The Manifestation of Modernity in Ripples Across Stagnant Water

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Abstract. *Ripples Across Stagnant Water* is a long novel written by Li Jieren, which reflects the cultural atmosphere of the Sichuan region in China during the late Qing Dynasty after it underwent modernization. It holds aesthetic modernity significance. The text of *Ripples Across Stagnant Water* provides three characteristics of Li Jieren's literary creation: different environmental designs in different spatial regions and time categories, character psychology, and the use of psychological details to create typical characters in the era's environment, with individual behaviors' choices corresponding to social upheavals, thereby showcasing folk customs. The changes in the environment drive the actions of the characters, causing their psychological changes after encountering spatial alterations, reflecting the changes in social structure and cultural structure of the late Qing Dynasty after it encountered modernity. The changes created by Li Jieren's writing constitute the unique characters of his literature and correspond to the late Qing society during the process of modernization. This vivid description of the social environment and character images embodies the literary historical value of *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*.

Keywords: *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*; Li Jieren, Modernity.

1. Introduction

Since the late Qing Dynasty, foreign cultures, along with colonial aggression, entered China's rural society. The traditional society was facing a situation of disintegration, and the society in western Sichuan, which was far inland, also underwent drastic changes. Li Jieren created the Chinese roman-fleuve, using the literary form of novels to record and create stories rooted in that era, presenting signs of modernity in China. Through the study of *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*, one can find the manifestations and influences of modernity in the early emergence of modern Sichuan society in the late Qing Dynasty, which is of supplementary significance for understanding the occurrence and development of modernity in Chinese society.

In 1936, the first part of the Chinese roman-fleuve, *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*, was first published by Zhonghua Book Company. Due to the limitations of the war conditions, it did not attract much attention at the time of its initial publication. It was not until the 1980s that the academic community in China began to pay more attention to it. Just one year after the initial publication of *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*, Guo Moruo compared it to Zola and lamented the low attention its works received, Li truly has the demeanor of a master, his writing is free and unrestrained, the depiction of the era and the environment is realistic. However, no one in the Chinese literary circle has mentioned this novel. This is truly an extraordinary event. [1]. Later researcher Song Jianhua proposed two reasons for its being obscured in his study of *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*. One was the insufficiency of enlightenment and revolutionary discourses in the novel, and the other was the influence of the national crisis history context in the mid-1930s on the aesthetic and acceptance of this novel by the Chinese people. This study combines the historical context of the novel's content and conducts a textual analysis from a modern perspective on *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*. It explores its modern aesthetic characteristics from three dimensions: the spatial scope where the story takes place, the social identities of the typical characters, and the personality strength of the core female character. This is conducive to uncovering Li Jieren's ideological treasure trove left for the history of modern Chinese literature.

2. The Modernity Impact on Spatial Migration

Li Jieren's novels adopt the writing style of the roman-fleuve of France. The description of scenery" in them reflects the modernity of modern vernacular fiction language. Through the contrast of space and the meticulous depiction of minute details, it presents the impact of modernity on traditional Chinese society and "opens up a new space for cultural criticism [2, 3]. Moreover, he creates a narrative that combines the generic possibilities of historical fiction (lishi xiaoshuo) and the novel of manners (shehui xiaoshuo) to recreate the social, material and affective life of the fin de siècle." "The narrative measures, enumerates and records with an insistently ethnographic eye [4]. Furthermore, by borrowing this folk narrative method, *Ripples Across Stagnant Water* is presented as a 'longitudinal conversation' to be 'displayed' [5].

Urban development is an important part of China's social modernization process. Li Jieren chose the town as the core of his narrative, which reflected his perception of Chinese society as being quietly changing yet leaving its mark. As he stated in his book, this peaceful ancient city, like stagnant water, although it is also slightly disturbed by the gentle breeze on the surface, still remains calm beneath the surface... And the news spreads slowly, so the hearts of people everywhere remain like stagnant water beneath the waves, without any movement. Without movement, it merely means that there is no major movement that reaches the bottom of the water, but there is still a slight movement on the surface waves, which is present [6].

"Ripples" is an image-based description of the way water flows, which can be visualized between the countryside, Tianhui Town, and Chengdu. Tianhui Town is an important setting for the story in *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*. Li Jieren traced the cause and effect in a flashback manner, weakening the causal relationship of the ripples and emphasizing the process of the ripples. The novel begins with "I" as the narrator, a person who grew up in Chengdu and enjoys the fruits of modernization, going to the countryside of rural area for a short stay based on the folk customs. The waves of modernization encounter a modern woman with extraordinary qualities, Deng Yaojie, for "I". Thus, Li Jieren links the narration of her "amazement" with the geographical space orientation of the novel. He shifted the narrative perspective back to Chengdu, advancing twenty miles from Chengdu to Xindu to Tianhui Town. He narrated the formation process of a modern woman in a gentle and flowing manner.

Centered on Tianhui Town, the material differences between the urban and rural areas reflect the spiritual and physical conflicts caused by modernity. Li Jieren used the words of two Chengdu residents, Mr. Han’s second wife and Mrs. Deng, who had experienced modernity and were from different social classes, to present their understanding and attitudes towards the differences between the city and the countryside. Mr. Han’s second wife, who came from a wealthy family, depicted an urban area with abundant food, clothing, and daily necessities. Her homesickness was conveyed to Deng Yaogu through the context of material abundance and extravagant consumption, allowing her to fantasize about the life of the wealthy. In contrast, Mrs. Deng, who came from a poor background, described the hunger and poverty of the urban poor. "Marriage" is not only an important part of folk customs but also a key link in the modernization process of Chinese society. The far-marriage of Mr.Han’s second wife and Mrs. Deng is a manifestation of the infiltration of modernity forces into Chinese society.

Tianhui Town is a microcosm of the transitional interface in China's social modernization process. It does not indulge in the material extravagance and estrangement of cities, nor does it follow the unchanging traditions of rural areas. The marriage of Deng Yaogu and Cai Xingshun indicates that the forces of modernity do not encounter smooth sailing in the process of breaking through the rural society.

Xingshun Shop is an old store in Tianhui Town that has been operating for fifty years. It is also a family that sustains itself through small-scale handicrafts. Li Jieren described in his book that Xingshun Shop had a complete range of goods, and its spiritual connection with Chengdu was reflected in the novelty and uniqueness of the goods it sold. The shop sells famous liquors from various parts of Sichuan Province, such as Mianzhu Daqu, Ziyang Chense, and Baisha Baijiu. The

spiritual connection between Xingshun Shop and the village was demonstrated when Deng Yaogu married into Cai's family and renovated Xingshun Shop, following the customs of the villagers and renovating the interior environment and layout of the shop.

The comparison of the facilities within the space and the way of people's life shows the influence of modernity in different social living environments. In Chengdu and rural area, the internal design of the houses is different from Xingshun Shop, and the atmosphere of the space also creates different living feelings for the people living here. The charm of Chengdu, which has modernity, is not attractive to everyone. Gu zhaodi was sold to the Hao Mansion on Shuwa Street. However, she did not like this "blessed place". The experience of the outsider Gu Zhaodi of integrating into Chengdu as "Chunxiu" shows the difficulties and pains of the transformation of the rural area into a city during the process of modernization. Firstly, the family group cannot move into the city simultaneously with individuals. The pain of the outsider's thoughts can only be digested by oneself. At the same time, outsiders have to follow the urban living norms on the dark side of modernity to survive. Secondly, the size of the living space in the city and the rural area is completely different. Modernity has marked differences in the space, and urban space has become the space enjoyed by the privileged class. Thirdly, the pace of life of the outsiders is influenced by the lifestyle of modernity. They also have to integrate into it. The process of the city embracing modernity is also a process that requires some people to give up and sacrifice their natural nature.

Compared to Chengdu and Tianhui Town, the descriptions of the scenery in rural area are relatively few. In *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*, the display of rural area is shown through Mrs. Gu and Deng Yaogu's lifestyles. Mrs. Gu upgraded the feud she had with Mrs. Zhong due to a chicken incident. Eventually, because she was reluctant to spend money on medicine and the chicken caused her illness to worsen, she died. Deng Yaogu wore small shoes, did needlework, and the behavior of warming the stove in winter also vividly depicted the lifestyle of the women in rural area. The concrete presentation of these rural area customs shows the chaotic yet peaceful state of the peasant society in rural area before modernity infected it.

3. The Inevitable Formation of the Religious Identity in Modernity

The influence of religious forces is one of the focuses in Li Jieren's exploration of the manifestation of modernity in China. It corresponds to the *Ripples Across Stagnant Water's* social phenomenon. At the same time, the author reflects on the obscure and unclear beliefs of the folk society before the revolution. It was precisely these beliefs that made people's hearts seem like stagnant water without movement. Here, it embodies the author's hope for spiritual revival [7].

Gu Tiancheng focused his reflection because he was a representative figure emerging after Western religious forces invaded the cultural soil of China. At the same time, the struggle between the paoge forces (a reactionary gang in southwest China before liberation) and the church forces provided the core driving force for the advancement of the novel's plot [8].

Gu Tiancheng's identity underwent a transformation from a tenant farmer to a religious adherent. This was both a historical inevitability in the process of late Qing society's acceptance of western culture, and also a result of the inherent character necessity of the "landlord image" as the opposite of "the character of 'Ah Q'" in Lu Xun's works, during the urbanization process. Liu Sanjin, who had a conflict with Gu Tiancheng at the casino, vividly described Gu Tiancheng's personality, "being rustic, detached from reality, arrogant, timid, and lacking in insight... fond of prostitution, willing to spend money... not very skilled at prostitution, and prone to being easily obsessed" [6]. Finally, Deng Yaogu, who married Gu Tiancheng, summarized Gu Tiancheng's character through examples, stating that he was ignorant, "able to be embarrassed by Luo Waizui, able to misled by Liu Sanjin, able to listen to Lu Maolin's instructions, able to join church in order to avenge... able to fall in love with me at this time, as long as I agree to marry him, even everything is agreed upon, even everything is willing to sign with paper and ink. I'm sure he won't dare to go back on his word!" [6].

The depictions of Liu Sanjin and Deng Yaogu are able to reflect Gu Tiancheng's multi-faceted personality. It stems from the mindset of relying on agricultural income and represent the manifestation of farmers' pursuit of modernity. Gu Tiancheng is a representative of the group that grasps a large amount of land resources. Such people are driven by interests and are willing to act as "disobedient sons" in traditional society to achieve their goals. However, they are different from the "disobedient sons" in the New Culture Movement. Although they have been influenced by Western culture, they still have a set of calculations that satisfy personal desires but are not shrewd.

Gu Tiancheng's original accounting system was based on the idea of using land as capital to exchange for official positions and career advancement. From a farmer to an official, the acquisition of power was rooted in the small-farmer's aspiration for rapid success. However, halfway through, his physical desires took precedence, and he desired to marry a concubine and had children to keep the family line alive. This is also an expression of the small-farmer's mindset. As a result, due to his ignorance and trust in others casually, he lost both his concubine and his money, and ultimately, his dreams of achieving success in his career and having descendants were shattered.

In Anthony Giddens's book, *The Consequences of Modernity*, he asked, "Is modernity a Westernization project?" [9]. If the result of Gu Tiancheng's transformation from a peasant farmer to a church member is the outcome of a Westernization project, then this achievement is not entirely the result of Gu Tiancheng passively accepting the church culture. His purpose of joining the church and his actions did not carry a Westernized flavor; instead, they possessed characteristics of Chinese culture. The reason Gu Tiancheng contacted with the church was that his gambling business failed, and his dreams of a successful career and family reproduction were both shattered. He needed a group that could help him to resist the power of the gangsters. His patriarchal clan could only throw one's weight at home and could not have a deterrent effect on the gangsters in the society. The government forces were completely opposed to the gangsters, and it was impossible for the government to mobilize soldiers to help Gu Tiancheng gain "justice" in the gambling business. Therefore, Gu Tiancheng turned to the Western forces for help, and the entry point was to join the church for assistance.

The acceptance of Western culture and religion by the Chinese people requires a gradual process, which is accompanied by confusion and fear towards foreign cultures. Eventually, driven by their own interests, they come to accept it. Gu Tiancheng's process of becoming a believer also went through several twists and turns. First, Gu Tiancheng met the believers through the familiar social circle in the countryside. However, when he first met Mrs. Zeng working in a church, he did not immediately convert. This was because at that time, he did not have sufficient motivation to convert. The economic losses caused by the failure of the casino were not enough to make him violate the ancestral teachings of the solid rural society.

The second driving force that led Gu Tiancheng to convert to Christianity was the disappearance of Gu Zhaodi. The selfishness and greed in human nature made Gu Tiancheng tease a lady who pressed close to Luo Waizui, hoping to achieve the thrill because he hated Luo Waizui. However, this behavior caused the conflict, and a clash between the two groups caused Gu Zhaodi, who had followed him into the city, to be pushed aside crowd and lost. As a result, Gu Tiancheng fell seriously ill. In the late Qing Dynasty, Chinese people often held a terrified attitude towards Westerners and western culture, and western medicine was also an object of exclusion. When Gu Tiancheng was on the verge of death, western medicine showed its power, so that Gu Tiancheng realized that the social power of westerners could help him avenge and find Gu Zhaodi.

Gu Tiancheng's transformation from a farmer to a religious adherent represents a modernization of the common people's identity. However, his psychology is still shaped by traditional Chinese rural civilization and would not undergo drastic changes due to the intrusion of religious culture. The change in his identity is both an accidental fluctuation in his personal life and a result of historical inevitability. In late Qing Dynasty, faith within the church becomes a means for becoming an official and gaining power, and also a way for ordinary people to rise to the ranks of the elite.

4. The Modernity of a Rural Woman

Deng Yaogu is the central character in *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*, and she is also the most modernized character in the work, highlighting the rebellious significance of "modernity". When Mr. Deng evaluated his daughter's three marriages, he said "The world has changed", which shows the historical significance of Deng Yaogu's threefold identity transformation in the late Qing Dynasty. This fate trajectory reflects the desire of the late Qing society to move towards modernity, to break free from the constraints of old ideas and set new standards, Li cannot ignore historical time, the crucial teleology in modern Chinese literary thought that provides the moral and developmental justifications for modern Chinese societies [10].

The name "Deng Yaogu" encompasses three distinct circumstances. Through subtle changes in her body and language, she has created a persistent space for resistance within the cracks of the system, highlighting the significance of modernity [11]. The first circumstance is that she is a daughter of the Deng family. The second circumstance is that she is Mrs. Cai. The third circumstance is that she is the second wife of Gu Tiancheng. In the first circumstance, Deng Yaogu received enlightenment on the differences between the countryside and the city from Mr. Han’s second wife, the teacher of material ideology, and thus developed the idea of moving from the countryside to the city. In the second circumstance, Mrs.Cai chose Tianhui Town as a compromise during the process of moving from the countryside to the city, obtaining both material satisfaction and spiritual pleasure. In the third circumstance, Mrs. Gu, is the one who holds the dominant position and controls her own destiny, as Deng Yaogu has achieved self-empowerment.

Dun Yaogu's domineering behavior reflects the spirit of modernity. She was restless with the old ways and constantly broke through the constraints of traditional society. Her modernity was not a result of being influenced by western spiritual culture, but grew from within Chinese society. Firstly, she had a strong sense of self-shaping regarding her own body. She insisted on making small feet in childhood that symbolized urban identity, and her words also learned from the city, having the courage to discuss national affairs. The modernity that grew on her was a force inherent in Chinese society in its modernity, with initiative and spontaneity. Secondly, Dun Yaogu was someone who dared to overturn conventional rules. Although she married Cai Xingshun, she was able to maneuver between Luo Waizui and Cai Xingshun, manipulating the marital and extra-marital emotions, and attracting the admiration of the secular society. This demonstrated the simple folk customs of the western Sichuan region, as well as the loosening of the solid cultural structure in the late Qing society under the impact of modernity. Thirdly, Deng Yaogu was someone who dared to plan her destiny. The novel ingeniously combined the omniscient perspective with the limited knowledge narrative perspective, depicting that the prerequisite for Deng Yaogu's marriage to Gu Tiancheng was that the latter met her needs in society, family, and individual aspects, bringing together the forces of the foreign church, the clan, and the commercial forces to bow to her [12]. The government released Cai Xingshun, Gu Tiancheng paid to repair Cai Xingshun's shop, and left Deng Yaogu the right to keep in touch with males outside of her marriage. All of those broke the logical restraint of the Confucian theory that the husband should be the head of the family.

However, the modernizing force represented by Deng Yaogu was limited. This is manifested in the fact that when she had to contend with the vast traditional social forces and western powers, she inevitably lost the battle. This is an inevitable outcome caused by the small size of the group. She was unable to confront the government and the foreign religious forces head-on. Nevertheless, the modernizing force that she represented is flexible and adaptable. While maintaining her own independence, she has the power to influence the foreign religious forces. Although she is arrogant, she could also be humble and flexible. This adaptive power gives rise to a new force that could engage in discussions with the government and the foreign religious forces.

5. Conclusion

Ripples Across Stagnant Water possesses the historical and literary value of urban and rural areas, embodies modern aesthetic consciousness, and represents an eternal aesthetic resulting from tradition transformation that has long existed into a transient and internal aesthetic due to varied changes.

As the first part of Li Jieren's Chinese roman-fleuve embodies the new novelistic spirit advocated by Liang Qichao, it possesses a modernist spirit in terms of aesthetic significance. This is not only reflected in the layout length of the long novel, which can influence the readers' feelings and reflect the era atmosphere of the late Qing Dynasty's transformation, but also in the differences and connections of the internal spatial layout that can make people immerse themselves, as well as in the deeply touching portrayal of Gu Tiancheng and other traditional farmers, and in the response-inviting significance of the modernist spiritual power represented by Deng Yaogu, which is summoned in the Chinese late Qing society and modern literature. Her image leads readers to come to Rong Province to witness the historical flow in the midst of the changes in the late Qing Dynasty. This study's in-depth analysis of the spatial environment, cultural forces, and female images is conducive to exploring the modernist connotation of *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*, and future research can focus on independent research content and enrich the historical and cultural details for in-depth study.

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