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A Metaphorical Exploration of Landscape Writing in Literature:  
Transformations and Claims from Natural Scenery to  
Mindscapes

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**Abstract**

*He is an important writer in modern Chinese literature, and a special writer who showed a different path of creation when revolutionary literature dominated the world in the 1930s, and his research has been increasing in the academic circles since the 1980s. In this paper, we take the writer's representative regional world, namely the world of Xiangxi, as the center, and introduce the principle of "landscape" of Japanese scholar Kojin karatani to explore the inevitability of his creation against the trend from the three aspects of discovery, construction, and the demands behind the landscape. By analyzing this kind of landscape writing as a metaphor, this paper aims to reveal the literary pursuits and national sentiments behind it, to provoke readers to think about the possibility of an alternative path of rural development in the 1930s, and to enrich the imagination of modern Chinese literature about the landscape of writing in the 1930s. This study not only helps us to recognize the unique value and contribution of those non-mainstream literary works more comprehensively, but also provides an important perspective for refining how modern Chinese literature has integrated into the world literary landscape and contributed to the unique "Chinese experience".*

**Keywords**

*landscape writing, western Hunan world, literary appeal, Chinese writer*

**1. Introduction**

In *Landscape and Identity—A Geography of Nation and Class in Britain*, Wendy J Darby describes “landscape” in this way: “the archaic or aged components of the landscape (which may be figures or buildings), the fields of decaying monuments, treasures such as ancient trees or “spirit stones”, and

traditions of speech, dress, and demeanor gradually join in the generation of this worldview." Landscapes are generated through a combination of the viewer's social, political, and cultural accumulations and thought structures, interacting with the natural landscapes seen in front of him or her, emphasizing the role of humanistic consciousness in endowing natural landscapes. It emphasizes the role of humanistic consciousness in giving the natural landscape, just like what Kojin Karatani said, "the landscape as a landscape has never existed before". Therefore, when observing the landscapes depicted by Shen Congwen in his literary works, to a certain extent, we can see the thoughts and demands hidden under the writing of landscapes.

Shen Congwen's landscape writing constitutes a textual metaphor in the context of modernity, and through the natural and humanistic landscapes in his works, he completes his reflection on the mainstream revolutionary literature's unitary path of creation, proposes the construction of a small Greek temple to enshrine "human nature", and builds a world in Xiangxi far away from the reality of strife in an attempt to alleviate the anxiety in the process of modernization with the beauty of human nature. He tried to alleviate the anxiety in the process of modernization with the beauty of humanity. Shen Congwen's Xiangxi novels writing provides a successful model for Chinese literature to become part of the world literature in the process of transformation of modern Chinese literature, and the relationship with the mainstream discourse presented in the Xiangxi writing shows to the world another modernity imagination of the literature of the modern nation-state. Re-examining Shen Congwen's spiritual breakthrough in the conflict between domestic politics and individual space, and between home and foreign land, and analyzing Shen Congwen's path of home and country construction in his works, are still of great significance for Chinese literature to the world today.

## **2. Renewal of Cognition and the Occurrence of "Landscapes"**

Kojin Karatani believes that the discovery of landscapes does not exist in a linear history, but in a distorted and inverted temporality. It can be seen that the "landscape" he narrates is not only a natural landscape to be viewed, but also a narrative infused with the subject's emotion, and the "device" that triggers the subject's narrative can be the country, society, system, economy, ideology and other factors. Reviewing Shen Congwen's journey of literary creation, it can be seen that the device that awakened his memory of the "landscape of Xiangxi" was the contrast between urban and rural areas. After drifting in Beijing and perceiving the urban landscape, Shen realized that there was a huge difference between the city and the countryside in terms of natural and humanistic landscapes, which awakened the rediscovery of the landscape of his hometown that was already in Shen Congwen's memory. In other words, if Shen had been living in Xiangxi, I am afraid that it would have been difficult for him to arouse his desire to narrate even how natural and simple Xiangxi is, and it would have been difficult for him to discover the real "landscape".

Social cruelty and economic distress became the "device" that triggered Shen Congwen's production and creation. Shen grew up in Xiangxi, and he was used to all the landscapes in Xiangxi for a long

time, and it was difficult to generate new cognition in the absence of new external thrust. What's more, at this time, Xiangxi in Shen Congwen's eyes is not the existence of beauty, but a symbol of backwardness, he was not willing to spend his life in the countryside, the big city is a different kind of scenery, so he resolutely gave up the well-paid and stable work and lifestyle in the countryside, and traveled to Beijing with a dream. However, Shen Congwen's cultural and economic limitations caused him to encounter obstacles in Beijing, and his dream of studying to save his country was shattered. After experiencing the warmth and coldness of people, Shen recalls the "memory of warm Xiangxi", and he writes about the "beautiful nostalgia for the countryside" and "disdain for the hypocrisy of the city", which is precisely the reason why the existence of Xiangxi makes the wandering of the city so difficult. It is the existence of Xiangxi that enables Shen Congwen, who has wandered away from the city, to obtain a way to place his ideals. When this kind of emotion of wandering is intensified by the fermentation of reality, the regional novels created by Shen Congwen become more and more infectious, and gradually evolve into a characteristic of Shen Congwen's creative work.

Xiangxi has become Shen Congwen's spiritual hometown, is the "spiritual enclave" left in the heart, "Xiangxi landscape" from the pure natural geographical space sublimated into a literary geographical space with the imprint of Shen Congwen, and has become an important part of Shen Congwen's literary creations since then. The existence of Urban and rural areas, as two complementary references, began to appear frequently in Shen Congwen's works, Shen Congwen's writing on the city and writing on Xiangxi in this period are actually two aspects of the same problem, and the discomfort and rejection of the urban landscape is exactly the embodiment of his position and attachment to the rural landscape, and the way of this emotional elaboration is shown in two types of subjects, the works depicting rural life, such as *Nine Sisters and Roses*, *The Bazaar*, *The Border Town*, etc., and the works depicting urban life, such as *In the Apartment*, *The Gentleman's Wife*, *The Eight Stallions*, etc. Therefore, this paper only explores Shen Congwen's literary demands from his "Xiangxi landscape" as the entry point.

### 3. The Construction of "Landscape" and Landscape Writing

The French scholar Voltaire said: "It is as easy to recognize an Italian, a Frenchman, an Englishman or a Spaniard by the style of his writing as it is to recognize his nationality by the contours of his face, his pronunciation, and his manner of action." In Shen Congwen's writing, the landscape itself is a kind of "structure", a kind of symbol to recognize his Xiangxi novels, it is not the "background" when the characters appear, attached to the characters' image, but a kind of rich and inexorable local sentiment permeating between the lines. The fusion of human nature and naturalness permeates the characters' joys and sorrows, which makes people sigh with emotion that only in such natural beauty can such natural and lovely people be nurtured, which makes the novel obtain the effect of warm and affectionate atmosphere. Thanks to the marginalized geographic location of Xiangxi, Shen drew unique literary nourishment from it, and he sketched a wonderfully exotic world with a lyrical tone. In his novels, he describes a lot of natural scenery, beautiful mountains and rivers, fields and villages, natural

scenery, while the folk customs and traditions that are very different from those of the mainstream culture, the simple and unadorned relationship between neighbors, and the romantic fervor of young men and women in love, etc., are humanistic landscapes that Shen wanted to promote to urban readers for reference.

Shen Congwen always look back to the countryside with temperance, his natural scenery, mostly warm and soft tone, leisurely and slow rhythm. Try to see "The Border Town", "the boldness and subtlety of nature, no place, no time does not make people fascinated by" In the work "Sophora Town", there is also a moving description, "the mound in the center, the top is extremely smooth, all the fine loess, to the month of August, loess on the opening of the wild Penny Chrysanthemums, like a star, but also like an embroidered blanket. The yellow soil is covered with wild chrysanthemums in August, like stars and embroidered blankets. If I knew how to paint, I would have painted it long ago." Xu Zhimo, who was the editor, once attached "Zhimo's Appreciation" to Shen Congwen's essay "Marketplace" and praised "This is a beautiful and vivid picture of the countryside. The author's pen is like a dinghy in a dream, swinging in the dream river of ripples and thick flounder, everywhere with a fall, but everywhere without leaving a trace." Xia Zhiqing, in his History of Modern Chinese Fiction, describes the natural scenery of Shen's writing in this way: "Shen Congwen was constrained by his own moral beliefs, as if he felt that he had to write about the countryside and people, but I personally think that what best demonstrates his strengths is the kind of scenery and events that he wrote out randomly, based on his good memories. He is the greatest impressionist in modern Chinese literature. He was able to draw out the essence of a landscape or the subtle vein of human feelings without a trace and with a few light strokes." Shen Congwen's ability to describe the natural landscape can be seen, fresh and beautiful natural scenery is desirable, and the humanistic landscape is naturally inseparable from the humanistic landscape.

People living in the countryside have a transcendent lightness and elegance, upholding customs and habits that are far away from the mainstream consciousness, such as marriage rites and love concepts. In the story of the The Border Town of Chadong, Shen Congwen used the remote geographical location to block the possibility of the town being disturbed by the outside world as much as possible, and downplayed the depiction of time in the town, deliberately weakening the influence of modern civilization on the The Border Town, so that Shen Congwen was able to idealistically write and freely construct the people, events, and scenes in the town. The people in The Border Town all uphold the concept of justice over profit. Cuicui's grandfather works as a ferryman, and even though he earns a meager income, he is still thankful and not overbearing, and he doesn't take any extra pay from others and doesn't covet any extra profit. Just as "the appropriate configuration of light and form, what kind of people live in what kind of air, all depends on nature". The ideology, customs, superstitions, and human relationships of the countryside people together form the vivid Xiangxi people under Shen Congwen's writing, and Shen Congwen was full of praise for the humanities of Xiangxi, and he expressed through the mouth of the countryside people: "Even as a prostitute, she is always so thick, and when she meets

the customers she doesn't know very well, she has to pay the money for doing business, and then close the door to spread the wild when she gets to know the number clearly. When you get to know people well, money becomes optional." Even the prostitutes who sell their bodies in the countryside are nobler than the wives in the city, because they still maintain sincerity and trust. Shen Congwen grew up in the exotic customs of the borderlands, and he brought this unique personal experience into his literary works. The simple characters and simple scenery complement each other, together forming a unique humanistic landscape in Shen's novels.

Shen Congwen's construction of the "ideal landscape" does not stop here, but he stands in the traditional folk position, and thinks deeply about what kind of society "human beings" should live in with the vision of a "countryman". He is a "countryman" who thinks deeply about what the society that "man" should live in is like. In *Landscape and Power*, Mitchell tries to change landscape from a noun to a verb, arguing that landscape is not a type of art, but a medium, and that "landscape as a medium is not only for the expression of values, but also for the expression of meanings, and for the communication between people". Throughout Shen Congwen's novels as the subject of the landscape, exactly confirms what Mitchell said the medium of thought transmission, she/they are condensed into a class of value symbols, in the novels with different individuals show, but the essence of their life is similar, she is Cuicui, Xiaoxiao, but also the boatman, Nuosong, and even can be a certain form of life. Vigorous vitality as a carrier, showing a kind of righteousness, simplicity and generosity of the national spirit, which is also Shen Congwen through the lyrical subject of the novel is trying to show the humanistic concern, "people" should live in the society just as the border of the world of Xiangxi constructed.

#### **4. Claims behind the "Landscape"**

Modern literature is caught in the valley of national and class conflicts, but Shen Congwen took the initiative to detach himself from the mainstream creation, examined the ideal social construction of modern civilization, and constructed an ideal harmonious landscape. Under the linear view of development, time rushes forward and never returns, so the anxiety of modernity becomes more and more prevalent, which is also reflected in the literary market. Shen Congwen gradually realized in the prosperous Shanghai that literature was being sold like "commodities", and that if he wanted to be remembered by the market, he had to win by quantity and speed, and he followed the trend of the times, and he was known as a "prolific writer", but in his heart, what he could never forget was still However, in his heart, he could never forget the world of Xiangxi, which carries the beauty of human nature. In the 1930s, when most of the writers changed their styles to speak out for the revolution, and some of the writers attached themselves to the commercial market, Shen Congwen formed a distinctive cultural stance in his reflection on modernity. He stood in the position of the native folk, stared at the farther reaches of life, and searched for the existence of the ideal human nature in the cultural resources in the west of the Hunan province, and offered himself to the "country people" as the "countryman". In his capacity as a "countryman", he enshrines the "humanity" in the small Greek temple, trying to

alleviate the pains brought by the process of modernization. The landscape framed by the photo frame has the opportunity to be appreciated by most people, but it doesn't mean that the landscape outside the photo frame is not a landscape. Shen Congwen gives the rural landscape outside the photo frame a chance to be seen and appreciated by others.

Shen Congwen rediscovered the resources of the countryside and questioned some of the slogan-like revolutionary literary creations. In the 1930s, there were three literary schools representing different literary paths. Left-wing literature, out of the need for revolution, showed the landscape of class struggle, which was reflected in the literary creation of the underclass living a happy life through struggle; Hai-pai literature, following the development of the times, discovered a new scene for depicting the city and gradually evolved an idea that the new was better than the old in the process of learning from the West, and rendered the glamorous metropolitan life to the fullest. In the process of learning from the West, it gradually evolved the idea that the new is better than the old, and rendered the bizarre metropolitan life to its fullest extent; while the Jing School of Literature headed by Shen Congwen focused on showing another possibility of the development of the countryside, and picking up the countryside that had been left behind, which formed another landscape of the literary creation in the 1930s, and was a real possibility that could not be ignored on the basis of the human nature tradition. The city in Shen Congwen's writing is more prosperous than the countryside in terms of economy, but it is inferior to the countryside in terms of a combination of various factors such as morality.

The reverence for the rural landscape is in fact Shen Congwen's attempt to change the thinking of modern literary creation, an effort to influence the mainstream of a single form of writing with regional writing, and an argument for the establishment of the power and value of his own writing. Literature should never have only one form and expression, and everyone can pursue and build a utopia in their hearts. When the revolutionary literature unified the literary creation, the outside world on Shen Congwen's evaluation of the natural mixed feelings, and even attached to Shen Congwen a variety of labels. But Shen Congwen has already built up a fence wall of literary writing, often gazing at the distant landscape from the wall, and then lowering his head, with a heart of gold to continue his appeal beyond the context of the times, he always believed that "the writer is not valuable enough, but the valuable thing should be that he can produce works. His achievements may be enough for the new literary movement to put forward a higher standard, to create a point of progress in fact, one side is enough to stimulate more writers, have the courage to get the revelation, can make all kinds of new efforts and adventure, and one side is enough to be infiltrated in the works of the deepest feelings of the magnificent, to the readers can be caused by the general and good influence. Shen Congwen's respect for the world of Xiangxi is also an attempt to open up another path of literary writing.

Shen Congwen tried to provide a pure land for the masses of revolutionary cries, and used the call of poetic life to separate literary creation from the bloody real world. In the context of revolutionary literature, some writers are more inclined to pursue the "grandeur" and "shocking power" of events, as

if they think that the larger the scale and the more intense the emotion, the more significant the artistic effect will be, so as to give the readers a profound reminder. However, given the readers' psychological tolerance and aesthetic inclination, textual descriptions of blood and tears are not always needed. In other words, the creation of literary works should not only be a simple imitation of real life, but should also focus on building the "psychological distance" needed for aesthetic experience. Shen Congwen said at that time: "Do you want blood and tears? Sorry, I can not give you this. We can not help but say that Shen Congwen was awake. The revolutionaries of the blood of the people, the people's selfless dedication can naturally become the scenery of admiration, but a pure land to give people the healing effect of the soul should not be underestimated, and this kind of silent nourishment can bring people a long time of solace, Shen's world of Xiangxi is exactly this kind of pure land.

The rural utopia constructed by Shen Congwen through words pulls the geographically marginalized Xiangxi into the mainstream literary vision and finds a way out for the nation and the country from it, providing another path of harmonious coexistence for the Chinese revolution. The relationship between urban and rural areas in Shen Congwen's writing is antagonistic, and the root of this disharmony comes from the invasion of the city. The urban and rural areas in the context of the revolution are incompatible with each other, just like the opposition between poverty and affluence, while Shen uses the simplicity of the countryside and the plainness of the countryside people to dilute this incompatible antagonism. "The Border Town" is quiet, isolated, wealth is not an absolute symbol of status, poor Cuicui have the right to choose, when the two brothers Tianbao and Nuosong well-off at the same time like simple and lovely Cuicui, they agreed to take the ancient and harmonious form of "song" to alleviate the emotional and even female resources of the competition, although the form of mitigation failed to meet the expectations, but the two brothers are not the same as the two brothers. This form of mitigation failed to resolve the acute conflicts as desired, Tianbao accident, Nuosong sent away because of guilt, Cuicui faced with no return waiting, but at this time there will not be a face or a group of "bad guys" to persecute the lonely Cuicui, she still has the right to protect the love or to choose another person. Such a narrative arrangement is very different from the snatch-and-grab story of a rich landowner robbing a poor girl under the revolutionary discourse. In "The Border Towns", any difficulties can be dissipated, or worse, left to time and the human heart.

Therefore, Shen Congwen's landscape writing and literary imagination provide valuable experience for modern Chinese literature to be among the world literature. Shen reflected on his literary creation in the process of modernization and development, constructed the identity mark of "countryman", took the initiative to stay away from the mainstream discourse in the literary world, and focused on the literary writing of the Xiangxi region, so as to use the traditional "local" culture of Xiangxi to reach modern times. "It also contains a holistic reflection on the "Chinese nation-state", reflecting a special orientation of modern Chinese literature in the process of transition to modernity, which also opens up a localized path for Chinese literature to modern literature. This also opens up a localized path for Chinese literature to modern literature.

## 5. Concluding

In Shen Congwen's novels, the landscape is no longer the category of natural scenery, but the synthesis of humanities and customs, which is the extension and expansion of the meaning of landscape, and the description of landscape occupies an important position in Shen Congwen's novels. For a long time, the landscape, as a marginal or even waste material in the literary narrative, often exists in dependence on the character image and plot, but Shen Congwen started to write from the Xiangxi in his memory, so that the landscape of Xiangxi was gradually discovered, and he not only gave the geography of Xiangxi a rich cultural connotation, but also showed the close connection between the vernacular place and modern China. Taking Xiangxi as the base, he connected the new literature with the most vital folk culture, drew nourishment from the local folk literature, and implied his demand for literature and even the nation-state in the writing of landscape. This paper introduces the theory of the study of "landscape" and explores it with the text, from the discovery of the landscape, the construction of the landscape to the demands expressed by the landscape, connecting the many landscapes as metaphors in Shen's works, trying to outline the demands of Shen's creation in the context of the revolution, and finding out from the natural landscape and humanistic landscape the demands of Shen's creation. another path for literary creation and the imagination of the modern nation-state from the natural and humanistic landscapes.

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