

Research on Influence of Classical Chinese Literature on Autumn Melancholy in “The Tale of Genji”

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Abstract: Mourning for autumn is deemed as an important theme in classical Chinese literature while the stories related to the character's destiny and its seasonal setting in “The Tale of Genji” also deserve attention. Particularly, in autumn, most stories occur in the context of tragedy. Starting with autumn melancholy, this paper conducts research in terms of thematology, discussing the influence of classical Chinese literature on “The Tale of Genji”.

1. Introduction

With respect to the influence of classical Chinese literature on “The Tale of Genji”, most pioneering researches focus on BAI Juyi, the influence brought by “Everlasting Regret” in particular. At the same time, the priority is also given to the research on traditional literature thoughts and aesthetic value-orientation in Japan. However, a certain room is still can be seen in thematic comparison. Starting with autumn melancholy, this paper addresses research in terms of thematology for parallel study of literature, discussing the influence of classical Chinese literature on “The Tale of Genji”.

2. The tradition of Chinese autumn melancholy literature

Autumn melancholy literature with distinct themes, complexity and wonder can be regarded as a type of traditional Chinese literature, which can be seen anywhere. Its development shows the closely connection between human and nature, between literature and society. Autumn means the change from flourish to decadence in nature with cool temperature and full bleakness. Ancient literati were very sensitive to the change of seasons and expressed their inner feeling via poems. “Without delay the sun and moon sped fast, in swift succession spring and autumn passed; the fallen flowers lay scattered on the ground, the dusk might fall before my dream was found”, as mentioned in “The Lament” composed by Yuan QU, has expressed autumn sadness. Nevertheless, Jipeng HE believes that it must just be “a spur of the moment”. [1] Furthermore, SONG Yu established a mode for autumn melancholy integrating subjectiveness and objectiveness in the course of fixing autumn emotions in sorrow, which can be seen in the first sentence of “Nine Distinguishes” in the Songs of Chu. That also laid the sentimental tradition for Chinese literature. From then on, autumn melancholy has become one of the most important themes in classical Chinese literature. Pursuant to “Lovesickness Return Theme on Autumn and Chinese Literature”, Chinese feelings of autumn melancholy consist of lovesickness return in farming life or emotional cognition on the meaning of their brief lifetime. Moreover, it may combine both, which causes most literati's autumn melancholy feeling arising from wandering far away from home, being frustrated for their talents or feeling down. [2] Jipeng HE thinks that Yu SONG continued the spirit of “The Lament” composed by Yuan QU in his “Nine Distinguishes” with the actual theme of “Scholars had no success”. But even so, it still founded the typical autumn melancholy of mourning for physical decline and life elapse dominated by space-time consciousness. [3] Later, his works regretting the fleeting life and nothing achieved emerged endlessly. Afterwards, the extension was made in autumn melancholy connotation, such as the sadness in the course of wandering, loneliness brought by lovesickness and bleakness caused by loneliness. Lifang ZHU believes that with the development and intensification of autumn melancholy, except for lament on life frustration, it also expresses separation sorrow,

lovesickness of relatives and friends, boudoir repinings, frustrated feelings, sorrow in old aged as well as bleakness arising from the defeated country and lost home.[4]

3. The establishment of autumn melancholy literature in Japan

The enthusiasm for learning Tang culture soared to a unprecedented height from Heian era in Japan. The imperial examination system to decide recruitment according to the merits and demerits of poems was also imitated by Japanese government in choosing officers. Those poets were much appreciated by the emperor, always serving him and attending poetry banquet with a great quantity of imperially assigned poems on singing praises left. [5]

A research was conducted on the imperially assigned poems at the Double Ninth Festival Poem Banquet held in 14th year of Saga Dynasty, which thought that these poems can be divided into three stages including early Saga Dynasty, late Saga Dynasty and the period after Saga abdication. Thereinto, the poems in the first period had extremely similar forms and themes with those in Tang Dynasty. The second period shall be deemed as the late Saga Dynasty and poems on autumn melancholy occurred in this period with its concept influencing waka. Its features were influenced by “Autumn Poem” composed by Yue PAN, which expressed autumn sorrow and oldness and weakness bleakness. Hence, “autumn” and “melancholy” came to stay at classical Japanese literature, which may purely express the bleakness of autumn landscape or regret the fleeting life.

4. Autumn melancholy in “The Tale of Genji”

Motoori Norinaga, the famous litterateur in Edo era proposed that “objective grief” was the main idea in “The Tale of Genji” and pointed out that it was the most remarkable one among all stories in “Abstract on The Tale of Genji”. It can be deemed incomparable. Any story in previous tales was neither so touching like this one, nor detailed and deep. Only this tale composed particularly deep object sadness, which must be written in a devoted way. “Object” means objective things while “sadness” indicates subjective feelings on objective things. That contains happy, sad, touching and other natural emotions, which is reflected extremely in “The Tale of Genji”. Distinct climate in island country and specific geographical conditions allow Japanese to be fond of nature and be sensitive to seasonal change since antiquity. The mid-year events, character’s fate and even the pattern of architectures have inseparable relation with seasons. Shibuya Rongyi considered there is a rather deliberate seasonal setting on significant events related to the fate of characters in “The Tale of Genji”. For example, most birth and encounter happened in spring while death and separation occur in autumn. Of that, Kiritsubo Consort, the mother of Genji deceased at the end of summer but Emperor Kiritsubo’s missing on her was set in autumn. The parting at death with Yukari and the homesickness of Genji exiling to Suma also happened in autumn. It can be seen that autumn in Heian era continued to give priority to sadness. As indicated by Li WANG in “Deep Sigh from Soul”, the cultural circle in East Asia is mainly influenced by Chinese culture with generality on the sentiment of autumn. People tend to consider autumn as a sorrowful season. Autumn of bleakness shall be deemed as the setoff of helpless sorrow in “The Tale of Genji”, which empowers the writer to combine the creation theme with the autumn melancholy in “objective sadness” and allows us to experience aesthetic feelings of “objective sadness” from those soul sighs. [6]

First of all, Emperor Kiritsubo’s missing on his mother was set in autumn. It was now autumn, and the evening winds blew chill and cold. The Emperor- who, when he saw the first Prince, could not refrain from thinking of the younger one- became more thoughtful than ever; and, on this evening, he sent Yugei-no Miâbu⁹ to repeat his inquiries.

Now, bereaved of this daughter, she dwelt alone; and the grounds were overgrown with weeds, which here and there lay prostrated by the violence of the winds; while over them, fair as elsewhere, gleamed the mild lustre of the impartial moon.

The moon was sailing down westward and the cool breeze was waving the herbage to and fro, in which numerous mushi were plaintively singing.[7] All descriptions set off sorrow and bleak atmosphere by virtue of autumn scenery, reflecting the character’s inner sorrow and missing.

Greatly differentiating from Yu SONG's "Scholars had no success", it was sorrowful for missed love. It can not be denied that the plot in "Kiritsubo" was significantly affected by Juyi BAI's "Everlasting Regret". However, comparing with Emperor Xuanzong of Tang's missing expressed in "when in vernal breeze were peach and plum full-blown or when in autumn rain parasol leaves were shed?", Emperor Kiritsubo's missing and sorrow almost emerged in autumn. It had to acknowledge that it was a deliberate setting instead of an accidental one and can be witnessed that autumn melancholy has harvested intensification and development in Japanese literature.

Yukari, the most important person in Genji's life also passed away in autumn. In Rites of the Sacred Law, Yukari on her deathbed was described as follows:"At dusk, a terrible, chilling wind began to blow, and just as she propped herself up on an armrest, thinking that she would gaze out at her garden, she saw Genji arriving. "How good that you're able to get up today! Her Majesty's visit has apparently cheered you, has it not?" She felt bad for him-he looked so happy whenever she was briefly feeling better that it moved her to imagine how devastated he would be when the end came. How brief the moment when you see me sitting up As brief as the time that dew clings to bush clover Before being blown off and scattered by the wind⁹ It was an apt comparison, for the dew clung precariously to the stems of bush clover in her ."[8]This chapter has a remarkable feature, namely, dew was used as the metaphor of fleeting lifetime on her deathbed, which also presented in classical Chinese literature time and again, such as "A Short-Song Ballad" composed by CAO Cao.

Before wine, sing a song;
How long is life, how long?
It seems like morning dew
With bygones gone with woe.[9]

The dew mentioned hereby does not indicate the season but, in classical Chinese literature, dew in autumn generally refers to "White Dew", for example, Fu DU composed "Tonight we start the season of white dew. The moon is just as bright as in my homeland." "Dew" mentioned by Yukari in "The Tale of Genji" meant "dew on silvergrass", which is very rare in classical Chinese literature. "Silvergrass" is one kind of plant in autumn, therefore, dew on silvergrass is also deemed as autumn dew. It is used as the metaphor of fleeting and changeable life, which add a ray of sadness. Genji recited in his poem:"Our lives are like fragile dewdrops vying To disappear ... would that no time elapse Between the first one to go and the last ".[10]

Wind dew is adopted hereby. Wind indicates autumn breeze given that it is autumn now. Dew will disappear soon under the work of autumn breeze. This word makes people further experience the sorrow and bleakness in autumn. In addition, Queen Akishi also mentioned "Who can look at this world, so like the droplets That cannot resist the blasts of autumn winds And think that only dew on the top leaves fades " in waka[11]

Autumn dew is directly adopted hereby, inserting the seasonal background locally and giving priority to the giant sadness to be brought by dying Yukari. "Dew on silvergrass", "Wind dew" and "Autumn dew" respectively used in three wakes, which all reflect the background in autumn and the priority given by the writer Murasaki Shikibu on the death of Yukari. In terms of description, the combination of autumn melancholy in classical Chinese literature and fleeting "dew" further intensifies the regret on brief lifetime. However, it purely exclaims over the fleeting and changeable lifetime instead of expressing their setback arising from not being appreciated like ancient Chinese poets.

From what has mentioned above, Emperor's Kiritsubo's autumn melancholy reflects his missing on his deceased wife while Yukari laments on the short lifetime. "The Tale of Genji" continues pains of separation, missing and fleeting lifetime in the autumn melancholy theme of classical Chinese literature but break away from the concept of "Scholars had no success". In consideration of expression, it combines seasons and seasonal scenery, which shapes the unique expression on autumn melancholy for Japanese literature.

5. Autumn melancholy presentation in "The Tale of Genji"

After she died, those who were not especially close to her, and who thus had no reason to mourn,

were still moved to tears this particular autumn by the melancholy sounds of the season—the chirruping of the crickets or the sighing of the wind.[12]

That is a passage describing the feelings of people around after she died. Among which, people who she did not know well can't help crying when hearing wind roaring and chirping. This description closely combines people's missing on her and autumn. They can't help missing her with sorrow at the sight of autumn scenery and at hearing of chirping. Previous classical Chinese literature all express their autumn melancholy by means of poems. In classical Japanese literature, autumn melancholy also reflects in "Manyōshū" while "The Tale of Genji" applies the feelings to legendary literature and creates new mode for the rendering of character's emotions.

Certainly, autumn described in "The Tale of Genji" can't exist without the reference of classical Chinese literature. Its description on autumn scenery also reflects its acceptance and transfiguration on classical Chinese literature. For example, "dew" expounded in Chapter three is a representative element of autumn melancholy. Furthermore, chirping is adopted in autumn waka in "The Tale of Genji" to render autumn melancholy atmosphere, which shall be considered as inseparable factors of autumn melancholy. The discussion on autumn in "The Tale of Genji" and factors on autumn melancholy in classical Chinese literature can be seen as below.

Bell crickets seem to cry their hearts out
But the tears I weep are not confined
To a single long night in autumn

A caller from beyond the clouds brings dewy tears
And greater woe to this hut amidst tangled reeds
Echoing with the lonely chirring of crickets.[13]

The first sentence was composed when Myōbu received orders to visit Kiritsubo Consort's parent after she die while the latter one was the poem made by the mother of Kiritsubo Consort. The former uses bell crickets as the metaphor of her mother's crying and the latter adopts chirring crickets to set off the silent and sorrowful mind in autumn night.

There are poems of the Tang Dynasty combining chirring crickets in autumn and tears, such as crickets chirr in a subtle way with touching sound, their chirring is intermittent in wild grass so they move under my bed with the same mood with me. How can I not cry in view of a long away from home, the abandoned wife is difficult to fall asleep till morning, The sad silk music and the exciting wind music are not as touching as the innocent voice, as composed by Fu DU. [14]

"It is hard to sleep alone at night, the crickets chirr in a mutual way. Long-term crying results in no tears and snot, autumn dew is dripping", composed by Jiao MENG [15].

Qing LIANG thinks that Chinese poets usually use chirping to express autumn sorrow. However, it is rare to see that use chirping as the metaphor of people's crying in Chinese poems but it can be seen in Japanese waka set in a common way. That illustrates that Japan waka is more creative than Chinese poems in terms of expression. [16]

"The Tale of Genji" above uses chirping as the metaphor of people's crying so as to set off autumn melancholy, which inherits the tradition of Japanese literature.

6. Conclusions

Autumn melancholy is an important theme in classical Chinese literature. Based on the analysis and research on autumn melancholy described in "The Tale of Genji", the feelings of classical Japanese literature is greatly affected by classical Chinese literature. That is to say, autumn is distressing, which does not mean that classical Japanese imitate in a blind way but explore the unique autumn melancholy belonging to their nationality. It gets rid of "scholars had no success", combining "dew" and autumn closely, further sighing the fleeting lifetime, absorbing autumn melancholy into legendary literature and following the traditions of previous waka. That fully reflects their acceptance and transfiguration on classical Chinese literature.

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