Law as an Important Category in the Ancient Chinese Formal Criticism

Abstract  Law is an important category in the ancient Chinese literary formal criticism, and it reflects the ancient masters’ thoughts about nature and universe and gets enriched and extended as time passes by. Even though law is more basic and concrete than images and emotions, it plays such a crucial role in writing that it becomes a prototypical category. The meanings and implications of law become salient when it is put into the social condition of ancient China, on which the ancient Chinese literary criticism is based. Hence, law is not only a technique in writing, but also a historic concept with both natural quality and social quality. The former is based on the order of heaven, earth and nature while the latter on rituals. Law comes from dao 道 and depends on li 理; it is revealed in Style and embodied in Case. It is closely related to literary principles and helps to highlight the native characteristics of traditional Chinese literary criticism.

Keywords  law, ancient Chinese literary criticism, history of literary criticism, category

Introduction

The critics of the past generations have paid due attention to the law of the ancient literary creation and criticism, but the critics of nowadays simply regard the law as one of petty requirements on the literary form, thus neglecting its profound meanings. What is more, the boundary of “law” is not clearly defined and as a result, the differences between law and many other similar categories,
such as “reason”, “style” and “case”, are blurred. The theories of law will shed light on the inherent mechanism and the local characteristics of the traditional Chinese literary creation and therein lies the crux of many important problems in the history of the ancient Chinese literary criticism. Therefore, it is necessary to review and analyze it again.

The Formation and Evolution of Law

The concept of law has undergone a long time of formation and extension before the specific law of creation in the literary sense was established and put into practice. Law originally referred to the transcendent order and standard and was derived from our forefathers’ thoughts about universe and nature. As soon as our ancestors noticed the isolation between themselves and the outside objects, they began to develop a strong desire to explore the world they were situated in. They held an infinite worship and piety for the vastness and inclusiveness of the universe, especially the three lights of sun, moon and star in the heaven, the five areas of the earth, the alternation of the four seasons and the nature which gives birth to everything. Therefore, they felt a strong impulse to dive to the bottom of them.

Our ancestors explored the universe in many different ways so as to shake off the obscuration and they also acquired some simple and basic knowledge, which were all record in Zhouyi 周易 (The Book of Changes). It is said that “when Mr. Paoxi 庖牺氏 had come to the rule of all under heaven, looking up, he contemplated the brilliant forms exhibited in the sky, and looking down he surveyed the patterns shown on the earth. He contemplated the ornamental appearances of birds and beasts and the different suitabilities of the soil. Near at hand, in his own person, he found things for consideration, and the same at a distance, in things in general. On this he devised bagua 八卦 (the eight trigrams), to show fully the attributes of the spirit-like and intelligent operations working secretly, and to classify the qualities of the myriads of things”. The above quotation is an illusory reflection of the process of law-pursuing. The author of Yijing 易经 made it clear that “the greatest virtue of heaven and earth was the reproducing ability and both things and human beings were produced.” “The heaven and the earth came into being first and then they gave birth to everything, which in turn existed between the heaven and the earth”1. Since the human beings are creatures of nature, then the law of nature will be upheld as the law of human beings and norms of the society. The sage thoroughly understood this logic, so he sought law in the world of nature. “The law of Heaven and Earth

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1 “Treatise on the Diagrams” of Yijing.