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A Brief History of the Reception of Laocoon in China: From the Perspective of the “poetical picture”

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ABSTRACT. “Poetical picture (poetisches Gemälde),” indicating a description or image in poetry, is one keyword in *Laocoon* and is maintained as a shared concern among Chinese scholars. The concept touches upon the very essential question in *Laocoon*: compared to painting (plastic art), to what extent can poetry (literature art) describe objects? In 1929, Wu Mi 吴宓 published “The 200th anniversary of the birth of Lessing” in *The Critical Review*, where he, with a good understanding of the limited framework (mimetic illusionism) used by Lessing, values the detailed arguments related to literary expression in *Laocoon*. On the other hand, Qian Zhong-shu 钱锺书, a student of Wu at Tsinghua University (1929-1933), recognized that “poetry’s holding a wider sphere of expression than painting” is an opinion originated from Lessing and tried to develop it in “Reading *Laocoon*” (1962). I particularly focus on how Qian referenced Burke to argue that “emotional atmosphere” can only be expressed by words. Between Wu and Qian, the progress in understanding western art theory to bring out the very essence of *Laocoon* in China is clearly manifested.

1. Introduction

Recognized as one of the established classics in modern western aesthetics, G. E. Lessing’s *Laocoon* (1766) has pointed researchers in various directions since its publication (e.g., paragon viz. relation between poetry and painting, semiotics, classics, intellectual history,

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comparative literature)²⁵. In the early twentieth century, *Laocoon* was introduced into China with the purpose of reconstructing traditional culture with the reference to western scholarship and turned out to be one of the most revisited western aesthetic texts to this day. In previous studies, the basic contour of its reception in China has been outlined, with accounts by Wu Mi 吴宓 (1894-1978), Zhu Guang-qian 朱光潜 (1897–1986), Zong Bai-hua 宗白华 (1897–1986) and Qian Zhong-shu 钱锺书 (1910–1998) from the 1920s to 1960s (Luo Ying-jie 2007; Lu Bai-yu 2018). However, an in-depth investigation, to which I refer not only to the content of arguments themselves but also how those arguments were posed and how they affected the course of modern Chinese aesthetics, has not been fully conducted.

I have hitherto scrutinized related treatises by Zhu Guang-qian, Zong Bai-hua and Qian Zhong-shu, and re-located them into modern Chinese aesthetics history²⁶. In this paper, I will focus on Wu Mi and Qian Zhong-shu to examine the reception through the perspective of the “poetical picture (poetisches Gemälde)”. “Poetical picture,” indicating a description or image in poetry, is one keyword in *Laocoon* and is maintained as a shared concern among Chinese scholars. The concept touches upon the very essential question in *Laocoon*: compared to painting (plastic art), to what extent can poetry (literature art) describe objects?

2. Wu Mi and Qian Zhong-shu

This paper selects Wu Mi and Qian Zhong-shu for the following two reasons. First, in contrast Zhu Guang-qian and Zong Bai-hua’s – deemed as the “two greatest modern aestheticians in China” – who attempted schematization of Chinese aesthetics, Wu Mi and Qian Zhong-shu act fundamentally as literary scholars and focus on the analysis of concrete examples. Regarding the problem of “poetical picture,” it is their discussion that lively characterizes the reception in China.

On the other hand, although the above four scholars were familiar with each others’ thoughts, Qian Zhong-shu had studied directly following Wu Mi at Tsinghua University (1929-1933), and treated the latter as his life-long respected professor²⁷. Therefore, taking a

²⁵ On the latest researching tendency, see Avi Lifschitz, Michael Squire (ed.) (2017).

²⁶ Regarding Zhu Guang-qian, see Yi Ding (2020); On Qian Zhong-shu, see Yi Ding (2021).

²⁷ Qian himself had stated that Wu was one of his most respected professors in Tsinghua University and influenced him for life. See Yang Jiang (1998).

comparison between them is considered to be helpful to measure more accurately how the reception progressed.

3. Wu Mi’s Reception of *Laocoon*

In 1929, Wu published “The 200th anniversary of the birth of Lessing” in *The Critical Review* 学衡, one of the most influential academic journals at the time where he served as editor in chief. This essay devotes half of the pages to introducing the person of Lessing and the other half to *Laocoon*. Wu states, “Regarded as a classic in the history of literature critics and aesthetics, *Laocoon* has not been fully introduced into China” (Wu, 1999 [1929], p. 12). Thus, this essay launches a formal introduction of the text in China.

Wu first overviewed the main conclusion of *Laocoon*, i.e., “painting and sculpture belong to spatial art whereas poetry to temporal art; the signs they utilize (for the former colour and line; for the latter tone), their [appropriate] subjects to be expressed (for the former one second in the [coexistent] ideal nature, namely object; for the latter successive process, namely action) are different” (Wu, 1999 [1929], p. 13). Obviously, this passage refers to Chap. XV and XVI in *Laocoon*. Moreover, Wu marked Lessing’s several other arguments covering the so-called “the most pregnant moment” chosen by painting (which can be found in Chap. III, XVI, XIX); an expression that is only feasible in poetry via symbol (attribute) (Chap. X), regarding invisible beings (Chap. XII) or the ugly (Chap. IV); in comparison to painting’s ability to represent formal beauty, poetry has methods of expressing from the effect of beauty or beauty in motion (Chap. XXI). It can be said that a comparatively thorough grasp of *Laocoon* has taken its shape.

What deserves particular attention is that Wu places his highest value on the view of poetry’s expressing ability “from the effect of beauty or beauty in motion”.

The principle that [poetry] should give up the expression of “formal [or bodily] beauty” is indeed the most significant contribution in *Laocoon*. Lessing discovered one “dead end” in literature [expression]. Preceding literature scholars walked down there and never knew how to get out. [Lessing] found out this “dead end” and furthermore pointed out its exit [namely to express from the effect of beauty or beauty in motion]. (Wu, 1999 [1929], p. 18)

To understand the passage, a brief explanation of the “formal beauty” or “bodily beauty” and

why, to Lessing, it features the subject of the painting is in need. As Wu quoted from *Laocoon*,

Bodily beauty [körperliche Schönheit] arises from the harmonious effect of numerous parts, all of which the sight is capable of comprehending at the same time. It requires, therefore, that these parts should lie in juxtaposition; and since things whose parts lie in juxtaposition are the peculiar objects of the plastic arts, these it is, and these only, which can imitate bodily beauty.

[On the contrary,] the poet – since he can only exhibit in succession its component parts – entirely abstains from the description of material beauty as beauty. He feels that these parts, ranged one after another, cannot possibly have the effect that they produce when closely arranged together; that the concentrating glance which, after their enumeration, we try to cast back upon them imparts to us no harmonious image; that it surpasses the power for human imagination to represent to oneself what effect such and such a mouth, nose, and eyes will produce together unless we can call to mind from nature or art a similar composition of like parts. (Wu, 1999 [1929], p. 17; cf. Chap. XX in *Laocoon*)

This passage actually touches upon the very core of Lessing’s theory. The fundamental logic here is not simple because “bodily beauty” demands a sort of coexistent order whereas painting deals with the coexistent, and hence it is considered capable of expressing bodily beauty. The sign used in painting and poetry, depicted as coexistent and successive respectively, do not refer to two types of signs belonging to the same dimension: to paraphrase with semiotic terminology, the former is categorized into natural sign whereas the latter into arbitrary sign. Natural sign means there is a necessary relation between the sign and the signified, while an arbitrary sign means the opposite. Based on this definition, it is legitimate to ask why the arbitrary signs of poetry cannot express the coexistent²⁸. The answer is that, to Lessing, the purpose of art is not for pure expression, but a certain expression that can evoke the so-called illusion. That is to say, in the process of this sort of aesthetic illusionism, signs need to become transparent and disappear from the consciousness of readers, whilst the signified is, so to speak, directly appealing to them. According to the latter half of the above quote, to Lessing, when poetry presents the co-existent, readers cannot combine images from different parts of an object signified individually to achieve a whole image.

The thought of aesthetic illusionism prevails in western art theory in the eighteenth century, and within this framework, Wu assessed and acclaimed the contribution of *Laocoon*.

²⁸ This question was actually posed first by Moses Mendelssohn, and later mentioned by Lessing himself in the Chap. XVII in *Laocoon*.

However, it is not because Wu had no knowledge of other kinds of possibilities of art mechanisms. In order to clarify this, I will take a look into Irving Babbitt’s (1865-1933) understanding of the text, who was Wu’s professor at Harvard University from 1919 to 1921 and exerted a far-reaching influence on his whole life.

4. Irving Babbitt’s *The New Laocoon*

Known as a precursor of the “New Humanism” movement and study of comparative literature, Babbitt contributed a broadly acknowledged response toward *Laocoon*, titled *The New Laocoon: An essay on the confusion of the arts* (1910). Wu concluded its main idea correctly at the end of “200th anniversary of the birth of Lessing” as follows.

...Lessing restricts his discussion on the object of poetry to action. He pays no interest in emotion. To him, the end (purpose) of art lies in mimesis of ideal nature. His art theory is in essence rooted from Aristotle, aiming at overturning “the pseudo-classic” and re-setting up “the truly classical”. Whilst Lessing has swept away the pseudo-classic confusion of the arts, there appeared later the Romantic confusion of the arts. Therefore, Professor Babbitt published his *The New Laocoon*. (Wu, 1999 [1929], p. 18)

Babbitt’s main criticism towards Lessing is Lessing’s constricting the discussion within the framework of “mimesis,” which is the foundation of aesthetic illusionism. Babbitt devoted most of his work to tracing down the previous conditions that led to the writing of *Laocoon*. He achieved one main conclusion: Lessing’s interest in ideal nature as the object of art was inherited from the Aristotelian orthodoxy backward to the Renaissance. One of the essential criticisms of Babbitt is as follows.

He [Lessing] does not for example concern himself sufficiently, to our modern thinking, with the suggestiveness of words. He looks on them too much as a sort of passive material, and on the poet as too conscious and deliberate in his combining of them. (Babbitt, 1910, pp. 51-52)

Here, “suggestiveness” means the function of utilizing imagination to allude or express more than words themselves, as what Lessing has noticed about the painter’s ability to select the moment that has the most suggestiveness -- the so-called “the most pregnant moment”.

It can be concluded that what Babbitt criticizes most about *Laocoon* is its framework of aesthetic illusionism and its inadequate understanding of literature. In this regard, Wu’s praise of Lessing’s arguments shall be considered as being conditioned with a good understanding of the limited illusionism framework, and, regardless of this limited framework, Wu still holds an interest in detailed arguments related to literary expression in *Laocoon*. This is in sharp contrast to Professor Babbitt’s reception of *Laocoon*.

5. Qian Zhong-shu’s Reception of *Laocoon*

However, is Lessing truly being ignorant of the ability of words as Babbitt pointed out? In exploring Lessing’s understanding of literature in *Laocoon*, I will concentrate on Qian Zhong-shu’s “Reading *Laocoon*” (1962). In this long essay, Qian set forth many viewpoints as responses to the text that are regarded as the representative literature theory in twentieth-century China.

Like other scholars, Qian first took a look at the central conclusion from Chap. XV and XVI that poetry and painting use different signs and thus have different subjects to represent. But Qian also has unique concerns with Chap. XIII and XIV. He comments,

According to Lessing, “a poetical picture (ein poetisches Gemälde)” is not convertible into “a material picture (ein materielles Gemälde),” for linguistic words describe successive action in time, whereas colours and lines can only depict an object that extends in space. This conclusion is not wrong, but taking the above-mentioned Chinese pre-modern poetries into thoughts, it is not fully enough considered: “a poetical picture” that does not describe action but stable object is not necessarily convertible into “a material picture” either. (Qian, 2002 [1962], p. 38)

“Poetical picture” refers to an image in poetry whereas “material picture” to concrete painting work. Because poetry and painting utilize different signs, the image regarding “action” achieved successfully in poetry may not be able to be represented in painting. However, with the reference of detailed instances of Chinese poetry, Qian maintains that even in terms of “stable object,” which shall be the domain for painting, poetry may still perform superior. He gave out a heap of Chinese poetry examples but his intention is to explain poetry in general. Elsewhere, I have examined how he facilitated scholarship from Chinese tradition and the west to re-explain Chinese poetry, while here I will pick up one point where he referred to western

thoughts to see how he demonstrated the argument itself. That is, Qian maintains that only poetry can express the “emotional atmosphere” brought about by the object.

Preceding to Lessing, Burke has already pointed out that when describing concrete objects, to insert some abstract or general words is useful to bring out a grand and magnificent atmosphere that concludes everything. For instance, when Milton depicts the rocks, caves, lakes, bogs, etc. in the gloomy and miserable hell, he concludes them as “a universe of death” – this is the unique ability of literature art, compared to plastic art. (Qian, 2002 [1962], p. 39)

In the eighteenth-century paragon study, Edmund Burke’s *A philosophical inquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (first edition in 1757, the second in 1759) shows a different stance from that of *Laocoon*. Here, Qian stresses the importance of using “abstract words” proposed by Burke, which does not exist in Lessing’s linguistic view.

Inheriting the semiotics from Leibniz-Wolf School, Lessing treats the basic function of words as means to analyze marks (Merkmal) of the representation of an object. If to describe the object “hell,” following the example from Burke, to Lessing, it is necessary to depict carefully what “rocks, caves, lakes, bogs, etc.” are like respectively. On the other hand, as already stated, Lessing’s understanding of art’s purpose is illusion-evocation. Hence, Lessing’s task, as shown in *Laocoon*, is to figure out a way to conquer the clarity of linguistic signs to reach illusion (David E. Wellbery 1984; Tanehisa Otabe 1995). However, compared to that, Qian points out another solution manifested by Burke in considering other possibilities of words’ function.

Burke’s theory is assessed as basically following the mimetic illusionism framework while showing the very first sprouting of new art theory, which gives room to the role played by the artist and recipient. However, what is important here is that, to Qian, Burke’s stance is not totally the opposite of that of Lessing, because fundamentally speaking the aim of Qian is not criticizing Lessing but developing the latter’s theory. In the end of “Reading *Laocoon*” writes Qian,

Lessing admitted that while poetry and painting have their own strengths, poetry, compared to painting, holds “a wider sphere” for expression. Supposing my foregoing accounts have some sense, then the expression sphere of poetry may be slightly wider than what Lessing has considered. (Qian, 2002 [1962], p. 57)

“Poetry holds a wider sphere of expression than painting” is considered to be an opinion that originated from Lessing himself. In saying this, Qian indicated his grounds of argument to Chap. VII and VIII in *Laocoon*. Let us confirm the corresponding passage from Chap. VII.

... if we simply consider the wide sphere of poetry, the boundless field of our imagination, and the spirituality of its images; a great and various throng of which can be placed in the closest juxtaposition, without concealing or disfiguring each other, which perhaps would be the effect that objects themselves, or their natural signs, would produce in the narrow limits of space and time. (Lessing, 1914 [1766], p. 44)

Lessing maintains explicitly that poetry, with the help of imagination, has a wider sphere of expression possibility than painting.

6. Conclusion

As an established classic in the eighteenth century, *Laocoon* illustrates the course of the transformation from old art theory to the modern. As pointed out by previous studies already, the central conclusion in Chap. XV and XVI of this treatise can by no means be seen as a reduced scheme for the whole text. Rather, Lessing’s arguments scattered in other parts are suggestive of the emergence of new art theory (Friedrich Vollhardt, 2013). If we focus on the main conclusion of the text, it is not difficult to understand the criticism from Babbitt. Indeed, compared to the Romantic art theory, the linguistic view in *Laocoon* is very limited to the mimetic illusionism framework.

On the contrary, what Wu and Qian focused on are other arguments embedded in *Laocoon* that deviate from the main conclusion. Wu finally gives his highest consent to Lessing’s discussion within the range of illusionism (admitting that pursuing formal beauty is the “dead end” in literature expression), while Qian values *Laocoon* for its insights regarding the function of imagination that exists in literature art and tries to develop it. On the other hand, As Wellbery (1984) has pointed out, the very authentic purpose of *Laocoon* is to render poetry a higher status to re-locate it to be equal to painting – via demonstrating the possibility of naturalness of signs in poetry, not in the level of signs themselves but in the level of structure of

signification.

This paper, focusing on the problem of “poetical picture,”– the term directly mentioned by Qian along though – has clarified that in referencing to *Laocoon*, Wu Mi and Qian Zhong-shu’s interests are on Lessing’s detailed discussions on literature instead of the academic framework in general and that they showed great progress in understanding western art theory to bring out the very essence of the treatise in the span of around 30 years: from 1929 by Wu to 1962 by Qian.

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