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On the Formation and Transformation of the Image of China in Modernity— A Review of Research on "China" Narratives in the Perspective of Modernity

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Abstract

Research on "China" Narratives in the Perspective of Modernity, from the new angle of modernity, insightfully raises the issue of presenting the image of China and explains it on five different dimensions: psychological, ethical, jianghu (martial arts), rural, and aesthetic worlds. This multi-layered and multi-dimensional modern interpretation of the "image of China" undoubtedly opens up a vast research space for the topic. It also reflects the narrative research on "China" from the perspective of overseas scholars, effectively expanding the international vision of Chinese literature and promoting academic exchanges between China and South Korea.

Keywords

Modernity; Image of China; Modern literature

1 Introduction

The issue of literary modernity remains ever-relevant and continues to offer extensive research opportunities. Dr. Zhao Bin and Professor UM Younguk from South Korea, through their book, *Research on "China" Narratives in the Perspective of Modernity*, present a distinct image of China. Modernity is based on the historical positioning of social conditions, specifically referring to a particular stage in human history.[1] "Social conditions" encompass political positioning, economic development, ideological connotations, and discourse directions in the cultural field. This book's "particular stage" refers to the modern and contemporary era spanning nearly a century. Clearly, "modernity" possesses the fluidity of historical time and the diversity of its directions. As Dr. Zhao Bin states, "The term 'modern' itself has a temporal significance. Exploring the modern transformation of Chinese novels from the perspective of 'time' can be seen as a fundamental inquiry into the issue. Since modern times, time has participated in the construction of novels in a 'brand-new' manner." [2] Therefore, "modernity" or "modern" inherently contains the complexity of temporal significance. Based on

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this, *Research on "China" Narratives in the Perspective of Modernity* elucidates that the "Image of China under the modern perspective is complex and variable," focusing on the diversified psychological, ethical, jianghu, rural, and aesthetic worlds within the modern view. Using the "self-cultural reflection" of writers from different periods as the starting point, it constructs various images of China.

2 The Ethical World under the Distortion of Power

Michel Foucault stated, "Power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations."[3]The operation of the ethical world has never been separated from the guiding role of power. *Research on "China" Narratives in the Perspective of Modernity* focuses on rural power within the ethical world, discussing the power chaos in "rural China" from perspectives such as regionality, kinship, subversion, scheming, appetite, and desire. First, examining the main characters in rural power narratives, it scrutinizes the clan forces represented by patriarchs during the feudal period and the political forces represented by village chiefs or village party secretaries in the new era (referred to as "rural spokespersons" in the book). It posits that "rural spokespersons" are both the "leaders" of rural power narratives and the "leaders" of rural power usage. The unique regionality and kinship in rural power constitute the "governing foundation" of the "rural spokespersons." For example, the Bai and Lu clans in *White Deer Plain* and the Li and Sun clans in The World of Chrysanthemums represent this phenomenon. The book also suggests that subversion and scheming are the intrinsic driving forces of "rural spokespersons'" power operations, evident in characters like Bai Jiaxuan in *White Deer Plain* and the "leaders" in The World of Chrysanthemums. Behind subversion and scheming lies the desire for "privilege," which also "creates" the power chaos of inequality. To satisfy their obsessive psychological desires, "rural spokespersons" must resort to subversion and scheming, making greed and desire the driving forces of subversion and scheming and the inducements of rural power.

Secondly, the discussion focuses on the specific impact of the ethical world on the populace. The authors utilize Lu Xun's summary of Chinese history: "First, the era of wanting to be slaves but failing; second, the era of temporarily being stable as slaves." [4]The ethical dilemma of "wanting to be slaves but failing" is more evident in women. The book uses the images of Xianglin's Wife and Tian Xiao'e, two women who "failed to be slaves," to illustrate the physiological tragedies in the rural ethical world of China. Despite their maximum individual "compromise," they remain "heinous criminals" in the patriarchal ethical world, a group that can die or disappear at any time because "they" themselves equate to sin. Therefore, from this perspective, the ethical world is no different from a "world of tragedy" for women. The stories of Xianglin's Wife and Tian Xiao'e are personal tragedies and accusations of patriarchal rule under the feudal ethical system. In the distorted ethical world of patriarchy, individual choices and efforts appear pale, and the twisted ethical world becomes their "eternal grave."

Finally, if the ethical world only "traps" women, then the survival dilemma is a predicament faced by both genders. This dilemma includes the suppression of the lower-class populace by the actual power holders and enforcers, such as Bai Jiaxuan in *White Deer Plain* and Hu Tiancheng in *The Gate of the Sheep*. In contemporary novels, the countryside has become a "symptom" of modernity, a symptom for which a treat-

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ment plan is temporarily unavailable. [5]Since the arrival of industrial civilization and the advancement of urbanization, the conflict between urban and rural civilizations has intensified. With rapid urbanization, the urban-rural gap has been continuously and infinitely widened. Zhao Benfu's novel The Village on the Verge of Disappearance discusses the destruction brought to rural civilization by urban civilization from three aspects: the loss of the real homeland, the transformation of villagers' values, and the decline of rural power. The most direct manifestation of farmers' influx into cities is land abandonment, leading to the "collapse" of rural houses. However, moving to cities is not just a simple spatial shift; it brings changes in thinking and behavior, gradually internalizing into value changes.

Meanwhile, the "governing foundation" of rural areas is gradually disintegrating. The collapse of one old house after another in Xikou Village symbolizes the "collapse" of the rural power that Village Chief Lao Qiao has upheld for many years. [6]It is also the direct reason for the "cooling" of rural power in contemporary China, indicating that the ethical world under the distortion of rural power is "collapsing."

From the perspective of social development, cities and modernity are inseparable. The book explores the entanglement of rural and urban cultures and the modernity shift in the hearts of modern rural writers. [7] It finds that the cultural choices of rural writers are greatly influenced by China's modernization and urbanization while also recognizing that China's long historical and cultural traditions have deepened the difficulties of the modern transformation. Although Lu Xun "despaired of Confucius and his followers,"[8] traditional Chinese intellectuals find it difficult to completely abandon traditional cultural thinking, even if they consciously try to do so. Therefore, rural writers inevitably experience the entanglement and distress of "selective detachment" during the creative process. By the 1940s, rural culture began to be increasingly influenced by mainstream consciousness, making the psychological choices of rural writers more complex. With the advancement of modernization, the author, through an examination of the creative thinking and works of rural writers such as Shen Congwen, Zhao Shuli, and Liu Qing, discovered that whether it was "the countryside surrounding the city" or "rural urbanization," the essence was the conflict between industrial civilization and agrarian civilization. It was manifested as the entanglement between rural and urban cultures in literature. Of course, from a future perspective, the opposition and conflict between rural culture and urban culture are gradually being diluted, integrated, and reconstructed in the psychological choices of writers.[9]

3 The Jianghu World of the Swords and Shadows

The world of Jianghu created in contemporary martial arts novels reflects the psychological and ethical worlds from a modern perspective. Since the 1950s, martial arts novels, represented by Jin Yong (Louis Cha), have been immensely popular. However, since Jin Yong's popular novels entered the research field, Chinese academia has polarized evaluations. In this book, the authors do not focus on the distinction between the elegance and vulgarity of Jin Yong's novels but rather attempt to examine the modern implications of the concept of "chivalry" in Jin Yong's novels from the perspective of modernity, presenting the modern transformation vision from Jianghu righteousness to national righteousness.[10] Since the May Fourth New Culture Movement, the direction of "new literature" reform has generally been to "step out

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of the family," opposing the family system based on blood relations; this narrative mode is evident in the works of Lu Xun, Ba Jin, and Cao Yu. In Jin Yong's martial arts novels, the authors feel that Jin Yong was influenced by the "new literature" since the May Fourth Movement. Among them, the authors believe that the father-son (master-apprentice) relationship in Jin Yong's martial arts novels has a clear intention in the narrative to deconstruct the family system based on blood relations — deconstructing bloodline ethics. Jin Yong attempts to construct a healthy, equal, and ideal ethical order in the Jianghu world through the father-son (master-apprentice) relationship, which retains certain traditional elements but continues the modern narrative of deconstructing bloodlines from the New Literature in May Fourth Movement.[11] In addition, the modernity of friendship (brotherhood) also manifests further deconstruction of the family structure based on blood relations, emphasizing the equality consciousness of non-blood relationships and representing equal interpersonal relationships. The modernity of the husband-wife (male-female) relationship breaks the patriarchal constraints on gender relations, primarily reflected in the concept of gender equality in romantic relationships, which can also be seen as another manifestation of modernity. What kind of social imagination does the modern "chivalrous spirit" reflected in specific characters reveal? The authors use the term "national righteousness" to summarize this and explain the reasons for the formation of Jin Yong's "national righteousness" and its modern significance, reflecting that the fictional Jianghu world created by Jin Yong is a yearning for an equal and free real world. Although Jin Yong's martial arts novels are popular literature in form, the Jianghu righteousness and national righteousness they convey reflect the national critique and spiritual reconstruction since the New Literature in May Fourth Movement, possessing significant modern characteristics and meanings.

Among them, the authors select the character of Guo Jing for discussion. They believe that Guo Jing embodies the two most typical characteristics of traditional Chinese society: "filial piety" and "righteousness," which create an almost perfect character in traditional ethical terms. Unlike other martial arts novels that promote the martial spirit, Jin Yong focuses more on shaping individual personalities in his works, paying more attention to the growth of "people" themselves, such as Guo Jing, Yang Guo, Qiao Feng, Huang Rong, Ah Zhu, and Duan Yu. Each character in Jin Yong's works has a distinct personality. Therefore, the authors believe that Jin Yong examines the transformation and improvement of characters' personalities and spiritual worlds from the perspective of human nature and ethical morality.[12] It is a distinctive feature of Jin Yong's martial arts novels and an essential manifestation of modernity in his works. With their rich imagination and profound humanistic care, Jin Yong's martial arts novels construct a charming Jianghu world. In The Legend of the Condor Heroes, Guo Jing grows from an ignorant boy to a great hero. His growth process is not only a honing of martial arts but also a pursuit of chivalrous spirit. In Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils, Xiao Feng becomes a legendary figure in Jianghu with his profound martial arts and noble character. However, his story is not limited to personal heroic deeds but also contains deep reflections on national righteousness. To maintain peace between the Song and Liao dynasties, Xiao Feng sacrifices his life, showing the broad-mindedness and responsibility of a hero. Xiao Feng's story reveals the connection between chivalrous spirit and national righteousness. In times of national crisis, chivalrous spirit becomes a powerful source of unity, providing strong spiritual support for the nation's survival and development.

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The authors believe that in Jin Yong's martial arts novels, martial arts are not only survival skills but also a touchstone of morality, and a chivalrous spirit is not only a manifestation of personal cultivation but also a symbol of social justice. Through Jin Yong's novels, we see a Jianghu world full of justice and evil, as well as the brilliance and darkness of human nature.

In summary, from the literary creation, the Jianghu world of swords and shadows in Jin Yong's works, to some extent, reflects our real world. From the function of literary works, it also represents our longing and call for the good nature of the real world. As Ge Fei said, literature and art are the most sensitive tentacles of reality. Jin Yong's martial arts novels are the best example of this.

4 The Comparative Study of Aesthetic World

White Deer Plain and *Taebaek Mountain Range* are renowned literary works from China and South Korea, respectively, set against the backdrop of Japanese imperialist aggression. Both novels reflect the internal conflicts of their nations under the influence of feudal systems, serving as mirrors to the histories of China and South Korea. Through a comparative study of these two works, the authors hope to deepen the shared era consciousness and subjectivity further, thereby advancing the study of modern literature in both countries.[13] The authors primarily discuss the character images in *White Deer Plain* and *Taebaek Mountain Range*, conducting a comparative analysis from five angles: creation time, background, characters, history, and narrative mode, which is of great significance.

Firstly, the authors believe that "tragic images" are the defining characteristic of the core characters in *White Deer Plain*, and these "tragic images" are depicted through the conflict between new and old forces. *White Deer Plain* does not have a grand narrative structure but consists of trivial matters, running through Lu Xun's aesthetic concept of "tragedy amidst triviality." However, what exactly is Lu Xun's aesthetic concept of "tragedy amidst triviality," and how is this tragic aesthetic presented in *White Deer Plain*? The authors believe that from classical tragedy to the family tragedies of Denis Diderot and the bourgeois tragedies of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in the 18th century, and the 19th-century realist tragic writers like Alexander Pushkin and Nikolay Gogol, they are all typical representatives of tragic aesthetics. Most Chinese literary works often adopt a happy ending with a "red cloth," making everyone content. Therefore, the manifestation of tragic aesthetics in Chinese literature is relatively unremarkable. However, the authors emphasize Lu Xun's uniqueness in literature creation: using people's misfortunes in a dysfunctional society as material, opposing deceptive literature, and rejecting the vulgar practice of happy endings. Lu Xun exposes tragic realities as much as possible to awaken apathetic Chinese citizens, emphasizing that the masses are the masters of history and art and should become the main forces to overthrow the tragic realities.[14] Lu Xun's tragic aesthetics lies not only in its profound critical nature but also in its deep insight into the complexity of humanity. Through the image of the "madman," we see the distortions and struggles within human nature and the inevitability of tragedy. However, the aesthetic thought reflected in Lu Xun's works is not characterized by despair or fragmentation. Instead, Lu Xun wanted to liberate the nation from predetermined frameworks, ushering in a new spirit for the new literature in May Fourth Movement. Thus, his

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tragic aesthetics in creations bears distinct Chinese characteristics. Based on this, the authors further focus on Lu Xun's tragic aesthetics in creation: the fusion of tragedy and comedy, "tragedy amidst triviality", and optimism within tragedy. In *White Deer Plain*, the conflict between old and new forces does not erupt suddenly and intensely, as in Thunderstorm, but is expressed through everyday trivialities. Thus, *White Deer Plain* embodies Lu Xun's aesthetic concept of "tragedy amidst triviality."

Bai Jiaxuan, as the patriarch of *White Deer Plain*, pursues "benevolence" and "righteousness" in line with Confucian orthodoxy. However, this also means he cannot fully escape the confines of feudal ideology. Thus, the authors argue that "as the patriarch and clan leader, Bai Jiaxuan's practice of benevolence and righteousness ultimately maintains the old order under the premise of upholding feudalism."[15]According to Marx and Engels, tragedy arises when a new social system replaces an old one,[16] making the reasons for tragedy on *White Deer Plain* easier to understand. In the conflict between old and new forces, the authors believe that the tragedies of the most representative characters in *White Deer Plain* are not classical but more akin to Diderot's domestic tragedies or Lessing's bourgeois tragedies,[17] where trivial daily matters wear down the soul. Among them, Lu Zilin and Bai Jiaxuan, although both representatives of the "old forces," can be seen as opposites, with Lu Zilin being a counter-character to Bai Jiaxuan. Lu Zilin's characterization aligns well with the authors' previous discourse on rural power, as traits such as sensuality and cunning are vividly depicted in him. The internal conflicts within the old forces also accelerate their collapse. Characters like Lu Zhaopeng and Bai Ling represent the progressive forces. They are not only the new generation of *White Deer Plain* but also the "new forces" of New China. The conflicts between them and Bai Jiaxuan, representing the "old forces," symbolize the social conflict between the old and the new in Chinese society.

Additionally, the authors analyze the characters in *Taebaek Mountain Range* from the perspective of class and ideological conflicts. Unlike *White Deer Plain*, the primary driving force in *Taebaek Mountain Range* is ideological conflict rather than the clash of old and new powers. The ideological conflict in *Taebaek Mountain Range* is manifested in the contradictions between the pro-Japanese and pro-American landlord classes and the tenant farmer class. The authors also focus on the unique use of dialect in this book. The authors believe that the use of dialect in the novel simulates reality, enhancing the authenticity of the characters and effectively showcasing, from the people's perspective, the actions, thoughts, and oppositions of those attempting to change or maintain the social structure of South Korea.[18] Finally, the authors compare the narrative strategies of *White Deer Plain* and *Taebaek Mountain Range*, noting that the former suffers from flat character development and a somewhat loose structure. However, these shortcomings help eliminate the rigid writing style of the original work, preventing the novel's tone from slipping into dogmatism and imbuing it with a romantic flavor.

In contrast, the binary character structure in the *Taebaek Mountain Range* leads to a more formulaic and simplified narrative.[19] However, the work successfully portrays popular consciousness and folk culture. Besides, including dialect helps create more archetypal characters, distinct from the conceptualized characters often seen in other works. This analysis reflects the South Korean scholarly perspective on the aesthetics of *White Deer Plain*, expanding the pathways for disseminating Chinese literature in South Korea.

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5 Conclusion

Research on "China" Narratives from the Perspective of Modernity remains a relatively new direction. One of modernity's achievements is creating new social orders, reflected in changes in social mechanisms and literary transformations. The "Image of China" in the modern perspective appears diverse and complex, a topic that requires clarification from the academic community. In this context, Dr. Zhao Bin and Professor UM Younguk's multi-layered and multi-dimensional interpretation of the modern "Image of China" undoubtedly provides many opportunities for research in this field. More importantly, the synergy between Dr. Zhao Bin and Professor UM Younguk perfectly exemplifies the study of "Chinese" narratives from an overseas perspective, effectively broadening the international vision of Chinese literature while promoting academic exchanges between China and South Korea. In the future, we hope to see more scholars contribute to the development of literature in both China and South Korea.

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