

## Historical Overview of George Santayana in China

XIE MINMIN

George Santayana's achievements and the magnitude of his ideas in history speak for themselves. Apropos of his popularity and studies across the world, there is a conspicuous unbalance between Western and Chinese academe. Undeniably, the former has been leading the way in research achievements, which in turn underpins its position as the centre. Despite being less systematic and rich than those in the West, the studies of Georges Santayana in China have by and large borne some fruits as the result of generations of works.

The reception of Santayana in China can be traced back to some fragments in the works of Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998) and Lin Yutang (1895-1976). Qian and Lin were very influential scholars and writers in the first half of the 20th century in China and abroad. Qian received his Bachelor of Literature at the University of Oxford and had a good command of many languages such as English, Latin, and French. Lin once studied at Harvard University and gained Doctor Degree at Leipzig University. These two scholars were among quite a few Chinese who had a cross-cultural vision and reputation at that time. Therefore, their introduction, though limited in length, was authoritative and crucial to the first dissemination of Santayana in China. In the article titled "Five Authors" written in 1933, Qian spoke highly of Santayana and referred to him as one of the "five wisest men in modern times" [Qian (1997), p. 142]. The other four were G. E. Moore, Francis Herbert Bradley, Bertrand Russell, and William James. In his English work, *The Wisdom of America*, Lin praised that Santayana's thoughts "have the character of a city built

high on the top of a mountain plateau” [Lin (1950), p. 2]. However, after then, Santayana’s name was nearly absent from publications.

The mid-to-late twentieth century witnessed two culminations in the evolution of aesthetics in China, the “Great Aesthetic Discussion” from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s and the “Aesthetic Fever” from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. The former involved the widespread debate about such questions as “What is beauty?” and “What is the nature and characteristics of beauty”; the latter, accompanied by and benefited from the reform and opening-up of China, began to expose intellectuals to Western thoughts. Zhu Guangqian and Zong Baihua, the founders of China aesthetics, both mentioned Santayana in their works. As a response to this historical ambience, the translation of Santayana’s works emerged. In 1961, the journal, *Abstract of Modern Foreign Philosophy and Social Sciences*, carried Zhang Qing’s translation of Morris Weitz’s review on *Santayana’s Aesthetics: A Critical Introduction* by Irving Singer, which brought Santayana to the reader’s notice. In 1966, Qiu Cheng, a scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Science, briefly introduced Santayana’s philosophy and selectively translated some of Santayana’s remarks on freedom, humanity, and humanitarianism in the *Journal of World Philosophy*. It also marked that the slow and intermittent translation of Santayana’s works in China commenced. In 1982, the Chinese version of *The Sense of Beauty* by Miao Lingzhu was published. Miao Lingzhu is a pseudonym for Miao Langshan, a famous Chinese translator and scholar who specialized in Western literary theory. This translation was of a landmark significance. It was not only the first book of Santayana to be fully translated into Chinese, but it also offered the most canonical version to date, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent studies on Santayana’s aesthetics.

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, translation activities grew by leaps and bounds. Several major works of Santayana had been rendered into Chinese in succession. In 2001, *Three Philosophical Poets* translated by Hua Ming appeared. Two

years later, the Chinese translation of *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* came out. In 2008 and 2015, Chinese versions of *Character and Opinion in the United States* and *Little Essays, Drawn From the Writings of George Santayana* were respectively published by two state-level presses, China Social Sciences Press and The Commercial Press. Though there was a palpable gain both in quantity and frequency of translation compared to the previous century, the inadequacy of scale was equally evident until “Santayana Series” was published by Peking University Press. This series, including *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, *Reason in Common Sense*, *Reason in Society*, *Reason in Art*, and *Reason in Religion*, took four years to complete and became the direct window into Santayana’s philosophical system. Yet, as of now, some representative works such as *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* and *The Last Puritan* haven’t registered with translators.

These translations sparked interest in Santayana studies. Since the 1980s, scholars, researchers, and students, primarily from departments of Chinese, philosophy and English in universities progressively entered into the elaborating, interpreting, and publicizing of Santayana’s works. The repeat mention of Santayana in some popular textbooks testified to this trend. For example, Zhu Liyuan and Zhang Dexing’s *General History of Western Aesthetics* viewed Santayana as “the first true aesthete in American history” [Zhu and Zhang (1999), p. 78]. His aesthetics “to some extent rebelled against idealistic aesthetics” and “exerted a great influence on the later pragmatism, symbolism, empiricism, especially on Thomas Munro’s neo-naturalistic aesthetics” [Zhu and Zhang (1999), pp. 98-99]. Santayana’s identity as a philosopher also came to be familiar as *New Course in Modern Western Philosophy* by Xia Jisong presented Santayana as a representative of critical realists. These books widely used in universities helped to scale up the number of students acquainted with Santayana. Wang Youru’s “Review of Santayana’s *Sense of Beauty*” was probably the first academic paper in the area. However, it sounded a note of criticizing rather than

praising. Wang claimed that “miscellaneous content, loose structure, and scanty theory featured this book” [Wang (1982) p. 78].

But in the 1990s, the tone of this kind had been shifted. Santayana’s reputation as an eminent philosopher and aesthete gradually got established. Cheng Menghui published two articles, respectively elaborating on Santayana’s theory of aesthetic taste and the three dimensions of his beauty concept. Cheng pointed out that Santayana’s naturalistic philosophy and ontological stance served as “a handrail and holder” in his aesthetics, which made it very unique at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [Cheng (1994), p. 89]. Following that, more diverse research approaches, such as comparative analysis, were adopted. For example, Shen Hong and Yan Xianglin explored in their article the disparities between Croce and Santayana’s outlooks on philosophy, beauty, expression of emotion, instinct, and logic link among utilitarian function, morality, and aesthetics. Wan Xiaoping, in one of his articles, analyzed different views that Santayana and Kant held towards beauty and sublimity whereby he refuted Melvin Rade’s argument that these two philosophers strongly resembled each other. These horizontal comparisons had turned the spotlight on Santayana’s critically inheritance from predecessors’ ideological legacies and distinctiveness among contemporaries. As a new thought force arising against the backdrop of the society in a state of flux, Santayana’s aesthetics also bore the stamp of transition. Zhang Wenchu and Huang Chunling reckoned that it was reflected in his attack on classic concepts such as disinterestedness and universality proposed by Kant and his construction of the paradigm of objectification.

Since 2010, some scholars have been branching out their studies. Santayana’s literary writings have received mounting attention. Zhang Junhua, as one of the scholars who did quite a few works about Santayana, also shifted her focus from Santayana’s aesthetics to the literary works at this phase. In a paper dealing with the artistic style and aesthetic education of *The Last Puritan*, Zhang stressed that Oliver’s irresolution in choices mirrored Santayana’s seeking

for the harmony between natural humanity and moral perfection. Niu Hongying considered *Dialogues in Limbo* as a manifestation of Santayana's revision of his early views about the reason. According to Niu, Santayana previously blurred the mutual boundary of sense and reason by including the former into the latter. However, in this dialogue work which was firstly published in 1925, Santayana modified his understanding of the relation between reason and sense. To put it in a more specific way, Santayana "extracted sense from the ambiguous cognition of reason, discussed the contradiction and opposition between these two concepts, and further claimed that reason was, in essence, an embodiment of human's subjectivity" [Niu (2019), p. 105]. Niu also pointed out from a literary perspective that this work was in effect Santayana's imitation of Lucian who blazed a trail in the western tradition of dialogues between the deceased. There has been another new research inclination to focus on Santayana's literary talents and to treat his writings with a more integrated perspective in recent years. More scholars tended to delve into Santayana's reconciliation between literary thoughts and philosophical ideas. Xie Minmin respectively explored the literary practices of naturalism and Platonism in his two papers issued in 2020. According to Xie, Santayana's introduction of poetry into classical poetics was a kind of innovation before the advent of modernism. His poetry exhibited the reflection on anthropocentrism, the inertial of imagination, and irrational impulses caused by the rapid development of industrial capitalism. In Xie's eyes, Santayana's absorption and worship of Platonism, to some degree, was reflective of his effort to maintain the logical self-consistency of his philosophy. It is crystal clear that "Santayana mixed the Platonic transcendence with Naturalistic substance, thereby forming a balance between the metaphysical world and material world" [Xie (2020b), p. 73]. Another good sign is that theses and dissertations involved with Santayana appeared more than ever, indicating the vast space in the field and a sustainable vigor from research groups as well.

On the whole, topics on Santayana so far remain on the periphery in China. Fortunately, the Chinese government has been encouraging the cultural exchange to which the study of foreign classics is undoubtedly integral. Under such favorable circumstances, the growing recognition of Santayana's work from China academia is highly predictable.

*Foreign Studies College*  
*Hunan Normal University*  
 36 Lushan Rd.,  
 Yuelu District, Changsha, Hunan, P. R. China  
 E-mail: minshinedream@163.com

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Katarzyna Kreplewska

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