The Dissolution of Historical Solemnity in New Historicist Novels from the Perspective of Individual Survival Situation: Taking My Life as Emperor as an Example

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Abstract. Since the 1980s, some Chinese writers have been fascinated by the trend of "New Historicism" have applied it to their novel writing, creating a distinctive literary realm. Instead of narrating history itself, they try to reveal the deep-seated desires and dilemmas of human nature, which in a way dissolves the solemnity of history. Taking Su Tong's My Life as Emperor as an example, this article analyzes the characters' living conditions from the aspects of human attitudes, spiritual worlds and identities, and examines the degeneration and redemption of human nature, so as to explore how the texts deconstructs the solemnity of history and reflect on its unique significance.

Keywords: New historicism; Individual survival; Human struggle; Dissipating solemnity.

1. Introduction

In the new historical novel, there are different views, either that history has been transformed from a subject matter into a narrative device, that the historical background is used to explore the value of human existence, and that the question of human nature is deeply investigated [1]; or that under the orientation of consumerism, the new historicist novels pursue sensory stimulation, and the seriousness and authenticity of history are cut down [2]. But no matter what, the Chinese new historical novel, as a cultural filtering and cultural mutation of the Western new historicist thinking, has absorbed the native cultural spirit [3], it is right to recognize its unique ideological and cultural value. In My Life as Emperor, Su Tong builds up a fictional post-apocalyptic family kingdom with dense text and narrates the survival situation of the characters in it with a detached tone, with the focus shifting from the depth of history to the depth of humanity. The essay attempts to explore how the solemnity of history is dissipated in the new historicist novel from the perspective of individual survival and to appreciate its unique value.

2. Focusing on the individual: how the solemnity of history can be dissipated

"If one day you are enthroned as king, and one day you have a palace full of beauties and wealth, there will inevitably come a day when you find yourself empty, like a leaf fluttering in the wind" [4], struggling in vain in the decadent and treacherous fictional time and space, and eventually going silently to the desolation of life, seems to be the common destiny of the characters in My Life as Emperor. Whether emperors or concubines or young children, all of them cannot escape their destiny of annihilation, and even if they are still alive, their spiritual worlds are only sadly empty. In Su Tong's writing, the human attitudes, spiritual values and identities of the individuals are the embodiment of their living conditions, and the solemnity of history itself is dissolved as the narrative unfolds with history as the 'backdrop'.First, confirm that you have the correct template for your paper size. This template has been tailored for output on the A4 paper size. If you are using US letter-sized paper, please close this file and download the Microsoft Word, Letter file.

2.1 The dissolution of historical solemnity in the light of individual human attitudes

In My Life as Emperor, Duan Bai, the "I" who has been unknowingly placed on the throne, looks at his surroundings with a teenage mentality, and his confusion and rebelliousness throughout dissipate the solemnity of history. Lacking the talent to rule and unprepared to be a king, Duan Bai's

only reaction when the black leopard dragon crown, the imperial symbol, is pressed on his head is "astonishment" [4]. In the palace conspiracy of "exchanging a civet cat for a prince", Duan Bai is the ultimate pawn of the scheme, but also a complete outsider, everything is manipulated by his grandmother, Madame Huangfu, and his mother, Madame Meng, from the beginning to the end, he is confused and unaware. He is only "pushed" into playing the role of an emperor, and he himself lacked the "self-awareness" to be one. As a result, the majestic and solemn court became a stage for drama, where Duan Bai in the courtroom did not care about the affairs of state, but would laugh at a fart by a courtier [4]; Huangfu's grandmother argued with her mother, Lady Meng, and Duan Bai only found the embarrassment of the eunuch in charge of passing orders in front of Danbi very comical [4] . Behind the humour is a profound, cold irony, and Duan Bai's unconcerned mentality suggests an identity crisis, which also leads to his confused attitude towards life. Instead of saying that he is a young man who happens to be a king, he is experiencing a ritualistic "game" of being a king.

It was not Duan Bai's wish to be manipulated, and in his confusion and disorientation, he also, consciously or unconsciously, gave vent to this confusion by his rebellious actions. Duan Bai was not a good and wise emperor; he would tyrannically order the tongues of the women in the cold palace to be plucked out because he did not like the sound of their cries [4] ; when he should have shown his imperial majesty, he treated it as nothing but a child's play, such as when he visited the area governed by the northwestern king Dayu, he only said "the ass of a macaque monkey" many times with great interest [4] ; when dealing with defeated patriotic generals, the more the onlookers pleaded for their lives, the more firmly he demanded that they must be killed [4] . Under the influence of his confused and rebellious mind, Duan Bai commits all sorts of absurd and ridiculous acts, without any sense of being an emperor, bearing the title of emperor but acting contrary to his role as an emperor, and his anti-conventional shaping dissolves the solemnity of an emperor in power and in government.

2.2 The dissolution of historical solemnity as seen from the individual spiritual world

"It is your destiny and your misfortune to be a youthful king" [4], a prophetic word left by Master Juekong before he left the palace. From the moment the Black Panther Dragon Crown is placed on his head, Duan Bai is reduced from a vivid youth to a puppet emperor with no real power, his physical and mental freedom is restricted, and his spiritual world becomes distorted and desolate. He is described in the book as seeing his father stabbing the word "Xie Wang"on his brother Duan Wen's head in a dream [4]; the white ghost imagery representing fear [4] also appears to him several times. The text elaborates in prose, "I am sensitive, I am brutal, I am playful, in fact I am still very childish" [4], the palace conspiracy doomed Duan Bai to fall victim to the power struggle from the very beginning, and created his eccentric and stubborn personality. Deep fear and self-doubt always weigh on Duan Bai's mind, gradually distorting his mental world.

Although Duan Bai was known as King Xie, his every move was strictly controlled by Lady Huangfu, and he was just a sad pawn in the game of imperial power. What he really wanted was freedom. Instead of being an emperor, he preferred to be a bird of prey who could come and go as he pleased. There are many references to Duan Bai often converses with the eunuch Yan Lang, and Yan Lang once says, "If Your Majesty were to walk on the ropes, I would go to tread on the logs" [4] in response. The imagery of the "flying bird" symbolizes Duan Bai's search for freedom, and also hints at the hopelessness of this search with an underlying tragic undertone. In the second half of the novel, Duan Bai becomes a real rope walker and seems to have won a brief victory; when he returns to the Xie king's palace to fulfil his noblest mission as a rope walker - to enter the palace to perform - it coincides with the annexation of the Xie kingdom by the Peng kingdom, with corpses strewn across the land and blood flowing into the river [4]. Duan Bai, who had lost everything, was also unable to fulfil this noble mission. The search for freedom ends in the tragedy of disappearing into emptiness, and Duan Bai can only chew the desolation of his spirit in the boundless silence after all.

In contrast to the high-minded and mysterious portrayal of the emperor, the author presents Duan Bai's psychological experience in a first-person narrative, making it delicate and palpable. The book

narrates Duan Bai's spiritual quest from the perspective of a young man, from rebellion to pursuit to loss. The text dilutes the historical role of the emperor with the rhythms of a young man's life at every turn [5], the distorted and desolate "civilian" spiritual world dilutes the mysterious solemnity of the royal family.

2.3 The dissolution of historical solemnity in the light of the fate of individual identity

In terms of individual identity and destiny, the ambiguity of the characters' identities and the emptiness of their fates dissolve the solemnity of history. In the case of Duan Bai, on the one hand, the text tries hard to empty him of his imperial authority, making his supposed status as emperor seem absurd; on the other hand, the book repeatedly describes his desire to walk the ropes, where being a king is like being in a cage, and flying the ropes is like regaining freedom. Duan Bai shifts freely between being a king and a rope walker that his identity as an emperor is blurred before he is exiled to the people. Even more ironic is the description of the 'dress-up game' between Duan Bai and Yanlang, in which Yanlang, a eunuch, puts on the emperor's costume and "gallops as if he were the emperor of his generation" [4]. The discovery greatly surprised Duan Bai and gave rise to annoyance and displeasure. The reason for this is that he realizes with a jolt that his sup-king attire would look equally majestic on anyone else, that is. The irony of the portrayal emphasises that the 'emperor' is not a person, but a mere symbolic of status, and only that. It also subverts the authority of the 'emperor' as a human being, diluting its sacred solemnity.

The sense of solemnity is somewhat deflated by the fatalistic emptiness of the characters in the story, as if he were an 'outsider'. When Duan Bai returns to the place where he used to be king, as the 'King of the Rope Walker', and witnesses the desolation of the defeated kingdom, his status as an 'outsider' is once again highlighted in the text. Seeing the once prosperous palace turned into a sea of fire, Duan Bai's thoughts, which should have been filled with sorrow, were only "stagnant", and in the face of the appalling tragedy, "I became an outsider" [4]. In addition, the so-called bright ruler Duan Wen, who once competed with Duan Bai for the throne, eventually buried the Xie state with his own hands because of his own blindness and pride. In a dream, the brothers Duan Wen and Duan Bai shook hands and reconciled, claiming that they were both "deluded by history" [4]. In Su Tong's writing, the people in the situation are also people outside the situation, no matter how they struggle, they cannot escape the destiny of falling into the void, and this is also the case with the concubines in the harem of Duan Bai, who momentarily win his favour, "I think they are also two pieces of paper, and one day they will be swept away by the gale to some distant and strange place" [4].The subversion of conventions to a certain extent dissolves the historical inevitability, the patterned destiny is replaced by uncertainty, and the empirical and solemn history becomes illusory.

3. "The Literature of Man": What is the significance of the dissipation of solemnity

3.1 Diluting history: the "divide" between human and history

In My Life as Emperor, history is no longer the subject of the text, but the background of the story, and the writing focuses on the characters. History is only the "veneer" through which Su Tong weaves his story, and through the "songs outside the walls and the night of the rain" [6], what it really seeks to present is the struggle, extinction and redemption of human nature. For example, the emperor Duan Bai is forced to "act" as an emperor for many years, but despite his noble status, his individual identity is always lost, fear and confusion fill his heart, and the twisted rebellion and pleasure under despair suppress his almost annihilated humanity. But when he became a rope walker, as he had always wanted to be, he finally found his spiritual world and the value of his existence, despite his fall from a place of great admiration. It was always his dream to walk on the rope, but it was also his way to redeem himself. In the post-apocalyptic family kingdom built by Su Tong's imagination, the external image of the characters becomes less important than the deeper desires and spiritual dilemmas hidden

beneath the exterior. The individual's search for the value of survival runs throughout the text, and the human struggles of the characters are reflected behind their words and actions.

As a result, the characters in the book shift from 'historical people' to 'individual people', and their relationship to history changes.There is always a hidden 'divide' between people and history. On the one hand, although the people in the text are experiencing their own stories, they feel as if they are 'outsiders', and they can even 'step out' of history, watching with the same indifference as the outsiders. As mentioned earlier, the protagonist, Duan Bai, whether he is a noble king or a rope walker, always looks at everything around him from the perspective of an outsider, and only speaks lightly of the tragedy of the fallen kingdom, silencing the bloodshed and desolation with utmost calmness, as the first-person writing style truly shows. On the other hand, the individual has a more active and contingent role to play, and is no longer passively wrapped up in the tide of the times, nor is his or her fate determined by them; in other words, the individual's destiny is no longer patterned to history, which is to some extent less inevitable and more contingent. The events that should have happened "according to the rules" were often disrupted by some unconventional contingency, as when the wise Duan Wen was astonishingly buried by blind arrogance after his accession to the throne, and sat on the throne for far less time than his tyrannical and ignorant brother Duan Bai. The reversal of the end of the Ming emperor's reign enhances the chance aspect of the work and diminishes its conventionality.

This is a break with the limitations imposed by the strong ideological colouring of literature during the Seventeen Years' Literature and the Cultural Revolution. Under the influence of the high political enthusiasm of those times, the "individual" in a literary work was placed in the context of the times, and his or her fate was closely related to the historical trend, and his or her happiness and sorrow were the product of the influence of the times. The characters are distinctive but at the same time relatively homogeneous, with the hero always holding up the banner of justice and the villain everywhere despicable. In the new historical novel, on the other hand, the political colouring is reduced, and the human being's own existence is given priority, appropriately distanced from history, and more complex and three-dimensional in his image. An example of this is the aforementioned Duan Wen, who, while heroic and brave, also has an astonishing ego and ultimately buries his country as a result of his astonishing ego, breaking the shackles of the perfect heroic image and overturning the patterned direction with an unconventional ending. As for the influence of the times on the characters, Su Tong distances himself from history with the distant attitude of an "outsider". This way of highlighting the individual subject and diluting the historical colouring has to a certain extent dissolved the focus of the previous grand narrative on history, and the portrayal of the characters has moved from a single to a complex one.

3.2 Highlighting the individual: the practice of human literature

The outsider's attitude of watching history from outside the casually constructed palace is like watching a fire on the other side of the river, and the outsider's attitude of coldly watching dissolves the solemnity and passion of history. Along with the reform and opening up, the social and cultural environment changed, the ideological overtones in creative writing were diluted, and the concept of "literature as human science" was once again brought to the attention of writers [7]. The reflective meaning in the text has become stronger, and the focus on "people" has increased significantly, echoing the "literature of people" that Zhou Zuoren and others had already proposed at the beginning of the 20th century literary reform but had not put into concrete practice. This echoes the "human literature" that Zhou Zuoren and others had proposed at the beginning of the 20th century literary reform but had not put into practice. Compared to previous works, the new historical novels no longer focus on the external elements such as character and experience, but instead focus on exploring the deep desires of the human heart, tapping into the loneliness, violence, fear and other factors in the subconscious of the individual, thus reflecting on the individual's living situation. At the same time, the text is structured by history as 'material' rather than as the main 'subject' of writing, i.e. history is no longer the object of the text, but the context in which the story takes place. The focus of the

writers of new historical novels, such as Su Tong, is to explore the fate of the individual in the context of history and to ask questions about human nature. The history that is relegated to the status of 'material' is either a concrete and knowable past or a virtual 'fragment' of time and space woven by the creator. It is untraceable in real history, whether or not it is virtual does not hinder the writer's creative purpose.

On the other hand, this shift is closely related to Su Tong's personal preferences. As an imaginative writer and a "master storyteller", Su Tong is keen on using metaphors and symbols to construct aesthetic imagery with the fragments of imagination in his mind, fictionalising a poetic world in fantasy,building an "ethnography" of the South that is delicate, elegant and nostalgic [8]. He is more interested in depicting a virtual world that transcends reality than in developing a narrative based on reality; moreover, this virtual world is not based on his own experience, but on the inspiration to construct the life world of others that he has not experienced or experienced before [9]. This way, he creates an aesthetic distance for creation. The story in My Life as Emperor cannot be dated to a real historical period, but Su Tong is full of "fictional enthusiasm" [10]. He constructs virtual kingdoms. The history constructed in this way is fragmented and vague, no longer the focus of the text, and the rendering of deep emotions such as fear and despair in the lives of individuals has weakened the value of history itself. History, with its solemnity dissolved, becomes the 'veneer' of the text, while the individual human being is deliberately elevated to the focus of the writing.

3.3 "Virtual"history: the value of the seemingly real

"Establishing the delicate balance of imagination and existence in the space left by the passage of time" [10], in My Life as Emperor, Su Tong enters the historical virtuality with a rather free mind, and history is just a set for its arbitrary cutting [2]. This reflects one of the themes of literary writing in the 1990s - "playing with history", i.e. writing about history in a virtual, parodic and consumer manner [2]. By writing with the attitude of playing with history, history is only a background material that is constructed randomly and seemingly real, and the text only wears "the clothes of history". The previous serious and monolithic grand historical narrative is dissolved. With the indistinguishable nature of history becoming blurred, coupled with the consumerist orientation, the new historical novels sometimes over-emphasize sensory stimulation and reading pleasure in order to cater to the reading interests of the public, and "historical consumption has become a double-edged sword" [2].

On the one hand, the advantages and disadvantages of writing as a 'game of history' are mixed. On the other hand, apart from the aforementioned disadvantages, the new historical novels have a freer literary space after dissolving the limits of grand and solemn history, and the individual human being has a more complex and three-dimensional image, and more attention has been paid to the spiritual dilemmas and deep desires of human beings. Compared with the previous period, the new historical writers have extracted the depths of history while delving into the depths of human nature, exploring new dimensions of human narrative. In addition, influenced by consumerism, writers use bizarre and mysterious plots to attract readers' attention, and even though they sometimes pursue pleasure excessively, the historical texts also changed from solemn and monotonous to complex and diverse [2]. In short, after dissolving the single solemnity of history, the new historical novel shows a richer human colour and aesthetic value.

It is true that the new historical novel, while subverting and reconstructing the monolithic history of the past, has the disadvantage of being overly entertaining. But literature and history are unique in their own right, and each plays a different role in the development of civilisation. Literary and historical scholars should not be confused with each other. From ancient times to the present day, historians have faithfully recorded what the orthodoxy has deemed to be the "proper history", that is, the only version of the history of their time that is considered to be different from the wild history (here, historians refer to those who record the proper history, as wild history may be mixed with literary writing for instance). The so-called authentic history should be objective and true, so that future generations can "learn from history", and so on. Under the calm and objective pen of the

historian, whatever events told in writing, whether plausible or absurd, really happened, i.e. the historical truth.

It is not the literary writer's task to write about events that, however "simulated", are false. But in a sense, literature's truth transcends history's truth, and it is closer to philosophy, more likely to provoke people to think about such essential questions as "what is man?" and "who are you" and other essential questions. The greatness of literature lies in its ability to provoke people to reflect on the value of life, even though it is not true. Thus, even though the new historical novels' history is no longer monolithic and solemn, the life drama performed on the virtual historical curtain is more capable of provoking modern people to pay attention to and ponder over human beings' living conditions. By using history as 'material', the New Historicists writers actually aim to raise human beings' status in their literary works and to explore and practise the 'literature as anthropology' idea, which does not This does not contradict literature's essence, but has its own unique value.

4. Summary

My Life as Emperor explores the depths of human nature, showing how individualized people survive in a fictional post-apocalyptic home state. The main thread is the pursuit and confusion of life, using history as a material rather than a subject, and dissolving its solemnity to a certain extent. "Literature is anthropology" [7]. This creative thrust lasted several years until the 1980s, when the creators started their journey of exploration in a real sense. With the help of history, the new historical novel opened up a human narrative, and the deeper desires of human nature, which had previously been overlooked, gradually surfaced and became a hot topic of creation and discussion. The strengthening of individual consciousness to the extent of diluting historical values and dissipating historical solemnity is a practice that cannot be ignored in the exploration of human narratives.

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