

The Native Reception and Transformation of Postmodernism in Chinese Literature: A Study of Neo-Realist Fiction

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Abstract. Originating in the mid to late 1980s in China, the "New Realism" novel was influenced by Western postmodernism and became one of the main variants of postmodernism in Chinese literary works, gradually forming a part of Chinese postmodernism literature. These works can analyze both the real-life scenes of Chinese cultural soil and the rebellious spirit influenced by postmodernism. This article takes the New Realism novel as the starting point and analyzes the local acceptance and transformation of postmodernism in Chinese literature, based on the social reality context of the transition period of Chinese literature. This article adopts the methods of parallel research and influence research, taking the characteristics of postmodernism in new realistic novels as the research object, exploring the acceptance of postmodernism in Chinese literature and its transformation in Chinese literature, in order to understand the existence of postmodernism in contemporary Chinese literature. Based on the research of Chinese new realistic novel schools, this article explores the development of Chinese literature in the context of postmodernism.

Keywords: "Postmodernism", "New Realism" fiction, Transformation, The Development of Chinese Literature.

1. Introduction

In the late 1980s, more and more representatives of Western postmodernism came to China to give lectures. Among them, James' lecture at Peking University was of great significance. James' construction theory of postmodernism in dialectical theory reflects the transformation from philosophy to non-philosophy, from temporal logic to spatial logic, and through the dialectical interpretation of Paul's time narrative theory, introduces the interpretation of three aspects of the narrative theory of materialist dialectics. James' lecture introduced the postmodernist perspective, marking a turning point in the acceptance of Western thought in Chinese literature. Later, his content was compiled by Tang Xiaobing as "Postmodernism and Cultural Theory" [1].

Due to the differences in traditional culture between China and the West, as well as the limitations of the context and the rapid changes in social culture and social relations, along with the changes in the creative thinking of Chinese intellectuals during the same period and the influence of their absorption of Western theories, the postmodernism that originated in the West and landed in China is bound to undergo filtration and variation by Chinese local factors. Therefore, the research on the acceptance and transformation of postmodernism in Chinese literature takes realistic novels as the entry point. First, the research on new realistic novels in China mainly focuses on the study of their relationship with realism, including comparative studies of new realistic novels and avant-garde novels, broad research on the characteristics of new realistic novels, and the analysis of new realistic novels using popular theories. However, the situation of studying new realistic novels from the perspective of postmodern theory is relatively rare. Secondly, new realistic novels are literary phenomena that emerged in a specific historical period. If new realistic novels are only defined as realistic literature or modernist literature, this statement is not comprehensive. The diversified characteristics of new realistic novels can better combine with the diversified tendencies of postmodernism. Finally, new realistic novels that originated in the 1980s and coincided with China's transformation period were also influenced by Western postmodernism [2].

2. A Review of Postmodernism in Contemporary Chinese Literature

The trajectory of "Postmodernism" in China, a highly influential socio-philosophical and cultural trend in contemporary Western thought, commenced in the early 1980s. Over time, its theories have been disseminated widely and comprehensively integrated within the Chinese intellectual landscape. Brian McHale, in his *Postmodernist Fiction*, elucidates: "Virtually every narrative has two aspects, one mimetic, the other artificial; one concerning what is represents some portion of the world we inhabit, and it does so in a particular manner [3]. Postmodernism, as a critical discourse, offers a novel perspective and methodology for interpreting contemporary Chinese literary works and phenomena. This approach provides a fresh framework for literary criticism in China. However, the application of postmodernism, originating from Western cultural contexts, presents both advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, a crucial issue for the integration of postmodernism within the Chinese literary landscape is how to effectively understand and utilize its positive aspects.

2.1. The Definition of Postmodernism

The definitional parameters of postmodernism remain, at present, a subject of ongoing contestation. As a socio-philosophical and cultural paradigm of considerable influence within contemporary Western thought, "postmodernism" has, with the continuous evolution of societal structures, cultural practices, and technological advancements, permeated not only literary works but also the quotidian sphere.

In Western discourse, the "Postmodern" intellectual current is generally perceived to have emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The term "post-modern" itself can be traced to the evaluation of avant-garde works by the renowned British artist Chapman around 1870, which were based on French Impressionist paintings. The academic community generally credits the initial appearance of the term "Postmodernism" to the anthology *Anthology of Spanish and Latin American Poetry* [4]. In the 1970s, certain American theorists began to broadly incorporate "Postmodernism" into scholarly discussions, defining it "to describe certain new works and phenomena that are markedly different from Modernism," subsequently imbuing the term with philosophical significance.

2.2. The Correlation between Postmodernism and Contemporary Chinese Literature

In the West, Postmodernism gained prominence during the 1960s and 1970s. Concurrently, China was undergoing a period of intense political upheaval. The dominance of highly centralized political structures and cultural authoritarianism permeated all aspects of social life. Both material resources and imaginative expression were severely constrained, resulting in a state of literary expression that was significantly diminished.

Following the cessation of the decade-long Cultural Revolution and the subsequent implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy in the early 1980s, China initiated a period of international engagement, facilitating the influx of diverse Western cultural currents. The exploration of literary movements such as "Scar Literature," "Reflection Literature," "Reform Literature," and "Root-Seeking Literature" during this new era, to varying degrees, demonstrated an engagement with the construction of modern values. However, Western modernism, predicated on the Enlightenment and the ethos of rationality, possesses a robust theoretical foundation and intellectual framework [5]. Due to the inherent cultural disparities between the East and West, China's millennia-old traditional culture and established social structures contributed to the marginalization, and at times, the suppression of modernism within the Chinese context. Nevertheless, the dissemination of various Western modernist currents in China fostered a cultural environment characterized by "blossoming of a hundred flowers and contention of a hundred schools," thereby establishing the preconditions for the emergence and evolution of postmodernism in China.

Within the unique cultural context of China, the postmodernist theory, originating from the Western cultural sphere, exhibits a profound deconstructive spirit, nihilistic tendencies, and an embrace of pluralism and relativism, all of which are deeply rooted in Western culture. Given the

cultural disparities between China and the West, scholars have engaged in extensive discussions regarding the reception and interpretation of this foreign intellectual current within the domestic context.

Existing research, combined with China's political, economic, and cultural context, suggests that the acceptance of postmodernism in China is simply a misinterpretation of postmodernism by Chinese society, blindly using and transplanting Western postmodernism. As Xu Youyu said, "Postmodernism's opposition to construction and advocacy for deconstruction may exacerbate deviance [6].

Based on a comprehensive analysis of Western postmodernism and modernist trends, existing research examines the acceptance and transformation of postmodernism in China by combining it with China's own cultural context. Postmodernism has a dual nature, but in any case, it has become a part of Chinese culture. While affirming postmodernism in Chinese culture, it is also necessary to connect with the Chinese context and approach the issue of integration with a rational attitude.

3. The Acceptance of Western Postmodernism by New Realistic Novels

3.1. Postmodernism Reflected in New Realistic Novels

Since the 1980s, Chinese literature has presented a prosperous and brilliant prospect - there is literature that exposes the scars of the Cultural Revolution and literature that deeply reflects on history. This period includes diverse genres of works such as educated youth literature, root seeking literature, and women's literature. However, in such a multicultural literary trend, the new realistic novels that emerged in the mid to late 1980s, after the root seeking literature in the Chinese novel industry and when avant-garde novels were in a low state at that time, were different from traditional realism and modernist literary tendencies. They rose to prominence among numerous literary phenomena, attracted attention from the literary community, sparked heated discussions, and became one of the research hotspots.

3.2. The Characteristic of Western Postmodernism in Chinese New Realistic Novels

Literature, as a carrier of social consciousness, has always carried the task of pursuing ideology such as truth, sublimity, and ultimate values around the traditional ideas of carrying the Way through literature and enlightening the Way through literature.

One of the deconstructive manifestations of postmodernism, characterized by criticality and deconstruction, is the weakening and rebellion against the mainstream consciousness of contemporary society. For example, even in the 1980s, Enlightenment literature's criticism of the ideology of the Cultural Revolution essentially had a tendency towards mainstream ideology or political utilitarianism.

For example, Chi Li's *Troubled Life* tells the story of the entire day of the Yin family's experience, only depicting the protagonist's troubles for a day, but reflecting the troubles that ordinary people face in life over time. Waking up children, going to the bathroom, washing up, doing homework, eating, anxious job evaluations, and so on, these endless daily trivialities have been consuming people's lives. My wife handed him a cup of warm water and threw a towel in his face" [7]. Such a small gesture could make him feel the happiness of life

The "New Realism" is dedicated to describing the daily troubles of ordinary people, such as clothing, food, housing, transportation, birth, aging, illness, and death; It expresses the aesthetic characteristics of "primitive ecology" in a "zero degree narrative" manner, and also realizes the direct and serious face to the heavy and trivial daily life.

In terms of material selection, "Troubled Life" takes the life of Yin Jiahou, a middle-aged employee of Wuhan Iron and Steel Company, as the theme and meticulously depicts his daily life experiences. Starting from being awakened by the howling of his son falling to the ground in the middle of the night, feeling anxious and pulling off the light rope, and causing his wife to complain, writing about turning off the lights, falling asleep again, washing up in the crowded public restroom

after waking up, picking up his son to catch the bus, getting on the ferry to catch the monthly ticket, discussing life on the ferry, having breakfast at a restaurant after getting off the ferry, taking his child to kindergarten after breakfast, returning to work in the car, then writing about going to the workshop to evaluate bonuses in the morning, having lunch after the meeting, and Lei Lei being "confined" at noon, going to the grocery store to buy alcohol and having a meeting with Yali, followed by a conversation about introducing advanced Japanese equipment in the factory director's office in the afternoon, and picking up the child after work. Go on the ferry, have dinner at home, and finally the novel ends with Yin Jiahou falling asleep again [8]. The article meticulously describes the daily necessities of life for Yin Jiahou, an ordinary worker, and the selected examples are all trivial matters in daily life.

In terms of structure, Chi Li's article structure is also in line with the mundane and repetitive nature of secular life. The *Troubled Life* is mostly a simple and natural artistic structure of life flow. Except for a small amount of interludes in the text, it mostly adopts the traditional chronological order, just like life, with no major ups and downs or twists and turns, which is in line with the logic of life. It is worth mentioning the circular narrative structure, which is a quite unique structure in the text of "*Troubled Life*". This structure forms a circle from the beginning to the end of the story, downplaying the plot and maintaining a simple structure [9]. From waking up from a dream to falling asleep at the end of the day, Yin Jiahou's life experiences are like a circle, reflecting the daily cycle of secular life. It is within these circles that the author achieves a primitive depiction of the daily lives of ordinary people.

4. The Transformation of Western Postmodernism in Chinese New Realism Novels

As the saying goes, "Oranges born in Huainan are called oranges, while those born in Huaibei are called tangerines." From the perspective of postmodernism, it can be concluded through the analysis in the previous section that the dissemination of postmodern theoretical trends in China has endowed new realistic novels with distinct aesthetic characteristics of postmodernism. But the spread of postmodernism in China is also bound to be a long process of change. Therefore, this chapter mainly explores the reasons and characteristics of the transformation of postmodernism in China's local dissemination, as well as its manifestation in new realistic novels. For example, the new realistic text creation accepts the deconstruction depth mode of postmodernism, but behind the uncertainty presented in its creation, there is a significant increase in resistance to real life; At the same time, new realistic novelists often deconstruct within traditional frameworks, constrained by Chinese local culture and social systems. The deconstructive spirit of postmodernism has also been reshaped into a constructivist color in the dissemination process in China, which has led to the transformation of Western postmodernism in China from deconstruction to a construction based on Chinese local culture.

4.1. The Representation of the Transformation of Western Postmodernism in New Realistic Novels

One of the fundamental characteristics of Western postmodernism is the exploration of the connotation and depth of literary works. It denies all existence related to essence and absolute spirit, and expresses everything in abstract texts and symbols. Therefore, in postmodern texts, the uncertainty of postmodernism is often reflected through unclear themes, incomplete plots, atypical character images, and playful language. For example, in Robegrier's postmodern work *In the Maze*, the title's "maze" itself carries multiple meanings, so readers will have many interpretations and questions after reading, ultimately leading to the theme of the article moving towards mystery and nothingness. The protagonist soldier in the article has neither an exact name nor a specific origin and background, which gives the character a certain degree of postmodernism and lacks a normal temporal and logical sequence in the plot. From the perspective of postmodernism, China's new

realistic novels have obvious postmodern characteristics, and also reflect the trans-formative features in the process of accepting postmodernism - that is, postmodern literature in China adopts a vague creative principle, but the reflection and resistance intentions towards reality are exceptionally clear, with a certain degree of relevance to reality.

4.2. The Concrete Manifestation of Postmodernism in Chinese New Realistic Novels

In the portrayal of character images in the text, new realistic novels attempt to eliminate typicality through popularization. Whether it is Yin Jiahou, Zhuang Jianfei, Zhao Tiansheng and others in Chi Li's works, or Qi Ge and Er Ge in Fang Fang's works, or Xiaolin, Lao Fei, Fū hreng and others in Liu Zhenyun's works, they are all characters who blend in with the general public, without personality, typicality, or the huge halo of historical figures, and are all in a state of mediocrity and inaction. The characteristics of these small characters mentioned above coincide with the core presentation of postmodernism. But in many texts, readers can also see the rebellious intentions of the characters, whose resistance is not like the illusory resistance of the characters in postmodern literature, and even what they are actually resisting is unknown. But the characters in these new realistic novels have clear goals, and readers can clearly perceive that these people are resisting a mediocre reality, with a strong intention of resistance and reflection.

In Fang Fang's article *Scenery* the second brother constantly strives for his dream of becoming an architect in college, but when faced with the shattered dream and the contemplation of death, he feels pain and confusion about life. But just as he faced the pain of life, these pains were diluted by love that was higher than materialism, and then he regrouped and gained firmness and satisfaction. Here, the second brother shows a protest against materialism with spirit. Although he ultimately declares the failure of this resistance with the outcome of death, it must be admitted that readers see this consciousness of resistance. For example, in the works *Unit* and *A Field of Chicken Feathers* Xiaolin and his wife, at the beginning, "no one is without a sense of career ambition. Everyone has worked hard, exerted themselves, stayed up late to read, and had grand ideals." In this regard, the new realistic novels are influenced by postmodernism and adopt the characteristic of depth of dissolution. But in essence, from the portrayal of the characters in the text, most of them have a clear spirit of resistance and reflection, which is also different from Western postmodernism.

4.3. The New Construction of Western Postmodernism by Chinese New Realistic Novels

The most prominent feature of postmodernism is its thorough deconstruction spirit. It is the deconstruction and abandonment of modern Enlightenment rationality by Westerners after the end of World War II [10]. After the reform and opening up, in the face of diverse cultural contexts, the mainstream consciousness supported by traditional culture in China gradually withdrew from its dominant position, and the Western postmodern trend with deconstructive spirit served as a tool for deconstruction. The new realistic novel, through its depiction of secular life, deviates from mainstream political ideology and turns its attention to the secular world of populism, reflecting the rebellious spirit of postmodernism. However, due to the constraints of Chinese local culture and reality system, the deconstructive approach of postmodernism has been endowed with a new constructive color in Chinese literature.

A strong sense of historical consciousness is deeply rooted in the minds of every Chinese literati, influenced by thousands of years of traditional culture. Throughout history, literati have enjoyed vividly portraying ethical and moral concepts. So compared to individual liberation, Chinese local writers emphasize more on the adherence and dedication to family, country, and love. The collective centered ideology is deeply rooted, and the ultimate concern for the country and the people still permeates in their bones. Many Chinese literati, including new realistic novelists, have been subtly influenced by this traditional culture. In the interview with the other party titled "Humanistic Ethics in the Secularized Era," it is mentioned that "I am still an intellectual [11]. As a contemporary intellectual, Chinese local writers possess a strong sense of care and practical responsibility.

In the process of the spread of postmodernism in China, the literary phenomenon of new realistic novels in the 1980s was influenced by Western literary trends. On the one hand, the new realistic novels reflect the aesthetic characteristics of postmodernism, which mainly uses popularized language to restore or present the ordinary and trivial daily lives of ordinary people. On the other hand, it also selectively accepted the deconstruction of meaning and the rebellious deconstruction spirit of mainstream consciousness in postmodern literature, replacing the grand narrative of heroism with personal narratives in daily life. "Especially constrained by the local reality of China, it filtered out the shortcomings of postmodern literature that only focuses on deconstruction and does not focus on construction, and obscured reality, so that the Chinese literary world mainly absorbs the narrative techniques of postmodern literature, partially absorbs its deconstruction spirit, and adheres to the fine tradition of caring for reality in Chinese literature. This is a powerful proof of the transformation of Western postmodernism in the fertile land of Chinese literature [12].

5. Reflections on Postmodernism in Chinese Literature

New realistic novels, as a result of the acceptance and transformation of postmodernism in the soil of Chinese literature, are no longer traditional Western postmodern literature, but rather reflect more explicit characteristics rooted in Chinese culture. The acceptance and transformation of postmodernism in new realistic novels involve a reflection on the way reality is reflected. On the basis of adhering to our national traditions, they absorb and reuse foreign theories, and selectively accept Western postmodernism while combining local culture and moral ethics, and put it into practice in literary creation.

5.1. Choose Postmodernism from the Perspective of Local Reality Culture

With the spread and acceptance of postmodernism in China, the "New Realism" novels, which originated in the mid to late 1980s and were closely related to the social reality of China's transition period, have been influenced by Western postmodernism and have become one of the variants of postmodern literature, forming a part of Chinese postmodern literature.

How to deal with this western literary school requires researchers to adopt the attitude of "taking the essence and discarding the dross". Firstly, postmodernism itself is a double-edged sword, with both positive and negative aspects coexisting. It is not advisable to completely copy or completely negate this foreign trend. Secondly, in the current more inclusive social environment and diversified literary and artistic development, postmodernism has a certain guiding role in the development of Chinese literature, although some of its content breaks our traditional literary concepts. At the same time, in the context of globalization, Chinese literature should not blindly imitate the West while learning from it. It should also build a literary theory with Chinese national characteristics to guide creative practice on the basis of a combination of Chinese and Western cultures and inclusiveness.

5.2. Adopting Constructive Postmodern Theory to Guide Literary Creation

On the basis of absorbing and borrowing from the deconstruction of Western postmodernism, the new realistic novels reflect the characteristics of flatness and have a strong atmosphere of postmodern creative concepts [13]. But the new realistic novels are also constrained by China's local culture and realistic context, containing humanistic care and spiritual depth. It transformed the deconstruction of postmodernism into a constructive transformation, achieving a breakthrough in the postmodern model in Chinese literature and effectively promoting the development of Chinese postmodern literature.

Constructive postmodern theory requires people to refocus on the novelty of tradition, and after a period of modern forgetfulness, pay attention to the decline and decay of new things [14]. Therefore, while drawing on Western literary ideas and styles, Chinese literary creation should also have a deeper understanding of the spiritual connotation and essence of postmodernism, and consider feasible paths for the integration of Chinese literary soil and foreign literary ideas. While absorbing the spirit of Western postmodernism, people should also see that the deconstructive thinking of Western

postmodernism is "a critical deconstructive spirit derived from Western cultural traditions, a free and inclusive cultural attitude, and a cultural connotation of human subjectivity and openness and freedom" [15]. To cultivate and develop China's own postmodern literature, we should practice the multidimensionality and richness of postmodern theory, focus on more long-term and constructive postmodern theories, and better promote the development of Chinese local literature.

5.3. Adhere to Literary Boundaries with a Reasonable Aesthetic Orientation

In the postmodern context, the principles of commodities and consumption have deeply penetrated people's hearts, and the rise of multiculturalism guides the aesthetic taste of literary creation in this era. How to uphold the original intention of Chinese culture and local schools in this inevitable wave of cultural integration is a question we need to consider.

On the one hand, with the rapid development of technology, the rise of electronic media, high-tech mechanical reproduction, and the emergence of mass media and imaging industries, cultural symbols that can be seen everywhere are flooding people's lives; On the other hand, there is an endless stream of spiritual consumption methods such as movies, popular music, and online games, which has led to a crisis in literature that used to have significant meaning and rich value for human life. The rise of popular literature and fast food literature is in opposition to the high elegance and depth upheld by traditional literature. Literature based on "aesthetic values" has been impacted by secular trends, which requires us to adhere to literary boundaries with a reasonable "aesthetic value orientation". The author not only need to root Western postmodern literature in the soil of Chinese culture, but also guide the public's aesthetic appreciation and taste appropriately. This aesthetic is a enjoyment that is put into the soul, but also requires literary production in a way that cares for reality. We need to combine literary aesthetics with the construction of enlightenment values that care for reality, so as to improve local literature. The value of a work, Reject the tendency towards vulgarization, return to the power of literature itself, and build postmodern literature rooted in the soil of Chinese culture.

6. Conclusion

In the wave of multiculturalism, new realistic novels are different from previous literary creations in China. They enter secular life with an approachable attitude and adopt Western postmodern narrative methods to tell the daily lives of the lower class people in China. The civilian consciousness reflected in it not only has strong postmodern characteristics, but also relates to China's practice of entering the context of real culture. On the one hand, it reflects and criticizes the traditional spirit, while on the other hand, it adheres to the fine tradition of Chinese literature that cares about reality. Therefore, the new realistic novels adopt the deconstructive mode of postmodernism, but in essence, they contain a color of construction. Its acceptance and transformation of postmodernism not only helps us understand the existence of postmodernism in contemporary Chinese literature, but also prompts us to further consider how to balance the relationship between foreign literary trends and Chinese literature when they intersect.

Therefore, China's construction of its own postmodern literature should delve deeper into the spiritual connotation of Western postmodernism, adhere to the fine traditions of Chinese literature, integrate China's reality with postmodernism, make its own choices in various dimensions of postmodernism, and surpass postmodern theory by adopting constructive postmodern theory to achieve breakthroughs in postmodern models and apply postmodernism to Chinese literature.

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