaching impact on modern literature. Overall, modern Chinese literature had more elements that did not change than elements that changed. The parts that changed were not formed from something totally new either. Many of the new trends and genres were still exclusively limited to the upper echelons of society. Under the influence of ancient literature, modern literature became separated into two completely different types of literature based on outlook and essential substance: the former sees modern literature as the end of ancient literature, it sees it as the symbol of the decline and death of ancient literature, it also sees modern literature as inheriting and continuing the themes of traditional literature; the latter sees modern literature as the new version of ancient Chinese literature, the precursor of contemporary literature, it focuses on the new forms and expansion of literary elements found in modern literature [16]. In conclusion, regardless of whether the point of view is taken from ancient Chinese literature or contemporary Chinese literature, modern Chinese literature is ultimately marginal in nature, it cannot be fully affirmed.

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