Self-aesthetic Direction in Yu Dafu's Proses

Zu-Mei WEI

College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China;
College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China
weizumei@163.com

Keywords: Yu Dafu, Prose, Self-aesthetic direction

Abstract. Some believe that "in terms of Yu Dafu's creations, his novels manifest themselves, poetries precise and well-knit, but the most thorough representations of his brilliance in emotional expressions are embodied in his pure, lofty and natural proses". [1] In reality, whether it is aesthetic sentiment, creative theme or artistic form, Yu Dafu's proses have formed their own unique creative style. Under the guidance of the May Fourth Movement cultural backdrop, the general character of his aesthetic form is: individualistic self-aesthetic direction.

Introduction

During "fast and furious" times of the May Fourth Movement, when thoughts and behaviors were urgently in need of liberation, in the space of individuality filled with proclamations and promulgations, authors were no longer the simple loud speaker for the era or the regime. They stood at the forefront of the epoch and of the literary evolution, recording with their bleeding and weeping pens the genuine emotions that have been pent up within the Chinese people for centuries, and the Chinese literary tradition of "beauty in harmony" and the literary style of "benevolence" were no longer. Yu Dafu was one of the iconic authors of this period.

In Introduction to Second Collection of Proses of An Expanded Family of Chinese New Literature, Yu Dafu mentioned that "elements of autobiography are more prominent among contemporary proses". [2] With his own personal experiences as blueprint, Yu Dafu provided extensive portrayals of society, politics, national character and many facets of the era, showing us the characteristics of the intellectuals of China in the 1920s and 1930s. From a certain point of view, his proses form the core of his life, "using forthright, honest and passionate words of proclamation and self-profiling to completely lay bare himself" [3], comprising of the sorrows of the sickness of that era that forms a unique literary charm and displaying "a sincere and natural style of writing that is not only a rarity in traditional proses but is also very distinct in new literature" [4].

Aesthetic Sentiments and Life's Emotions

The introduction to Second Collection of Proses of An Expanded Family of Chinese New Literature written by Yu Dafu states: "of the biggest successes of the May Fourth Movement, first and foremost has to be the discovery of the 'individual'. Previously, people exist for their lord, exist for the way, exist for their parents, but only now have people learned to exist for themselves. If I don't serve any lord, if the way does not suit me it is not truly a my way, and my parents are my parents; if there is no me, then where will society be, where will country be, where will clan be?" [5] In the course of the literary revolution during the May Fourth Movement period, a plethora of avant-garde western thoughts and compositions were ceaselessly introduced to China and translated, and for the first time the Chinese began to discover the outside world, which induced the interpretation and structuralizing of Chinese literary traditions from brand new angles.

Yu Dafu was a pioneer, and the revolutionary innovation in his proses can be summed up as such: "most of Yu Dafu's proses were him talking about his life's encounters to his heart's content and plainly conveying sentimental moods, like chatting or venting with a friend in whatever forms that ultimately yield outcomes that touches and moves the heart. Reading his proses is like entering his life" [6]. The
self-pity in his words represented a voice common among a portion of intellectuals at the time, of how there is no path ahead upon waking up from a dream, of an embarrassing and painful realm of "how everyone is inebriated but I am sober". Thus, such dejection and constraint is transformed into introspection, and the wailing and resistance of the external perspective are turned into internal discharge and depression. "Darkness bestowed me a pair of black eyes, but I use them to search for light," youths were fomented to rebel against this unreasonable and cannibalistic society, to wage war against feudal code of ethics, to denounce the literary traditions of "placid and gentle," and to announce the emergence of the literary style of "malevolence". "Capture a cross-section of life, and compress and fade out the circumstantial details to illustrate the complicated characteristics and inner world of people," [7] the flow of personal emotions directly "stirs the heart of readers" [8] and resonated with the inner world of the youths of the period that led to a "Yu Dafu fever" during that time.

Innovation in Creative Themes

"Literature of humans" advocates a life where "the spiritual and the physical are as one," and new literature ought to be humanistic literature. Zhou Zuoren meticulously expounded and verified "new types of ethics and viewpoints on marriage and love of 'literature of humans', while decrying old literature, where Confucianism and Taoism traditions erase and dispel the individual identity, as 'literature of non-humans'. [9]

In Chinese literature traditions, human nature and desires are expressed under the confinement of moral norms, such that "pitted but not hurtful, happy but not lustful," and declaration of unrestrained affections can only be transmitted under disguise. During the age of feudal rules, there was no possibility that a personal hero fighting against code of ethics or paradigm of thoughts could appear, and even someone like Jia Baoyu (protagonist of the classic Dream of the Red Chamber) could only choose to commit to the monastic life, leaving behind a regret of "emptiness". However, the literature revolution since the May Fourth Movement had affirmed the individual character, as well as affirmation of the instinct and desires in the routine life of the people, along with the emotions in life founded upon this basis. Works that attest to desires and celebrate love were catapulted into the limelight, painting new literature with a swath of romantic colors.

"The authors of Creation Society were keen on describing love or exposing the nature of sex, as a medium to illustrate the evils of the author's entity" [10]. A succinct distillation of the features of their proses is "viewing the world through a grain of sand, talking about human feelings on half a piece of flower petal".

The author tried to use a brand new point of view to interpret the subject matter of life and death, as a challenge against hypocritical morals. For instance, Gui Hang recorded "the complicated emotions of the author on the day of his departure to return home, which was a mix of not only disgust of the life in a foreign country that brought upon humiliation and depression, yet also a feeling of not ready to say farewell, a disturbed perturbation to roam rampant, as well as that type of flow of mood of fantasizing shooting dead those foreigners that have garnered the admiration and adoration of young Chinese girls. [11]This complex burst from the writing unhindered".

The author's this kind of "uncovered writing of my own thoughts," [12] a forthright exposure intended for "people to understand the despondency in my heart," [13] reflected the feeble psychology unique to those who grew up in an oppressive cultural environment. That is a totally unveiled sort of anxiety and hesitancy, a fear of losing oneself. What the author is writing appeared to be sickness, but what it actually demands is facing solemnly of human nature's reasonable pursuits, yearning for the freedom to pursue, and castigating of the authoritarian cultural structure. Whether it is the mental shock cast upon the reader or the impact on traditional Chinese morals, "the extreme sorrows and strong lament and resent, compounded by disposition of destruction of individuality," [14] did so with the might of "earthquakes".
Influence of Aesthetic Principals of "Individualism"

The explorations in creativity and artistic expressions of Yu Dafu's "individualism" had deeply influenced his peers of the time and authors of later generations. They followed the trail of autobiographical expression of self-emotions he blazed, forming the voice of liberation of individuality of the collectives of the period. This symbolizes that "Yu Dafu's influence exists on a long-term basis, exemplifying a completely individualized kind of literature, and also one filled to the brim with traits of the era". [15]

Yu Dafu believes that the dairy as a medium and letters as a medium are the best choices for autobiographical pieces. This opinion was thoroughly personified by Lu Yin. Known for writing about personal train of thoughts and lauded as a "child of'May Fourth"" [16] by Mao Dun, vast amount of diaries and letters are interspersed in her works, and her master piece Hai Bin Gu Ren ("Seashore Old Acquaintance") embodies the ravenous spiritual hunger of the youths of that era. Lu Yin also leveraged on her own life experiences and applied the mindset and tender tone unique to females to fantastic effects, especially in depicting the treacherous paths, melancholic hearts and tragic fates of young females on the quest for democratic liberation and love and happiness. Like Yu Dafu, she also used a bosom of sadness to face a reality of misery, which generated widespread and resounding praises among young readers of the time.

The creative style of Wang Yiren, acclaimed by Yu Dafu as his "next generation inheritor of direct lineage," [17] was also marked by frank and honest showing of individual characters. Much of his work mirror the pursuits and hesitations of youth intellectual of the age, and are overflowing with narrations of the psyches of the ill, large portions of soliloquies, exposure of oneself and tones of saddening sentiments. His magnum opus, the medium-length Gu Yan ("Lonely Swan Goose"), is "constituted of six letters, which are short essays on their own and a connected medium-length composition when placed together. This format facilitates the full-fledged and unhindered expression of emotions, as nothing is hidden or muted wherever the letter-writing mentality wanders to" [18]. Gu Yan centers on an unemployed young educator, who drifted around society, was assaulted by the various difficulties in life, turned demented, and ultimately died from addiction to gambling and alcohol. This was designed to portray the author's fierce criticism of how the dark society annihilates individuality.

Feng Yuanjun is yet another female star literati after Bing Xin and Lu Yin. The central topic of her works revolve around bold portraits of the psychological states of girls of the time who are in love and fighting to free themselves from the chains of old social etiquette. Her creative style is akin to that of Yu Dafu's and her works "are also emotionally expressive novels that contain many sources from the powerful subjective sensibilities in her daily life". [19]The themes of her four novels Ge Jue ("Isolation"), Ge Jue Zhi Hou ("After Isolation"), Lv Xing ("Travels") and Ci Mu ("Loving Mother") are basically identical, on the one hand showing the courageous, fiery and free affection of the female protagonist that is indestructible, and on the other hand, outright intervention and absolute rejection of the elders, who are vanguards of the marital system of the feudal society. Thus, disagreements and disputes reach boiling point, with the former being an emerging but not yet stabilized new force of life, and the latter being old establishment underpinned by a massive paradigm of old systems and old code of ethics. This type of brutal conflicts was demonstrated from a first-person point of view, using letters as a format, with the female protagonist as the principal entity of output. "As a female writer, being able to so bluntly divulge the secrets of the heart of the self-protagonist certainly requires remarkable audacity". [20]

It is evident that the writing style of Yu Dafu, attributed by revealing wording and novel concepts, and the open illustration of the literary theme of "myself" are of monumental meaning to the creative history of contemporary prose composition in China. The revelation in his creations is that: if authors wish to authentically articulate themselves, it is mandatory to stay true to the genuine call of the heart and the impulse of literature, and consider the consciousness of the self-entity as the absolute truth.
Conclusion: Self Aesthetic Direction

Yu Dafu's proses are products cultivated under the special backdrop of the May Fourth Movement period. They directly exhibit the complexity of the "May Fourth" ages, possess the clear conflicts that arise from the dual personalities of dejection and resistance, and contain strong senses of both ethnic inferiority and social responsibility. For the most part, his proses reach straight into the heart and are direct and distinct in their autobiographical quality.

Taking a holistic look at the life of Yu Dafu, he was born into a childhood of poverty in an oppressive environment. In the decade studying abroad in Japan, at a phase when he transitioned from a juvenile to a teenager, he had to deal with the dejections and sufferings brought about by life at home and overseas. These forged him into a sensitive and listless man with a predominantly depressed, gloomy languid and lonely outlook, which thus determined his creative style. From returning home and successfully passing the senior civilian diplomatic examination in September 1919, to heading southward to Guangzhou with the aspiration of devoting himself to the "revolution," to his final downfall in a foreign land in the name of his country at the age of 49 years old, he used a calamitous ending as the most desolate and regretful annotation in the conclusion of this extraordinary life of his. Mr. Hu Yuzhi put it this way: "his attitude in life on the surface, all those talks about fine wine and women and promiscuous poetry, were all just the mask of a poet, used as a facade to handle his enemies and prosecutors. Therefore, only those who does not have a soul, those that have never really been on the same wavelength as him, would evaluate and judge him for what he is on the surface. For those that have been close to him and have truly read his works, they would understand how solemnly Yu Dafu treated his life, how much passion he has for humankind!" [21]This is a manifestation of his contradictory tragedy, and also a real experience of the inner struggle of those who are lonely and awaken at that period. I suppose this statement is adequate enough as an annotation of the status of Yu Dafu's proses in the history of contemporary Chinese proses and the history of modern Chinese literature.

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by the research project of the Central University of Sichuan University (No. skq201264), Sichuan Provincial Department of Education (No.LYM12-38), and the research project of the Central University of Sichuan University (No.2skzx2015-gb78).

References