Influence of Biancheng, Xiangxi's Environment on Temporal and Spatial Structure of Shen Congwen's Border Town

Lehao Weng[1,a,*]

[1]*Ningbo Xiaoshi High School, Ningbo, Zhejiang, 315000, China*
[a]*3981263287@qq.com*
*Corresponding author

Abstract: As research in the literature field further develops, interdisciplinary practice and applications are gaining more momentum in academic research. Most past studies on the influence of Biancheng, and Xiangxi's environment on the temporal and spatial structure of Shen Congwen's Border Town are mono-disciplinary or combined with similar disciplines. Hence, this study tries to adopt multi-field and multi-disciplinary research methods, such as narrative research and historical research, to examine the interplay of time and space in literary works and real-world environments. This study explores Shen Congwen's motivation for using Biancheng, Xiangxi as the inspiration for *Border Town*, from both subjective and objective perspectives, and analyzes the practical and multilayered meanings of the novel for the real Biancheng Town. This study explores the profound interplay between Xiangxi's environment and Border Town's spatiotemporal narrative, reflecting on utopia's modern dilemmas. It offers fresh insights into Shen Congwen's works and critically addresses the tensions between literature and reality amid modernity's encroachment.

1. Introduction

Border Town, also known as Biancheng in Chinese, is a novel by Shen Congwen, a well-known Chinese writer. It is an important research subject of modern Chinese literary studies, consistently receiving widespread attention from the academic community. Earlier studies focus more on the artistic characteristics, rural narratives, and human nature theme of the novel. For instance, Ling discussed the thematic orientation of the novel. Jin explored the creation psychology of the writer. With the emergence of literary geography and spatial theory, studies in recent years gradually shift their focus on the analysis of interaction between text and place. Liu revealed the inter-constructive relationship between Border Town and Chadong ancient town from the perspective of landscape narrative. Wang discussed the symbolic meaning of time and space in the novel using the theory of utopian narrative. These findings have laid a significant foundation for the understanding of the literary-geographical features of Border Town.

However, existing studies are still limited in two aspects. The first aspect is that there lack of

systematic analysis of how the environment of Biancheng, Xiangxi specifically influences the novel's spatial and temporal framework, especially the geographical isolation. The deep connection between ethnic diversity and narrative strategies remains insufficiently explored. The second aspect is that most discussions on the utopian qualities of Border Town are confined within the text and fail to place it within the broader context of the impact of modernity, leading to insufficient research of the underlying real-world dilemmas and its contemporary value.

This study starts with Shen Congwen's motivation for using Biancheng (the border town) as the inspiration for his novel and provides an in-depth discussion based on the geographic and historical conditions of Chadong ancient town, as well as the life experience of Shen Congwen extracted from his biographies and diaries. Then, it shifts perspective from the external to the internal of the novel and explores the transition of time and space and relevant narrative problems of the novel. In the last part, this study discusses how Shen Congwen crafted utopian literature, thereby presenting distinctive temporal and spatial characteristics. This part will elaborate on and discuss several questions, including how it became the last utopia in China, whether the utopian fantasy will be alienated, and whether it suggests that the utopian fantasy of Chadong ancient town is incompatible with modern society.

2. Multiulti-dimensional Discussion of Shen Congwen's Creation Motivation

2.1. Cultural Geography of Xiangxi and Other Objective Influences

The geographic isolation and diverse culture of Biancheng are the major objective causes of Shen Congwen using it as the background for novel creation. The influence of cultural geography reveals utopian features, which justify using Biancheng as the inspiration.

2.1.1. The Perspective of Geography

From the objective perspective of geography, Chadong ancient town is located in the northwest of Huayuan County, Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Hunan Province in terms of administrative divisions. Situated at the junction of Hunan, Chongqing, and Guizhou, it is also known for its one-step-across-three-provinces place with an absolute location of 109°28′ east longitude and 28°32′ north latitude [1]. In terms of relative location, it is surrounded by Fengming Mountain, Jiulong Mountain, and Xianglu Mountain on the east, north, and south. To the west, it is bordered by the Qingshui River, which contributes to the formation of a distinctive river valley basin and terrace landform. On the whole, the terrain of Chadong rises in the west and descends toward the east with altitudes ranging from 300 to 1,000 meters [1]. Considerable fluctuations in the terrain demonstrate its strategic position, like a dragon coiling and a tiger crouching. The enclosed terrain offers an ideal setting for creating a secluded paradise or utopian world.

2.1.2. The Perspective of History and Politics

From the perspective of history and politics, the diversity of Chadong's ethnic culture originates from its "unregulated zone" nature [2]. The geographical marginality not only reflects the physical characteristics of the administrative division but also highlights a distinctive phenomenon in spatial politics. As early as the Qin and Han dynasties, the Xiangxi region一once regarded as a wild and untamed land一was brought under the governance of the central imperial authority. As history advanced, the central government in the Tang and Song dynasties imposed the Tusi system on the Xiangxi region to manage with the aim of consolidating national governance, which has destined Xiangxi to be an area inhabited by ethnic minorities. Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, the central

government had intentionally implemented a strategy of dividing and governing the Miao regions, promoting policies such as "using Miao to govern Miao" and "migrating Han settlers to borderlands" to isolate the "raw" and "cooked" Miao. The "raw" Miao refers to Miao people who live in more remote regions and are less influenced by Han Chinese culture. The "cooked" Miao refers to Miao people who have had more frequent contact with the Han Chinese and other outside cultures. This further contributed to the prolonged detachment of Xiangxi's border towns from the cultural mainstream of the Central Plains, which led to the inevitable cultural and political marginalization [3]. The towering Wuling Mountains not only geographically hindered the development of transportation but also curtailed communication with the outside world. This ethnic diversity became a key factor in the creation of the novel.

2.1.3. The Perspective of Biancheng Culture

The distinctive cultural character of Biancheng also serves as an important objective factor. Architecturally, it reflects a hybrid style that mixes Miao stilted houses, Tujia corner buildings, and Han-style firewalls. Linguistically, the Chaotong dialect blends approximately 34 percent Miao vocabulary, 28 percent Tujia elements, and 38 percent Southwestern Mandarin [4]. In terms of customs, unique celebrations such as the Miao New Year, Dragon Boat Festival, and the Tujia tradition of "crying weddings" all contribute to the image of Biancheng as a "cultural island," or an isolated community. Moreover, Chaodong people are known for their simplicity and sincerity and the community is built on mutual assistance and trust among neighborhoods. For example, the centuries-old Lala Ferry still upholds the tradition of free ferry service. This heartfelt, rural generosity is one of the most prominent embodiments of the region's unique humanistic spirit and a key reason for choosing Chaotong as the basis for creation.

2.2. Life Experience of Shen Congwen, Emotions and Other Subjective Influences

2.2.1. Background of Shen Congwen

Subjectively, Shen Congwen is a native of Xiangxi, largely contributing to the motivation of using his hometown as the inspiration for novel creation. Born in a military family from Fenghuang County, Hunan Province, he had been influenced by the local ethnic culture since childhood. At the age of 14, Shen Congwen joined the local army and traveled through different parts of Xiangxi. During this period, he witnessed and experienced many local customs and traditions of Xiangxi, as well as the production and daily lives of the lower-class people in Xiangxi. These experiences served as great sources for his later creations, contributing to his idea of "constructing Xiangxi through words" [5]. Shen Congwen is closely attached to Xiangxi. For example, in Sketches of A Trip to Hunan, he wrote, "A profoundly touching feeling was stirred within me by the sights and scenes of this place"[6]. This reflects his heartfelt emotions for Xiangxi.

2.2.2. The Perspective of Emotional Expression and Release

One of the causes is emotional expression and release. In 1923, Shen Congwen left Xiangxi for Beijing and began to engage with the New Culture Movement. During this period, he felt a sense of estrangement from the urban culture. Although he was personally involved in this movement, he was mentally detached from the mainstream. As he wrote in the Autobiography of Shen Congwen, "I was like a country bumpkin cast into the city, unable to understand the ideologies they discuss, nor the civilization beneath the neon lights" [7]. This alienated experience facilitated him to create a temporal and spatial realm to find comfort. Rather than a mere nostalgic attachment to his hometown, he showed a yearning to redeem the real world through literary works, embodying both

emotional release and longing for the past. The uncontaminated spatiotemporal imagery in Border Town, along with the symbolic opposition between the ferry and the water mill, reflects the value conflict between rural ethics (natural economy) and urban civilization (capitalist logic). Moreover, there is a sharp contrast between the mechanical time of the city (such as the clock tower and train schedules in the Shanghai concessions) and the "natural rhythm" of Xiangxi (represented by cycles like the Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival) [8]. This information indicated the reasons for using Chadong as a medium to project his own emotions.

2.2.3. The Perspective of Emotional Healing

It might be one of the causes of his motivation to construct a utopia to heal his inner wounds. For example, Shen Congwen's elder brother died when he was 14 years old, which resembles the scene in the novel where the old ferryman passes away. The character is not only the guardian of Cuicui but also Shen Congwen's compensatory reconstruction of the image of his elder brother [9]. Another remedy for the inner wounds is to romanticize and purify previously violent and gory memories. For example, Shen Congwen depicted beheading scenes in What I Saw in Qingxiang Campaign without bloodshed. He also narrated death using the imagery of water, such as the love suicide of Cuicui's parents and the drowning of Tianbao. The mitigating depiction of death cleansed the brutal and violent realities and aligns with the Miao people's (an ethnic group in China) reverence for the primitive belief of "the soul returning to water" [10]. Certain clues may also be observed when Shen Congwen shifted his research focus to cultural relics. On the surface, he might be avoiding the literary world. However, it was the ongoing recovery from the trauma. Shen Congwen's later research on ancient clothing patterns and designs forms an invisible connection with the depiction of Miao silver jewelry in Border Town, which manifested his way of healing psychological trauma.

3. Narrative and Temporal and Spatial Transformation of Border Town

3.1. Projection of Chadong's Cultural Geography in the Novel

The culture and geography of Chadong ancient town are integrated into Border Town's narratives, which have been perfectly replicated with the idealized narrative of time and space. The white pagoda and the ferry crossing are two symbols with rich significance, reflecting the cultural and geographic characteristics of Chadong.

3.1.1. The White Pagoda

The white pagoda not only represents the landmark of Chadong but also serves as the core symbol and marker in Shen Congwen's construction of rural ethics. In the real world, the white pagoda is the place of worship shared by the Miao and Tujia ethnic groups, where the local people revere nature and honor their ancestors [11]. Also known as the "sacred place", the religious symbolism of the white pagoda resonates with the "cosmic pillar" imagery of the Nuo culture of the Miao people [12]. In the novel, the series of events surrounding the White Pagoda has been imbued with deeper symbolic meaning. The collapse of the white pagoda and the death of the old ferryman happened simultaneously in the novel. The white pagoda, constructed collectively by people, not only symbolizes religious faith but also embodies the sanctity of the moral order within traditional rural society. The old ferryman, serving as a "guide," is both the guardian of the ferry crossing and the upholder of traditional ethical values, such as the principle of offering ferry rides free of charge. His death, along with the collapse of the white pagoda, metaphorically reflects the disintegration of moral order and the rupture in the transmission of rural traditions in Xiangxi under the pressures of

modernization.

3.1.2. The Ferry Crossing

In the novel, the ferry crossing is not merely a geographic boundary. It serves as a liminal space where cultural tensions converge [13]. In anthropological terms, a liminal space refers to an in-between, ambiguous zone marked by overlapping states of uncertainty. At the junction of Hunan, Guizhou, and Sichuan, the ferry crossing operates as a commercial hub in the real world. It is an outlet for goods including timber and tung oil, and the main passage connecting Chadong (the border town) with the outside world. At the same time, it also left an opening for capitalist influence. The contrast between the introduction of the grain mill (representing mechanized production) and the ferryboat (representing natural economy) reflects not only how modern technology seeks to penetrate and transform rural life through this crossing point, but also underscores the broader cultural clash between rural tradition and urban modernity. Whether in fiction or reality, the ferry crossing serves as an ambiguous symbolism. Through this metaphor, the novel skillfully captures the ferry's role as a focal point of cultural conflict.

3.2. Ideal Time and Space and Utopian Narrative

3.2.1. Natural Cyclical Patterns and Enclosed Environment

Time is not specifically defined in Border Town, as the exact dates of the story are not revealed. Traditional festivals are used as temporal markers. It depicts a cycle where all the festivals, such as the Dragon Boat Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival, are repeatedly celebrated in succession. The timelessness of utopia is generally achieved through cycles of natural repetitive patterns. Similarly, the novel intends to dissolve the linear progression of history through the cyclical flow of natural time, thereby dehistoricizing the story and justifying the imagination of an eternal homeland [14]. In addition, the timelessness of Border Town not only represents the self-sufficiency and stability of rural society but also indicates the closed-off nature of time and space within a utopia. Aside from this, the geographical space exhibits the isolated characters. According to the aforementioned contents, Biancheng, or the border town, in both the real world and the novel, is surrounded by mountains on three sides, with a river running along one side. The geographic environment in the novel implicitly portrays the closed-off character of rural society. The river running through the border town links it with the outside world, which symbolizes the future and implies the uncertainty caused by the intrusion of modernity into traditional rural life.

3.2.2. Narrative Rhythm

The narrative of the text is a key factor in creating a sense of timelessness in the novel. For instance, the soothing narrative rhythm extends the text, with extensive depictions of the customs and scenery of Chadong, creating a psychological sense of time stagnation, immersing readers in the idealized world where time is diluted. Moreover, with multiple perspectives of different characters and a large number of psychological portrayals, the narrative time far exceeds the story's time, reinforcing the sense of timelessness in the utopian world [15]. Through repetitive events (such as the waiting of Cuicui for Nuosong) and descriptions of ritualized life scenes (such as ferrying and call-and-response singing), the narrative rhythm is deliberately slowed down by Shen Congwen. The linear flow of time vanished with ritualized, repetitive actions], enhancing the timelessness imagery of the utopian world [16]. Hence, the major aim of Border Town's narrative is to extend the text, thereby creating a sense of stillness.

3.2.3. Potential Problems

However, the problem that arises is the paradox between the narrative of time and space transformation in Border Town and the concept of utopia. While the cyclical rhythm of the novel attempts to construct eternal time, the natural rhythms it relies on are inherently fragile. Uncontrollable factors such as disasters and population movement, will inevitably lead the town to face historical changes and trends, such as the replacement of manual labor by modern industrial production. This does not mean that the idea of timelessness in traditional utopian concepts harbors an inherent desire for change. Rather, it reflects a flaw within the narrative structure itself. Meanwhile, the deliberately delayed narrative rhythm not only reflects an aesthetic selection, but also demonstrates Shen Congwen's evasion of anxieties towards modernity, who created an idealized and protective rural fantasy to gloss over real-world conflicts [17]. Narrative strategies of cyclical time, enclosed space, and the timelessness of utopia reflect the resistance of literature towards linear time in essence. However, this idealized resistance is fundamentally and fatally flawed.

4. Contemporary Predicament of Time and Space in *Border Town* and the Heretical Transformation of Utopia

Border Town constructs an ideal society where nature, ethics, and time are all enclosed. However, under the impact of modernity, the compatibility between the Biancheng fantasy and modern society shows a complex dynamic. This involves the reshaping of cultural symbols and the reinterpretation of resonating with ecological demands while facing the challenge of capitalist alienation and spiritual estrangement.

4.1. The Reshaping and Commodification of Cultural Symbols

Cultural symbols are reshaped and commodified with the development of tourism and the nostalgia economy, which turned the literary image of Chadong ancient town into a "utopia under the gaze" [17]. The commercialized development of Fenghuang ancient town has caused the resettlement of local residents and the "museumification" of traditional living spaces, which further confirms the prediction of Lefebvre that space would become a commodity. Although this transformation has diminished the critical edge of the text, the pastoral imagery still evokes modern people's longing for nature and tradition. It mitigates the anxiety of urban life and becomes a commodity. The disruption and rupture of Border Town's cyclical temporal order turns Cuicui's waiting from a symbol of timelessness into an open-ended conclusion. It evokes associations with the fast-paced lifestyle of modern society, which is characterized by short dramas, quick videos, and other forms of instant entertainment. At the same time, the novel offers a modern interpretation of traditional virtues. Practices such as courtship through song and marriage concession between brothers may conflict with contemporary views on love and marriage, yet their emphasis on universal values like honesty and familial bonds resonates with current reflections on the erosion of moral order in society. In addition, from an ecological perspective, the natural imagery in Border Town, such as the white pagoda and bamboo groves, echoes contemporary concerns about environmental protection. The replacement of the ferry by the mill mirrors the tension between capitalism and nature. Furthermore, Cuicui's living space being gradually pushed from the riverbank to the periphery, namely the ruins of the white pagoda, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the shrinking of rural land in the face of modernization.

4.2 The Paradox and Transcendence of Compatibility

Regarding the paradox and transcendence of compatibility, the compatibility between Border Town's utopian imagination and contemporary society is a form of critical dialogue in essence. While the imagery has been commodified under the influence of capitalist norms, it also facilitates reflection on the problems of modernity. True compatibility extends beyond the surface-level symbolism. It lies in the reconstruction of a utopian spirit through ecological ethics, communal rebuilding, and a critique of temporality. Rather than simply replicating a closed-off Chadong, it uses the aesthetic and ethical legacy of the past to propose diverse solutions to the predicaments of contemporary civilization. As Shen Congwen once wrote, "Beauty is often accompanied by melancholy." It is precisely through this melancholy that Biancheng reflects both the limitations and the possibilities of modernity.

5. Conclusion

Shen Congwen's portrayal of Biancheng, Xiangxi serves as both a poetic reproduction of geographical space and a spiritual projection of a literary utopia. Through an interdisciplinary exploration of the geography, history, economy, culture, and ethnicity of Chadong ancient town, this study reveals the dual logic of the time and space construction in Border Town. On one hand, the closed geography, diverse ethnic groups, and ethical traditions of Xiangxi provide the material foundation for the utopian narrative; on the other hand, Shen Congwen's estrangement towards urban life and traumatic memory prompts him to reconstruct rural life through literature, thereby resisting the erosion of human nature by modernity. The narrative strategies of cyclical time and closed space employed in the novel represent both the eternalization fantasy of the pastoral ideal and a self-deconstruction that implies the fragility of utopia. The collapse of the white tower and the commercialization of the ferry crossing symbolized the irreversible impact of urban modernity on the traditional time and space order.

In today's society, the utopian fantasy in *Border Town* reveals a complex paradox of compatibility. While the natural ethics and ecological imagery offer inspiration for the slow living movement and ecological criticism, in reality, the development of cultural tourism and the consumption of landscapes reflect how capitalist logic distorts literary symbols. This contradiction highlights the critical value of utopia: it is not a secluded paradise to escape from reality, but rather a mirror that reflects the dilemmas of modern civilization through its incompleteness. Through Cuicui's waiting and the ruins of the white pagoda, Shen Congwen transforms the demise of utopia into a point of reflection, suggesting that true redemption lies in a dialectical reconstruction amid the tension between tradition and modernity. It does not lie in replicating a closed-off rural past, nor in fully embracing instrumental rationality, but in drawing on ecological ethics, communal ties, and aesthetic heritage to offer an alternative solution for an atomized, fast-paced modern world.

The ultimate significance of Border Town lies in its prophetic use of "melancholy" as a mirror. When Chadong transforms from a literary image to a commodified symbol, it signals the urgent need to guard against the fading of the utopian spirit. Only by reviving its unfinished reflection on modernity through critical dialogue can the possibility of poetic dwelling amid fractured time and space be rediscovered.

References

[1] Biancheng Chadong Tourist Scenic Area. (2023). The People's Government of Huayan.www.huayuan.gov.cn
[2] Jin Jiepu. (2022) The Odyssey of Shen Congwen. Beijing: International Cultural Publishing Company
[3] Liu Anquan. (2021). Literary Image,Landscape Narrative and Cultural Reshaping:An Investigation on the Mutual Construction Between Shen Congwen' The Border Town and the Border Town in Xiangxi. Journal of Jishou

University(Social Sciences), 42(5), 124-131.

[4] Li Qiqun. (2022). Xiangxi Prefecture - Dialect Volume. Hunan People's Publishing House.

[5] Ling, Yu. (1980). The tendency and artistic characteristics of Shen Congwen's novels. Modern Chinese Literature Studies, 3, 45-62.

[6] Shen Congwen. (2022). Sketches of A Trip to Hunan (original edition 1934). People's Education Press.

[7] Shen Congwen. (2023). Autobiography of Shen Congwen. The Writers Publishing House

[8] Jing Shouyang. (2025). Shen Congwen's vernacular writing and resistance to modernity. Modern Literature Studies, 45(2), 78-95.

[9] Zhang Xinying. (2014). The Latter Half of Life of Shen Congwen: 1948-1988. Shanghai:
Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House

[10] Shen Congwen. (2023). What I saw in Qingxiang Campaign. In Autobiographies of Shen Congwen. Beijing: The Writers Publishing House

[11] Ling, Yu. (2005). From Border Town to the World. SDX Joint Publishing Company.

[12] Eliade, M. (1959). The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

[13] Turner, V. (1969). The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure. Aldine.

[14] Wang Dewei. (2023). Time and space in fiction: utopian narratives in modern Chinese literature. Peking University Press.

[15] Genette, G. (1980). Narrative discourse: An essay in method. Cornell University Press.

[16] Ricoeur, P. (1984). Time and narrative (Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press.

[17] Harvey, D. (2012). Rebel cities: From the right to the city to the urban revolution. Verso Books.