

From Classics to Canon Formation: British Literature amidst Changes in the Idea of Culture

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Abstract: The canonical debate has always been a vital subject. Chinese scholars have participated in this debate and achieved a series of important accomplishments. *British Literature amidst Changes in the Idea of Culture* is the culmination of a great tradition of canon making in China. It analyzes the role that culture plays in the process of canon formation. By adopting the ways of universal relations and development in dialectical materialism, it makes a systematic survey on the reciprocal relationships between the idea of culture and canon making. British literature evolves with the transformation of the society. Classics are made into canons amidst changes in the idea of culture. This new finding reveals an undercurrent in the historical texture of British literature.

Keywords: canon formation; classics; culture; *British Literature amidst Changes in the Idea of Culture*

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标题: 文化观念流变中的英国文学经典化历程

内容摘要: 文学的“经典化”问题一直都是学界的重要议题，中国学者也在此领域持续发声，取得重要研究成果。《文化观念流变中的英国文学典籍研究》是近年此领域研究的集大成者，它辨析了文化观念在文学作品经典化过程中所起到的重要作用，运用普遍联系和发展的唯物辩证法观点，独辟蹊径地对不同历史时期文学经典作品中和文化观念的互动做出系统分析。英国文学伴随着近代社会的转型而演变，在文化的观念流变中大浪淘沙成为经典，这个要旨为我们指明了英国文学历史进程中的一条新脉络。

关键词: 经典化；典籍；文化；《文化观念流变中的英国文学典籍研究》

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The issue of “classics” and “canons” has stirred a critical debate all over the world. “Classics” originally referred to the great works in Greek and Roman literature. It gradually developed a broader sense to be more inclusive for literary works in different cultures. Classics are generally considered as works of high artistic quality and achievement which deserve to go down to posterity. David Damrosch, in his *What is World Literature* (2003), proposes that “there never has been a single set canon of world literature” (Damrosch 5) and that “world literature has often been seen in one or more of three ways: as an established body of classics, as an evolving canon of masterpieces, or as multiple windows on the world” (Damrosch 15). In this light, classics and the canon belong to different categories, even though they do share the same nature of “classic-ness.”

The past seven decades or so have witnessed a rising interest in the concept of canon in the intellectual community. Many critics are dedicated to the research on the formation of literary canons. Eminent scholars like Ernst Gombrich, Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode, Edward Said, Robert Alter, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom approached the issue of canonical debate with their separate interpretations of the concept of canon (Gorak v; Ungureanu 87). Chinese scholars participated in the canonical debate, too. They approached the debate from the perspectives of Chinese culture and stance. With theoretical innovation, interdisciplinary vision and pioneering spirit, they blazed new trails in this field.

The Canonical Debate and Advancement in China

There are many problematic complexities and subtleties in the process of canon formation, giving rise to the emergence of the canonical debate. Different critics adopt different perspectives to address the idea of canon and its relationship with classics. Suzanna E. Henshon points out: “Classics are difficult to define, except as works of lasting and great quality, classics present universal truths about human nature, the best voices and visions available in the literary tradition. The established canon of literary works represents different historical periods and is a constantly changing and evolving entity” (Henshon 138). Canon formation is an academic, historical and ideological process that evolves and changes over history. Canonicity involves criteria that we take to select, choose and preserve for the world and for posterity. “The well-known core meaning of the Greek ‘Kanon’ is ‘rule’ or ‘measure’ and, by extrapolation, ‘correct’ or ‘authoritative’” (Harris 110). Eugene Ulrich points out that the word “meant a ‘rod’ or ‘measuring stick’ and acquired

the figurative senses of ‘norm’ or ‘ideal’” (Ulrich 266). The original meaning of “canon” is closely related to the Bible. It is used as a contrast to “apocrypha,” which means something outside of the canon. The notion of canon, however, was not a functionally important existence in English literature in the beginning. Ross holds, in *The Making of the English Canon: From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century*, that the institutionalized process of modern canon-formation “can be rightly said to have begun, in England at least, during the eighteenth century” (5). The content of “The Canon” or canons undergoes an expansion with the accumulation of more and more classics in different periods of the history of literature. Canon making is an action of choice that is made with the authority and taste of the person who proposes to make a canon.

Silvia Maria Teresa Villa makes a good survey of the situation of this debate in her monograph *The Concept of Canon in Literary Studies: Critical Debates 1970-2000*. Whenever the concept of literary canon is involved in contemporary criticism, Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) is always mentioned as a famous landmark. Harold Bloom chooses 26 writers, including Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Dr. Johnson, Wordsworth, Austen, Dickens, George Eliot, Joyce and Woolf in British literature, as canonical and authoritative authors. In Bloom’s mind they are crucial figures in the national literature of the United Kingdom. He takes “strangeness” as the reason for their greatness and canonicity: “The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange” (Bloom 3). Bloom emphasizes the canonical centrality of Shakespeare and Dante and takes them as “the center of the Canon because they excel all other Western writers in cognitive acuity, linguistic energy, and power of invention” (Bloom 46). Bloom’s conception of the canon is a hierarchical structure that has a center and different degrees of importance and greatness. Bloom divides the past centuries into a cycle of three phases, which is borrowed from Giambattista Vico: the aristocratic age, the democratic age and the Catholic age. The general tone of *The Western Canon* is rather pessimistic, which is evident in the title of Chapter One “An Elegy for the Canon.” Bloom exerts a great influence on other critics in the research field of literary canons. Bloom’s concept of a rigid and fixed canon is debatable. We need a more flexible and optimistic vision towards the formation and evolution of canon over history.

Put in historical context, *The Western Canon* can be looked upon as an important part of, as well as a reaction to, the canonical debate in the last decades of the 20th century. Alastair Fowle’s *Kinds of Literature* (1982) addresses the

relationship between literary genres and canon formation, while *The Western Canon* puts emphasis on elements of stylistic, aesthetic and intellectual excellence. Culture is mentioned many times in this book but only dealt with in an abstract and broad sense. Apart from the “anti-multiculturalist view [that] asserts an aesthetic value-centered canon” (Ungureanu 89), other critics tend to study canon formation from the interactions between literature and culture. Jan Gorak’s *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (1991) is an interdisciplinary and cultural study in this field that takes culture as a more serious and seminal power in the process of canon formation. John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993) pushes the frontiers of the canonical debate from the perspective of sociology and cultural studies. In the field of world literature, the concept of canon is more closely related with the power of circulation, changes and national identity. Pascale Casanova, in her *The World Republic of Letters* (1999), proposes to remap a global canon which is established through circulation. In the year 2011, Liviu Papadima, David Damrosch and Theo D’haen published *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*. It testifies to the fact that the canonical debate is still going on with due importance.

Chinese scholars have also responded to the issue of classics and canon formation with great vigor. Xiao Minghan has published *The Development of English Literary Tradition in the Middle Ages* (2009) and *Tradition and Development: Studies of English and American Literary Classics* (2016). Equally important academic achievements are made in China, such as Zeng Yanbing’s *Reevaluation of Western Literary Classics* (2011), Huang Weizhen’s *What is the Canon and How is the Canon* (2018) and Jiang Ningkan’s *Literary Canon and National Culture* (2015). A more noteworthy achievement has been made by Wu Di, who won a major program from the National Social Science Fund of China in 2010 and published the research findings of his team in an eight-volume series entitled *Studies in the Formation and Dissemination of Foreign Literary Classics* in 2019. It is a massive project on world literature, which “maximizes its coverage of foreign literary classics, tracing their formation from their source language contexts all the way to contemporary China’s context” and is successful to “delineate the humanities genealogy of the formation and dissemination of foreign literary classics, revealing the profound dynamics underneath the cultural mechanics, aesthetic motivation and social factors” (Wang 181). It is one of the earliest efforts in China to carry out large-scale systematic research on the formation and dissemination of literature across the world. Jiang Chengyong’s *Classical Reassessment and Innovation*

of *Western Literature Research Methods* (2020) is a no less fruitful theoretical exploration to address the idea of classics and canons by investigating the evolution of literary trends over history.

In contrast to the global and theorized research on classics in different countries, “British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture,” a major program granted by the National Social Science Fund of China, was initiated by Yin Qiping in 2012. It focuses on the cross-examination of British literature and culture. Ten years later, Yin Qiping and his research team brought forth a monumental work entitled *British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture* (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2020). It was funded by the National Publication Foundation, which is the symbol and guarantee of academic excellence. This series of books consists of six volumes: overview, beginning, burgeoning, maturation, expansion and fission. The ultimate aim of the book series is to “evaluate the roles that core values play in the evolution of literary canons over time” (Yin, *British Literature* back cover). *British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture* represents the latest advancement of academic research in China and can be deemed as an ideal response to the ongoing Canonical debate. As a central concept of this book series, “the idea of culture” is worthy of special notice. Yin Qiping clarifies this notion at the beginning of his general preface to the book: “The ideas of culture refer to such ideas as perceived in literary classics, especially the ideas which have been reflected by literary classics, characterized by critiques of modern civilization and by the aim to guide the overall way of life of a nation” (Yin, *British Literature* iii). In this way, he succeeds in bridging the gap between the shaping force of culture and the driving force for the formation of canon in British literature.

Culture and Canon Formation in British Literature

Influenced by the changes in the idea of culture, canon formation, as a long historical process, changes and evolves over time in a corresponding way. Early efforts of canon making are visible, though scarce, in the original phase of British literature. Trevor Ross argues that “Geoffrey Chaucer’s self-consecration in the envoi to *Troilus and Criseyde* is the first notable instance of an English author canonizing his work by comparing it to the classics” (Ross, “The Canon” 370). This self-conscious endeavor itself is a historical entity, too. The notion of classics is always associated with the high standard of “the best” among all the literary works. Therefore, the criteria of classics bear a transecting relationship with culture, which is defined by Matthew Arnold in his *Culture and Anarchy* as “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us,

the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold 5). In the great tradition of literary criticism in Britain, two intersecting currents are visible: the currents of moral criticism and cultural criticism, which are shaped by Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, William Morris, F. R. Leavis, C. P. Snow, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton.

Efforts of canon making in British literature are not limited to the native language and culture. On the horizon of world literature, classics of British literature travel into other cultures and take different shapes in accordance with the cultural landscapes and historical circumstances of other countries. Great scholars, including Qian Zhongshu, Wang Zuoliang, Li Funing and Zhou Jueliang, have made significant contributions to the canon making process of the classics in British literature. Pursuing the courses charted by these predecessors, Yin Qiping is dedicated to the study and research of British literature. *British Literature amidst Changes in the Idea of Culture* is a continued academic effort on his part. He has dedicated himself to studying the reciprocal relationship between culture, literature and discourse. In his *Debating the Discourse of “Progress”: A New Type of Novels in Nineteenth-Century England* (2009), he holds that even though Dickens, Thackeray, Disraeli, Hardy and Conrad have diversified writing styles and narrative strategies, they express the same anxiety in their works: “...a query on the quick pace of ‘progress’, an antipathy to the arrogant discourse of ‘progress’, a worry about the heavy price that is paid for ‘progress’” (Yin, *Debating the Discourse of “Progress”* 13). One of the major arguments in his *“Apologia of Culture”: Cultural Criticism in the 19th Century Britain* (2013) is that culture can soothe our anxiety over social transition mostly in two ways, namely “to criticize and to provide a vision” (Yin, *“Apologia of Culture”* 9). This argument inherits the great critical heritages created by the above-mentioned critics in England and China. Meanwhile, its innovativeness lies in the fact that it pushes the frontiers of the function of culture and concentrates on its shaping power that runs through all the literary works.

British Literature amidst Changes in the Idea of Culture is the culmination of a great tradition of canon making in China. It is necessary to take an overview on the reciprocal relationship between the idea of culture and formation of the canon in a specific historical period. A clear vein of this is visible in the historical texture of Britain. Over the past several hundred years, great writers have almost unanimously tended to provide a tentative answer for the real meaning of life and literature: a good life relies not on the targets and indexes of a mechanical society, but rather on the harmony of a community and the spiritual-material balance in a society (Yin, *British Literature* back cover). Here we can find the shared traits of literary classics

and culture.

British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture, nevertheless, brushes against the grain to appeal to the roles that writers and historical circumstances play in the process of canon-formation. In the theoretical framework of this book series, the beginning of the idea of culture in British literature covers the period between the latter years of the Middle Ages and “the Glorious Revolution” of 1688. It explores the historical phenomenon of the budding of the idea of “culture” in the early modern age. Literary works are studied in specific historical contexts to reveal the emergence of modernity and individualism in Britain. The burgeoning period addresses the historical span between 1688 to 1815 when the Napoleonic Wars ended. The maturation period covers the Victorian Age, whereas World War II divides the periods of expansion and fission. *British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture* cross-examines the interactions between the evolution of ideas of culture and literary classics in a reciprocal way, so that “A study of British literary classics in the perspective of the evolution of the ideas of culture reveals the new mechanisms of cultural history and literary history” (Yin, “The Evolution” 12). A central theoretical innovation of *British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture* can be found in its method of taking ten key words as the framework of the history of cultural ideas. The ten key words are the anxiety over transition, depiction of vision, fashioning of community, appeal for order, taste and aesthetic judgment, cultivation of the mind, creation of literary language, national conscience, the moral and ethical tradition, the way of work and life. By taking these ten key words as pillars to hold the theoretical framework, *British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture* distinguishes itself from all the other canon making efforts.

British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture focuses on interpretations of classics in light of the idea of culture. It does not intentionally create an authoritative canon. Nevertheless, it is an inevitable cause of canon making. The publication of this series of books functions as an important power of canon formation. As a monumental work in the study of British literature and culture, *British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture* is destined to be a landmark. Canonical writers, as in any work of canon formation, are studied with great details, including William Langland, Chaucer, Shakespeare, John Milton, John Bunyan, Metaphysical Poets, Francis Bacon, Alexander Pope, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, William Wordsworth, Walter Scott, Coleridge, Jane Austen, Alfred Tennyson, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Samuel Butler, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William

Butler Yeats, William Golding, William Somerset Maugham, George Orwell and others. Due space is allotted to philosophers, critics and popular writers. Edmund Burke, John Stuart Mill, William Empson, C. P. Snow, Tolkien, J. K. Rowling and many other writers occupy an important position in the project. *British Literature amidst Changes in the Idea of Culture* is not only the “magnum opus” of Yin Qiping, but also one of the greatest achievements in the research field of British literature in China.

Institutional Efforts on the Formation of Classics and Canons

Canon making has emerged as an important institutional force to shape the boundary of literature. The idea of canon formation, in turn, has stimulated and facilitated efforts of canon making with textbooks, professional criticism, cross-media adaptation, institutionally funded research programs and other methods. As Frank Kermode has rightly said, “the institution does not resist, rather encourages change; but it monitors change with very sophisticated machinery” (Kermode 85). Selective canons are only recent historical entities. Wendell V. Harris points out that “Further perspective comes from recognizing that, until the Renaissance, selective canons in literature were generally of little importance, that selective canons of European vernacular literature blossomed only in the eighteenth century and that selective canons of English and American literature are more recent still (Harris 113). Institutional efforts on the part of the publishing industry, universities and scholars are strongly tangible in the plan of a series of canons. Encyclopedia Britannica has published the 54-volume *Great Books of the Western World*, which is a collection of great books in western civilization. The Modern Library has initiated ambitious projects to fund the best books in English literature, while the publishing industry as a whole has provided readers with greater access to classics, which has in turn reinforced the notion of classics on the part of readers.

When English literature circulates within other cultures, the issue of textbooks for this “foreign” literature looms large, in a certain sense, as a very important channel of canon making. In China, a great variety of textbooks on British literature are finished by scholars including Wang Jin (1920), Ouyang Lan (1927), Zeng Xubai (1928), Xu Mingji (1934), Jin Donglei (1937), Fan Cunzhong (1983), Chen Jia (1981-1986), Liu Bingshan (1981), Liang Shiqiu (1985), Wu Weiren (1988), Wang Zuoliang (1996), Zhang Dingshuan (2002), Nie Zhenzhao (2004), Wang Shouren (2006), Li Zhengshuan (2006), Liu Yiqing (2008), Suo Jinmei (2009) and Chang Yaoxin (2010). These textbooks lay a solid foundation for the notion of British literature, providing an outline and framework for generations of Chinese college

students. These institutional efforts play a central role in making Chinese versions of the British literary classics and canons. They exert an extremely influential power on college students and shape their notion of the classics and great writers in British literature. Their importance can never be overestimated. The institutional force can also be seen in the National Social Science Fund of China. Over the past twenty years, the Fund has supported dozens of research programs in the field of foreign literature to carry out studies on the issue of canon. Some of these academic endeavors are noteworthy due to their ground-breaking originality, insight and all-inclusiveness. Compared with the monographs in the west, Chinese scholars distinguish themselves with a broader vision and a more systematic scope. Combing the institutional and authoritative force of the National Social Science Fund of China and the conscientious efforts of scholars, *British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture* inherited the merits of general history and textbooks of British literature. As pointed out by Ou Hong, “there are histories of facts and histories of ideas of the compiler embodied in the facts. Most of the histories written by scholars from the Chinese mainland belong to the first type, hence lacking originality” (Ou 5). *British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture*, no doubt, belongs to the second type. It fulfills all the expectations of histories of ideas in a good way, aiming to delve into the complicated reciprocal relationships between culture and literature. By focusing on the idea of culture and tracing its changes and dynamic development over time, *British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture* reshapes the canon of British literature in the shifting cultural landscape of the Great Britain. In this sense, by remapping the scope of literary classics from Chaucer to the 21st century, *British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture* establishes, in fact, a new version of canon. As the research achievements of a major program of the National Social Science Fund of China, this series of books is endowed with the authority of the institutional power of the National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences.

British Literature midst Changes in the Idea of Culture approaches the process of canon-formation from the perspective of a constantly changing culture and form. As a special design of this project, *the book series* has a very diversified version of appendixes. From the text of the story of the Holy Grail, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *The Faerie Queene*, *God and the Bible*, *Across the Pond: An Englishman’s View of America*, Johnson’s preface to the Dictionary, *The Tatler*, *Signs of the Times*, Matthew Arnold’s “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreus,” Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil*, John Stevenson’s *British Society 1914-45* and David Lodge’s *Thinks....*, the selection of these classical texts aims to provide a cultural and historical context to

illustrate the process of the formation of the literary canon. In this way, Yin Qiping testifies to his determination not to make a closed, authoritative and old-fashioned canon. He leaves gaps, ellipsis and open space for readers to open up the boundary of the book series.

The formation of classics and canons is a complicated phenomenon created with institutional efforts. For centuries the term “literary canon” has often been used to refer to the classics and masterpieces which are constructed by textbooks and critical reviews. However, the formation of the literary canons is shaped by the notion of culture, which does not stay in a static state but evolves over time. Herein lie the elements that lead to the formation of the literary canons that changes over history by corresponding to the changes of the idea of culture. In this sense, it is a suitable, feasible and reasonable model for us to use to remap the literary canon through the shaping power of British culture. In the field of literature, the word “canon” is used in a secular sense. It still, nevertheless, implies a force of power, authenticity and authority. In a postmodern age, it is always problematic to say that we have a fixed and existentialist body of selected texts that can be termed as “The Canon.” Instead, it is safe to propose a more localized, personalized and diversified version of “the canon” or “canons” out of the classics. Trevor Ross points out that “canon making is a way of ordering important works, and the conceptual order a canon provides simplifies much about these works that is hard to comprehend” (Ross, “The Canon” 368). *British Literature amidst Changes in the Idea of Culture*, in all aspects, is a great new stride made in the research field of British literature and culture. It not only offers a new path for research on canon formation and culture in the future, but its achievement also has a retroactive effect: the hidden vein of British literature amidst changes in the idea of culture over the past centuries is revealed for the first time.

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