

Comparative Study of the Features of "Returning to National Characteristics" in Japanese Aestheticism and the Beijing School in China

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Abstract: Based on the shared literary proposition of "art for art's sake" in Japanese aestheticism and the Beijing School, this paper analyzes the similarities and differences in the two schools' features of "returning to national characteristics," explores the influence of classical cultural ideas on their respective national literature, and identifies common features that are manifested in different cultural origins.

Keywords: Aestheticism, The Beijing School, National Characteristics, Classicism.

1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, a literary trend centered around aestheticism emerged in the Japanese literary scene. However, the beauty pursued by Japanese aestheticism was unrelated to traditional moral concepts. Writers such as Haruo Sato, Junichiro Tanizaki, and Kafu Nagai pursued strong stimulation and explored abnormal pleasures and pathological sensual experiences in their works. They even pursued a sense of value reversal by praising sinfulness. Although Japanese aestheticism literature did not form a more complete theoretical system, its works were based on the suffering in life and expressed a radical rebellion against a better life, embodying a spiritual concept and pursuit of Japanese writers in the later period.

The "Beijing School" was a group of liberal writers who continued to be active in Beijing after the center of China's new literature shifted south to Shanghai in the 1930s. The basic characteristics of the "Beijing School" were a focus on life, a distance from political struggles, and an emphasis on the uniqueness of art. They advocated for "pure literary taste," reflecting the concept of literary ontology, with "appropriateness," "moderation," and "harmony" as the basic principles of aesthetic consciousness.

The national characteristics of literature refer to the features reflected in the literature of a particular ethnic group that are different from those of other ethnic groups. The 20th century was an important period for the construction and return of literary national characteristics. Based on the common literary propositions of Japanese aestheticism and the Beijing School, this article explores the comparability of the two literary genres in terms of returning to national characteristics. By analyzing their similarities and differences and delving into the specific historical and cultural contexts in which they existed, this article reveals the deep reasons behind the phenomena of similarity and difference, including historical, cultural, social, political, economic, and personal life experiences. Understanding Japanese literature and culture and the foundation of our own national culture can be helpful in understanding the issue of literary national characteristics.

2. Analysis of Literary Characteristics

Literary characteristics are an essential component of literary works, endowing them with unique artistic charm and expressiveness, making them more emotionally engaging, resonant, and thought-provoking. The following text will analyze and compare the similarities and differences between the literary characteristics of Japanese aestheticism and Chinese "Jingpai," helping us to better understand their literary characteristics that reflect a return to their respective cultural roots.

2.1. Identical points

This article will mainly analyze and compare the similarities between the literary characteristics of Japanese aestheticism and Chinese "Jingpai" in three aspects: 1. Non-political nature, 2. Depiction of natural beauty, and 3. Reflection of the conflict between two civilizations.

2.1.1. Non-political thought

One of the traditions in Japanese literature is its non-political nature. Compared to other countries, ancient Japan had a relatively stable political situation with a hereditary imperial system, and there were no frequent changes of power or foreign invasions. Therefore, literature did not need to be used as a political tool, nor did it need to focus on national concerns. The *Kojiki* by Yasumaro no Taketoshi was a royal command to compile a history, but its content was mostly unrelated to politics and focused on love stories. The earliest poetry collection in Japan, the *Manyoshu*, included over 4,000 poems, but few of them addressed social and political issues, with only one poem, the "Poverty Question and Answer Song," expressing themes of people's livelihood hardships. The later *Kokin Wakashu* was written in the same style as the *Manyoshu*, with both works consisting of twenty volumes, and mostly describing natural landscapes and love stories. The *Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, as a representative work of Japanese classical literature, depicts the love experiences of Genji's life. It not only reflects the realistic aesthetic ideology of "writing the truth," but also embodies Japan's unique romantic and melancholic "mono no aware" ideology, which initiated Japan's "aesthetic" tradition and made "aesthetics" the homeland of Japanese literature.

The non-political tradition of Japanese literature led

Japanese aestheticism to believe that beauty is detached from social consciousness and is a pure form of beauty, usually expressed as natural beauty. In Kafu Nagai's natural descriptions, the beauty of nature is like strolling through the streets of Tokyo and admiring the fluttering fallen leaves, or exploring the quiet paths alone after the rain, or listening to the sparse insect chirping at dusk. He experienced the charm of the Edo period along the Sumida River, felt the brilliance and diversity of nature in foreign lands, and contemplated the true meaning of life in eternal nature. These experiences coalesced into an image of an old man strolling in the natural beauty of Tokyo wearing low wooden clogs and holding an oiled paper umbrella. He worshipped nature, advocated for a return to nature, and sought a healthy mode of coexistence between humans and nature. From the melancholy rain soaked into the works or the colorful foreign scenery, people can feel Kafu Nagai's desolate mood and appreciate the philosophical notion of "the harmony of heaven and humanity" contained in his works.

In the 1930s, left-wing writers emphasized the political service of literature, while the Hai Pai advocated for the commercialization of literature. At that time, due to the southward shift of China's cultural and political center, the Jing Pai belonged to a "marginalized" region, far from the center of China's conflicting struggles. Most of the Jing Pai's writers lived on university campuses, less affected by commercial and party influences, and thus formed a calm and simple writing style. In the turbulent era of war and chaos, Jing Pai literature stayed away from the utilitarianism and commercialization of politics and made every effort to become a "pure literature."

This form of "pure literature" is depicted by Feng Menglong's Oudongchuan River, constructed by Shen Congwen's Xiangxi world, and portrayed by Lu Xun's Henan Guoyuan City. Jing Pai writers jointly constructed a local fiction poetic and prose culture with the beauty of landscapes and human goodness as their main writing objects, using healthy and simple natural forms, clean and beautiful landscape paintings, and vivid and eternal images to maintain the aesthetic position of literature.

2.1.2. Portrayal of natural beauty

In the aforementioned "non-political thought," it was mentioned that lifelike descriptions of natural scenery play a significant role in the works of both sides. As the best way to display literature for the sake of art, the free expression of natural beauty not only plays a vital role in opposing the utilitarianism of literary politics but also has high aesthetic value in itself, showcasing a natural world that is highly desirable.

In Kawabata Yasunari's "The Flowering Plum Tree," he creates a mysterious garden fragrant with flowers, "The flowering plum tree has already shed its blossoms, and the fresh leaves of the new trees have suddenly lost their luster. The rhododendrons, which have been blooming for a long time, have also lost some of their colors. At this time, the green of the pine trees gradually spreads out, and the golden pollen floats in the wind like smoke. It is now May and has been over ten days. If flower lovers occasionally visit my abandoned house, they will feel the fluttering fragrance of flowers in this butterfly-filled courtyard. This fragrance is neither as noble and elegant as plum blossoms or pear blossoms, nor as cool and refreshing as lilacs or roses, nor as fragrant and tempting as lilies." The author does not directly describe the scent of the flowers, but rather creates a

confusing fragrance through comparisons of the fragrances of plum blossoms, pear blossoms, lilacs, and lilies. In "Ukiyo-e Appreciation," there are dreamlike scenes, "The postures of the geisha watching the flowing water in a daze at the bamboo window make me happy. The night view of the riverbank where the paper lanterns selling late-night snacks lonely stops is intoxicating. The cuckoos crying in the rain at night, the autumn leaves falling in the rain, the falling flowers drifting in the wind, the snow on the mountain road at dusk, everything that is impermanent, hopeless, and meaningless, all of these things are friendly to me and make me meditative." The desolation and sadness of the cuckoo's falling leaves, and the heaviness and slowness of the bell ringing with the snow, make the lonely author appear like a wandering poet on a mountain road, exploring this deep and distant rainy night.

In addition, Edo civilization had a strong influence on the natural beauty creation of Kawabata Yasunari. In his pursuit of the splendid Edo atmosphere, Kawabata also incorporated a keen and fresh perception of Japan's rural atmosphere. The Sumida River, with its natural scenery of wind, flowers, snow, and moon, cultivated a unique Edo literature and became an important symbol of Japan's natural environment. The traces of the Sumida River can be seen everywhere in Kawabata's works, and it can be said that the Sumida River has become an internal symbol of Kawabata's literature. For example, the "Toward the Island" section records many documents about the scenery along the Sumida River. Looking back at the literary works of this period, such as the "Tokyo Customs Gazette" of 1901, which records the beauty of the Sumida River when the cherry blossoms bloom, and "Spring Ink Dike" by Lu Banxing, which depicts the ink and wash scenery, as well as the "Edo Flourishing Chronicle," "Ink and Wash Flower Viewing Chronicle," "Wandering Ink and Wash Chronicle," and so on from the Edo period, all reflect the natural environment on both sides of the Sumida River during the Edo period.

The Kyoto school writers, such as Zhou Zuoren, Fei Ming, and Shen Congwen, adhered to the philosophy of nature, weaving picturesque rural landscapes, recalling the poetic countryside, and praising the beauty of human nature and emotions in the expression of natural beauty.

In Shen Congwen's "Border Town," the landscape description is "There is a painting in the text, and there is poetry in the painting." "The place of Chamei is built on water and mountains, with one side near the mountain. The city wall on this side is like a long snake crawling along the mountain. On the side facing the water, some space is left beside the river outside the city wall to set up a wharf for small boats." In the delicate strokes, the daily life of people in the border town who live by the mountains and waters and the beautiful natural scenery of the Chamei region are depicted vividly and realistically. Apart from aesthetics, the novel has no other narrative function.

In his other novel, "The Long River," the description of the desolate rural scenery reveals a moving brightness, "For half a month, half of the tree leaves have fallen. As long as there is a little breeze, there are always some leaves that have left the branches, fluttering in the high air like red and purple butterflies. The sunlight is mild, with a hint of coldness, and the scenery becomes clearer, sparse, and desolate. The river is like a silver ribbon, winding through the mountains and valleys, and the distant mountains are shrouded in mist, adding a sense of mystery to the scene." Shen Congwen's

description of the natural scenery is not just a simple depiction of the environment but also expresses the emotions and moods of the characters in the story.

In conclusion, the portrayal of natural beauty and scenery is a common theme in Chinese literature, and it has played a significant role in promoting literature for art's sake and opposing utilitarianism in literary politics. The lifelike description of natural scenery not only has high aesthetic value in itself but also reflects the philosophical and emotional depth of the author's works.

2.1.3. Reflect the conflict between the two civilizations

Yongai Kofu once said, "The patriotism we recognize should be devoted to perpetually protecting the beauty of our homeland and striving to purify our national language as our top priority." In his novel "Competitive Beauty," he used a magnificent and exquisite writing style to depict the unique social customs and human emotions of the flower streets and alleys by telling the stories of geishas such as Kikuchiy, Kimidragon, and Juyoshi who each did their best to pursue love. The novel is like a moving ukiyo-e painting that leaves a lasting impression on the reader. Additionally, by setting the stage on Shinbashi-Kita Street, the author intentionally highlights the intersection of old and new customs. Kofu's works not only contain the romanticism of a wandering poet but also the emotions of a writer of popular fiction, and are imbued with the sharpness of a critic of civilization. Although the world he depicts in his writing is beautiful, it is one that is regressing. The ethical and moral factors hidden in his works are also in opposition to the times. The author even nostalgically looks back at the past, making it his supreme thought.

In the short story "Sumidagawa," Kofu fills the story with the flavor of the Edo period and uses a comparison between Edo and modern-day Tokyo to reminisce about the past, opposing the phenomenon of decay and disappearance of past famous places. His "lonely and sad poetic flavor" is a combination of both conceptual and realistic meanings that are different from those of historians. Therefore, the various character and scenery descriptions in this work vividly depict the "abandoned beauty" of the commoner settlement area along the Sumida River. "Sumidagawa" shines with a unique light on the Japanese literary scene, which was then devoid of poetic sentiment. It is in this direction that Kofu ultimately developed his unique style of combining the depiction of social customs and poetic feelings with criticism of civilization.

When focusing on depicting rural landscapes filled with romantic colors and humanistic feelings, the Kyoto School writers also wrote a considerable number of urban criticism novels. The dual portrayal of rural and urban areas gives the Kyoto School a double cultural and aesthetic feature. On the one hand, under the strong impact of modernity, the traditional cultural aesthetic of the native land is gradually disappearing, and they sing a dirge. The countryside they depict is not a realistic record, but rather one filled with idealized, pastoral praise. On the other hand, they are both bewildered and doubtful about modernity, resulting in anxiety about it. The city is emphasized as an accompaniment to the countryside, and in their works, it is mostly portrayed as a cultural symbol with negative connotations, rather than as a sign of progress in modern civilization. Many times, the city lacks a dynamic historical perspective in the writings of Kyoto School writers, resulting in a strong contrast between their attachment to the countryside and their weariness of the

city.

"The rural life depicted by the Kyoto School writers is the source of traditional culture and the dwelling place of the lonely and anxious soul of modern man, as well as the source of spiritual inspiration that drives them forward." The majority of the works by Fei Ming describe the rural life that has not been eroded or polluted by modern civilization and poetically glorify the rural areas with the feudal system of the old society. Among them, "The Bridge" portrays the naivety of children from the perspective of characters such as Kobayashi and Koto. Shen Congwen's work "Border Town" embodies a clear Taoist style, such as the old ferryman's simplicity, gentleness, and unconstrained nature, as well as the romanticism of the two elderly people. However, when examining his urban novels such as "Mr. Huanhu" and "Lansheng and His Wife," the themes are centered around the contradictions and conflicts between urban life and human existence. Therefore, the image of the city is negative, being excluded, accused, and satirized.

Historical development has shown that modern civilization, sparked by industrialization, is an important stage in the progress of human civilization. It changes the production and living methods of underdeveloped natural economies and embodies the spirit of science and rationality. Although modern civilization brings undeniable shortcomings, it is also a reflection of historical progress. Although Japanese aestheticism and the Kyoto School both emphasize the return to literary national character, they failed to view modern civilization objectively with a historical attitude. The city is the product of their one-sided understanding and subjective narration, which also limits the literary national character they pursue.

2.2. Distinct point

Regarding the differences between the literary characteristics of Japanese aestheticism and Chinese "Jingpai," this article will mainly analyze and compare in two aspects: 1. The admiration of feminine beauty in Japanese aestheticism compared to the universal beauty of humanity in "Jingpai," and 2. The non-moralistic nature of aestheticism versus the moderate and peaceful thinking of "Jingpai."

2.2.1. Comparison of the worship of Japanese female beauty and the universal human beauty in the Beijing School

"When Japanese people are anxious about their national characteristics, they will unconsciously turn to Shintoism, which naturally leads them to the female goddess who represents the central axis of Shintoism. In Japanese mythological history, the image of female gods has a long-standing tradition, among which Amaterasu, the sun goddess, holds an extremely high position. In later legends, she is depicted as a sacred and compassionate mother, becoming the source of the Oedipus complex and the worship of women in Japanese culture. The image of the goddess is passed down in the form of ancient myths and is strongly reflected in the mythology tradition centered on female gods, which constitutes a strong yearning and reminiscence for gentle and beautiful women in Japan's aestheticism cultural return to the nation.

In Junichiro Tanizaki's famous masterpiece "The Makioka Sisters," the blind protagonist Sawako is described as having "the eyes of the Buddha Bodhisattva, whose merciful eyes that look down on all living beings are always half-closed, so perhaps after getting used to it, we feel that they are more

compassionate and grateful than open or closed eyes, sometimes even awe-inspiring. So when Sawako closes her eyelids, she also makes people feel like an exceptionally gentle and elegant woman, like worshipping the Kannon in an old painting, with her subtle compassion." The work depicts the female protagonist as a symbol of beauty through delicate portrayal, while the author indirectly describes men's worship of female beauty, believing that this is the most beautiful thing. Tanizaki is good at amplifying the surface beauty and making people deeply immersed in it. In Japanese aestheticism literature, "The Makioka Sisters" shines with its romantic classical style and pure pursuit of beauty.

In addition, Tanizaki, on the basis of inheriting the traditional worship of women in Japanese classical works, added his own reflections on Japanese national culture. "Returning to the classics" is not only a return of aesthetic thought but also integrates the writer's feelings in modern life, linking emotional life and literary creation. After a long process of writing and exploration, "The Makioka Sisters" by Tanizaki presents a profound understanding of the nation and life, as well as the pursuit of vast beauty.

Throughout Chinese history, the idea of "promoting the world and benefiting the people" has been pervasive, and the pursuit of social prosperity and people's well-being has been the goal of ancient sages. The humanistic thought that benefits the people has influenced many intellectuals. Beijing, as an ancient city with a profound cultural heritage, after the baptism of the New Culture Movement, has laid a solid cultural foundation for the creation of Beijing School writers. Beijing School not only depicts beautiful natural landscapes but also pays great attention to the simple and natural human nature. Their works mostly present vivid portraits of ordinary people. Writers spend a lot of ink depicting the daily lives of uneducated ordinary people, showing the simple, natural, primitive beauty of human nature and human emotions unique to life, expressing love and intimacy for mundane matters and ordinary people.

For example, Shen Congwen's "Border Town" uses warm strokes to depict a love story between a widow and a sailor, highlighting the harmony between natural and human nature, affirming the normal primitive desires of human beings between Bai Zi and the widow. Looking at the various characters in Shen Congwen's works, some are fishermen and sailors, and some are widows and prostitutes. Although they are born humble, they are kind and simple, and they value friendship and loyalty. Although they live in poverty, they are warm and hospitable. In Fei Ming's novels, the images of shepherds, old men, and village girls all show a simple and natural inner spirit. In contrast, the characters in Wang Zengqi's works may have some friction and grievances in their lives, but they are full of primitive simplicity and sincerity in their sense of right and wrong. The characters in the Beijing School writers' works emerge from the simple and peaceful natural environment, expressing a view of life that is tolerant, free, and unassuming, and they share a primitive and simple beauty and human sentimentality. Most of them are "noble savages."

Through comparison, it is not difficult to find that due to the different cultural roots, Japanese aestheticism focuses on the delicate portrayal of female beauty, while Beijing School writers use their brushstrokes to depict universal human nature. Therefore, the two schools exhibit significant differences in their choices of character portrayal when returning to the literary national identity.

2.2.2. The non-moralistic nature of aestheticism and the middle way and peaceful thinking in the Beijing School

"The Tale of Genji" by Murasaki Shikibu tells the love story of the protagonist, Hikaru Genji. Throughout his life of pursuing women, there are many "immoral relationships," such as the affair between Genji and his stepmother, Fujitsubo. In Genji's inner world, there is both a longing and a sense of helplessness in wanting to see Fujitsubo, as well as a sorrowful and lonely feeling of missing her that can't be eliminated. Moreover, there is a deep love for Fujitsubo, but also a sense of fear and dread for violating societal norms. The author uses these immoral relationships to express the tragic nature of life.

Japanese aestheticism writers have returned to this "immoral thinking." They do not write with a moral obligation to establish ethical standards or a system of moral thinking. Instead, they pursue a value-reversed happiness by depicting a large number of people with sexual confusion, portraying their complex emotional and attitudinal changes. The works of Nagai Kafu often reveal a lingering and sentimental mood, and eroticism, such as the abnormal relationship between a female hostess and her destitute father in "Melting Snow" and the contrasting sorrows of two wives whose husbands are having affairs in "Two Wives." Kafu once said, "If we want to create a perfect and ideal life, I firmly believe that we must first conduct special research on the dark side of human nature, just as a court must carefully investigate the evidence and origin of a crime to uphold justice. Therefore, I will faithfully describe the many facts of desire, cunning, and violence that arise from ancestral inheritance and circumstances, without any scruples."

The "harmony," "moderation," and "appropriateness" of the Kyoto school's aesthetic consciousness are largely influenced by the traditional Confucian doctrine of the Middle Way. The Middle Way emphasizes moderation and balance, and people should follow the "Middle Way" and act impartially, not pursuing personal interests too much or social benefits too much. This ideology is concentrated in the Confucian ethical concepts of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust."

Although Shen Congwen's works involve many descriptions and praise of sexual love and emotions, he does not excessively exaggerate or indulge in expressing emotions. On the contrary, he pays great attention to emotional moderation. In "Border Town," he deals with love that conforms to traditional morality rather than lust, reflecting the ancient Confucian teaching of "starting from emotions and ending with propriety and etiquette." Shen Congwen opposes some "romantic" writers who are artificial and overuse words to render emotions. He once said, "I think that whether it is to express ideals or explore issues, since they are all related to creation, even if it is in the form of a novel, the content of dialogue, action, and so on must be appropriately controlled, and excessive extravagance should be avoided. Detailed observation is indispensable, but everything must start from the needs."

Fei Ming deeply studied the peaceful thoughts of Buddhism, and through Zen practice, his inner world became calm and quiet, enabling him to better comprehend the beauty of nature. He often uses activities such as washing clothes by the river, wandering in the fields, and walking in the rain to purify the soul in his works. This contemplative and peaceful mindset is what Zen seeks, and it is also the cornerstone of

Fei Ming's art and aesthetics, reflected in the simple and profound beauty of his works. To a large extent, the Zen Buddhist philosophy has contributed to Fei Ming's literary creation.

Through comparison, we can see that under different cultural influences, Japanese aestheticism works are filled with a large number of immoral sexual phenomena, while the Kyoto school nurtures literary works with peaceful and moderate thinking. In the cultural return of literary nationality, the two schools present a polarized difference, which is the difference in cultural roots and the difference in writers' ideological attitudes in different eras.

3. Conclusion: The Significance of The Topic

The Japanese aestheticism literature that emerged in the early 20th century boldly broke through the areas that literature had previously been afraid to touch upon, using a unique style to express the authors' self-awareness. On the one hand, it used a unique aesthetic perspective to express the reality level, and on the other hand, it used the hedonistic literary characteristics to conceal the inner fragility. The Kyoto School in the 1930s, amidst social and political turmoil, refused to let literature become a political or commercial appendage. Instead, they emphasized the value of life, focused on nature, and pursued a quiet and serene aesthetic consciousness and artistic proposition.

Whether it is Japanese aestheticism or the Kyoto School, their literary creations have an obvious tendency towards classicism. They are not fleeting expressions, but representatives of a literary period, each reflecting a cultural situation in Japan and China at the time, and their influence at the time and even now cannot be ignored.

"Similarity makes people see the brilliance of humanity and common aesthetic psychology; dissimilarity not only makes people see the differences in national psychology and aesthetic psychology, but also makes people aware of the characteristics of Chinese and Western literature, which is more conducive to mutual learning and complementing each other." Through the analysis of the similarities and differences in the two schools' return to national characteristics, we can explore the influence of classical cultural thought on their respective national literature. Different cultural roots form the differences in literary features, as well as the similarities that emerge in the return to national characteristics.

Although the specific literary practices of the two schools of "art for art's sake" are different, their common advocacy for "art for art's sake" has allowed the two schools of literature to maintain their independence and not become political and economic appendages. It has enlightened people that literature has a unique development path, which was rare under the historical context of that time. Furthermore, the diversity of literary creations from the two schools has created a flourishing situation of "letting a hundred flowers bloom" in literature, rather than the dominance of a single approach of "romanticism is necessary for non-reality."

More importantly, the conscious convergence of the two

schools of writers in returning to national characteristics, reassembling memories with a nostalgia for their hometowns, embodies a symbol of national consciousness as a spiritual home. They strive to understand the ideal state of existence in the gap between reality and imagination, and to rethink the ways of self-redemption and national soul renewal. This may provide some inspiration for intellectuals who are currently facing the challenges of the times.

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