

From the “Local World” to the “Modern Nation”: “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” and the Maturation of Contemporary Chinese Rural Fiction

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Abstract: In the 1950s, Chinese rural literature underwent a significant transformation from “native soil novels” to “rural-themed novels”. Compared to rural-themed novels that prioritized localism, as exemplified by renowned authors like Sun Li and Zhao Shuli, the “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” by Zhou Libo presented a more pronounced tension between the “local world” and the modern nation-state. This not only positioned the novel as a pivotal work in the maturation of rural-themed fiction, but also endowed it with rich interpretive dimensions and cultural connotations. Zhou Libo’s skillful handling of the relationship between national identity and modernity made him a key figure in the development of rural-themed novels and enabled “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” to achieve a unique and timely artistic accomplishment.

Keywords: “Great Changes in a Mountain Village”; Rural-Themed Novels; Local World; Nation-state

1. Introduction

In the process of modernization, Chinese national identity underwent a transformation from a “world” state to a modern nation-state. Scholars generally agree that “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” by Zhou Libo delves into the personal characteristics and modes of thinking that emerged as the southern political and cultural sphere was influenced by the discourse of the northern political center during this period.

The relationship between “locality” and “nation” in “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” offers rich interpretive dimensions and cultural connotations.

2. From Local Worlds to the Modern

Nation-state

Existing scholarship on the “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” by Zhou Libo has paid relatively little attention to the relationship between “place” and “nationhood” within the novel. While Zhou Libo’s rural fiction of the 1950s exhibits characteristics reminiscent of the nostalgia-laden “native soil” novels, it simultaneously bears the distinct imprint of the national discourse prevalent in rural-themed fiction. Benedict Anderson argues that in early 20th-century Chinese modern rural fiction, “place” represented the authentic values of a nation or culture.

He posits that the depiction of locality in Chinese modern “native soil” novels follows the Japanese modern folkloric tradition of equating “locality” with “nationality”. In rural-themed fiction, however, “place” is simultaneously utilized and transformed by the modern nation-state to construct a new “nationality”, while at the same time, the “locality” inherent in rural-themed fiction implies a resistance to the discourse of the modern state [1].

Consequently, the local world depicted in Zhou Libo’s novels is both a realm distinct from the modern nation-state and a reflection of China’s rural landscape. The writing of locality in “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” signifies a shift in Zhou Libo’s creation from the “modern” to the “contemporary”. The novel fully embodies a key characteristic of Chinese realist fiction: employing realist methods to depict the process and prospects of a “local world” moving towards “modernization”, thereby providing a “realistic” literary narrative for the bright future of the modern nation-state.

The local world depicted in Zhou Libo’s modern literature is both burdened by the rural society of “old China” and serves as the cradle of “new China”. Zhou Libo once

suggested, “If we truly want to help the Miao people, we should help them establish their own language and writing system. However, a prerequisite for the Latinization of the Miao language is that the Miao people participate in the anti-Japanese and anti-feudal struggle and achieve their own independence and liberation” [2].

This suggestion is rooted in the perspective of the modern nation-state as an “Imagined Communities”. “Imagined Communities” traces the origins of “nationalism” in modern colonies to “reactions to the new imperialism brought about by industrial capitalism” and argues that the compilation of dictionaries and other efforts to unify national languages have fostered “official nationalism” [3].

The narrative perspective in Zhou Libo’s novels often follows an “outsider” representing modern civilization as they enter the ancient rural society, a “foreign land”. In “Violent Storm”, the novel begins with a solemn and objective narrative tone, emphasizing the significant historical importance of the land reform work team’s initiation of a “stormy petrel” in rural society: “In the early morning of late July 1946, in the Songjiang Province of Northeast China, on the highway southeast of Harbin, a cowherd saw a four-horse, four-wheeled carriage that had set off from Zhuhe County and was heading for Yuanmao Village”. The novel concludes with Squad Leader Xiao leading the villagers in achieving democratic self-governance in the village.

Here, the “place”, as a traditional rural society, is truly integrated into the modern nation-state. The land reform heroes joining the army signifies that the liberated “individuals” are joining the historical torrent of building a modern nation. At the beginning of “Great Changes in a Mountain Village”, the cadre Deng Xiumei goes to Qingxi Township to promote agricultural collectivization and sees the ancient land temple and the couplet, reflecting on the long history and importance of the land issue. However, her thoughts are interrupted by an old farmer.

Both of Zhou Libo’s major rural novels, “Violent Storm” and “Great Changes in a Mountain Village”, begin with a classic conflict pattern: an outsider representing the “modern state” clashes with the traditional “local world”. This makes “Great Changes in

a Mountain Village” a significant paradigm in 1950s literature. Compared to “Violent Storm”, the contradiction between “tradition” and “modernity” is more pronounced in “Great Changes in a Mountain Village”.

While the conflict between peasants and landlords in “Violent Storm” is primarily about class and property, the agricultural collectivization movement and the modernization of rural society in “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” are closely related to changes in customs and practices. The father-son conflict between Chen Xianjin and Chen Dachun, for example, becomes a classic narrative pattern in subsequent rural fiction.

However, when depicting rural scenes, Zhou Libo does not portray the locality and the state as opposing forces of backwardness and progress. Instead, the “locality” becomes a “Chinese landscape” that embodies modern aspirations. Zhu Yu, building upon Tang Tao’s argument that the “simple, concise, and plain” colloquial style in Zhou Libo’s 1950s rural fiction has political significance, believes that the portrayal of the “Chinese landscape” in “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” connects natural history with social history, revealing a complex and authentic rural social ecology [4]. Cai Xiang points out that the “local” landscape can be metonymically understood as “native land”, “people”, or even “rural ideal” in different narrative contexts.

Although the political discourse in Zhou Libo’s novels originates from outside the rural society, it finds fertile ground within the rural context. Some scholars have pointed out that the political language of Squad Leader Xiao in “Violent Storm” is “mixed with various discourses such as personal politics and traditional politics”, and that “the author implies that ‘we’ are the builders working for the arrival of a new democratic society”.

Therefore, the political discourse in Zhou Libo’s novels is always linked to the people as the builders of modernization. Zhao Shuli criticized Soviet literature for always introducing an outsider who brings new ideas, as if pouring them into a mold from the outside. Compared to Zhao Shuli, Zhou Libo attempted to bridge the gap between rural society and the political propaganda function of rural fiction through a richer, more

inclusive, and broader realist style. He aimed to demonstrate the vitality inherent in rural society and to integrate the national discourse into the rural cadres and peasants—the “we”—as the subjects of modernization. For example, in “People on the Other Side of the Mountain”, published in *People’s Literature* in 1958, the editors praised the novel’s “national and beautiful” style as a “greater leap forward” in literary art.

However, compared to other works of the time with strong political propaganda, “People on the Other Side of the Mountain” seemed somewhat “out of tune”. In 1965, Zhou Yang pointed out: “(Previously) we copied the Soviet model quite seriously, but after 1958, ... we put forward our own independent views” [5]. In fact, “People on the Other Side of the Mountain” reflects the nationalization movement of the “Great Leap Forward” literature, revealing a nationalistic demand for contemporary literature to break away from the Soviet model.

Starting from “Violent Storm”, Zhou Libo has consistently viewed dialects and local color as integral components of his novels, aiming to unify locality and politics within the process of modernization. Zhou believed that using peasant language in literature would revolutionize both literature and language. Consequently, “Violent Storm” was written entirely in Northeastern dialect.

In his essay “On Dialects”, Zhou argued that literary creation should “employ local dialects”, thereby forming a vivid literary style and a “unified national language” [6]. However, critics have pointed out that Zhou was an instrumentalist of dialects, “making every effort to immerse himself in the rural world but remaining an ‘outsider’. In other words, Zhou attempted to bridge the gap between the “locality” of rural society and the modern nation-state in his novels.

The absorption of Chinese-style realist literature by Zhou Libo also left its mark on his novels.

3. Chinese-Style Realism and Hunan Culture

Zhou Libo was a significant proponent of Chinese-style realism theory in China. Li Yang defines “Chinese-style realism” as a “formal ideology” that serves the modern nation-state in “Yan’an literature” and

“Seventeen Years Literature” [7].

“The basic characteristic of Chinese-style realism lies in its adherence to the principles of the truthfulness, popular nature, and proletarian character of literature and art”. After being introduced to China in the 1930s, Chinese-style realism became the creative principle of left-wing literature and the mainstream literature of the “Seventeen Years” period.

Zhou Yang was one of the earliest Chinese theorists to introduce Soviet realism. In his 1933 essay, “Soviet Literature of the Past Fifteen Years”, he mentioned the new slogan of Soviet literature, “the romanticism of realism”. He defined Soviet “realism” as “the depiction of objective reality in its essential and typical aspects, while simultaneously depicting both negative and positive elements and illuminating the consistent victorious nature within” [8]. In 1953, at the Second National Congress of Writers and Artists, Zhou Yang declared Soviet realism as the mainstream method of literary creation. Reflecting on his past in the 1980s, he admitted, “When I first started writing, I followed the ‘left’ line completely, simply understanding literature as a mouthpiece for ideas and neglecting the laws of art itself” [9]. As Zhou Yang’s fellow countryman and friend, Zhou Libo’s literary views inevitably carried a strong “mainstream” political color. However, Zhou Libo also believed that “life is the only source of literary creation”, emphasizing the importance of “going to the countryside to live” before creating, because “the garden of literature is in the lives of the people”.

On the one hand, Zhou Libo saw “the lives of the people” as the source of literary creation. On the other hand, as an outsider, Zhou Libo’s rural novels often featured the perspective of cadres sent to the countryside. The rural life in his works is frequently “scenery-ized”. For example, in “Zhang Manzhen”, the cadre “I” and the rural female cadre Zhang Manzhen see the scenery differently. “I” observe the “scenery” of the interplay between human effort and nature and express appreciation for China’s agriculture and modernization, while Zhang Manzhen is concerned about whether the rice seedlings will rot this year [10]. This is closely related to Zhou Libo’s literary views.

Zhou Libo asserted that “politics comes first, and art comes second”, and that even within artistic creation, there is a political propaganda aspect to the Chinese-style picturesque. As early as the 1930s, Zhou Libo closely followed Zhou Yang in the “two slogans controversy”, advocating for the “national defense literature” slogan that linked “national identity” with struggle. Zhou pointed out that “national defense literature” is “the true national literature of the Chinese nation, and it should reflect all the struggle situations in the national liberation movement” [11]. Zhou Libo’s emphasis on the authenticity, political nature, and dialect issues in literature all stem from his concern for the issue of the modern nation-state.

4. Conclusion

Zhou Libo played a pivotal role in the maturation of rural-themed novels. While Sun Li and Zhao Shuli’s works were rooted in local communities and employed a traditional realist style closer to modern rural literature, Zhou Libo and subsequent authors adopted a more mature Chinese-style realist approach. Shen Congwen, from a rural perspective, portrayed Xiangxi as an organic entity with deep affection, revealing how the “local world” was being swallowed up by the “modern state” and couldn’t be simply affirmed from the utilitarian perspective of modernization. Hunan culture also influenced Zhou Libo’s novels. The lower volume of “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” depicts the “self-governance” of rural cadres, demonstrating the author’s affirmation of the transformative vitality of the “local world”. On the one hand, Zhou Libo’s novels affirm the value of the “local world”; on the other hand, his Chinese-style realist approach makes “local color” an essential element in constructing a new “national identity” and a “Chinese rural landscape”. Compared to previous rural-themed novels, “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” has a clearer orientation towards modernization and the characteristics of “Chinese-style realism” - the cadres’ “entry into the countryside” at the beginning and the villagers’ celebration after the “great transformation” of the rural society at the end have become classic narrative patterns in subsequent rural-themed novels like “The History of Entrepreneurship”.

Therefore, the complex tension between the “local world” and the “modern state” has always permeated the development of rural-themed novels. Behind this lies a significant issue in contemporary literature: the relationship between national identity and modernity. It is precisely because of Zhou Libo’s skillful handling of this relationship that he became a key writer in the maturation of rural-themed novels; due to his persistence in local color and the spirit of realism, “Great Changes in a Mountain Village” achieved unique and timely artistic achievements, rather than being a work that “avoided the profound historical significance of the collectivization movement”.

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