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How to Criticize Classic Chinese Art in the Horizon of Western Theory?—Taking the Aesthetic of Irony in Late Ming Literature and Painting as an Example

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ABSTRACT

As a world-famous Sinologist, Andrew H. Plaks is committed to using the research method of comparative literature to analyze classical Chinese literary works with the help of Western narratology, thus realizing the fusion of critical perspective and textual context while producing an innovative critical theory. Among them, the ironic aesthetics, which firstly proposed by Plaks in *The Aesthetic of Irony in Late Ming Literature and Painting*, could be regarded as the best embodiment of the characteristics and value of his theory. On the foundation of ironic aesthetics, Plaks focuses on exploring the internal relationship between literature and painting in the late Ming Dynasty, and restores them to the historical and cultural context at that time, thus revealing the identity and subjectivity of artists in the late Ming Dynasty. In this research, I will discuss the legitimacy and rationality of Plaks' theory by specifically analyzing his statements of ironic aesthetics and investigating the origin of irony, thus exploring the doable ways of using Western theory to criticize classical Chinese art.

Introduction

Andrew H. Plaks once said his study was "for Chinese literary heritage with foreign academia, maybe just to fill the understanding of the domestic scholars and readers"(Plaks, 2011). In other words, his research based on the perspective of the other (western theories), whose purpose was to research the literature and culture of the opposite side—China. Although he claimed that this method could be appropriately applied to the classical Chinese art, as he later demonstrated in *The Chinese Narrative*. However, whether the study of ironic aesthetic is feasible, and whether it is available to provide a significant growing point for the criticism of classical Chinese art from the comparative perspective. Before responding to the above two questions, a critical analysis of Plaks's arguments is necessarily needed.

Plaks' statements of "Aesthetic of Irony"

At the very beginning of *The Aesthetic of Irony in Late Ming Literature and Painting*, Plaks endowed it with the necessity and rationality of conducting aesthetic research on Chinese classical novels. In his view, popular novels and short stories from the Ming and Qing dynasties were excluded from the conceptual boundaries of Chinese aesthetic models for a long time. However, in reality, they were closely associated with elegant artistic forms such as painting and calligraphy. That is, the late Ming literature and painting had the same aesthetic tendency. Plaks claimed, from the point of producer, artists of the above two civilian were the same (in fact, many of the same individuals) or at least involved in these two fields.

In other words, both painting and literature generated by the aesthetic trend of "the sense of novelty (or newness)", even though the former is nonverbal while the latter is verbal. Moreover, the sense of novelty and strange compositional techniques represented in the novel and painting, which called the aesthetics of irony by Plaks. "Irony generally points to a standard of signification beyond the level of surface presentation. But by its very nature irony also refuses to articulate that potential, a fancy home brigade it in a state of provocative



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indeterminacy" (Plaks,1991). Therefore, through fiction and imitation, ironic rhetoric in the novel raises questions about specific daily experience, presents a broad field of potential meaning. Besides, it also provides readers with a rich space for interpretation to some extent. Most importantly, the aesthetic basis of the novel also changes from presenting truth directly or indirectly to think about subjectivity.

In Plaks' opinion, there were two main reasons why this phenomenon happened in the late Ming dynasty. On the one hand, China, in the 16th and 17th centuries, made remarkable progress in critical theory, which then influenced various fields of culture (i.e. literature, art and history). The critical works of this period were particularly interested in structure and rhetoric and devoted themselves to the interpretation of the text between the lines. It was a new critical consciousness of media, subject and meaning that some painters "spoken". On the other hand, the contradictory relationship between artistic creativity and traditions led artists to shift from the traditional "model" to the affirmation of spontaneity and originality. That is to say, what the painters of the 16th and 17th centuries wanted to express through various ironic insinuations was their self-conscious gaze towards their identity as artists.

In conclusion, based on the ironic aesthetics in the novel, Plaks found the similar aesthetics of irony was also presented in the paintings of the late Ming Dynasty, and they had an inseparable internal relationship. The ironic aesthetics in painting originated from the critical mentality at that time, which was rooted in the critics' interpretation of the novel. Therefore, seemingly unrelated arts shared the same specific aesthetic tendency, which in turn could be attributed to a western concept, namely, "aesthetics of irony".

The origin of irony

After particularly analyzing literature and painting in the late Ming Dynasty, Plaks concluded their common artistic trend as the irony of aesthetics. However, what is the concept of irony in western theories? So I will conduct the origin of irony in the following. Etymologically, the English word "irony" is from ancient Greek "Eiron". "Eiron" and "Alazon" are common characters in ancient Greek comedies. The former feigned ignorance and spoke foolishly in front of Alazon who supposedly clever, but it turned out that Alazon was the stupid and boastful one. In the Republic, Plato recorded Socratic irony, in which he first admitted that he was ignorant, and by asking questions he finally proved that his opponents were ignorant, and on this common basis both sides of the argument sought knowledge together. Aristotle later developed the term into rhetoric, where irony is "the speaker trying to say something but pretending not to, or using a name that is opposite to the truth" (Aristotle, 2009). From the glib tone that made the audience laugh to a rhetorical device for persuasion, irony began to have an affirmative dimension.

In the mid-18th century, led by the German romantics, the word "irony" was developed from a rhetorical term which remained at the linguistic level to a metaphysical philosophical concept. Schlegel insisted that irony could mediate the contradiction of human beings, which not only kept the infinite development trend but also limited the doubting factors. Besides, Schlegel also believed that the world was inherently paradoxical, and only an ambiguous attitude could grasp the contradictory wholeness of the world. In the 19th century, The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard emphasized in his book *On the Concept of Irony* that "just as philosophy begins with doubt, a true and real-life begins with irony". He believed that there could be no real-life without irony. "Irony distinguishes right from wrong, establishes the goal and limits the scope of action, to give truth, reality and content" (Kierkegaard, 2005).

However, critics in the twentieth century brought irony back to the text. The new critics broadened the definition of irony. Collins Brooks redefined irony and claimed that irony is "the obvious distortion and modification of context to a declarative language" (Brooks,1948). The uncontrollable nature of language led to the indirect expression of irony: "The poet must consider not only the complexity of experience but also the difficulty of language; It always depends on hints and indirect statements." (Wimsatt & Brooks, 1957). He even thought that irony was not only an important feature of the structure of poetry but even the poem itself. Northrop Frye pointed out: "The word irony implies a technique for revealing duplicity, the most common technique in literature, to contain as much meaning as possible in as few words as possible" (Frye, 2000). Moreover, Wayne Booth's *Ironic Rhetoric* explored the rhetorical question of irony from the perspective of narrative aesthetics and put forward the four steps of ironic reading and the ironic clues that the author may leave in the work.

Therefore, it could be seen that from the rhetoric of ancient Greece to the definition of romantic metaphysics in 18th century, finally to the linguistic discussion of new criticism in 20th century, the meaning of irony constantly produces the new boundary of "meaning" through the carrier of words. Then this important concept of literary theory has been gradually entered the horizon of Chinese people and received extensive attention. For example, Fang-Chong(方重), who was the earliest translator of British irony, put forward irony is curving, which is different from direct invective. And Feng-Zhi(冯至) translated irony into indirect ridicule. Besides, Zhao Yi-heng

(赵毅衡) pointed out that irony was the contradiction between superficial and ideographic, and sought to transcend the superficial meaning of the text by "rhetoric is not real".

All in all, what indicated above is that there is no such proposition as "irony" in ancient China. The irony, as a loanword, is essentially duplicity. But in Plaks' analysis of literature and painting in late Ming dynasty, he defined irony as the sense of novelty(or newness), "which suggest the sort of self-conscious manipulations of medium and 'message' which I have described above as characteristic of irony" (Plaks, 1991). In other words, irony pointed to duplicity by associating with novelty. Moreover, in the view of Plaks, among all the painting and literature, only works which possessed the sense of novelty could present the aesthetic tendency of irony. Therefore, in irony, meanings are infinite even though words are limited. The aesthetics of irony in the late Ming literature and painting inspired readers to "read the painter rather than read the painting, to 'listen', as it were, for the artist's voice" (Plaks, 1991). Consequently, pointing to a kind of demystification, which reflected the self-consciousness of artists.

An innovative method of comparative research

In *The Aesthetic of Irony in Late Ming Literature and Painting* (1991), Plaks' analysis could be regarded as a primary application of his ironic theory, while his investment in *Chinese Narrative* (1995) was the enrichment and perfection. Both could be viewed as the product of the perfect blend of Chinese and Western culture, which is not only western but also has the strongest Chinese characteristics. As Plaks points out the flexible way to use Western culture and makes a good illustration for us to study the ancient Chinese arts, thus providing a new perspective and method for the study of Chinese narrative.

Specifically, Western narrative always ignores the original meaning of the text, and blindly with their vorurteile to illustrate works of art, easily causing the deviation and confusion of the work's original intention. Similarly, Chinese narrative is so limited to specific work that lacks integral consciousness and historical dimension, thus leading to the deficiency of wisdom. Therefore, I argue that Plaks' research overcomes their shortcomings and constructs a systematic theory that could provide an effective category and operating procedure for criticism. First of all, it is universal and could be widely applied to the analysis of all narrative works. Most importantly, its category maintains enough tension between universality and individuality to give birth to new and richer connotations concerning different works.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the goal of the new critical theory conducted by Plaks is to achieve the superposition and integration between the critical horizon and the original perspective of the text. As a result, it could reflect the creativity in the criticism of the text, but also be based on the scientific interpretation. As Yue Daiyun(乐黛云) said in the preface *Chinese narrative*, "his method of study is very good" "he dose not impose some kind of analysis model in Chinese literature, but put the Chinese literature in the rich development of world literature from various perspective of appreciation and analysis, thus inspiring many new horizons and interests" (Plaks, 1996).

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