

# Canon Formation in Literary Field --A Sociological Perspective

**DU Ping**

School of Foreign Languages,  
China West Normal University,  
No. 1, Xihua Road, Sunqin District  
Nanchong, Sichuan  
People's Republic of China  
Email: [dping64@163.com](mailto:dping64@163.com)

## **Abstract**

*From the perspective of Bourdieu's cultural field of literature, canon formation means cultural familiarization of canons—a process of wider socialization and institutionalization whose aim is to reach an extensive social recognition. Canon formation is never a natural process, but one fully exposed to struggles of powers of various kinds. In the process an array of institutions and social agents are involved in competing for the legal monopoly over literary canons, thus eventually contributing to canon formation.*

**Key Words:** Canon Formation, Literary Field, Institutionalization, Cultural Familiarization

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Since 1970s, issues about established literary canons and canon formation have become a major concern in the literary circles and culture studies. Some conflicting views are obviously discerned. Defenders of standard canons hold that canons are defined by aesthetic standards and must endure the test over a period of time. They are concerned with “canonicity” of literary works, underscoring the necessity and irreplaceability, i.e., aesthetic quality of literary works. However, opponents claim that standard canons have been determined less by “artistic excellence than by the politics of power, that is, that the canon has been formed in accordance with the ideology, political interests, and values of an elite class that was white, male, and European.” (Abrams, 2004:30) Today, the opponents' demands for opening the canon and abandoning elitism are gathering momentum. So far no consensus has been reached as to the issue because of different approaches to canon formation the two sides hold, but the conflicting viewpoints reveal explicitly internal and external forces which drive canon formation.

The debates over the nature of canon formation, in fact, necessitate the question as to what factors determine the canon formation. Canon formation is a constructive process, determined by an assortment of socio-cultural factors. The social forces in the formative process certainly involve social contextual and institutional aspects which enable authors and works to acquire a legitimate status of canons. Canon formation is a complex process of socio-historical accumulation, which goes beyond a sole criterion, and a holistic view of canon formation process should be placed in a socio-historical field. The paper, based on Pierre Bourdieu's literary field, attempts to probe into the social formative process and institutional elements of canon formation.

## **2. Cultural field of literature and canon formation**

According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, field is "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation". (Wacquant.1989) It consists of an interrelated network consisting of the agents' social status, capital power, power domain and cultural factors etc. Moreover, a field is also "a field of struggles in which agents' strategies are concerned with the preservation or improvement of their positions with respect to the defining capital of the field". (Wacquant.1989) Literary field is just one of the many social fields which differs from political and economic fields, but all the fields are all tightly interwoven together in a covert relation.

In the cultural field of literature canon formation, on the one hand, means the artistic quality of certain literary works is recognized; on the other hand it means certain writers and genres through socialization and institutionalization, are accepted by all the society and acquire legal status and become part of the mainstream culture. Socialization and institutionalization, according to Bourdieu, is an inevitable process for canon formation—cultural familiarization. Since literary canons play a special role in cultural tradition, their cultural familiarization, from the very beginning, is never a natural process, but one saturated with struggles of varied power relationships for the legitimate monopoly and discourse power.

Canon formation is a complicated process imbued with tensions of different powers and relations competing for literary legitimacy. Literary field follows its own logic, but still retain a tie with other social fields. An unequal distribution of cultural capital constitutes a hierarchy of agents and agencies in literary field, and accordingly the amount of cultural capital those agents and institutions possess in different hierarchies determines the power they have, the role they may play as well in canon formation. It is, as it were, those agents and agencies with more power of cultural capital that take control of the power to select canons. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological views on the cultural field throw new light on cultural production; it therefore helps to gain an insight into all kinds of social forces which shape the field of literature by legitimizing some authors and works.

## **3. Institutionalization and Socialization of Canon Formation**

Even after the process of cultural familiarization few authors and works are established as canonical, their status, moreover, might be unstable with the changing times. Specifically, the relative positions held by authorities and institutions account for the mechanism of literary production, diffusion, consumption and evaluation, thus deciding the final destination of those canonical authors and works. In Bourdieu's sense, "educational monopoly" over canon formation since the late 19th century has come to a gradual end, hence the

cultural field of literature has gained a certain degree of autonomy with more prominent roles of institutions and agents.

### 3.1. The Role of cultural institutions in canon formation

There are a great variety of agencies which can make judgments in canon formation. Agents such as publishers, sponsors, literary historians, critics, biographers, translators and university professors all occupy their own positions in literary field, and contribute in a varied degree to canon formation, but only with their joint efforts can the canonizing process be completed. (Kolbas. 2001:62)

The canonizing processes of cultural familiarization usually involve operation and functions of different agencies which are responsible for publication, transmission, consumption and evaluation of literary works. The number of printing and the reputation of publishing houses can certainly serve as important criteria for canon formation. However, critical attention from literary critical circles is of equal importance. By means of introduction, reviews, taking notes and quotations, specialized journals and magazines, critics and scholars show their particular favor for some works and authors, and accordingly their evaluation influences general readers and plays a leading role in establishing criteria for canons.

According to Bourdieu, cultural fields rely too much on educational institutions, therefore, the latter plays a role in consecrating, vindicating, transmitting and reproducing legitimate culture. (qt. in Tao. 2004) Since educational institutions like schools and universities have long been acknowledged as the transmitters of knowledge, they serve as one of the major fields or sites for consecrating canons. One benchmark by which canons are judged is to see whether certain authors or works can enter course books and are prescribed in literary readings. The popularity of canonical works, to a degree, can be attested by their university readerships they have. Hence only those authors and works which have entered teaching syllabuses, literary textbooks and reading lists of the students will be rewritten, reprinted, restructured, and attain maximum social recognition. In universities or educational institutions a minority of elites and professors who are authorized to possess a wealth of academic resources have a voice in selecting authors and works for curriculum design and teaching content; meanwhile course design, instruction and degree offer can further reinforce "linguistic capital" and "symbolic capital" of literati and works.

Canon formation also a familiarizing process of publication, distribution, consumerism and etc.. Firstly, this process must be subject to literary reviewing. For instance, institutions like publishing houses can promote popularity and reputation of literary works and authors by means of hardback editions, festschrifts and elegant editions. The reputation and of an author or a literary work must rely on the continual reediting and rewriting of the works, which is probably one of the preconditions for canonical familiarization. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* has been in print and reprint for many centuries since 1667. They become so familiar that "they formed part of what one might call the national consciousness. Generations of literate Englishmen found resonant phrases from Milton on their lips." (Danielson.1989) It is necessary for canonical authors and works to be quoted, adapted and recreated in various forms. So the prestige of the publishers and the numbers of the print are one of the standards by which we judge a canonical author and his works. Secondly, critical attention from critics is also one of the criteria to judge whether an author and his works are canonized. Critical reviews, book reviews, annotations, quotations and introductions all are important vanes in literary world for canonical familiarization. Some empirical studies show that "literary institutions and in particular the institution of

criticism are of major importance” in canon formation. By studying the choices journalistic reviewers make while selecting a book for a review van Dijk and Vermunt (Dijk. 1997) point out that “among other things, the publisher and the genre of a book, as well as the seniority of an author, determine whether a book is reviewed and, accordingly, has a chance to become part of the canon in the long run.”

### **3.2 The Role of general readers**

General readers are regarded as the largest group of literary consumer and the largest number of agent in literary field. However, the role general readers can play in traditional canon formation is very much restricted as a consequence of their paucity of academic resources and cultural capital, being reduced to a dominated status in the literary and power fields. The emergence of consumer culture and cultural commercialization has stimulated an upsurge of the general readers’ awareness of subjectivity and gradually enhanced the folk power they represent, which poses a powerful challenge to the superior power held by the elite minority. The average readers’ reading activity may endow authors and their works with some culture capital, and even exert significant influence upon the content and form of literary creation. Meanwhile, their reading orientation serves as a vane of literary reproduction, consumption, and the social acceptance of the writer and their works as well. Therefore, the general readers have developed themselves into a force to be reckoned with in the canonizing process. It is very likely for those works which cater most to the readers’ psychology and horizon of exceptions at a given time to be canonized. In 1960s the American “cult fictions”, for instance, were popular with all the readers and some of them were gradually consecrated from best-sellers to canonical works. The very reason for this transformation is that those novels fit the changes of the times and cater to the general readers’ psychological needs.

The social recognition of canonical literary works and authors needs testing by average readers and critics as they constitute an indispensable part in the canonization. Tong, a Chinese scholar, stated, “Whether literary works and authors are canonized, even if recognized and recommended by the authorities, still depends on reading experience and appreciation of the general readers and critics.”(Tong, 2005) In the view of receptive aesthetics, average readers are the constructors of textual meaning. With their active participation, new meanings are added to the text and the space for interpretation is also expanded. Reader response has not only shattered the elites’ aesthetic standard but also confirmed readers’ well-deserved status in the process of canon formation. In one word, reading practices and aesthetic experiences of general readers may represent the demand of mass culture and play a subversive role in traditional views on cannon formation. The involvement of general readers in this process breaks the monopoly and power the few elites hold over canons, which provides “ the public readers with opportunities to participate in the reading and criticism of canons, thus benefiting the adjustment or even reconstructing canons.”(Wang. 1996)

### **3.3 The influence of Mass Media**

Canonization, a long process of socialization, is intimately associated with media propaganda. Media agencies and their agents function as catalysts for accelerating the process of canon formation. Thanks to its powerful effects, media evolves into an active player for enabling wide and quick circulation of literary works and converting literary works' symbolic capitals into maximum economic capitals. The transition from traditional

printing age to current digital printing age has promoted the change from the paper-based book culture to the digitalization-driven electronic one. The vicissitudes of media culture entail changes in modes of literary reproduction, consumption, reading behavior, and distribution of cultural capital and power in the literary field, finally prompting a paradigm shift of canon formation. It is impossible today for any canonical works to be immune from the commercialization and industrialization of cultural products as the reproduction of cultural and artistic works, including the adaptation of classics into different forms, genres, and media increasingly relies on the industries of culture and the attention of the mass media (Kolbas. 2001), it seems that cultural commodification has begun to fill the void. In the digitalized world, mass media, as powered by its own technological advantages, has played in some sense a greater role than education institutions in shaping canons, debilitating the standards intellectual elites have laid down for canon formation.

In the age of print matters media mainly consisted of paper books, newspapers, magazines, advertisements and posters while representation of artistic and literary works relies heavily on digits, images and internets and other modern media. Literary works can be adapted in the form of TV drama, movie or hypertexts on the internet, which help popular mass get easy access to canonical works. Furthermore, contemporary artistic modes like pastiche, montage, parody can level off the depth of canonical works and shorten the distance between canons and the mass.

### **3.4 The ideological Influence**

It is the desire for cultural hegemony and intellectual powers that drive the ruling class to be particularly concerned with canonization of literary works since canons are sometimes “direct representations of ideological and political potentials.” (Wang. 2007:219) The ruling class, in fact, worships the authority underlying the process of canon formation and take canons as tools to transform the political influences and reinforce ideological purposes. With the transformation of its wealth of social and economic capitals into cultural capitals and discourse powers, the ruling class gets a firm control over all the institutions and propaganda apparatus. Therefore, some literary classics become part of medium for propaganda, personnel selection, examinations and academic research, thus easily making them canonical.

Originally many literary works and authors are not deliberately Ideological-oriented, but there are times when social morals and values are sometimes foisted on them. An assortment of devices might be employed by the ruling class to establish its canonical works and authors. First some works are forced into educational and cultural systems and become classical since the ruling class can control public opinions. Secondly for didactic purposes certain works are sometimes distorted and exaggerated to embody ideological implications so that they serve the dominant class. Finally adaptation, commentaries and political propagandas can further reinforce ideological thoughts to pander to the ruling class. External interferences in the process of canon formation breed a lot of canonical works with their overt political overtones and characteristics of the times.

## **4. Concluding**

The complexity of the present-day canon formation has gone beyond the traditional critical stance. The prevalence of consumerism culture results in pluralism of evaluation standard, evaluation approach and circulation channel. As the effects of mass media grow increasingly salient, canon formation is more likely to

fall into the hands of external forces. Therefore, it is safely assumed that traditional mode of literary canon formation has been dissolving into the wave of popular culture.

## **References**

- Abrams, M.H.(2004). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Danielson, Dennis. Ed.. (1989). *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*. The Cambridge University Press.
- Dijk, Nel van. (1999). Research into Canon Formation: Nationalism, Literature, and an Institutional Point of View. *Poetics Today*, 20:1.
- Kolbas, E.Dean.(2001). *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon*. Westview Press.
- Tao, Dongfeng.(2004). Deconstructing and Reconstructing Canons. Shanghai: *Chinese Comparative Literature*, 3.
- Tong Qingbing. (2005).Factors and Their Relationships in Canon Formation. Beijing: *Beijing University Journal*, 5.
- Wacquant, L.D. (1989). Towards a Reflexive Sociology: A Workshop with Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociological Theory*, vol. 7.
- Wang Ning.(1996). “Cultural Studies” and Classical Literature Research. Tianjing: *TianJing Social Science*, 5.
- Wang, Xiaolu.(2007). *Key Words in Cultural Criticism*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.