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Dai Xianmei

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From Rejection to Appreciation: Henry James Studies in China*

Henry James studies in China formally began in 1980. In an article "American Literature in China" written by Xia Dingguan,¹ we can clearly see the Chinese tendency of accepting foreign literature. In 1901, Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the first American novel translated into Chinese, inaugurated Chinese acceptance of American literature. Since then, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis, Jack London, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck have been introduced to China one after another. So even nowadays, when you ask a college student who the American writers most familiar to him are, he will quickly mention these writers, since there are numerous translations and critical studies of the works of these writers. Compared with his fellow countrymen in the literary world, Henry James had been ignored for over eighty years. Eighty years later, with China's policy of reform and opening to foreign countries, Henry James began to find his readers in China, especially near the end of the last century, and he even became a hot topic of debate among some Chinese doctoral students.

Considering the fact that Henry James had already been well accepted in the 1920's in the west, the long absence of this great writer in China is thought-provoking. Studying the phenomenon of the different attitudes towards Henry James at different times in China from a kind of political rejection to an aesthetic appreciation can not only help us understand the acceptance of the writer but also, even more importantly, help us see the development of foreign literary criticism in China. Thus this paper briefly tries to introduce Henry James studies in China mainly over the last century and find out the possible reasons for both this rejection first and then the appreciation.

* This paper was read at the 2002 International Henry James Conference in Paris.

¹ Xia Dingguan, "American Literature in China," *The Journal of Xin Jiang University*, 1991. 4, pp. 67-75.

THE REJECTION OF HENRY JAMES IN CHINA BEFORE 1980

The long silence of the academic voice about Henry James in China before 1980 has different reasons with 1949 as the dividing year when the People's Republic of China was established. As we know, the first half of the XXth century was full of political disturbance in China: the decline of the Qing Dynasty first, then the peasant rebellions, the foreign interferences, the chaotic competitions for power among the warlords, the long civil war and the anti-Japanese war. When the old China was groaning in despair, Henry James seemed quite far away from its taste: to seek a practical way to keep the country stable and free from foreign invasions proved to be more urgent.

Such an unusual historical period determined the Chinese people's special need for literary works. From the list of the American writers translated into Chinese, we can also find that the old China welcomed those foreign writers who exposed social evils, criticized their societies most severely and sympathized with the poor and the suppressed in their works. For example, numerous Chinese readers as well as Chinese intellectuals found understanding and encouragement in the works by Mrs. Stowe and Mark Twain, or Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo. It seems whatever they wrote or read, they took the responsibility of strengthening their country as their first and foremost spring of action. Chinese scholars read the foreign literary works for ideological instruction rather than for their aesthetic mould. So it may not be very surprising that the Byronic hero and Shelley's poetry were particularly appreciated at that time. Shelley's poetic lines such as "if winter comes/Can spring be far behind?" inspired and encouraged numerous Chinese intellectuals to believe that "the darkest hour is before dawn."

Under such circumstances, Henry James, with his pursuit of an aesthetic and philosophical appreciation of the cream of life, seemed far away from Chinese needs. Quite a lot of Chinese intellectuals were unavoidably and understandably involved in political activities and political thinking about their country's future. When the whole country was busy looking for ways to save their motherland, Henry James, even though already well-known in western countries, was unfairly ignored, except for the occasional mention in some Chinese-American scholars' works.²

² For instance, the Chinese-American scholar Lin Yutang who moved to America in 1936, in the tenth chapter of his biography of *Su Dongpo*, compares Su Dongpo and his brother Ziyou with the James brothers: "they are also different in literary style—just like Henry James and William James. Dongpo is like William and Ziyou Henry. According to their intelligence, William should have written novels, whereas Henry James should have written psychological and philosophical articles. However William poured his wisdom and humor

Yet, Henry James still remained largely unknown to Chinese readers even after 1949. However, the silence of Henry James studies in this period has quite different reasons behind it. As is well known, the People's Republic of China after 1949 shut its door against most of the white, western, capitalist countries. Any ideology different from socialism was kept away from the Chinese mind. Also, China is a large country in which a vast majority of its citizens are poor peasants. During this period, those foreign writers writing of poor people's lives, exposing and criticizing capitalist societies, were warmly welcomed. That's why so many Chinese people were familiar with O'Henry, William Makepeace Thackeray, Thomas Hardy, and all the American writers mentioned above. As for the intellectuals, they did not study western literary works but criticized them in the mode of Marxist dialectics. Whether the works were great or not depends not on whether they were artistically created but on whether they were about poor people's morality and rich people's corruption. Thus, we can understand why after 1949, when most of Mark Twain's works were translated, his fellow countryman and contemporary, Henry James, was still refused for over 30 years in a new era. It was not before 1980, when China opened her door to the west, that Chinese scholars began to translate and introduce the long-ignored writer, but we can still sense the ideological influence in literary criticism.

A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO HENRY JAMES STUDIES IN CHINA (1980-1990)

The year 1978 marks the dividing line of new China with Mr. Deng Xiaoping's policy of reform and opening to the foreign countries. Since then, China's national door has been open to all foreign countries regardless of their social systems. Chinese governments as well as Chinese people after over thirty years' experimental probing in every aspect of a new country's construction have become confident enough to see things from two sides. It was also in this same year that Feng Zhi, the director of the Foreign Literature Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the chief editor of the journal *World Literature*, when interviewed by a journalist from Xinhua News Agency, gave his historic speech on the attitude China should adopt towards world literature. After reviewing the prejudices prevailing in Chinese academic circles over the past thirty years, Mr. Feng pointed out:

into the usually dry and uninteresting psychological and philosophical textbooks, meanwhile, Henry James poured his humanistic ideas and observation into his novels, from which world culture benefits much without losing anything."

- China must learn from history and the outside world in order to build the new socialist culture.
- The foreign writers and their works should be viewed dialectically and historically.
- Both the blind superstition towards foreign literature and the pure rejection of it should be avoided;
- Chinese youth should be exposed both to right and wrong examples for them to judge by themselves.³

In a certain sense, Feng Zhi, as a famous scholar from the most authoritative branch of China's social science study, could represent most of the Chinese scholars' academic consciousness of world literature in a new era. Encouraged by the reform and open policy, they wished to discover more foreign writers, especially those who had been ignored for their non-socialist ideological tendency. Zhao Luorui, a professor at Beijing University, started Henry James studies in China at the very beginning of the 1980s. As the first real Chinese scholar translating, studying and introducing Henry James to avid Chinese readers, Professor Zhao's introduction of Henry James might be regarded as the most typical and representative voice during the first ten years of Henry James studies in China. So to understand her efforts and views on this writer could offer us an overview view of the reception of Henry James in China during this period.

According to her memoirs, Professor Zhao began to be attracted by the great writer early in her visiting days in the 1940s when she was studying for her doctorate at the University of Chicago. She was even proud of her most complete collection of Henry James's works.⁴ Her introductions of Henry James's works began with the two tales *Daisy Miller* and *The Beast in the Jungle*. She then wrote a few introductory articles on some other James novels, and also a preface to the translation of *The Portrait of A Lady* in 1984. From 1980 to 1990, she contributed five articles altogether on Henry James, and of course, so far it proves that she is not only the most avid Henry James scholar but also that she deserves the title of the literary critic who wrote the most Henry James articles in China during this period. The five articles she wrote are

³ "Feng Zhi's talk on the attitude China should have towards world culture," Feng Zhi's answer to a journalist from Xin Hua News Agency, the newspaper of Xin Hua Agency, 1978. 10. 16, pp. 39-40.

⁴ Professor Zhao Luorui said proudly, "I was told by one of my American professors that I was the third Henry James collector in America so far." *My Life With Books*, Beijing University Press, 1996, p. 5.

respectively “Brief comment on the Artistic Achievements of Henry James”(1981); “The Focal Content of *The Aspen Papers*”(1982); “The Profound Description of a Girl’s Emotional World” (the preface to the translation of *The Portrait of A Lady*) (1984); “an unfinished masterpiece” (on *Hume Maylor*) (1988); “An Ode to Fine Consciousness” (on *The Wings of the Dove*) (1990).

As part of the first generation of Henry James scholars in China, Professor Zhao introduced Henry James as a psychological novelist to China. Interestingly, her first generally introductory article covers less than five pages. Unfortunately, while pointing out the artistic contributions Henry James made in his literary creation, such as his views on “the point of view”, his subtlety and his special interest in adverb employment, Professor Zhao did not forget to use the traditional Marxist approach to view Henry James as a capitalist writer, taking James’s focus on the leisure class as “his extreme limit of horizon,” because Zhao believed that

[Henry James] lacks a strong and profound perception of politics and society, once concerned about this aspect, he showed his extremely conservative attitude, he even satirized and mocked the progressive democratic movements (*The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*), ignoring the social origin of morality and social surroundings; although he knows the upper class well, he knows little about the lower class, furthermore, he has a spiritual aristocrat’s prejudice against people and matters.⁵

What’s more, the late James artistic experiment was also regarded as one of the limits matching his “ideological limit” (*ibid.*) Here, we can still see the ideological echo in Zhao’s criticism of Henry James and it was not rare in the early years after China’s gradual recovery from “the Cultural Revolution.” As we know, Zhao received her doctoral education in America in the 1940s. It was a time when Henry James had already been positioned firmly as a great literary master in the western literary world. As a Henry James fan, she must have been familiar with modern scholars’ views and aesthetic appreciation of the artistic novelist, but she still adopted a kind of political approach criticizing literary works. What’s more, she was not the only one to read James in this way.⁶ This

⁵ Zhao Luorui, “A Brief Comment on the Artistic Achievements of Henry James,” *My Life With Books*, Beijing University Press, 1996, p. 31.

⁶ Some other scholars such as Qu Shijing from Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences in his quite influential Henry James article “Henry James—the Turning Point of Western Literary Criticism” (*The Academic Quarterly of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Journal*, No. 11, 1987) and Yu Jianhua in *The Analysis of Twenty American Classic Novels* (Shanghai Foreign Education Press, 1989) held the same point of view when they perceptively figured out his artistic contributions to the development of the modern western novel creation to different degrees.

phenomenon convincingly indicates how Chinese scholars were influenced ideologically during the time of “the cultural revolution” when any “capitalist taste” or “capitalist ideas” were to be abolished completely. I once doubted the sincerity of Zhao’s critical words, believing that, with her educational background, she might have employed such an approach ironically. But when I talked of it with my supervisor, his confirmation of Zhao’s positive use removed all my suspicion based on his personal contact with the professor. “She did mean what she said,” said my professor. I know he spoke from experience as a rigorous scholar of 56 years of age who had also lived through the Cultural Revolution.

During this period, apart from the five articles Zhao offered, there are about 13 other articles. The 18 articles range from a general introduction to Henry James to the artistic or cultural interpretation of his specific works, from his short story *The Real Thing* to his tales (such as *Daisy Miller*, *The Beast in the Jungle* and *The Turn of the Screw*), to his novels *The Portrait of A Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*. None of the 18 articles are long, and all of them scarcely had any new discovery in all of these James works, apart from the settled suppositions about the writer in the western literary world.

With regards to James’s artistic achievements, most of them agreed with the western Henry James critics’ views about his fresh (psychological) understanding of realism and his artistic contributions to western modernism (such as his multiple points of view, his focus of consciousness, his obsession with artistic form, etc.), as they introduced them to Chinese readers. So far as his international (America *vs* Europe) theme is concerned, there are mainly two suppositions: the first one is represented by Zhao Luorui, Hou Weirui, professor of Shanghai Foreign Languages University, and Yang Xiaoping, a young Chinese scholar. They believed that Henry James gave preference to American innocence and morality between the conflicts of the two cultures,⁷ Yang Xiaoping was even convinced that the writer intended to express the American persistence in transcending European culture. While the early puritan pioneers went to the new continent to surpass the old world, their descendents returned to their “old home” to outdo it, this time culturally.⁸ The second

⁷ Hou Weirui even quoted Michael Swan (*Henry James*, London, 1969, p. 7) to support his idea about Henry James’s contempt for European corruption, having his readers “smell the bad flavor the old world gives off,” *History of the Modern English Novel*, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1985, p. 35.

⁸ Yang Xiaoping, “The American Spirit of Persistence in Transcending the Old World,” *The Academic Journal of Seeking Truth*, No. 3, 1990, p. 66. Here, Yang Xiaoping also quoted Markus Cliffs’s words: “there is no other colony or race of the settlers so complex, so long away from Europe politically, and there is no other country originating from Europe so

supposition can find its voice in Zhang Weishui's article on *The Ambassadors*. Mr. Zhang thought Henry James, using "situational irony," "satirized the vulgarity of American culture," thus "showing the success of the highly cultured Europeans over the vulgar and simple Americans."⁹ Additionally, almost all of the early Chinese James critics sensed the difficulty of his language and found themselves willing to accept H. G. Wells's view that James's magnificently artistic form is at the cost of life and content.

If Zhu Luorui is the first Henry James scholar in China, Hou Weirui might be the most liberal scholar who contributed the first chapter (around 30,000 words, the longest article on Henry James so far) to Henry James in his book *The History of the Modern English Novel*, taking James as the pioneer of the modern English novel. This chapter covers almost every aspect of Henry James: his life, his artistic theories, his early and late novels, his plays, his short stories and tales. Accompanying a survey of James's works, Professor Hou also presented a lot of western James critics among whom he seemed to stand with H. G. Wells in believing James sacrificed life for his artistic experiments. Even though this article was written in 1985, from its length and content, we can well assume that it is the most conclusive and most representative article in the first period, summarizing the main trend of James studies in China.

Briefly, the first ten years of Henry James studies in China can only be taken as a general introductory period during which Chinese critics did not seem to have much creative perception of the writer while following the western critics' assumptions. However, with their great efforts, Henry James was gradually made known to Chinese readers.

THE APPRECIATION OF HENRY JAMES (1991 TILL NOW)

Although early in the 1980s, the famous Chinese scholar of French literature Luo Dagang wrote an article for the newspaper *Wen Hui* criticizing the weak points and mistakes, mainly the "dogmatism and vulgar sociology" (sic) characterizing the reception of foreign literature in China,¹⁰ most of the

keenly aware of the necessity of breaking away from European culture and of transcending it." *The American Literature*, Today's World Publishing House (a translation into English from the Chinese translation, including the critic's name), pp. 35-8.

⁹ Zhang Weishui, "See James's Satire on American Culture from the Situational Irony in *The Ambassadors*," Xiamen University Press, No. 4, 1988. Zhang quoted Englewood Cliffs's words (from *A Collection of Critical Essays*, Leon Edel (ed.), N.Y.: Prentice Hall, 1963) to support his own idea. The last words quoted are my translation from Chinese.

¹⁰ Luo Dagang summarized, explained and criticized the dogmatism of this sort in the following terms: "there seems to be a settled formula, that is, to classify foreign writers into

critical articles on Henry James in the following ten years still evidence the same dogmatism; even the famous and authoritative scholars who once studied in the west are no exception. To our great relief, ten years later, Professor Luo's hope that we should respect literary works according to their own laws and principles, evaluating them according to these rules rather than from our own preferences was practiced at long last.

The most conspicuous feature of the second period of Henry James studies in China is that about 90% of the writers of the 21 articles could more or less adopt an artistic interpretation of his works, and the political terms of the early class division had disappeared completely. For example, they began to discuss either the artistic space of *The Aspern Papers*, the structure of *The Portrait of a Lady*, or James's literary theories of psychological realism. The few articles contributed to his cultural ideas also read much more like literary criticism than political examination. For instance, the article entitled "The Exchanged Economy—on Henry James's *The American*"¹¹ could take Henry James's own artistic theories (from his letters, his prefaces to the novels of the New York Edition as well as from his notes or travelling books) as the very standard to evaluate this novel, illustrating how well James practiced what he advocated theoretically.

If the 21 articles respectively on one of James's works showed us the beginning of an aesthetic appreciation of Henry James during the first eight years of the second period, we can consider the last three doctoral dissertations at the end of the last century as the systematic and academic study of this writer. In 1998 when I was busy preparing my graduate paper in the graduate school of CASS, I was much pleased to know there were two other doctoral students doing thorough research on this same writer coincidentally under their supervisor's instructions. I said "coincidentally," because we didn't know each other at all, and furthermore we were in different universities or even in different cities. Of course, we studied the writer from quite different perspectives. I mainly made a cultural interpretation on Henry James's ideal reconstruction of American culture, another doctoral student, Wang Liya (from Beijing University), studied Henry James in an approach of narratology and western feminist theories, while the third one, Cui Shaoyuan (from Nanjing University), employed modern western literary theories to interpret his works.

classes first, then point out the contemporary value of their works, and finally criticize the writers' class limit as a conclusion." "How can the Work of Foreign Literature be carried on healthily?" Wen Hui, page 4, 1980, 1. 29.

¹¹ Zheng Da, "The Exchanged Economy—on Henry James's *The American*," *The Foreign Literature Review*, no. 2, 1997.

My dissertation intended to probe James's reflection and reconstruction of American individualism by analyzing four of his novels (*Roderick Hudson*, *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Bostonians*). I assumed that Henry James, on reflecting Emersonian individualism, and following Matthew Arnold's great vision of cultural combination, put forward an ideal pattern combining American freedom and morality with European intelligence and aesthetic experience. I concluded in the end that James's cultural conceptualization is a supplement to the traditional American idealistic individualism. On the other hand, I also pointed out that, as a cosmopolitan writer taking the duty of perfecting novel artistry as his life long work, what James had been probing for so many years was a kind of cultural maturity and intellectual evolution in terms of social progress. So whatever fit the standard would surely come into his vision and attract his attention, no matter whether it came from America or from Europe. He was in pursuit of something that transcends national lines.¹²

If my dissertation could be taken as an attempt to balance the early Chinese either-or assumption on James's attitude towards American and European culture, Wang Liya, who graduated one year later than I, might try to keep other critical approaches towards James in balance. Wang Liya's dissertation is an exploration of narrative techniques in relation to gender ideology in Henry James's five novels: *The American* (1877), *The Bostonians* (1886), *The Tragic Muse* (1890), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and *The Ambassadors* (1903). By selecting those novels from James's early, middle and late stages, and focusing on a primary technical aspect in each novel, she tried to uncover the relationships between James's various narrative strategies and gender politics. Tracing James criticism throughout the years from aesthetic investigation to political criticism, Wang assumed that the former neglected the ideological and contextual dimensions of the work, while the latter overlooked the functions of narrative techniques. With the five novels as main texts, Wang illustrated how narrative techniques could simultaneously function as methods of arranging story events for the author and as a means of discovering the ideological import for the reader.

Nowadays, James studies are still in progress. So far as I know, there is another dissertation this year. The author, Chen Rong, from Luoyang PLA Foreign Languages University, entitled her dissertation: "Victims under Adult

¹² Dai Xianmei, "On Henry James's Ideas of Cultural Combination," *The Foreign Literature Review*, No. 1, 2000. I especially appreciated F. R. Leavis's point in his famous book *The Great Tradition* that among all of these cultural conflicts, James only picked out his favorite things regardless of their nation.

Gaze: Objectification of Children in Henry James's Fiction." By applying modern feminist theories, psycho-analytical theories and post-structuralist theories into her dissertation, Chen Rong illustrated clearly how the adults in James's fiction utilize the child as commodity or construct the child as a sign in their phallic gaze. In the first two years of the XXIst century, I have already seen six critical articles published on James's works: either on one of his novels or on the colonial consciousness in James's works.¹³

In some sense, we can say it is these doctoral dissertations that push Henry James studies further into a new period in China. Together with the other articles so far, there seems to be a Henry James fever in Chinese academic circles. To analyze the phenomenon of a sudden interest and appreciation of Henry James after so many years' refusal will be very significant in understanding the change of Chinese mind at the turn of the century.

For one reason, it might be understandable that at the turn of the twentieth century—a symbolic crossing—and facing economic globalization, Chinese intellectuals are eager to find a master and examine how he was concerned about cultural conflicts, social problems, and the complex literary phenomena at the turn of nineteenth century: we know history sometimes repeats itself, and of course literary history is no exception. Hence, Henry James becomes a sensible guide. What's more, with its successful experiment in the economic field, China is becoming stronger. When the vast majority of Chinese can live a comfortable material life, they will surely have enough time and education to understand Henry James for his aesthetic perspectives on life and artistic work. So we cannot deny that sometimes it is not knowledge but experience that creates understanding. For the third possible reason, a confident government could become more open-minded and tolerate different voices. The further acceptance of Henry James bears this out.

Maybe James is not radical in politics, but he is at least sensitive and convincing in exposing the emotional social reformers in his novels. Maybe he concentrated too much on artistic experiments, but we should remember he never forgot his moral responsibility as a writer when he understood and described ethics in an artistic way. After all, there is no abstract morality. Of course, Henry James was fully aware of the impossibility of this supposition because he was keen not to ignore the weak points of human beings as exposed in his works: vanity, ignorance, conceit. However, he never stopped

¹³ Among the six articles, I contributed two: "The Death of a Genius: a Cultural Interpretation of *Roderick Hudson*," published in the second issue of *Foreign Literature Study*, a national journal, in 2002; and "On Henry James's Modernity," included in a collection of critical essays.

searching for a better way to live and work in the world. Most of his heroes and heroines die or become disillusioned at the end of his works, but obviously that is not what James wanted for us; what he did wish to imply behind all these things seems to be that when we come to realize that freedom is much limited because of human weaknesses, what we can do in our limited life might be that we can at least try our best to become wiser in order to avoid more mistakes and sufferings. That is, maybe, the most attractive aspect of the universal Henry James to me.

From political rejection to an artistic appreciation of Henry James, we can sense the change of the Chinese mind or China's attitude towards western culture. When we rejected the western writers of his kind (the so-called capitalist writers writing about only the leisure class), we were not confident enough to open our mind to various voices from the different world. We were afraid that Chinese readers might be misled. But when we turned consciously from a political criticism to a kind of aesthetic appreciation taking him as what he is rather than classifying him into a certain reactionary class, we suddenly realized that the world was so rich and that cultures were so colorful. The conscious appreciation of Henry James and some other western writers of his kind such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, to name but a few, sufficiently indicates the fact that Chinese people are becoming more and more open-minded in a new century with the development of economy, science and technology, more and more confident in combining her own ancient glorious civilization with all the other cultures to create a more lively Chinese culture, just like Henry James's enthusiastic pursuit of an ideal cultural combination of the cream of both American and European cultures. Confidence brings about justice, for when we are confident, we find it not so difficult to accept different voices and avoid prejudices, and as a result, either borrowing from the past or learning from foreign cultures turns out to be easy.

At the same time, compared with Henry James criticism in the western world over the past century, we have to admit that we still have a long way to go to catch the very essence of James's works. There still remains much work to do for us: the systematic translation of his novels and the variety of methods used to interpret his works are challenging and calling for our great efforts.

Dai XIANMEI

Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications (China)



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