

Chinese-Western Double Aesthetic Perspectives: A Review of *British Formalist Aesthetics and Its Literary Writing Practice*

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Abstract Having been one of the valuable aesthetic trends in the West in the 20th century, British formalist aesthetics is worthy of attention from the academia. Prof. Gao Fen's monograph *British Formalist Aesthetics and Its Literary Writing Practice* comprehensively construes aesthetic theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, and literary writings of Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey from Chinese-Western double aesthetic perspectives. Its originality lies, first of all, in its holistic inquiry into formalist aesthetics in the West, as well as their commonality and creativity, manifesting remarkably their theoretical and academic values. Second, it is methodologically innovative since it follows the principle of Chinese-Western double perspectives to reevaluate the British aesthetics. Third, it accentuates the employment of Chinese aesthetic criticism and invokes abundant categories from Chinese poetics, heralding a meritorious attempt to take Chinese culture to the global stage.

Keywords British formalist aesthetics; *British Formalist Aesthetics and Its Literary Writing Practice*; Chinese poetics

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As a trend of literary theory thriving in the early 20th century, British formalist aesthetics presents a succession and breakthrough of the traditional European

aesthetic ideologies from Pythagoras's "arithmos" and Plato's "eidos" to the 19th century British aestheticism. It is theoretically founded by Roger Fry (1866-1934) and Clive Bell (1881-1964) and literarily practiced by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Lytton Strachey (1880-1932), who published a series of striking and original theoretical and literary works and articles which elevated conservative British aesthetics and criticism to the forefront of modern European aesthetics, yet it failed to attract enough attention from the academia. As a response, *British Formalist Aesthetics and Its Literary Writing Practice* (2021) has made a groundbreaking effort. Funded by the National Social Science Foundation of China, the monograph is Gao Fen's latest academic achievement. It can be deemed as a progression of her last academic output *Towards Life Poetics: A Study of Virginia Woolf's Theory of Fiction* (2016), which extends the research domain from literature to aesthetics via her conspicuous methodology. According to Gao, it is beneficial to adopt a "Chinese-Western double aesthetic visions" (7) to clarify and reveal the connotations, characteristics and significance of British formalist aesthetics and its literary practice, namely to examine its inheritance and breakthrough to the Western aesthetic tradition, and at the same time to perceive its profound connotations and values through relevant Chinese poetic categories, for there is universality between Chinese and Western aesthetics. In such a comparative manner, Gao succeeds in standing at the forefront of aesthetic thoughts in the new millennium.

Gao's monograph incorporates five chapters. Based on the elucidation of the term "form" and the tradition of British aesthetics (Chapter 1), it deciphers in detail the formalist aesthetic theory of Roger Fry (Chapter 2) and Clive Bell (Chapter 3) and its literary writing practices of Virginia Woolf (Chapter 4) and Lytton Strachey (Chapter 5). To be more specific, Chapter 1 is an elaboration of the bases of British formalist aesthetics, with a time span from the classical age to the 19th century. Chapter 2 sheds light on Fry's formalist aesthetics through a comprehensive analysis of his practical aesthetics, theory of emotion, theory of form, and art criticism. Chapter 3 "Bell's formalist aesthetics" explicates the essence of visual arts, Bell's theory of artistic form, and his practices of art criticism. Chapter 4, in the wake of the exploration of Fry's and Bell's theories in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, expatiates on Woolf's literary innovations influenced by formalist aesthetics. Chapter 5 decodes Strachey's innovative theories and practices in biography writing via an exposition of his association with formalist aesthetics. Lastly, in the conclusion part, Gao reiterates the commonality and creativity of British formalist aesthetics and its literary writing practices. Arguably, Gao's monograph, remarkably characterized by theoretical, creative and practical properties, presents its originality via a holistic

inquiry into formalist aesthetic thoughts, an innovative methodology of Chinese-Western mutual perspectives, and a meritorious attempt to take Chinese culture to the global stage.

A Holistic Inquiry into Formalist Aesthetic Thoughts

Gao renders a thorough exploration of the Western “form” and then anatomizes the theories and practices of four aestheticians and writers, thereby theoretically and comprehensively expounding on the profound connotations of formalist aesthetic thoughts in the West.

In order to disinter the implications of formalist aesthetic thoughts, Gao first and foremost punctures the Western concept of “form” through tracing its evolution. The four cornerstones of the concept of “form” consist of the Pythagorean School’s “mathematical form,” Plato’s “eidos,” Aristotle’s “four causes,” and Horace’s “decorum” (49) in the ancient Greek and Roman period, respectively revealing the essence of nature, self, the existence and art. Subsequently, the Medieval aesthetics witnesses the fusion of theology and Plato’s and Aristotle’s theories, while Byzantine aesthetics features the form of visual arts especially “Church frescoes” (56), which constitute a vital source for British formalist aesthetics. The Renaissance aesthetic form showcases three shifts: “from divinity to humanity,” “from spirit to object,” and “from theme to technique” in terms of arts (56). The contributions of British empirical aesthetics in the 17th and 18th century, romantic aesthetics in the 19th century, and Victorian aesthetics and aestheticism in the 19th century lie in two aspects: 1) They accelerate the development of aesthetic methodologies from “empirical induction” to “organic integrity” (103) which, arguably, echoes with the dominant method advocated by Fry and Bell; 2) They have a multidimensional grasp of aesthetic form from creative subjects, to social functions, then to intrinsic components.

However, notwithstanding the long-standing concern for aesthetic form, it is Fry and Bell who make a substantial breakthrough. As is minutely explained by Gao, Fry’s practical aesthetics bears three hallmarks: the method of induction, the emphasis on aesthetic experience, and the expression of life emotions; his theory of emotion conveys that “art is a means of communication of emotion, with emotion itself as the end” (122); while his theory of form reifies the connotations of formalist beauty into three layers: 1) the unity of expression and the unity of significance, 2) the unity of expression and significance, and 3) the unity of artistic work’s “form” and creator’s “spirit.” As regards Bell’s formalist aesthetics, Gao mainly dissects the concept of “significant form,” which is known as Bell’s most prominent

contribution. The “form” of visual arts is created with the ultimate aim of expressing emotions; while their “significance” signifies the “aesthetic emotions” evoked by artistic works (191-192). Such “significant form,” according to Bell’s metaphysical argumentation, is tantamount to “the thing itself” and “the essential reality” (196) and it testifies to Bell’s overall observation of “religion, history, and ethics” (200).

It is worth noting that British formalist aesthetics can find distinct expression in Woolf’s and Strachey’s literary practices. On the one hand, Gao foregrounds the tacit agreement between Woolf’s literary works and Fry’s and Bell’s formalist aesthetics. *Jacob’s Room*, with a reference to Bell’s aesthetic techniques of “simplification” and “composition,” wields such creative forms as “sounds,” “internal and external focalization,” “juxtaposition of the things,” and “images” to unfold the integrality, uniformity and poetic quality of life spirit (275). *Mrs. Dalloway* takes the contrast between Western culture and Chinese “Way” as a kind of “form” to transmit its “significance” that indicates the preferable ethical choice of treasuring life, thereby corresponding with Fry and Bell’s standpoint of “significant form” (275). On the other hand, Gao enunciates Strachey’s construction of significant form in biography writing. For instance, in *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey weaves two threads as the biography’s “form” in displaying historical events so as to deliver “significance”—uncovering human nature. Also, in *Queen Victoria*, “form” refers to the interplay between the dual clues of considering Victoria as a woman and deeming her as a queen, while “significance,” correspondingly, hints at the unity between the queen’s personality of “putting kindness first” and her political target of “bringing benefits to the people” (331), which, undoubtedly, accords with the concept of significant form advocated by formalist aesthetics.

An Innovative Methodology of Chinese-Western Dual Perspectives

Gao unremittingly boosts the methodology of Chinese-Western dual perspectives in her research and thus confers innovative characteristics onto her monograph. In other words, she advocates the combination of rational cognition and aesthetic perception so as to reach an agreement between stringency and profundity. Such an innovative methodology is instantiated in the investigations of formalist theories through the lens of “Chinese life poetics based on intuitional experience” (16), thereby demonstrating connotations and values of formalist aesthetics to the full.

Gao insightfully pronounces the commonalities between Fry’s theories and Chinese poetics. Fry’s theory of emotion, which formulates the creative principle of “emotion as ends” and the ideographical process of “techniques – factors – composition – emotion” (127), derives from British empirical philosophy and

dovetails with the Chinese “Qing Zhi” (emotion and thought as end of art) category and “images for expression” principle (129-130). Fry’s theory of form, as Gao reveals, resembles the notion of “Shen Yu Wu You” (unification of the soul and the thing) in Chinese poetics, thereupon reaching the highest realm of artistic form (162). With regard to art criticism, Fry takes the overview of an artist’s temperament, predilection and historical background as the starting points of his criticism and invokes his own emotions and imaginations to penetrate into the forms and connotations of artistic works. His critical bases and methods, as Gao points out, share a close affinity with the concepts of “Zhi Ren Lun Shi” (the precondition of literary criticism being a thorough understanding of the author and the times and the world he lives in) and “Yi Yi Ni Zhi” (understanding as a soul to soul communication between author and reader by means of work) in traditional Chinese poetics. His critical practices, more importantly, spotlight the brilliance of aesthetic criticism in the arena of European art criticism and spur the mutual learning among world arts “with a global vision” (181).

Bell’s theories are also interpreted with Chinese-Western double aesthetic visions. His concept of “significant form” does not only originate from Plato’s, Aristotle’s and Kant’s notions, but also shares common denominators with the Chinese category “Xu Jing” (emptiness and serenity), as Gao proclaims (189). When it comes to Bell’s theory of artistic form, Gao takes the theory of Chinese literati painting as a counterpart to make a comparison. Just as she accentuates, if the former elucidates the turning of Western artistic paradigm from “representation” to “expression,” the latter in the Northern Song Dynasty witnesses a veer from “Xie Shi” (realistic style) to “Xie Yi” (expressive style) (200). Gao clarifies their similitudes and differences from such perspectives as creative tenets, constructional models, artistic states, and so forth, showing a broad Chinese-Western double perspectives.

Moreover, Gao utilizes the methodology of Chinese-Western mutual perspectives to decrypt Woolf’s theories and practices associated with formalist aesthetics. Woolf’s theory of life writing, according to Gao, defines fiction as something with harmonious mentality, comprehensive genres, emotional components, poetic quality and organic integrity, aiming at “presenting vivid lives” (248), in some way analogous to the traditional Chinese concept of “Shi Yan Zhi” (poetry being essentially the expression of one’s emotion and thought) (250). Her theory of emotional form, whereas, underscores the expressive natures of literary forms, including the unity of form and spirit, the identity of object and self, the fusion of feelings and scenes, impersonal emotions and reality of life, which, as Gao

proposes, proves akin to the category of “Wen Zhi” (unity of expression and quality) in Chinese poetics (260). As for Woolf’s literary practices, *The London Scene*, for instance, conspicuously featuring the fusion of feelings and scenes, covers triple connotations: the identity of object and self, the unity of form and spirit, and the implications beyond words, which can find consanguinity in the Chinese poet Wang Changling’s theory of “Wu Jing” (image of the thing), “Qing Jing” (image of emotion), and “Yi Jing” (significance of image) (297).

A Meritorious Attempt to Take Chinese Culture to the Global Stage

As a Chinese scholar, Gao does her utmost to amplify the significance of aesthetic criticism and Chinese poetics in the course of foreign literature studies. Just as she articulates in her monograph, Chinese scholars should stick to the standpoint of “adhering to ourselves and benefiting for our own use” and the principles of “Chinese mode of thinking” and “dialogue-innovation” (33). That is to say, it is a necessity to take the original and fontal thoughts of our nation as the starting points to examine and evaluate cultures of other countries. In this way, Gao exercises a meritorious attempt to take Chinese culture to the global stage.

Aesthetic criticism and Chinese poetics are the two most powerful weapons used to disseminate Chinese culture in Gao’s monograph. Aesthetic criticism, in Gao’s words, is synonymous to a sort of literary criticism where “critics go through the opinions and sentiments beneath the works via their own heart and soul” (36), thereby paying close attention to temperament or life itself without preconception and utilitarianism. It cannot go without Chinese traditional poetics which, according to Gao, bears four characteristics: 1) the literary view of “Shi Yan Zhi” (poetry being essentially the expression of one’s emotion and thought); 2) the critical approach of “Yi Yi Ni Zhi” (understanding as a soul to soul communication between author and reader by means of work); 3) the critical methods of “Zhi Ren Lun Shi” (the precondition of literary criticism being a thorough understanding of the author and the times and the world he lives in) and “Liu Guan Shuo” (to make aesthetic criticism from six perspectives); and 4) the critical essence of “Shen Yu Wu You” (unification of the soul and the thing) (40-41). Besides, Gao borrows from Chinese culture constellations of writing categories such as “Shen Si” (spirit and imagination), “Xu Jing” (emptiness and serenity), “Miao Wu” (transcendental epiphany), “Xu Shi” (fiction and truth), formal categories as “Qing Zhi” (emotion and thought), “Wen Zhi” (expression and quality), “Yi Xiang” (significance and image), “Yi Jing” (sublime state of mind), “Xing Shen” (form and spirit), and critical categories as “Zhi Yin” (resonance and appreciation), “Mei Chou” (beauty

and ugliness), “Qu Wei” (taste and interest), etc. Under the guidance of these original theories and categories entrenched in Chinese literature and arts, Gao manages to write her monograph from a native and advantageous position.

Gao never ceases to underpin the leading role of Chinese mode of thinking in conducting foreign literature criticism. Chinese mode of thinking, as Gao pinpoints, bespeaks an adherence to Chinese “Xiang” (image) thinking pattern, which is characterized by “an integral, correlative, complementary and dynamic thinking way based on the unity of nature and human beings and that of subject and object” (34). Western mode of concept thinking, on the contrary, is a pattern that allows abstract concepts to transcend and override particular things, exhibiting such binary oppositions as essence/phenomenon, subject/object, and so forth. Taking Chinese mode of thinking as the predominant, as Gao recapitulates in her monograph, would exceed the cul-de-sac of myriad binary oppositions in Western thinking and give full play to Chinese scholars’ aptitude of perception and innovation, thus spotlighting fine Chinese culture in the arena of global literature and arts.

British Formalist Aesthetics and Its Literary Writing Practice is an integral, innovative and inspiring book. It is integral for its encyclopedic untangling of the origins, connotations and values of British formalist aesthetics and its literary practices. Apart from the theories and practices of Fry, Bell, Woolf and Strachey, the reader can also retrieve other aesthetic ideas ranging from the classic period to the 20th century in this quasi-reference book, which would conduce to more convenient and efficient researches. The book is innovative due to Gao’s original and critical principle of “the combination of Western history and Chinese poetics” (34). Such a methodology, when optimized in academic researches, would surmount the circumscription of national sentiments and yield more impartial and innovative outputs. What’s more, the book is inspiring in that it provides a fresh idea for taking Chinese culture to the global stage. As Gao recommends, Chinese thought patterns should play an important role in world literature criticism, so she utilizes aesthetic criticism and invokes categories from Chinese poetics in her monograph to realize a double observation on formalist aesthetics. Her allegiance to Chinese poetics, beyond all doubt, would motivate more methodological explorations in the academia and stimulate further profound interactions between Chinese and Western cultures.

Work Cited

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