

Zen Thought in The Representative Works of Yasunari Kawabata

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Abstract. The study of East Asian culture is an important theme of contemporary research, in which Japan, as an important part of the East Asian cultural circle, plays a great influence. Yasunari Kawabata is also a famous Japanese writer. His works not only reflect Japanese culture, but also influence many Chinese contemporary writers. This paper studies the history of Zen in Japan, the formation of Yasunari Kawabata's Zen thought, and the specific embodiment of Zen thought in his works through the methods of literature analysis and the interpretation of Yasunari Kawabata's famous work "Snow Country". Yasunari Kawabata has a great connection with Zen culture in both his personal and professional works. Kawabata Yasunari, both personally and in his works, has a great connection with Zen culture. The research in this paper helps readers to better understand Japanese culture and the creative history of famous Chinese writers to better understand the historical and cultural differences that have developed during the formation of East Asian culture and to promote the exchange and interaction between East Asian culture and global culture.

Keywords: Zen culture; Yasunari Kawabata; Snow Country.

1. Introduction

Yasunari Kawabata, born in 1899, is a representative figure of Japanese neo-sensationalist literature. In 1968, three of his masterpieces were awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, making him the third Asian writer to receive the prize. His style of writing is known for its elegance and refinement, which not only brings readers feelings about the beauty of Zen culture and Japanese culture, but also influences famous Chinese writers such as Mo Yan, Yu Hua, and Jia Pingwa.

In the existing studies, Li Xiaoyu has discussed the theme, and he believes that Yasunari Kawabata was deeply influenced by the Zen idea of nothingness [1]. In addition, Ye Weiqiu has also studied about Japan and Kawabata Yasunari [2]. Based on the existing research, this paper further deepens the understanding of Kawabata Yasunari from three aspects and analyses the connection between Zen thought and Kawabata Yasunari and the forms of these connections in his works in the light of the history of Zen development in Japan.

Therefore, the study of Kawabata Yasunari's works and thoughts have a two-fold significance. Firstly, understanding the "master of the masters" in contemporary Chinese literature will help readers to improve their understanding of the creative process of the above Chinese writers, so that they can better understand contemporary Chinese literature. Secondly, understanding this author, who is highly embedded in Japanese culture, will help readers to grasp the unique melancholic and elegant temperament of the Japanese nation and to understand Japanese culture more deeply.

1.1. Life Experience of Yasunari Kawabata

Yasunari Kawabata was born in June 1899 in Osaka, Japan. In 1901, his father died of tuberculosis, and in the following year, his mother also died of tuberculosis. After that, Yasunari Kawabata and his older sister were adopted by their grandparents, and his grandmother died the year he started school. 1909, his older sister died of fever and heart paralysis, leaving him with only his grandfather as his closest relative. His grandfather died in 1916, when Yasunari Kawabata was fifteen years old. His short works "The Recovery of Bones" and "To My Hometown" record the events of this period: the ancestral house, which he had vowed not to sell, was sold by his uncle to a poor helper; the furniture used by his grandparents was sold piece by piece; after the helper moved out, the ancestral house was

used by the neighbours to lock up the crazy people; and the anniversary of the death anniversary of his grandfather was forgotten [3].

As an adult, Yasunari Kawabata also had a bad time in his relationships and career, and so on and so forth. Both the dead and the living reflect the emptiness of the destination of life and the inability of people to face the emptiness. It is also the experience of his childhood that influenced the style of Yasunari Kawabata's works and was one of the reasons for his later study of Buddhist philosophy [4].

1.2. Literary Career of Yasunari Kawabata

The New Sensibility School was born out of the modern literary thinking that emerged in Japan in 1923, when the Japanese society was in a panic after the Great Kanto Earthquake, and the political scene was in turmoil as a result, and the Workers' and Peasants' Movement and proletarian literature, which had developed under the influence of Soviet Marxism-Leninism, were suppressed. The emptiness of the social and spiritual life of the populace, as well as the need to break the solidarity of the Japanese literary scene, led to the emergence of the New Sensibility School, represented by Tetsuhei Kataoka and Yasunari Kawabata. Following the example of Western modernist literature, the New Sensibility School emphasised sensual perception and used new forms to explore the world of inner feeling rather than objective existence.

In general, the theory of the New Sensibility School was based on the philosophy of idealism, which coincided with the Zen philosophy shown in Kawabata Yasunari's works. Later, due to its own limitations, the neo-sensationalist innovation movement ended in failure, but Kawabata Yasunari formed his own unique creative style during this period and bid farewell to this period as a "heretic of the neo-sensationalist school" and started a new phase of his creative path [2].

2. Yasunari Kawabata and Zen Culture

2.1. Overview of Japanese Zen

Japanese Zen Buddhism originated from Chinese Zen, which can be divided into five schools: Cao Dong, Yun Men, Fa Yuan, Lin Ji, and Weiyang, among which Lin Ji and Cao Dong were introduced into Japan and became the main schools of Japanese Zen. It is now recognised that the earliest formal introduction of Zen into Japan was the Japanese monk Eisai, who is therefore also known as the ancestor of the Rinzai Sect in Japan. Initially, Zen came to Japan as "part-time Zen", not as a mainstream religion, but gradually spread and became popular among the upper class of samurai due to the support of the emerging samurai class. Cao Dong Sect, the other of the major schools, was brought back to Japan by the Japanese monk Dogen, and during its development it gained the support of the lower class of samurai and commoners. This shows that Zen entered Japan with a certain connection to the samurai culture, and initially formed a Zen culture with a Japanese cultural style.

After this, Zen Buddhism was further developed in Japan, and there was a tendency to break the trend of "practicing Zen at the same time", which was manifested by Chinese monks entering Japanese Zen temples to spread the Zen culture, and there was the second peak of cultural exchanges after the Tang Dynasty's cultural exchanges between China and Japan, and Zen Buddhism became the mainstream religion in Japan. Zen culture in Japan has also formed a unique cultural expression, such as: the background of "five mountains and ten temples" as the background of the five mountains of literature, tea ceremony culture, "withered landscape" garden art, calligraphy and sculpture, etc., Zen culture has become an indispensable part of Japanese culture.

2.2. Yasunari Kawabata's Zen Thought

Zen Buddhism is a religion of "teaching, not writing, pointing directly to the heart, seeing the nature of Buddha" [5]. The form of its practice is also different from the traditional Buddhist requirements of the external form, the so-called "Symbols are what principles borrow to manifest; clinging to symbols leads to confusion about the principles. Teachings are the means by which

transformation is achieved; rigid adherence to teachings leads to ignorance in that transformation” [5]. Zen culture has become an integral part of the Japanese culture.

Zen practice returns to the heart to expel distractions, examine the heart, and meditate in order to achieve epiphany and the highest wisdom. It also advocates the suppression of desire and the reverence for nature, which resonates with the Japanese people’s inherent respect for nature and their cultural ethos of self-restraint. This fusion of ideas profoundly influenced Japanese culture, forming unique idea embodiment, such as: the literati painting art in the pursuit of silence in the mood; tea ceremony of the four rules of the seven rules emphasise the “harmony, respect, clear, and silent”.

One of the reasons why Yasunari Kawabata has been labelled as a “heretic of the New Sensibility School” is that he chose to combine Japanese and Western cultures to create his works, rather than the traditional New Sensibility School’s quest to learn Western literature in its entirety. Yasunari Kawabata also introduced and quoted many poems by Zen masters and monks in his Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech. Among them, the poems of the monk Ryokan were evaluated by Kawabata Yasunari as “expressing the true essence of Japanese civilisation” [6]. This reflects the deep influence of Zen thought on him.

3. Embodiment of Zen Culture

Snow Country is Yasunari Kawabata’s first middle grade novel and his masterpiece, and it is also one of the works that can best reflect his Zen Buddhist philosophy. The following analysis aims to understand the Zen meaning in this work.

3.1. Zen’s View of Nature

“Through the long tunnel on the county border is the Snow Country” [6]. The story is set in a place called Yukiguni, which is based on Niigata Prefecture in northern Japan, where the monk Ryokan mentioned above spent his life. The setting is a pure and transcendent land of monks and snowy mountains, where people live in solitude among trees, ski, and weave. This environment of peace and simplicity are imbued with a Zen-like, transcendental quality.

At the same time, the works often incorporate the description of natural scenery into the storyline, reflecting the natural aesthetics of Zen Buddhism. For example, “The snow is frozen, rustling like a sound, as if it came from the bottom of the earth...cold and quiet, everything is very harmonious”, “the distant mountains are silent, an ethereal”, Yasunari Kawabata’s repeated description of the lonesome features of the mountains, making the story atmosphere with Zen’s “empty” colour. The repeated descriptions by Yasunari Kawabata of the lonesome features of the mountains give the story a Zen-like “emptiness”. Later, he writes that Komako practises playing in the valley on weekdays, which further reveals the life force that shocks the heart. Under the nourishment of this natural scenery, man and nature become one, and it is easier to enter the realm of forgetfulness and gain inner clarity and peace. This is the embodiment of Zen’s view of nature [7].

3.2. Zen’s View of Impermanence

The protagonists of the story are Shimamura, Komako and Ye, in which Shimamura is the perceiver and believer of the impermanent view, Komako is the bearer of the impermanent view, and Ye is the very manifestation of the impermanent view. Although he is impressed by Komako’s vivid life, his attitude of distancing himself from everything is essentially a different philosophy of life from that of Komako.

Shimamura understands Komako, but Komako does not, and their differences make Shimamura unable to do anything about the love that Komako gives him, which ultimately leads to the emptiness and dissolution of their relationship. Although Komako is fully committed to the relationship and shows her youthful vigour, she can only passively accept the futility of the results and the futility of her efforts. Shimamura is also impressed by the heartbreaking purity of Yoko, but seeing that Yoko is caught up in her own emotions and destiny, Shimamura also understands that he cannot get close

to Yoko, but he is not saddened by this, but only faintly appreciates the ethereal beauty that is unattainable.

Whether it is the beauty of Komako or the leaf, although Shimamura calls it “the silence of nature, a distant world”, reflecting the withdrawal of the inner and outer world, he was moved by it, which is exactly the embodiment of Shimamura’s knowledge of impermanence, acceptance of impermanence, and appreciation of impermanence, and the best interpretation of the Zen view of impermanence, which is different from the negativity of Western nihilism. interpretation.

3.3.Zen’s View of Life and Death

At the end of the story, Ye chooses to end his life without pain and screaming just turning into impermanence itself to bring it to the world. The arrival of death does not bring too much fear to Shimamura, but “the Milky Way seemed to pour down on Shimamura’s heart with a crash” [6]. Yasunari Kawabata’s portrayal of death shows more of the beauty of impermanence and the completion of the beauty of life, and Shimamura trembles and has an epiphany for this ultimate beauty. Putting aside the fear of death, he accepts and even appreciates it openly, which is very similar to the Zen Buddhist concept of looking down on life and death [7].

4. Conclusion

The paper has analysed Kawabata Yasunari’s Zen thought from two aspects, namely, his personal experience and analysis of his works. While the formation of Kawabata Yasunari’s Zen thoughts has a great relationship with his life experience, he also interprets these thoughts perfectly in his works. The calmness and purity and the lightness and transcendence that readers experience in his works are important reflections of Zen culture, as well as Japanese culture. Through the introduction and analysis of this paper, it will help readers to strengthen their understanding of contemporary Chinese writers and their understanding of Japanese culture.

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