

Genre Negotiation in Contemporary Chinese Long-form Novels under the Influence of Western Modernity

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Abstract—Genre negotiation is also known as genre combination, in which multiple genre styles are inserted into a literary text, overcoming the constraints of a single genre. This approach takes advantage of the different ways of expressing emotions in different genres to create a more layered and rich reading experience. In China, the novel-writing paradigm of genre negotiation is an emerging focus of literary aesthetics, but scholars often overlook the overseas cultural factors implicit in this way of writing. This article explores the intrinsic connection between genre pluralism and Western culture in contemporary Chinese novels by examining changes in the novel genre. Ultimately, the article finds that genre negotiation in Chinese literature involves adaptation and stylistic innovation under the influence of overseas literary ideas. This study integrates the idea of socio-cultural space into the examination of literary genre and writing forms to provide a direction for promoting the exchange of world cultures in discursive contexts.

Keywords—Chinese contemporary literature, cross-cultural communication, comparative literature, cultural studies, *The Three-Body Problem*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the late Qing dynasty, Western literary thought and styles have had a profound impact on Chinese literature. In the late Qing era, Chinese intellectuals began translating Western theoretical ideas and literary texts into Chinese, promoting a series of fusions and conflicts between traditional Chinese literary ideas and Western literary concepts that led to the development of genre in the traditional Chinese novel. Most impactful were Western literary concepts such as those of the short story, free verse, and “stream of consciousness” writing. Through this ongoing exchange with Western literary ideas, the genre of the classical Chinese novel was transformed, shifting from a single narrative form to a composite genre combining fairy tales, letters, plays, poems, and diaries. This marked the beginning of the process of genre negotiation in Chinese novels.

Today, with the diversification of media technology, the structure of the novel genre has become increasingly rich, integrated with modes of stylistic innovation such as splicing, graphic insertion and even digital technology. Examining the evolution of language, especially written language, can shed light on the development of a country’s literary concepts and cultural institutions. Therefore, this study explores the dynamic socio-historical and cultural dynamics of genre change in the Chinese novel from the beginning of China’s reform and opening up in the 1980s to the present day. It analyses the phenomenon of genre negotiation to gain a deeper understanding of the interactions and collisions between Chinese and Western

cultures in this period.

II. GENRE NEGOTIATION IN CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURAL CONTEXTS

The idea of genre negotiation is inspired by the article “Conjunctures on World Literature” published by the American scholar Franco Moretti in 2000. In this article, Moretti cast doubt on Goethe’s and other scholars’ proposition that national literature has been replaced by world literature, claiming that this is a one-sided observation. Instead, based on his study of the development of world literature since the 19th century, Moretti argued that marginal cultures have developed through compromise and blending with core cultures [1]. This trend can also be seen in the development of literary genres in China. However, with the increase in the number of quarto works in China in recent years, the compromise between marginal and core cultures tends to become a process of negotiation or even self-renewal. In the words of Alastair Fowler, “every age of modern literature might, perhaps, admit of a new classification, by dividing it into its periods of fashionable literature” [2]. Works with multiple genres, an important literary symbol of the ideological collision between China and the West, implicitly reflect the developing relationship between Chinese and Western societies over the last 40 years, which also mirrors the ideological connection between marginalized cultures and English-speaking cultures.

Discussion of the concept of genre has a very long history in both China and the West. A relatively accurate definition of “literary genre” was offered in the ancient Chinese literary treatise *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*. According to this treatise, “genre” is a general term for the categories of literary forms, and it also refers to a certain relatively stable literary style shared by different types of works, which defines the particular genre used [3]. *The Literary Mind* even categorizes literary genres: essay, historical biography and poetry. In the West, the discussion of literary genre can be traced back to Aristotle, who categorized different forms of literature in his *On Rhetoric*. Genre theory in the West continued to develop into the last century, with scholars arguing that genre is more meaningful in literary than other types of texts; some even considered genre to be the “rhetoric” of language. Modern redefinitions of genre have referred mainly to Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics and Bakhtin’s dialogism, which argue that genre is typified social action rather than a traditional writing paradigm—a flexible use of rhetoric in common contexts to facilitate reading. In this tradition, genre is defined less by its formal conventions than by its purpose,

participants, and subject matter, or by its rhetorical acts. Genre is redefined as rhetorical composition in complex and varied ways that are determined by its situation and function in social contexts. Amy J. Devitt stated that “in some ways, such a functional, rhetorical, and social view of genre, based largely on the study of discourse operating in a pragmatic world, seems foreign to an understanding of literary genres” [4]. Whether linguistic or stylistic, the path of genre expression reveals the writer’s aesthetic intentions and ways of thinking; however, there is no way to escape the constraints of the zeitgeist and ideology of the time. As Adena Rosmarin noted in *The Power of Genre* in 1985, genre has again become a tool for literary critics. As the subjectivity of genre epitomizes the literary characteristics and national aesthetics of a given era, genre offers world readers a tool for understanding Chinese literature and its image system [5].

Compared with Western concepts of genre, traditional Chinese concepts of genre are much narrower. Therefore, this study aims to integrate the traditional Chinese understanding of genre with Western concepts to demonstrate the value of international perspectives to the development of novels’ genre and style. Crossing the cultural boundaries imposed by genre brings new ideas for research on the development of novel genres according to the cultural and creative contexts of the writers. The article studies the divergence between and fusion of Chinese and Western cultures in the process of cultural dissemination in the present age, thinking about the cultural and historical development undergone by countries that are culturally disadvantaged.

This study focuses on the concepts of “inter-genre” texts and “blending genre”, which are theories of textual creation based on the phenomenon of genre negotiation. An inter-genre text is created by harmoniously combining one or more genres into the structure of a text, thereby deconstructing the original closed form of a single genre. Genre blending should be understood in the sense of genre fusion, crossing the boundaries of a single genre within a text to constitute a multi-genre work with a mixture of genre styles, such as poetic prose. Although the definitions of these two concepts are theoretically clear, they can easily become fuzzy in the context of actual exploration, as with the intermingling of genres and integration of new genre norms, genre boundaries are becoming increasingly unclear. As a result, Chinese academia has to date offered only tentative definitions of genre negotiation in modern texts. To fill this gap, the current paper conducts textual close reading to explore the changes in specific textual genres and styles under the framework of genre negotiation, while using distant reading to contemplate the trends of cultural change in culturally disadvantaged countries such as China in the face of the invasion of Western modernity.

III. THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHINESE GENRE NEGOTIATION NOVEL

The Chinese novel originated in the Song dynasty and gradually matured in the Ming dynasty. However, at the end of the Qing dynasty, when Western stylistic thought was introduced to China, the novel’s writing mode, reading aesthetics, and even expression of emotions changed

dramatically. During the development of the modern Chinese novel, genre theories introduced from the West also informed the perspectives of Chinese writers and literary critics, who adapted the classical novel style and used newer techniques of expression and freer Western-style structures to pursue innovation in Chinese literary works. However, due to the demand for complex logical structures and reading contexts, the artistic form of the Chinese long novel was not thoroughly reformed until the 1980s and 1990s, when the abovementioned new techniques ushered in a variety of high-quality developments. Since 1980, innovation in the style of the Chinese long novel has reached a new climax, and contemporary Chinese writers—led by Mo Yan, Han Shaogong, Liu Cixin, and Yan Lianke—have begun to explore diversified literary categories. A number of long novels from this period have engaged in diversified stylistic negotiation and have been well received both in China and abroad.

A. 1980s: Early Explorations of Chinese and Western Cultures in Cross-genre

Contemporary Chinese novel writers have sought to break down the traditional paradigm of novel writing and integrate the open and free structure of genre into their novels. In the early days of reform, the simultaneous penetration of modernity and post-modernity became a distinctive feature of contemporary Chinese literature. At this stage, with the growth of China’s market economy, literary thinkers gradually integrated Western thought with Chinese culture to create a new Westernized form of literary aesthetic thought with Chinese characteristics, influencing the reading aesthetics of both domestic and international readers.

In the 1980s, Chinese writers continued to experiment with the styles of modern novels, leading to the diversified development of literary styles. With China’s reform and opening up, writers came into contact with modernism; they began to explore the aesthetic concepts of Western pluralism and personality and actively engage in new modes of creation of novelistic genre practice. Genre negotiation in the 1980s was mainly in favor of poetic and prose novels, represented by Wang Zengqi, Zhang Chengzhi, Zhang Wei, and others. Undeniably, the 1980s were the era of short and medium-length novels as well as the era of poetry. Therefore, the phenomenon of genre blending in this period was still concentrated in short and medium-length novels. However, with writers’ skilled use of genre interpenetration, this emerging stylistic trend still affected the creation of full-length works in the 1980s. The most representative full-length novel involving genre negotiation from this period is Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine*. At this time, works relied on a realist critical outlook for cross-genre creation, and writers used the freedom of the cross-genre mode to express their personal emotional reflection.

The Republic of Wine features a complex fictional genre of narrative that attacks the corrupt politics of the last century, mixing epistolary and “novel-within-a-novel” narrative. In particular, in the second part of the text, the narrative structure of the “novel-within-a-novel” mixes allegorical fiction with realist content, showing readers the cognitive space created by multi-dimensional genres and thus enhancing the satirical effect of the language from an

aesthetic perspective. *The Republic of Wine* is representative of the practice of genre negotiation at the end of the 1980s. Under the influence of modernism, the author uses the theme of Chinese wine as the foundation of the discourse and integrates a subjective public consciousness into the work. As a result, the novel not only reflects local people's philosophy of existence but also highlights the contradictions encountered in the collision between traditional Chinese culture and Western thought [6].

B. *The 1990s: A Transformative Exploration of Contemporary Intercultural Genre Negotiation*

In the 1990s, novel writers began to adopt a new Westernized creative orientation, which involved a shift in novel writing from merely appropriating Western characteristics to opening up a space for the expression of the Chinese literary system in Western modernity. This change took place because the "Western Enlightenment" boom had begun to cool down in China and cultural changes had created more forms of stylistic aesthetics for Chinese authors to integrate into their novel writing. At the same time, postmodernist novels from the West were being translated into Chinese, and writers tried to learn from the free-flowing narrative style of these postmodernist works by combining the cultural values and literary morals of both the East and the West into novels' genre and rhetoric. *The Abandoned Capital* by Jia Pingwa and *A Dictionary of Maqiao* by Han Shaogong are examples of attempts to merge genres and overcome the limitations of a single genre, combining Chinese and Western artistic aesthetics, deconstructing and rebelling against traditions, and negotiating a brand new rule of art that would be more easily accepted by the public. The sinologist Bonnie S. McDougall proposed that Chinese literary works have four audiences: Chinese intellectual readers, Chinese general readers, overseas intellectual readers, and overseas general readers [7]. The further expansion of the readership of Chinese long-form literature in the 1990s was due to a conscious effort by writers to avoid over-emphasizing ideological and socio-political issues in their criticism and to focus the content of their novels on the traditional Chinese aesthetic interests of the general reader.

Chinese writers influenced by postmodernism in the 1990s remained skeptical about the vacuousness of society, human nature, and history and advocated the deconstruction of the human subjective consciousness by modernism. Among this group, the position held by Jia Pingwa in contemporary Chinese literature cannot be ignored; his genre explorations from the 1980s to the 21st century have been matched by few others. In *The Abandoned Capital*, Jia Pingwa utilizes a Western narrative form alongside the "chatty" style of the classical Chinese novel to reveal subtle connections between characters. Whilst aligned with the aesthetics of the traditional Chinese novel, *The Abandoned Capital* broadens its target audience to both Chinese and Western readers. It was awarded the Prix Fémina in 1997. The opening chapter, which begins, "In 1980, there was a strange incident in the city of Xijing...", exemplifies Jia Pingwa's combination of the Chinese "chatty" style with the Western narrative genre in this book [8]. He presents a kind of private space for language by making use of the

civilian-like gossip that is characteristic of traditional Chinese novels. Within this space, the novel endeavors to offer readers an opportunity for interpretation, breaking down the traditional primacy of the author's interpretative role and expanding readers' receptive psychology with diverse genre expressions.

A Dictionary of Maqiao by Han Shaogong is even bolder in its stylistic variations, as the author uses a dictionary to explain words and phrases to recreate the customs, folkways, and concepts of life in rural China [9]. The work was published in 1996 and was later named one of the "Top 100 Chinese Novels of the 20th Century" by *Asia Week*. Han Shaogong deconstructs the alienation of rural China at the turn of the century with subtle psychological symbolism and explanations of 100 words, demonstrating the integration of postmodernism into the Chinese context. The deconstruction of genre as an ideological interpretation in the context of social change is also a bold stylistic experiment by Chinese writers, represented by Han Shaogong, to call on society to return its attention to national tradition. This is a warning to writers from countries in marginalized cultural zones in the context of globalization. The genre and style of Han Shaogong's novels complement each other to express the writer's concern for the culture of his country and the culture of its people and to make non-native English speakers understand his thinking about society.

During the 1990s, the dialogue between Chinese culture and Western thought deepened, providing pioneering ideas that furthered the genre revolution of contemporary Chinese fiction. For Chinese writers during this period, choices of literary narrative and genre were inextricably linked to both the global cultural context and China's national ideology. In this decade, the stylistic exploration of Chinese novels, encouraged by Western trends, presented a rich variety of narrative modes. With such diverse genre negotiation, Chinese novels began to express the national spirit from an international perspective, providing more favorable conditions for the dissemination of Chinese literary works to the outside world.

C. *21st Century: Cultural Exchange and Innovation in Negotiation*

Across history, the development of style in Chinese literary works has been marked by the practice of negotiation of literary genres. In the 5th century, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* categorized ancient literary styles, with chapters such as "*The Wind and the Bone*" reflecting the writer's thoughts on literary stylistics. Ancient Chinese literary theorists pursued genre innovation on the basis of the high aesthetic quality of literary works. Rather than emphasizing the value of a single genre, ancient literary theorists advocated harmony between genres and genre aesthetics to achieve a balanced and aesthetic literary realm. In the last 40 years, as the exchange between Chinese and foreign cultures has deepened, a process of negotiation in Chinese culture has become increasingly evident, manifested in the tendency for negotiation in literary style. Chinese authors have consciously made use of stylistic and narrative techniques to demonstrate an aesthetic of tolerance that is open to and incorporates the values of local Chinese culture following

the cultural collision between China and the West. Since the turn of the 21st century, writers have used more mature and diversified writing styles to give Chinese humanistic thought a voice in the world's cultural interactions and to engage in dialogue with and reflection on world literature.

The early 21st century has demonstrated the effectiveness of genre writing that negotiates the fusion of Chinese and Western ideas. In the last two decades, creators have achieved a subtle combination of cultural ideas and stylistic aesthetics in the content and rhetorical style of Chinese and Western texts, combining traditional narratives with Chinese characteristics with Western deconstructionist ideas. In the exploration of genre negotiation in the 21st century, Mo Yan's *Frog* is an extremely creative example, setting a precedent for a triple-genre work combining epistle, drama and novel. This cross-genre novel won not only the praise of local Chinese readers but also the recognition of overseas readers, with Mo Yan awarded the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature. Mo Yan chooses the epistolary style to begin his work in a documentary style to give the reader a sense of authenticity, thus narrowing the gap between author and reader. At the end of the novel, Mo Yan uses a theatrical style to emphasize the fictional nature of the work [10]. In doing so, the author moves the reader farther from the real story, using the stage space of drama to overthrow the sense of reality painstakingly created by the epistolary style and create more intense conflict. The conflict and tension of the story are fused with the reality and fantasy of the modes of "letter plus novel" and "novel uplus drama". In the 21st century, Mo Yan's novels show the reader how structure and narrative can take a mutually adjusting and accommodating harmonious posture.

Moving away from realistic novels, the Chinese science fiction trilogy *The Three-Body Problem*, which won the Science Fiction Achievement Award overseas, is a modern classic in Chinese cross-genre literature. As a work of science fiction, the trilogy represents the shadow of science and technology at various levels. To better reflect the contradictions between and entanglements of humanistic ideas and scientific and technological forces, the author of the novels, Liu Cixin, chose to use cross-genre writing. With the advancement of the plot, the intensity of cross-genre narration also gradually increases. In the first volume, *The Three-Body Problem*, there is relatively little cross-genre content [11]. The narrative of the second volume, *The Dark Forest*, is interspersed with numerous news reports and government reports. Here, the author uses multiple literary genres to simulate real-life scenarios, bringing the reader back to real society from the fictional imaginaries of science fiction, and then to critique the development of science and technology as well as the human spirit [12]. The third part, *Death's End*, retains the historical genre of the second part, dividing a timeline spanning 2,000 years into six major parts, interspersed with the memories of the female protagonist. This places the entire macro-universe within the narrative perspective, and the reader rationally experiences the author's questioning of human morality from the perspective of an observer, thereby arousing empathy in the reader [13]. Liu Cixin's cross-genre writing represents an exemplar of genre negotiation in Chinese literature today, in terms of both its content attributes and its means of interpretation.

This indicates that the development of genre negotiation in China is being optimized in the process of inheritance. Chinese novels of the 21st century also demonstrate the exchange and re-creation of Chinese culture in the wake of the collision between Chinese and Western culture.

This century, the phenomenon of genre negotiation has involved an unprecedentedly harmonious and refined negotiation of genre identity. This negotiation has roots in both ancient and modern Chinese concepts of genre, as well as the acceptance and development of contemporary Western literary critical theories in China. Meanwhile, the spirit of the times, national traditions, and the real experiences of the creators provide the conditions for the generation of a text's stylistic structure. It could be argued that this stylistic negotiation is the result of the creators' being imbued with both classical literary theories and living in an era of frequent interactions between Chinese and Western cultures. Therefore, the phenomenon of genre negotiation reflects the evolution of China's thinking during its cultural exchanges with the rest of the world, and it is also a reflection of the interaction in the 21st century between culturally marginalized countries and culturally powerful countries.

IV. THE PROSPECTS AND LIMITATIONS OF FOREIGN COMMUNICATION OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LONG NOVELS IN GENRE NEGOTIATION

Since 1980s, authors such as Mo Yan, Han Shaogong, Jia Pingwa, and Liu Cixin have not only actively explored diverse forms of genre transformation but also disseminated their literary achievements to the world. The genre exploration and breakthroughs of these authors not only reflect the gradual activation and diversification of long novels under the influence of multiple cultural factors but also significantly enhance international recognition of contemporary Chinese long novels. Such stylistic innovations not only integrate contemporary Chinese culture but also meet the aesthetic demands of a global audience and are in line with the trend of exchange between China and the world, creating an environment conducive to aesthetic and artistic exploration in literature.

The literary ecology of China's full-length novels is developing in a direction favorable to writers' artistic exploration. This trend is reflected in three main ways: first, the international literary community's promotion of genre has provided Chinese writers with a broader platform for international exchange; second, the importance attached to genre by domestic writers has increased the diversity and depth of literary creation; and third, the promotion of genre by domestic academics and the media has enhanced the public's awareness of and support for literary innovation. In addition, various types of domestic and foreign awards and rankings, as well as related activities organized by academic journals, all reflect a preference and respect for exploration of literary genres. Under the influence of these factors, some writers with a strong sense of genre have received recognition and encouragement for their perseverance in artistic exploration, foreshadowing the trend and direction of the future development of Chinese novel writing.

However, genre negotiation may raise the specter of stylistic confusion, which leads to the dissolution of

boundaries between categories of literature and even between literature and non-literary “popular” narratives, thereby compromising the quality of literary works. In the 21st century, stylistic innovation has entered a bottleneck. New writers want to surpass previous writers in terms of stylistic innovation, which tends to promote stylistic formalism; in turn, the excessive pursuit of form leads to the loss of creative ideas and the degradation of literary aesthetics. This weakens the novel’s power of expression, and ultimately the mixture of stylistic features dissolve the boundaries between the novel and the article, resulting in the loss of the novel’s literary and aesthetic characteristics.

Chinese contemporary writers operating in the international literary market have gained overseas recognition for their genre exploration, and their works have not only changed the narrative mode of the Chinese novel but also actively incorporated elements of the contemporary background and Chinese culture into their content. The artistry of the design of the genre and plot of these works has drawn the attention of international readers to Chinese literary works. However, authors also need to attain a high level of artistry in terms of creative techniques and ideas and to reflect the development of the Chinese nation in different dimensions of their content. Therefore, if China wants to obtain overseas recognition for its long-form works in the future, it needs more authors to combine stylistic innovation with features of Chinese literature to build a literary ecosystem that is rich in both innovation and heritage.

V. CONCLUSION

Chinese genre negotiation comes from the symbiotic development of social and historical contexts, culture, and writers’ selves; it reflects the autonomous demand for local literature based on the space of world literature and breaks away from traditional frameworks of literary theory following the collision of Chinese and Western civilizations. Since 1980, the exploration of Chinese genres has been led by a group of creators with a spirit of exploration and a keen aesthetic awareness seeking to innovate. Overcoming the aesthetic fatigue inherent in traditional Chinese genres, they have insisted on combining Chinese cultural characteristics with innovative Western stylistic forms, helping Chinese culture to find a foothold in a powerful Western core culture.

This bold innovation has drawn the attention of overseas readers and literary critical scholars to Chinese works of long fiction, highlighting the profound cultural negotiation between and mutual attraction of traditional Chinese literature and overseas literary thought. Literary development shows a strong sense of openness and stylistic variation is strongly linked to China’s international connections. In the 21st century, the exploration of Chinese literary styles has included both the aesthetics of local traditional literature and the accumulation of global cultural ideas, striving to escape a closed cultural system. Chinese literary writers are committed to entering the global cultural space for self-negotiation and development, as Chinese culture realizes its potential for free exploration through negotiation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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