

The Structure of Feeling in Wei Wei's *Yanxia Li*

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Abstract: Wei Wei's *Yanxia Li* is a work that traces back to the author's own life and marks a return to her self. The book adopts a form that combines annalistic chronicle with biographical narrative, fictionalizing the forty one year life course of the protagonist Tian Zhuang. It reflects the social transformation of China and offers a profound and nuanced depiction of the intricate interconnections between society and individual existence. Drawing upon Raymond Williams's theory of "structure of feeling" as its methodological foundation, this paper attempts to analyse *Yanxia Li*. Focusing on the emerging connections between the individual and the collective, the individual and society, as well as the formation of shared perceptions and lived experiences across multiple temporal and spatial dimensions during the process of social change, it seeks to uncover the structure of feeling characteristic of that era.

Keywords: Wei Wei, Post-70s, *Yanxia Li*, Structure of Feeling.

1. Introduction

Wei Wei is a highly representative and distinguished writer among the "Post-70s" generational cohort of Chinese authors. As a "precocious talent of her era," she has consistently placed her contemporaries at the heart of her literary creation. Her works are mostly set against the backdrop of everyday life, excelling at excavating the depths of human nature within the mundane, and manifesting an understated, poetic narrative style that is both serene and restrained. She has contributed a body of distinctive and emotionally resonant texts to the contemporary literary scene.

Wei Wei's distinctive and tension-filled oeuvre has garnered considerable critical attention. The *Woman of Da Lao Zheng* won the Third Lu Xun Literary Prize in 2005; *Makeup* won the Second China Novel Society Award and the Tenth Zhuang Zhongwen Literary Prize in 2006; *Sister and Chronicles of Yanhe Village* won the Ninth Chinese Literature Media Prize for Novelist of the Year in 2011. *Yanxia Li* parodies historical chronicles through its annalistic form. The 41-year life journey of the protagonist Tian Zhuang—from her birth to her death—unfolds progressively within the narrative, with her life spanning across places such as Lizhuang, Qingpu, Jiangcheng, and Guangzhou. Through this geographical and temporal expansion, the novel weaves together a chronicle of transformations affecting both a family and an entire era.

Existing critical discussions on *Yanxia Li* have largely been conducted from the perspectives of narrative content, stylistic features, language, and aesthetic sensibility. Departing from these approaches, this paper employs the theory of the "structure of feeling" as its analytical framework, attempting to offer an interpretation of *Yanxia Li*, the new work by the representative "Post-70s" writer Wei Wei.

2. The Structure of Feeling as a Method

The concept of the "structure of feeling" first appeared in Preface to Film, co-authored by Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom, where it was initially formulated with reference to the cinematic medium. Williams argued that for film—as an art form—to fulfil its task of conveying experience from the artist to the audience, it must first establish a shared

structure of feeling between the creator and the viewer, emphasizing that literary and artistic works are permeated by social experience.[1] To a certain extent, the "structure of feeling" can be equated with "experience." It is deeply embedded in people's everyday lives, yet has no tangible counterpart, and can only be preserved as an integral experience within literature and art.

In *Culture and Society*, Williams examined the characteristics of British industrial novels from the 1840s onwards—works by Dickens, Gaskell, Lawrence, and others—and revealed the interactive relationship between individual experience and the social environment. He argued that these industrial novels embodied a contradiction between the values of the British middle class and the lived experience of the novelists themselves, a contradiction that constituted a pervasive inner experience within nineteenth-century British society.

Beginning with *The Long Revolution*, Williams extended the application of the "structure of feeling" from the literary domain to cultural studies more broadly, yet he continued to uphold its core theoretical point of departure: shared social experience. He emphasized the flexibility of the structure of feeling, describing it as "the culture of a period: it is the particular and living result of all the elements in the general organization." [2] It typically emerges from the tension between old values and new lived experiences. Consequently, Williams contended that to understand the culture of a period, one must attend to the authentic experiences of people at that time—not merely consult the writing of cultural history, which is often constrained by ideology, but rather examine the structure of feeling of that era, so as to gain a fuller understanding of their shared life experiences and values. At the same time, he regarded changes in the structure of feeling as portents of cultural transformation.

In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams sought both to affirm the stable, structural dimension of consciousness and to capture its fluid, non-fixed emotional quality. By juxtaposing the seemingly oppositional terms "feeling" and "structure," he captured the fluid and transformative aspect of culture.[3] On the one hand, the "structure of feeling" distils individual experience into culture, reflecting the shared life experiences and values of members of a social community in a given era. On the other hand, it is capable of revealing the underlying

structures that exceed textual expression, thereby bringing to light those spaces not touched by the text and those realms of consciousness beyond mainstream values-thus enabling us to re-examine and reinterpret the cultural configuration of a particular period.

From its initial formulation as a new approach to literary criticism, the "structure of feeling" was subsequently expanded into an epistemology of culture and society. Williams persisted in using the concept throughout different phases of his career, continually extending its connotations and offering fresh interpretations. It is worth noting, however, that he never provided a definitive or fixed definition of the "structure of feeling." Raymond Williams's theory of the "structure of feeling" offers a new framework and methodological foundation for understanding the structure of feeling in contemporary Chinese fiction. Taking as its point of departure the core concerns of the theory-"cultural practice" and "shared experience"-this paper attempts to analyse Yanxia Li, the important work published in late 2022 by the representative "Post-70s" writer Wei Wei. Focusing on the process of social change, it investigates how and what new connections were established between the individual and the collective, between the individual and society; it also examines the specific milieus in which shared perceptions and lived experiences took shape, and inquires into what kind of structure of feeling is manifested therein.

3. Collective Experience in Individual Chronicle

In the 1990s, the "Post-70s" women writers made their debut on the literary scene, quickly gaining considerable renown and attracting widespread attention. The mention of "Post-70s" women writers inevitably brings to mind the so-called "beauty writers" represented by Wei Hui and Mian Mian, whose bold "body writing"-or even "lower-body writing"-coincided conveniently with consumerist trends. Their work was aggressively promoted by the media, relentlessly commercialized and sensationalized. By extravagantly portraying women's unending desires and the sense of emptiness and absurdity of urban existence, they overshadowed the creative output of other "Post-70s" women writers in a rather crude manner. At the same time, "Post-70s" women writers were also referred to as "the awkward generation," and the "Post-70s" cohort as "the intermediate generation." By the time they stepped onto the literary stage, the era of pure literature dominated by the "Post-50s" and "Post-60s" generations had already come to an end, with those earlier writers having secured an unassailable literary status. The subsequent "Post-80s" cohort, riding the wave of the New Concept Essay Competition and propelled by market forces and the media, enjoyed considerable influence among young readers. Caught between these two groups, the "Post-70s" writers became "the awkward generation." [4]

Yet the "Post-70s" women writers have continued to labour quietly in the literary field. Abandoning grand themes and historical narratives, they have turned instead to the mundane world, steeped in the smells of everyday life, writing about the most authentic ordinary existence. "They possess a meticulous observation of human sentiments and social dynamics, a masterful depiction of contemporary urban life, and a penetrating revelation of the emotional world of modern people amidst the mundane world. They demonstrate a loyalty to the details of life and the everyday that surpasses

that of their predecessors; our daily lives come alive vividly under their pens." [5] They attend to the underprivileged, reflect social realities, and, with women's sensibility and delicacy, engage in reflections on both the era and the individual. Their creative process is one of minute detail, fragmented observation, and sustained emotional responsiveness, imbued with a strong humanitarian concern, opening up new aesthetic experiences and providing fresh aesthetic sensibilities for contemporary Chinese literature. Yet precisely because of this turn toward personal, everyday writing, they have been criticized by many scholars as being disconnected from the era and from history. This critique is certainly biased, yet it does point to certain issues in the "Post-70s" writers' creative practice, as well as their pronounced characteristics of "individual consciousness and emotional sensibility." [6] Wei Wei, widely regarded as one of the most accomplished writers of the "Post-70s" generation, has, with the growth of her life experience and the maturation of her spiritual vision, and in the face of time that slips away like shifting sands and the ever-constructed nature of social history, voiced the poignant reflection: "The effective time left for our generation is not much." [7] This utterance reveals her acute sense of urgency and responsibility grounded in her collective identity. For the "Post-70s" generation, generational identity has become a significant marker of social self-recognition. Wei Wei's sense of mission toward this generational identity drives her aspiration to construct the generational memory and structure of feeling of the "Post-70s" through the writing of Tian Zhuang's life story.

In the novel, Wei Wei frequently employs the first-person plural pronoun "we" (women)-a rhetorical device that serves to continually remind the reader of the essential connection between the protagonist Tian Zhuang and ourselves. The "we" ostensibly refers to the editorial committee of this Chronicle of Tian Zhuang, yet in reality it signifies the author Wei Wei herself, as well as the countless ordinary people born in the 1970s. On the title page, the author emphatically foregrounds the universality and representativeness of Tian Zhuang as a character: "She is the protagonist Tian Zhuang, she is also me, and she is all the young people of the 1990s. Yes, all of them." Within Tian Zhuang's brief forty-one-year life span are embedded the lived experiences and collective memories of the "Post-70s" generation. Thus, as "we" follow Tian Zhuang's life journey from birth to death, what we are in fact experiencing is the resurrection of "ourselves"-"Her death allows us to live." [8]

In his exposition of the structure of feeling, Williams places particular emphasis on individual experience in contemporary life, arguing that personal experience is precisely that which cannot be overlooked or marginalized: "This is not only a way of saying that we must move beyond the official forms and the systematic beliefs (though we always have to allow for them); it is also a way of saying that we are involved in meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt." [9] It is through the participation of each and every individual that the distinctive structure of feeling of an era manifests itself as a present, active, evolving, yet continuous state. The structure of feeling thus serves as a mediating term between the individual and society, implying that the individual plays an agentive role in shaping both their own emotional structure and the cultural configuration of their time.

Yanxia Li is an individual chronicle-as the term suggests, it is a historical record of the significant events and temporal milestones in an individual's life. Similar to a national

historical chronicle in form, yet focused on the personal experiences, trajectory of growth, and observations of a single individual, the lyrical subject of the book is Tian Zhuang. Through the fictionalized "record" of her life year by year, the author unfolds Tian Zhuang's individual life trajectory before the reader in its entirety and vividness, allowing "us" to step into the scene of her lived practice. A defining feature of the individual chronicle is its high degree of particularity; to elevate from such particularity to collective experience is no easy task, for one false step may lead to a proliferation of trivial everyday details and fragmentary personal experiences. Therefore, throughout the narrative, Wei Wei employs the pronoun "we" in her commentaries on the vicissitudes of people and events, momentarily drawing the reader out of Tian Zhuang's personal experience and inviting them to view things from a broader perspective, so as to perceive and comprehend the collective or generational common experience that Tian Zhuang represents. Moreover, Wei Wei deftly integrates major social events into the fabric of Tian Zhuang's life journey, thereby enriching the work's historical and cultural depth. Tian Zhuang's growth trajectory is closely intertwined with the transformations of the broader social background; political events and socio-cultural memories not only deepen the portrait of Tian Zhuang as a character, but also allow the reader to recognize that her individual life history is a microcosm of the collective.

By composing a biography for Tian Zhuang as an ordinary individual, Wei Wei constructs the generational and collective experience of the "Post-70s" cohort. The individual and the collective are interpenetrated with each other, dialectically unified: Tian Zhuang is an ordinary individual within "us," and her life history bears the generational commonalities of "our" lived experiences, while "we" and society, "we" and the era, mutually mirror one another.

4. Feeling in Time and Space

Williams did not provide a clear-cut definition of the "structure of feeling," yet he unequivocally emphasized its fundamental characteristics: the structure of feeling is present-tense, practical in nature, and can only be understood through living individual experience.[10] What Yanxia Li manifests at the level of time and space is precisely an emotional expression that is present-tense and practice-oriented.

(1) Feeling in Multiple Temporalities

The perception of time is inherently charged with emotion. How a writer handles time within the text, along with the emotional expression embedded therein, reflects their understanding of the nature of existence and the meaning of life. In Wei Wei's works, a multi-temporal consciousness is particularly pronounced. As one critic observes, "In contemporary Chinese literature, Wei Wei is one of the few writers who treats 'time' as the subject of narrative rather than as a mere 'tool.'"[11] In her novel *Yanxia Li*, temporal consciousness is displayed to its fullest extent. The narrative not only follows a linear chronological structure in the annalistic mode throughout, but also interweaves fragments of static and flowing time, beneath which lie richly stratified emotional layers.

As Tian Zhuang grows up year by year, the people around her bustle and fade with the rising and setting of the sun, as if time has frozen at this very moment. The repetition and interweaving of scenes, characters, and events create a strange illusion that time has come to a standstill. Neither the

vicissitudes of revolution nor the natural cycles of birth, aging, sickness, and death can disrupt the tranquility of everyday life. Tian Zhuang seems to become a microcosm of ordinary existence, fixed as an eternal tableau. Wei Wei deliberately attenuates the sense of time in everyday life, endowing it with a poetic beauty that transcends temporal boundaries. In those seemingly mundane moments of daily routine, Wei Wei startlingly captures the faint sound of time slipping away. It is precisely in these slow moments that she discovers the happiness of ordinary people and the pleasures of quotidian life, while simultaneously bestowing upon us a poetic sensibility.

The time in Wei Wei's writing is indeed poetic, yet it is not merely so. In contrast to the rapid transformations of the era, the everyday life close to the ground appears dull, slow, and stagnant. These days and years, repeated ad infinitum, embody both the constancy of human existence and the beauty of simplicity, while also revealing the stagnation and extreme ordinariness embedded within trivial reality. This is precisely the absurdity of life that Wei Wei's everyday narratives bring to light. The multi-layered significance of Wei Wei's writing lies in the fact that she both cherishes the precious tranquility and peace of daily life and does not overlook the undercurrents hidden beneath its beautiful surface, thereby enriching our perception of time and our emotional experience of it.

(2) Feeling in Shifting Spaces

Fluid and shifting spaces represent individual freedom, yet it is the sense of belonging to a place that constitutes the source of individual security. In the long river of Chinese literature, attachment to a specific locality has been a perennial theme, and "hometown" occupies a uniquely emotional position within the Chinese literary tradition. Wei Wei's works encompass three distinct spatial dimensions—"village—county town—city"—which interpenetrate one another and incorporate experiences of alienation, rootlessness, and homecoming in modern life.

In her early works, Wei Wei fashioned the village into a spiritual homeland through childhood memories and family stories. This emotional impulse receives a more profound and multi-faceted expression in *Yanxia Li*. The locales of Lizhuang, Qingpu, Jiangcheng, and Guangzhou manifest Wei Wei's emotional ties to her hometown and to Guangzhou, where she has long resided, with the attachment to her birthplace, Lizhuang, being particularly intense. Through Tian Zhuang's perspective, Wei Wei presents the emotion toward "hometown" in richly layered forms—from the abstract to the concrete, from childhood to adulthood, and from the holistic to the particular. In 1979, as the Reform and Opening-up policy took effect and rural populations began to migrate to cities on a large scale, Tian Zhuang left her birthplace, Lizhuang, which from then on became her hometown. In this chapter, Wei Wei employs extensive landscape description to express her emotional identification with her hometown: "Lizhuang was not always shrouded in fog; sunny and rainy days were also frequent. On clear days, the air remained moist, for this area was crisscrossed with rivers and lakes, thick with vaporous moisture... Lizhuang was but one of countless villages scattered across these hundreds of miles, with rivers and lakes threading them together like stars in the sky." [12] "The little girl steadied the back of the seat and glanced back at the village over her shoulder. For her entire life, she would remember that glance—so solemn. Yet that glance, if one were to be precise,

was not so much a glance at Lizhuang as it was a glance at her hometown. More accurately, it was a glance at the hometown in the lexicon-that hometown which, through millennia and the murmurs of countless mouths, had come to bear a weight so heavy." [13]

Tian Zhuang's childhood perspective renders her understanding of her hometown concrete and perceptual. Simultaneously, the author, through the narrative subject's perspective, imbues Tian Zhuang's collective unconscious with a reverence for her hometown, thereby creating a projective effect of collective shared experience in the emotion of hometown attachment. As temporal and spatial distances widen, Tian Zhuang's feelings toward her hometown become increasingly abstract: "Later, whenever Tian Zhuang looked back upon her birthplace-whether in her Guangzhou home thousands of miles away, at her workplace, or on her way to and from work, whenever she thought of Lizhuang-she always had a misty sensation, something elusive, indistinct, and uncertain, like the impressionistic strokes of a Chinese ink painting-a few brushstrokes, suggesting the meaning, but highly abstract." [14] Tian Zhuang's emotional experience of her hometown is remarkably multifaceted and profound, spanning temporal and spatial boundaries while embodying deep collective experience and cultural connotations, achieving a harmonious fusion of individual emotion with the era and society.

In Wei Wei's narration, these essence-touching temporal and spatial dimensions illuminate and interweave with everyday life and nostalgia, together constituting a complete and harmonious narrative whole.

5. Conclusion

As a theoretically flexible category, the value of the "structure of feeling" lies precisely in its capacity to accommodate both the collective experience of grand history and the subtle, everyday perceptions of the individual. When a society undergoes rapid transformation, existing cultural frameworks often prove inadequate in accounting for emerging lived experiences; it is precisely within this contested space-between the old and the new, the stable and the fluid, the collective and the individual-that the structure of feeling is born. To examine the structure of feeling in a literary work, therefore, is essentially to pose the following question: How is the shared experience of an era perceived, expressed, and transformed into individual lived experience? This line of inquiry moves beyond formal analysis and thematic summation, redirecting literary criticism toward a deeper investigation of the inner dynamics of cultural change.

Wei Wei's creative trajectory offers a compelling textual practice that illuminates this theoretical proposition. In the 1990s, when the cohort of "Post-70s" women writers first entered the Chinese literary scene, bodily narrative served as their primary passage into mainstream critical attention-those writings concerning private experience, gender consciousness, and the articulation of desire, while undoubtedly possessing groundbreaking significance within their specific historical context, also revealed their limitations as critical discourse gradually solidified. What distinguishes Wei Wei is her sustained narrative self-awareness: at a time when her contemporaries were keen to establish their writing identities through the medium of the body, she chose a more inward and submerged path-one that carries the weight of emotion through the texture of everyday life and reflects the pulse of the era through the details of ordinary existence. It is precisely

this persistent excavation of emotional depth that has enabled her to transcend the constraints of generational labels, offering an alternative possibility to bodily narrative in contemporary Chinese literature.

In Wei Wei's writing, the trivialities of daily life are never mere surface decorations; they carry an invisible yet ubiquitous emotional force. Rural memories intertwine with experiences of growing up, personal emotional fluctuations resonate with broader historical currents, and together they weave an inner spiritual trajectory that is both vividly real and richly symbolic. This trajectory extends from the flagstone paths of Lizhuang to the myriad lights of Guangzhou, from a child's bewildered glance to an adult's abstract retrospection; each spatial shift and temporal crossing is not merely a displacement of geographic coordinates, but an accumulation and reshaping of emotional experience. Through this trajectory, we can discern the multi-dimensional complexity of modern life-that ambivalent posture of both advancing and looking back amid the tide of modernization, that contradictory psychology of alienation and attachment within the urban-rural binary structure, and that persistent spiritual struggle for selfhood at the intersection of collective memory and individual remembrance.

Wei Wei navigates the emotional world between the urban and the rural with an aesthetically detached stance. Her detachment is not aloofness, but a kind of gaze that maintains a necessary distance-neither indulging excessively in nostalgic lyricism nor rushing to condemn the city, but rather striking a productive tension between the two. This stance enables her to bring to light those hidden psychic recesses along the path of individual growth that are often obscured by everyday discourse, revealing the distinctive spiritual imprint left by a generation in an era of vast transformation. It is in this sense that Yanxia Li is not merely a summation of one writer's personal creation, but also an emotional archive of a generation-a precious record of how ordinary people lived, felt, and remembered during a period of social transition in China. With her quiet and steadfast writing, Wei Wei has left behind an irreplaceable emotional legacy for contemporary literature..

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