Aesthetics of Ivan Bunin in the Context of Chinese Literary Theory

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Keywords: Ivan Bunin, aesthetics, Taoism, Chinese literature.

Abstract. It is generally known that China and Russia had very close literary relationship in the last century. But this literary phenomenon is not just a historical accident caused by politics. China’s acceptance of Russian literature may also be derived from literary. Ivan Bunin had his loyal readers in China no matter whether in the special era of literature serving politics or in the era of people's ideological emancipation at the end of the last century. Bunin’s acceptance in China shows the diversity of Russian literature and its tremendous vitality in China, which has important research value. This paper explores the reasons why Bunin is popular in China from the perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetics. It is hoped that it will be of reference value to the study of the reception of Russian literature in China.

Introduction

In the last century, Russian literature has had many influences on China. It is widely believed that the reason why China accepts Russian literature is the need of social change, but this view cannot explain the acceptance of Bunin in China. Ivan Bunin is one of the most famous artistic poet and translator in the history of Russian literature in the 20th century. Because “his rigorous artistic ability enables Russian classical tradition be inherited in prose”, Bunin became the first Russian writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and he also won the attention of many Chinese readers. But it is worth noting that Bunin literature’s journey to China was not always smooth. Influenced by the literary trend of “literature serves politics” in China, the ideology of Bunin’s works has been severely criticized by Chinese critics for half a century. In the 1960s, the deterioration of relations between China and the Soviet Union led to the loss of its influence of Russian literature in China. But at this time, Bunin unexpectedly became one of the Russian writers welcomed by Chinese readers. Obviously, the acceptance of Bunin is different from that of other Russian writers. This paper compares Bunin's creation with Chinese literature from the perspective of aesthetics, and proposes that Bunin's works have similar aesthetic characteristics to Chinese literature, trying to explain the reasons why Russian literature is accepted by Chinese literature from an aesthetic point of view.

Artistic conception of Chinese lyric literature

The fundamental reason why a literature becomes classic is that it conveys the common feelings of human beings. Cultural expression based on emotional commonality can arouse people's sympathy in reading, and thus literature can be accepted. For Chinese readers and scholars, Bunin's creation has similar aesthetic ideal with Chinese lyric literature, which is precisely the emotional foothold. "Artistic conception" is the aesthetic ideal of Chinese lyric literature. It is not a single dimension, but a multi-dimensional organization. In Chinese literature theory it is believed that the aesthetic ideal of art lied in deep levels of semantics. People can’t get it only by reading, but catch it outside the text by placing the words [1]. The artistic conception of Chinese literature is the synthesis of images projected by "subjective conception" on "objective object”, but artistic conception is by no means the product of simple unity of subjective and objective. In Chinese lyric literary aesthetics, both self and object are subjective, or "psychological reality", because the "object" here is no longer the "scenery"
of nature, but is the "scenery" after the poet's "view of things and feelings". In other words, artistic conception is the superposition of the author's subjective emotions after their objectification. When the objective existence is rendered by subjective feelings, the mind and objects will merge closely, and the objectivity becomes relatively fictional and unreliable, and the subject's understanding of reality becomes relatively credible. In this process of forming aesthetic ideals, the vitality is the driving force for the formation of artistic conception, the parallel description of the scenery is the construction of artistic conception [2].

Similarities of aesthetic characteristics in Bunin's works and Chinese literature

Bunin like Chinese literature, is sure of the height of vitality in art. Bunin was touched by everything he encountered. The world itself is full of lives, and the substantial materiality is the real way of existence of the world. Therefore, there are similar aesthetic views in Chinese literature, which come from Taoist philosophy. Tung-kwo tsze asked Kwang-tsze, saying, "Where is what you call the Tao to be found?" Kwang-tsze replied, "Everywhere… in this ant, in this panic grass, in this earthenware tile, in that excrement" [3]. We can see from some ordinary, even annoying things, which are uncomfortable, just because all things in the world are full of the wit of life. Russian scholar Slivitskaya O. V. believed that everything that looked ugly in Bunin's views might have its beautiful side [4]. In fact, in Bunin's works, all phenomena have long lost the conventional meaning of beauty and ugliness. In other words, everything is equal from the perspective of Taoism.

We can think that Bunin is concerned about the existence of Tao, where there is no rank, no order relations after human consciousness's evolution, all forms of existence have the same dignity, belong to the same spiritual species, no beauty and ugliness in the traditional sense. Therefore, we can see in Bunin's works that “women's clothes in the yard” and “the smell of dirt” both make people feel the joy of the world [5], “manure” is not used to reflect the sanctity and loftiness of the stars [6], but simply because they exist in the world. All things in the nature witness the integrity, infinity and eternity of the world with their characteristics of equality and personality.

The creation of Bunin has the same structural characteristics as Chinese literature. According to James B. Woodward, “the contrast structure is the primary structural principle of Bunin's works” [7], which is manifested in his intentional insertion of independent and detailed plots, ruthless interruption of the development of the plot, or deliberately obscuring the development of the main plot, which give the reader an intuitive feeling that the logic that traditional novels should have are destroyed by paralleled fragments. Compared with the symbolist, who always tries to specifically show an image, Bunin tried to create an artistic atmosphere that was difficult to perceive in daily life through the paralleled listing of several different images, hoping to create an artistic space that is difficult to perceive so as to infect readers' emotions and call them to participate in the construction of this artistic space.

For poets, the paralleled description of nature is obviously more important than the plot. In the novel The Old Woman [8], the camera constantly flickers on several pictures, transforming among "a snowstorm Christmas, a weeping old lady, a poor teacher who devotes herself to writing useless literary essays, a child who only knows to mechanically memorizes historical materials, a poor watchman who lost all his sons in the war, and Petersburg's upper class that seeks pleasure." For example, in the novel In August [9], only the first sentence is related to the plot. All other parts are the description about nearby objects, every paragraph is description about a new scene, which seem to have no correlation with each other. This aesthetic feature created by Bunin is more perfectly expressed in his plotless novels. For example, the collection of novels published in Paris in 1931. There are 49 mini-fictions in the book. The length of these works usually only covers half a page, or even a few lines. For example, the novel Noon, composed of 68 words, is obviously just a superposition of some artistic images, which contains no plot or characters. It describes a group of swimming girls and cows eating grass on a hot summer day [10]. But the writer publishes it as a
complete novel. Obviously, from the author’s perspective, it is an artistic work with independent aesthetic value.

We can also often see this paralleled artistic description in Chinese literature. Liu Yuxi (Chinese poet, philosopher, and essayist, active during the Tang Dynasty) also have a similar view on the ideals of Chinese literature and aesthetics. He believes that the aesthetic ideal of art lies in deep levels of semantics. People can’t get it only by reading, but catch it outside the text by placing the words [11]. For example, “Early Departure at Shang Mountain”, written by Wen Ting yun: “Cocks crow, small in and the moon, Footprints, boards of bridge and the frost” [12]. These are only a few highly simplified words in the original: there are no verbs, from which we can’t tell the poet's feelings. Does this poem contain meanings? If you look at these simplified words, you certainly can’t see the meaning, but there are hints, invitations and summons in these verses. Only when these words and images are shown on the reader's mind can they be linked together and integrate with other words and images in the poem, producing the mood of infinite sorrow.

Conclusion

From the reader's perspective, a large number of paralleled descriptions force the reader's attention to turn to another artistic space beyond the plot. These coordinate details exist in parallel in the text. Bunin's Creation and Chinese Lyric Literature are more like a picture in the form of words, which is a suggest, inviting readers to participate in the construction of artistic space beyond the text. After accepting the invitation, the reader's imagination will be fully mobilized. In the reader's interpretation of the text, all the feelings of the author that cannot be conveyed by words are fully shown in the reader's imagination, and the author successfully constructs a poetic mood between the text and the reader. Faced with the external influence, Chinese readers always consciously or unconsciously adjust their impression of the external world and finally achieve the goal of changing the external world. From this recognition basis, when they read foreign literature, they always intentionally or unintentionally focus on one aspect from the actual needs or their own understanding. "Vitality" and "parallel description of the scenery" may be Bunin's main aesthetic characteristics, or may be secondary, but from the perspective of Chinese aesthetics, these three elements in Bunin’s work is one of the important reasons why Bunin is very welcomed in China.

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