

Original Paper

On the Intertextuality of Liu Renqian's Literary Creation and Local Chronicles

Yan Zhu^{1*}

¹ College of Liberal Arts, Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology, Nan Jing, China

* Yan Zhu, College of Liberal Arts, Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology, Nan Jing, China

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Abstract

Liu Renqian has written a story of the “yesterday’s world” moving towards today through the construction of the “Xianghe” world, with the products and customs of the Lixiahe rural world permeating his writing, creating a water town world with strong regional characteristics. The intertextuality between modern and contemporary literary creation and local chronicles is not only the inheritance of excellent traditional culture and local memory, but also the reconstruction of modern local writing. From the Xianghe Trilogy to Xianghe Chronicle and Chushui Scenery, Liu Renqian’s short, medium and long novels and essays have all been intertextualized with local chronicles. This article focuses on Liu Renqian’s depiction of the local products and customs, and explores how he inherits and reconstructs modern local writing under this reflective intertextual writing, based on the geographical and personnel divisions in the Xinghua New County Annals.

Keywords

Liu Renqian, intertextuality, local chronicle, vernacular fiction

1. Introduction

In the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, many writers of local literature cannot write without the influence of a specific region and its culture. The land and culture they come from have become an important source of imagination for their narrative and writing, and have become a unique landscape in their textual world. Like most modern and contemporary writers, Liu Renqian, a representative writer of the Lixiahe literary school, has a deep love for his hometown. “More than 30 years ago, when I first picked up a pen to engage in literary creation, I once said, ‘I will use my pen to tell the world about my hometown.’ The original intention was to let people know more about my

hometown through my works” (Liu, 2019). Strong local consciousness, hometown love, and desire to write about hometown have made Liu Renqian blend the rich content of the natural environment, historical geography, product crafts, customs and dialects of his hometown Jiangsu Xinghua into his literary creation, in order to show the historical features and implications of Xinghua’s rural culture.

Kristeva, who proposed the concept of “intertextuality”, believes that any text is the absorption and transformation of other texts (Wang, 2011). Although Liu Renqian has never used intertextuality to flaunt his literary creation, introducing the theory of intertextuality into the exploration of Liu Renqian’s local novels facilitates a different perspective on the intertextual connections between his literary works and local chronicles. Jiangsu is a large province with a rich history of local chronicles, and the local writers of the Lixiahe literary school are a powerful force in the literary Soviet Union. Combining the study of local chronicles with literary research is a higher civilization perspective for aesthetic reflection on Jiangsu’s literary creation and the historical reality of local regions.

For more than 30 years, Liu Renqian has been rooted in his hometown. His loyal growth trajectory and profound cultural memory have not only shaped the unique characteristics of his local novels with rich local color, but also enhanced the cultural connotation of his literary creation. At the same time, this kind of local writing has not only become an inseparable historical and cultural scene and context in Liu Renqian’s literary creation, but also intertwined with local chronicles in the text. If we use the research method of “using poetry to prove history” and “mutual proof of literature and history” by historian Chen Yinke, we can outline the rich content of “local chronicles” in Liu Renqian’s works, and also find the “restoration” of various rich contents in Liu Renqian’s works from local chronicles. Like the classification in local chronicles, this article focuses on the natural and cultural resources and folk customs in Liu Renqian’s works according to the geographical and personnel division in *Xinghua County Records*, and explores how he carries out the inheritance and reconstruction of modern local writing under this reflective intertextual writing.

2. The Origin of the Research on Liu Renqian’s Intertextual Writing

With his deep affection and familiarity with this land, Liu Renqian has been rooted here year after year, looking back at and writing about his hometown with deep sentiment. This has given his literary creations a distinct sense of presence, leading scholars in 2010 to astutely point out that Liu Renqian’s works resemble local chronicles. His love for his hometown and the desire to promote its fame have made his literary texts and the local chronicles of his hometown filled with inseparable intertextuality.

2.1 Liu Renqian’s Literary Creation and the Xinghua County Records

Liu Renqian’s literary creation began in 1985. From the beginning of writing, he firmly rooted himself in the soil of Xianghe theme. *Xianghe Customs* is a young man’s first cry in literature after three years of hard work. This first cry has won widespread attention from the literary world and readers. Therefore, Liu Renqian has been deeply rooted in the Xianghe theme for 35 years, using dozens of novels such as

the *Xianghe Trilogy* *Xianghe*, *Floating City*, *The Last Moon* (novel), *Xianghe Chronicle* (collection of short stories) and *Xianghe Quartet* (collection of novellas) to complete the process of watching, inheriting and reconstructing a rural literary world.

The scenery and customs are the carriers of homesickness, and seeing familiar objects triggers nostalgia, while nostalgia connects to these objects. Liu Renqian's prose *Chushui Scenery* describes more than 60 kinds of objects from his hometown, all of which are his "temptation of homesickness" (Liu, 2017).

Here, "Chu Shui" is an alternative name for his hometown, Xinghua. In ancient times, it belonged to the territory of Chu, a land of rivers and lakes, thus it is called "Chu Shui"; while "fengwu" refers to scenery and objects. *Chushui Scenery* is composed of six sections, documenting 63 items such as water caltrops, bitter gourds, river clams, hairy fish, sparrows, wild ducks, hyacinth beans, lotus root, sugar candies, and most of them are culinary delicacies from Xinghua. Although *Chushui Scenery* focuses mainly on objects, the objects themselves are also scenery, and within them lie "feng", or customs and traditions. Liu Renqian's concise yet evocative descriptions read like flipping through the pages of a record of Xinghua's scenery, customs, and ecological landscapes.

At the seminar on Liu Renqian's works held on October 19, 2010, Huang Fan believed that from the perspective of literary classification, *Xianghe* could be classified as a 'southern 'agricultural novel' that focuses on writing local chronicles, dialects, rural customs, geography, and natural history, without focusing on exploring universal human nature, but highlighting regional individuality through aesthetics and literature" (Liu, 2010). Local chronicles have always had a narrative homology relationship with novels. In the Chinese novel tradition, local chronicles and novels have many similarities, and there is a mutual exchange of identities between chroniclers and novelists (Lin, 2023). Liu Renqian's novel *Xianghe*, one of the "Xianghe Trilogy" based on Xinghua and its archetype, is a literary local chronicle written for "Xianghe", which is a literary version of "Xinghua County Chronicles"; while the "Xianghe Trilogy" is the history of changes in Xianghe Village, it is also a history of characters in Xianghe Village; the essay *Chushui Fengwu* is more similar to a special issue of local chronicles.

2.2 Intertextuality Theory Overview

Influenced by Bakhtin's theory of dialogue, Julia Kristeva was the first to propose the term "intertextuality". She argued, "It (literary word) is a dialogue between several utterances: the author's, the reader's, the character's utterances in the work, and utterances of contemporary and previous cultural texts... Any text is made up of a mosaic of quotations; any text is an absorption and transformation of another text" (Wang, 2011). She believed that every literary text is dynamic and interconnected, evolving through integration and development with other texts.

As soon as the theory of intertextuality was proposed, it was widely discussed in Western theoretical circles. Over the past four decades, the theory of intertextuality has flourished in Chinese academic

circles, which shows that it can bring vitality and innovation to literary studies, worthy of our learning, reference and application. In general, we can summarize the “intertextuality” by quoting the statement of Mr. Zhang Longxi, who first introduced the theory of intertextuality to China: because the symbols in a work are related to other symbols that do not appear in the work, the text of any work is intertwined with other texts (Zhang, 1982).

In reading Liu Renqian’s works, we can find that his novels have formed a unique and distinctive color through the integration of the culture and history of this region, thus creating textual intertextuality with local chronicles. As a representative writer of the Lixiahe literary genre, Liu Renqian’s literary world is filled with layers of Lixiahe culture and distinctive reflections. These cultural texts flow through literary works like the blood of life, constantly renewing and vibrant. Therefore, intertextual understanding can bring culture, history, and literature closer together, enabling local chronicle content to be integrated into literary writing and forming the force that supports Liu Renqian’s creation.

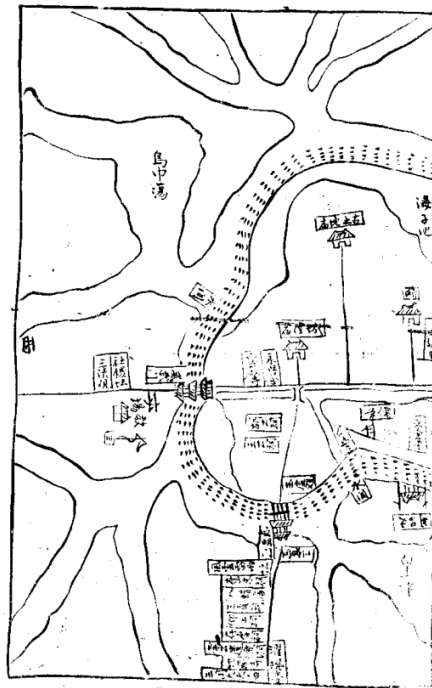
3. Reflective Intertextual Writing between Local Chronicles and Literature

Regarding readers’ inquiries about his original intention for writing, Liu Renqian once said, “I’m not trying to express something through my hometown, I want to express my hometown itself” (Liu, 2023). This tongue-twisting statement corresponds to the many rural details that appear frequently in his literary creations. He presents the scenic beauty, abundant natural resources, simple people, and well-organized customs of his hometown to us like precious treasures. The reason for repeatedly listing the rural details in his works below is to illustrate that the use of these local matters evidenced by local chronicles makes Liu Renqian’s stories more authentic and local. The utilization of rural details in his novels has a similar effect to the description of daily objects in Chinese classical novels.

3.1 Geographic Chronicle: The Intertextuality of Geographic Wonders, Rich Resources, and Historical Facts in the Text

“Where there are mountains and rivers, there are scenic wonders; where there is land, there are rich resources” (Ouyang, 1983). The backdrop of Liu Renqian’s short and long novels is the “water town” style of “seeing water as soon as you step out, unable to travel without a boat” (Liu, 2010). His hometown, Xinghua, has always been known as “the land of fish and rice”, with a dense network of waterways. In 486 BC, King Fuchai of Wu, aiming to expand his territory northward, utilized the many lakes between the Yangtze and Huai Rivers and dug the Hangou Canal to connect the two rivers for the transportation of grain, which later became the Lixiahe region (Gu, 2019). Among them, Xinghua City is the lowest-lying area, commonly known as “Guodiwa” (literally “pot bottom depression”). The dense network of waterways and crisscrossing rivers is a characteristic of Xinghua as a water town. In Volume 2 of *Xinghua County New Records*, there are detailed descriptions of scenic wonders, with dozens of categories including rivers, lakes, creeks, estuaries, harbors, beaches, ponds, and ditches.

At the beginning of *Xianghe*, Liu Renqian presents us with a vivid picture of duck hunting: cunning villagers from Xianghe spend three or four years taming a “decoy duck” and bring it to Wujin Pond to attract wild duck flocks. When the duck flock approaches their firing range, the “decoy duck” gives a few ya ya (yā yā, imitating the sound of a duck) calls to signal, and then the hunter shoots and harvests a plentiful catch. Duck hunting in Xinghua is not a recent phenomenon; people hundreds of years ago already used the beautiful feathers of wild ducks for decoration. As mentioned in *Xinghua County New Records*: “Hunt the curled tail of wild ducks, and the Tartars use them to decorate hats” (Ouyang, 1983). Besides, Wujin Pond is not a fictional landscape created by Liu Renqian; it truly exists in reality.



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Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Territory of Ancient Xinghua County

Wujin Pond, still existing today, is a vast and picturesque reed marsh located right next to the north of Xinghua City, with breathtaking scenery. It frequently appears in the works of writers from the Lixiahe literary school, such as Bi Feiyu and Pang Yuliang, demonstrating its typicality. According to *Xinghua County New Records*, “Wujin Pond is located half a mile west of the county seat, connecting to Hailing Creek” (Ouyang, 1983). From the illustrations in this county record, one can also see that it is located at the northern end of Xinghua. Liu Renqian uses this reed marsh, which exists in real life, as a bridge connecting fiction and reality, bringing the characters in his writing, such as Xiang Da Shao and Tan Tuo Zi, to life, as if they had indeed walked in this world.

In the stage of the “Xianghe Trilogy”—Xianghe Village, it is a very typical village in Xinghua. Villages grow along rivers, just like melons on vines. The introduction of “wood” in *Xinghua County New Records* says, “There is no wood thick enough to embrace, and no shade deep enough to cover the sky” (Ouyang, 1983). That’s right. In Xianghe Village, there are no lush forests or ancient trees with a long history, only the weeping willows by the riverbank gently swaying in the wind.

With such a unique geographical background, there are naturally rich products. This land can be described as “endless products” (Ouyang, 1983). As recorded in *Xinghua County New Records*, “If the farmers do not have a good harvest, they will turn to fishing, even diving into the water with bare hands. Young people can catch ducks, geese, fish, turtles, shrimps, snails, and clams, and gather water chestnuts, lotus seeds, reeds, lotus roots, reeds, algae, and the like” (Ouyang, 1983). “Vegetables like wild rice, reeds, duckweed, and algae are all from lakes, lotus roots, wheat, and water chestnuts are all from swamps... suitable for all terrains, easily obtainable” (Ouyang, 1983). Due to such a water network, most people in Xinghua have learned to catch fish and shrimp since childhood, which can be considered a memory ingrained in their bloodline. Therefore, in Liu Renqian’s novels, we can see that the people catching knife fish (crucian carp) and tigerhead sharks on the Xianghe River have gradually changed from Tan Tuozi to Xi Zi (Liu Chunyu’s son) and Xiaoyingzi (Qin Yatou’s daughter). With the changes in generations, the plot arrangement of “children enjoying fishing without any instruction” not only meets Liu Renqian’s subjective need to continue the Xianghe territory, but also aligns with the objective regional background of this land.

In addition, swimming in various waters is also a typical feature in the rural areas of Xinghua, a water town. In *Xianghe Chronicles*, villagers along the Xianghe River by the ridges, while doing farm work, squat by the ridges and hold large blue bowls filled with glutinous rice, smelly but delicious amaranth dumplings, and tasty snails and clams, just as described in *Xinghua County New Records*: “River shrimp and crab are also delicious, and freshwater snails and clams satisfy farmers” (Ouyang, 1983). In *Xianghe*, the Wujin Lake and Xianghe River are home to various freshwater fish swimming leisurely all year round, such as mandarin fish (*Siniperca chuatsi*), black fish (snakehead), knife fish (crucian carp), and tigerhead sharks (sand goby). Tan Tuozi’s expertise is catching tigerhead sharks under willow trees. As stated in “The New Annals of Xinghua County” about local products: “The intestine of snakehead is especially fatty and delicious” (Ouyang, 1983). It is not difficult to see that the tradition of Xinghua people being skilled in fishing and enjoying fish has been long-standing, and the people who work hard on this land have a deep affection for swimming in the water.

3.2 *The Record of Human Affairs: Reflecting on the Reality of Folk Customs and Practices*

As the saying goes, “People are shaped by their land”. Under the nourishment of the geographical environment and the influence of rural ethics, the folk customs in Xinghua’s countryside are exactly as Liu Renqian described: “the local customs here are simple and honest (Liu, 2010)”. One plot alone can reveal this: in *Xianghe*, the women of Xianghe Village adhere to the established custom of being

diligent and thrifty in managing their households. When Qin Yatou followed the boats to the piles to prune cotton plants and remove extra buds, she was secretly anxious because she had left home too hurriedly and forgotten to bring needles and thread. This is because “when women in the countryside go to farmland far away to do farm work... they will always bring some needles and thread to work on during the journey (Liu, 2010)”. The “Customs” section of Volume 3 of *Xinghua County New Records* states: “Etiquette and scholarly demeanor still prevail, with a focus on honor, frugality, and simplicity. Men engage in farming and fishing, while women specialize in embroidery (Ouyang, 1983). “This shows Liu Renqian’s profound knowledge of his hometown’s customs and his mastery of detail.

Liu Anran, the representative figure of the elders in Xianghe Village, once recounted in the beginning of the story of *Xianghe*: “Xianghe Village is a place of auspicious omen, with flowing water and excellent feng shui! It’s a place that produces capable people. Back in the Qing Dynasty, there was a Grand Scholar who visited Xianghe Village. He was an official in the imperial court and a renowned scholar!” This was not a groundless claim. Based on Liu Renqian’s introduction and personal account in the novel, we can discover that this figure was Liu Xizai, the author of *The Summary of Arts*, who lived during the reigns of Emperor Daoguang and Emperor Tongzhi. The “Biography of Famous Officials” in Volume 13 of *Xinghua County New Records* states: “When there was turmoil in the department, many officials fled, but Xizai remained. After the peace treaty was signed, the governor of Hubei, Hu Wenzhong (Lin Yi), recommended him in a memorial as ‘a man of integrity and refinement, whose scholarship surpasses his contemporaries’” (Ouyang, 1983). Liu Renqian’s mention of this background at the beginning of the novel is undoubtedly a reflection and promotion of the folk customs of Xinghua.

Apart from folk customs, Liu Renqian also devoted considerable effort to portraying folk marriage customs in his works. In *Xinghua*, there are unique marriage customs that require strict adherence to regulations and rituals, yet beyond these rituals lies the warmth and care: “Regardless of betrothal gifts or funeral arrangements, extravagance is not encouraged. When a couple is matched, it is truly a bond destined for a lifetime. The betrothal gifts should not be compared in terms of richness or scarcity, but should be given according to one’s ability” (Ouyang, 1983). The marriage rituals in Xianghe Village are not limited to the ceremony on the wedding day, but trace back to the day when the couple met. The process begins with the matchmaker introducing the couple, followed by the groom’s family visiting the bride’s family. Then, the groom sends a “communication gift” during the festival, and if the bride agrees, she will accept it and start preparing for the wedding. If she doesn’t agree or her parents want to negotiate the betrothal gifts again, the gift will be returned for further discussion. Finally, comes the wedding, during which making the wedding dress and preparing the trousseau involve established customs and rituals. Each step has its significance and must be followed precisely.

4. The Cultural Inheritance and Reconstruction in Liu Renqian's Intertextual Writing

Among the native writers of the Literary Jiangsu Army, whether they are writers from afar who have left their hometown and look back on it, or writers who still stay in their hometown, they all face the reality of urban-rural dualism under the process of urbanization. As the living space of the entire rural world is increasingly marginalized in the trend of urbanization, the textual intertextuality between contemporary literary creation and local chronicles is not only a heritage of excellent traditional culture and local memories, but also a reconstruction of modern native writing. In this regard, Liu Renqian, with his compassionate sentiment and literary style refined from Wang Zengqi's literary influence, occupies an important position in the Lixiahe literary school.

4.1 Inheritance of Rural Memory

When reading Liu Renqian's literary works, many scholars would discuss his connection with Wang Zengqi, and he himself is also willing to acknowledge his identity as Wang's literary successor, just as he said, "I deeply love Mr. Wang Zengqi and his works" (Liu, 2023). The literary essence embodied in Liu Renqian's Xianghe literary world is in the same vein as Wang Zengqi's, carrying a distinctive congenital feature of Wang's literary birthmark.

Known as the "Wenquxing of Lixiahe", Wang Zengqi can be considered the spiritual mentor of Liu Renqian's creative journey. Liu once recounted: "I have been deeply fascinated by Wang Zengqi for more than 30 years, turning myself into a true 'fan' of his. After his return to the literary world, his works such as *Breaking the Ordination* and *Chronicle of Da Nao*, which are set in his hometown of Gaoyou, have captivated me. And after being a fan of Wang for more than 30 years, I have also created a series of works, including three novels with a 'Wang-style', and thus built the literary geography of 'Xianghe'" (Liu, 2023). *Chushui Scenery*, a prose collection similar to a local gazetteer, is Liu Renqian's literary footprint following Wang Zengqi's *Food of My Homeland*. In 2017, on the 20th anniversary of Wang Zengqi's death, Liu Renqian reworked *Chushui Scenery* expanding it from 70,000 words to 160,000 words as a tribute. "What moved me the most was that my fellow townsman and critic Wang Gan, who wrote the preface for the first edition of *Chushui Scenery* published by Lijiang Literary and Artistic Publishing House, again wrote a preface for this book after more than 20 years. Many critics have said that the best tribute is inheritance" (Liu, 2023).

The concept of the "Lixiahe Literary School" was also constructed by Liu Renqian and others in the early twentieth century, evolving from obscurity and doubt to gaining increasing recognition today. The central figure of this school is Wang Zengqi. With Wang Zengqi as the flag-bearer, a large number of followers who share the same creative ideas and consciously practice common literary propositions have been found under this banner, promoting the Lixiahe Literary School and passing down a kind of memory.

The inheritance does not stop with Liu Renqian and Wang Zengqi, but can even be traced back further. Wang Zengqi learned from his mentor Shen Congwen, and by reading *Xianghe*, it is not difficult to see

the inspiration and influence of Shen Congwen and Wang Zengqi on Liu Renqian. *Border Town* and *Chronicle of Da Nao* only begin with a few sections describing local customs and scenery, while *Xianghe* runs through the entire text. Through *Border Town* and *Chronicle of Da Nao*, Shen Congwen and Wang Zengqi teach people that novels can be written in this way, and the description of customs and scenery can bypass the precedent of conventional novels that use characters and stories to capture the soul, and become the soul of the novel (Liu, 2023).

Liu Renqian's intertextual writing not only enriches the regional culture of Central Jiangsu, but also highlights the continuous inheritance of Jiangsu's local chronicle culture. The inheritance of rural memories is also the inheritance of the unique cultural genes of the Chinese nation.

4.2 Reconstruction of Modern Native Soil Writing

In Chushui Scenery, Liu Renqian does not describe local customs in a solid and static way, but rather radiates out, displaying the richness of the existence of objects in vertical and horizontal connections, similar to the writing style of "recording people" in local chronicles: maintaining the main line vertically and including essential elements horizontally.

Take the first essay *Water Caltrop* as an example, it is written in a scattered but coherent manner, with rich content within a limited space (Ding, 2018). The essay begins with a description of the scene of water caltrop vines spreading across the river surface in summer, quoting Yang Wanli's "A path opens through the water caltrop and duckweed, who will pass by the caltrop boat in the morning?" to illustrate it, naturally and aptly. Later, it explains the word "ling" in "water caltrop" by citing a phrase from Li Shizhen's *Compendium of Materia Medica*. In the middle, it depicts the scene of women harvesting water caltrop, first citing Liu Yuxi's *Gathering Water Caltrop*, and then tracing back to Xu Mian's *Gathering Water Caltrop Song* from the Southern and Northern Dynasties, expressing the longing of young girls. From the objects in front of the eyes, it turns to the historical and cultural connections of the objects, giving the customs a cultural foundation. Finally, from the cultural flavor of water caltrop, it writes about its practical value, ending with the cooking of the dish "fresh water caltrop and young rooster." The appreciation of water caltrop not only illustrates its physical characteristics and uses, but also discusses many poems related to water caltrop, demonstrating Liu Renqian's erudition and knowledge.

Different from the zero-degree narrative or top-down criticism of other literary schools, Liu Renqian has always stood among the villagers, expressing his praise for beautiful human nature and his attachment to the simple countryside. He insists that the cultural spirit of Chinese villages has its precious value, and his poetic and warm writing concept has never been devoured by the modernization process. In the process of literary creation, what Liu Renqian upholds is not so much theory, knowledge, and skills as long-term life experience and artistic intuition. Liu Renqian's self-proclaimed position as an "amateur writer (Liu, 2019)" and his more than 30 years of life experience in rural Xinghua have unintentionally freed him from the shackles traditionally imposed on writers.

Therefore, Liu Renqian tends to use compassionate and harmonious strokes in his literary creation, omitting disasters and famines, and peacefully promoting the development of the story. When describing the past of Grandmother Three in *Xianghe*, he briefly mentioned: “In those years, people couldn’t eat rice or rice porridge unless it was a holiday... So many people died of edema disease” (Liu, 2010). The three-year natural disaster even affected the fertile Xinghua Plain, and the famine then still makes many elderly people in rural Xinghua shudder, leading to the “family tradition” of never wasting food. However, Liu Renqian omitted the disasters and focused on the characters in his narrative, using them only as necessary background and telling the story calmly. Liu Renqian certainly cares about the joys and sorrows and turning points of that era, but he skillfully resolves them with subtle manoeuvres and the method of “moving a thousand-pound weight with four ounces of force” (Jiang, 2021).

In the temporal and spatial context of this novel, the countryside undoubtedly underwent political changes, but this was not a keyword in the novel. Like the disasters mentioned in the novel, it was also omitted by Liu Renqian’s method of “moving a thousand-pound weight with four ounces of force”. Daily life in the rural community of Xianghe Village consists entirely of cooking oil, rice, salt, vinegar, and family affairs, and these have not changed under Liu Renqian’s pen due to political involvement. He removed the political color and faced human nature and life directly.

5. Conclusion

Apart from the reconstruction of modern native writing in terms of content arrangement and writing style, Liu Renqian’s intertextual literary creation is also valuable in the innovation of literary forms. The textual interaction between literary texts and local chronicles is valuable for the expansion of aesthetic horizons and narrative spaces in contemporary literary works. Using local chronicles as writing resources in novels can significantly enhance the breadth, thickness, depth, and inclusiveness of displaying native life, as exemplified in the *Xianghe Trilogy*. Conversely, examining local chronicles through novels endows the descriptions of landscapes, characters, languages, and customs in native novels with a vivid vitality that permeates throughout. In terms of form, the introduction of local chronicles can also enrich the structure, shape, and techniques of literary creation.

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