

Interpreting the Modernity of Yu Dafu's "Sinking" Combined with Decadence Theory

Pinfu Zeng^{1,*}

¹College of Chinese Language and Literature, Hengyang Normal University, Hengyang, Hunan, 421200, China

*Corresponding author: apoantidope@outlook.com

Abstract:

Yu Dafu's work "Sinking" portrays the life of a young man studying in Japan from his perspective. It particularly emphasizes depicting personal experiences through the character's psychology and dialogue. Additionally, it uses character choices as metaphors for the pain of modernization faced by contemporary China. This article uses the protagonist's image in "Sinking" as an example to deduce cognition through social and historical backgrounds. It combines the theory of modernity and decadence and examines its characteristics from national consciousness, civil identity cognition, and changes in moral concepts. The analysis of modernity's characteristics demonstrates how "Sinking" illustrates the problems in Chinese society's modernization and the fundamental reason why the character behaves this way. The practical issues depicted in the novel confirm the various challenges faced by modern Chinese society's modernization and how the youth of this era developed, thereby showcasing Yu Dafu's concern for reality and awareness of social responsibility.

Keywords: Yu Dafu, "Sinking," modernity, decadence

1. Introduction

The social era in which Yu Dafu lived had distinctive modern characteristics, and thus, reality elements were the primary reason why „Sinking“ rose to prominence. On the one hand, China's modernization did not occur according to the mainstream Western model but was carried out in a semi-passive form dominated by other forces; on the other hand, even the May 4th Movement that occurred independently in Chinese society did not bring about modernization. The spirit of modernity soon fell into a low ebb. Affected by this, the protagonists in „Sinking“ usually show various anti-traditional and rebellious consciousnesses detached from the new times. Still, they have to accept the darkness of social reality, thus possessing a distinctive decadent style.

The current modern interpretation of „Sinking“ mainly has two achievements: one is the modernity of Yu Dafu's narrative technique; the other is the modernity of the protagonist's illness, identity concept, psychology, and ethics. Academic circles have currently shown from a social and historical perspective that the modernization process in China disrupted the traditional national concept, which led to this image's formation [1]. They have also mentioned that identity cognition collapsed due to the modern „exile“ environment[2], and they have discussed the protagonist's

modern ethics from the perspective of breaking through traditional literary consciousness[3]. Although the protagonist's image has been deconstructed, further research is still needed to fully understand how the novel might be interpreted in the present era while incorporating decadent consciousness. The character image based on decadent awareness will be examined in this article to provide a more thorough grasp of its contemporary features.

2. Theoretical Framework

Modernity theory includes the basic conceptual interpretation of modernity and the scope of meaning that continues to expand with the development of the times. On the one hand, modernity is embodied in the historical concept of industrialized civilization, which highlights the progress of a certain stage of human development. On the other hand, it is an aesthetic rebellion incompatible with the former's reaction to capitalist civilization, particularly the subsequent resulting class morality, which contradicts the approbation attitude [4]. This shows that modernity has a natural negative tendency. The resulting aesthetic standards try to use negative methods to achieve the purpose of being unconventional and deeply exploring the connotation of beauty, although they are not necessarily rational. Decadence, which typically originates in literature, began to take shape in the 19th century and peaked in the

20th. This trend is intimately linked to the social reality of capitalism's ongoing development. It is often combined with society's moral decay, culture's decline, and personal spiritual crisis. Early Romantic literature goes from simply describing human physical pain to pathologically rendering psychological distortions, always showing a kind of skepticism and criticism towards modern civilization. Based on research on decadence by some Italian literati, modernity, and decadence are increasingly closely related, and decadence shows that criticism of modern civilization points to issues such as spiritual crises and the alienation of people brought about by industrial society. This is a manifestation of modernity [4]. Beyond this, literature acknowledged decadence as an expressive facet of modernity. Rebellion to tradition, dissatisfaction with modern life, the pursuit of personal sensory enjoyment, and the exploration of personal emotional psychology are the main expressions, striving to realize the integration of the concept of one's modernity and the modernity of the times [4].

3. The Superfluous Men of Awakening

Originating from Russian literature, the extra man is the image Yu Dafu focuses on. They consider themselves to be an extra part of society and have a strong resistance to the dark reality. They want to fight but lack the strength to take practical action. They often fall into self-denial, sensitivity, and suspicion and „collapse“ during social changes. Although not every superfluous man in his works can awaken, the protagonist in „Sinking“ shows that the combination of decadent consciousness and modernity symbolizes gradual awakening.

3.1 Modern Interpretation of National Consciousness

A few progressive writers and thinkers had already addressed the Roman Empire as a „decadent“ case during the Enlightenment. Decline, in their opinion, is invariably associated with the „progressivity“ or „progressive disease“ of the time [4]. Therefore, we can understand the decadent flavor expressed by the behavioral patterns of the extra men from the perspective of „progressivity“ and „progress disease“ at that time.

The root cause of the extra men lies in the country's desolation and decadence [1]. The dark reality accompanying the modernization of Chinese society cannot escape the blame for the tragedy of this alienated group. The national consciousness of traditional China is a unified concept based on the theory of the unity of nature and man. It subconsciously places China at the center of the world, and „bridging“ helped ancient China achieve long-term stability and dynastic cycles [5]. The long-term tradition built by

isolation and stability disappeared amidst the destruction suffered by modern China, forcing the people to accept a modern national consciousness. Since the European national revolutions, countries oppressed by massive feudal reactionary forces have hoisted flags representing their nations to symbolize a shared national consciousness. Their ideas also represent the modern capitalism or socialism trend partly [6]. To become a modern country, its citizens must first rely on the consciousness of modernity to maintain the community. Despite society's fragmentation, most intellectuals remain committed to China's unification. Because China's entire territory resembles a „begonia leaf,“ people use it to refer to the whole nation. This undoubtedly demonstrates the attempt to use the slogan „One China“ to guide the general public in establishing a new understanding of the nation and regrouping the spirit for national rejuvenation.

Yu Dafu wrote at the beginning that the protagonist's experiences while studying abroad were due to his precocity and loneliness. Still, he did not explain the origin of this characteristic. In other words, the readers targeted by this work do not need the author to directly point out the source of their „loneliness“ - the reality of China they face is naked. In decadent literary works, the illness usually causes self-reflection, and the reflection of the social system is realized after being forced into personal loneliness [7]. The protagonist attributes his own unfair experience, the isolation brought about by depression, and the inability to satisfy his desires to the „illness“ of his motherland. After leaving the school environment, he lost contact with his family due to quarrels. The lack of material support allowed him to fully understand the anguish of a foreign society, prompting him to ponder more deeply about Chinese society's difficulties. Facing reality, he felt powerless and lost his soul. In a state of confusion, he went to a beachside restaurant to have sex with a prostitute. Later, he felt a strong sense of shame and chose to die for relief. However, his shouting, „Motherland, motherland, you are the one who caused my death!“ demonstrates his strong sense of patriotism [8], and it's not just a simple act of covering up shame with death; it's even a call to rally national consciousness.

Yu Dafu insisted on writing „Sinking“ with an „autobiographical“ attitude, presenting his sincere personality after turning his personal experience into art. This image of superfluous men is a microcosm of the morbid and twisted psychology of himself and thousands of young people of his generation who are suffering from depression and hesitation. At this time, the modern national consciousness of the youth and the common recognition of the „to become prosperous and strong“ consciousness also reflected on the current social situation through a decadent expression,

which aroused widespread resonance.

3.2 Modern Interpretation of Identity Recognition

At the time, China had several established transit ports, modern cities, prosperous inhabitants, and a massive backward countryside and peasants exploited by powerful landlords. A huge rift opened by modernization made the national perception of the civilians unable to form a unified concept. Most of the rural population still maintains the traditional production method of men farming and women weaving, while urban residents serve the mighty forces. Both of them are indifferent to the social reality that restricts their freedom and cannot change the status quo. This kind of identity contradicts the republican national identity promoted by the modern Chinese government. An interesting example is that the integration of Chinese and foreign cultures and the intertwined management of political powers in Shanghai has led to foreigners (British, French, German, etc.) developing a sense of superiority over locals and a mindset of treating themselves as first-class citizens. Gradually, they developed an identification with the Shanghai area and called themselves 'Shanghaiander' [9]. This kind of identity recognition is similar to a kind of internationalism that transcends the level of one's own country and certainly breaks through one's original identity. Such a broader awareness is even more unavailable to Chinese people now.

Following the May 4th Movement, the youth group recognized their enormous influence and became the primary group working to make the country strong and affluent. They traveled to foreign countries with strong intentions, yet frequently perceived a disconnect between modernity and backwardness. Proficient language and professional skills do not guarantee recognition from others. The harsh realities of life rapidly dashed their longing for contemporary civilization, and they began to question their identity. The author exploits the protagonist's identification to ask, 'How should a modern civilized citizen view his own identity?' Can young people who represent the people be appreciated in other nations' societies and identify with the cities of other countries? These questions represent the continuous thinking and construction of modern identity cognition.

The protagonist in the novel is a multilingual user. He can recite poetry in English and German and communicate in Japanese. Occasionally, when he feels emotional, he writes poetry in Classical and vernacular Chinese (This is a special phenomenon in the use of modern Chinese language). However, the pursuit of producing poetry appears too feeble, serving merely as a form of self-consolation. His living situation in Japan is analogous to exile, and the cul-

tural milieu in a foreign nation has become a jail, limiting his physical freedom [2]. His extremely fragile connection with his cultural soil caused him to lose the support of his hometown and fall into a state of doubt: even if he did not reveal extremely exciting contempt, the sensitive and inferior protagonist always felt discriminated against and insulted, thinking to 'retaliate against the Japanese.' Most typical decadents have developed a form of schizophrenia, which causes them to refuse to accept reality and fantasize about destroying everything [6]. When the protagonist's 'melancholy' attacks, he either refuses to trust others or tells the truth very easily, further deepening his isolation. When confronted with reality, it is extremely difficult to cheer up again, and the idea of rebuilding national identity is quickly destroyed. Naturally, they lose hope of studying abroad to help China flourish and are forced to seek relief through self-destruction. The country's poverty is an important factor; however, the main reason for the collapse of the extra men is the spiritual conflict between the identity provided by traditional culture and the hope placed in modern Western civilization [10]. Despite this, his decadent choice still shows that he has a new understanding of modern identity that is different from that of most citizens.

3.3 Modern Interpretation of Moral Concepts

Although the May 4th Movement aimed at releasing the meaning of 'human beings,' the traditional dross, such as feudal ethics, did not evaporate with successive revolutionary movements. Even until the 'New Life Movement' proposed in 1934, a movement in the wake of the crisis of Japanese imperialist invasion, which aspired to urgently improve the moral standard of the people, is still advocating 'Honesty and Honor' and some concepts in traditional culture mixed with feudal remnants. Meanwhile, those 'new exemplary provinces' construction policies have been ineffective. For example, in Shanxi Province, where 'strictly implement' is believed, troubles such as vague content, exaggerated subjective initiative, and layers of exploitation by bureaucrats with clever names have never been addressed during the implementation process. Naturally, they have failed to achieve the goal of enlightening people's intelligence [11]. Taken collectively, the national ideological movement has long been stagnant, and it has even become an empty slogan used by the rulers. Requiring the 'new ideological concepts' proposed during the New Culture Movement to be part of the national moral outlook — that is, negating the old morality and establishing new morality — is Yu Dafu's pursuit of the civic qualities that modern Chinese should possess.

Moral crisis is one of the problems targeted by decadence. Since the twentieth century, the combination of individualistic inclinations in decadent writing has taken

on a key role in the works, reflecting the adoration of individualism in modern literature and art [4]. Compared to conventional Chinese literature, Yu Dafu's portrayals of lust have a more self-expressive meaning based on his moral concepts. According to the focus theory proposed by Gérard Genette, the narrative of „Sinking“ belongs to the third-person internal focusing perspective [12]. This method, which promotes the development of the plot based on the flow of thoughts of the characters, allows readers to gain insight into the characters' experiences and inner choices, focusing on the psychological changes of the characters and creating a hazy narrative effect. In this novel, we can feel the combination of decadent style and the author's strong personal expression tendency.

The preface to „Sinking“ reads: „The description of a sick young man can also be said to be an analysis of the youthful Hypochondria. It also contains a description of the depression of modern people — that is, the requirements of lust and the conflict between his spirit and body.“ [8]. Reflected on the moral concepts of the characters, what is highlighted is the swing between satisfying desires and mental difficulties. The protagonist wrote in his diary: „What I want is love! If there is a beauty who can understand my pain, and she requires me to die, I will obey it.“ [8]. Peeping at the hotel owner's daughter taking a bath, eavesdropping on the whispers of men and women, and running to a brothel to have fun, the protagonist does not dare to show his emotions when his desires are inflated and indulged in sexual fantasies obscenely. He was unable to break free from the restraints of traditional society, so in Japan's relatively open social environment, it also seemed out of place. The conflict between his ideas and the natural tendency of human desire deepened his isolation and melancholy. He had a decadent thought about the „pain“ of desire: Is it because he has lost his morals and no longer cares about his homeland, or is this damn society incapable of accepting a sensitive and melancholic individual like him? Raising such a question undoubtedly challenges the feudal morality and pretentious habits of the old Chinese society [13]. Moreover, it also leads to the traditional morality that Yu Dafu wants to criticize. The affirmation of human desire is the first step towards new moral concepts.

4. Modern Consciousness of Chinese Literature

The modernized national concept triggers citizens to think about their cognition, and improved morality is a supplement. The overall modernity is demonstrated through the unique decadent consciousness of the protagonist in „Sinking,“ which points to issues such as human spiritual

alienation, demonstrating the modernization consciousness of Chinese literature on a social scale. Therefore, this trend not only shares commonalities with Western literature but also highlights some unique elements of China.

The traditional spirit of Confucian literati and officials made many ancient intellectuals think one way and behave another: When they were in power, this group did everything they could to help the people, but when things got bad, they often withdrew from the world, lament, and wander. It appears to be decadent and negative, forming an atypical feature [13]. They are independent and aloof from the world; if they are cruelly hit by reality, they are more likely to be unable to recover. Confucian consciousness may be a starting point for modern Chinese literati to develop a consciousness of modernity. The May 4th Movement initially gave rise to the emancipation of ideas, and then the New Culture Movement kicked off the modernization of Chinese literature. However, the cruel and dark social reality violently impacted the modernization process, causing it to develop into a deformed state. The modern writer's consciousness faintly originated in the description of „Sinking,“ connected with the traditional literati's sense of responsibility, resulting in an atypical decadent change.

The modernization background of Western literature is very different from that of China, so it presents a process from identifying with the concept of capitalism to re-cognition and even criticism. Affected by the First World War, modern Chinese literature often experienced a jump in the judgment stage and made more critical narrations of capitalist concepts. Generally speaking, the emotionalism shown in „Sinking,“ that is, the narrative mode with emotion as the core, has resonated with a large number of young people of the same generation and generated a unique „Yu Dafu fever“ [14].

5. Conclusion

The first thing China faced in modern times was the contradiction between modernization and remaining conservative. Through the initial awakening of the ideological movement, people of insight realized that only modernization can end the fragmentation of society. Furthermore, how the nation's traditional social identity confronts modernization challenges and changes has gradually received attention. How new moral concepts can overcome the old system has posed challenges to modernization. „Sinking“ gives its answers to these questions, becoming a mirror in the process of modernization and reflecting the living conditions of special groups.

Regarding the interpretation of „Sinking,“ this article needs to deeply explore Yu Dafu's creative psychology in

connection with the plot but mainly interpret the modern characteristics of the characters combined with the background of the times so as to better understand the characters' motivations and life performance. This essay hopes to broaden the modern understanding of the characters in „Sinking“ by analyzing the close relationship between decadence and modernity, thereby deepening the understanding of modern Chinese literature.

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