

“Topophobia”: Emotional Shaping in Migrant Geographic Landscape: *O Pioneers!* and *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges* as the Center

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Abstract—Immigrants, placed in the mixed space of the post-globalization era, are constantly undergoing geographical displacement, life transplantation and nonvisualized emotional experiences, embedded with strong “topophobia”. They face the shackles of the new and old land. From Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* in the early 20th century to *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges* by Hong Ying in the late 20th century, they depict segregated migrant geographical landscapes based on diverse forms of land and rivers respectively, giving rise to different forms of “migration lines”: the “dividing line” in Nebraska and the “water line” in the Three Gorges Dam area of the Yangtze River. Both double lines conceal the authors’ immigrant experience and their special anti-isolation, and finally complete social gender and identity confirmation. Through the counterpoint writing of geographical landscapes and the shaping of dual emotions, multicultural forms are continuously activated by immigrant communities. In this context, wishing to provide a novel perspective and interpretation path for immigrant literature, it will bridge the intersectional commonality between Chinese and foreign immigrants, and compose the immigrant song of the times.

Index Terms—Migrant geographic landscape, *O Pioneers!*, *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges*, topophobia

I. INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and Hong Ying’s *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges* both give aesthetic, moral, and vital meanings to geographic landscapes, implicitly reflecting the authors’ migratory experiences, and both use social gender, identity, and other elements to frame immigrant culture. Scanning the research home and abroad, the main object of immigrant literature is Chinese immigrants, focusing on North American Chinese literature and Southeast Asian Chinese literature with localized characteristics, and its themes mostly focus on exile, foreign life full of cultural conflicts and choice problems. Some researchers may go beyond a simple ethnic perspective and cut from ecocriticism to new thinking about species relations in immigrant literature. For instance, in 2016, Bidisha Banerjee discusses an inter-species relationship where the immigrant man is assisted by a native animal in Shaun Tan’s novel, and uses “companion species” to explore the importance of a non-human Other coming to the assistance of the immigrant Other within the space of a posthuman, postcolonial world [1]. In 2021, Feng Yun points out that immigrants write about memories of their homeland while also showing their value as a transnational Chinese group [2]. In recent

years, along with the spatial turn of the new cultural geography, the regional space depicted in immigrant literature has begun to attract the attention of scholars at home and abroad, and the regional characteristics have come to the fore, providing another clear geographical category for literary studies. For example, in 2015, David H. Kaplan and Elizabeth Chacko probe the significance of place and context in forming immigrant identity, as well as the diverse ways in which immigrants make places [3]. Then in 2016, Lin Chaoran blends the foreign culture of the West with the local culture of Heilongjiang [4]. In addition, other minority immigrant literature is increasingly rising abroad, and domestic literature on the Three Gorges Project of the Yangtze River and Chinese Korean immigrants continue to emerge. The study of immigrant literature has expanded to culturalology, psychology, narratology, and folklore studies, but it is still monotonous and lacks richness, and there is a gap in the study of the visualization of human geography and placemindedness. Moreover, the migrant geographic landscapes in fiction have received little academic attention, and almost no one has compared the texts across China and abroad.

In *Topophobia: Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination*, Robert T. Tally Jr. introduced “topophobia”, a new concept that embodies people’s awareness of and concern for the place they are in, such as location, site, orientation, environment, spatial relations and so on [5]. In this regard, based on the multidimensional emotions embedded in “topophobia”, the paper takes “topophilia” and “topophobia” as typical examples, focuses on two forms of “migration lines”, namely land and river, and explores how they are artificially given symbolic meanings, and explores the characteristics of the subject’s existence in the flowing space, aiming to analyze its original characteristics and the different “sense of place” and “topophobia” derived from it by interpreting the specific forms of migrant geographic landscapes, instead of narrowly limiting to different stages of geographic landscape development in a typical “cultural area”, so as to better explore the close connection between landscape and emotion.

II. “SENSE OF PLACE”: SHIFTING LAND “MIGRATION LINE”

In *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, the American historian Frederic Jackson Turner introduced the concept of “moving frontier”, giving the “frontier” an abstract connotation of mobility, which is a concrete representation of “place” of mobility. This boundary between civilization and barbarism receded westward as the migratory masses continued to move westward, and its status as an

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entity changed. Turner argues that the “frontier” was the periphery of the immigrant settlement area, a specific natural area where people were attached or extended or huddled, not a fixed place; in a deeper connotation, the “frontier” was a gradual progression, i.e., the process of the Westward Movement, in which white immigrants continued to adapt to transform the “ownerless land” and conquer the barbaric environment there, and in which American exceptionalism germinated and grew, so that the “frontier” should be regarded as “the intersection of savagery and civilization” or “the line of rapid and effective Americanization”, i.e., the “migrant line”. However, the “migration line” keeps changing perspectives and reference systems, and the seemingly infinite space is glued to the place, giving rise to a “sense of place”.

Willa Cather was a distinguished American writer in the first half of the 20th century, famous for her stories of immigrant pioneers, and known for her sparse and fresh artistic style and high-minded purity. Her classic *O Pioneers!* is the product of Cather’s combined personal experiences to create the story of Alexandra, a Swedish immigrant who comes to the pristine wilderness of Nebraska, America, to start her own business, undergoes a series of emotional transformations and overcomes various hardships. In *O Pioneers!*, the “dividing line” is a geographical landscape created by Alexandra’s family, the heroine of the story, after they left their homeland and immigrated to a primitive wilderness, i.e., the “home site”. Therefore, the “dividing line” is a shifting “migration line”, and its form and geographical area are constantly changing, from wilderness to fertile land, a synthesis of natural and man-made landscapes.

Based on the study of Henry Gannett, the “migration line” was defined more precisely as the borderline between the multiethnic community-like homeland represented by Alexandra and the uncultivated area, a “Alexandra” homeland with a locally adapted material production method and a diverse cultural output in the color of migration. This also confirms that the “dividing line” in the novel is the “migration line” in land form, which undergoes different changes at different times: from wild mountains to a thousand miles of fertile land, from untamed land to Alexandra’s territory. Therefore, the struggle of immigrants who reclaimed the virgin land in the West to develop and build the new continent, as embodied in the novel, is an important part of the Americanization process, providing an effective paradigm for Americans to establish a harmonious relationship between people and land.

Alexandra’s relationship with the “migration line”, as a representative of the migrants, is essentially a relationship between people and the land. This relationship is an oxymoron, combining sameness and antagonism. At first, the wilderness “maintains its inherent fierce power, its wild beauty and its continuous sorrow” [6]. Unlike most people, Alexandra is taught not to take the attitude of collapsing without a battle to its arrogance and unrest, but to rise to the occasion and learn from it, consulting with the crofters on their farms by the river to learn about farming, and keenly sniffing out the commercial ways of the real estate agent Charlie Fuller who is buying up lots. Alexandra did focus on the economic benefits of the land, and she needed a certain source of income for her family. But unlike the wealthy, profit-oriented businessmen, she dotes on and respects the land. After five days on the farm, Alexandra discovered the

possibilities of the highlands with great joy, and as she climbed the first long rise of the “dividing line”, she began to hum an old Swedish hymn, facing the wilderness with love and longing.

Alexandra’s reclamation of the wilderness gives her a new understanding of the “dividing line”, a sense of security in the countryside and a deepening sense of trust and faith in the “dividing line”. Her “experimental” love for the land led to the creation of a new relationship, and the “dividing line” became a densely populated fertile land, a territory that she triumphantly explored. The rough ground of the meadow has become a broken kite, never to return. The awakening of the “dividing line” is a rebirth, but it is not a trophy that Alexandra is proud of, but a unique geographical landscape that she has created with her intelligence and ability. However, Alexandra’s attitude toward the “dividing line” is also changing silently, as she believes that it adds to her sense of clumsiness and heaviness, making her clumsy and rigid in her actions, always repeating the same things. She said to Carl that she would rather have Carl’s freedom than her land. This is the first time in the novel that Alexandra feels a sense of disenchantment with the land, loneliness and helplessness, and she presents a gesture of submission in front of Carl’s freedom. Emil is in the same state of mind as Alexandra, but Carl sees him as wandering, without a house, a place or a person of his own, describing himself as a stone rolling in the city. But Carl’s helpless description of the urban landscape does not change Alexandra’s longing and yearning for the city, the “dividing line” that separates her from the outside world, filled with a slow tone, as if it were a prison, binding her in an unfree prison, making her “marginalized”.

However, Alexandra’s boredom with the “dividing line” is temporary, and the period of her passionate love for the land eventually subsides to the third stage of her relationship with the “dividing line”: the period of maturity and stability. During this period, she finds a sense of belonging on the “dividing line”, truly turning the land into her own caring family, and realizing that the land is a symbol of home. Once she thought that the “dividing line” confined her freedom, but when she came to the real prison to see Frank, she found that it did not match the open field, and she wanted to escape immediately and return to the “dividing line” with a heavy heart. It seems to be a paradox, but it shows that the relationship between Alexandra and the “dividing line” has reached the highest level of interdependence and mutual understanding. Until the end of the novel, Alexandra does not want to leave the “dividing line” forever, Carl believes that Alexandra belongs to the land, and the “dividing line” opens its heart to accept the hearts of people like Alexandra. But she never feels she was subordinate to the land; she believes that “we are transients here, and the land is here to stay.” [6]. Alexandra’s words exemplify the sustainability of the land and the continuity of America’s pioneering history.

Alexandra’s androgyny becomes increasingly evident in the process of living with the “dividing line”, reflecting the rise of women’s status in the historical process of Americanization and frontier exploration. Androgyny means the coexistence of masculinity and femininity, which is a power of $1+1>2$. It also signifies that men and women are equal in spiritual status despite their different physical makeup. Alexandra’s bravery is the most prominent quality of her “masculinity”, as she is the sole breadwinner of her family after her father’s death. Moreover, Cather cleverly uses the male figure of Emil to counteract Alexandra’s

primitive desire for love. From a gender perspective, Emil is added to Cather's feminine features. He wears "facecloth dresses" and "skirts" and envies the little girl's woolen shawl. It is not a coincidence that he and Alexandra practice heterosexual dressing at the same time, but a deliberate attempt to symbolize the gender dislocation of the two siblings [7]. In Cather's writing, Alexandra goes against the tide, breaking through the mainstream of society at that time, which was oppressing women and adhering to the male individualistic view of nature, and becomes a representative figure who combines the beautiful character of women and male style.

As a territorial space, "dividing line" has the characteristics of strict and clear segregation, but as a moral and ethical space, its defining criteria break through the barrier of segregation and present a blurred state of "antisegregation" tendency. Alexandra's obscure and hazy attitude toward Emil and Marie's affair and her guilt toward Marie's husband Frank fully demonstrate Alexandra's difficult choice between natural lust and morality and ethics, reflecting her "incomplete identification with femininity", i.e., "her own character conflict, the opposition between logos (reason) and lust (sensuality)" [7]. The geographical landscape of the orchard in the novel is a place where these Swedish immigrants reap solace, but also a place of tragedy. The orchard, which Emil and Marie often tend together, seems to be the original home of Adam and Eve in the Bible: the Garden of Eden. Emil and Marie's "love affair" in the orchard brought about their deaths. From her initial shock when she saw the two lying on the grass, Alexandra quickly developed a sense of awe for them. She is not disdainful and angry about Emil and Marie's affair, but respects Emil's uncompromising love and pursuit of good things, which is a step Alexandra herself does not dare to cross, and she insinuates the ambiguous moral boundary of the "dividing line" on this unethical matter. However, Alexandra tries to hold on to her principles and struggles with her own ethical views. Her sympathetic and friendly attitude towards Frank who shot Emil, is partly a reflection of her self-redemption and maternal feelings of "repaying evil with good". In fact, Emil's death symbolizes the death of her other self, and the union between Alexandra and Carl eventually proves the survival of her true self and the confirmation of her social identity.

Alexandra is the realization of the ideal model of immigrant "Americanization" in Cather's mind: the acquisition of a pioneering imagination, while at the same time holding on to the cultural elements of her homeland and refusing to be completely assimilated into American values [8]. Thus, the successful reclamation of the "dividing line" is also the result of multicultural coexistence. The immigrants have the characteristics of a new region, but they uphold the personality of the Swedes and break through the "flexible" national boundaries. The "cow" character and practical national identity of most Swedish girls are fully reflected in Alexandra, showing the reader the immigrant character and spirit inherent in the changing land "migration line".

III. "TOPOPHOBIA": SEGRGATED RIVER "MIGRATION LINE"

"Topophobia" implies spatial anxiety such as restlessness, dissatisfaction and displeasure, and even points to Sartre's nausea, a state of discomfort. This anxiety is felt even in a familiar environment such as one's own home, and it

constitutes the fundamental driving force behind the desire to draw. Of course, "topophobia" does not only refer to unpleasant spatial experiences, but also includes the sunny and cheerful "topophilia" proposed by Yi-Fu Tuan and "topophobia" proposed by Trigg [5]. Turner uses the concept of "frontier" to express the core idea of the "frontier thesis", which views "frontier" as a type of society whose energy extends into the wilderness, rich in untapped resources and uncultivated land, but Turner's vision of the "migration line" is limited to the land. Based on this, Yi-Fu Tuan focuses on humanist geography, and he does not focus on the study of objective topography, landforms and other natural phenomena, but on the relationship between human beings and the geographic environment with the survival of human beings as the core, reflecting the various forms of the "migration line".

Hong Ying, a world-renowned female writer, was a famous British-Chinese novelist in the second half of the 20th century, and several of her full-length novels have been translated into more than 30 languages and published in many countries. Her masterpiece *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges* is set against the backdrop of the dramatic changes in the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River, and describes what Liu Cui, a genetic engineering scientist, sees when she returns to the Three Gorges. Hong Ying's big move back to China, as a discrete writer, is to return to the memory of her own history to absorb the nourishment [9]. Hong Ying roots her "modernity anxiety" in the novel. The "water line" at 175 meters above sea level, like the "dividing line" in *O Pioneers!*, serves as a divider, creating a "double-decker" city that is a special geographical landscape for the migrants of the Yangtze River Three Gorges Project.

The "water line" is a manifestation of the river "migration line", which divides the different fates of migrants and is closely related to the Three Gorges Dam, and is essentially a relationship between migrants and the land, reflecting a love of the land. Yi-Fu Tuan's idea of "place" highlights the survival of human beings, focuses on the spirit and qualities embedded in places, on human experience and human behavior, and on the social construction of places, revealing a spatial concept that returns to human beings. Place affects human perception, attitude and worldview, triggers different degrees of beauty, is the source of human security and identity, and is the collection and embodiment of human worldview, and the stability and integrity of place also contribute to the sound development of personality. The dam is both a barrier, a rift valley into a road, and a convenient path. It is such a bridge, a direct bridge from pre-modern to post-modern, and the symbolism is enormous [9].

The "water line" is like an invisible hand that manipulates the immigration status and fate of the Three Gorges people. This geographical landscape of migration conceals the reality of the large gap between the rich and the poor among the project migrants. The 175-meter elevation of the "water line" separates the new city from the old city, forming a stark contrast, but the metaphor of the "double-layer cake" reflects the fused and mixed characteristics of the "water line". In the process of regeneration of the fusion area, the traditional space is combined and "grafted" with the symbols of modernity, resulting in a hybrid cultural and geographical landscape, reflecting the real problems of migration. During the population transfer, Liu Cui saw the people crowding in the streets to "make trouble" about the transfer fee in the face of the Liang County government. She was even "arrested for

the first time in her life” [9]. Liang County, below the “water line”, is an important dock for river navigation and the place where Liu Cui was born. She stands in the position of ordinary people and small people, and appreciates the existence of the lower class, with a civilian consciousness. Liu Cui’s reflections and observations are about defending the people at the bottom, who are not harmed in the economic growth and in the large-scale operations of global capital [9]. Thus, the contrast between the narrative of the “slums of the big city” and “Jin Yue Hotel” reflects a social concern and a deep reflection on the ideological power of global capitalism.

The meaning given to the shout in the novel is multifaceted. The peacock in the novel is an image from the ancient culture of the Three Gorges, a golden peacock lamp stand is a bimillennial relic, and the faint and desperate shout of the peacock symbolizes the cultural heritage of the Yangtze River valley being washed away by the consumer society. Hong Ying’s narrative spans time and space, connecting history and reality. She transplants to modern times the old story of “Du Liu Cui”, which fascinated the dramatists of Song, Yuan and Ming novels, and her work entangles the mystery of reincarnation, the shuttle between history and reality, and the ultimate mystery of people and times. Hong Ying seems to be trying to reconstruct a connection between history and reality. In her narrative, reality is another way of existence for history. That is to say, history always tenaciously exerts its influence on reality through some means. The karmic reincarnation of Liu Cui to Yu Tong Zen master and Yue Ming to the prostitute Hong Lian, their karmic reincarnation and the succession of cause and effect, establish a very meaningful connection between history and reality [9]. In the novel, Hong Ying endows the peacock lamp stand with some real “substantial” characteristics through fictitious techniques. The peacock lamp is an exquisite item two thousand years ago. Hong Ying borrows the image of “peacock lamp” in the novel to show that it is really valuable. It will not be eliminated in the torrent of history, but will exert its use value, achieving a long-term reflection effect and cultural continuation.

Liu Cui travels from Beijing to the Three Gorges Reservoir where her husband works, but she is actually on a mission to find her identity. In Aunt Chen’s statement, Liu Cui learns that Master Yu Tong and Hong Lian are people who have a love for the cultural heritage of the Yangtze River and the beauty of nature, and she gradually realizes that she and Yue Ming are their “doubles”, yet Liu Cui herself is also caught in a kind of identity confusion, from which the problem about genes and reincarnation arises. In the novel’s narrative, Hong Lian is reincarnated as Chen Yueming. This hope of reincarnation, put together with genetics, is conceived with ingenuity, as it seems in the postmodern era, when she, as a postmodern genetic-biological scientist, goes to look back at the fate of her parents, she ends up in a story about reincarnation [9]. The tragic end of Yu Tong and Hong Lian becomes a symbol of Liu Cui’s inner repressed fear, but the identity of the “double” gives Liu Cui and Yue Ming their destined destiny, and eventually they also reap spiritual liberation, as Liu Cui’s indifferent memories of the past become clear and transparent, and she leans her head lightly on Chen Yueming’s shoulder to find inner peace, suggesting that Liu Cui and Chen Yueming’s journey to find their roots finally comes to an end, completing their personal and social identity.

The “reincarnation complex” reflects Hong Ying’s respect and reverence for nature. The beauty of humanity is nourished by the waters of the Yangtze River, and through the “reincarnation” of generations, the character of integrity, benevolence and kindness is passed on and manifested. Compared with the natural world, the life of an individual is short and fragile. Individuals cannot have a clear vision through the fog of history to examine their relationship with the habitat environment. Only by considering human beings as a whole can they be compared with nature. The reincarnation in *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges* is not the origin and fall of individual lives in a religious sense, but implies the intergenerational reproduction of human beings. The segregated river “migration line” has both natural ecological and social-humanistic attributes, reflecting Hong Ying’s forward-looking perspective and long-term vision, and continuing the legend of the Yangtze River with reincarnation stories.

IV. CONCLUSION

The thesis selects typical texts from Chinese and foreign immigrant literature, recreating the epic poem of European immigrants pioneering the west and the important historical events of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River in China. The focus of the study is on migrant groups, using the geographic landscape as a guide, and specifically the different forms of the landscape: solid and liquid, that is land and river to build the mobility of the “migration line”. Cather and Hong Ying intermingle the other time with the present time, breaking through the linearity of time, fundamentally realizing the co-temporalization of hetero-temporality, engaging in a “dialogue across space”, and building a bridge between landscape and emotion. By drawing on Tally’s new theoretical findings, i.e., “topophobia”, combined with “topophilia” and “topophobia”, to analyze the existence and perception embedded in the geographical landscape of “migration line”, and then show the derivation and reproduction process of different emotions. The literary practices of the two writers present the common concern for immigrant groups stemming from a sense of place, while at the same time, generations of immigrant groups are constantly bred and alternated. As inheritors and reflectors, “Alexandra” and “Liu Cui” engage the sense of place in the concrete process of geographic space, reshape the relationship between individuals and groups, give the landscape a symbolic relationship and consciousness, i.e., “an experience of emotion and cognition”, continue the emotional genealogy of individuals and regions, accommodate the meaningful nodes of mobile space, and realize the emotional link between migrants and places, in order to examine the developmental relationships between global and local, traditional and modern, real and virtual under the influence of post-globalization [10], and to better get rid of the “shelling” dilemma of “removing the old” and “welcoming the new” of the immigrant group and the “cocooning” problem of “picking up the old” and “removing the new”, that is, how to remove the emotional memory of the previous living space, how to explore the way to renew, regenerate and revitalize the old way of life in the new living space, and how to treat the place as an emotional symbol to be preserved and inherited.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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