

Comparison Between Rural Works of Shen Congwen and Lu Xun

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ABSTRACT

Lu Xun and Shen Congwen are both masters of rural literature in the history of modern Chinese literature. They perceived rural China and interpreted rural culture from their own unique perspective. Although they took different paths, their patriotism about the country are in common. Lu Xun pioneered Chinese rural novels, while Shen Congwen opened up a new field of modern rural novels. Whether it is the theme of cultural criticism and enlightenment, or human care and poetic aesthetics, Lu Xun and Shen Congwen had formed a completely different spiritual context. Lu Xun is the master of "rational" and Shen Congwen is the "emotion"; Lu Xun' writing is based on realism, and Shen Congwen is based on romanticism. In addition, they have different creative styles. This article compares the thoughts, emotions and art of Lu Xun and Shen Congwen's local works in several aspects by elaborating the context of Lu Xun and Shen Congwen's local literature. The author of this paper also clarifies the two genres of Chinese local literature of sensibility or rationality, criticism or aesthetics under the influence of the two writers. The two branches have nearly covered the modern Chinese rural literature of the 20th century.

Keywords: *Rural novels, literary ideals, aesthetic meaning, artistic expression*

1. INTRODUCTION

Lu Xun and Shen Congwen play critical roles in Chinese modern literature. As the representative writer of rural literature, Lu Xun was defined as the earliest pioneer, who built up a solid foundation for the development of this aspect. Under his direct influence, an upsurge of creation of rural literature in the 1920s was formed. For Shen Congwen, he opened up a new field of modern rural literature and paved a new way for the diversified development of modern Chinese novels. The high output and unique content of their works make them stand out in the history of rural literature and directly promoted the prosper of rural literature.

The concept of "rural literature" was first mentioned by Lu Xun when people summarize the achievement of the "first decade of new literature" in 1920s. He said that "people who presents their sensation by writing in Beijing, whether he claims to be subjective or objective, actually their works always to be rural literature, from the perspective of Beijing, they are the authors who live away from their hometown" [1]. It clarifies the specific connotation of "rural literature", the authors of rural literature are the ones who had previously lived in the countryside, then left away from their homeland. With attachment to their homeland in the memory, they continued to dream of distant hometown. Qian Liqun believes that the "rural literature" mainly refers to the works that describe life in the countryside based on the reorganization of memories, with a strong country

favor. The protagonists are always farmers, and the themes are always focusing on two different aspects. Firstly, it explores the relationship between the rural literature and the background of times and society and focuses on explaining its ideological connotation. Lu Xun's rural novels can be classified into this category. The second category is to tap the aesthetic value of rural literature and explain the moral and emotional connotations contained in them, which include Shen Congwen's works.

2. ANALYSIS ON REASONS OF COMMON FEATURES BETWEEN SHEN CONGWEN AND LUXUN

As contemporary authors, Shen Congwen and Lu Xun's artistic creations have many things in common such as era background, theme and genre.

2.1. Same Era Background Leading to Same Social Cultural Context

The creation of Lu Xun's literature is based on the historical background of China's moving toward modern society, and was formed under the ideal dawn of enlightenment. After he went to Nanjing to study, he began to learn about modern science and modern culture. It can be said that Lu Xun belongs to a generation of people who came into contact with advanced science very early in China. For instance, the medical profession that Lu Xun

studied is the frontier of natural science. With the experience of study in Japan, Lu Xun had more opportunities to accept modern Western thoughts and influenced by modern scientific civilization and Western bourgeois culture. It can be said that before the arrival of the "May Fourth Movement", Lu Xun's thoughts had formed the basis of enlightenment consciousness. Because of this, Lu Xun's enlightenment ideology was ahead of the average May 4th intellectuals as it directly touched the formation of the May Fourth New Culture Movement and leading the creation of May 4th literature.

Shen Congwen's works can also illustrate the background of that time. After the May 4th Movement, advanced Western science and technology, ideology and culture have been introduced into China. During the transformation of Chinese society, the culture has also undergone unprecedented openness, integration and transformation. Therefore, a large number of young writers engaging themselves in search of modern civilization from the countryside to the metropolis, burdened with the rich accumulation of traditional rural culture, and accepted the influence of urban heterogeneous culture, leading them to reflect on rural culture from the perspective of the awakened. It was the same historical background that induced Shen Congwen's leaving south Hunan and coming to Beijing.

2.2. Common Concerns Spawn Similar Themes

Lu Xun and Shen Congwen were born in a semi-feudal and semi-colonial country, a poor and weak nation with internal and external crisis so they both hold patriotism and the desire to save the nation. Their first common concern is the criticism of current affairs are contained in their rural novels. Lu Xun's early works such as *Zhufu*, *Medicine*, *The true story of Ah Q*, revealed how the brutal conquest of corrupt authorities and warlords' melee caused peasants' suffering. As the same, Shen Congwen's early works *My Education*, *Immigration and After Enlistment* criticized the cruel military. The warlords kill innocent people indiscriminately, even treat wars as gambling. Feudal etiquette are exposed in works like *Kong Yiji* and *White Light*. Another example is *Seen in Qingxiang*. Soldiers kill innocent people under the banner of "Qingxiang", and they appreciate their "masterpiece" with relish, even kicking corpses for fun.

The second theme they all explored is the destruction and alienation of feudal thoughts. The monarchy that has ruled China for a long time has disappeared, but the traditional ideas that have taken root in the hearts of the people are still deeply rooted. The "New Culture Movement" aimed to resist the influence of Confucianism which lasted thousands of years. However, it is almost impossible to be completely replaced. Lu Xun, as one of the pioneers of the new culture, his creations cover a wide range from *Madman's Diary*, which exposes feudal cannibalism, to *Kong Yiji* and *White Light* which criticize pedantic Confucian scholars. Shen Congwen also mentioned the

disaster brought to women by the feudal marriage institution.

The criticism of weakness nation character is another main point of their rural novels. National character refers to the sum of common and recurring spiritual traits, personality characteristics, emotional connotations, values, thinking styles, behavioral styles, and so on. The two authors also went deeply into the national character, exploring national weaknesses, such as bullying and fearing power, admiring foreigners blindly. Firstly, in *Alice's China Journey*, Shen Congwen exposes the Chinese character of bullying and fearing power. He said that "China is not growing up, no matter what country they come from, they have the right to bully the Chinese" [2]. This character is vividly and profoundly revealed in Lu Xun's work *The true story of Ah Q*. The main function of Ah Q's "spiritual victory" is to maintain the psychological balance of the slaves and to numb themselves by deceiving themselves, concealing themselves, and deceiving themselves. Secondly, his works expose the Chinese contradictory cultural psychology: the need for vanity and the worship of foreigners. Shen Congwen's work *Recording a College Student* narrated a college student who thought that all foreign students were good, and was blindly chased foreign living style such as tobacco, alcohol, coffee. He even said that Chinese people are not very human [3]. In Lu Xun's view, he also thinks that the most important issues are people's attitudes toward life and their understanding of human spirit and value. Therefore, Lu Xun believes that for the oppressed people in the lower classes, the primary problem is to change their spiritual world, which is imprisoned by traditional feudal concepts, to raise their ideological consciousness, and to enable them to obtain profound development.

3. HETEROGENEOUS DEPICTION OF LU XUN AND SHEN CONGWEN'S RURAL WORKS

3.1. The Deconstruction and Construction of National Character

As a unique literary phenomenon in the 20th century, the flourishing development of modern rural novels stems from the conflict and penetration of two cultures. As the writers of rural literature who are deeply influenced by modern cultural trends such as human nature liberation, democracy and science, they take a rebellious attitude towards rural culture. On the contrary, the hypocritical and alienated urban civilization makes them nostalgic for their rural life. It is rebellion and attachment to rural culture that constitute the two different perspectives of deconstruction and construction in rural novels. Lu Xun and Shen Congwen are their representatives. Lu Xun makes novels with an attitude of Enlightenment as his works are full of cultural criticism, which can be reflected in the combination of Lu Xun's criticism of national character

and criticism of traditional culture. The subject matter of his novels was mostly taken from the unfortunate people in a morbid society, with the intention of exposing the illness and drawing attention to the "treatment" [4]. This is mainly reflected in his writing of "national character" or "servility". While exposing and criticizing the national character, Lu Xun focused on reforming the status and establishing a new system.

Shen Congwen's rural novels inherited some of Lu Xun's thoughts of transforming national character, but as Shen Congwen focuses on the transformation of abstract "concepts", he put forward more of the construction of national spirit. He also thinks about how to change, but his vision is to return to the traditional culture and vitality of life, from which to dig out things that worth cherishing and retaining to reshape the national character. He mentioned in the *Preface to the Collection of Study Works* that "There may be people in this world who want to build Chongloujie Pavilion on sandy or on the water. That's not me. I just want to build a small Greek temple. I choose mountain as the foundation. It is piled up with hard stones. It is delicate, strong and well-proportioned. Although the shape is small, it is my ideal building. This temple enshrines 'humanity'". It can be seen that Shen Congwen's passion is for the writing of ideal "humanity". At the same time, he also created a series of characters from the perspective of health and natural character, such as Longzhu and Tiger Cub, to make a contrast between hypocritical and weak urbanites. Lu Xun's determination to deconstruct and Shen Congwen's construction determined their different interpretations of the same subject.

3.2. Artistic Expression: Rational Examination and Perceptual Depiction

Lu Xun does not write the peasants in the standpoint of the peasants in his rural works, but from the standpoint of the modern intellectuals. The concept of rural life and its social cultural consciousness are sublimated into the philosophical thought of understanding the countryside. In his creations, he adopts more realistic techniques. When he wants to express his feelings about reality more directly, he usually takes the original form of life, including the truth of characters, plots, and details. Since the purpose of his writing is to "expose pain" and "cause healing", his realism is more of suspicious, critical, and negative realism of traditional culture. The display of Ah Q's "servile" character in *The Diary of a Madman* is revealed through an objective and true description of the characters' words, deeds, behaviors, and thoughts in the event. In terms of character creation, Lu Xun focuses on farmers to show their material poverty, and highlights the numbness of their souls through objective and calm descriptions. The most touching description in his work *Hometown* is not the poverty of the protagonist Runtu, but the hierarchical concept shown by his calling me "Master"; Xia Yu, who was the revolution pioneer in Lu Xun's novel *Medicine*,

was executed, and his "blood" turned out to be a farmer Hua Xiaoshuan's "medicine" for curing diseases, implying that the sacrifice of the revolutionaries did not awaken Hua Laoshuan's family. Through his rational display of reality, Lu Xun allows us to see the ignorance of the masses and the sadness of the revolutionaries.

Unlike Lu Xun's rewriting, Shen Congwen pursues a peaceful and harmonious aesthetic ideal, as well as a calm and harmonious aesthetic taste. The rural scenery described by Shen Congwen is different from that of Lu Xun, and is always full of poetic atmosphere. He believes that the natural environment is the externalization of characters and the derivation of people so he is committed to creating an artistic conception of harmony between man and nature, and harmony between man and the environment [5]. For example, *Border Town* starts with the description of "Chadong", from the river, the river street, the stilt tower... a pure, simple and tranquil away from the bustling and hustle of the city, but a quiet, soft and romantic dreamy Xiangxi world. Although Shen Congwen also feels the darkness, sin and suffering in real life, but his emotion focuses on ideally expressing objective things, and expressing beauty and harmony with rich poetry to unearth the poetry contained in daily life and weave a poetic dream with fantasy to reshape the national character to fight for the misery of life. From the above comparative analysis of Lu Xun and Shen Congwen's rural literature, both the "remoulding of national character" and "the reshaping of national character" are the common point of two writers.

4. CONCLUSION

Lu Xun criticizes the inferiority of our national culture, while Shen Congwen affirmed the traditional virtues and primitive folk customs that have disappeared or are disappearing. In a word, there have been three branches of modern Chinese rural literature: one is the Enlightenment literature represented by Lu Xun; one is the left-wing revolutionary rural literature; another is Shen Congwen's beautiful and quiet Xiangxi style literature [6]. Left-wing literature can be regarded as the continuation of Lu Xun's batch of enlightenment rural novels; while Shen Congwen's narrative style was inherited by Wang Zengqi in the 1940s. Therefore, it can be said that the branch of modern Chinese rural literature started in Lu Xun and Shen Congwen [7]. It provides us with many possibilities to interpret the literature of the 20th century, and provides direction and material for future generations to engage in literary creation and literary criticism. It will construct a splendid and colorful world of rural literature by exploring all these perspectives. Undoubtedly, due to the limitations of the domestic research perspective and the author's lack of academic ability, the arguments and research methods in the article are still insufficient to catch up with the international frontiers. Therefore, the subsequent research will focus on contacting with sociology, history, economics, and culture to broaden interdisciplinary

perspective to accomplish academic achievements in this area.

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