

The return of the collective narrative benchmark in contemporary literature

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Abstract: A review of various types of classical Chinese literature reveals a common characteristic of collective narrative. The significance of collective narrative stems from the relationship between people, culture, and literature. Literature is the way people play with memory, while culture is the guideline for human life activities. People need culture to guide practice and need literature to interpret metaphysical questions that culture cannot demonstrate. The root of the current literary crisis lies in the rebellion of literature against the collective nature of culture, causing literature to detach from real culture and become a game of pure personal imagination. Only by focusing on human reality, repositioning with culture as the coordinate, and returning to collective narrative can literature escape the crisis encountered in the new era.

Keywords: Contemporary Chinese Literature, Collective Narrative, Literary Essence

1. Introduction

Literature has faced various crises in different eras. In response to these crises, scholars and literati have thought and explored, ultimately resolving the crises and giving rise to mature literary genres such as Han Fu, Tang poetry, Song Ci, Yuan Qu, and Ming-Qing novels. These developments have not only promoted the evolution of literature but also contributed to the progress of social culture. After the reform and opening up, society underwent tremendous changes. However, the reform of literature lagged behind social reform, eventually leading to a crisis in the existence of literature. In summary, the root of the literary survival crisis lies in the alienation of the relationship between literature and culture, and between literature and people. This alienation has resulted in literature becoming a purely illusory game of imagination. Its illusory nature has caused literature to lose a solid foundation for existence.

2. Characteristics of collective narrative in classical literature

The collective narrative in literature encompasses two meanings: universal narrative and realistic narrative. The collective demands common welfare and progress, hence classical literature inevitably discusses universal issues and is based on reality, facilitating the understanding of real issues. Therefore, classical literature possesses characteristics of realism.

Realist literature focuses on the creation of typical characters within a typical environment and plays an important role in the perfection of culture. Wordsworth's Romantic manifesto states, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," and later, Bacon, in his brief analysis of poetry, believed that poetry is related to imagination and makes the appearance of things conform to the desires of the mind, emphasizing the expression and catharsis of human inner emotions in Romantic literature. However, whether it is realist or Romantic literature, the content expressed is related to reality and is a form of collective narrative. One of the reasons for the greatness of "Dream of the Red Chamber" is its revelation of the cause of the decline of the feudal dynasty - capital; revolutionary novels like "Red Sun" depict the passion and reality of revolutionary warfare. Mythological novels such as "Divine Tomb" and "Yin-Yang Agent" are popular among readers due to the spiritual concepts that align with contemporary society contained within the novels. In "Divine Tomb," it is said, "No one can succeed casually," and "There is no such thing as invincible in this world. When a person feels lonely and has no match, it is just a feeling in a certain field. In a sense, this person's level is still not enough. If he could enter a new field, he would find that

the world is really too big!" [2]. In the online novel "Yin-Yang Agent," Duanmu Sen always emphasizes the importance of adhering to the duties of a Yin-Yang agent and doing what one should do. It is precisely because these novels, as a history of success and struggle, reflect the aspirations of the general public that they have won the favor of readers, especially the enthusiasm of young people.

Mo Yan's success is closely related to his realist style. His award-winning work "Frog" truly recreates the conflict between official and folk cultures in China, showcasing the suffering of the entire Chinese nation. "I do not complain about my aunt, that is history. History only looks at the results and ignores the means. In the past more than twenty years, the Chinese have finally controlled the situation of the population explosion in an extreme way. To be realistic, this is not only for China's own development but also a contribution to all of humanity. From this point of view, the Western criticism of China's family planning is unfair." [3] This tragedy has shocked Chinese readers and has been recognized by foreign literary critics. "The Garlic Ballads" exposes the government's exploitation of the people, while "The Republic of Wine" and "Red Sorghum" criticize the current "bureaucratism" of society; "Big Breasts & Wide Hips" depicts the suffering life of the lower classes in the 20th century and praises the greatness, simplicity, and selflessness of mothers; works such as "Thirteen Steps" and "Forty-One Bullets" showcase the tragic lives of the lower classes; novels represented by "Sandalwood Death" imply the loss of traditional culture in modern times.

3. The relationship between people, culture, and literature

The reason why the collective narrative of literature has become an indispensable characteristic for the survival of contemporary literature lies in the relationship between literature and people, as well as culture. Culture is the pattern of behavior and philosophy of people; literature continues the mythological thinking mode of humanity, thereby becoming a supplement to culture; people in literature achieve the alleviation of pain caused by the insufficiency of ability through imagination.

3.1. People and culture

"Culture is usually divided into broad and narrow senses. The broad sense of culture almost includes the entire human social life, which can be illustrated by Hegel's famous saying, 'Culture is the second nature created by humans'; the narrow sense of culture refers to ideology and the corresponding institutional and organizational structures." [4] Culture is the fixed pattern of behavior formed by people in the long-term process of trial and practice, which optimizes human survival in the environment, thus culture is the solidification of the extension of human capabilities; as bearers of culture, people are restricted by cultural norms, while at the same time they use culture to seek development.

Humans, as living beings, share the same insufficiency as other life forms and must integrate into the environment, engaging in the exchange of matter and energy with it. The fundamental principle is to obtain the greatest self-sufficiency at the smallest cost. Under this goal, practice is carried out, gradually forming a fixed set of behavioral practices adapted to the environment. Different criteria form relatively stable patterns through communication and practice, and this pattern is culture.

The essence of culture is the guidelines for human activity. Since life mainly exists in the illusory form of memory, culture, which is attached to life, naturally has a clear subjectivity. On the other hand, because culture is generated in the process of interaction between humans and the objective environment, it has a certain degree of objectivity compared to literature. Human practical ability has its limitations. For practical activities within human capabilities, culture can guide people to achieve success in practice. For practical activities that are beyond human capabilities, or those that cannot be carried out due to conflicts between overall and partial interests, culture can, according to its philosophy and logic, eliminate or alleviate the anxiety and pain caused by the limitations of practice.

At the societal level, culture plays a crucial role in maintaining peace and order. "The root of all human disasters is that the reform of cultural institutions lags behind the reform of technological progress." [5] An important reason for the outbreak of both world wars was that after the Industrial Revolution, society made tremendous technological advancements, while cultural concepts lagged behind. After each world war, humanity has initiated a large-scale wave of cultural reflection. World War I led to skepticism about rationality, while World War II gave rise to modernist and postmodernist philosophical trends.

3.2. Literature and humanity

"On one hand, literature is closely related to people's lives, and on the other hand, it is closely related to human nature. Works that focus on representation provide us with the richness and vividness of the lives of people in the past, while works that focus on expression reveal the course of the human soul." [6] Literature is a form of play for human memory, and the sense of pleasure in human life has a very strong subjectivity. Literature satisfies the human need for pleasure through its illusory nature; the practical abilities of humans have the limitations of their times, and the pain brought about by these limitations requires the playful nature of literature to alleviate and eliminate.

Human life possesses only the present moment, and this moment, whether compared to the future or the past, is insignificant. Therefore, as living beings, the entire meaning of human life lies in memory. Human emotions and rationality are only manifested within the context of the past and the future. Cognition of an individual's life is also primarily based on their past life activities. Precisely because humans focus on life activities that exist in the form of brain memory, and cannot travel through time and space to return to the past, the existence and creation of literature become possible. In essence, literature is a form of play with past memories, where people freely piece together memories according to the needs of reason and emotion to meet spiritual needs.

Due to the illusory nature of the existence of life, literature, as a form of play with life memories, leads to the fact that although literature has educational and cognitive functions, the most fundamental nature of literature is its aesthetic attribute. Literature compensates for the lack of memories due to limited practice with illusory imagination.

3.3. Literature and culture

"Culture and literature are originally one and the same. Literature was once the most concentrated expression of culture, possessing beautiful emotions, depicting the joys and sorrows, reunions and partings, and the spectrum of human emotions with such a poignant and moving eloquence that, over time, it has subtly disseminated the brilliance of culture." [7] Literature is a complement to culture, and it must be in harmony with the cultural demands of the times, thus literature forms genres and modes of expression that are adapted to culture; as culture is a solidified extension of human capabilities, it implies that it is limited by the objective capabilities of humanity, necessitating the use of literary imagination to compensate for the memory gaps caused by the limitations of human practical abilities.

Literature is a component of culture, having differentiated from its concepts, and compensates for the deficiencies of culture with its illusory aesthetic nature. The pursuit of the pleasure of life by individuals and society is eternal. However, their practical abilities are subject to various limitations. When the desires of humans conflict with objective reality, humans experience depression, anxiety, fear, and unease. If these negative emotions are not effectively resolved and accumulate over time, they can lead to a spiritual crisis for individuals and instability in social order. Culture, on one hand, guides human practice with its objectivity; on the other hand, it keeps human activities within the limits appropriate to the conditions of the times based on ethics and morals. However, relying solely on culture cannot completely solve the crisis caused by insufficient practical abilities. At this point, literature can compensate for this deficiency with its unique functions.

Literature satisfies the life experiences that people cannot obtain in real practice by purposefully editing their memories of life, thereby achieving the purpose of spiritual pleasure.

"Due to the 'mythos' (myth, a common translation used in Taiwan's academic circles), imagination, and other characteristics of myths, it is now difficult for people in a rational and scientific thinking paradigm to restore the true content contained in myths, hence myths are also widely regarded as the earliest form of literature." [8] The earliest form of literature originates from myths, which are a way for people, in their extreme weakness, to understand and control natural forces. Nowadays, as science has become increasingly advanced, myths have been marginalized, but this way of thinking has not disappeared. When humans face difficulties they cannot overcome, they still turn to imagination, relying on fantasy to make up for the shortcomings of their practical abilities, and literature is the continuation of myth in the scientific age.

In terms of the forms of Chinese literature, the success of time-travel themed films and TV series, and Xian Xia (immortal cultivation) online novels, such as the novels "Divine Tomb" and "The Grave Robbers"

Chronicles," as well as TV dramas, all reflect the mentality of the general public when they lack practical abilities and yet want to change reality. The common point of the aforementioned novels and film and television works is the reliance on supernatural power to change reality.

The development of human civilization is inseparable from culture, and the deficiencies in the functions of culture itself require literature to make up for them. As living beings, humans have a unique way of existence, which makes the existence of literature an inevitability.

4. Returning to the literary essence of collective narrative

The mythological thinking pattern of humanity is the root of literary value, and the current situation of China's fragmented and conflicting cultural value system directly determines the necessity of collective narrative in literature.

4.1. Current state of Chinese culture

The development of Chinese culture has shown a pattern where elite culture leads the folk culture. Like other cultures, Chinese elite culture focuses on the construction of metaphysical culture during its development, exploring propositions such as the meaning of the universe, life, and human rationality. An important part of metaphysical culture is religion, and elite cultures in various regional cultures are closely related to religion and witchcraft, with religion having a significant influence on social beliefs. In contemporary China, religious hues have faded, but this has been accompanied by a lack of faith. Compared to Western culture, where Christianity has become the state religion and social faith and morality are based on Christianity, Chinese cultural forms have established faith based on morality, and the main support for Chinese morality is Confucian thought. Feudal society's Confucian thought relied on the "interaction between heaven and man" as its theoretical cornerstone. The contemporary society's denial of this metaphysical thought has led to a lack of metaphysical support for China's moral system, resulting in the decline of Chinese morality. The decline of moral culture, an important force in the elite culture that dominates folk culture in China, has weakened the influence of Chinese elite culture, in contrast to the rise of folk and mass culture. Folk and mass culture have a strong utilitarian and entertainment color, emphasizing human nature and instinct, and have a certain tendency against civilization, which has become an important reason for the chaos in China's cultural pattern.

Contemporary China is in a period of cultural contention, with a diversification of cultural values and concepts. Tradition and modernity, Chinese and foreign cultures are in conflict, and different groups and regions are culturally divided based on their distinct cultural values. "In addition to film and television works, other cultural fields are also generally plagued by impetuosity and vulgarity: the body writing trend popular in the literary world is still thriving, the violent online games and pornographic websites that fascinate countless teenagers are repeatedly banned but not eradicated. There is also the mass media's hype over celebrity gossip; the distortion of historical figures by those seeking attention; and the secular culture's promotion of a luxurious lifestyle, etc. These are all cultural tendencies that are extremely irresponsible to society." [9]

The increasingly close social connections have, on one hand, facilitated exchanges between people, and on the other hand, intensified conflicts and competition among them. The traditional Chinese cultural system is facing collapse, and human desires have been fully aroused. Everyone is trying to tap into their potential, but the limitations of objective conditions such as systems restrict these desires, leading to a pervasive sense of impetuosity and anxiety among the Chinese public in contemporary times.

Problems that culture cannot resolve due to the limitations of its objectivity need to be addressed by literature. As the pace of changes in the social environment far exceeds the development of culture and the limits of human observation and thinking, in the face of human anxiety and bewilderment, literature, relying on its aesthetic characteristics, can alleviate the crisis caused by the lack of cultural interpretive power to a certain extent. "Because, today, the affairs of the moral world have more immediate interests at stake, and the state of the era urgently demands the philosophical spirit to explore the most perfect works in all artistic works, that is, to study how to establish true political freedom... Substantial systems are inevitably oppressive to the human spirit and to some extent hinder the realization of its freedom, while the aesthetics of artistic works can alleviate the pain of the human spirit." [10]

4.2. The mythological thinking pattern of humanity

The mythological thinking pattern of humanity is a way of grasping the unknown, and both literature and myth rely on imagination to think about and explore unknown issues. When faced with external forces that cannot be understood or effectively controlled, humans tend to experience fear, unease, and anxiety. Even if they cannot provide a scientifically reasonable explanation to guide practice, humans will still propose an explanation with only functional significance in the form of imagination, and myth is a method for humans to grasp the world. "Even though the culture we live in mainly relies on rational thinking... the mythological thinking pattern has not disappeared, and its legacy can still be seen everywhere: we give cards with poetic and mythological information, we sing nursery rhymes and tell fairy tales to children, we read daily horoscopes, etc." [11]

After the unification by the Qin Dynasty, China experienced over four hundred years of unity under the Han Dynasty, and by the end of the Han Dynasty, the Confucianism-centered ideological and cultural system was essentially perfected. However, while society operated according to this set of ethical systems, another question arose: why should society function according to this particular system, and where does its rationality come from? This led to the emergence of the cultural trend during the Wei and Jin Dynasties. The scholars of that time engaged in discussions of purity and exhibited behaviors that deviated from conventional ethics, precisely because they were questioning the rationality of social ethics, searching for the "essence" of this system on the so-called "utility" level. Just as the emperor's supreme power was derived from the mandate of heaven, after a series of prolonged explorations, Confucian scholars of the Song Dynasty proposed the doctrine of heavenly principle, suggesting that the essence of social systems and ethics lies in the heavenly principle and the laws governing the world's operation.

Any culture must demonstrate its own rationality. Only after proving its rationality will it be firmly believed in and adhered to by people. If it is questioned during the practical process and its value and significance cannot be proven, its existence will face a crisis.

Humanity always has unknown territories, and the emergence of confidence in exploring the unknown requires cultural solutions. When this function of culture goes awry or cannot be carried out normally, a spiritual crisis in human society arises. After entering the industrial age, productivity has been greatly improved, and material wealth has been unprecedented. Cultures in different environments have also basically established corresponding political and economic systems, establishing the relationship between humans and the environment on a metaphysical level. However, humans have subjective initiative towards the environment and demand to find reasons and bases for social practice activities according to the existing system. Metaphysical issues cannot be solved by practice alone; they require cultural construction. As an important supplement to culture, literature serves as a medium between practice and culture. "Literature originates from life but transcends it." On the one hand, literature uses memory to comb through practice, and on the other hand, it shapes the spiritual homeland of humanity with its spirituality, constructing the value and meaning of human life.

4.3. The inevitability of returning to the collective narrative in literature

People need culture to guide their actions, but the development of mass culture, which lacks the strong influence of elite culture, shows a kind of deformed prosperity. Elite culture, due to its profound and abstruse nature, has some difficulties in spreading downwards. Literature, with its illusory nature, meets the human need for pleasure. Writers, on the one hand, have received education in elite culture, and on the other hand, their creation needs to face the public. Therefore, culture spreads its elite cultural ideas through literary creation, completing the influence of elite culture on social beliefs and morals, and promoting the development of the entire social civilization. "Literature is the study of humanity; it can only indirectly affect society by influencing the spiritual world of readers, changing the internal mental state of readers (including ideals, beliefs, emotions, will, etc.), and changing the life attitude and actions of the recipients." [12] Elite culture is developed from mass culture and folk culture, and in essence, it is a generalization and reflection of social culture, a kind of culture with overall forward-looking nature. Folk culture has regional characteristics, but elite culture has relative universality, and its dissemination is applicable to the whole society.

Therefore, literature must adapt to the demands of culture and return to collective narrative, that is, to think about and explore the universal realistic issues of contemporary society in a literary manner. Only in this way can literature gain the recognition of readers and possess a strong vitality.

There is currently a tendency in literature towards an overabundance of individualized expression and a neglect of collective narrative, which leads to literature becoming a personal linguistic game. Ancient Chinese literature has always had the realistic tradition of "using literature to convey principles," and Cao Pi called literature "the great enterprise of governing the country, and the eternal significant matter." During the Chinese war against aggression, literature became a powerful weapon to mobilize the entire nation for resistance; in the West, from the ancient Greek era to before the Industrial Revolution, writers and philosophers held a lofty or even sacred status, especially poets. Aristotle believed that the status and contribution of poets were even higher than those of historians because the content expressed by poetry has more universality and inspirational significance.

Literature must aim to focus on reality. Even postmodernist literature is accepted by readers in part because it reflects the sense of fragmentation and the perception of absurdity that people experience after being alienated in reality. If literature pays attention to reality, it will inevitably pay attention to people, and the content it expresses must be related to human nature, which is precisely the foundation of culture. Therefore, literature can only become an organic part of culture and be accepted by society and humanity by being based on and rooted in reality.

5. Conclusion

In the long river of literature, the transition of each era is accompanied by crises and challenges in literature. However, it is these crises that have stimulated the profound thinking and unremitting exploration of scholars and literati, giving birth to a series of mature and prosperous literary genres such as Han Fu, Tang poetry, Song Ci, Yuan Qu, and Ming-Qing novels. They have not only promoted the development of literature itself but also contributed to the advancement of social culture.

However, after the reform and opening up and the tremendous social changes, the pace of literature seems to have failed to keep up with the times, gradually revealing a crisis of existence. The relationship between literature and culture, and between literature and people, has become alienated, and the illusory nature of literature has caused it to lose a solid foundation for survival. But the true value of literature lies in the power of its collective narrative, which can connect individuals with society, reflect universal issues, and promote the cognition of reality.

The relationship between literature and people, and between literature and culture, is inseparable. Culture is the embodiment of people's behavioral patterns and philosophies, while literature continues the mythological thinking mode of humanity, becoming a supplement to culture. In literature, people use imagination to eliminate the painful feelings caused by their own limitations. Literature and culture complement each other, together forming an important part of human spiritual life.

In contemporary China, the development of culture shows a multifaceted pattern of elite culture, folk culture, and mass culture. The decline of elite culture and the rise of folk culture reflect the lack of social faith and the diversification of cultural values. Against this backdrop, the collective narrative of literature is particularly important, as it can connect individuals with society, reflect universal issues, and promote the understanding of reality.

Literature must return to its collective narrative as its primary role, focusing on reality and taking root in the common experiences and universal issues of humanity. Through the illusory nature of literature, it meets people's needs for pleasure and alleviates the pain caused by limited practice. Literature should become an important supplement to culture, using the power of aesthetics to alleviate the crisis caused by the lack of cultural interpretive ability, and to construct the value and meaning of human life.

Ultimately, the value and significance of literature lie in its ability to influence the spiritual world of readers, to alter their mental state, and thereby to indirectly affect society. Literature must adapt to the demands of culture and return to collective narrative in order to gain the recognition of readers and a strong vitality. In this way, literature can truly become an integral part of culture and contribute to the development of society and humanity.

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