



The Influence of Cleanth Brooks on China

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Abstract

Cleanth Brooks has a profound and far-reaching influence on China's critical theory, practice and teaching. The major influence of his critical theory on China may be concentratedly reflected in this key word of irony. A few scholars in China criticize the literature works both abroad and at home in the basis of application of Brooks' paradox and ironic theories. The types of literature mentioned above involve in poetry, novel and drama and so on. Moreover, Brooks' influence on China's education and teaching can be shown in the classroom teaching where more and more teachers are making use of the teaching mode which centers on the text-analysis.

Key words: Comparative literature; The New Criticism; Cleanth Brooks; Irony; China; Influence study

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INTRODUCTION

The influence of Cleanth Brooks on China is a very complex issue to be stated clearly. So far, there is still no scholar who has been systematically discussed the influence of Cleanth Brooks on China or Chinese literature, because this issue is very complicated and not easy to be stated and discussed. First of all, it is very

difficult to know whether the influence is from Cleanth Brooks or from other new critics, for their influences are always blended. What's more, Brooks's two famous theories paradox theory and irony theory are the most important contribution of Brooks on the new criticism theory while at that time ironic poetics is sometimes referred to as the whole theory of the new criticism, that is to say, when even illustrating the influence of Brook's irony on Chinese literature, it is hard to distinguish which part is affected by Brooks and which part is affected by the new criticism. Furthermore, many of Brooks's books were cooperatively written with Robert Penn Warren, Wimsatt, et al.. In addition, Brooks's theory itself is also very complex, which is sometimes interpreted in a completely opposite way, and some Chinese scholars not consciously know that they have been influenced by Brooks theory, which further increase the degree of the difficulty in the statement of Brooks's influence on China. Therefore, this article tries to make a general discussion on the influence of Brooks's theories on Chinese literature, Chinese criticism and teaching, and so on.

1. INFLUENCE OF BROOKS ON THE THEORY AND CREATION OF CHINESE LITERATURE

Although Brooks has never been to China, he does have communicated with the Chinese scholars to some extent. In 1989, Brooks gave some suggestions to the selected contents of the book *New Criticism* written by Shi Liang, and at the same time sent the related materials to the writer as a gift. In this regard, Shi Liang expressed his gratitude to Brooks in the postscript of the book *New Criticism* (Shi, 1989, pp.356-357). In addition, some Chinese scholars who were studying abroad in the United States had been in contact with Brooks, and some had been taught directly by Brooks, such as Li Funing, Yang Renjing, Xia Zhiqing,

and so on. Therefore, Brooks does influence China, especially Chinese literary theories, through his Chinese students such as Yang Renjing, Xia Zhiqing, et al., besides through the direct way of the translated books and works.

In Li Funing's book *Honey and Wax: from Reading of Western Literature*, he recalled his meeting with Brooks, and admitted that he had paid more emphasis on the perfection of the works and the form of art since China's reform and opening up, always attached importance to the discussion of language analysis and aesthetic, which is obviously influenced by the new criticism (Li, 1995, pp.171-179). As a famous professor and scholar in the Chinese mainland, Li Funing has made a lot of achievements on the research and teaching of the British and American literature, who has got influence from Brooks and kept his influence on China and Chinese literature in a very profound way.

Yang Renjing recalled that he admired Brooks after his reading of Brooks's book *American Literature: the Makers and the Making*, and wrote to Brooks with hoping to visit Brooks. A week later, Yang Renjing received "a letter with ebullience". Brooks replied that "it's a great pleasure to discuss American literature with a young scholar from the great China". So on one day of July, 1981, Yang Renjing went to Yale to visit Brooks from Harvard. They talked for most of the day about the book *American Literature: the Makers and the Making*, and about some academic issues like text close reading, paradox, irony, tension and the study of Faulkner, in the hall of the first floor of library of Yale University near the library counter. Brooks's knowledge, kindness and passion impressed Yang Renjing (Yang, 2003). Yang Renjing later became a loyal fan of Brooks in China, deeply affected by Brooks.

In Xia Zhiqing's book *History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, it can be seen that Xia Zhiqing has been influenced by Brooks and he has influenced a lot on Chinese literature theories and criticism. Xia Zhiqing's profound influence on Chinese literary theories and criticism can be seen in Li Oufan's comment that "in 1961, the publication of the book *History of Modern Chinese Fiction* is a groundbreaking milestone in the history of modern Chinese fiction, and for the western academic world this book is like the thunder in a sunny day. There is no other book (in any kind of language) that can be competed with it no matter in breadth or originality.... He has shown a unique view on modern Chinese literature, which has now become our standard... All of the Chinese modern literature studies must be measured by this standard" (Li, 2007, pp.14-19). In the book *History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, Xia Zhiqing actually carried out Brooks's text closely reading method. When Xia Zhiqing was an assistant professor of Beijing University, he had bought Brooks's work "*The Well-Wrought Urn*" in the bookstore and also lent the book to Empson to read. In an interview in 2005, Xia Zhiqing admitted that he

had been taught by Brooks at the Yale University and of course influenced by him (Ji, 2005, p.34). Xia Zhiqing gave a great deal of respect and admiration for Brooks and he was also very much appreciated Brooks's literary theory and teaching method. Furthermore, Brooks's text closely reading method was regarded as the Bible, and as the fundamental of innovation. The theories, methods and literary critical position, used in the book "*History of Modern Chinese Fiction*", are deeply stamped with Brooks's text closely reading method and position that keep far from politics. From the discussion above, a conclusion can be drawn that Xia Zhiqing's book *History of Chinese Modern Fiction* has been influenced by Brooks's literary criticism theories, which obviously approved that Brooks influenced China via Xia Zhiqing's influence on Chinese critical theory.

In addition to the text close reading method, another maximum influence of Brooks's criticism theory on China is likely to be concentrated in the word "irony". As to the influence of irony theory on Chinese literary theory and creation, some scholars have done some researches (Gong, 2008). Because the irony theory involves a wide range, it is not certain that the influence of the Western irony theory on China is derived from Brooks. In the past, there were no special writings talking about the influence of Brooks's irony theory on Chinese writers. However, Brooks has been recognized as the representative of new criticism irony poetics. Therefore, those western theories and works of irony are more or less marked by Brooks's irony theory.

2. INFLUENCE OF BROOKS ON THE PRACTICE OF CHINESE CRITICISM

In China, there has been a group of domestic scholars and critics using new criticism theories such as text close reading, paradox, irony, etc., in criticizing the works of domestic and foreign writers since a very early time. In the mainland, the well known scholars include Ye Gongchao, Zhu Ziqing, Li Changzhi, Yuan Kejia, Liu Xiwei (Li Jianwu), Bian Zhilin, Wang Furen, Le Daiyun, Sun Shaozhen, Wang Xianpei, Wang Yi, etc., and in Hongkong and Taiwan islands, there are Yan Yuanshu, Chen Shixiang, Wang Meng'ou, Yu Guangzhong,, Ye Jiaying, Ye Weilian, Huang Weiliang, Long Yingtai, Ouyang Zi, Li Yinghao, and so on (Zhao, 2012, pp.139-147). Regardless of the writings of these scholars or some other discussion using the new criticism theories, if the text does not explicitly mention Brooks, the writers or the works are not included in the discussion scope of this article. To take such a strategy, outsiders are difficult to confirm where the influence is coming from because some criticism practice may indeed be affected by Brooks, but the authors do not explicitly declare their influence coming from Brooks. Therefore, in this paper's discussion

of the influence of Brooks on China's criticism practice, the writers and works are limited to those that clearly have reference to Brooks's works in their criticism of Chinese scholars and foreign writers and works.

Chinese scholars' use of Brooks's theory to analyze Chinese and foreign writers and works, according to the country of the criticism target, can be roughly divided into three categories. The first category is the use of the poetics of Brooks and other new critics to criticize the foreign writers and works. One evidence is that in Tao Naikan's writing *Frost and Paradox—on Frost's Poetic Images and Tones*, the writer stated that there is consistency in Brooks's paradox theory and the core of Hegel's dialectics, that is the reason why the writer chose the two theories to analyze the 20th century American poet Robert Frost's poetry, and in this writing the writer mentioned and cited many times the ideas and thoughts from Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* (Tao, 1990). Another evidence is in Gu Shunruo's writing "On the Poetic Paradox in the House on Mango Street", the writer mainly used Brooks's paradox theory to analyze "*The House on Mango Street*" written by Sandra Cisneros (1954-) and believed that poetic nature of *The House on Mango Street* through paradoxes (Gu, 2011). This kind of outstanding criticism achievement is relatively rare.

The second category is the use of the poetics of Brooks and other new critics to criticize the Chinese writers and their works. The first critic in this field is Yan Yuanshu who has made outstanding achievement. Yan Yuanshu is one of the chief scholars who brought the translation of the new criticism to Taiwan. He has translated *Literary Criticism: A Short History* coauthored by Brooks and Wimsatt, which help him get very familiar with Brooks's theory. Therefore, Yan Yuanshu has been doing very well with skill and ease in his use of Brooks's poetics on the analysis of the Chinese poetry. For example, in his writing "Close Reading on the Two Poems Written by Luofu", criticized Luofu's poetry whether good or bad according to the structure of the poems, and Brooks's organic whole theory can be obviously seen in his analysis of the two poems (Yan, 1972, pp.133-134). Yan Yuanshu thinks that the worst poem written by Luofu is *The Man on the Operating Table*, because of the weak structure or completely missing of structure; he thinks the best poem written by Luofu is *The Death in a Stone Room*, especially the section *Personal Letter of the Sun*. Yan Yuanshu declared he had used Brooks's theories in his criticism and said "American new critic Cleanth Brooks has mentioned that a poem is language of paradox. Many paradoxes were used in Luofu's poems, such as the sayings "all the trees would be sculptured to ashes", "ironware are horrified in the silence of maker", "only ashes is the beginning", etc.. The language of paradox is not the obscure language, or the language offsetting each other. Brooks believes that the language of paradox grasps the true spirit of poetry, and even life. It can be seen that the above lines of poems

have achieved their purposes through their own structure." The language of paradox mentioned by Yan Yuanshu is now often interpreted as irony, or paradox language.

Yan Yuanshu also uses Brooks's poetic theory to analyze Chinese classical poetry. As at the beginning of his work Analysis of "Chunwang" (*Spring View*), he clearly stated that he would use the method of new criticism on analyzing Du Fu's *Spring View* (Huang & Cao, 1998, pp.221-222). Yan Yuanshu made a detailed analysis of the paradoxes shown in *Spring View*, to prove Brooks's assertion that "the language of poetry is paradox" and that the poem is full of ambiguity. At the same time, Yan Yuanshu, just the same as Brooks, analyzed the poem on the poetry and overthrew the eisegesis analysis that Du Fu expressed his concern for the fate of the country and the people, and proved that what the poet mainly wanted to express is his homesickness. Because of the thorough analysis of this article, Yan Yuanshu became a model for elucidating China classical literary works with Western theories.

Of course, Yan Yuanshu thinks it is a failure that the final couplet of *Spring View* says "I cannot bear to scratch my grizzled hair; It grows too thin to hold a light hairpin", because the trivial and the feebleness shown in the last couplet does not coincide with the first three couplets that express the writer's grief for the broken country and families, giving reading a sense of apathy. The writer of this paper does not agree with Yan Yuanshu's statement, because this kind of juxtaposition precisely constitutes a kind of irony. In this poem, there is no any mention of the nature of the war whether the war is just or not just, which the poet did not care, because whatever the reason to launch the war, after all, it is not humane. The poet just paid his attention to his family's safety and self survival in the war, not the so-called moral justice, not patriotism, not the care for other people, etc., which appeared particularly false and deceiving, and instead, better to concern his white hair which became thinner and thinner. The respectively placement of two images completely different in space and volume at the beginning and the end of a poem, is similar to Brook's analysis of *Understanding Poetry* in which Brooks thinks that the altar (which is really small) on the top of Tennessee Mountain (which is very large) has actually become a kind of symbol in this context. In *Spring View*, "hairpin" plays a similar role as a metaphor and a symbol in a sense, so speaking from the deep sense, this poem can be regarded as a poem with an anti war theme, a poem with a publicity of human nature and personal life, with a black sense of humor, which is different in approach but equally satisfactory in result with Western anti war theme novels, such as Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*. Therefore, *Spring View* is an organic whole full of irony.

In the use of Brooks's ironic poetics to criticize the Chinese writers' works, the relative outstanding thesis is "the Irony Shown in the Chinese Novels in Recent

Years” written by Wang Liansheng. This paper makes a brief analysis and evaluation of some representative works in the Chinese language, and gives the attention to irony skills used in Mo Yan’s novels, and points out that there is often a quoted text in *Hong Gao Liang* (“*Red Sorghum*”), “I finally realized: Gaomi Northeast Town is undoubtedly the most beautiful on earth while the most ugly, the most popular while the most mundane, the most holy while the most lascivious, the most heroic while being the son of a bitch, with the most drinking while the most love ability.” It is considered that this is a typical example of the combination of ironic words, which can cause more and more tension. Under the pen of Mo Yan’s *Hong Gao Liang* (“*Red Sorghum*”), *Hong Huang* (“*Red Locust*”) and other works, there are paradoxes of “dream and reality, science and fairy tales, God and the devil, love and dissolution, nobleness and humbleness, beauty and stool, past and present, the gold medal and a condom... which are blending with each other, closely connected and united, forming a complete world” (Wang, 1993, pp.91-93).

The third category is the use of the Poetics of Brooks and other new critics in the parallel comparison on Chinese and foreign writers and works. This kind of paper is the least, and the relative more representative work is “Irony and Irony Tension—a Comparison Study on the Poem Styles of Li Shangyin and Donne”, analyzing the difference and the same effect in the two ironic techniques respectively used by Li Shangyin and John Donne (Zhang, 1997).

From the above analysis, it can be seen Brooks’s wide influence on China’s critical practice, on a large number of scholars and people, in different level. Regardless of scholars from Hong Kong and Taiwan or scholars from mainland, the use of Brooks’s poetics in the critical practice is kept in high enthusiasm, and some scholars apply quite well from the theoretical essence. And, of course, there are some shortcomings. For example, most scholars quoted Brooks’s theories that are confined to the irony, paradox poetics; in their analysis of foreign writers and their works, most works have been mentioned by Brooks, such as British and American writers John Donne, Keats, Yeats, William Faulkner, and so on; and in the analysis of the Chinese writers and works, mostly are superficial and blank, rarely good; as for Chinese and Western comparative study, due to the requirement in mastering the theory at the same time as well as blending Chinese and western, few paper is written in this field, which is the field needed to be strengthened in urgency.

3. BROOKS’S INFLUENCE ON CHINESE EDUCATION AND TEACHING

Brooks’s influence on China is also reflected in education and teaching. Of course, this influence is at first blended

both on China’s new criticism and China’s education and teaching.

The teaching function of the new criticism was once a handle in attack. For example, some opponents lampoon that new criticism is “normal business”, because of its fixed set of standards, by which the scoring to the students is simple and machinery just like scoring math homework (Medici, 1997, pp.760-773). In 1940, Conrad Aiken also attacked other new critics like Brooks who always read the poems like the vision of middle school teachers and give the poem accuracy, but with the boring classroom learning (William, 2009, p.559). And now, this has become an advantage of the new criticism. William E. Kaine from Wellesley College wrote in the *Literature Review* for the fifth volume of *the Cambridge History of American Literature*: “new criticism has become a teaching method; after all, the characteristics of the new criticism for the study of the text have been tested in the teaching practice as a new teaching method (which cannot be doubted, and John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks and other people have contributed to the development of this new criticism teaching method” (William, 2009, pp.350-351). Zhao Yiheng also said with a deep feeling: “it may be contrary to the expectations of many literary scholars, contemporary literary theory has to do a major social task, that is, the college liberal arts teaching” (Zhao, 2012, p.146). And new criticism is one of the best.

The influence of new criticism on China’s education can be traced back to the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century, from Ye Gongchao’s teaching adhering to the literary standard in departments of foreign languages in Qinghua University and Beijing University, etc., and then Xia Mianzun, Fan Cunzhong et al., dissatisfied with the teaching idea, and it was Richard and Empson who taught in China and brought teaching method of the new criticism to China, and then this new teaching method influenced many scholars and teachers at that time including Wang Zuoliang, Xu Guozhang, Li Funing, Yang Zhouhan, Mu Dan, Du Yunxie, Zheng Ming, Yuan Kejia et al. While in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the new criticism is also a great impact on teaching. In the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century, new criticism easily entered the college of liberal arts education within the system, for the rule of the Taiwan government policies are mainly focus on stability and the Anglo American new criticism theory and proposition are exactly in line with the demand at that time, coupled with the promotion of Yan Yuanshu (Zhang, 2011, pp.66-89). From the above discussion, it can be seen that the influence of new criticism on education cannot be overlooked because most of those Chinese critics influenced by the new criticism are engaging in teaching and research work in the first line of colleges and universities and also tending to use the new criticism text reading method in their classroom teaching.

Among the scholars and teachers influenced by the new criticism, some are clearly mentioned Brooks's influence on Chinese education and teaching, including Zhang Jinyan, Yan Yuanshu, Wang Runhua, Yang Renjing, Cao Wenxuan and Meng Fanhua et al.. Zhang Jinyan recalled in the 1950s when he came to see Empson to ask for advice how to learn English poetry, "Empson invited me to go to his house without hesitation and recommended an introductory book about poetry written by an American. After meeting, he took out Brooks Cleanth's *Understanding Poetry*.... and lent it to me. I benefited a lot and my horizon was broadened after reading the book, benefit." Although Zhang Jinyan said a lot about how Empson affected his academy, it can be seen from his narrative that Brooks's book *Understanding Poetry* plays a very important role in his academic progress as well. Zhang Jinyan also recalled in 1964 he visited Qian Zhongshu, Mr. Qian talked with him about the western literary criticism and mentioned about the book *A Short History of Literary Criticism* coauthored by Cleanth Brooks and William K. Wimsatt, and recommended the best chapters in the book (Zhang, 2005, pp.60-78). Therefore, it can be seen that Qian Zhongshu should be influenced by Brooks more or less, and this influence would consciously convey to his students.

Yan Yuanshu is not only the first scholar who translated and introduced to other Chinese scholars about the book "*History of Western Literary Criticism*" (i.e., *A Short History of Literary Criticism*) coauthored by Brooks and Wimsatt. In 1963 when he came back to Taiwan from the United States, he taught the course New Criticism in departments of foreign languages in Taiwan University and Tamkang University, and the teaching textbooks and materials used are the three books coauthored by Brooks and other new criticism writers. The three books are *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction* and *Understanding Drama*. According to the statement in Yan Yuanshu's book *the Literary Theories and Means of New Criticism School*, the above mentioned new criticism textbooks have made far-reaching influence on Taiwan, and in the sixties of the 20th century, there appeared reprint editions, which are widely used in every university of Taiwan (Yan, 1969). At the same time, Yan Yuanshu's translation of *the History of Western Literary Criticism* has become one of the teaching materials. Wang Runhua recalled: "in 1964 I bought the three books written by Cleanth Brooks et al, in the bookstore opposite to Taiwan University, and these three books are *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction* and *Understanding Drama*. I believe a lot of Taiwan University students and Taiwan students have been inspired by these three books and started their learning of modern literature. It is a milestone in the development of modern literature in Taiwan." Here it can be seen Brooks's big influence on the education and teaching of Hongkong and Taiwan.

Yang Renjing is very impressed with Brooks's knowledge and teaching achievements. He recalled during his study in Harvard, his teacher Professor Daniel Alan recommended the book *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* written by Brooks et al. This book is listed at the first in the reference books for the doctoral students, which is a necessary reference book. Yang Renjing said that he has benefited a lot from the book, and after a number of years, he has been training his doctoral students of British and American Literature Major with the book *American Literature: the Makers and the Making*, which is a considerable part of reason why his doctoral students have been able to obtain the recognition of foreign experts from the world famous universities such as Yale University (Yang, 2003). Cao Wenxuan with a double identity as a scholar and a writer has very enthusiastically expressed his appreciation and admiration on the book *Understanding Fiction* coauthored by Brooks and Warren. He believes that the tendency of thought and theory of contemporary Chinese literary criticism seriously deviated from the text, and the critics become thinker with the pursuit of the thoughts and theories outside text; in recent decades of Chinese literary criticism, Brooks's and Warren's novel appreciation and subtle interpretation ways have almost disappeared. Therefore, China's universities should also have such teaching materials as *Understanding Fiction* (Cao, 2007, pp.135-136). Meng Fanhua once recommended five classic works on China Reading Newspaper, one of which is *Understanding Fiction* coauthored by Brooks and Warren. He also believes the teaching method of criticism advocated in *Understanding Fiction*, is now China's the urgent need incriticism and teaching (Meng, 2007). Although some scholars have come to talk about Brooks's Enlightenment from the point of view of the practice of criticism, they are bound to penetrate Brooks's criticism ideas into their teaching practice because they most are teachers.

Brooks's influence on Chinese teaching is not only reflected in the teaching of college literature, but also in its radiation power of the Chinese language teaching. For example, in Sun Shaozhen's work *Masterpiece Close Reading: Microscopic Analysis of a Case Study*, he proposed the idea that the value of the text should be put in the first place from the text itself in the middle school Chinese reading teaching and should not be impacted by vulgar sociology. This is obviously reflecting the shadow of reading theory advocated by Brooks and other new critics. Some middle school teachers in the Chinese language wrote papers and claimed that Brooks's close reading of the text is in line with the fundamental purpose of the current middle school language curriculum reform. Language teachers in many schools began to apply teaching method with text close reading into their daily teaching, which means that text close reading method of

the new criticism has been implemented in middle school teaching.

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it can be seen that Brooks has made a profound influence on China's criticism theories and practice, education and teaching and other aspects. In the present China, the cultural studies are increasingly out of the text, and the reflection of the academic community is constantly deepened. At the same time, along with the strong revival of new criticism, it will set off a new upsurge in the literary criticism. Critics will be turning more and more attention in new criticism. In the literary criticism, more and more writers will consciously take the new criticism as their guidance. In the teaching reform, the teaching pattern of text analysis will appear constantly.

Of course, in translation, dissemination and reception process of an alien, heterogeneous thing, variation will inevitably produce, with more or less deviation from its original properties, or some of its inherent properties lost, or increase of the number of things that it does not own, or the meaning of it distorted, and even completely contrary to its original intent. That's the same in Chinese academic circle. There are many misunderstanding in Brooks's irony and reading theory. The most common misunderstanding is denouncing them as a non historicism and formalism, anti romantic etc.. The reasons for this misunderstanding are many. In addition to the unclear understanding of Brooks's theory, there are some social and political factors, and people hope to use a new way to reflect on the Marx doctrine of literary criticism in urgency. Chinese scholars' misreading on Brooks and his theory in 80s and 90s of the twentieth century is not necessarily a bad thing, because this misreading has a positive effect on literature evaluation method needed in society with serious anti social and political bias. Brooks's theories such as irony, text reading have been understood differently in China, and some of interpretation is even contrary to Brooks's original intention and intention, but these various interpretation and variability, in some degree, play a very important role in China's literary criticism and education. Of course, in the Chinese academic circle, with the deepen research on the new criticism, more efforts need to be taken to a further study of Brooks and his theories.

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