# Stones from Other Hills May Serve to Polish the Jade of This One

-- Talking about Wang Anyi's reception of foreign literature in Baotown

Suxin Sun[1], Shiming Xu[2]

[1] School of Humanities, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

[2] School of Journalism and Communication, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

**Abstract.** The Novelette Baotown by contemporary writer Wang Anyi which has been influenced by a variety of foreign literary trends is a masterpiece of root-seeking literature. Using a combination of influence studies and parallel studies, this article analyses the reception of foreign literature in Baotown, especially Tolstoy's Resurrection and Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, and explains the influence of foreign literature on Wang Anyi's notion and writing, to explore her perspective of the possibility of our traditional culture continuation in modern civilization with referring to foreign literature.

**Keywords:** Baotown; Wang Anyi; Tolstoy; Márquez.

## 1. Introduction

In the 1980s, the decade-long devastation called the Cultural Revolution came to an end and Chinese society began to reform and open up. Faced with the influx of Western literary trends, Chinese writers were deeply confused about how to cope with the relationship between their culture and foreign tides. Meantime, they were also anxious about the lack of their cultural status in the world literary arena. As a result, Han Shaogong made the declaration in 1985 that "literature has roots, and the roots should be deeply rooted in the cultural soil of national traditions", officially starting the root-seeking literary campaign. On the other hand, Chinese writers who were eager for literary reconstruction turned their attention to foreign literature, with their creations inevitably impacted by it.

As one of the best contemporary Chinese writers, Wang Anyi belongs not only to China but also to the world, and her writing has been inextricably linked to foreign literature from the very beginning. In Talking Book-My Literary Life, she said: "I always like to read Western novels in translation."[1] In the 1990s, teaching a course titled “novel studies” at Fudan University, she gave sophisticated readings of many classic foreign novels, including Notre Dame Cathedral, Resurrection, and One Hundred Years of Solitude. Besides, she mentioned the nourishment she has received from foreign literature in many circumstances. In short, she has never avoided sharing this kind of influence as taboo.

Wang Anyi's ability to learn from foreign literary sources is inseparable from that era of diversity and openness, as well as from her growth environment and proactive affinity. These nutrients enabled her to see China and the world with a fresh vision and then to concentrate on literary creations from a national and international cultural perspective. At the same time, she obtained the opportunity to re-examine herself through this brand-new window.

## 2. The Creating and Publishing of Baotown

In August 1983, Wang Anyi went to the United States with her mother, Ru Zhijuan, to participate in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. The visit brought her abounding feelings: "The American trip provided me with a new perspective: everything in America confront ours, including our views of history, time, and people. When I look back at China at that time, I can

discover plenty of unusual things in what I thought to be a normal life."[2] This distinctive experience has injected original energy into her writing.

As a consequence, it contributed to the publication of the Novelette Baotown in late 1984, and the corresponding English translation was published in New York in 1985. Baotown narrates the spiritual condition of Chinese peasants realistically, setting a rustic atmosphere of the Chinese countryside by using the art of irony and symbolism subtly, searching for the historical truth of lost roots in a dual discursive confrontation between the explicit and the implicit, and exploring some grand propositions such as human destiny and culture. Therefore, as Wang Anyi's transformation work, it is regarded as one of the best root-seeking literature works as well.

In particular, Wang Anyi's reception of foreign literature is shown to the fullest extent in Baotown. Accordingly, this novel uses a combination of influence and parallel studies to analyze the influence of foreign literary trends on Wang Anyi's conceptions and creations, to better explore how she used foreign literature to grasp the essence of her national spiritual world.

## 3. The Artistic Authentic Atonement Mode-Wang Anyi and Tolstoy

In the 19th century, Russia gave birth to a bunch of masters who influenced the world's literary arena, the prestigious realist writer Leo Tolstoy being a representative of them. "Every writer must be impacted by their predecessors. I think my works come mainly from the influence of Russian literature by osmosis." [3] Furthermore, Wang Anyi's conversation with Zhang Xinying referred to her youth reading: "My reading experiences of classical literature was done at that time, including Tolstoy, Turgenev." [4] "Tolstoy won by height rather than features." [5] It can be seen that Wang Anyi believes classical writers like Tolstoy subliminally enhance the literacy of readers and there is exactly a shadow of Tolstoy in her works.

### 3.1 Ancestral Original Sin and Laozha's Atonement

As a devout Christian, Tolstoy was steeped in profound religious discourse, constantly searching for the true meaning of the soul, which is evident in his writing. The whole Resurrection is based on Christian doctrine, with numerous detailed accounts of Christian rituals and direct references to Biblical. Also, it makes use of the myth of Adam and Eve's sinful journey to salvation. Correspondingly, Maslova and Nekhlyudov were both punished physically or mentally after eating the forbidden fruit, nevertheless, they gradually broadened their horizons and saved themselves.

Some of Wang Anyi's novels also contain her expressions of religious spirituality, one of which is Baotown. Wang once described a scene in the film Resurrection in which many exiles marched through the Siberian blizzard. She said of this scene: "Each of us is a sinner. In the boundless world, we do not know which is the beginning and which is the end. We are so confused, so blind, so painful, so tortured, but we must go on." [6] This kind of feeling reflected profound awareness of the "original sin" that everyone is born guilty.

Incorporating such feelings, the whole of Baotown is marked by a Christian metaphor. The description of the flood, with its “seven days and seven nights of rain” [7] , floating branches, and coiled worms, could be described as a symbolized Genesis. The ancestor of Baotown was originally an official whose responsibility was to rule the water so he built a dam to enclose 99,999 acres of land, but heavy rainfall flooded the dam and turned it into a lake. After being dismissed, he felt ashamed of the people, so he took his wife and children to settle in the most depressed area below the Bao dam, which later multiplied into a village Baotown of a few hundred people. Since their ancestor sinned, descendants seemed to have inherited this congenital sin, enduring generations of poverty and flooding. In addition, they all had personal, unspeakable, and inescapable hardships. For instance, the old Baowu was left alone; Bao Bingde had to live with the torment of his mad wife; Jianshezi could not find a wife due to poverty..... Calamities had been passed on from generation to generation, growing thicker and thicker, with everyone suffering under the shadow of their original sin. When it comes to the question: why did floods continue year after year? Why did the ancestor fail to manage

the water? Why were villagers there so poor? Answers to these questions can only be found in the history and environment of Baotown: floods brought disasters, disasters caused poverty, poverty made people ignorant, and the threat of floods was attributed to the incompetence of their ancestor. Ultimately, the people of Baotown were responsible for everything there, and the only answer could be their sins.

Based on the original sin, it is the classic pattern in Christianity that mankind seeks redemption relentlessly, which is further enacted in Baotown. The whole structure of this novel is that the ancestor made a mistake, descendants bore the original sin, and then Jesus came down to fulfill their salvation with his life. [8]There is no doubt that Laozha, the youngest son of Bao Yanshan, is the saint who saved the world.

The name "Laozha" means "the last one" to suffer. His death predestined to bring unexpected glory to Baotown and allowed villagers to reach the outside world and escape their destined misery. For example, Baowu ended his lonely life; Bao Bingde's mad wife disappeared; Bao Renwen became a creative writer; the love between Wenhuazi and Xiaocuizi came to a happy ending..... With his death in the flood, Laozha fulfilled his mission to atone for villagers' sins. As Chen Sihe said, "One head and one tail. One symbolizes the beginning of the Baotown misery and the other the end of it. Meantime, one symbolizes the original sin of mankind and the other the atonement of them." [9]

Like Jesus, Laozha is a noble practitioner, and in whom Wang Anyi has placed almost all of her moral ideals. The reason why she chose the identity of "child" is also perhaps a reference to Tolstoy. At the end of Resurrection, Nekhlyudov read Matthew chapter 18: ".....If you do not turn like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. So whoever humbles himself like little children, he is the greatest in the heaven".[10]Tolstoy regarded children as a source of light and purity. It is thus evident that Wang chose a child to be the “son of God” who would save villagers.

### 3.2 Artistic Truth and Profound Criticism

Realism literature has always adhered to the tradition of realistic portrayals of society. It takes the current state of society and historical changes as its basic materials, and reflects life objectively according to the logic of life.

From the very beginning, Wang Anyi's writing has shown a concern for the reality of life. She insists on "recognizing the world as it is and creating a copy of it, rather than writing about what the ideal should be".[11]She has repeatedly stated that she is inspired by realism writers such as Tolstoy and Balzac, and only by internalizing the richness of the real world can she create a unique artistic imagination, and Baotown is one of the products of this perception.

In 1987, in a conversation with a student at Fudan University, Wang Anyi gave a more specific explanation of the original idea for Baotown: it originated from an interview in which "I heard many stories along the way", especially stories of the "pot mender" (the prototype of "Shilai") and the "little hero" ("Laozha"), which aroused "a lot of memories in the brigade. "[12]It is noticeable that Baotown is a fermentation result of original stories scattered among the folk, the writer's life experience, and the artistic vision of that period, and is also an expression of realism, where the realistic existence can still be felt behind the reasonable fiction.

Realism writers, including Tolstoy, Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, often launched strong critiques of bad social habits in their works. In Resurrection, when Maslova, a peasant girl, was falsely accused of murder, a gang of enforcers sit in the courtroom and sentenced her to four years of hard labor. Thus Maslova was a victim of the Tsarist dictatorship, and her ordeal indicates a broad and profound attack on the corruption of the bureaucracy, while Baotown constructs a myth about "benevolence" superficially, and deep down the author exposes the "depravity of it" in a subtle way. It criticizes the sluggishness of the nation and gives people a new understanding of the problems of traditional culture.

In addition, Wang Anyi has affirmed Tolstoy's "solidity", Flaubert's "cruelty" and Emily Brontë's "do addition".[13]She strongly approves of the power of logic to drive stories. She believes that the

reason why there are few excellent long novels in China is the lack of rational control and logical impetus during writing. This influence is not evident in Baotown, so more details are not provided.

## 4. A Lonely Village that Believes in Benevolence - Wang Anyi and Márquez

From 1960s to 1970s, the “Latin American literary explosion” swept the world, and it was Colombian writer Márquez who was a leading figure in Latin American realism literature. His novel One Hundred Years of Solitude published in 1967 was quickly translated into a variety of languages, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982.

In the 1980s, One Hundred Years of Solitude sparked an overwhelming response in the Chinese literary arena, and many local writers, Wang Anyi being one of them, have written works that were more or less in the shadow of it. Wang Anyi has expressed her appreciation of this novel in articles and lectures many times, even including a single chapter in Thirteen Lessons for Novelists to analyze the narrative structure and thematic ideas of it in detail, commenting: "The landscape of the mind world in modern novels, including Márquez's, is completely different from that of the realism period which we were familiar with before.....Márquez's novels seem to be constantly falling downwards, like a sinking ship, where shows a landscape below the horizon instead of the landscape illuminated by light." [14] It can be seen that she knows the plots of One Hundred Years of Solitude well.

Set in Magundo, a small town on the Caribbean coast, Márquez narrates seven generations of the Buendia family as they survive, reproduce, migrate, prosper, and then perish, reflecting the decline of indigenous cultures in Latin America in One Hundred Years of Solitude. Wang Anyi's Baotown is considered to be "inspired by One Hundred Years of Solitude"[15], which takes Baotown as the setting for its stories, sketching the lives of the Bao family and describing the gradual decline of benevolence. The former makes readers feel the sorrow of an entire nation from a single family, while the latter glimpses the stagnation of an entire society from a single village. They both explore the common fate of human beings and show the group consciousness of their respective people as well.

### 4.1 Gathering Space and Benevolence Code

In One Hundred Years of Solitude, Márquez constructs a space, the Magundo, that carries the stories of seven generations of the Buendia family, while Wang Anyi fictionalizes Baotown built by their ancestor out of atonement in Baotown. By comparison, it can be seen that Wang Anyi draws on Márquez's technique of fictionalizing a space where a community lives, as she said: "I must admit that One Hundred Years of Solitude has influenced me, as if by appointment, in the form of a virtual space in which the story unfolds." [16]

The settlement spaces in these two works have distinctive commonalities. More precisely, they are closed, backward, and self-contained. Besides, the villagers have a group cultural mentality. As a result, authors created new stages, which facilitated a more focused portrayal of existence in them.

People who live there might be stagnant and backward, languishing in poverty. On the other hand, there could also be a self-sufficient paradise. However, their equilibrium can be upset by the impact of foreign cultures, which was evident in Magundo shaken by modern Western civilization with the railway opening, and in Baotown benefited from the death of Laozha. Dating back to the initial impact, two outsiders, Shilai and Xiaocuizi made it, the former with no cultural roots while the latter a complete drifter. As soon as they came to Baotown, they both challenged the traditional moral values and fell in love with the wrong person, but they ended up being despised and leaving home instead of being understood or accepted, which showed that the power of individuals was weak. It was not until Laozha became a hero and the people of the county flocked to him that Baotown was completely shaken.

Another dominant feature of Baotown was that villagers have always regarded "benevolence" as their most vital value. For instance, the whole village pledged to support the old Baowu; Xiaohuizi lied that her biological child was found for fear of traditional morality; The poor Bao Yanshan adopted the beggar Xiaocuizi; Bao Bingde could not abandon his crazy wife due to "benevolence"..... All of

these incidents showed that people there attached significance to “benevolence”. In this way, these communal spaces, the Magundo and Baotown, can be seen as symbols of a highly concentrated national culture: they represent the Indian civilization of Latin America and the Confucian culture of China. This technique is also an important aspect of how Baotown draws on One Hundred Years of Solitude[17]

Furthermore, enclosed gathering spaces are one of roots of the loneliness which is a significant trait of 20th-century Western literature. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, loneliness is a main characteristic of the Buendia family, and Márquez considered the history and current situation of Latin America with a modern Western consciousness, while Wang Anyi used Baotown to demonstrate the loneliness of Chinese culture in the root-seeking literature. The village's tradition of benevolence was deeply rooted, yet villagers hardly ever faced up to their poverty, and found it difficult to develop any modern perceptions. For example, Bao Yanshan’s wife adopted Xiaocuizi out of sympathy, but her ultimate goal was to make Xiaocuizi a child bride; Bao Renwen, the "literary madman" who had studied for two years in the county to realize his dreams, was unable to gain acceptance in the traditional atmosphere so ended up in isolation. This reminded us that it was the "benevolence", this requirement of restraint and repression, that had turned into the inert force that made Baotown ignorant and backward. In this sense, "benevolence" had led to indifference among people and to the isolation of this village from the outside world, which was a deeper loneliness.

### 4.2 Traditional Beliefs and Cultural Imageries

To make stories more culturally relevant, both Márquez and Wang Anyi chose to write about traditional beliefs and cultural imageries.

Traditional belief is a central element of national culture and character. The Indians generally believe in animism and the ability of the dead to communicate with the living, as happened many times in One Hundred Years of Solitude. For instance, the ghost of Prudencio Aslar followed José Alcátio Buendía for fear of being alone and became a close friend of his. Premised on it, Márquez also focused on the superstitious beliefs of Indians in divination, witchcraft, and prophecy, such as Colonel Aureliano's talent of foresight, which helped him to escape death several times during his military career.

Similarly, Wang Anyi also depicted ethnic beliefs with Chinese characteristics such as the Buddhist concept of reincarnation in Baotown. Baowu initially disliked Laozha because his grandson died on the same day as Laozha's birth, so he felt that Laozha took his grandson's life. Then later he grew fond of the kind-hearted Laozha and believed that Laozha is an incarnation of his grandson, which implied a reincarnation mentality.

By incorporating the traditional beliefs of their respective nations, both authors portrayed the authentic way their peoples think. [18]Besides, they selected cultural imageries to suggest a deeper and more universal social meaning.

In One Hundred Years of Solitude, Márquez used the color yellow, an ominous symbol of disaster and death in Indian customs. Mysterious yellow things abounded in this novel, and always accompanied the misfortunes of the Buendia family, such as yellow discs, yellow flowers, yellow trains, etc. Márquez arranged for small yellow flowers to appear when three old men of that family passed away, a color of decay that added a shadow to the dying world. In addition, the yellow butterfly in One Hundred Years of Solitude appeared in every scene where Barberonia was present and it represented a critique of patriarchy and an indictment of love.

There are some profound cultural imageries in Baotown as well. For example, the flower-drum opera symbolized “benevolence”, which has been condensed over 5,000 years of history. Baotown began and closed with Bao Bingyi's singing, which symbolized the decline of “benevolence”. Besides, a double-sided leather drum shaken by hand was considered as a metaphor for emotions forbidden by traditional Confucian culture throughout the incestuous love between Shilai and his aunt. It was a symbol of impurity that contradicted the “benevolence”.

In conclusion, Wang Anyi's Baotown drew on One Hundred Years of Solitude to a certain extent. The reasons for this were, as she stated, "You will be surprised to read One Hundred Years of Solitude, which reveals cultural reasons underneath the political reasons, and then you will further ask why such politics happened in our country, in our nation, which contains various reasons such as the region, climate, living mode, civilizational indoctrination, etc. "[19] This similar writing context and cultural reflective stance made Wang Anyi display a complex attitude towards traditional culture similar to that of Márquez. On the one hand, she identified with the traditional Chinese virtues represented by benevolence in Laozha, sang an elegy for the loss of Confucian culture, and expressed her concern for the loss of human nature and the fate of our nation. On the other hand, by narrating the villagers who were bound by feudal rituals, she deeply criticized the rigid and backward traditional concepts. This ambivalent attitude was also evident in the works of many other contemporary writers.

## 5. Conclusion

As a representative work in the root-seeking literature, Baotown presents "a re-understanding of our nation, an awakening of potential historical elements in aesthetic consciousness, and an objectified performance of the pursuit of infinity and eternity"[20] Wang Anyi interweaves ordinary people and events into a profoundly meaningful picture of the world and takes modern consciousness as a fulcrum with fiction and truth to explore the possibility of the continuation of traditional culture, typically represented by Confucianism, in modern civilization. Eventually, she constructs distinctive Chinese literature based on the exploration of her nation's thinking mode and cultural psychology.

In Wang Anyi's Baotown and her other works, it can be seen that foreign literature including European and American literature, Russian and Soviet literature, and Latin American literature has given her multiple inspirations and influences with their respective spirituality, aesthetics, and characteristics. Meanwhile, what is most remarkable about her works is that she is constantly reflecting on herself, pursuing innovation, and seeking breakthroughs. The influx of foreign trends is a double-edged sword. Fortunately, she can take a calm and serious attitude, choosing her resources carefully according to her real needs from it, while basing on our cultural traditions and maintaining her style in her creation. As an excellent national writer and world writer, her fiction writing will continue to grow.

## References

[1] Wang Anyi, Zhang Xinying. Talking Book-My Literary Life [M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2010:10.

[2] Wang Anyi. Baotown-Literary Fiction-Urban Style-A Dialogue between the Young Writer Wang Anyi and the Chinese Language Students of Fudan University [J]. Language Herald, 1987(4):18.

[3] Tao Lan, Wang Anyi. Writing novels because of the narrated way [N]. Beijing Youth Daily, 2004-5-23.

[4] Wang Anyi, Zhang Xinying. The Book of Conversations: Reading during the Cultural Revolution [M]. Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008:26-27.

[5] Wang Anyi. The World of the Mind: Lectures on Wang Anyi's Fiction [M]. Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2007:95.

[6] Wang Anyi. The World of the Mind: Lectures on Wang Anyi's Fiction [M]. Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2007:95.

[7] Wang Anyi. Baotown [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1986:5.

[8] Gan Luman. Wang Anyi and Foreign Literature [D]. Hunan Normal University, 2012.

[9] Chen Sihe. Double Iteration, Deep Symbolism: Mythological Patterns in Baotown [J]. Contemporary Writers' Review, 1986(1).

[10] Tolstoy, translated by Rulon. Resurrection [M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1982:606.

[11] Wang Anyi. Brethren [M]. Beijing: China Federation of Literary Press, 2001:363.

[12] Si Yanwei. The "trendiness" of contemporary Chinese literary criticism in the 1980s [N]. Studies in Literature and Art, 2021.11.30.

[13] Pi Jin. Wang Anyi's novel creation and foreign literature [D]. Hunan Normal University,2015(38).

[14] Wang Anyi. Thirteen Lessons for Novelists [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2005:202.

[15] Wang Anyi, Chen Cun. Dialogue on Baotown [J]. Shanghai Literature, 1985(09),93.

[16] Wang Anyi. The Fourteenth Lesson for Novelists [M]. Zhengzhou: Henan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2016.134.

[17] Li Ziran. The Construction of National Literature--A Study of the Influence of One Hundred Years of Solitude on Baotown [J]. Masterpiece Appreciation,2018(03):134-136+152.

[18] Li Ziran. The Construction of National Literature--A Study of the Influence of One Hundred Years of Solitude on Baotown[J]. Masterpiece Appreciation,2018(03):134-136+152.

[19] Wang Anyi. Thirteen Lessons for Novelists [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2005:78.

[20] Han Shaogong. The Retreat of Progress [M]. Shenyang: Chunfeng Wenyi Publishing House, 2002.