The Construction of an Ideal World in Shen Congwen's Border Town

Meng Cheng *

School of Literature, Wuhan University of Bioengineering, Wuhan, China

* Corresponding Author Email: meng.cheng1@outlook.com

Abstract. In the 1930s of the twentieth century, China was in the dual dilemma of social turmoil and the impact of modern civilization, and materialism and utilitarianism continued to erode traditional human feelings and the authenticity of human nature. In this social context, Shen Congwen took his homeland of Xiangxi as the prototype and built an ideal world opposed to modern civilization in the novel *Border City. This* article aims to systematically explore how Shen Congwen constructed an ideal country in this work. Research reveals that the ideal world constructed by Shen Congwen is not a fictional, detached utopia, but rather one grounded in the customs and local traditions of Xiangxi, built upon three fundamental pillars: the beauty of nature, the goodness of human nature, and social harmony. Through layered depictions of landscapes, characters, and rural stories, Shen constructs layer by layer a harmonious and self-sufficient spiritual haven. This article further points out that the ideal world depicted in *Border Town* reflects not only the author's lament for a lost golden age but also offers a spiritual remedy for the modern soul's decline. The philosophical reflections embedded in it regarding nature, human nature, and society still hold significant enlightening value today.

Keywords: Border Town*;* the beauty of human nature; an ideal world; utopia.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the social reality of China in the 30s of the twentieth century under the dilemma of warlord warfare and the alienation of urban civilization, when most literary creations focused on the critique of reality, while Shen Congwen depicted a poetic ideal world with his unique perspective of western Hunan. This study is of great significance in systematically interpreting the classic status of *Border Town* and deeply exploring Shen Congwen's spiritual quest to preserve the authenticity of human nature amidst the tide of modernization. It also offers valuable reference for how contemporary society might rebuild its spiritual homeland.

This article mainly elaborates on two major aspects: the "three-dimensional foundation for constructing an ideal world" and the "artistic construction techniques". The former focuses on the analysis of three levels: nature, humanity, and society, while the latter emphasizes the study of techniques such as poetic language, narrative structure, and symbolic imagery. In terms of research methods, the literature analysis method and close reading method were employed to conduct systematic search and reading of the original work *Border Town* and related academic literature. In terms of research methods, the literature analysis method and close reading method were employed to conduct systematic search and reading of the original work *Border Town* and related academic literature.

The ultimate research objective of this study is to systematically expound the internal structure of the ideal world constructed by Shen Congwen in *Border Town. In* order to achieve the goal, this article successively analyzes the three fundamental pillars that constitute this ideal world - the symbiotic model between humans and nature, the true state of human nature, and the social operation mechanism based on human relationships. It further examines how Shen Congwen, through a series of artistic techniques, elevated the local customs of Xiangxi to a timeless literary classic, and ultimately reveals its spiritual salvation for modern people.

2. The Three-Dimensional Foundation for Constructing an Ideal World

The ideal world constructed in Border Town is not an abstract concept. Instead, it is realized through specific depictions of the three dimensions of nature, human nature, and society. These three dimensions are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, jointly forming a complete and harmonious "Border Town world".

2.1. The Ideal Model of Human-Nature Relationship

In Shen Congwen's envisioned ideal world, the relationship between humans and nature is endowed with an ideal model that embodies the characteristics of traditional Chinese culture, and it prominently reflects the philosophical concept of "the unity of man and nature". This concept emphasizes holistic thinking, which means understanding and mastering the internal connections and operating laws of things from a holistic perspective. It holds that humans and nature are not in a binary opposition but rather exist in a dialectically unified relationship of mutual dependence and mutual achievement [1].

The novel takes place in a small mountain town called Chaotong. Through the meticulous depiction of natural scenery, it creates an ideal model where humans and nature coexist harmoniously. The opening sentence reads: "From Sichuan, crossing the lake, there is a government road to the east. This government road approaches the border of western Hunan. When reaching a small mountain town called 'Chadong', there is a small stream. By the stream, there is a white small tower, and a single family lives beneath it [2]."The ceaseless flowing of the stream symbolizes the continuation of life and the stretching of time; the white pagoda standing still represents the constancy of spirit and the guardianship of culture; the passing of the ferryboats serves as the connecting link between the two banks and the bridge for communication between people, and also embody the concrete expression of dedication and exchange. These images are not isolated descriptions of individual scenes; instead, they collectively form an organic whole - humans depend on nature, and nature, in turn, acquires meaning and spirit due to the existence of humans. The two elements achieve an internal unity through a dynamic balance.

Furthermore, simple customs have also become a bond for the interaction between humans and nature. "On the Dragon Boat Festival, local women and children all wore new clothes, and on their foreheads, they drew a 'king' character with realgar wine. On this day, every household can enjoy fish and meat. Around eleven o'clock in the morning, all the people of Tanchong would have their lunch. After the meal, those who lived in the city would all lock their doors tightly and go out of the city to watch the boat races by the river [3]."The dragon boat races during the Dragon Boat Festival are a collective activity full of primitive vitality. They echo the flowing streams, and the natural world is also endowed with profound meanings by human cultural activities. These customs embed human activities into the natural rhythm, forming a harmonious closed loop of people, nature and culture.

In *Border Town*, nature is not merely the backdrop for the characters' activities; rather, it is also a symbol of their personalities and destinies. The innocence of Cuicui echoes the purity of nature, the tenacity of the old boatman contrasts with the constancy of the white pagoda, and the flow of the stream suggests the change of fate of the characters. Through the delicate depiction of natural scenery, Shen Congwen constructs an ideal model of harmonious coexistence between man and nature.

2.2. The Ideal State of Human Nature

The idea that human nature is inherently good is the spiritual core of the ideal human nature in the Xiangxi world. Through a series of vivid character groups, Shen Congwen transformed the essence of goodness into external behaviors of people, revealing the purest aspect of human nature.

The protagonist, Cuicui, is the embodiment of goodness and beauty: she is innocent and romantic. Her goodness is uncorrupted by moral teachings; it is a natural expression of her nature. At the beginning of love, her performance was subtle, introverted and even ignorant, she was not as active as a girl in a big city, and all she retained was the most innocent throbbing and shyness of a girl.

The old boatman vividly interprets the benevolence and faith in traditional Chinese virtues. He "no matter rain or shine, he must stay at the bow of the boat", and he has been fulfilling his duties for ten years, not only out of professional adherence, but also from the heart of benevolence. He never took money from transitional people, and even if passengers forcibly stuffed coins, he would use the money to buy tea and grass tobacco for peace of mind and generously provided them to all transitional people for enjoyment. This behavior transcends utilitarianism and shows the spirit of "benevolent people love others" - he regards ferrying people as his duty and giving as second nature and completes the moral practice from "small self" to "big self" in ordinary perseverance, shining with the glorious image of self-denial in traditional ethics [4].

The two brothers Tianbao and Nuo Song perfectly interpret the concept of "righteousness is higher than profit". The two fell in love with Cuicui at the same time, but there was no traditional drama of brothers fighting for wives but they chose to compete fairly. When he learned that Cuicui preferred Nuo Song, Tianbao did not resent his brother, but chose to take the initiative to quit and go out to the beach. This behavior not only shows the affection between brothers but also reflects a personality realm that transcends selfish desires [5]. When he lost his son, he showed coldness and avoidance to the old boatman, but after the death of the old boatman, he was willing to let go of his resentment and help Cuicui take care of the old boatman's funeral. He embodies the responsibility and morality of local leaders and elders.

Through the shaping of these characters, Shen Congwen has built an ideal world with goodness as the core, showing the most authentic and purest side of human nature. This kind of human beauty is not only a characteristic of the world in western Hunan, but also a reflection and redemption of Shen Congwen's alienation of human nature in modern society.

2.3. The Ideal Mode of Operation of Society

The social order in the border city is not constrained by the system, but by using "human feelings" as a link to jointly build an ideal world community full of temperature. This social operation model focuses on the interaction between people, rather than the maximization of personal interests.

In Chadong, collective activities are an important way of social and emotional cohesion. For example, on the day of the market, "people from dozens of nearby villages have carried their goods", where people not only complete the exchange of materials, but also use this occasion to exchange emotions and exchange information and establish an emotional connection beyond utilitarianism. In other words, the market is not only a place for material exchange, but also a public space for emotional bonds. Here, credit is emphasized between buying and selling, and sincerity is seen in conversation. This trust mechanism, which is naturally formed in daily interactions, allows individuals to gain a sense of belonging in public life, and also makes society invisibly coalesce into an organic whole - this is a vivid embodiment of "human feelings" rather than institutions, as the core link of social operation.

In the more private neighborhood relationship, it further reflects the moral public-private view based on "benevolence". When the old boatman fell ill, "the neighbors sent a liter of rice to this family and a bowl of salt to that family", not based on blood ties and kinship, but with compassion as the starting point, showing the benevolent spirit of "standing up for oneself". After the death of the old boatman, everyone's care for Cuicui has not stopped. This kind of care goes beyond utilitarianism, is from the heart, is a natural extension of private emotions in the public sphere and is also a vivid practice of "benevolence" under moral self-discipline. Based on the natural flow of human feelings and moral self-discipline, this kind of society with human feelings as the core is what Shen Congwen aspires to [6].

3. Artistic Construction of the Ideal World

Shen Congwen not only constructs an ideal world through content in *Border City* but also strengthens the ideal color of the world through a series of artistic techniques. These techniques

include the use of poetic language, slow narrative structure, the establishment of symbolic imagery, and the integration of tragic colors.

3.1. The Use of Poetic Language

In *Border Town*, Shen Congwen did not adopt a forceful and straightforward critical tone. Instead, he used poetic and evocative literary language to meticulously create a pure and harmonious world of Xiangxi. His writing style is concise and restrained, fresh and natural. In his plain narration, there is a strong lyrical flavor. For instance, in the novel, it is written: "The stream flows on, meandering around the mountains. After about three miles, it merges into the main river of Tachong... The fish in the river can be counted by the hundreds as they swim in and out." There is no gorgeous rhetoric here, but through the crystal clear stream and countable swimming fish, it outlines a Peach Blossom Land that has not been intruded upon by modern civilization, giving the border city a transparent and peaceful poetic temperament.

Shen Congwen's poetic language is also manifested in the symbolic technique of integrating characters' emotions with natural imagery. When depicting the hazy emotional world of Cuicui, he wrote: "The moonlight was like silver, shining everywhere. The bamboo and cypress trees on the mountain turned black under the moonlight. The chirping of insects in the surrounding grass was as dense as falling rain [7]."This is not a direct statement of the girl's thoughts, but the bright moonlight, silent bamboo shadows and dense insect chirping externalize the clear and chaotic feelings in Cuicui's heart [8]. Through such figurative expressions, Shen Congwen integrated the characters' psychological states with the natural landscape. This not only deepened the layers of emotions but also enveloped the entire border town world in a gentle and eternal glow, enhancing its artistic appeal as an ideal place to live.

3.2. Slow Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of *Border City* is slow and natural, which is in stark contrast to the fast-paced narrative of modern novels. This slow narrative pace resonates with the rhythm of life in the border city, further writing the tranquility and harmony of the ideal world. Shen Congwen deliberately downplays dramatic conflict and plot tension and instead uses delicate brushstrokes to lay out daily fragments to show the gradual trajectory of the characters' psychology and emotions. For example, it describes Cuicui's ordinary days on the ferry: waiting for pedestrians during the day, listening to the sound of oars shaking the waves on the river, or sitting on the bow of the boat at dusk, watching the sunset stretch the shadow of the white pagoda, and helping his grandfather brush off the dust on the bamboo stool on the ferry. The novel is not in a hurry to promote the development of the plot but gradually constructs the natural and cultural landscape of the narrative space of *Border City* in an almost "static description" way. This narrative treatment not only structurally echoes the life philosophy of the border city people who are "not in a hurry" but also conveys a peaceful and self-sufficient life mood through the rhythm of language itself [9].

From the perspective of narrative, the narrative structure of *Border City* belongs to "spatialized narrative" rather than linear narrative. The plot is not a one-way advancement but gradually presents a complete picture of life in the superposition of multiple details and scenes. The narrative time seems to be stretched and synchronized with the natural time sequence, just like the people of the border city conform to the four seasons, just as the people of the border town follow the seasons and adopt a life attitude of not deliberately pursuing efficiency. Such a narrative arrangement is not only an externalization of the writing style, but also a high degree of unity between form and content.

3.3. Symbolic Imagery is Established

Shen Congwen constructed a series of symbolic images in the novel *Border City*, which are not only a true portrayal of the customs and customs of western Hunan, but also an important carrier that carries the core values of his ideal world. Together, they build a poetic and self-sufficient spiritual home.

First of all, the "border city" itself has an overall image. It is located at the junction of Xiangchuan and Sichuan, a geographical borderland, and a cultural and moral utopia deliberately created by Shen Congwen. It not only retains the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation but also stays away from the complexity and filth of mainstream society and is an ideal kingdom that exists independently.

"Ferry" and "white tower" are two images that run through the article. The old ferry, connecting the two sides of the strait, is also the ordinary, persistent and dedicated way of life of the old boatman and Cuicui. They don't take money, they don't ask for anything in return, they just facilitate people day after day, and the ferry has become a symbol of benevolence, integrity and responsibility in the border city world. And the white tower standing on the mountain ridge is white, resolute, and silent, like a patron saint, watching the day and night of the border city, witnessing the joys and sorrows of the characters. It is the embodiment of the spiritual beliefs of the border city, a symbol of purity, eternity and order. At the end of the novel, the white tower collapses on the night of a thunderstorm, coinciding with the death of the old boatman, suggesting the shaking of the traditional ethical order and the crisis facing the ideal world; The later reconstruction of the White Pagoda is pinned on the author's deep expectations for the return of ideal values.

These carefully constructed symbolic images concretize the core values of "goodness", "beauty" and "eternity" in the border city world. These images are intertwined to form an ideal world.

3.4. The Integration of Tragic Colors

The ideal world in *Border City* is not perfect. Shen Congwen deliberately injects tragedy - the old boatman dies, Tianbao dies unexpectedly, and Nuo sends away with guilt, leaving Cuicui alone guarding the ferry waiting for a person who "may never come back, maybe 'tomorrow' will come back". However, this tragedy did not destroy its idealism, but added realistic weight and philosophical depth to it.

The integration of tragedy in the novel has two main effects: first, it breaks the fantasy of perfection in the traditional utopian narrative and makes the ideal world closer to reality. Even in the beautiful small mountain city of Chatong, there is also the impermanence of fate and the helplessness of misunderstanding, and this "imperfection" adds credibility and reality to the ideal world in the border city. Second, the integration of tragedy deepens the theme of the novel - after the tragedy, the social order in Chatong did not collapse, the neighborhood still took care of Cuicui as usual, the dragon boat race during the Dragon Boat Festival was as usual, and the core of "goodness" and "harmony" in human nature was still stable. This just proves the strong resilience of "human nature", even if it is a tragedy, it will also light a lamp in the mutual support of people, so as to move towards a new day. It also makes Shen Congwen's call for "protecting beauty" more profound and powerful [10].

4. The Practical Significance of the Ideal World of Border City

The ideal world constructed in *Border City* is not a utopian imagination in the literary sense, but also a reflection and redemption of real social life. In today's rapid development of modernization, the beauty of nature, the goodness of human nature and the sum of society shown in *Border City* still provide people with important spiritual reference and civilizational enlightenment.

First of all, by reading *Border City,* people are reminded to pay attention to the harmonious relationship between man and nature. In modern society, the relationship between man and nature is becoming increasingly estranged, and nature has become an object of conquest rather than a symbiotic partner. The model of harmonious coexistence between man and nature in *Border City* provides a model of ecological ethics that can be used as a reference. Secondly, the beauty of human nature in *Border City* is a salvation for the alienation of human nature in modern society. In today's world of utilitarianism, the good in human nature is often overlooked. Border *City* shows the most authentic and purest side of human nature through the characters of Cuicui, the old boatman, and the ship's captain Shunshun, providing us with spiritual comfort. Finally, the social operation mechanism with human feelings and morality as the core in *Border City* provides us with a different idea for reflecting

on the governance logic of modern society. In today's world of high dependence on legal and institutional constraints, the relationship between people tends to be alienated and indifferent. The social community built through human feelings, trust and local ethics in *Border City* emphasizes the social integration function of moral self-discipline and interpersonal warmth and enlightens people to pay more attention to the cultivation of emotional connection and moral literacy in addition to system construction, so as to achieve social harmony and stability in the true sense.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically analyzes Shen Congwen's specific path and artistic techniques for constructing an ideal world in *Border City*. The results show that the author constructs a ideal world layer by layer through the three dimensions of natural beauty, human goodness and social harmony; Therefore, his research concludes that the ideal world constructed by *Border Cit*y is not a completely fictional utopia, but a spiritual home rooted in the real terroir of western Hunan and sublimated through artistic techniques. It contains profound philosophical thoughts on nature, human nature and society, and still has important practical enlightenment significance.

This study provides a multifaceted reference value for future research on *Border City* and Shen Congwen's literary idealism, which mainly affects the in-depth excavation of the spiritual core and artistic techniques of classic texts, and also provides a literary reference for the reconstruction of the spiritual home in real society. Future research should focus more on the possibility of dialogue between the ideal world of *Border City* and the real problems of contemporary China. For example, his methods of transformation into reality in the fields of rural revitalization, ecological ethics, and moral education, as well as the universality and particularity of "rural ideals" from a cross-cultural perspective, further expand the contemporary significance and research depth of Shen Congwen's works.

References

[1] Wang J. On the Formation and Evolution of the “Harmony Between Man and Nature” Outlook in Taoism and Confucianism. Journal of Shenyang Agricultural University (Social Sciences Edition), 2006, (04): 634–636.

[2] Shen C. Border Town. Wuhan: Changjiang Literature and Art Press, 2017: 1.

[3] Shen C. Border Town. Wuhan: Changjiang Literature and Art Press, 2017: 21.

[4] Bai Y. Inheriting Traditional Chinese Virtues and Enriching People's Spiritual World. Studies in Ideological Education, 2024, (05): 111–117.

[5] Chen Y. An Appreciation of the Main Character Images in Shen Congwen’s Work Border Town. China National Expo, 2024, (09): 26–28.

[6] Li P., Yang Y. The Concept of Public and Private in Traditional Chinese Ethics and Morality and Its Modern Analysis. Modern Philosophy, 2020, (05): 1–11.

[7] Shen C. Border Town. Wuhan: Changjiang Literature and Art Press, 2017: 83.

[8] Wang Z. A Study on the Linguistic Features and Aesthetic Value of Border Town. Changjiang Novel Appreciation, 2025, (05): 7–10.

[9] Yang L. Border Town and the Western Hunan World in Mr. Shen Congwen’s Works. Literature Education (Upper), 2021, (07): 24–25.

[10] Zhao X. “Beauty is Always Sorrowful”: A Tragic Poetic Interpretation of Border Town. Modern Chinese Literature Studies, 2011, (09): 1–10.