ZENG Xu-bai and the Journal *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness*

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The journal *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness* was the main field where ZENG Xu-bai published his literature works; in response to the miscellaneous “revolutionary literature” at that time, he put forward the idea that literature should be a combination of unity and artistry, and emphasized self-expression of literature on the basis of popularization of literature. With these literature views, his works also had shown his pursuit for the specialty and artistry of literature, as well as a transition from technique-oriented writing to a balance of emotion expression and technique usage. Anyway, during his translation of French literature and creative practice, the rich literature nutrition he received led to his unclear and complex thoughts which he neutralized with carefulness, and hence his unique literature views.

Keywords: ZENG Xu-bai; *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness*; literary popularization

Introduction

From the 1920s to 1930s, ZENG Xu-bai has made great contribution to the translation of French literature by publishing a large number of translating literature and creative works on the journal *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness* which he initiated together with his father ZENG Pu. During his translation and creative practice, the rich literature nutrition he received led to his unclear and complex thoughts which he neutralized with carefulness, and hence his unique literature views.

Unity and Specialty of Literature

In 1927, ZENG Xu-bai stepped into the literary circle with the journal *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness* run by his father ZENG Pu. In fact, the journal was more likely to be a spiritual comfort after political setbacks between the father and son. During the four years of running *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness*, ZENG Xu-bai’s contribution is unfathomable and at the same time he improved his own artistry greatly. Anyway, it was through *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness* that ZENG Xu-bai criticized those notorious phenomena in the literary circle of that time and expressed his own creative viewpoints.

At that time, the National Revolution was developing rashly, a large number of “revolutionary literature” became the main trend of literature. With the aid of politics, literature became a port for emotional release; “the revolutionary wave which influences people’s life and mind is turbulent, and everyone has his or her own distress, thus they shout or jump, use artistry by any means to let out the flame in their bottom mind” (ZENG, 1928b, p. 1). In a word, “revolutionary literature” at that time was brimming with naive catchwords and slogans as well as rough depression and indignation. Meanwhile, ZENG Xu-bai (1928b), a man with political ideology, expressed

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his understanding about this naive behavior of “revolutionary literatures”:

We all know that it is not the right path for literature. But we sympathetically regard it as an inevitable process of it. Their works are rough, and their path is leading to nowhere, but it is an incubation time that we cannot avoid. Who can say that roughness would not bring out purity and nowhere would not lead to somewhere? We needn't be pessimist nor fight against it, whereas we should be calm and find a new path. It is a waste of time to shout among the crowd or cry out alone beside the road. (pp. 1-2)

To ZENG Xu-bai, the rough revolutionary literature is a sign that literature is going off the track, which is inevitable during the development process of literature; following the trend aimlessly or fighting against it fiercely are all useless, and the only thing we can do is to find a proper way to go back to the right path according to the deficiency of “revolutionary literature”.

With understanding and sympathy in his mind, he analyzed the deficiency of “revolutionary literature” in depth. Firstly, he considered that the biggest problem for “revolutionary literature” was the mighty attitude it held towards other voices, which suppressed the diverse development of literature. With its clear political purpose and the need for usurping the power of artistry, “revolutionary literature” had radical color from the very start. Then because of different standpoints and viewpoints, vehement argument was sweeping throughout the literary circle; people intended to exchange their views with the help of the argument, but at last it became arguments about personal feelings or even abuses:

Their pure white gown of artistry have been tainted with the color of politics. Thus fighting and abusing happened, hatred arose; suppression is carried out first, and then forbiddance. It may express some young men's thoughts, but in fact, they are out of the literary circle and became the victims of political whirlpool. (ZENG, 1928c, p. 4)

In ZENG Xu-bai's opinion, this tough combination with politics and crude way of conversing have already let go of the individualism of literature, which made it the tool for politics. Aiming at this phenomenon, he wrote an article “A Letter for New Literary and Art Workers in Our Country”. As for the purpose of the letter, he said:

My letter, actually, is a fighting persuasion, since they are quarreling and squabbling about trivial things like village women,” and “we have no need to divide literature into different schools, for whatever the purpose of the writer, what banner he took, the value of his successful works will be appreciated. (ZENG, 1928c, p. 1)

Secondly, ZENG Xu-bai held that “revolutionary literature” paid much attention to political color which caused its deficiency in artistry, and literature got into a dilemma of invariableness. He clearly expressed his dissatisfaction:

Until now, I know nothing about revolutionary literature. I've read novels by famous writers and many very short stories which cannot read as a whole. Those works have no requirements for emotion, art, or any elements of literature; to make a revolutionary literature stir, the only thing you need to do is adding words like yell, kill, the common people, and the workers into your work. Whether it is revolutionary literature? Is there any possibility to establish a revolutionary literature school? You must know better than me. (ZENG, 1928c, p. 10)

According to ZENG Xu-bai, rough “revolutionary literature” broke away from the aestheticism of literature, and inevitably led to the decline of its artistry.

Directing towards the monopoly and deficiency of artistry of “revolutionary literature”, ZENG Xu-bai considered that literature has no class division and put forward a new path for literary circle. In the essay “A New Path for Artistry: After Reading Mao Dun's ‘From Guling to Dongjing’”, he stated his view systematically. He

thought that Mao Dun's viewpoint of "petty-bourgeois literature" is a powerful refute to the monopoly of "revolutionary literature", and at the same time, he thought it "made the same mistake as the revolutionary writers" (ZENG, 1928c, p. 3), for using class division to guide literary creation and criticism is an exclusive literature view in essence. He also rebutted the viewpoint "class literature", denied the rupture of literature made by class division, and emphasized the diversity and unity of artistry. To sum up, artistry is "a whole, without any sense of time or class; no matter it's for life or art, it is inseparable; people can never cut it into meaningless fragments to fit for a period or a group of people" (ZENG, 1928c, p. 4). The presentation of artistry is

both in part and whole: Artistry itself is a whole, the presenter, for his limit of strength, might as well present the whole as a part according to his range, but the presentation of the each part intricates, exchanges, and glows, and each showed its specialty, thus a splendid whole is formed. (ZENG, 1928c, p. 4)

Anyway, with a concern for the unity of literature, proletarian literature and petty-bourgeois literature "have their reasons to exist", and they have infinite hope, "if only the writers can represent this partial brightness", at the same time, however, it is "a severe mistake to say that it is the only trend of artistry or the only path for all writers" (ZENG, 1928c, p. 6). It is the co-existence of various literatures that forms the unity of artistry and shows the society as a whole.

While making efforts to break the class differences of literature and emphasizing the unity of literature, ZENG Xu-bai also suggested that literature cannot be presented in just one way but should show its specialties. For a long time, the ideology requirements of "revolutionary literature" made writers ignore their self-expression, which led to the loss of sincerity of literature. To change the situation, ZENG Xu-bai thought that the writers should exert their specialties. To him, "self" is the most important:

No matter what school of literature, it is the expression of "self"; the so-called objectivity and subjectivity is a matter of the distinctiveness of self-color. The main ideology of "self" is the resource of work, everything except world and "self" can only be presented based on the ideology of "self" in every writer's work, besides, the secret of a noble work that surpassing other works is that it can enlighten the dull reality by a transformation in the divine soul. Thus, losing "self", artistry would have no way to go. (ZENG, 1928b, p. 11)

The collection of the specialties of "self" creates the diversity of literature, thus, in order to highlight the richness of literature, ZENG Xu-bai (1928b) claimed that "artistry has no common path and every writer has his own way to go" (p. 12). Indeed, ZENG Xu-bai's dialectical understanding about the unity and specialty of literature was a powerful refute to widespread "revolutionary literature" at that time.

Popularization and Non-utilitarianism of Literature

Besides his pertinent criticism of "revolutionary literature", ZENG Xu-bai bettered his writing skills by incessant imitation and then creation. He translated foreign literary works in large numbers so as to get much nutrition from these works; meanwhile he inevitably confronted with contradiction and complexity in this process of digestion and study. Seen from his works and criticisms in *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness*, ZENG Xu-bai held that literature is for the people and emphasized writers' enlightenment function in the popularization of literature, although he did not approve of rough "revolutionary literature". Meanwhile, he absorbed the concept of aestheticism that literature is non-utilitarian and self-expressing, and inclined to belles-lettres because "popularization of literature does not mean to cater to the bad interests of the common people but to improve their

interests” (DAI, 1928, p. 2). This contradiction and complexity has close relationship to his life experience and creation process.

ZENG Xu-bai was born in a family of scholars and good manners and traditional culture influenced him deeply. Thus, his writing is filled with the spirit of Confucian doctrine which have a long history in Chinese literature. According to his occupation choice, he had a positive attitude of getting into the society; he worked as a newsman and then a publisher, which showed his participation spirit, and before the closedown of *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness*, he came back to the press circle, which suggested his enthusiasm to social politics. It was for this enthusiasm that he always looked into the reality while producing his works. In the same time, he read a large number of French literature works and published many translation works with aesthetic flavor in *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness*, which deeply affected him. Through a thorough research about the translation of French literature, ZENG Xu-bai realized the “poverty” and “weakness” of new artistry:

“Weakness” is the root of “poverty,” therefore, we should come closer to find the reason of the “weakness.” I dare to say that it is because of the indifference between writers and readers that they live in their own world and show no sympathy to each other’s life. (ZENG, 1928a, p. 5)

He thought that artistry should be social and popular: “Art is the realization of emotion by various forms; we need more social people who care about art to make it thrive. Thus, art depends on the caring heart from society” (ZENG, 1929, p. 2). To ZENG Xu-bai, the gap between readers and writers hindered art from popularization and the writers should change their attitudes to remove this gap:

The mission for a writer is not to lock himself up in the crystal palace of artistry to sing about beauty or love and entertain himself; he should be a prophet and a guide for the people, and direct them to a bright road; to be a prophet and a guide, he should have a clear understanding about the nature of people. (ZENG, 1927, p. 2)

He also published many folk songs on *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness* to affirm the artistry of folk literature, and appealed writers to learn it by heart. It is clear that ZENG Xu-bai firstly thought that a writer should play the role as an initiator, provide positive and advance ideologies to common people, and try to be a guide of common people’s literature.

Anyway, under all these circumstances, his works showed some contradictory and complicated viewpoints about literature. On one hand, ZENG Xu-bai emphasized literature was for the common people, but on the other hand, he was unwilling to yield to common people’s taste and led artistry to vulgarity; he insisted on the purity of literature instead. He advocated the non-utilitarianism of literature:

Artistry is not a tool, it come into being from the revelation of the brightness of nature, it has no prejudice for any individual; it is a light that never burn out, which can light up all the periods from ancient to modern and all entity’s fiber organization in the universe; put it straight, it is the brightness that has no limitation of time and space. If we try to regulate the purpose of artistry, we must misunderstand it, no, we just insult artistry. (ZENG, 1928b, p. 4)

In fact, the style of *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness* he ran is belletrism-oriented and its focus is to represent the richness of life; the works in it mostly show common people’s life, and in ZENG Xu-bai’s own work, he depicted ordinary citizens, told their life stories, and revealed the true color of life. With artistic creation method and description, he kept himself from pandering to vulgarity. Thus, ZENG Xu-bai endeavored to nurture common people by depicting ordinary citizens’ life in his works.

At last, the most important point to notice is that ZENG Xu-bai thought that literature was for the people, but on the other hand, he also thought that literature should express “self”; “literature works are representation of writer’s mental organization” (XU, 1929, pp. 5-6). Therefore, to ZENG Xu-bai, there exists some discordance between the people and self; it is a hard task for the writers to insist on his self-expression and at the same time guide the people with his aesthetic taste. It is clear that ZENG Xu-bai’s efforts to balance elegance and vulgarity show his elite color. From ZENG Xu-bai’s literary concepts of elegance and vulgarity, many of his thoughts have some contradictions: As an intellectual he hoped to create elegant literature, but when he realized that artistry became irrelevant to common people, he hoped to find a proper way to let the elegant literature step into common people’s life. No satisfying solution would be found and the only thing ZENG Xu-bai could do is make compromise on the basis of upgrading people’s understanding.

Conclusion

In a word, ZENG Xu-bai’s complexity came from various reasons: For one thing, the social reality at that time left no much room for self-improvement in one’s study, and for another, ZENG Xu-bai has his own social consciousness, even though his belles-lettres ideal has been crushed by reality. Thus his contradiction can be interpreted as a breakthrough at that time.

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