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Further Interpretation of the Anti War Consciousness in Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "General"

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Abstract: The Akutagawa Ryunosuke Award, set in honor of the first-class Japanese literary master Akutagawa Ryunosuke (1892-1927), is not only the top award in the Japanese Pure Literature Award, but also the most authoritative one in the Japanese literary field. This indicates the position of Ryunosuke Akutagawa in the history of Japanese literature. Studying Ryunosuke Akutagawa's war novels undoubtedly has inspiring meaning for us to understand Japan's war novels. Therefore, based on previous studies, the researcher discusses "*General*", the first masterpiece in a series of works criticizing Japan's aggressive war after Akutagawa went to China. On the basis of the overall dynamic research method currently advocated, this paper attempts to explore the anti-war consciousness in "*General*" through detailed reading of the text. The main body of this article is divided into three parts. The first part sorts out the background of "*General*", summarizes the entire whole text and the main idea. The second part is to study the Japanese during the war. Japanese soldiers strongly admire the Mikado, and Japan has a strict hierarchical system, which are all exploited by extreme militarists. The third part analyzes the anti war consciousness and the foolish loyalty of Japanese soldiers in four independent and meaningful works, namely "*The White Army*", "*Spy*", "*Performance on the Field*", and "*Father and Son*".

Keywords: "General"; Ryunosuke Akutagawa; Anti War; Blind Devotion.

1. Introduction

In 1921, Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927) went to China as an Osaka Daily News Inspector and visited multiple places such as Shanghai, Suzhou, and Nanjing. The following year, the short story "*General*" was published. Subsequently, several works with a conscious anti-war consciousness were published, such as "*Tao Taro*" reflecting on the thief genes in traditional Japanese culture, and "*River Boy*" on the causes of modern war from the perspective of capitalist system. "*General*" is arguably the first masterpiece in a series of works by Akutagawa criticizing Japan's aggressive war after his visit to China.

A literary award in Japan, known as the Ryunosuke Akutagawa Award, was set in honor of the top Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa. The Akutagawa Prize is not only the top award of the Japanese Pure Literature Award, but also the most authoritative award in the Japanese literature. Through this literary award, one can understand the position of Ryunosuke Akutagawa in the history of Japanese literature. Studying Ryunosuke Akutagawa's war novels undoubtedly has enlightening significance for us to understand Japanese war novels. Therefore, it is necessary for us to dissect the short story "*General*".

The novel mainly tells the story of General N leading the Japanese army to invade Fushun, China, during the "Russo-Japanese War" in 1904. The protagonist of this novel is General N, also known as His Excellency N. The reality is that during the reign of MikadoMeiji, the renowned leader of the Japanese army, Naomi Hideden (1849-1912), was named General N in the novel due to the first letter of the English word was 'N'. On the day of MikadoMeiji's death, this person committed suicide through caesarean section in the form of Bushido and was regarded as a model by the Japanese military. The tone of the novel is to satirize this military leader idol, for which it was "regulated" by military newspaper commentary agencies. So as a legacy of 'regulation', there are more than ten vacancies in the original Japanese printed text, such as 'XXX'. "*General*" consists of four chapters, each of which is independent and has its own meaning. The first chapter, "*The White Army*", depicts the foolish and loyal Japanese soldiers; The second chapter "*Spy*" describes the excellent qualities of Chinese soldiers in facing death, indirectly reflecting the foolish loyalty of Japanese soldiers in the face of death and their strange behavior of treating murder as loyalty and bravery; The third chapter "*Performance on the Field*" portraits the special military culture nurtured by foolish loyalty; In the final chapter, "*Father and Son*" features the inheritance of foolish loyalty. And in these four chapters features a common character General N. Through the description of General N in each chapter, he strongly criticized General N's militarism and foolish loyalty, thereby expressing his anti-war Idea.

2. Japanese in War

In order to have a clearer understanding of "*General*", we need to understand the Japanese in the war. Japan is an independent island country with a considerable lack of material resources and frequent occurrence of natural disasters such as earthquakes. Therefore, most Japanese people hold a belief of "material mourning", such as the sense of impermanence caused by natural disasters. So, for Japanese, there has been a strong admiration for the Mikadosince ancient times, so that if someone insults or attacks the Mikadoin by words, it will stimulate the Japanese, especially soldiers. For this reason, some Japanese militarists harnessed the people's admiration and loyalty to the Mikadoto encourage them to join the army, dedicate themselves to war, and make the people willingly sacrifice themselves, thus leading to the emergence of the death squads. Japan also has a strict hierarchical system, so in the military, unconditional obedience to leaders occurred, to the point of hanging a leader's portrait to worship, admire, and emulate. This cultural tradition has led some extreme militarists to believe that Japan

needs to fight in order to establish a strict hierarchical order, leading to hegemonism and provoking wars among many countries. They believe that such wars are aimed at making the world more peaceful.

Ryunosuke Akutagawa detailed the war-time Japanese through different chapters in "*General*". In the first chapter, Japanese soldiers complain about from death, helplessness to foolish loyalty; In Chapter 2, Japanese soldiers treated murder as a strange act of loyalty and bravery; The special military camp culture in Chapter 3 allows Japanese soldiers to develop the idea of foolish loyalty; In Chapter 4, the inheritance of foolish loyalty is described through a dialogue between the father and son, who are major generals.

3. Ryunosuke Akutagawa's Anti War Consciousness in "*General*"

(1) "*The White Army*"

As the first chapter of "*General*", "*The White Army*" depicts foolish and loyal Japanese soldiers. The word "the white army" is rarely used in daily life, referring to a cloth strip or strap hanging diagonally on around the shoulder. Through reading the text, it can be seen that "The White Army" refers to a very special army in Japan, namely the Expendable Death Brigade. Literally speaking, the soldiers of this army are not afraid of death, but this section actually expresses the opposite: it's not that the soldiers of this army are not afraid of death, instead, they just foolishly stay loyal. It is written with sarcasm.

The article provides a detailed description of the dialogue between "First Class Private Tian Province Kou who once opened a paper shop", "First Class Private Hori Wei who used to be a carpenter", and "First Class Private Jiang Mu who used to be a primary school teacher", as well as the scenes like General N shaking hands with the soldiers. Unlike professional soldiers, these three originally lived an ordinary life, and forced to go to the battlefield and sacrifice themselves. From their dialogue, we can read about the changes in the ways of "war" before and after Meiji, as well as the people's confusion about the country. Modern warfare regards state power and the authority of the Mikado as absolute, and ensures its legitimacy through education and law. As a result, the samurai class who fought for the rewards and fame of the Great Martial Land Regiment gradually disappeared, and "joining the army" became an obligation that the people must take. There is a great difference between fighting with the goal of "fame" and "gratitude", and safeguarding personal "life", and the daring death squads with the goal of "death". However, in the end, all three were foolishly loyal soldiers, from which we can read Akutagawa's anti-war consciousness and criticize the disregard for individual will and individual life in modern warfare.

(2) "*Spy*"

As the second chapter of "*General*", "*Spy*" depicts the excellent qualities of Chinese soldiers in facing death, indirectly reflecting the foolish loyalty of Japanese soldiers in facing death and their strange behavior of treating murder as loyalty and bravery. The beginning of the text indicates that two Chinese people are suspected to be Chinese soldiers and are referred to as spies by Japanese soldiers. When they were about to be killed, the two Chinese people were not afraid. Instead, they resolutely faced the death without any signs of panic or revealing any news that harmed interests of their homeland. The excellent qualities of Chinese soldiers in facing death in this chapter are in stark contrast to the foolish loyalty of Japanese soldiers in facing death in the first chapter "*The White Army*". It reflects that Akutagawa's anti war ideology, which is that Chinese soldiers voluntarily went to the Japanese army to inquire about information in order to defend their motherland, while Japan, as aggressor, cruelly harmed two Chinese people.

In addition, Akutagawa also detailed the attitude of Japanese soldiers killing them. When the brigade staff gave instructions to execute these two Chinese soldiers, Japanese soldier Taguchi appeared hesitant. And at this moment, Cao Chang, who was passing by, said, "Let me also kill one." Later, when Cao Chang was about to wield his knife to kill, General N came and scattered a crazy light, shouting, "Kill, Kill!" This directly describes Cao Chang's craziness in killing and General N's inhumane words. However, Taguchi later said, "If it were XXX, I could also kill him." This indicates that Taguchi was encouraged by Cao Chang and General N and became crazy about killing people. From this, it can be seen that Akutagawa strongly criticized General N, criticizing Japanese soldiers for strange act of treating murder as a loyalty and bravery.

(3) "*Performance on the Field*"

"*Performance on the Field*", the third chapter of "*General*", depicts the special military culture nurtured by foolish loyalty. This chapter is based on three stage plays and profoundly describes General N's emotional changes towards different stage plays, thus introducing Japan's special military camp culture, which is a major reason for Japanese soldiers developing foolish loyalty.

The beginning of the article describes General N's passion for stage plays from the side, and he even reveals a sunny and kind smile. This is because he knows the importance of military camp culture to soldiers, and through watching stage plays and such intuitive military camp culture, he can vigorously spread the foolish and loyal ideas he wants to express. The first act of the stage drama depicts a male actor engaging in sumo wrestling with a maid wearing only a red underskirt. The second act of the stage play depicts an old play full of human touch. General N is very dissatisfied with these two stage plays. The third act of the stage play depicts an incident between a patrol officer and a thief. After being hit by a thief, the patrol officer is worried about his own mother. General N did not criticize and reprimanded this play like he did twice before, but instead he praised it in particular the patrol officers. Akutagawa indirectly reflects General N's deep-rooted ideology of foolish loyalty by describing his criticism to the first and second acts of the stage play, as well as his praise for the third act of the stage play. Thus, it can also be seen that Akutagawa strongly opposes war by criticizing such military culture and foolish loyalty.

(4) "*Father and Son*"

Being the final chapter of "*General*", "*Father and Son*" depicts the inheritance of foolish loyalty. This chapter begins with several portraits depicting the dialogue between the father and son, who are major generals. At first, the son took down the portrait of General N and replaced it with a portrait of Rembrandt. For this, the Major General directly expressed his opinion that it would be better to hang a portrait of General N and began using various methods to make his son change his mind.

The Major General first asked his son about his opinion on General N, and his response was, "I don't have much opinion. Anyway, he is a great soldier." The Major General was still a

bit dissatisfied with his son's answer and gave an example of General N to prove his opinion. He compared General N with Rembrandt and emphasized that General N is not a layman, but a sincere person. It reveals that the Major General wants to pass on his views on General N to his son, that is, to pass on the idea of foolish loyalty. Although the son believed that General N was a great soldier, he did not share the view with his father in terms of ideology. From here, it can be seen that Akutagawa has an anti war consciousness and criticizes General N from the side, but due to the limitations of the times, his criticism is not thorough.

4. Conclusion

As an Osaka Daily News Inspector, Akutagawa went to China and published multiple works with a conscious anti-war consciousness. And "*General*" can be said to be the first masterpiece in a series of works criticizing Japan's invasion war after Akutagawa went to China, mainly telling the story of General N leading the Japanese army to invade Fushun, China during the "Russo-Japanese War" in 1904. The Japanese, especially the Japanese military, have a strong admiration for the Mikado. Some militarists in Japan use these traditional cultures to deceive the people. In Japan, there is a strict hierarchical system, leading some extreme militarists to believe that it is necessary for Japan to fight in order to establish a strict hierarchical order, resulting in soldiers not feeling strong guilt even if they kill indiscriminately. This article analyzes the anti-war consciousness in "*General*" from four aspects: "*The White Army*", "*Spy*", "*Performance on the Field*", and "*Father and Son*", which are relatively independent and have their respective meanings. The detailed description of three foolish and loyal soldiers in "*The White Army*" reveals Akutagawa's anti-war consciousness and his criticism of the disregard for personal will and life in modern warfare. "*Spy* "depicts the excellent qualities of Chinese soldiers in the face of death and the attitude of Japanese soldiers towards killing. It indirectly reflects the foolish loyalty of Japanese soldiers in the face of death and their strange behavior of treating killing as loyalty and bravery. It can be seen that Akutagawa strongly criticized General N and the attitude of Japanese soldiers killing men. "*Performance on the Field*" is based on three stage plays and deeply depicts the emotional changes of General N towards different stage plays, leading to the special military camp culture in Japan. It can also be seen that Akutagawa strongly opposes war by criticizing such military camp culture and foolish loyalty ideology. The section "*Father and Son*" begins with several portraits, depicting the dialogue between the father and son as a major general, which is the inheritance of foolish loyalty. This reveals that Akutagawa has anti war consciousness and is criticizing General N, but due to the limitations of the times, the criticism is not thorough.

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