

The Language Art and Tragic Beauty of Shen Congwen's *Border Town*

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Abstract:

As Shen Congwen's representative work, *Border Town* was published in the 1930s. This work has a beautiful writing style, showcases unique local customs and ideal human beauty, and occupies a unique position in the history of Chinese literature. After nearly a century, it still receives high attention from the academic community and support from readers. Its literary value can withstand the test of time. The work *Border Town* has rich exploratory value. This article mainly analyzes the literary value of *Border Town* from two aspects. On the one hand, the language art of *Border Town*, which is the concentrated embodiment of the author Shen Congwen's talent and the key to touching people's hearts in this work. This article will deeply analyze how the work constructs poetic words that touch people's hearts from the shaping of the environment and the psychological details of the characters. On the other hand, the tragic beauty of *Border Town* is reflected in the tragic love story between Cuicui and Nuosong, the tragic life story of her grandfather, and the tragedy of the author's creation not being accepted by the times. This article will explore how the work creates a lingering and tragic atmosphere from these perspectives. The research ultimately proves that *Border Town* is a work that transcends the times and has research and aesthetic value, worthy of repeated reading and exploration.

Keywords: Shen Congwen, *Border Town*, language art, tragic beauty

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Object and Significance

In the modern literary world of 20th-century China, Shen Congwen is undoubtedly a writer with a unique temperament. His life experience of wandering between the countryside and the city has brought him a unique perspective, allowing him to examine the rapidly changing Chinese society as a "rural person", reflecting on urban modernity, and reconstructing the ideal world of Xiangxi. Among them, the novella *Border Town* published in 1934 best reflects Shen Congwen's creative temperament and is also the most influential work of his life [1]. In the "Top 100 Chinese Novels of the 20th Century" selected by *Asia Weekly*, *Border Town* ranks second only to Lu Xun's *Scream*, demonstrating its charm.

The 1930s was a transformative era for China, and literary history divides this period into three main schools: the left-wing literary school that emphasized the realism and revolutionary nature of literature, the Shanghai-style literature that wrote about modern urban life and humanity, and the Beijing style literature that separated from politics and cities and pursued pure literary taste. The *Border Town*, which this study aims to discuss, is a typical Beijing-style literary work. On the one hand, it reflects the

author Shen Congwen's portrayal of the ideal world, and on the other hand, it reflects Shen Congwen's confusion in the new era. Nowadays, in the 21st century, at the beginning of a new era of modernization, facing the complex information society, contemporary people are also at a loss in this era. From the perspective of novel reading, readers' reading habits and methods have undergone significant changes compared to the last century, and even compared to twenty years ago. According to the results of the 21st National Reading Survey, the average daily reading time for adult Chinese citizens in 2023 is 23.38 minutes, and new reading methods such as digital reading and listening to books are gradually becoming mainstream [2]. Moreover, according to the research results of the Research Report on the *Development of China's Network Audio Visual (2024)*, in 2023, the average daily use time of mobile Internet users will be 435 minutes, of which the average daily use time of mobile audio-visual applications will be 187 minutes, and the average daily use time of short videos will be 151 minutes [3]. The comparison between these two survey results is very obvious. Short videos and other new media are occupying an increasingly large proportion of modern people's daily lives, and their impact on traditional reading methods cannot be underestimated. From this perspective, the era dilemma that Shen Congwen faced nearly a century ago has inevitably descended

upon this era, and the romanticism that existed in the past seems to be increasingly lacking in support.

Therefore, this study believes that as a classic work that still has a large readership in today's era, the unique research value of *Border Town* deserves further exploration. This is not only because *Border Town* has achieved a unique position in literary history, but also because, as a 90-year-old work, *Border Town* is still popular among general readers in today's era. On the one hand, the poetic narrative language of *Border Town* provides readers with a unique aesthetic value, which is distinct from film and popular literature and irreplaceable; On the other hand, the tragic beauty contained in the work can be the tragedy of teenage love, the tragedy of separation and death among family members, or the tragedy of nostalgia for past time that cannot be traced back. These themes still have a strong appeal to today's readers.

1.2 Research Status

Up to now, academic research on Shen Congwen's *Border Town* has mainly focused on the portrayal of the Xiangxi world, the portrayal of human beauty, and comparative studies with other works. For the study of the shaping of the Xiangxi world, such as *On the Spatial Narrative of Shen Congwen's Xiangxi Novels*, the author comprehensively explains the causes of spatial narrative in Shen Congwen's Xiangxi novels from the theory of spatial narrative to Shen Congwen's personal experience. The author starts with the spatial structure of natural space, social space, and cultural space, and discusses the influence of spatial structure on novel narrative and character portrayal in conjunction with the text [4].

In comparative studies with other works, *Border Town* is often compared to Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country*. For example, in the *Comparative Study of Border Town and Snow Country*, a comparative study was conducted on the two works from the perspectives of text background, character image, and artistic style. For example, the works were all born during turbulent times. *Border Town* was completed in 1934, during China's domestic political turmoil and the increasing threat of Japanese aggression. The final draft of *Snow Country* was in 1948, when Japan had just experienced its defeat in World War II and was in the period of American occupation and reconstruction. Both works pursue the literary independence lost in the creative environment at that time; The main characters in the two works share similarities in their spiritual aspects, such as the old ferryman and the Komako both displaying the power of life, while Cuicui and Yoko represent pure beauty. However, due to the different focuses of the works, there are differences in the character positioning and interrelationships in the story. By compar-

ing and studying the two works, people can gain a better understanding of the shared emotions and human nature contained in them [5].

In addition to the study of the work itself, Shen Congwen, the author of *Border Town*, is also a favored research subject for researchers. The unique temperament of Shen Congwen's works cannot be separated from his own unique experiences and personality. The paper *On the Construction of Shen Congwen's "Rural Person" Identity*, mainly focuses on the core concept of Shen Congwen's "rural person" identity and explores its formation, development, and literary significance in Shen Congwen's autobiography and creation. In this paper, the author combines Shen Congwen's creative experience to analyze how he went from anxiety about identity to self-identity, and finally explores the literary ideal of "poetry and truth" from the construction of his identity as a "rural person" [6]. The study and exploration of Shen Congwen's identity is undoubtedly of great help for readers to understand the literary value of *Border Town*.

2. The Application of Poetic Language in Border Town

As a disciple and close friend of Shen Congwen, Wang Zengqi once commented on the language of *Border Town* as follows: "The language of *Border Town* is the best language of Shen Congwen. It is neither sweeping and unrestrained like in the early stages, nor intricate and obscure like in the later stages. During this period, every sentence was full of water, sweet and sour in moderation, like freshly picked Yantai agate cherries [7]." How the language of this work received such high praise can be analyzed from the environmental shaping and detailed description of the work.

2.1 Fresh and Simple Environment Shaping

The story of *Border Town* can be simply described as a pure love story that takes place between Cuicui, who relies on her grandfather for survival, and a pair of brothers in a small town called Chadong. In addition to the aforementioned characters, this novel has a very important non-humanoid character, namely the Border Town Chadong, which exists as the title of the novel. The author's portrayal of this important character begins from the first paragraph of the novel.

When people talk about world-class novels, they always mention their captivating beginnings. Novels like Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Camus' *The Outsider* can capture readers' interest in the first paragraph and set the tone for the entire novel. The first paragraph of *Border Town* reads as follows: "An old imperial highway running east from Sichuan into Hunan province leads,

after reaching the West Hunan border, to a little mountain town called Chadong. By a narrow stream on the way to town was a little white pagoda, below which once lived a solitary family: an old man, a girl, and a yellow dog.” Each place has its own way of supporting its own inhabitants. Shen Congwen, who moved between cities and villages, deeply understood this. Therefore, Shen Congwen spent a huge amount of space in the first two chapters of the novel to describe the natural scenery and local customs of Chadong.

In the second chapter of the novel, there is a description of the Baihe River, which highlights the clarity of the river water and the seasonal changes of the same scenery. On the one hand, while highlighting the clear water of the river, the novel states: “Trace the river back upstream, and it was so clear you could see right down to the bottom, through pools thirty or fifty feet deep. When the sun shone on the deep parts, the white pebbles and striated carnelian stones at the bottom were visible clear as could be, along with fish darting to and fro as if floating in air.” The artistic conception described in this passage is similar to that of Liu Zongyuan’s famous article *The Little Stone Pond*, “In the pond, there are about a hundred fish, swimming as if suspended in void, unattached. Sunlight pierces down, casting shadows on the stones.” They all describe the most primitive natural scenery that has not been touched by humans. More than a thousand years ago, Liu Zongyuan, who was demoted from official position, comforted his resentment by seeking solace in the mountains and rivers. Similarly, Shen Congwen, who traveled between Beijing and Shanghai, used the same method to guide his confused sense of identity and found a place for his soul by seeking solace in the pure natural scenery. On the other hand, this passage also mentions the four-time changes of the year, where the same scenery presents different atmospheres in different seasons, peach blossoms in spring, purple cotton-print tunics and trousers in summer, walls of yellow earth and pitch-black tiles in autumn and winter. China has been an agricultural country since ancient times, and in the past, most ordinary people spent their entire lives in dozens of cycles of spring plowing and autumn harvesting, never leaving the land that nurtured them until death. Just like the mother and daughter of the woolen yarn shop that Shen Congwen saw when he returned to Xiangxi, “Seventeen years ago, that little girl stood by a cotton yarn edge in the cabinet all day long, repeatedly exchanging hands to wrap her cotton thread. What I see now is still the same [8].” For these people, time flows without moving forward. People grow up with time, but there have never been any fresh changes in the middle of each year, so it repeats itself until old age.

The composition of the environment includes not only the

natural environment, but also the social environment. Shen Congwen once mentioned his creative philosophy, “What I want to express is a ‘form of life’, a ‘beautiful, healthy, natural, and not contradictory to human nature’.” This concept is also vividly reflected in *Border Town*. One of the major characteristics of tea culture is its non-utilitarian nature. When the passenger wants to tip the old ferryman, the ferryman feels “a little bullied” and “he put on a show of anger and forced the man to take back his money—pressed the coins right back into his hand”. Perhaps their material life is not rich, but the people of Chadong know how to be satisfied and have a sense of self-esteem that is not favored. Another major characteristic of the Chadong area is simplicity. Even between prostitutes and customers, “promising to stay true during their separation. The one afloat on the boat, and likewise the one staying ashore, got through the next forty, the next fifty days with their heartstrings firmly bound to the other so far away.” It is among such a group of people that Cuicui’s pure love story can happen.

2.2 Vivid Detail Description from the Side

Border Town is a work that will touch people’s hearts when read. To a large extent, it is derived from Shen Congwen’s portrayal of Cuicui, who skillfully captures her innocence and delicate thoughts.

When the first description of Cuicui appeared in the novel, she was compared to a “little wild animal”. “Yet she was as docile and unspoiled as a mountain fawn, wholly unacquainted with cruelty, never worried, and never angry. When a stranger on the ferry cast a look at her, she would shoot him a glance with those brilliant eyes, as if ready to flee into the hills at any instant; but once she saw that he meant her no harm, she would go back to playing by the waterside as if nothing had happened.” This metaphor of wild animals is often associated with barbarism, but the novel focuses more on expressing an uncivilized instinct, caring about the gaze of others, loving to play, and inevitably falling into love.

The novel almost does not directly depict the psychology of love, although it does not directly talk about emotions, emotions can be felt everywhere. The meeting between Cuicui and Nuosong originated from an accident. Cuicui got separated from her grandfather in the town. Er Lao met Cuicui and invited her to wait for him to come back. However, Cuicui misunderstood Er Lao’s kindness and cursed him. As a result, not only did Er Lao not get angry, but he also helped Grandpa find Cuicui. Although Cuicui had some complaints about her grandfather, “But something else, which had to do with her and not her grandfather, kept Cuicui in silence through the rest of the night.” Cuicui, who had relied on her grandfather since child-

hood, had never accepted such kindness from the same age and opposite sex before, so her initial reaction to this behavior was still the instinctive resistance of a “little wild animal”. However, the concern of the Nuosong awakened another instinct in her, which is the vague longing for love as a teenage girl, which belongs to human instinct.

Although Cuicui has never directly expressed her feelings, her unintentional actions still exposed her cautious thinking. Two years later, when she goes back to the town again, she feels that the bustle of the city is “not as sweet and beautiful as that left by the day of the dragon boats two years before”. When she heard that Nuosong didn’t want to grind the workshop but wanted a ferry, she would be “too embarrassed to speak”. When she talked to her grandfather about her proposal, “Her heart still pounding, she bowed her head as if she hadn’t heard and went on picking her scallions.” When she heard Nuosong singing in her dream, she felt “her soul drifted upon the strains of beautiful songs, seeming gentle to float all about, up to the white pagoda, down to the vegetable garden, onto the boat—then it flew back, midway up the hanging bluffs—but for what purpose? To pick the tigers’ ears.”

Through such subtle details, readers can truly empathize with the characters in the story.

3. The Multi-level Tragic Beauty *Border Town*

3.1 The Misfortunes and Incompleteness of Life

Shen Congwen once said, “Everything is full of goodness, full of perfect and noble hope, but there are always coincidences everywhere. Since it is coincidence, the simple goodness and pure hope will inevitably lead to tragedy [9].” The tragedy of *Border Town* largely stems from this kind of coincidences shrouded in love and hope. The people in this story are of course kind, but a considerable number of tragedies are not determined by human will, although each person in the tragedy has no malice.

The love between Cuicui’s parents was not coincidental. Although the two truly loved each other, their love could not be transformed into a complete family due to their father’s military status. In the end, Cuicui and her grandfather were left to rely on each other for survival. The love between the two brothers for Cuicui and the passing of the elder brother were also unfortunate. The relationship between the two brothers did not become estranged due to falling in love with the same girl, and the elder brother accepted calmly that he could not surpass Nuosong in the competition of singing mountain songs. However, an accident happened before the love between the Nuosong and Cuicui was fully developed, and the love that involved

human life never had a result again. Shen Congwen sincerely praised the goodness and beauty of human nature, showcasing his idealistic side. But when writing tragedies, he remained calm and realistic, realizing clearly that the power of kindness is limited. The world of ordinary people is inevitably plagued by unexpected events and natural laws of birth, aging, sickness, and death. Therefore, good and beautiful wishes inevitably turn into tragedies in the end.

The tragedy of the novel also stems from its incompleteness. The incompleteness of Cuicui’s love is superficial, and the deeper incompleteness is the incompleteness of her grandfather’s life. The story of *Border Town* can be seen as both a love story that happened when Cuicui was in her teens and a story of her grandfather finding trust for his granddaughter in the last few years of his life. The novel has a description of the grandfather’s psychology, he realized that Cuicui had grown up and his time was running out. He should find someone to entrust Cuicui to before he passed away, so that he could leave peacefully. We all know the ending of the story, grandfather never entrusted Cuicui to him until he passed away, leaving Cuicui alone to guard the ferry and wait for the Nuosong to come back. For Cuicui, “He may never come back; or perhaps he will be back tomorrow!” But for grandfather, he will never see the day when he ‘come back’.

3.2 Loneliness out of Step with the Times

To understand a work, starting from the author’s personal experience is an important entry point. The study of Shen Congwen, the author of *Border Town*, is quite extensive in the academic community, and the most commonly mentioned one is his inferiority complex towards self-deprecating as a “rural person”.

Shen Congwen’s creative journey was quite tortuous. From starting with the pen name Xiu Yunyun to writing his lifelong masterpiece *Border Town*, Shen Congwen spent ten years exploring his creative path and finding his identity in modern cities. The so-called identity means “The position of an individual in society, that is, status. Narrowly defined, it refers to the legal or professional position of an individual in a group; broadly defined, it refers to the value and importance of an individual in the eyes of others [10].” In the early stages of Shen Congwen’s creation, he did not possess either of these aspects of identity. Beijing-style literature does not have a formal organization like left-wing literature and Shanghai-style literature. It is a term concept in literary history that brings together a group of writers with similar creative styles. The biggest characteristic of this school of writers is also to keep a distance from political struggles, so they inevitably deviate from the mainstream. During this period, Shen Congwen’s

works were also criticized and misunderstood by many critics. Some believed that his obscurity and boredom were not as profound as Lu Xun's, some believed that his works were filled with idealism and nihilism tendencies, and some questioned the authenticity of his life experiences. Regarding such accusations, Shen Congwen expressed his own grievances in the preface of *Alice's Journey to China*: "Apart from a few family members and a few close friends, there are many people who are known to each other, and none of them can truly feel what kind of person I am from the perspective of spiritual beauty. Love is not all my love, and hatred is not all my hatred. I live in this unjust state [11]."

During the period of *Border Town*, in the inscription of *Border Town*, Shen Congwen gained a clearer understanding of his creative style and also dared to be criticized and isolated. The title of this book reads: "The publication of this book may not have been abandoned by the leading majority of theorists and critics, and the majority of readers who are led may not have completely abandoned it, but the author of this book has already intentionally abandoned this majority" From this, it can be seen that Shen Congwen had a great determination to confront opposing opinions when writing this novel, and at the same time, he had a greater stubbornness to appeal to his true feelings. Even if he went against the current, he wanted to write a work that was sincere enough from his heart. Shen Congwen probably did not anticipate that a century later, this work, which he had decided to abandon the majority of readers, would gain the support of a large number of readers. The era remembered Shen Congwen's voice, and readers were fortunate enough to receive such a nostalgic work.

4. Conclusion

In summary, as a representative work of Shen Congwen and even modern Chinese literary circles, *Border Town* has unique aesthetic value and rich research value. The beautiful writing style of the work has been highly praised, vividly depicting Shen Congwen's ideal small Chadong. The description of delicate emotions is subtle and introverted, allowing readers to truly feel the vitality of the small town and the warmth and coldness of human emotions inside. On the other hand, the sense of tragedy in the work progresses layer by layer, that is, because the story itself is full of coincidences and the incompleteness of love and life, the author's unique experiences outside the work further deepen this tragic atmosphere.

The reason why *Border Town* stands out among many literary works is that the work grasps the common spiritual

pursuit of readers in different eras. Through the appearance of the city of Chadong and the love story, the beautiful textual portrayal, sorrowful atmosphere, and pursuit of beautiful humanity in *Border Town* are still sought after in today's era. Perhaps Shen Congwen's choice has been questioned by many critics in the special turbulent era. But when the tide of the times recedes and new social forms gradually emerge, today's readers, looking back at the classics of the last century, will choose to regard such a work that is neither grand nor avant-garde as one of the most representative works of the literary level of the last century, which shows that Shen Congwen's choice at that time was correct.

Through the study of *Border Town*, researchers analyze not only the value of a single work, but also the common characteristics that transcend time and ethnicity contained within it. By analyzing such a work, readers can better understand the meaning of literature for life, which includes both the pursuit of grandeur and the pure enjoyment of beauty. Only in a sufficiently inclusive and open environment can literature continue to develop and thrive.

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