

The Contradictory Orientation of “New” and “Old” from the Perspective of Countryside: A Comparative Analysis of Shen Congwen’s *Border Town* and Zhao Shuli’s *Sanli Bay*

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Abstract:

Shen Congwen and Zhao Shuli are important writers in the field of modern and contemporary rural literature. There are contradictions between “new” and “old” in their works *Border Town* and *Sanli Bay*. The author analyzes this phenomenon by combining the writer’s experience, social background and historical motivation, and finds that the main factors of the contradiction between “new” and “old” are the national cultural relations and the influence of social background. These factors are embodied in the impact of nationality, modernity and cooperative period background on rural traditional family structure. They reflect the characteristics of literary works responding to The Times and examining modern traditions in the social context of the time. Through the study of the contradiction orientation of “new” and “old”, the author perceives the development direction of modern and contemporary literature and history: modern and contemporary literature develops in the process of adapting to the changes of The Times.

Keywords: Contradiction between “new” and “old”; Shen Congwen; *Border Town*; Zhao Shuli; *Sanli Bay*

1. Introduction

There have been many studies on Shen Congwen’s *Border Town* and Zhao Shuli’s *Sanli Bay*. At present, most of these studies are about the expression of human beauty in *Border Town* and the agricultural cooperative writing in *Sanli Bay*. It also involves the

urban and rural perspective and land writing in the two works. Some people believe that the excessive perfection of human nature in *Border Town* is the root cause of the tragedy [1]. Zhao Shuli’s “*Sanli Bay*” is adapted from his real story in Chuandi Village. In the book, the “separation of families” of three young couples presents the contradictory relationship

between family and labor production in the cooperative period [2]. As for the causes of the contradiction between the old and the new in rural culture, some scholars believe that on the one hand, it originates from the entanglements between the old culture nurtured by the unique production mode of China's ancient "precocious" civilization route and the new culture born under the impact of modern industrial production mode. On the other hand, the traditional culture is still preserved in the contemporary era when the old mode of production has gradually collapsed, and it shows strong inertia and dispersion. The opposition between the traditional culture and the new culture in content and mode is stable and intensifies the new and old entanglements [3].

Since the May Fourth Movement, the development of literature has undergone tremendous changes. The collision between urban civilization and local literature gave birth to new literary writing, the *Border Town* and *Sanli Bay* are typical representatives. After a close reading of the two texts, the contradictory orientation of "new" and "old" in the two works from the same local perspective can be found. Starting from the text, the author analyzes this contradictory orientation in combination with the writer himself and different historical periods. Through comparative reading, find the similarities and differences of contradiction orientation in the two texts. This paper aims to explore the influence factors of the contradictory orientation of "new" and "old", so as to perceive the development direction of modern and contemporary literature and art.

2. The Contradiction Between "New" And "Old" in Border Town

2.1 The Contradiction Between Characterization and Plot

Combining the content of *Border Town*, the author has created some "traditional" Chinese female images that can be found. "Usually when a stranger on the ferry pays attention to her, she looks at the stranger with her bare eyes and acts as if she can run away into the mountains at any time." Cuicui, the protagonist, has lived with her grandfather since childhood. She is in the flower age and always keeps alert to the outside world. Once by accident, she met two old Nuosong in the Dragon Boat Festival, since then buried in the heart of the hazy affair. But her expression of emotion is always shy, not brave, she buried the emotion deep inside. In the process of being pursued, Cuicui is always in a passive state, she can't express her feelings, even if she likes him. So even though she and Nuosong love each other, she cannot achieve perfect

love. Even after Nuosong is far away, she also chooses to continue to escape, and does not leave the tea cave in bold pursuit of love, but a person stays in place and waits. Cuicui has never taken any action that can represent her subjectivity as an independent person, and her subjective consciousness is missing [4].

In addition to Cuicui, Cuicui's mother is also one of the representatives of "traditional" Chinese women in the article. She had an affair with a Chadong soldier, and after the soldier committed suicide by taking poison, she gave birth to Cuicui, who also died of martyrdom. In the context of the article, it seems that free love between men and women is not allowed. She is afraid of the town gossip. In her heart, she also believes that it is shameful to have a secret love affair with a soldier, so she is willing to die with guilt. However, this characterization contradicts the plot of the article. Tianbao and Nuosong fell in love with Cuicui at the same time, without arguing or conceding to each other, but each won Cuicui's favor by his own ability. Tianbao took the "car road", Nuosong away the "water way", The words of parents' arranged match-makers in the text is not reflected. The expression of the article reveals a simple and free atmosphere. This traditional Chinese female image forms a conflict with the mutual love, simplicity and health of people in the border town, which also shows the contradiction between "new" and "old".

2.2 Closed or Open?

The plot development of the characters in *Border Town* is concentrated in the small town of Chadong, which is not connected to the outside world. It gives the impression that the setting is closed. But at the same time, some clues in the article point to the outside world and modern society. Tianbao went out to the beach to help his brother achieve love but died unexpectedly. Nuosong had a grudge against the old boatman because of his brother's death. He left his hometown because he didn't get Cuicui's response for a long time. "There is an official road from Sichuan to Hunan in the east. When this official road is close to the border of western Hunan and arrives at a small mountain city called 'Chadong', there is a small stream. There is a small white tower by the stream, and a separate family lives under the tower." It can be seen from the beginning of the novel that there is a road in the border city, and people outside can come in. As the guardian of the border city, "White Tower" witnessed the joys and sorrows of this town [5]. Nuosong went far away, Cuicui's grandfather died, and the "White Tower" collapsed, which means that the circular concept of time has been broken, the countryside has been given modernity, and the contradiction between closure and openness has reached its

peak.

Shen Congwen was born in Phoenix County, Xiangxi Province. He experienced the darkness of society since he was a child and was used to the cruelty of all kinds of persecution and killing. The premature face of ignorance of social life made him form a character of pursuing a better life and kindness and virtue when writing “cruelty” and “ignorance” in his works [6]. Shen Congwen came to Beijing in 1922 and applied for the Chinese class at Yanjing University but was not admitted. In 1928, he went from Beijing to Shanghai. In the days of coming from the countryside to the city, he had no cultural capital and high education, and regarded himself as a “marginal group of society”, so he built a colorful world in western Hunan, which was entrusted to his imagination of the ideal China. However, the ideal world cannot be realized after all. When he walks out of the Xiangxi world and examines it from a rational perspective, he will find the weakness of human lover nature. The author believes that the difference between ideal and reality is the reason for the contradiction between “new” and “old” in *Border Town*.

3. The Contradiction Between “New” and “Old” in *Sanli Bay*

3.1 Briefly Written in Marriage and Love

The novel is also from the perspective of the countryside. Unlike the description of the world in western Hunan in *Border City*, *Sanli Bay* focuses on the countryside and farmers. Through the writing of revolutionary marriage and love in the book, the deviance of the plot can be found. It only took one night for Lingzhi to determine the emotions of Yusheng from perception to confirmation, and the author’s description of it is less than one chapter in a book with 24 chapters. Such a narrative is inevitably abrupt. At first, Lingzhi liked Wing because the two went to school together and gradually developed feelings, but Lingzhi was angry that he had no opinion and was afraid, so he gave up Wing. “Thinking of this, she compared Youyi and Yusheng again. In this comparison, Yusheng completely collapsed the wing - from the perspective of the two people’s thoughts and actions, she felt that Yusheng was always paying attention to building a socialist society, and Wing was always paying attention to the mother who obeyed feudalism. It can be seen from here that her good impression of Yusheng is based on the contrast with Youyi. Yusheng’s ideas are more advanced than those of Youyi, who has a secondary school degree. “She said with a smile, ‘You haven’t thought about it before. Now please think about it, okay?’ Yusheng said, ‘My

teacher! As long as you don’t think I’m uneducated, what else can I consider!’” In the face of the courtship of Lingzhi, who was a middle school graduate, Yusheng agreed without thinking. Their love and union were based on revolution.

Why does love with revolution as the main line appear in such a hasty form? At the explicit level of the text, the author narrates the grand narrative of farmers getting rid of the agricultural cooperative nation of feudal production relations under the leadership of the Party. At the implicit level, it reveals the contradictory mentality of cooperation, and also implies the forced intervention of power in farmers’ independent choice of mode of production. The former is the political requirements for literature and art in the 17th literary period, and the latter is the product of the author’s subconscious [7]. The combination due to the revolution should have been praised and is representative of the “new” thought, and the expression in the article also hints at the author’s contradictory attitude. He supports agricultural cooperation, but some phenomena that Zhao Shuli saw in the process made him, has a deep love for farmers, inevitably confused. The brief writing of revolutionary love reflects his complex emotions.

3.2 Shift of the Focus of the Plot

Combined with the content of *Sanli Bay*, it can be found that the description of the focus of plot development has shifted. Zhao Shuli focused his writing on the contradictions of the characters. He used two-thirds of the article to describe the difficulties encountered in joining the company and building canals and the uncooperation of some villagers, and used the last third of the article to describe the transformation of figures with feudal ideology such as Fan Deng Gao and Ma Duoshou. In addition, in terms of the language characteristics of the work, the language of the description of the plot contradictions is vivid and full of tension, such as Xiaojun’s quarrel and divorce with Yusheng, Juying’s separation and other plots. Zhao Shuli uses a lot of language descriptions and action descriptions. However, the description of the plots of revolutionary construction, mutual production and so on is just straightforward, which makes people feel tasteless. This shift in the center of gravity between the plot arrangement and the language setting reflects the entanglement in the author’s consciousness, which is expressed as a contradiction between “new” and “old”.

Zhao Shuli grew up in the countryside since he was a child. He has had extensive contact with folk literature and art since he was a child, such as being friends with neighbors who love to sing mountain songs and are obsessed with the local opera “Shangdang Jingzi”. The folk

habits in the countryside have deeply influenced him, so his writing is full of peasant interest [8]. This can also explain why his description of rural life and peasant relations is so wonderful. Zhao Shuli has deep feelings for the countryside that gave birth to him. He not only hopes that the village can make progress and keep pace with the times, but also feels dissatisfied with some phenomena in the process of cooperation. He subconsciously stands on the side of farmers, which is also the reason for the contradiction between “new” and “old” in his works.

4. Comparative Analysis Between *Border Town* and *Sanli Bay*

4.1 Similarities and Differences about Old and New Contradictions

Border Town and *Sanli Bay* are both novels from the perspective of the countryside, and there are some similarities in the writing of contradiction between the old and the new. *Border Town* and *Sanli Bay* are both novels from the perspective of the countryside, and there are some similarities in the writing of “contradiction between the old and the new”. Shen Congwen walked out of Xiangxi and came to the city. Without a high education, he didn’t know how to settle himself in the city, so he used the Xiangxi world to compare with the real world, trying to use local civilization to fight against modern discourse hegemony. However, the ideal world he built could not be realized in the end. He not only hoped to use local literature to enlighten the masses, but also was bound by the difference between ideals and reality. This contradictory mentality is reflected in the text. Zhao Shuli, as a revolutionary literary artist, went deep into the masses with the literary and artistic requirements of “serving workers, peasants and soldiers” in the 17th year. He supported the cooperativeization of agriculture, but due to his deep feelings for the countryside and farmers, he had a skeptical and contradictory attitude when he saw the forced intervention of power in the production mode of peasants in the process of cooperativeization.

4.2 The Social Background and Historical Motivation of Old and New Contradictions

Talking about the causes of contradiction between the old and the new in Shen Congwen’s novels, the author believes that the important factors affecting his creation are nationality and modernity. From Shen Congwen’s works, the conflict between Miao and Han cultures can be found. “Because Xiangxi does not allow foreign merchants and priests to stand here, modern nationalism is also unable

to eat in Xiangxi” [9]. The mixed atmosphere of ethnic culture in western Hunan has made Shen Congwen have a distinct national consciousness. This is also reflected in the text of *Border Town*. The opposition between “walking the road” and “walking the car road” is essentially the opposite of the two marriage cultures. “Walking the road” is to courtship through songs, which is a typical form of Miao marriage and love. It respects the self-choice of the subject of love; while “walking the road” is a marriage proposal through matchmakers, and everything is up to the parents. This is a typical modern form of marriage and love [10]. However, when Shen Congwen came to Beijing, he was in the late stage of the May Fourth Literary Movement. He was insulted by “people with a good life at home as ‘Wen Qi’” and spoke as a “Miao” and could not build any channel to obtain cultural rights and capital. At this time, Shen Congwen faced the double loss of cultural identity and geographical identity [11]. Therefore, it can be seen that the conflict between nationality and culture has had a significant impact on Shen Congwen’s creation. For the modernity of literature, Qian Liqun’s understanding is “modern literary language and literary form, words that express the thoughts, feelings and psychology of modern Chinese people”. It is generally believed that “modernity” refers to a set of systems, behaviors and thought patterns established in Europe in the post-feudal era and gradually expanded to the world. With the development of history, the “modernity” of May Fourth Literature takes innovation as the core and establishes the criterion of “breaking the principles of the past and creating new principles”. The problem follows: the mental fission is so fast that people can’t let themselves go. In this way, a kind of “melancholy subject” was born, represented by Shen Congwen. He constructed a specific time and space, expressing his nostalgia with the contrast between local civilization and urban life.

Judging from the historical background, the new and old contradictions in *Sanli Bay* arise from the impact of the background of the cooperative period on the traditional family structure. Traditional rural families are family members who jointly own the means of production and assist in obtaining living materials through production under the guidance of parents [12]. In early 1952, the mutual aid and cooperation movement reached a climax, which conflicted with the traditional land system and production mode. At the beginning, the cooperative movement was basically healthy, but from the second half of 1952, there was a phenomenon of “devading” to varying degrees in various places; due to the rapid development, there were also problems such as simple and rough working methods and forced orders [13].

Zhao Shuli described a large number of articles in the text

as the closed gate of Ma Jiayuan, which was based on the social background of this period. And the family structure in rural China has also been affected by cooperation to a certain extent. Farmers join the company to help each other with labor, and the land and means of production are collectively owned, which has led to the widespread phenomenon of separation. For example, Juying in the novel divided her own property and house under the auspices of the village cadres, and successfully divided her family with Ma Jiayuan. During the period of agricultural cooperation, people produced, worked together and lived a collective life, which also weakened the concept of family, which is more prominently reflected in the marriage relationship in rural areas. The writer briefly dealt with the marriage of Lingzhi and Yusheng. After registration, Lingzhi and Yusheng have been working in a flagpole courtyard. They are so busy that they can't even say a word. The two of them do not want to set up a separate household registration. What they do is work separately, but they live together at night. It can be seen that the role of families in the period of cooperation has been greatly reduced, and they focus on the struggle for socialism. In addition to the writer's own contradictory mentality, the impact of cooperation on traditional families is also an important cause of the "new and old contradictions" in Zhao Shuli's *Sanli Bay*.

5. Conclusion

There are similarities as well as distinctions between *Border Town* and *Sanli Bay*. Through the comparative analysis of Shen Congwen's *Border Town* and Zhao Shuli's *Sanli Bay*, the contradictory orientation of "new" and "old" in the two works can be found. This orientation not only reflects the writer's contradictory mood, but also is influenced by different times. The contradiction between the old and the new in *Border Town* originates from the loss of national identity and the resistance to modernity, and that in *Sanli Bay* originates from the impact of the cooperative period background on the traditional rural family structure. From the contradictory orientation of the new and the old embodied in the two works, the author can summarize the common characteristics of literary works from the rural perspective in the social background of the time: responding to The Times and examining the modern tradition. This provides a new way to perceive the devel-

opment direction of modern and contemporary literature history: the history of modern and contemporary literature develops in the process of adapting to the changes of The Times. It is of great significance to the academic history and background analysis of modern and contemporary literary writers and works.

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