Abstract

During his earlier years, Liang Qichao (1873-1929) was determined to eradicate the general practice among writers of modelling their literary styles on that of the old ones. By initiating the "Literary Reform Movement", he aimed at creating a new kind of literature which had better political functions.

However, Liang's attitude seemed to change drastically in his later years when he quitted the political scene and concentrated on academic research. He disagreed with people who discriminated against anything traditional and tried his best to persuade them to treasure their literary tradition.

Does this seemingly change in attitude towards literature show that Liang had contradicted himself? The five chapters of the academic exercise hope to provide an evaluation of Liang's literary thought.

Chapter one depicts the critical political situation in Liang's time which aroused the patriotic feelings of the people. Chapter two explores the origins of Liang's literary thought. Not only did Liang have a firm grasp on traditional literature through his early education, he also absorbed Western culture extensively during his fourteen-year stay in Japan.

Chapter three comprises three parts. The first two touch on Liang's views on the nature and functions of literature in his later years. He held that emotion is the essence of literature and that literature is the best tool for purification of the emotions of people. The third part relates Liang's thought on
literary reform in his earlier years.

Chapter four also consists of three parts which discuss and analyse Liang's views on novels, prose and poetry in terms of theory and practice. For novels, Liang stressed that it was the highest form of literature which could best be used for political purposes. Through the publication of newspapers and periodicals, he achieved great success in his attempt to reform prose. With a new form of prose, he fulfilled his aim of enlightening the people. As for poetry, Liang had a much more conservative view and wanted only limited reform.

Chapter five presents an evaluation of Liang's literary thought. The main focus is on Liang's attitude towards literature. Liang did not break away from the traditional pragmatic attitude of the Chinese towards literature. As this attitude had not changed despite the shift in focus of his views on literature, he could not be said to have contradicted himself. However, it also appears to be a major limitation of Liang's literary thought as it is often believed that the correct attitude towards literature is that of aesthetism instead of pragmatism.

This academic exercise tries to evaluate Liang's literary thought from a different perspective. Many have evaluated Liang's respective contribution on novels, prose and poetry in terms of theory and practice, but few have adopted a holistic perspective when examining his literary thought. In adopting the latter perspective, this study provides a more constructive evaluation of Liang's literary thought.