

The Mapping of Shen Congwen in Characters of the Western Hunan world under the Perspective of Identity in the 1930s

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Abstract. The 1930s was an important turning point in the history of China's development, and the turbulence of the times also affected the spiritual world of intellectuals. Amidst the literary world of different schools of thought, Shen Congwen, with his unique identity, constructed a world of Western Hunan blending local customs and cultural atmosphere. In the 1930s, Shen Congwen, on the one hand, held fast to his self-identity as a countryman by virtue of his bloodline rooted in the countryside, and on the other hand, his life experience of moving from the countryside to the city enabled him to gain the identity of a "marginal man" in the society. While hovering between the urban and rural areas, this led Shen to create a lot of far-reaching, complex and diversified characters in the western Hunan world. This process also reveals the impact of the formation of the Dual urban-rural structure on the author.

Keywords: 1930s; Shen Congwen; Identity; Western Hunan.

1. Introduction

The word "identity" is derived from the Latin root "idem", the primary meaning of which points to internal consistency and certainty [1]. By interacting with social forces, an individual intrinsically identifies himself or herself as the same person in development. In the sociological school of symbolic interactionism, the self - identity - social structure [2] is seen as inextricably linked, and one's understanding of things can change with the process of social interaction. Just as Shen Congwen entered the 1930s, with his growing sense of self-identity, the addition of more diverse characters recast the flesh and blood of the Western Hunan. Between 1930 and 1933, Shen Congwen published a number of works in turn, such as *Xiaoxiao*, *Lamps*, *The Husband*, *San San*, *Long Zhu* and *Tiger's Nest*, etc. And the style of his creation was different from that of the 1920s. *the Autobiography of Congwen* published in July 1932 represented the formal establishment of Shen Congwen's self-identity as a "countryman". Then the first writing peak was ushered in by the creation of *Border Town* in 1934. *The Long River* in 1938, as a sister chapter, highlights the author's awakening of the literati consciousness, and the social identity of "marginal man" was formed. Since then, Shen Congwen has been building a unique and fascinating native-soil literature of Western Hunan world under the dual identity.

2. Shen Congwen's Construction of Identity

2.1. Self-Identity—"Countryman"

The term "countryman" has a dual meaning of geography and identity, and forms a unity of opposites with "city people". Geographically, Fenghuang County, as Shen Congwen's birthplace, is a veritable countryside. Psychiatrist Erik H Erikson believes that adolescence is a critical period for the formation of self-identity [3]. From birth to the military enlistment, Shen Congwen wandered around the Western Hunan. The local customs and interpersonal interaction of countryside have a profound impact on the formation of self-identity of Shen Congwen, so it can be said that Shen Congwen is an authentic "countryman".

The link between the Western Hunan and Shen Congwen has been integrated into his bloodstream. Shen Congwen's elegant and pastel style of writing since then is largely derived from



the beautiful landscapes of the Western Hunan. In 1923, Shen Congwen went to Beijing to study, but Beijing did not open its arms to him, "the first five years, the words could not be grasped, which was mainly to maintain the family's livelihood." [4] Being unsuccessful in his pursuit of education and living in poverty, Shen Congwen felt deeply that "Metropolitan life has made me tired" [4]. Shen Congwen's nostalgia for the Western Hunan has become a kind of "Topophilia" under the influence of urban development, "it is not the strongest feeling of human beings, but when this feeling is stronger, this place or environment has become a carrier of activities full of emotions or is regarded as a symbol." [5] The Western Hunan, which Shen Congwen was dreaming of, naturally became the main character of his works. The Western Hunan world appeared fresher and lovelier in his fond memories, which gave Shen a stronger sense of recognition of his identity as a "countryman". His rise to prominence in the literary world also helped him to shed the initial embarrassment of his identity as a "countryman".

In the 1930s, Shen's success in his career and life eliminated the need for him to use the identity of "countryman" as a weapon to compete with the genius elites in the city. After achieving a further balance between market value orientation and personal ambition, Shen reduced his writing about the Western Hunan, which was as beautiful as a dream, and began to re-examine his hometown, realising the unity of the self-identity of "countryman" and his literary ideals.

2.2. Social Identity—"Marginal Man"

Western social psychology defines "marginal man" as "a kind of transformed personality produced in the process of socio-cultural change or geographical change, which is the product of the collision, choice and conflict between old and new cultures, or between local culture and exotic culture, resulting in the personality splitting into variable and dual products." [6] Shen Congwen was nurtured by the Western Hunan for the first twenty years of his life, while the formal starting point of his literary career was in the city. From Beijing to Qingdao, Shen Congwen's transition in the 1930s was a reflection of the changing social structure on his self.

The transformation of the region and the change of the times made a deep mark on Shen Congwen's spiritual world. It can be said that the self-identity of "countryman" constitutes the nature of Shen Congwen. He is fundamentally doomed to not be able to fully integrate into the city, and his contempt for all kinds of ugly practices in the city is embodied in the *Eight Chun map*. This can also be seen in Shen Congwen's rejection of "genius writers". Only the countryside can give him what he has been pursuing all his life, which is a kind of uncontaminated natural sublime humanity. On the other hand, the identity of "marginal man", which was closely related to the city, transformed Shen into a progressive intellectual. In the 1930s, Shen had already realised his change of identity, and at this time he was no longer a grassroots youth who had run away from his hometown, but an intellectual who had lived in the city for many years. Therefore, during his two trips back to his hometown in 1934 and 1938, he recognized the "changes" and "constancy" of the countryside more clearly. As the American scholar Wu Meifang argues, "As the Jing school writer, Shen wrote for urban or elite readers, and his narrative and aesthetic perspectives did not belong to the aborigines of western Hunan, but reflected the gaze of urban elites." [7] Hovering between urban and rural areas, Shen chose the third way: using his identity as a "marginal man" to tell a good story of the countryside with his skillful literary skills learned from the city.

3. Characters in the Western Hunan World in the Thirties

3.1. Profound Reflection on the Withering of Old Dreams in the Countryside

Most of Shen's works before the 1930s were based on his memories. To a large extent the characters in the Western Hunan world in this period were the carriers of Shen's beautiful memories of the countryside and sincere feelings, which did not form distinctive and prominent character traits. Until the end of the 20th century, works such as *Wild shop* and *Bozi* have more obvious realism tendency, especially the sailor in *Bozi* seems to be completely out of the category of "beauty of humanity" and

shows the ugliness of the most primitive desires. But this "ugliness" becomes natural and poetic under Shen Congwen's sparse and peaceful tone. The catharsis of life at this moment becomes an exchange of rewards. We can already see Shen Congwen's deeper reflection on human desires and his efforts to depict more aspects of human nature in the portrayal of "Bozi".

On 10th January 1930, *Xiaoxiao* was published. Shen introduced the factor of reality into the Western Hunan world. He emphasized Xiaoxiao's innocence many times in the text, but this "innocence" was also tarnished by the author's in-depth description. Regarding the female college students passing by the village during the "water holiday", the elders of Xiaoxiao's family thought that "these people are almost the same with the people living in another world, who dressed up like monsters and their behaviors are unbelievable." [8] The elders used it as a joke to tease Xiaoxiao. Xiaoxiao's naivety is a product of the countryside's isolation and the obscurantism brought about by lagging development of countryside. According to Wang Anyi, "Xiaoxiao's countryside is very sentimental and realistic, which always gives people a way out, so that they can live in a modest way from generation to generation." [9] The only time Xiaoxiao demonstrates her own will is after she mistakenly has Hua Gou's child ---she wants to escape to the city. But this is obviously not an awakening of individual will, but an escape from reality. The countryside cannot tolerate this kind of thing, but in Xiaoxiao's fantasy, the city can forgive everything. But the reality did not give Xiaoxiao this opportunity, the milk of human kindness in the countryside under special circumstances kept Xiaoxiao, so the "tentacles" of Xiaoxiao to the outside world were completely cut off.

Although Shen Congwen did not give excessive criticism to the countryside in the text, we could still feel the author's disillusion and uneasiness about the isolated countryside. Xiaoxiao's life is like the epitome of countless young girls in the countryside, which is all the more alarming because of its universality. The constancy of countryside retains the nature of humanity, but it also casts a shadow over the future of the countryside. Shen realized that if the status quo was maintained, the countryside would only be abandoned by the times, and his spiritual home would collapse. These worries constitute a brand new aspect of western Hunan world in the 1930s.

3.2. The Persistent Pursuit of a Clean and Transparent Soul

Reflection on the old dreams of the countryside withering can be seen as the strengthening literati self-consciousness of Shen Congwen, but this did not change the essence of Shen Congwen's self-identity of the "countryman". In 1934, Shen Congwen created *Border Town* to continue to write the clear soul of the countryside epic. He attributed the changes in the countryside to the intrusion of urban civilization. To remove the ills of the city and achieve the renaissance of Chinese civilization, it is still necessary to call for the return of a healthy and pure humanity in the countryside.

Cuicui, the heroine of *Border Town* is, as her name suggests, a symbol of nature's green colour. Cuicui possesses strong vitality, a clean soul, and sensitive feelings. Living with her grandfather between heaven and earth, Cuicui was able to get closer to nature. Shen Congwen apparently gave Cuicui the beautiful characteristics of "son of nature". Pulled by primitive human nature, Cuicui and Nuo Song's love is depart from convention and do not show vulgarity. Even if this relationship does not seem to usher in a happy ending, it is because of fate rather than the character's mutation. Shen kept this humanity in *Border Town* as much as possible, letting the characters grow freely in "the Peach Garden" and live unconstrainedly, fearlessly and shamelessly.

In the title of *The Long River*, Shen also said that "the integrity and enthusiasm of the characters in *Border Town*, although it has become the past, should still retain some of the essence in the blood or dreams of young people, and it can rekindle the self-esteem and self-confidence of the young people in the appropriate environment." [10] Shen Congwen's self-identity reached its peak in *Border Town*, and the main character in his works was no longer lost in the city, but successfully constructed his own spiritual world as well as the author himself, presenting a rare natural humanity.

3.3. Bravely Exposing the Heterogeneous Intrusion of the City

"Except for the brightness of the natural scenery, and the innocent temperament of a few children growing up in this environment, which can see the light, the rest of the people and things involved in the writing are naturally bleak." [10] This "the rest of the people involved" points to the brand-new characters that appeared in the Western Hunan world in the thirties, who were the mutations that happened within the western Hunanese people, and the invaders of the western Hunan world who had lost their humanity under the impact of the times.

"Especially when it comes to the local privileged people, a pen can't go on writing even if it is cruel, and the intentional humour of the countryside can't neutralize the painful feelings." [10] The captain of the security team in *The Long River* is a typical representative of the local privileged. His invasion of the western Hunan world can be reflected in two aspects. One is the persecution that the western Hunanese people suffered. In the text, the security captain is power-hungry and selfish, and the words he uses to molest Yoyo are filled with the superiority. His character is very different from the sincerity, straightforwardness and kindness of the western Hunanese people in their bones. Obviously, the power of the security team has made the security team realise the class transgression and being out of the category of "country people"; secondly, it is the infringement on the folk customs of the western Hunan. This kind of people with the bad style of the typical urban class is bound to seriously affect the original ecology of the world of the western Hunan. The incident of buying oranges is not typical. The captain of the security team used all kinds of means to exploit the president of the Chamber of Commerce, Changshun's family and even all the townspeople. His appearance makes the originally quiet and peaceful life in Lujiaping filled with uneasy and tense atmosphere, which heavily impacts the cultural value system of the countryside.

Similar to the intruders depicted in *The Long River*, there are also committee members who inspect the countryside but keep things of local people for themselves, and officials who do not recognise justice but only profit. The inclusion of these characters marks the complete awakening of Shen Congwen's literary consciousness. In addition to his identity as a countryman, Shen Congwen realises his historical responsibility as an intellectual. Therefore, Shen began to introduce more realistic factors into the world of western Hunan, showing the destruction of the countryside by the development of the city in depth, and making the world of western Hunan connect with the times.

4. Reasons for the Formation of Dual Identity

4.1. Dual Urban-rural Structure in the 1930s

In the 1920s and 1930s, with the rapid rise of cities and the prosperous development of the industrial and commercial economy, the nature of modern China's cities began to change, and cities were no longer just political centers, but also economic and cultural centers. Population and capital gathered in the cities, and the difference between the city and the countryside gradually expanded from the economic sphere to the sphere of life, contributing to the formation of the dual urban-rural structure. This not only represents the differences between the natural spatial structure of urban and rural areas, but also shows the differences between both of them in terms of industrial and economic structure.

The dual urban-rural structure brought about a deep gap between urban and rural areas, and also created objective conditions for Shen Congwen to firmly identify himself as a "countryman". Firstly, the living environment is very different, Shen was born in the Western Hunan, surrounded by mountains and water. Boats are the most common means of transport in the area, while the city has already used four-wheeled cars. Shen needed to overthrow all the habits and start from scratch. Secondly, the irrational distribution of resources between urban and rural areas led to the fact that people in the city possessed higher quality resources. The door of Peking University was closed to Shen Congwen, and the manuscripts submitted to the publishing house were like a stone sinking into the sea, all of which thickened the barrier between Shen Congwen and the city. In addition, the dual urban-rural structure also has a hidden psychological impact. "Fashionable" and "advanced" has

become synonymous with the city people, while the countryside is labelled as "rustic" and "dull". Polarised evaluation made Shen Congwen deeply be troubled by stereotypes, and he once appeared negative and confused state. For all these reasons, there is an unfillable gap between Shen Congwen and the city, and by labelling himself as a "countryman", Shen Congwen carved out a safe place for himself in the city and used it as a way to fight against the city's alienation of himself.

In the 1930s, the contradictions of the dual urban-rural structure tended to intensify, and the two trips back to his hometown in 1934 and 1938 were important nodes in the establishment of Shen's identity as a "marginal man". Before that time, almost all of Shen's works about the Western Hunan world were written in the city, and it can be said that Shen had been relying on his memories of his hometown during his adolescence to create his works. However, the two trips back to his hometown in the 1930s broke the static impression of the Western Hunan in Shen Congwen's memory, and the time in the western Hunan world finally began to flow. Shen was surprised to find that he had long been accustomed to the "new life" compared to the uneasiness and fear the townspeople felt about the coming "new life". Under the influence of the dual structure of urban and rural areas, people from the countryside came to the city to make a living, and Shen Congwen, like many of them, gradually got used to the urban lifestyle, and even acquired the status of a city dweller under the household registration system. He still harboured the nostalgia for the countryside in his heart, so he was trapped in a great sense of separation, and turned into a "marginal man" wandering in the middle of the countryside and the country.

4.2. The Turbulence and Changes of Author's Personal Spiritual World

First of all, Shen Congwen's personal mood changes led to his different attitudes towards the identity of "countryman" at different times. In his early creations such as "honest man", "cowardly man" and other images are pointing to the marginalized youth groups in the metropolis. They are alienated from the city and excluded from the mainstream literary world. These are the mapping of Shen's real feelings when he first arrived in the city. In the 1930s, Shen realized the limitations of this kind of Yu Dafu-style autobiography and began to stand in a urban and rural socio-historical vision to tell the story about the Western Hunan world. The transformation of his writings in the literary world enhanced the status of Shen Congwen and washed away the inner haze of him. The identity of "countryman" finally established in a healthy and positive outlook.

Secondly, the maturity of Shen's own literary views in the 1930s was also an important factor in the formation of dual identity. Around 1930, Shen further explained the harm of the tendency of literary interest, "In the decade of Chinese literature, on the one hand, due to the cultivation of witty interest, a bad influence is to infuse satire into all kinds of works, which is a common phenomenon a little after the literary revolution". [11] The entry of professors, literary giants and other holders of cultural capital into the literary world is bound to accelerate the formation of the tendency of literary interest. The creations of these people tends to lack rigor, which more often expresses the leisure, and the topics of concern are not closely related to the reality. Therefore, compared with the title of "genius writer" recognized by the public, Shen preferred to be a "silent and hardworking " "countryman". On the other hand, the literary ideal established by Shen Congwen was based on his many years of writing practice in the city, and he was not the grassroots youth who first came to the city. His skillful literary skills, broad vision and rigorous attitude made the Western Hunan world more real and three-dimensional. The traces of urban-rural integration show Shen Congwen's distinctive traits of "marginal man".

5. The Significance of the Times and the Influence of Later Generations

5.1. The Significance of the Era

"There may be people in this world who want to build lofty buildings on sandy foundations or on water, but that's not me; I only want to build small Greek temples. Choose the mountainous ground for the foundation, and pile it with hard stones. My ideal building is delicate, strong, well-

proportioned, small but not slender. The 'humanity' is enshrined by the temple"[12] The Western Hunan world under Shen Congwen's writing, from the utopia consisting of truth, goodness and beauty to the "small temple of humanity " which is close to the pulse of the times, has been carrying the author's lofty literary ideals of reviving the culture of the Chinese nation. Unlike the way of attacking the dark reality of the society, Shen Congwen has been sticking to the position of building "humanity". In Shen Congwen's view, biological nature is the first primitive desire, which people need to express in a healthy and restrained way, while divinity is what all people should persistently pursue. Led by such a view of humanity and life, the Western Hunan world opposes the alienation of human beings by modern urban civilization in a distinctive manner. The poetic language and pastoral mood allowed Shen to take a unique path among a group of outspoken critics of vernacular writers, exploring a path of development of vernacular novels that compose love and beauty, and had a profound impact on the Chinese literary ecosystem.

5.2. Influence of Later Generations

Shen serves as a connecting link between the preceding and the following in the development of Jing School novels, and his creation of the "Western Hunan World" directly influenced Wang Zengqi, who was called "the last writer of the Jing School". Although they never met, Wang Zengqi said, "I seem to be destined to be a student of Mr Shen Congwen." [13] In his masterpiece *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, we can clearly feel the flow of natural and healthy humanity and the charm of traditional folklore. Everything is expressed in a graceful and peaceful tone. These are obviously influenced by Shen Congwen's writing style. In addition to the intergenerational inheritance within the fiction writers of Jing school, Shen Congwen's literary works has also been widely recognized by other writers. Hu Shi once said to Zhang Zhaohe that Shen Congwen is "the most promising of Chinese novelists", and Ba Jin considered that Shen Congwen "not only has a high talent, there is a heart of gold." [14] The works of Mo Yan, Jia Pingwa, Chen Zhongshi and other vernacular writers have more or less received the influence of Shen Congwen. Until now Shen Congwen's works still influence the development of modern Chinese vernacular literature, and more and more people are trying to take the vernacular complex as the core of their own literary creation, weaving the beautiful dream of the prosperous development of rural culture.

6. Conclusion

Aesthician Jiang Xun evaluates Shen Congwen's literary value as "Shen Congwen's language is very special, on the surface it seems to be merciless, but it has a kind of astringent power, and the surging passion behind it is no less than that of Lu Xun." The 1930s was a period of transition in Shen Congwen's creation. Shen changed the autobiographical literature describing urban disillusionment into the vernacular literature of the Western Hunan world that glorified the sublime humanity. Under the dual identities of "countryman" and "marginal man", Shen Congwen successfully constructed his personal spiritual home, and let the world see the rural world full of clean and healthy souls, realising the continuation of the roots of rural culture in the end.

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