

BOOK REVIEW

Li Chunqing 李春青, *A History of Taste: From Zhou Dynasty Aristocracy to Han and Wei Literati*¹ 趣味的歷史：從兩周貴族到漢魏文人. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company 北京：生活·讀書·新知三聯書店, 2014. Pp. 471.

In “The Progress of Modern European Literature” (1910), Wilhelm Dilthey pointed out: “Firstly, we discover that poetry was determined by the common spirit of a smaller political-military community. It expresses the spirit of the society with the lyric poetry.” (Dilthey, 2005: 1) He also outlined the representation of two spiritual activities—imagination and rationality within modern European literature, and proposed the perspective of spiritual history as a method for doing literary studies. In recent years, some experts of classical Chinese literature have been investigating the generation and evolvement of literary activities, out of discontent with the lack of attention on the relation between historical background and literary activities, and trying to explore this problem from different aspects such as the writer’s mentality, faith, thought, and living condition, etc. With new perspectives, they intend to describe the relation between literary history and spiritual history more meticulously. But since they have not found a notion that is self-explanatory, the research about the relation his new monograph *A History of Taste*, carries out a thorough discussion on the evolution of the collective taste of the intelligentsia from Zhou dynasty (周代) to Han and Wei dynasties (漢魏) (1046 BC-266 AD), by using the notion “taste paradigm” as a mediator between literature and its producers. This book, which reveals the close linkage between Chinese literary history and spiritual history in the above-mentioned historical period, is significant in suggesting the method of spiritual history in studies of classical Chinese literature.

The notion “taste paradigm” is referred to as the universal taste embodied in a specific stratum in different historical periods. When researchers discuss the relation between literary history and spiritual history, the most difficult problem encountered is how to explain the relation between the aesthetic form of the text and the belief system of the authors. Previous studies tend to explore the deep thoughts within literary works or literary theories, and then put them in the

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context of intellectual history. Obviously, this method show beliefs can be presented in literature, but could not give us a powerful explanation about how belief system influences aesthetic forms of literary works and about the theoretical discourse under the view of spiritual history; also it cannot properly demonstrate how literature is intertwined with the process of spiritual history. In fact, having a concept that could connect sensibility and thoughts in the spiritual world of the subject of literary production is the key to solve the above-mentioned problems. As a spiritual pursuit, “taste” is “the sensational manifestation of ideology, cultural customs, and aesthetics with ideas of politics, ethics, religion, etc.” In other words, it is “a comprehensive representation of the writer’s emotions, interests and preferences” (p.3), so it could be used as an effective notion to connect literary history and spiritual history. In fact, slightly later than Dilthey, German literary historian Levin Ludwig Schücking had given a thorough exploration of the great value of studying the history of taste in studies of literary history. In “Literary history and taste history: An attempt to a new problem” (1913), Schücking put forward three major tasks in studies on the relation between literary history and the history of taste as the following: “What did the different parts of the people read at a certain time, and why did they read these Works?”, “To investigate the driving force behind that devotes to show the popularity of a certain taste”, “To probe the influence of taste on creating literary works” (Schücking, 1991: 39-45). If we check Li’s book against these three tasks, we may say that the third one, which referred to by Schücking as the most beneficial for studies of literary history, is the main focus of the book, whereas the first and the second ones are also dealt with as the subordinate. Based on revealing the developing process of the taste paradigm of subjects of literary production from Zhou to Han and Wei, Li offers an insightful theoretical interpretation of the logic of the evolution of literary ethos and that of the discourse of literary theories in the period.

For a long time, evaluating selected writers and texts chronologically is the typical model on the historical writing of Chinese literature and criticism. The advantage of this model is that it is convenient for arranging historical materials, but it is hard to sort out the inner logic of the evolution of the history. However, Li takes the inner logic as the focus of his research, so that, governed by the notion ‘taste’, how literature and criticism (as spiritual phenomena) derive from traditional intelligentsia’s spiritual world and in turn, play a role in the construction of the spiritual world. The interaction of both ends is analyzed

profoundly at theoretical level. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote: “to the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class’.” (Bourdieu, 1984: 1-2) It means that what is behind taste is the identity of the subject that constructs a corresponding taste and also in turn, the identity was created and strengthened by the taste. So describing the evolution of the identity of literary subjects is an important choice for studies on the history of taste taken by Li Chunqing. In his opinion, from Zhou to Han and Wei, three kinds of identities of literary subjects had emerged successively: the earliest one was aristocracy in Western Zhou (1046-771 BC), then was scholar-official from Spring and Autumn (*Chunqiu* 春秋) to Western Han (770 BC -8 AD), and then literati in Eastern Han, Wei and Jin (晉)(25-420 AD). Correspondingly, the mainstream literary tastes in the above periods had evolved from aristocratic taste to the scholar-official’s taste, then to literati’s taste. It was not a simple process named “replacement”, but a rather complex one that we could call “derivation”. The philosophers of the pre-Qin period, representatives of scholar-officials, were the declined aristocrats who had become plebeians. Although they had lost the hereditary status and salary so that they must rely on knowledge or other skills to take part in social affairs, certain aristocratic spirit was still in their consciousness. Further the literati identity was also different from the identity of scholar-official, and they often coexisted in literary subjects, rather than having one replacing the other. Due to such a complex deriving process of the identities, the development of taste paradigms dominated by identity was also a derivative process. We learn that the three literary tastes described in *A History of Taste* are continuous, opposite but complementary, instead of developing in a linear fashion. Obviously, Li’s creative generalization and refined description provide beneficial enlightenments for us to understand the spiritual world of literary subject and its text representation in ancient China more deeply.

In Li’s book, the main part is the generalization and interpretation of the history of taste from Zhou to Han. But what deserves more concern is the description about the symbiotic relations between the literary history and the spiritual history under the perspective of taste history. Western Zhou literature is usually linked with propriety-music civilization. The literary texts conserved at later eras are only the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經) and the *Classic of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書). However, Western Zhou literature has a profound

and long-lasting influence on the coming ones, which is difficult to make a satisfactory explanation if we limit our vision in literature. In Zhou dynasty, the word “*wen*” (文) has multiple meanings including rite, law, institutions, literature, moral, etc. While Confucius admired Western Zhou that “Zhou is resplendent in culture (*wen*), having before it the example of the two previous dynasties (周監于二代, 郁郁乎文哉)” (Confucius, 1992: 23), *wen* was regarded as the global feature of Western Zhou culture, whose connotation is not confined to any one enumerated above. In *A History of Taste*, combining political system and ideological concepts in Zhou, Li analyzes the meaning of *wen* used in pre-Qin literature in detail, and points out that *wen* is “a general name of propriety-music system, knowledge system, moral concepts in Zhou dynasty” (p.69). This means that *wen* becomes the norm of social life for aristocratic stratum at that time. The norm was internalized to the spiritual world of aristocracy and formed the aristocratic taste -- Li names it “the taste of *wen*” -- which includes the correlative ideas, emotion, experience, etc. This taste strengthens the awareness of identity of Zhou aristocracy. So, although they did not deliberately engage in literary creation that was named “literature” in later ages, all of their lives are “*wen*”. Li remarks: “In later ages, *wen* as institutions and moral concepts that was constructed by Zhou aristocracy was abandoned and reformed in the prolonged historical evolution, but the taste of *wen* was inherited and carried forward by intelligentsia, being a cultural heritage with constant renewal in very long historical times.” (p.70) Therefore, we could understand the inner relationship between orthodox literary thoughts and the spirit of “*wen* of Zhou dynasty”. Meanwhile, this study will also enlighten us for an in-depth discussion about the origin of Chinese literature.

In Li’s book, another impressive finding is his analysis on the relationship between scholar-officials’ spirit and literary thought. Comparable with aristocracy, scholar-officials were rising intelligentsia, “replaced aristocracy to be the creators and inheritors of knowledge and culture” (p.120). In pre-Qin era, they were mainly philosophers who attempted to rebuild the order of the world; in Han dynasty, they were intellectuals who pursued to be officials of the empire. According to the historical background of scholar-officials and their life goals, Li summarizes that the taste of scholar-officials consist of four essential elements: “the evident self-consciousness with certain narcissistic characteristics”, “grand spiritual life goals that are difficult to achieve”, “the role consciousness of a sanctified TEACHER”, “the ultimate value indicated by Dao” (pp.141-152).

Compared with the general discussion on “carrying Dao” (*zaidao* 載道) in classical Chinese literature, Li suggests that Dao is the label of taste for scholar-officials, which is a very important finding. Actually, the general discussion about this “carrying Dao” embodied a sense of essentialism; very few studies consider -- with a historical perspective -- why the category “Dao” can emerge in classical literary thoughts. *A History of Taste* makes it clear that Dao is the spiritual pursuit of scholar-officials, not belongs to Zhou aristocracy, then in the history of Chinese literary thought, “theory of the relationship between literature and Dao” is formed because “in scholar-official’s discourse system, the value of literature always exists in Dao”. This demonstration shows the formation of literature concept combined with Dao closely in classical Chinese literature from the logic level. Following Li’s analysis on the structure of scholar-officials’ taste, it is not difficult to make a further research on the relations between scholar-officials’ literature and the Chinese national spirit.

In this book, the major task is to discuss the formation of literati’s identity and taste, and its relation with scholar-officials’ spiritual world and Han-Wei literature. Li holds the view that “literati” was a new identity derived from scholar-officials in Eastern Han dynasty, and emerged as a complete form in late Han to early Wei dynasty. The major cause was that the political corruption appearing in middle Eastern Han led to continuous frustration of scholars’ official promotion. Meanwhile, Classicism (*jingxue* 經學) had become grotesque and tedious, so the disappointed scholars engaged in creating literary and artistic works for conciliating their inner world. In this process, to pursue individual “leisurely delights” (*xianqingyizhi* 閒情逸致) became a group selection of some scholar-officials, and there upon the taste of literati was set, which had a far-reaching influence down through the ages. In Li’s opinion, this is the real reason why literature develops rapidly throughout late Han to early Wei period. “Leisurely delights” became a public choice, which is regarded by Li as a symbol of the formation of the taste of literati. He says “the leisurely delights implied scholar-officials’ split and transcendence from the identity of literati. They tried to find another way to achieve self-confirmation and self-fulfillment out of the official system.” (p.227) It discriminates the relations between the tradition of “carrying Dao” and that of “expressing ideal” (*yanzhi*, 言志) in classical Chinese literature, and reveals the other side of traditional intelligentsia’s spiritual structure.

The above review just outlines the “branches” of Li’s *A History of Taste*, and

there are a lot of other discussions and thoughts that are insightful and worth further exploration. Certainly, some shortcomings can be detected in the book. For example, Li seldom uses the intuitive and concrete materials to support the characteristic analysis of the three kinds of taste paradigm. Personally speaking, it would be nearly perfect if he can borrow the new findings in the field of archaeological anthropology and art history. To sum up, Li's book poses a number of important questions to the evolution of the collective taste of the intelligentsia from Zhou to Han, and answers them in a very specific, subtle way. Of course, the most important point of the book is that it puts forward the notion of "taste paradigm", which means a new approach to the study of relation between classical Chinese literature and spiritual history, though Professor Li does not use the term "spiritual history".

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- Dr. XUE XUECAI, Lecturer, Fujian University of Technology. E-mail: xuexuecai@fjut.edu.cn.