

A Study of Vernacular Narratives in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature

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Abstract. Through a comprehensive discussion of the historical evolution, themes and imagery, characterisation, language and style, and contemporary values and influences of vernacular narratives in modern and contemporary Chinese literature, this paper reveals the unique manifestations of vernacular narratives and their profound connotations at different historical stages. With their unique perspectives and profound social insights, vernacular narratives depict the life of rural China, reflecting the realities of social change and cultural inheritance. Writers such as Lu Xun, Shen Congwen, and Mo Yan, through their respective classic works, not only enriched the themes and techniques of literary creation, but also provided readers with an important window to understand rural life and social reality. In contemporary times, vernacular narratives continue to play an important role by focusing on rural issues and preserving cultural memories, arousing people's identification with and concern for rural culture. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the unique position and significance of vernacular narratives in contemporary Chinese literature and to explore their inspiration and contribution to contemporary literary creation through a multi-angle analysis of vernacular narratives.

Keywords: vernacular narrative; modern and contemporary Chinese literature; cultural inheritance; literary creation; cultural identity.

1. Introduction

As an important branch of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, vernacular narrative, with its unique perspective and deep cultural connotation, deeply reflects the social changes and people's living conditions in rural China. Since the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, vernacular narratives have occupied an important position in all historical stages of Chinese literature, and their development trajectory not only reflects the evolution of literary forms, but also reflects the great changes of Chinese society [1]. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the historical evolution of vernacular narrative, its themes and imagery, characterisation, language and style, as well as its contemporary value and influence, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the unique charm and significance of this literary form.

During the late Qing and early Republican periods, Chinese society was at the intersection of the disintegration of the feudal system and the rise of the New Culture Movement, and the vernacular narrative, as a new form of literature, began to make its mark on the literary scene. The rise of the May Fourth Movement led many writers to pay attention to rural issues and to reveal the plight of rural life and social injustice through their literary works. Lu Xun's *The Hometown* and *The True Story of Ah Q* are important founding works of vernacular narratives, as they delve into the social contradictions in the countryside and the spiritual plight of the people [2]. After the founding of New China, vernacular narratives took on a new vitality in the context of socialist construction, and a large number of new works reflecting rural life emerged. The vernacular narratives of this period depicted more of the collectivisation process of the countryside and the new life of the peasants, which not only showed the achievements of socialist construction, but also revealed the complexity of the rural society.

Entering the period of reform and opening up, vernacular narratives were once again revived. With the deepening of the reform of the rural economic system, profound changes have taken place in the rural society, and through the meticulous depiction of these changes, vernacular writers have revealed the plight and hope of the countryside in the process of modernisation. Mo Yan's works such as *The Red Sorghum Family* and *Plump Breasts and Fat Hips* deeply reflect the diversity and complexity of rural society through the depiction of family history and rural life. The vernacular narratives of this period not only inherited the traditional spirit of vernacular literature, but also incorporated modern consciousness and global vision, showing a richer and more diversified outlook [3].

In contemporary times, vernacular narratives continue to play an important role. With the rapid advance of urbanisation and globalisation, rural problems and the gap between urban and rural areas are becoming more and more prominent. By depicting the realities and cultural connotations of the countryside, vernacular narratives have aroused people's concern for vernacular culture and their profound thinking about rural life. Contemporary writers such as A Lai and Jia Pingwa have further enriched the expression and artistic connotation of vernacular narratives through their in-depth exploration of rural themes. Their works not only reflect the changes of the countryside in the process of modernisation, but also put forward profound thoughts on the inheritance of traditional culture and the development of modern society [4].

To sum up, as an important part of Chinese literature, vernacular narrative, through its unique perspective and profound social insight, demonstrates the richness, colourfulness and profound connotation of the Chinese countryside. In this paper, we will comprehensively explore the vernacular narratives from multiple perspectives, with a view to revealing their unique position and important value in Chinese modern and contemporary literature. Through the study of vernacular narratives, we can not only better understand the changes and development of China's rural society, but also re-understand and re-examine the unique charm and contemporary significance of vernacular culture in the context of globalisation.

2. Historical Evolution of Vernacular Narrative

During the development of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, vernacular narrative, as a unique literary form, carries rich historical, cultural and social connotations. The historical evolution of vernacular narratives not only reflects the changes in Chinese society, but also the diversity and complexity of literary creation. From the late Qing Dynasty to contemporary times, vernacular narratives have experienced a tortuous development process from germination, prosperity, low tide to revival.

During the late Qing and early Republican period, vernacular narratives gradually came into prominence in Chinese literature. With the decline of feudal society and the influx of Western culture, the traditional rural society and way of life underwent drastic changes. By depicting rural scenes and the lives of peasants, writers revealed social upheavals and people's inner conflicts [5]. The rise of the May Fourth Movement gave impetus to the prosperity of vernacular literature. Through their works, writers such as Lu Xun and Ye Shengtao explored the plight of the countryside and the fate of the peasants in an attempt to awaken national consciousness and a sense of social responsibility. The vernacular narratives of this period not only had profound practical significance, but also laid the foundation for later literary creations.

The vernacular narratives after the founding of New China showed new features and appearance. Against the background of socialist construction, vernacular literature gradually became an important part of mainstream literature. Writers depicted the construction achievements of the new countryside and the new life of the peasants with new perspectives and strokes. Between 1949 and 1976, vernacular narratives paid more attention to the process of collectivisation of the countryside and the collective fate of the peasants. However, during the Cultural Revolution, literary creation was greatly restricted, and the vernacular narratives also fell into a low ebb. It was not until after the reform and opening up that vernacular narratives were revived again. Writers re-examined rural life and revealed

the complexity and diversity of rural society by depicting the changes in the rural economy and the confusion in the process of modernization [6].

Entering the 21st century, vernacular narratives have taken on a new lease of life in the context of globalisation. With the widening gap between urban and rural areas and the highlighting of rural problems, vernacular literature has once again become an important theme of literary creation. Modern writers are not only concerned about the realities of the countryside, but also committed to exploring the deeper connotations and contemporary values of vernacular culture. They reflect on the collision and fusion of traditional culture and modern civilisation by describing the changes in the countryside during the process of modernisation. The vernacular narratives of this period not only inherited the traditional spirit of vernacular literature, but also incorporated modern consciousness and global vision, presenting a richer and more diversified outlook.

3. Themes and Imagery in Vernacular Narratives

As an important branch of contemporary Chinese literature, vernacular narratives paint a vivid picture of rural life for readers with their unique themes and imagery. Through the depiction of vernacular emotions, social changes, natural and humanistic landscapes, etc., vernacular narratives not only reveal the realistic dilemmas of China's rural areas, but also express the deep emotions of traditional culture.

Native emotion and nostalgia are one of the core themes in vernacular narratives. Many writers express their fondness for rural life and nostalgia for the lost years through their memories and descriptions of their hometowns. This emotion is deeply reflected in Lu Xun's *Hometown*. By describing the beauty of his hometown as a child and its decay as an adult, Lu Xun contrasts the great changes brought about by the passage of time and the helplessness and sadness in people's hearts. This kind of nostalgia is not only an expression of personal emotion, but also an inheritance of cultural memory, reflecting the writers' deep understanding and love of native culture [7].

The change of rural society is a theme that cannot be ignored in the vernacular narratives. With the development of Chinese society, the rural economy, social structure and people's way of life have undergone great changes. By depicting these changes, vernacular writers have revealed the profound impact of the modernisation process on rural society. For example, in *The Red Sorghum Family*, Mo Yan demonstrates the changes and upheavals in rural China during different historical periods by depicting the fate of several generations of his family. He portrays the struggle and resistance of peasants in the midst of social change, and deeply reveals the complexity and diversity of rural society. These works not only reflect historical changes, but also offer readers a profound reflection on the relationship between modernisation and traditional culture.

The depiction of natural and humanistic landscapes is an important part of vernacular narratives. Rural writers create a unique rural atmosphere through their delicate descriptions of idyllic landscapes, seasonal changes and rural scenery. Shen Congwen's *Border Town* is a typical representative. With delicate strokes, he depicts the natural beauty and humanistic customs of a small town in western Hunan, creating a picturesque rural world. In these works, the natural landscape is not only the background, but also an important element of the characters' emotions and story development. This depiction of nature and humanity not only shows the richness and colourfulness of rural life, but also conveys the writers' reverence for nature and their deep attachment to rural life.

In addition, many images in the vernacular narratives, such as loess, ancient trees, old houses, etc., are rich in symbolism. These images not only have distinctive regional characteristics, but also carry deep cultural connotations. For example, the yellow soil often symbolises the hard work and perseverance of farmers, while the ancient trees and old houses symbolise the inheritance and continuation of traditional culture [8]. The use of these images gives the vernacular narrative a deeper cultural connotation and artistic value.

In conclusion, vernacular narratives show the richness, colourfulness and profound connotations of rural China through multi-dimensional depictions of themes such as vernacular emotions, social changes, natural and humanistic landscapes, and so on. These works not only provide readers with a window into rural society, but also retain a deep love and respect for vernacular culture in a changing society. The themes and imagery of the vernacular narratives are like a mirror reflecting the writers' deep affection for their native land and their persistent pursuit of cultural inheritance.

4. Analysis of Characters in Vernacular Narratives

Characters in vernacular narratives, as one of the core elements of literary works, profoundly reflect the changes of Chinese rural society and people's destiny through the portrayal of many types of characters, such as peasants, intellectuals, and young people returning to their hometowns. These characters not only enrich the content of literary works, but also provide readers with important perspectives for understanding and thinking about rural life.

In the rural narratives, the image of peasants occupies an important position. As the main group of rural society, the life and fate of peasants often become the focus of writers' attention. In *The True Story of Ah Q*, Lu Xun creates a vivid and complex image of a peasant, Ah Q. Ah Q's ignorance, arrogance and helplessness are not only a true portrayal of the living conditions of the peasants in old China, but also a profound revelation of the spiritual plight of the people at the bottom of the society. Through the image of Q, Lu Xun expresses his strong criticism of social injustice and deep concern for the fate of the peasants. In addition, through the portrayal of his mother, Shangguan Lu, a peasant woman, Mo Yan demonstrates the image of a peasant woman who is resilient and quietly devoted in the turbulent times in *Bountiful Breasts and Fat Hips* [9]. Her strength and spirit of sacrifice became the representative of countless rural women in that era, reflecting the great strength of rural women in a hard life.

The image of rural intellectuals is also an important part of the vernacular narrative. These characters are often the objects of self-projection by the writers of the countryside, and through their experience and journey, they show the special status and spiritual dilemma of the intellectuals in the rural society. Shunshun, the boat chief in Shen Congwen's *Border Town*, is such a typical figure. He is in the countryside, but he has a heart for the world, and he observes and understands the rural world from his unique perspective. The image of Shunshun not only reflects the intellectuals' sense of cultural mission, but also shows their helplessness and struggle in reality. This contradiction and conflict reveals the complex mentality and unique destiny of intellectuals in the rural society.

Entering the new era, returning youths have become emerging figures in the vernacular narratives. These characters are usually young people who return to the countryside with ideals and try to change the face of their hometowns in the process of urbanisation. Dust, the main character portrayed by A Lai in *Dust Settles*, is such a figure of returning youth. He returns to the countryside from the city, bringing with him new ideas and hopes, but at the same time facing the conflicts and challenges between tradition and modernity, ideals and reality. Through Dusty's story, A Lai explores the dilemmas and hopes of the countryside in the process of modernisation, reflecting the roles and missions of the new generation of youth in rural revitalisation.

In addition, many of the characters in the vernacular narratives, such as peasant entrepreneurs and grassroots cadres, reflect the diversity and complexity of rural society to varying degrees. Jiu'er, depicted by Mo Yan in *Red Sorghum*, is both a resilient peasant woman and a heroic figure who dares to defy her fate. Her story demonstrates the strength and wisdom of rural women as well as reflects the change and development of rural society. In short, the characters in the vernacular narratives vividly reproduce the picture of life and social changes in the Chinese countryside through the portrayal of many types of characters, such as peasants, intellectuals, and young people returning to their hometowns. These characters are not only a true depiction of rural reality, but also a profound expression of the writers' emotions and thoughts. Their resilience, wisdom and complex destinies not

only enrich the artistic expression of literature, but also provide readers with a multi-dimensional perspective to deeply understand rural society.

5. Language and style of vernacular narratives

The language and style of vernacular narratives are an important part of their unique charm. By using language rich in local characteristics and diverse narrative styles, vernacular writers have vividly depicted the life scenes and humanities of China's rural areas. This unique way of literary expression not only enhances the authenticity and infectiousness of the works, but also provides readers with a rich reading experience.

The language of vernacular narratives often carries strong local colours. Writers create a kind and natural rural atmosphere by using dialects, slang and colloquial expressions. In *Border Town*, Shen Congwen uses a lot of vivid colloquial expressions based on the dialect of western Hunan, making readers feel as if they were in that quiet and beautiful town. Such language not only enhances the authenticity and affinity of the work, but also lets the readers feel the unique charm of vernacular culture [10]. In *Red Sorghum Family*, Mo Yan also depicts the customs of the northeastern township of Gaomi, Shandong Province, through language rich in regional characteristics. The local nature of this language is not only a true reproduction of rural life, but also a deep tribute to vernacular culture.

The language of vernacular narratives is also characterised by colloquialism. Writers make their works more readable and popular through the use of concise and easy-to-understand language. Lu Xun used a lot of colloquial expressions in *The Hometown*, making the work both literary and popular, easy to be accepted and understood by the general readers. Such language style not only brings the distance between the work and the readers closer, but also enhances the infectious and expressive power of the work.

In terms of narrative style, vernacular narratives present diverse characteristics. Writers have enriched the artistic connotation and expressive power of their works through different narrative techniques and artistic expressions. Shen Congwen's *Border Town* depicts the beauty and serenity of a small town in western Hunan with poetic strokes, and its romantic style combines with the delicate description of realism to create a dreamlike rural world. Mo Yan's works, on the other hand, are known for his bold narrative techniques and magical realism style, which profoundly reveal the complexity and diversity of rural life through strange storylines and rich symbolism. These diversified narrative styles make the vernacular narrative works more colourful in terms of expression and stronger in terms of artistic influence. In addition, vernacular narratives often integrate elements of tragedy and comedy, enhancing the drama and tension of the works through contrast and conflict. In *The Dust Settles*, A Lai expresses the sorrows and joys of rural life by depicting the struggles and frustrations of Dust, a young man returning to his hometown. This narrative style of sorrow and joy not only reflects the diversity of rural life, but also enhances the emotional depth and artistic expression of the work. In conclusion, the language and style of vernacular narrative vividly depicts the life in rural China through the use of local and colloquial language and diverse narrative techniques [11]. This unique mode of literary expression not only enriches the forms of expression of contemporary Chinese literature, but also provides readers with a multidimensional perspective for a deep understanding of rural society. The language and style of vernacular narrative are an important part of its unique charm, injecting vivid vitality and profound cultural connotations into the literary works.

6. Analysis of Typical Writers and Works

In modern and contemporary Chinese literature, many writers have created a series of classic vernacular narrative works with their unique perspectives and profound strokes. These works not only occupy an important position in the history of literature, but also profoundly influence the development of Chinese society and culture. By analysing typical writers such as Lu Xun, Shen

Congwen and Mo Yan and their works, we can better understand the rich connotation and artistic charm of vernacular narratives.

Lu Xun is one of the founders of modern Chinese literature, and his works of vernacular narrative, such as *The Hometown* and *The True Story of Ah Q*, reveal the backwardness of the rural areas and the plight of the peasants in old China by means of profound social criticism and delicate characterisation. In *The Hometown*, Lu Xun depicts the withering of the hometown and the change of people's hearts through the reunion of "I" with my old friend, Leap-Tu, when he returns to the hometown. The transformation of Leuntu from an energetic teenager to a middle-aged peasant who is suffering from oppression not only reflects the cruel reality of the society, but also expresses Lu Xun's deep sympathy for the rural life and his urgent hope for social reform. The image of Q in *The True Story of Ah Q*, with its ignorance, arrogance and helplessness, has become a symbol of the typical image of Chinese peasants, which profoundly reveals the spiritual dilemma and helplessness of the people at the bottom of the society.

Shen Congwen's works, with his poetic language and romantic strokes, depict the unique natural scenery and human landscape of western Hunan. His masterpiece, *Border Town*, shows a beautiful and peaceful rural world through the description of the western Hunan town of Chadong and the lives of its inhabitants. The innocence and kindness of the main character, Cuicui, as well as her warm relationship with her grandfather and Shunshun, form a picture of a rural society full of humane flavour. Through his delicate depiction of natural scenery and deep portrayal of characters' psychology, Shen created a dreamlike literary world, which not only expresses his fondness for the traditional rural life, but also reveals the impact and challenge of modernisation on the countryside.

Mo Yan is an important representative of contemporary Chinese literature. His works deeply reflect the complexity and diversity of Chinese rural society with his bold narrative techniques and magic realism style. In *The Red Sorghum Family*, Mo Yan demonstrates the historical changes and social upheavals in the northeastern township of Gaomi by depicting the fate of several generations of his family. He blends the violence, beauty and tragedy of the countryside into one, and through a strange storyline and rich symbolism, he profoundly reveals the contradictions and conflicts of rural life. *Bountiful Breasts and Fat Hips*, on the other hand, reflects the great strength and indomitable spirit of rural women in difficult times by depicting the resilience and sacrifice of her mother, Shangguan Lu. Mo Yan's works, with his unique perspective and profound social insight, show the rich connotation and artistic charm of vernacular narratives.

These typical writers and works have not only made great achievements in literary creation, but also had a profound impact on Chinese society and culture. Lu Xun, through his profound criticism of social reality, awakened people to think about social change; Shen Congwen, with his poetic strokes, showed the beauty and dilemmas of rural life; and Mo Yan, through his bold narrative techniques, revealed the complexity and diversity of rural society. Their works, which are both true reproductions of Chinese rural life and profound reflections on social changes, constitute an important chapter of Chinese rural narrative literature. By analysing these writers and works, we can better understand the rich connotation and artistic value of Chinese vernacular narratives.

7. Contemporary Value and Influence of Vernacular Narrative

As a form of literature, vernacular narrative not only occupies an important position in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, but also plays a unique value and influence in contemporary society. Through the delicate description and profound reflection on rural life, vernacular narrative provides readers with an important way to understand social reality and pass on cultural memory.

First of all, the value of vernacular narratives in contemporary society is mainly embodied in the profound reflection and criticism of social reality. With the rapid development of Chinese society, the urban-rural gap and rural problems are becoming increasingly prominent. By depicting the real

life in the countryside, vernacular narratives reveal the dilemmas and challenges faced by the rural society in the process of modernisation. A typical example is Mo Yan's *Frogs*, which arouses people's concern and thinking about social problems through its profound revelation of the impact of family planning policy on rural society. This realist literary expression not only enhances the social influence of the work, but also promotes public concern and discussion of rural issues.

Secondly, rural narratives are of great significance in the inheritance and innovation of national culture. The Chinese countryside is rich in traditional culture and historical memories, and vernacular narratives have preserved these valuable cultural heritages through the delicate depiction of rural scenery, folklore and lifestyles. Shen Congwen's *Border Town* preserves the unique cultural memory of the western Hunan region through its vivid depiction of the region's customs and people, making it an important part of the national culture. At the same time, vernacular narratives are constantly innovating, integrating modern ideas and global perspectives, enriching the expression and connotation of Chinese literature. For example, in *The Dust Settles*, contemporary writer A Lai creates a literary world with both national characteristics and modern significance by integrating Tibetan culture and modern narrative techniques.

Vernacular narratives also play an important role in enhancing people's sense of cultural identity and belonging. Against the background of globalisation and urbanisation, many people have developed a strong interest in and deep nostalgia for rural life and vernacular culture. Through vivid literary depictions, vernacular narratives evoke people's memories of their hometowns and their identification with rural culture. This emotional identification not only enhances people's pride in national culture, but also promotes social harmony and stability. For example, Li Rui's *Thick Earth* deeply touches the hearts of the readers through his affectionate portrayal of his hometown Hunan, expressing his love for his hometown and his deep emotion for the rustic culture. In addition, vernacular narratives have an important revelation and reference significance in the contemporary literary world. Through their in-depth depiction of rural life, vernacular writers have explored the multiple dimensions of human nature, society and culture, providing rich materials and inspirations for contemporary literary creation. Their works have not only enriched literary themes and methods of expression, but also provided valuable experience and reference for the younger generation of writers. For example, Jia Pingwa's *Qinqiang* has become one of the important works in contemporary literature through its meticulous depiction and profound reflection on the rural life in Shaanxi, setting a model for the subsequent creation of vernacular narratives. In conclusion, vernacular narrative has an important value and far-reaching influence in contemporary society. Through the true reproduction of rural life and profound reflection, it not only reveals the social reality, inherits and innovates the national culture, but also enhances people's cultural identity and sense of belonging. At the same time, vernacular narratives have also provided rich inspiration and materials for contemporary literary creation, and have become an indispensable and important part of Chinese literature.

8. Conclusions

Through an in-depth exploration of vernacular narratives in modern and contemporary Chinese literature, we can clearly see the evolutionary trajectory of this literary form at different historical stages and its colourful manifestations. With its unique perspective and profound social insight, the vernacular narrative comprehensively demonstrates the realistic predicament, cultural connotations and various changes in the process of modernisation in rural China. Whether it is Lu Xun's profound analysis of the life of peasants in old China in *The Hometown* or *The True Story of Q*, or Shen Congwen's poetic depiction of the local conditions in western Hunan in *Biancheng*, or Mo Yan's bold narration of the historical changes in the countryside in *The Family of Red Sorghum* or *Fat Hips and Breasts*, all of these works, with their own distinctive artistic styles and profound social concerns, have left a rich and colourful legacy in the history of Chinese literature.

Rural narratives have not only made great achievements in literary creation, but also played an important role in social reality. Through the real depiction of rural life and the profound revelation of

social problems, the vernacular narrative has aroused public concern and thinking about rural problems. In contemporary society, with the rapid advance of urbanisation and globalisation, rural problems and the urban-rural gap are becoming more and more prominent, and vernacular narratives continue to promote people's attention to rural life and their identification with vernacular culture with their unique power.

Vernacular narratives also play an important role in the inheritance and innovation of national culture. Through their delicate depiction of rural scenery, folklore and lifestyle, vernacular narratives have preserved a great deal of valuable cultural heritage and become an important part of national culture. At the same time, vernacular writers have continued to integrate modern ideas and global perspectives into their creations, enriching the expressions and connotations of Chinese literature, and providing rich materials and inspirations for contemporary literary creation.

In terms of characterisation, vernacular narratives have vividly reproduced the life scenes and social changes in the Chinese countryside through the portrayal of a wide range of characters such as peasants, rural intellectuals, and young people returning to their hometowns. These characters are not only a true depiction of rural reality, but also a profound expression of the writers' emotions and thoughts. Their resilience, wisdom and complex destinies shown in their works not only enrich the artistic expression of literature, but also provide readers with a multi-dimensional perspective to deeply understand the rural society. Through the study of vernacular narratives, we can not only better understand the changes and development of China's rural society, but also re-conceptualise and re-examine the unique charm and contemporary significance of vernacular culture in the context of globalisation. With its unique perspective and profound social insight, vernacular narratives have demonstrated the richness, colourfulness and profound connotations of rural China, and have made important contributions to the development of Chinese literature. In future literary creation, vernacular narrative will continue to play its unique charm and role, bringing readers more works with deep meaning. In conclusion, as an important part of Chinese literature, vernacular narrative has injected vivid vitality into the history of Chinese literature through its unique form of artistic expression and profound social insight. It not only enriches the subject matter and expressive techniques of literature, but also plays an important role in social reality. The study of vernacular narratives is not only an exploration of literary forms, but also a deep reflection on social reality and an in-depth excavation of cultural heritage. Through the study of vernacular narratives, we can better understand the complexity and diversity of Chinese society, and further enhance our identification and understanding of vernacular culture.

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