

# The Modernity in the Creation of Shen Congwen's Western Hunan Novels

Zhengjie Ran

School of Literature, Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, 530000, China

Email: ranzj@ldy.edu.rs

## Abstract:

Shen Congwen's novels of western Hunan provide inspiration and warning for reality. Using literature research from various angles, this paper explains the reasons for the modernity of Shen's Western Hunan novels, which resonate with contemporary thoughts. The depiction of pure and noble human nature and the tranquil living environment in his works make up for the missing mental support of modern urban residents. This paper chooses Shen Congwen's masterpieces, the text "Border Town," "Xiao Xiao," and "San San," to discuss their characteristics about the context of their creation. Furthermore, it examines the relationship between social development and individual growth. Shen Congwen's works convey the importance of maintaining individual freedom and consciousness, which continues to serve as a spiritual warning for modern urban residents. This conclusion opens up a path of research in which the development of human society cannot be separated from the internal support of literary works.

**Keywords:** Western Hunan novels; individual consciousness; social construction; inspiration; warning.

## 1. Introduction

Literature is a way to give voice to ideas. Shen Congwen's novels of western Hunan in the twentieth century have become the spiritual solace for people from all walks of life. Under the general trend of national development, materialistic desires have diminished, and spiritual needs have surged. The psychological needs of security and belongingness are most indispensable for human beings as social animals.

Shen Congwen's inner thought system opens up the "Peach Blossom Garden" in the city of skyscrapers and traffic, allowing readers to be in the city of desire without numbing their souls. Shen Congwen's creations revolve around the essence of human nature amid change and constancy, and "normalization narrative" is his style [1]. The beauty of nature in Shen Congwen's novels and the idealized pursuit of "the unity of heaven and man" in the contents impacted the transition from tradition to modernity. It gave readers an unparalleled aesthetic feeling across time and space [2]. Wang Zengqi comments that "Shen has a special sensitivity to beauty. Shen has a special sensitivity to beauty. He has a passionate, physiological, almost carnal affection for beauty. Beauty amazes, saddens, and intoxicates him" [3]. "Shen Congwen appreciated beauty; think of beauty as a human being. He always sees people through objects. To

marvel at beauty is also to marvel at man. It is the labor of man, the wisdom of man" [3]. Thus, exploring the beauty of the characters in Shen Congwen's works is essential.

## 2. The Intermingling of Human and Scenery in the Border Town

The part starts the analysis with the highly influential novel *Border Town* [4]. The novel is based on ordinary life in rural areas of western Hunan and is idealized to avoid the turbulent background of the time. The novel reflects the tragedy of the times and the characters' psychology through conflicts, and finally, bowing down to reality, its "ideal country" gradually collapses. It can be said that this is a novel with strong vernacular flavor, which is first raised and then lowered. The narrative language used in the body of the novel is very plain. First, the logical descriptions of directions and distances picture the landscape scenery. "Too beautiful to be true" is an online comment on Shen's work. "Beauty" includes natural, social, and human beauty. Since the work brings people the aesthetic feeling of beauty, all three aspects of beauty are covered. Shen's characterization methods are simple and direct, accounting for most of the image of the unique personality of the characters through their language and events to reflect their unique personality. For example, one character "uses a sharp voice shouted: Grandpa, Grandpa, you listen

to me play the flute, you sing!”), as well as Cuicui said to the little yellow dog, “Dog, dog, what are you doing! Don’t do that” [4]. The tone and brief content bring out Cuicui’s lively and lovely image and her dependence on her grandfather.

The language style is clear and uncluttered, and the unadorned language brings out the unique nature of the country girl, “Nature both raised and educated her and she was innocent and lively, everywhere as if she were a small animal” [4]. Cuicui’s parents were not around at a young age, but her character is not aloof, perhaps because nature nourishes people. Although the author does not say more about the reasons for the character development, the introduction of the environment is buried in the factors that contain the characterization. This leads naturally to a dialog with events that bring the characters to life and add a lot of realism.

Border Town is about the good life and has tragic plots. In the countryside, Grandfather and Cuicui are victims of a society that has not yet fully broken away from the feudal mindset. They are also experiencing their inevitable tragedies. Xiao Xiao also illustrates the era’s problem holding the characters’ development in check. There is no other choice for them to be there. In Border Town, the White Pagoda, which symbolizes a peaceful and stable life, collapses because of a violent storm and is repaired with time. However, the death of the grandfather and the disappearance of Cuicui’s love partner suggest that the work attempts a completely idealized portrayal but fails to achieve it. Hence, the author ends the story with a tragic and realistic event to bring the novel’s content closer to life and resonate with the readers.

Existing research literature emphasizes the traditional turn to reality [5]. There is also an analysis of why it is an idealized version of rural life in western Hunan [1]. In the context of the time, such an idealized countryside was hard to build up. Western Hunan’s reality is certainly not lacking in primitive simplicity, especially in the beauty of the natural environment. However, it is closed, poor and backward, even to the point of savagery and brutality, lacking in humanity” [1]. The novel also reflects “the idealized mentality of attempting to integrate modern and traditional agricultural societies that prevailed after the Chinese nation embarked on the road to modernization. The ambiguous gesture of looking back and half-pushing half-accommodating in Border Town concretely demonstrates this idealized mentality in China” [5].

### **3. Modernity as Mapped by the Thoughts of the Novel’s Characters**

Shen Congwen is a good landscape writer. His landscapes

show the simplicity of creation. Moreover, in Shen’s conception, ‘nature’ possesses a magical efficacy of mirroring the original color of life, reducing the fleshly components and increasing the breath of the spirit” [2]. Shen Congwen’s idea is a kind of following in nature, attempting to build a perfect and harmonious relationship between nature and humans. Thus, he can use such simple language to shape the classic Xiang scenery, and he sends his feelings to the scenery to reflect his thoughts about his “building a small temple of ‘humanity.’” Literature expresses human nature and the realization of life, which is the basic starting point of Shen Congwen’s view of literature [6]. People have all kinds of desires and too many imperfections. The environment and human beings can’t fit perfectly, which tells Shen Congwen that human nature is changeable and cannot reach “the unity of heaven and man.” Thus, he expresses the emotions of sorrow and helplessness in his description of the beauty of western Hunan.

Nowadays, with the development of society, people’s thoughts are still free from the poison of feudalism. However, in some remote mountain villages, women are still inferior to men, and even in the process of urbanization, masculinity, and old-fashioned thoughts are still rooted in some people’s hearts. Xiao Xiao shows the poisonous effects of feudalistic village life in an exquisite way. Shen Congwen’s reflection on the lower-class people’s demand for the right to live and dignity of life is rooted in his understanding of people as human beings with the same humanity as others [7]. For example, the lower-class characters living in the day-to-day labor environment and small spaces in the work also aspire to the novelty of the big city. Still, they can only work hard to live a better life in the limited conditions due to reality.

On the contrary, people who travel in the metropolis gradually become negative and even develop a robot-like numbness of the mind and soul. Li Jianwu praised Border Town, “It is not a big story, but it is a jewel that will not be worn out for a thousand years. In the modern metropolis of sick men and women, I ensure that this is a delicious medicine”. His remarks reveal the modernity in Shen’s works [2].

The village girl in “San San” hopes to study in the city and “never comes back once she enters the city.” Shen seems to have tried to speak out for the underclass people restricted by the feudal society in those times, but he still did not write it out with strong strokes. This may be because his style of Western Hunan novels is often natural. Otherwise, it will give a scene that makes people puzzled and unable to determine the value of its existence. As time passes, his works are deeply rooted in people’s hearts because his dripping water penetrates the stone. When they

are physically and mentally exhausted by the modernized society, they find a resting place for their souls in Shen's "quiet" (describing the serenity and calmness of his work style). The public accepts the tragedy in the novel because people look at it from a modern perspective. After all, there are always sacrifices in the current of the times. It is sufficient that beauty exists in his works.

Modern people's thinking is more rational, which leads to "beauty" occupying a big position in his works. In Shen Congwen's view, love and beauty are the attributes of life, the form of life seeking immortality, and their content and relationship determine the cultural connotation of human nature, forming the specific appearance of life in each cultural era [8]. The simple and tranquil local conditions in western Hunan depicted in his works heal the wounds of most "lonely" people in the city, who do not have a place to settle down and take root in the city. In such a feudal society, the people in the countryside did not lose their passion for life and motivation to pursue an ideal life.

#### 4. Pursuing Purity and Goodness in Current Time

The construction of a society cannot be separated from human beings, and the development of human beings is the development of society. The images of lovely young girls in 'Border Town,' 'San San,' and 'The Long River' are exactly the form Shen wanted to express in his novels about western Hunan, in which the environment and human beings complement each other. These innocent girls were hatched between the landscape and grew up under bricks and mortar, possessing the same beautiful inner nature as nature. The simplicity of society is a manifestation of the simplicity of human beings. The society's transition from simplicity to complexity symbolizes man's progress from simplicity to abundance.

After the environment is diversified and complicated, individuals may lose their original heart and become confused. Purity and goodness will become especially precious. In Shen Congwen's novels of western Hunan, people are free and conscious beings [9]. The fact that modern people freely and consciously choose to read his works shows that the novels' natural and spiritual characters and the idea of pursuing the purest and the best make up for the missing part of modern people. This is the direct reason for its modernity.

In addition, what is expressed in Xiao Xiao is the feudalism in the rural areas of western Hunan, which is numb and rotten. Shen Congwen's novels do not have a purely closed structure but a different mode of "lyricism-irony" to reach a reconciliation with modernity [10]. The modern city is developing rapidly, and under the shadow of

the same pattern is the convergence of people. People no longer want to be their unique selves first, but first, they should consider whether they will fit in this society. Just like Xiao Xiao, who was kidnapped by feudalism and could not be herself, contemporary individuals gradually find themselves constrained by the shackles of conformity. Shen's works provide inspiration and warnings for present society.

#### 5. Conclusion

Through literature research and text analysis of Shen Congwen's novels, the paper analyzes the characteristics of the natural beauty depicted in the landscapes and human nature and the modernity represented in these works. After analyzing the characteristics of Shen Congwen's novels and the reasons behind their modernity, the conclusion of this paper is divided into the following three points: firstly, the portrayal of the blending of people and landscapes in the small towns of Xiangxi is idealized. Secondly, examining the characters' thoughts reveals a discernible trend towards modernization in the works. Thirdly, by comparing the texts in the first two parts and combining them with modern life and society, it is clear that the direct reason for the modernity of Shen Congwen's novels lies in the novels' portrayal of pure and free human nature, which compensates for the inner deficiencies experienced by modern city dwellers.

The research connects modern literature with human society in a broad context. Shen's novels of western Hunan are not mere "nostalgia" novels but works that touch on the spiritual level, warning modern urban residents not to miss the opportunity to become free and conscious individuals and avoid becoming individuals whose souls are numbed by secularism. These works are positioned as inspiration and sustainable educational resources. Future research can focus on interpreting literary works from the perspective of human development and social construction, not limited to the era in which the works were produced and conducting modern analyses across different eras. This approach will enable literary works to lead in national spirit and human development.

#### References

- [1] Gao Yu. On the significance of urban "sick image" to the construction of Shen Congwen's "western Hunan world." *Literature Review*.2007(3).
- [2] Chen Guoen. Shen Congwen's Western Hunan novels and Taoist spirit. *Study and Exploration*. 2008(1).
- [3] Wang Zengqi. *My Teacher, Shen Congwen*. Elephant Publishing House. October 1, 2009.
- [4] Shen Congwen. *The Border Town*. Beijing Democracy and

Construction Publishing House. First edition, May 2017.9.19.

[5] Liu Yongtai. The Border Town: The Abandoned Fortress of Anti-Reality. *Literary Review*.2007(2).

[6] Zhang Ling. A Brief Review of Shen Congwen's Literary Concepts. *Journal of Guizhou University (Social Science Edition)*. 2004.22(1).

[7] Ling Yu. The tendency and artistic characteristics of Shen Congwen's novels. *Modern Chinese Literature Research Series*. 1980(3).

[8] Zhang Guangmang. A preliminary study of Shen Congwen's ideal view of literature. *Journal of Humanities*. 2002(3).

[9] Liu Yongtai. The Poverty and Simplicity of Human Nature. *Modern Literature Research Series*. 2000(2).

[10] Guo Jiawei, Wang Gengye. The Reconciliation Gesture Behind Rejection: The Modernity of Shen Congwen's Works from Xiao Xiao. *Journal of Nanhua University (Social Science Edition)*. 2008(1).