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Metaphor and Awakening: The Characteristics of Modernity and the Meaning of Modernity in Huang Xiuqiu

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Abstract: In the history of Chinese literature, Late Qing literature has important transitional significance because of its special position between tradition and modernity. As a key link in the literary system of the Late Qing Dynasty, "novel" not only achieved unprecedented development at that time and had a profound social impact, but also attracts many literary researchers today: combining it with modernity, exploring the characteristics of modernity, and giving it important modern significance. This paper will analyze the characteristics of modernity and the meaning of modernity behind the novel text from three dimensions: plot metaphor, name metaphor and gender metaphor.

Keywords: Late Qing Dynasty novels; metaphors; modernity

1. Introduction

In the opening chapter of A Ying's History of the Late Qing Novel, he states, "The Late Qing novel, in the history of Chinese fiction, was an era of prosperity." [1]. This prosperity was not only reflected in the number of novels, but also in the abundance of topics of novel writing. The reason for this is that the unprecedented prosperity of novels in the Late Qing Dynasty was not only due to the development of the printing industry at that time, but also to the more important factors of the background and social reality of the times. Historian Cho-Yun Hsu once pointed out that the more in the transitional period of turmoil and inequality, the easier it is to produce new ideas and concepts, and to form the crystallisation of human literature and art; for example, in the ancient China of the Axis Era, the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, which were marked by the wars of the feudal lords and the social turmoil, had created the literary and cultural scene of the "Hundred Schools of Thought". The Late Qing Dynasty was precisely such "an era of excess of the old and the new, and a time of turmoil where darkness and light alternated" [1]. The Late Qing Dynasty was corrupt and incompetent, foreign capitalism invaded China, and a variety of social trends emerged. Thus, the complex Late Qing society became a fertile ground for the flourishing of the novel. Influenced by both internal and external factors, novelists of this period realised the importance of the novel and used it as a carrier of their ideas and a weapon of struggle.

It is in the midst of such a prosperous development that we see the emergence of modernity in the novels of the Late Qing. As David Der-wei Wang says in the preface to the Chinese edition of *The Suppressed Modernity*, the Late Qing novel not only represents a transitional stage from tradition to modernity; its emergence, as well as its neglect, has itself witnessed one end of the modernity of Chinese literature. The Late Qing novelist Yi Suo's Huang Xiuqiu is one such masterpiece, which, although it extends the form of the traditional chapter book novel, is a literary work full of metaphors of modernity in its content and is of great modern significance.

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2. Plot Metaphors and the Awakening of Modern Consciousness

An important manifestation of modernity is the awakening of modern consciousness. According to David Der-wei Wang, the Late Qing novels have a “repressed modernity”, one of the dimensions of which is: “There is a kind of unceasing creativity within the Chinese literary tradition. While writers of the Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties could write in relatively independent and closed contexts, the writers of the Late Qing Dynasty found themselves in the midst of a worldwide traffic of ideas, technology, politics, and economics. They were confronted with the imperative of grasping and responding immediately to developments in the West, which often took centuries to mature.” [2]. This is an awakening of modern consciousness. In the novel *Huang Xiuqiu*, the awakening of modern consciousness is manifested in the following ways: the author draws his material from the social reality of the Late Qing Dynasty and skillfully integrates it into the content of the novel, using the narrator and the characters’ mouths to comment on issues such as the officialdom’s shady practices, the current state of the country, and the improvement of the society, and through the metaphors of the plot, such as the theory of the house, the author demonstrates his awakening of the national and state consciousness and his consciousness of the problem.

First of all, the novel uses the village of Freedom as a metaphor to skillfully summarise the social status quo of China in the Late Qing Dynasty, which is “troubled from within and troubled from without”, and at the same time puts China in the position of a nation-state. In the first chapter of the novel, it is written that the villagers of Liberty Village are self-sufficient, and that they are “used to enjoying the blessings of the ready-made, and are extremely afraid of trouble” [3]. The village was not in contact with outsiders, “the outsiders were envious of the wealth of his village, jealous of the comfort of his village, and knew the temper of his village, so they gradually came up with ways to liaise, and gradually took up the means to bully. The village of Freedom was deprived of all the joys of freedom” [3]. In addition to these “external problems”, the village also has “internal problems”, which the novel illustrates through the mouth of Huang Tongli: He feels that “in my village, all kinds of scenery are better than outside, but none of them can match the splendour of the outside” [3], the squires are at odds with the people, and the scholars only know how to read. And this seems to be the symbol and metaphor of the current situation of Late Qing. The Qing Dynasty, and even before, China had always been in a closed, self-sufficient, small peasant society, unaware that it had already suffered from the disadvantages of closure and backwardness: the “outsiders” “liaised” with each other by sending missionaries, and then “bullied” each other through trade and wars. On the inside, the Qing government is corrupt and incompetent, the officialdom is dark, and the people suffer a lot. With the help of metaphors, the social situation and dark reality presented in the novel undoubtedly show that the Late Qing novelists represented by Yi Suo already had a certain sense of national consciousness, state consciousness and national state consciousness, and they recognised that China in the Late Qing period, as a member of the “global village” at that time, was faced with internal and external problems; moreover, there were other races and countries outside the “free village”, and that they had to put China into the perspective of the whole world.

In addition, the novelists of the Late Qing Dynasty not only had a sense of national state, but also an awakened sense of problems. The author, Yi Suo, uses the metaphor of a house to illustrate the social problems of Late Qing China, which undoubtedly reflects the author’s awakening of modern consciousness. Huang Xiuqiu sees that the back house of her family is going to fall down after being battered by wind and rain, and reminds her husband Huang Tongli to hire a craftsman to repair the house, but he says: “If I change the damage, it will be out of shape, I want to change the shape, so I should just destroy it all together, and it is not a matter of fixing and repairing the house to keep it for a long time.” [3]. In the face of the village people’s indifference, he said helplessly and resentfully, “I am really for our village’s customs and people’s feelings are corrupted to the point of

being out of shape, although the name of the village is freedom, the village people do not know how to pull themselves together, and were held hostage by the people from the villages outside, I want to restore my freedom of the two words of the authority of the word, to organise the word of the word of my freedom of the glory of the word, so how much of a moral there is on the house" [3]. Huang Tongli's words are really the author's own opinion. The author realised that there were already problems in the country and the people at that time: the house was going to tumble to signify China's backwardness and decadence, and the ideas of "heavenly country" and "I am the only one" were already outdated, and the practice of shutting the door to the rest of the country was already backward, so the country had to be awakened from its lethargy to make a change. Although the novelists represented by Yi Suo could not give correct and practicable solutions and practices at once in view of the social environment at that time, it is a rare and precious thing to have such a sense of problem, which is undoubtedly a kind of awakening of modernity.

3. The Name Metaphor and the Generation of the Subject's Modern Character

It is not difficult to notice that the names of almost all the characters in the novel are carefully designed by the author, which contain either deep or shallow meanings. For example, "Huang Huo", as its name suggests, is a scourge that attracts right and wrong; in addition, the names of the characters, such as Huang Tongli and Huang Xiuqiu, have more profound meanings and modern significance. The author symbolises the significance of different characters in the novel with the metaphor of names and shows the modern character of human as a subject and the generation of self-consciousness through a series of characters, which is also a manifestation of the novel's modernity. As the scholar Yi Junqing said: "The generation of individual subjectivity and self-consciousness or towards self-consciousness is one of the essential stipulations of modernity. Under the pre-modern mode of empirical culture, the vast majority of individuals live spontaneously in accordance with experience, common sense, customs and practices. It is only when the individual transcends the threshold of purely spontaneous daily life and becomes substantively associated with the conscious spiritual reproduction of science, technology, and rationality or the conscious objectification of class essences that the rupture between the modern and traditional societies occurs substantively, and the modern in the sense of the word 'man' is truly created." [4].

Take for example the couple Huang Xiuqiu and Huang Tongli. The novel mentions that most of the people in Freedom Village are descendants of the Huang Clan, and the two main characters are both surnamed Huang. There are two interpretations of this surname: one is that it is taken from the "yellow" in "all the children of the Yellow Emperor", which is a symbol of all Chinese people; the other is that the character yellow is also a symbol of race and ethnicity, and the characters in the novel are of the yellow race, in addition to other races and ethnicities such as the white race and the black race. The yellow character is also a symbol of race and ethnicity. The word "Huang Xiuqiu" is not only a homonym of her original name "Huang Xiuqiu", but also contains her beautiful ideal and vision as a representative of the awakened woman: "I will make my village as beautiful as embroidery, so that the splendour will shine out onto the earth, knowing that my village is a part of the ten thousand parts, and that it is not trivial. In the future all the places on earth will come to learn my embroidery, and I will give them all kinds of patterns, and I will embroider the whole earth." [3]. As her name suggests, Huang Xiuqiu's series of practical actions, such as putting her feet up and establishing a school, all reflect the awakening of her sense of subjectivity as a human being in an individual sense, and show her dedication to realising the beautiful vision of weaving the earth into a brocade embroidery. In addition to this, Huang Xiuqiu also shines the light of modern female consciousness on issues such as women's liberation, which will be explained in detail later.

Another important character, Huang Tongli, is also as his name suggests, an enlightened and sensible figure. Firstly, he is a modern man with a sense of national state and a sense of problems, and he becomes the spokesman of the author's trivial ideology by using the metaphor of a free village and a house, which has been discussed in detail in the first part, so I won't repeat it here. Secondly, he also has an important role of enlightenment in the novel: on the one hand, he enlightens Huang Xiuqiu and becomes her guide. On the other hand, in the process of enlightenment, the two of them really possess subjectivity and self-consciousness, which in turn generates the character of modernity. "It is in the sense of individual subjectivity that Immanuel Kant defines enlightenment in his essay 'What is Enlightenment'. He emphasises that 'Enlightenment is man's breaking away from the state of immaturity which he has imposed on himself'. The so-called 'immaturity' is the inability to use one's own reason without being guided by others." [4]. Huang Tongli's enlightening role is firstly manifested in inspiring Huang Xiuqiu to understand that women can do things as well as men, affirming the idea of equal rights and equality between men and women, and at the same time implementing it into practical actions. For example, when Huang Xiuqiu was planning to reform the two nuns by her own strength, Huang Tongli did not obstruct her, but quietly gave her understanding, support and help, which is undoubtedly a stream of clear water in the feudal society centred on male power at that time. In addition, Huang Tongli, together with Huang Xiuqiu and the two children, researched new knowledge and learning to prepare for the opening of the family school and eventually put it into practice, which is also the progress, development and leap of Huang Tongli as a man in the modern sense of the word, and has an important modern significance.

4. Gender Metaphors and the Rise of Modern Women's Consciousness

The author of the novel *Huang Xiuqiu, Yi Suo*, always focuses on the Huang Xiuqiu, paying attention to the emancipation of women and the equality of men and women from a female point of view, and attacking the traditional notion of men's superiority over women through the practice of women's physical strength. In traditional Chinese society, women are often at a disadvantage and do not even have their own ideas, not to mention making a difference, but Huang Xiuqiu dares to think, speak and act, and possesses an enterprising spirit and practical ability. Firstly, she realised the necessity of women's awakening under the enlightenment of her enlightened husband and Madame Roland, then she achieved physical liberation by putting her feet on the ground, and spiritual liberation through reading, literacy, and knowledge, and put it into practice by opening a school, and so on. This is not only a critique of tradition, but also a step towards modernity. It is also for this reason that A Ying highly praised it in *A History of Late Qing Novels*, arguing that "the best novel on women's issues produced at that time is Yi Suo's *Huang Xiuqiu*" [1]. The rise of modern female consciousness of the protagonist, Huang Xiuqiu, is gradually perfected and realised through three stages: awakening at the level of consciousness, physical emancipation and spiritual emancipation.

The first stage is the awakening of consciousness. As mentioned above, through the enlightenment, the couple of Huang really possess the subjectivity and self-consciousness, while Huang Xiuqiu, as the representative of women, the awakening of her female consciousness gives the work a more important modern meaning. In the novel, when listening to Huang Tongli's talk about the metaphor of the house, her first reaction is not one of puzzlement or disbelief, but one of impatience, "I wonder if there are women in the world who come out to do things and share men's responsibilities?" [3]. Hong Tongli replies, "Why not?" [3]. This is the awakening of women's consciousness. After the pain of foot-binding, Huang Xiuqiu's own shallow female consciousness was also wrapped up, until inspired and influenced by Tongli's house metaphor and the dream of Madame Roland, the female consciousness in her body awakens with a jolt: she realises that she can do things herself, that "men and women in the world are each endowed with their own

power, and they can each do their own things." [3]. She also realises the importance of equal rights for men and women, believing that both men and women can read, and that "all men and women are equal" [3]. This is not only the awakening of Huang Xiuqiu's female consciousness, but also the author's own affirmation and praise of the idea of equal and equal rights for men and women.

After awakening comes liberation. The first step is liberation at the physical level. Huang Xiuqiu realised that "in order to do something, one must first be able to walk; and in order to walk, one must first let go of these stinking feet" [3]. Although the pain of foot-binding is still fresh in her mind, and her neighbours are surprised and think she is crazy, in the face of this pain and lack of understanding, Huang Xiuqiu is determined to let go of her feet. This is not just a foot, but also a symbol and sign of the liberation of the body of Huang Xiuqiu. Not only that, she also advised other women to let go of their feet, and under her propaganda and influence, some women in the Free Village also let go of their feet [5]. After this, Huang Xiuqiu took the second step under the inspiration of Huang Tongli and others, she realised the importance of knowledge: "If we as women want to break away from that suppression and not to be bound, we can only hurry up to talk about the method of learning. With learning, we will naturally have insights and skills." [3]. And on the basis of their own learning and accumulation of knowledge and learning, Huang Xiuqiu persuaded and sensitised two nuns, who inculcating progressive ideas and donating the nunnery as a classroom for the school. Together with Huang Tongli, Bi Qurou, Wu Shuying, and Hu Jinou, Huang Xiuqiu put into practice their wish to open a family school and set up a school, and then completed her spiritual emancipation. In addition to Huang Xiuqiu, the novel also portrays other female characters with a modern sense of femininity. For example, the doctor Bi Qurou, who studied in the West, is a highly skilled doctor and a humble person, supports Huang Xiuqiu's work and gives her spiritual guidance at the same time [6].

The novel successfully portrays the female characters represented by Huang Xiuqiu, who, through a series of practical actions such as putting feet up, opening a family school, and running a school, achieve both physical and spiritual liberation, and highlight the rise of modern female consciousness in pursuit of progress, equality, self-reliance and self-improvement.

5. Conclusion

Although influenced by the special historical period of the Late Qing Dynasty, Huang Xiuqiu has strong political colours and utopian colours in its characters, we still cannot deny that it is one of the masterpieces of the Late Qing Dynasty novels, which has important literary significance and modern significance, and we also cannot deny that it presents the modern meaning of the novel through three dimensions of plot metaphors, name metaphors and gender metaphors. In fact, there are not only four major condemnatory novels in the Late Qing Dynasty, but also many other novels like Huang Xiuqiu with important modern qualities and modern significance, which are worthy of our further attention and research, and the mystery of modernity in the Late Qing Dynasty novels is waiting for us to further discover and excavate.

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