

Original Paper

Research on Wang Xiaobo's Humanitarian Enlightenment

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Abstract

In the 20th century of China, The enlightenment spirit was obviously active twice, once in the May 4th, 1919 when the New Culture Movement happen, and once in the 1980s. The core of the spirit of enlightenment is a kind of humanitarianism, which emphasizes rationality and freedom. And the core of Wang Xiaobo's spiritual exactly is consistent with Humanitarian enlightenment, so the discussion of Wang Xiaobo's ideological value can be summarized from the perspective of Humanitarian enlightenment: advocating science and rationality, advocating freedom and human rights, and the pursuit the true interest in life.

Keywords

wang xiaobo, humanitarian, enlightenment

1. Introduction

Wang Xiaobo was born in an intellectual family of Beijing in May 13, 1952, when his family suffered tiny political changes, so he was named after "Xiaobo" by his parents. After that, Wang Xiaobo's life was related to political movements with a close connection. He spent his teenage years during the period of China when political movements happen frequently in the 20th century. Therefore, Wang Xiaobo witnessed the "Great Leap Forward" and "the Great Cultural Revolution". Governed by the policy, he once sent to Yunnan to farming. During the period, Wang Xiaobo began to write novels. Later, Wang Xiaobo moved to his mother's hometown in Shandong Province, and became a teacher. In 1973, Wang Xiaobo returned to Beijing and became a factory worker. At this time, he continued to make his own literary creations. In 1977, Wang Xiaobo met Li Yinhe who became his wife later through the novel "Green Haired Water Monster". In 1978, Wang Xiaobo took the college entrance examination and successfully entered Renmin University of China, where he studied in the Department of Trade and Economics, majoring in commodity science. In 1984, Wang Xiaobo went to University of Pittsburgh and became a graduate student at the East Asian Studies Center. At this time, Wang Xiaobo

met Cho-yun Hsu who was teaching in the University of Pittsburgh and received many supports. Wang Xiaobo returned to China in 1988, teaching at Peking University and Renmin University of China. In September 1992, Wang Xiaobo resigned from his teaching position to specialize in literary creation. On April 11, 1997, Wang Xiaobo died of heart attack at home. Since then, the society has paid more attention to Wang Xiaobo, and there has been a “Wang Xiaobo craze”.

2. Method

2.1 *The Origins of Humanitarian Enlightenment in China from 1919 to Present*

2.1.1 The Historical Origins of “Humanitarian” Thoughts in China from 1919 to Present

The term humanism is derived from the Latin “humanistas”, which originally meant the spirit of humanity. Then it extended to be a kind of values which comprehensively improves the abilities of people and enables them to fully develop their talents. Humanism encompasses three main meanings: human dignity, human freedom, and human existence. Its main principles and characteristics are following: First, believe that human beings are a unity. Second, emphasize human dignity. Third, emphasize the ability of people to develop themselves. Fourth, emphasize sense, objectivity and peace. According to the definition of humanitarianism in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, modern humanitarianism is the “religion of human nature”. The third edition of “*Webster’s Dictionaries*” also provides the definition “Humanism is a doctrine, a set of attitudes or a way of life centered on human interests and values. It is a kind of philosophy which opposes the supernaturalism and regards people as objects off natural. It affirms the basic dignity and value of people, includes the ability to use rational methods to obtain self-realization.

The academia generally believes that humanitarianism originated in the Renaissance, and before the Renaissance, Europe was anti-humanism. But in fact, the thought of humanism born earlier than the concept of humanism, and the origin of humanism can be traced back to Homeric Age. According to Lei Yongsheng’s research, the history of humanitarianism can be divided into five historical periods, corresponding to five forms of humanitarianism. They are: humanitarianism in the Greco-Roman period, Christian gospel humanitarianism in the Middle Ages, Enlightenment-rational humanitarianism from the Renaissance to modern times, Russian “new spiritual philosophy” humanitarianism from the end of 19th century to the beginning of 20th century (Evangelical humanism which was engineered and developed), Diversified humanitarianism in the 20th century.

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Humanitarianism was introduced to China as a political philosophy. At that time, the revolutionaries such as Yan Fu, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Zou Rong, etc. used the concepts of freedom, equality, and democracy which derived from the humanitarianism to fight against the rule of the Qing government. By the time of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, humanitarianism began to extend to the intellectual class, and concepts such as “freedom”, “equality”, and “human rights” began to spread. Humanitarianism in literature was

spread by translating during the May Fourth Movement.

2.1.2 The Historical Origin of the “Enlightenment” Thought in Modern and Contemporary China

“Enlightenment” can be divided to a broad sense and a narrow sense: From a broad perspective, enlightenment refers to cultural ideas or movements which appeal of modernity, so it can also be called “enlightenment modernity”. In a narrow sense, it refers to ideological movements against religious and feudal autocracy during the bourgeois revolution in Western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Today’s “enlightenment” is more inclined to a broad interpretation, it is a kind of promotion of the humanitarian spirit, and it is a pursuit of freedom, democracy, science and rational spirit.

The enlightenment literary trend is the first literary trend in China. Its first stage originated at the end of Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China. It emerged in the May Fourth era and declined in the period of literature revolution. It lasted more than ten years. It flashed in the history of modern Chinese literature, and was quickly submerged in the wave of literature revolution. It was not revived until the 1980s.

Modern China has gone through a bumpy process relatively before it gradually completed the transformation from tradition to modernity. From the beginning of the Opium War in modern China, in order to resist the aggression of Western powers, China began to gradually reform and embark on the path of modernity. The occurrence of Chinese modernity has gone through progressive transformation from the material level to the political level and then to the cultural level. The first thing that started was the innovation of instrument of production. The “self-strengthening movement” aimed at “from learning foreigners to control foreigners”, systematically learning technologies of Western developed countries, setting up factories, and sending Chinese students to the United States schools. But, in the end, the complete annihilation of the Beiyang Fleet in The Sino-Japanese naval battle of 1894-1895 declared the failure of this movement. The failure of the reform of implements made Chinese politicians and intellectuals realize that only material innovation is not enough to achieve resistance to Western powers, so they turned the reform to the political system. However, The Reform Movement led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao and the Revolution of 1911 led by Sun Yat-sen ended in failure one after another. Neither reform nor revolutionary methods were adopted to enable China to embark on a new path of modernization. The ignorance of the masses hobbled the pace of reform. After struggling, some people of insight began to realize that it is necessary to shift Chinese people’s fatuous thoughts in order to complete the modernization transformation. To gain solid mass base, the reformers have begun to make efforts. As a result, The New Culture Movement was carried out, democracy and science were promoted. The May Fourth New Culture Movement liberated individuals from the shackles of feudal power, it challenged the roots of feudal ethics with sense and freedom, and the value of human beings was promoted.

The emergence of “modernity” gave birth to the Humanitarian enlightenment during the May Fourth Movement. The standard of literary was modernity which striving for science, democracy, freedom and

individual liberation at that time. The theme of “human” was praised and the free and individual “human” was discovered. The concept of “human literature” was pushed onto the historical stage. China experienced ups and downs in the 20th century. Before the 1980s, from the aggression of western powers to the turmoil within the country, China has been working hard to achieve national independence and development. When faced with national peril, the enlightenment thoughts were replaced with concepts such as “salvation” and “class struggle”. Therefore, during the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the Great Cultural Revolution, the enlightenment spirit failed to reoccupy the high ground of thought. Since 1978, China’s modernization development has been put on the agenda with the need of economic development. Under the opportunity of this era, the ideological liberation movement was revived in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

2.2 The Germination of Wang Xiaobo’s Humanitarian enlightenment

The experience of Wang Xiaobo is related to the general trend of time. The political movements had left a very deep mark on his youth. In some of his literary creations, we can see the trace of political movements. During the Great Cultural Revolution people’s normal desires were suppressed. The anti-intellect of people made Wang Xiaobo awake, He always vigilant about his surroundings, thinking questions with a reflective attitude. The life in Yunnan province made Wang deeply realize the poverty of both matter and spirit. The chaos of life made Wang calmly thought about the value of the absurd life. Freedom, sense and interest has become his eternal pursuit.

Wang Xiaobo was influenced by both Chinese and Western cultures. Chinese traditional culture, philosophy and classical literature are important parts of Wang Xiaobo’s knowledge structure. Another important influence of Wang Xiaobo’s thoughts comes from his experience of studying abroad. The life of studying abroad gave him a more comprehensive understanding of Western philosophy. From 1984 to 1988, Wang Xiaobo studied for a master’s degree at the University of Pittsburgh. He used his vacation traveled around the United States and European countries. During this period, Wang Xiaobo had a deeper understanding of liberalism. In the conflict between Chinese and Western civilizations, Wang Xiaobo was able to think about China’s issues comprehensively from a more rational perspective. A large number of Western philosophical thoughts and scientific theories affected Wang Xiaobo’s thoughts.

The acceptance of Western theories laid a solid foundation for Wang Xiaobo to interpret Chinese issues from a Western enlightenment perspective. The time when Wang Xiaobo published his works coincided with the time when the enlightenment spirit revived in China. He was the individualized representative of the enlightenment humanitarian thought at that time.

2.3 The Embodiment of Wang Xiaobo’s Humanitarian Enlightenment

During the whole life, Wang Xiaobo created a large number of literary works, mainly novels and essays. The enlightenment humanitarian thought runs through out Wang Xiaobo’s works. The academia summarizes Wang Xiaobo’s main ideas in three aspects: “intelligence”, “sex” and “interest”, which

coincides with the spiritual core of Humanitarian enlightenment. Wang Xiaobo, who was major in science and engineering, always adheres to a rational perspective when pondering problems. His works reflect the advocacy of freedom, the pursuit of truth and fun.

2.3.1 Advocacy of Science and Reason

Wang Xiaobo is a writer with rational thought, which reflected in many of his essays, including his novels. Characters such as “Wang Er” and “Li Jing” have a good mathematical foundation. In the collection of essays “The Silent Majority”, Wang Xiaobo expressed his review of life and evaluations of social issues, cultural phenomena, and literary works in the 1990s, from which we can see Wang Xiaobo’s pursuit of science and reason.

Two words appeared in Wang Xiaobo’s essays for many times which are “science” and “stupid”. Through thinking about issues in various fields, Wang Xiaobo advocates his belief in science and rejection of ignorance. In the preface of “The Silent Majority”, Wang Xiaobo said, “There is simply no self-evident thing in this world”. From this we can see his rational view of everything. In “The Silent Majority”, Wang Xiaobo bluntly stated his advocacy of science: “I think that the time when I experience the greatest happiness is when I first entered university, because science is charming to me, and it is always logically complete. Impeccable, this is something rare in this ordinary world. “In “Experience Life”, Wang Xiaobo recounted his experience of eating bran in Yunnan province, which place the educated youth suffered physical pain by eating awful food in order to conform to certain formalism. Wang Xiaobo criticized the regressive approach that only seeks its fame without any practical effect. He negate the ignorance is aim to pursue rationality.

Wang Xiaobo gave a deep irony to many absurd phenomena. However, his purpose was not to simply irony, but to find the reason for the absurdity, and summarize rational enlightenment. He strongly agrees with scientific knowledge and believes that knowledge is good. Even if some knowledge is useless in a short period of time, the power of science far exceeds the vision of utilitarianism.

2.3.2 The pursuit of freedom and human rights

According to hierarchical theory of needs, human needs are mainly divided into five levels: physiological need, safety need, belongingness and love need, esteem needs and self-actualization need. Physiological needs are one of the most basic human needs, which mainly refer to people’s daily needs for dressing and eating, food and clothing, such as the need for water and inorganic salts, the need for warmth and sex. There are many descriptions of “sex” in Wang Xiaobo’s works, which are actually a reasonable extension of human nature and human rights.

The Cultural Revolution has extremely suppressed human nature, and the reasonable desires of people are also repressed by traditional culture for thousands of years. Wang Xiaobo regards sex as an important pole of enlightenment. He promotes the freedom of human nature with the freedom of “sex”. Whether it is an educated youth-themed novel represented by “The Golden Age”, or a gay-themed novel such as “East Palace, West Palace”, Wang Xiaobo is very open of the topic of “sex”. The scholar

Dai Jinhua said, "In Wang Xiaobo's writings, gender scenes and sexual relations are not a space for rebellion or a space for personal privacy, on the contrary, it is a miniature power structure, an effective power practice". Sex has become a miniature power practice of individual personality in Wang Xiaobo's writing, and is an extension of freedom and human rights.

In "A Maverick Pig", Wang Xiaobo praised the black pig that is brave enough to break through the pigpen. Wang Xiaobo used a distinctive pig to show his desire for freedom. People always like to set up their own cage, and content with such arrangements, Wang Xiaobo expressed denial for such kind of mind. The spiritual pursuit of freedom is the longing that Wang Xiaobo repeatedly reveals in his works, and he called for people to keep longing for such spirit of liberty.

2.3.3 Pursuit of the True Interest of Life

Interest is Wang Xiaobo's ideological pursuit of all time, which is reflected in two aspects, the one is "real" and the other is "interesting". Wang Xiaobo has always tried to resist hypocrisy and absurdity with truth, and dispel boredom with fun. For life, he pursues real happiness or real pain.

In "The Silver Age", Wang Xiaobo said: "The absurd I feel on the X-shaped frame is this: The world in front of me is not real. There is no place in it that seems to be true, but it is like a story made up by someone: A Utopia". For the absurdity of life in a specific historical period which was a huge artificially fabricated system, Wang Xiaobo gave a deep reflection on how to survive in the cracks with rationality. Wang Xiaobo puts forward this point of view in his essays: "There are three ways to obtain popular information: filtering from the truth, modifying the existing information or fabricating. The first is the most difficult. The third is the most convenient". The pursuit of truth is Wang Xiaobo's lifelong spirit Attribution.

Wang Xiaobo advocates the joy of thinking. He wrote: "In the evening, you sit under the eaves and watch the sky slowly darken, feeling lonely and desolate, and feel that your life has been taken away. At that time, I am a young man, but I am afraid of living this way and getting older. In my opinion, this is something more terrifying than death". Wang Xiaobo advocates that everyone should make clear judgments with his own independent thinking, and refuses to be indoctrinated by anyone. He pointed out that China's ideological rule of "rejecting other thoughts but Confucianism" since the Han Dynasty is a kind of strangulation of thinking, and only by breaking out of such traps can one escape the massacre of thinking.

3. Result

The core of Wang Xiaobo's spirit is rationality, freedom, truthfulness, and fun, which coincides with the trend of Humanitarian enlightenment. Wang Xiaobo has experienced the most absurd era in China in the last century. He has honed his character in the entanglement of suffering. In his works, he made a deep sarcasm of the absurdity in life. He paid attention to the thoughts of people who were suppressed under power, and therefore called for a liberation. He applied the speculative vision of Western

philosophy to the interpretation of the traditional culture of his country. The objective examination of the world, the pursuit of truth, and the rational judgment based on scientific knowledge are not only the content that we are missing in the absurd age, but the spiritual freedom that every individual needs to pursue in every historical period.

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