Abstract

This Academic Exercise begins with a biographical study of the author Li Boyuan (1867 - 1906) and goes on to examine the direction of his writing and his system of thoughts. The study also includes an in-depth and critical analysis of Li's representative work "The Bureaucrats" with respect to its ideology and artistry and its influence on later works of similar censorious nature in the late Qing dynasty. Such an assessment will be used to determine Li's contribution to the development of Chinese literature.

Li Boyuan was one of the four writers of censorious fiction during the late Qing dynasty. As an active and dedicated member of the literary world, he founded and published a newspaper in Shanghai and was the chief editor of "Shijie Fanhua Bao" (世界繁华报) and "Xia-Xiang Xiao-Shuo" (绣像小说) et cetera. Besides writing many excellent pieces such as "Wenming Xiao Shi" (文明小史) and "Huo diyu" (活地狱), he also encouraged literati of that period to write and contribute articles or novels to his newspaper exposing social ills. Hence Li could be called a keen advocate of censorious fiction during the late Qing period.

His long stay in Shanghai since 1896 equipped him with detailed knowledge of bureaucratic life. Thus, he wrote a 60-chapter novel entitled "The Bureaucrats" which constituted a series of short stories, exposing, to a large extent, the corruption and inefficiency of the Manchu regime and its bureaucrats, and the influx of western imperialism and the pro-West psychology of the officials. Li also wrote with the hope that his book could arouse the attention of the ruling party to the need for reforms and awaken the people from their state of apathy.

However, like Kang Yu-wei (康有为) and Liang Chi-chao (梁启超), Li was a reformist. Though in the book "The Bureaucrats" he exposed the
evil doings of the bureaucrats and the weaknesses of the bureaucracy, he was unable to transcend the constraints of time and place and so could only urge the bureaucrats to turn over a new leaf. In spite of his advocacy for bureaucratic reforms, he was still for the monarchy and against revolution. His work showed traces of his contempt and disapproval of revolutionaries. Furthermore, he was not fully aware of the meaning of western imperialism and its influx, and as a result was often the target of attack of Chinese critics in the mainland.

However, from an objective point of view, it can be seen that Li was a patriotic literati as well as a writer of socio-political realism. Most of his works exposed the ills of bureaucracy and society, and the sufferings of the Chinese under western imperialistic invasion. His works had historical significance, providing later researchers with telling reasons for the decline of the Manchu dynasty. Hence, though his works were restricted in ideological context, they were invaluable to the development of Chinese literature.

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