ABSTRACT

Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), a pioneer essayist, literary critic and translator in the modern literary movement, is one of the most controversial yet least understood figures of prominence in Twentieth-century Chinese literature. This paper intends to open a new vision for the studying of Zhou Zuoren, exploring how his texts relate historically to their intellectual contexts. By focusing on a particular period in Zhou’s life: from 1917, the onset of the New Literary Movement, to 1928, Zhou’s formal declaration to withdraw into his private den thus breaking away from most of his contemporaries, this paper examines the complex relationship between the historical dilemma of Zhou’s intellectual conviction and the sentiments and flavors embodied in his acclaimed essays. Advocating both individualism and cosmopolitanism, Zhou was the leading thinker in the May Fourth Movement that triumphed in the emancipation of Man. However, Zhou’s antagonism to Nationalism has rendered him completely at odds with his era, in which mainstream literary reforms have been unanimously dominated by Nationalism discourse in vision of China’s impending doom since late Qing. The paper dissects a fundamental sore that lies at the core of Zhou’s deviation from Nationalism: his deeply rooted skepticism and loathe towards mass social movement, for its immense collective violence coupled with an irrational tendency would easily and blindly crush individual dignity. Ironically, such mentality was exposed during Zhou’s period of unprecedented fervor for social reform in promoting the Atarashiki Mura (the New Village). Zhou’s opposition to Nationalism and his deliberate detachment from the general mass have, in reality, ruptured his ideal
scheme of a fully respected individual contributing to mankind. His historical dilemma is reflected and permeated in his texts that the underlying sentiments and overall flavors of his essay convey a complex duality of leisureliness and bitterness, of confident lucidity and repressed dreariness, of the light in his humanistic promise and the shadow from its inescapable practical constraints. In his enclave of essay writing, Zhou earnestly sought to rescue the breach from individualism to cosmopolitanism and to restore the waning elite value of the intelligentsia. His argumentative type of essays targeting at current affairs employs science and rationality to demolish the feudalistic system of myth and moral that deformed the individual, especially women and children. Dwelling upon the artistic appreciation of a variety of trivialities from nature and from daily life, Zhou’s belles-lettres type of essays reconfirms his self-identity as one among the grass roots and expresses a genuine interest and affection towards ordinary living. The third type of essays on academic criticism, together with Zhou’s extensive intellectual framework, testifies to an ultimate concern towards human existence that transcends both time and national boundaries. Zhou Zuoren’s life and works serve as a profound example of Chinese literati negotiating through the transition from traditional scholar gentry to modern intellectuals. It is in this light that Zhou’s historical dilemma has forced upon him an agonizing conversion of roles that has eventually aided in the realization, in another realm, of his humanistic ideals.