

# A Comparative Study of *Gao Xing* and *Sister Carrie* from the Perspective of Structuralism\*

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**Abstract**—There are many similarities between Mr. Jia Pingwa's novel "Gao Xing" and the debut novel "Sister Carrie" by Theodore Dreiser, an American naturalist. The two authors have similar life experiences and are under the background of social changes. They have immersed the characters in the works with the same emotional characteristics. Through the comparative study of the two works, it is helpful to better understand the two works and to better explore their deep meaning.

**Keywords**—*Gao Xing*; *Sister Carrie*; comparison

## I. INTRODUCTION

Structuralism flourished in the 1960s and is inspired by the difference theory of Saussure, the Swiss linguist. Structuralists believe that by decomposing the text on the basis of wholeness and systematic and recombining it according to the structure framework of binary opposition, its essential meaning and value can be revealed and the deep structure of the text can be seen. All literary works are the reconstruction of the deep structural system under the surface phenomenon. Thus, it can be seen that "binary opposition" is the root of structuralism, the most basic structure to generate meaning and the most fundamental deep structure of narrative works.

"Sister Carrie" is the debut novel of Theodore Dreiser, an American naturalist writer. It was published in 1900. A masterpiece of naturalism, it opened the doors of the 20th century in 1900. "Gao Xing" is the masterpiece of contemporary literary giant Jia Pingwa in Shanxi province in 2007. "Gao Xing" uses the dual urban and rural narrative structure, and through the description of the life of the "born to the city" at the bottom of the society, it expresses out all aspects of the city of Xi'an, indirectly show the local conditions and customs of Shanxi's rural areas, launched a rich cultural picture of Shanxi. Although two novels came out to the world stretching across a hundred years and separated by vast oceans, but as Qian Zhongshu said in "Guan Zhong Edition", "the psychologic characteristics of people are the same both in East China Sea and the western world. And the arts are alike both in different parties." Through the parallel comparison of the images of the rural migrant workers in the

two novels, the readers can have a comprehensive understanding of the images of the rural migrant workers in the city and realize the concern and sympathy hidden between the lines of the two authors.

## II. SIMILAR SOCIAL BACKGROUND

From the perspective of the creation background, Jia Pingwa's latest work "Gao Xing" and Dreiser's debut work "Sister Carrie" both focus on the ordinary people who work in the city from the countryside during the period of social transformation, both of which belong to the category of social record novels. At present, China is in a critical period of social transformation. Chinese society is moving from an agricultural society to an industrial society. Urbanization is still the main trend. In this period, consumerism and excessive commercialization also emerged, and the gap between the rich and the poor further expanded. The social transformation is not only the change of the modernity of the social system, but also the change of the whole social ideology in the cultural psychology. The weakening of the status of the traditional concept of propriety and law and the fragility of the modern value system under construction make the Chinese people in it feel the general confusion of value and seem unable to find an ultimate value that can be fully trusted. In this sense, the great crisis of Chinese modernity is the lack of human meaning. It is this kind of crisis that makes confused Chinese people start to think about the value rules of modern Chinese people and pursue the faith of modern life.

Jia Pingwa has mentioned many times that the afterword of each of his works is the process of his own mind in writing this work, but it is not always valued by the public. In the postscript of "Gao Xing" and I and happy, he said frankly: "China has seen the largest migration in history and the place is the cities," he said. He wrote his works as a social record and left it to history, "trying to touch the pulse of the city that is not easy to touch in the living and mental state of the migrant workers from the countryside to xi'an".

At the beginning of the 20th century, American society was undergoing a huge social change, that is, the transition from free competition capitalism to monopoly capitalism, which further widened the gap between the rich and the poor. However, American literature at that time was still immersed in idealism. Writers were keen to describe "the bright side of life" but ignored the social reality of the law of the jungle.

\*Project: This paper is one of the research achievements of Xi'an Peihua University's university-level research project "a comparative study of "Gao Xing" and "Sister Carrie" from the perspective of structuralism" (project no.: PHKT18085).

### III. SIMILAR EMOTIONAL COLOR

From the perspective of the author's writing emotion, Jia Pingwa and Dreiser, the authors of the two works, both describe the struggling and climbing beings in the world with an objective and calm style. They put themselves in the common people, feeling the fate of the protagonists of the novel. Both writers are concerned about the reality and have a sense of compassion, pay close attention to the ordinary people who make a living from the countryside to the city in a sober and realistic manner. They understand and sympathize with the struggles of ordinary peasants at the bottom. For this reason, in their works, the ugly social phenomenon hated by others is not parroted by others but presented in a practical and realistic way. There is no aversion or teasing, but only the understanding reflected among the works.

Jia Pingwa has been paying close attention to his hometown and fellow villagers since he started his literary career. As he says in the epilogue that if he had not taken the literary path: "I must also be a farmer. When I turned to my fifties, I also would come to pick up garbage. How will that be? This kind of emotion makes me deploring and lamenting the poverty, lowliness, loneliness and all kinds of discrimination of the people who left the countryside to the cities. A feeling of being oppressed always controls my writing.

Dreiser's "Sister Carrie" is based on his sister's personal experience and life experience, which contains his personal feelings of life and the memory and understanding of their loved ones, all of which also determine the pessimistic thinking and naturalism in his creation.

### IV. SIMILAR EXPERIENCE OF DRIFTING

When Carrie first arrived in Chicago, she was simple and naive, dreaming of a comfortable life in a big city through her own efforts. This is the moral coronation of Carrie by the author. But all Carrie could hope for now was four dollars in her pocket and the address of her sister Minnie. After a short life in Chicago, she soon understood the difficulty of making a living in a big city, and even faced with the dilemma of being forced to go home, which was the author's renunciation of Carrie on the material level. Carrie now became the "king of revelry," with whom everyone in the place was free to make acquaintance or remark. After starting a new life in New York, Carrie became a popular actress on Broadway through acting, and was eagerly sought after by people. Dreiser's coronation of Carrie on the material level also reached the peak. At the same time, the pure rustic atmosphere of Carrie when she first arriving at Chicago has been gone, "carnival king" Carrie got the most thorough renunciation of her moral level. Dreiser's creation period coincided with the transformation of American industrialization, which led to the gradual bankruptcy and collapse of the American rural economy represented by the Midwest, resulting in more and more people leaving their hometown to work in the city. In such a period of social transformation, not only many traditional lifestyles and ethical and moral concepts have been strongly impacted, but also people's thinking and understanding are undergoing a sharp change. "Sister Carrie's fate reflects the results of people's moral conflicts and choices in the period of social transition."

The coronation and de-coronation of "carnival king" Carrie at different levels symbolically reflect the dual meaning of alternation and change — the ebb and flow of the old order and the new order in the period of social transformation in America. In other words, it is the death of traditional moral concepts and the gradual formation of new moral concepts.

If Carrie began her urban journey with sadness and timidity, Liu's urban journey was one of excitement and impatience. As if he knew the city pretty well, Liu, who had just arrived in Xi'an, took on the responsibility of supporting and taking care of Wu Fu, and became the core figure of Wu Fu, Huang Ba and Xing Hu. In this respect, Jia Pingwa is undertaking coronation for Liu. He changes from the countryman that is abandoned by fiancée to become a man of the revelatory king in Xi'an, a particular revelatory square. However, as the plot progresses, the death of Wu Fu and the questioning of the Wu Fu's wife force him to admit that he is still a farmer and his ability is limited. At this point, the author ruthlessly removed the previous coronation in the "carnival king" — Liu, completed his de-coronation. In recent years, the urbanization process has swept the whole China with an irresistible momentum, and the migration team from rural areas to cities is growing continuously. Liu and Wu Fu in the works are typical representatives of migrant workers who come to the city from the countryside. As people on the edge of the city, on the one hand, they have to bear the hard work of working; on the other hand, the traditional moral concepts they are used to are gradually being eroded. All the time, they are suffering from both body and soul. It is obvious that Liu has undertaken the duality of the alternating and changing spirit: On the one hand, the decline of traditional agricultural civilization is overwhelming. On the other hand, traditions are hard to erase, but in order to adapt to urban life, these urban migrants have to accept new values. Such a metamorphosis is like the pains of production and is unforgettable. From this point, it is not difficult to understand why Liu asked himself: "I already think I am a city person, but in my dream, why am I still walking on the ridge of the field in Qing Feng town?" This also deconstructs the fact that the urban-rural dualistic confrontation is difficult to dissolve from the ideological level. Furthermore, it reflects the writer's deep concern about this change.

### V. SIMILAR HELPLESSNESS

From the perspective of characters, the protagonists of the two works both leave the countryside and become rootless urban vagrants, while they struggle in the city but still cannot provide them with a basis for their own survival. They feel helpless and alienated but there is nothing they can do. If Jia Pingwa wrote about how the farmers in his hometown stepped out of the land step by step in "the Qinqiang Opera", then in "Gao Xing" he wrote about their life in the city after they stepped out of the land and how they strived in Xi'an, a city as big as the sea step by step. Liu decided to live in Xi'an, because he had already sold a kidney to Xi'an. He always felt that he should be in Xi'an and deserved to be in it. He was so convinced from the beginning of the novel to the end of the story that he insisted on staying in this city after going through all kinds of hardships and human kindness. Perhaps this is also

a helpless act — he can never return after leaving it. “Sister Carrie”, as she boarded the train for Chicago and waved goodbye to her family, she knew full well that she had no other choices but to stay in cities. Dreiser writes in “Sister Carrie” 1, “She (Carrie) uttered a sad sigh; the thread which had been so lightly connected with home and girlhood was cut irretrievably.” So, when she was frustrated in her search for a job in the city and her sister asked her to return to her hometown, she would rather turn her back on social morality and become the despised mistress of the salesman Duruel than go back to her hometown again. Even at the end of the novel, she feels empty and lonely for her struggle in the city, and she has no intention of going back to her hometown. She is still dreaming and looking forward to her life in the city.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Both "Gao Xing" by Jia Pingwa and "Sister Carrie" by American naturalist writer Dreiser named their novels after their protagonists, fully reflecting their concern for individuals in social life. "Gao Xing" tells the story of a male figure who makes a living from the countryside to xi 'an and drifts around the city without roots, while "Sister Carrie" tells the story of an ordinary female figure who leaves the countryside to live in Chicago without roots and drifts around the city. Both works originate from the author's plain observation and experience of the living state and spiritual prospect of the masses at the bottom of society and his deep exploration of the meaning of life. They present a common picture of the Chinese and western societies in different cultural traditions in the period of social transformation: Modernization has limited function to solve the problem of human survival and development. "If we divide human needs (human nature) into 'material survival needs' and 'spiritual development needs', the major achievement of modernization is to adapt to the basic material survival needs of human beings. The irresistible charm of modernization lies here, and so does its limit." Therefore, in order to realize the harmonious development of modern society, both eastern and western societies should pay attention to the modernization of human culture — the promotion of mass cultural literacy and the sublimation of values and ideals.

Both Chinese and foreign works send the same message to readers: The process of human modernization has its costs, and material modernization is far from the ultimate goal of human civilization. How to carry forward the excellent cultural tradition of our nation, how to integrate with the consciousness and idea of modern development, and how to forge a modern culture that is conducive to the harmonious and healthy development of modern people's body and mind is a common task that Chinese and western societies need to face.

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