

BOOK REVIEW

Construction of Chinese and Foreign Biographical Poetics

Zhao Baisheng. (2003). *A Theory of Auto/ Biography*. Beijing: Peking University Press. 272 pp. CNY18.00.

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Though Chinese biographical literature has a long history, it still goes on without its own theories. Small wonder. Not only has the biographical literature been ignored in China, but in the western countries as well, wherein research lags behind writing. Carl Van Doren (1915) said pessimistically that no criticism had nearly touched on the field of biography. (p. 180) But this phenomenon happened in the early 1920s. From 1970s, biographical literature theories, especially, autobiographical theories, have been paid unprecedented attention in the western countries. Many researchers had aroused much interest in auto/biography criticism. Auto/ biography has been one of the most appealing discipline and field of study. James M. Cox (1989) pointed out that compared with the past, autobiography and confession writing in the current western academia has been attached with more importance, which does

not merely mean that criticism has exhausted its energy in other genre in the long term, but the whole conception of literature has changed. Changes here means the textual value of biography inspires the interest of theory researchers, as the prints of non-fiction literature in the press markets are greatly over novels and other fictions. Without doubt, biography, one universal cultural anthropological phenomenon, is arousing the interest of more philosophers, estheticians, ethnologists, sociologists, and even psycho-analysts after Sigmund Freud. French Scholar, Jean Yves Tadie (2009), regarded the biographical literature and fictions as the same prosaic poetics. He said, "Biography is a very old type of literature, and now it is also lucky today" (p. 215). He also said, "Madelenat pointed out that though the type of biographical literature has been severely criticized for two thousand years, it still survived toughly over

philosophies and literary theories which attacked it”. (p. 216) Even deconstructionist Paul de Man delivered his idea about biographical theory. He (1998) wrote two papers which discussed the biography. He pointed out the character of justification of *The Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, meanwhile, he deconstructed the biography text itself.

Unluckily however, China’s biographical literature study, especially, biographical literature theory study, is at the germinating stage. As we all know, Liang Qichao, Hushi, and Zhu Dongrun paid great attention to biographical literature in 1900s, who set up the subject—biographical literature respectively in Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Fudan University—but their biographical theories were not systematic, which demonstrated academic research mark of that time. For example, Liang Qichao mixed history and literature. In 1990s, *Biographical Literature History of China* compiled by Han Zhaoqi (1992), finished the history that there was no biographical literature history in China. *Outline of History of Biographical Literature* compiled by Yang Zhengrun (1994), filled up the gap in the history of world biographical literature. Works above are studies from the perspective of the history of literature, but are weak in theoretical thinking of biographical literature. Though later, *Development History of Biographical Literature of China* compiled by Chen Lanchun (1999) set up especially a chapter about its theory, it being confined by style, did not extend comprehensively theoretical thinking of biographical literature. From this perspective, we are pleased to have read *A Theory of Auto/Biography* by Mr. Zhao Baisheng (2003).¹

The book issued by Peking University Press is one of the research projects from programs of Peking University establishing the first-class university in the world. It consists of five chapters, each including three to four sections, and has 220,000 words. It explores comprehensively, intensively, and deeply the essential issues to

be solved in biographical theories both in China and the western countries. Preface is a brief biographical literature history. First chapter is “*Factual Theories of Biographical Literature*” in which Mr. Zhao puts forward three new terms of biographical literature theory: biographical facts, autobiographical facts, and three-dimensional facts. Mr. Zhao thought that fact is a key word to define biographical literature: “biographical facts, narrowly, refer to the facts which define the biographee in biography. They were called as ‘anecdote’ by Si Maqian, a famous litterateur in ancient China, ‘evidences of soul’ in Lucius Mestrius Plutarch’s *The live of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, and ‘facts of creativity, richness and inducement hint and brewing to happen’ written by Virginia Woolf. For short, biographical fact is the lifeline of the biography” (p. 14). “Biographical facts are evidences for constructing self-development” (p. 14). So what are three-dimensional facts? Zhao Baisheng has figured out the interflue and correlation between “historical facts” and “narrative facts” with different views of history and philosophy to analyze the “historical facts”. “The kernel of autobiography is autobiographical fact, but biographical facts and historical facts cannot do without. They are as well blended as milk and water, which are called the three-dimensional facts” (p. 32). He took *Dichtung and Wahrheit* of Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe for example. He said, “From above analysis, we can know that Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe demonstrated ‘the self of relationship’ with two main approaches: one is the relationship of human being and time, the other relationship of self and others, which cause directly historical facts and biographical facts to engage and mix with the autobiographical facts, which make up the three-dimension of autobiographical facts” (p. 41). The theory of “the three-dimension of autobiographical facts” is meaningful for autographical (biographical) writing. That is, whatever the autography or others’ story is, it

is not inevitable to depict others or self. *The Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2010) is a typical autography, but in the whole works; he narrated more facts about Mrs. Warren and others. *The Life of Samuel Johnson* is a famous biography, but the author, James Boswell (2014), has no way but to narrate much about himself. The theory of three-dimension offers answers to us: any autobiographer (biographer) must be aware of the facts in the works, which often are the three-dimensional facts.

The second chapter discusses “Fiction of biographical literature” which makes biography researchers feel intractable. Though the fact is that the lifeline of biographical literature, biography, autobiography, confession, diary, letter, memoir, and so on has a touch of fiction, which cannot be ignored. Thus, Zhao Baisheng thought that the essential things of biographical literature ontology are the nature of biographical literature fiction, causes of biographical literature fiction, and forms of biographical literature fiction. As is known to all, in the western literary theories, the contemporary critics who are affected by the “poem is higher than history” of Aristotle stress greatly the fiction of biographical literature. Henry David Thoreau (1980) thought that the life we have experienced is a wonderful dream, which we do not believe that any narration can be given. Zhao Baisheng, however, pointed out straight from the shoulder that biography neither is the pure history, nor is the complete fiction of literature, conversely it should be a comprehensive narration which is based on history and gained the level of literature. It is not the dissevered relationship of history and literature, but the interknitted relationship. The biographer must take account of two facts at the same time: true to facts and true to narrative. The former asks him to persist in consistency, while the latter demands him to submit to persistency. Generally speaking, consistent persistency makes up the special truth of biographical literature. So under this situation, we can think that the fiction

of biography by nature is “the dead-elephant-bone” reversion “to flesh the bone of the dead elephant” is the famous saying of Qian Zhongshu (2008, p. 166). He thought that historians told about the people and the things existed in the past, and they must take the human feeling and situation at that time into account, meantime, imagine what happen at that time. Like fictions and other texts, fabricating the people and circumstances, though they are different, are interpenetrative. In *Hai Feizi · jie lao*, it said, “A man hoped to see the living elephant, but he saw a skeleton of a dead one, so he imagined what a living one looked like, which is the reason why people calls the imagination as the “elephant (conception)” (Qian Zhongsu, 2008, p.166). Thus, the make-up of biography is the narration of what had happened but could not be consistent. The theory of fiction of biographical literature by Zhao Baisheng is constructive to the biographical poetics between China and Western Countries, but also is a new perspective for us to know the “make-up” essence of fictions and other texts. That is, any narration, indeed, is not a fictional narration, but factual.

“Structure Principle of Biographical Literature” is discussed in chapter three. In the first section, Allegory of Identity, he put forward his original idea about the status identification of the biographer, publisher, and reader from ecological perspective. Status identification is an important conception in the western culture; everyone establishing identification relationship among himself, society, and others by self-narration. Especially in the autobiography, status identification is the basic principle of organizing facts and is the core in autography reading. The narrator, Ben Franklin (1956) of *The Autobiography of Ben Franklin*, paid great attention to self-identity. He first established a “printer” of himself, not a philosopher or a litterateur at the same time. He emphasized repeatedly that his wealth is owed to the “industry and frugality”, which, indeed, is the basis of his

“self-identity transforming”. Ben Franklin was subtly aware that he mixed his self-identity into national identity by the construction of cultural identity. He gradually became a father-like figure of the national allegory because of the influence of the press. Indeed, it is proven by facts that the most successful autobiography in the history of autobiography tends to be the inspiring one, since the readers decide whether the topic structure is perfect or not by the status identification. Zhao Baisheng analyzed the “failure” of status identification of the *Life of Sai Jinhua* written by Liu Bannong and Shang Hongkui (1986) and offered the theory sources for autobiography publishers to choose biographers.

The fourth chapter, “Elucidation strategies of biographical literature” discusses the *On mission, On non-self, On psychology* and *On the current situation* and explores the rationality and commonness of biographical literature elucidation and the aesthetic value of biographical literature writing and reading. In the section of *On psychology*, Zhao Baisheng chooses *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo Da Vinci* written by Sigmund Freud as an example and demonstrates deeply the advantages and shortcomings of psycho-analysis methods in biographical elucidation. Leonardo Da Vinci had “condor memory” of his childhood— a condor flew down, using its tail to open my mouth, and flapped my lips with its tail. Sigmund Freud read it as if he found out treasure, and got a conclusion that it was the “sex symbol”. As a result, he made a blunder, in that he ignored the facts and put psychoanalysis as ends. Mr. Zhao said, “from this, we can know Sigmund Freud’s attitude to facts: elucidation in the first place, and facts second” (p. 171). For example, in the section three of *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo Da Vinci*, when he explained the condor memory as Leonardo Da Vinci’s homosexuality, he could almost not find any facts. So in Zhao’s opinion, the influence of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis

on biography should be dialectically considered: for one thing, to criticize its arbitrary decision, for another thing, to stress its elucidating selfhood from the details and dealing with sex bluntly. Zhao’s biographical theory offers narrative skills for the current biographical writing.

The fifth chapter is, “Classic of biographical literature”. In this chapter, Zhao Baisheng gave his anxiety and expectation of literary development. In recent China, literature is in the verge which is a incontestable fact, but he puts forward a proposition: Biographical literature is the new land of literature after the death of novels. (p. 200)

In a word, Zhao’s *Biographical Literature Theories* not only is a pioneer work to supply a gap of the literature theory study of Chinese and the western biography, but the work contributes greatly to the construction of Chinese and the western biographical poetics. It is also worthwhile to mention in the preface that Zhao Baisheng gave a high appraisalment to the scholars who have engaged in biography study now. In “commercializing” academic study days, we can see, as the chairman of Chinese and Western Biography Research Committee, his intention and comprehensive mind in academic study.

NOTES

¹ Zhao Baisheng, professor and tutor of doctorate candidate, assumes director of Agency of World Literature of Peking University, director of Center of World Biographical Literature of Peking University and president of Chinese and Foreign Biographical Literature Study Association, and so forth. He was once awarded Excellent Teaching Prize of College of Foreign Languages (2007), Harvard Yenching Fellowship (1999-2001), Zhu Guangqian Aesthetics and the Western Literature Prize(1998), Zhao Luorui British-American Literature Prize (1997), and so forth. He once was a visiting professor of Université Jean Moulin Lyon (2006), Johannes Gutenberg – Universität (2005), and he also is one editor of U. K. *Auto/Biography*. His main academic achievements: *European- American Literature Studies*

Series (The People Literature Press, 2005), *Biographical Literature Theories* (Peking University Press, 2003), *Portrait* (Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2000), *The life of Caudillo* (The International Culture Press, 1995), and so forth.

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