

## Original Paper

# Searching for Flow—An Interpretation of Wang Menmen’s Novel “Nomadism”

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### Abstract

*In “Nomadism”, the protagonist “Ren” integrates the modern society and “One-Hua Land” through the flow of perception and thought, exploring the fluidity of individual existence from multiple perspectives. The presentation of fluidity in this novel unfolds primarily through narrative flow, spatial fluidity, and bodily fluidity. By comparing the names and living spaces of the characters, the novel reflects on the existential dilemmas in fluid narrative and fluid spaces, and explores the meaning of existence amid the complex changes of subjective perception and external objects. The search for meaning involves not only perceiving it but also grasping its fluidity, which is a challenge not only for people in modern society but also for human beings throughout history.*

### Keywords

Wang Menmen, “Nomadism”, Fluidity

## 1. Introduction

“Nomadism” is a new work by contemporary Chinese author Wang Menmen. The novel tells the story of the protagonist “Ren”, who enters another space called “One-Hua Land” to grasp an elusive “existence” in his real life, depicting the survival dilemmas of a group of young people in modern society. The author adopts a multi-threaded narrative approach, merging modern society and “One-Hua Land” through the flow of perception and thought to explore the possibilities of subjective emotion and thinking. This novel carries a strong philosophical dimension, delving into philosophical issues while embedding deep thoughts and philosophical expressions through character names, spatial settings, and narrative elements. The novel tightly links artistic expression and philosophical inquiry, provoking readers’ thoughts through contrasts of fiction and reality, stability and flow. The protagonist “Ren” is entangled in various issues in modern society, and as a writer, he records his feelings and thoughts,

creating “One-Hua Land” on paper. In this symbolic ancient space, characters experience the flow of life in past times. Meanwhile, in modern society, the protagonist “Ren” and his lover and friends navigate the flow of modern life, which, from the perspective of the future “self”, becomes a past experience. Through this connection of modern society and “One-Hua Land” in different temporal and spatial dimensions, the author reflects on fundamental questions of human existence, contemplating individual value and meaning within the flow of space and time.

## 2. Multi-Perspective Presentation of Fluidity

The discussion of fluidity in this novel essentially addresses the issues of human existence across different times and spaces, individual-community relations, and the tension between innovation and conservatism. Whether depicting the survival dilemmas faced by the modern-day protagonist “Ren” and his lover and friends or portraying the life conditions of the leader named “Earth” and his family in “One-Hua Land” in ancient society, the novel is imbued with reflections on how individuals situate themselves spiritually and physically amidst the flow of time and space. The presentation of fluidity unfolds mainly through narrative flow, spatial fluidity, and bodily fluidity.

Regarding narrative flow, if analyzed from the perspective of narrative form and characteristics, the novel adopts a multi-threaded parallel narrative approach. Modern society and ancient society coexist within the text, with chapters interwoven to link the modern protagonist “Ren’s” perceptions and experiences as the intersecting narrative thread. The linear storytelling in different spaces unfolds mainly through the protagonist’s perceptions and plot development. In modern society, “Ren” experiences major life events such as job searching and marriage, with unusual experiences and perceptions occasionally emerging in his life. Through “Ren’s” perceptions, the author connects modern society and “One-Hua Land”. The novel achieves fluidity of plot in both modern society and “One-Hua Land”, creating a unified narrative system from different character perspectives to serve the fluid narrative, blending the stories of both spaces.

The novel’s fluidity also manifests in spatial fluidity, centering around two main spaces: modern society and “One-Hua Land”. These spaces are connected through the protagonist “Ren’s” perceptions, dreams, and body. The groups of characters in modern society and “One-Hua Land” face behaviors and choices influenced by their respective spaces, sharing the commonality of inevitable change. This reflects the author’s belief that regardless of the era, fundamental human issues—desires, decisions, and changes—remain largely unchanged across historical progressions. Within individual spaces, such as “One-Hua Land”, spatial fluidity persists. For example, the leader “Earth” passes power and wisdom to his two sons, “Wu” and “Quan”, who in turn create their own spaces, encompassing physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. The elder son “Wu” inherits leadership, while the younger son “Quan” inherits a precious wisdom phrase rather than a physical artifact. This phrase symbolizes wisdom, while leadership symbolizes power. The brothers’ competition represents the historical clash

of power and wisdom. By depicting their inventions, such as papermaking, movable type printing, and iron smelting, the author condenses the long history of human civilization's progression within "One-Hua Land". This compressed spatial narrative merges with the modern societal narrative, endowing the novel's spatial storytelling with fluidity.

The novel's fluidity also extends to bodily fluidity, which mainly encompasses emotional fluidity and experiential fluidity. Emotional fluidity refers not only to changes in characters' emotions but also to the relationship between characters' emotions and external objects. For instance, in one passage, "Earth wanted to inform Taigu overnight that he would formally hand over the woman Bai to Quan the next morning, but then he thought, why make the trip when Taigu had assured him she would deliver the woman punctually? Since Taigu had lived in 'One-Hua' for countless years, she had already mastered the ability to control everything with her heart". Here, Taigu's ability to control "everything with her heart" is acquired through the flow of time, transcending or replacing verbal communication. This ability, described in the novel, occasionally manifests in the modern protagonist "Ren" as well, facilitating emotional connections between characters in modern society and "One-Hua Land". Bodily fluidity is also expressed through experiential fluidity. Whether in the survival struggles of modern characters or the inventive pursuits of the two brothers in "One-Hua Land", the accumulation and integration of experience tightly connect emotions and intellect with changes in circumstances, making this connection a unique way for characters to perceive the world.

### **3. Reflection on Fluidity: The Existential Dilemma of Human Beings**

The novel's exploration of fluidity is expressed primarily through contrasting structures, highlighting differences and movements in various contexts to reflect the existential dilemmas of characters across different times and spaces. This contrast appears in two main forms: first, through character names, and second, through their living environments. Different character names carry distinct meanings, and varying living environments present diverse narrative backgrounds. The author uses these contrasts to place the plot and content of the novel within a narrative flow, contemplating the existential dilemmas of humanity within this fluidity.

The naming of the protagonist is notable in this novel, often appearing in contrasting pairs that carry metaphorical or symbolic meanings. For example, in the modern setting of the novel, the protagonist "Ren" has a romantic relationship with "Chun" and a friendship with "Shen". In these two relationships, "Chun" as Ren's romantic partner frequently encourages his growth and work, while "Shen" as a friend often provides intellectual inspiration. Here, "Chun" and "Shen" are not merely names but symbols carrying special meanings that connect the author's life perceptions with the readers' emotional experiences within a specific cultural context. For instance, "Chun" in the context of Chinese culture symbolizes natural vitality, fertility, and the sweetness and bitterness of love. As Ren's romantic partner, "Chun" embodies these symbolic meanings. Similarly, "Shen" as a friend often inspires Ren

intellectually, with the name implying depth and philosophical reflection rooted in both physical and cultural experiences. The interactions between Ren and Chun, and Ren and Shen, depict the challenges and milestones of modern life, such as work and marriage, as Ren navigates through the tumultuous flow of modern society.

A young boy named “Qing” also appears in the novel as a deliberate character created by the author. Ren discusses lightness (“Qing”) with him, and as the story progresses, “Qing” transcends his role as a character to symbolize carefree and lighthearted experiences amidst the heavy burdens of modern life. “I felt the heaviness in my body melting away... We used movements in harmony with natural rhythms to purify the world and ourselves, seeking a pure heart. I thought of Qing and said, ‘Do you know Qing? He is young, but he does similar things as you’”. Ren alleviates his burdens through bodily movements, creating a juxtaposition of “heaviness” and “lightness”, reflecting the fluidity of meaning in the narrative and exploring the existential dilemmas of modern life. This contrast extends beyond the modern setting and into the constructed “One-Hua Land”, where the leader “Earth” and his two sons, “Wu” and “Quan”, embody a similar dichotomy. “Wu” symbolizes material possessions and power, often exerting his authority over his younger brother Quan, such as winning the hand of the beloved Magpie and inheriting leadership. Character names in the novel often serve symbolic purposes, with the essence of a symbol lying in representing or signifying something beyond itself.

The author also contemplates the meaning of existence by contrasting characters’ living environments. The novel primarily features two spaces: modern society and “One-Hua Land”, as well as other spaces like dreamscapes and perceptual experiences. Characters face unique or similar survival challenges in different spaces. In modern society, the protagonist deals with pressing life issues, while characters in “One-Hua Land” confront power struggles, resource distribution, and the pursuit of wisdom. As a space with compressed time and events, “One-Hua Land” features characters such as “Taigu” symbolizing time, “Earth” symbolizing power, and “Wu” and “Quan” symbolizing human wisdom and the progression of civilization, each facing their unique challenges. Both modern society and “One-Hua Land” are in constant spatial flow, with job hunting and house renting exemplifying movement in modern society, while Wu and Quan’s fortress building represents spatial change in “One-Hua Land”. The overarching “One-Hua Land” also grapples with external threats, symbolized by concerns over outsiders like Quan’s wife “Bai”. “Taigu” worries she might bring disruptive external cultural influences, imposing limitations on her learning of Chinese characters to preserve order. “Bai” symbolizes both external influence and communication barriers as a mute who relies on gestures. Her rapid learning and foresight about incoming changes evoke anxiety in “One-Hua Land”, fueling the fluidity of knowledge and thought, which in turn drives spatial fluidity as people confront changes and adaptation. The author’s portrayal of existence within “One-Hua Land” serves as a tangible expression of humanity’s survival dilemmas across time and is a profound inquiry into the eternal questions of human existence.

#### 4. Seeking Meaning in Fluidity

In the novel's preface, the author expresses that the impetus for writing was to explore the meaning of human existence, driven by reflections on the repetitive and changing nature of life. This pursuit manifests as an awareness of the present moment's meaning and a detachment from the mundane. Whether through the protagonist's perception of sound in modern society or the quest for treasure in "One-Hua Land", both reflect a yearning for certainty, often met with elusive answers. "Maintaining a fluid state requires sustained vigilance and effort—success is always tentative at best". In both the modern world and the symbolic ancient "One-Hua Land", people are constantly challenged by the passage of time and spatial changes. The author embraces this fluidity and seeks to understand meaning within it.

The protagonist's landlord alternately called "Yellow Soil" and "Plateau", and his colleagues who switch between "Bingbing" and "Chunlin", reflect this fluidity in naming, erasing memories of reality through change. In the flux of modernity, people do not strive for permanence but seek momentary meaning, finding satisfaction in transient experiences. "What we remember most are formless, fleeting moments of emotions and sensations; stagnant states of life are merely instantaneous memories with no meaningful enlightenment". The pursuit of transient meaning amidst fluidity represents both resistance to and construction of self-identity. When life becomes increasingly uncertain, people transform from settlers to nomads, fragmenting their lives while seeking new tribes or communities for value and meaning. In "One-Hua Land", Quan's premature reveal of his invention symbolizes an attempt to adapt rapidly to inevitable change, believing that preserving existing gains requires moving with, and even outpacing, the currents of change.

The philosopher Mou Zongsan remarked in his discussion of Daoist philosophy: "Life cannot merely be suspended as a horizontal section in the present space-time. For life to have meaning, it must also have a vertical trajectory encompassing growth and enlightenment". To seek meaning within fluidity, one must appreciate both the acquisition of meaning and the value of fluidity itself. Only by embracing fluidity can meaning truly flourish. In the novel, the protagonist not only seeks fleeting sensations and meaning but also yearns for value within fluidity. For example, in modern society, his focus on capturing sounds in different moments and spaces exemplifies capturing meaningful existences within fluidity. Ren's friend "Shen" names this state "emptiness", breaking the boundaries of reality and fiction and merging imagination and reality. From the narrative's perspective, this fusion allows imagination to flow freely, as in dreams, liberating the novel from the constraints of realism. This dissolution of the real and the fictional enables characters to derive value and explore the meaning of human existence within fluidity.

## 5. Conclusion

The fundamental issue of human existence is inherently a philosophical concept, and in this novel, the author attempts to address this question through the medium of fiction. If one word were to encapsulate the novel's response to this issue, that word would be fluidity. By contrasting the spaces of modern society and "One-Hua Land", the author bridges modern and ancient times and examines the flow and change of these spaces and periods from a future perspective. Throughout the writing process, the author tightly integrates narrative form with the novel's theme, using fluid storytelling to convey fluid narratives within fluid spaces. In the context of shifting time and evolving civilization, all things are in a state of flux. Concepts such as innovation and tradition, ignorance and awakening, progress and regression—the core challenges faced by humanity—are expressed through storytelling in this novel. "One-Hua Land", as a compressed space, contrasts with the conventional space-time system of modern society, also serving as a contrast between past and present. How humanity views the past shapes its understanding of the present, yet from a future perspective, both past and present are in constant change. Through its exploration of fluidity, the novel reveals that we, in different times and spaces, are both settlers and nomads. We need both definitive outcomes and fluid processes; only by seeking within fluidity can we weave together the notes that compose the symphony of life.

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