A Tragic Analysis of Border Town by Shen Congwen

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Abstract. *Border Town* is widely regarded as an idyllic utopia, yet it harbors profound modern tragic elements, a subject of scholarly debate. This paper explores its tragic formation mechanism by integrating Western Hunan's historical and cultural context, defining the fundamental features of its atypical tragedy: non-conflictual form, a structure without clear culprits, and an ending of "unfinished possibility". It further analyzes that emotional, eventful and concluding contingency act as superficial tragic triggers, while the era's denial of free love, characters' cognitive limitations and the structural predicament of transitional society constitute the inherent inevitable driving forces. The tragedy is essentially that of traditional pastoral civilization in historical transformation, reflecting the era's predicament in individual emotional fates. This study offers a new perspective for understanding the work's literary and ideological depth.

Keywords: *Border Town*, Shen Congwen, Tragic.

1. Introduction

Since its publication, Shen Congwen's Border Town has occupied a unique position in modern Chinese literature, its distinctive literary qualities widely acclaimed. Set against the pastoral scenery of Chadong in western Hunan, the novel meticulously depicts the daily lives, local customs, and minute details of the ferry residents, crafting a poetic world detached from the clamor of modern civilization. Within this setting, the villagers' innate simplicity and genuine emotions flow naturally. Consequently, this work is widely regarded as an embodiment of "beauty," "goodness," and "harmony," even becoming a symbol of an idealized pastoral utopia. Yet, when one looks beyond its aesthetic surface of poetic beauty, one can discern profound and enduring tragic elements within the narrative. It is precisely these elements that elevate Border Town beyond mere lyrical storytelling, endowing it with deeper intellectual significance [1].

The classification of Border Town as a tragedy has long been a subject of scholarly debate, with multiple perspectives proposed. One view argues that the work lacks the sharp conflicts and catastrophic conclusions typical of traditional tragedies. Since the characters' fates do not undergo drastic upheaval and the narrative maintains a consistently gentle and restrained tone, Border Town cannot be regarded as a tragic work. Another perspective, however, points out that the form of tragedy in modern literature has transcended traditional paradigms, manifesting more as a misalignment of fate, a loss of emotional resonance, and a suspension of meaning. Border Town is precisely a quintessential text of this modern transformation of tragedy [2].

Existing research has touched upon the tragic core of Border Town, yet further deepening and expansion remain possible in certain areas: First, most analyses remain confined to qualitative judgments about the conclusion, lacking a systematic dynamic analysis of the process by which tragedy unfolds; Second, discussions of the numerous "contingent factors" in the work often simplistically reduce them to plot coincidences, leaving room for further exploration of their core significance within the tragic structure. Third, insufficient attention has been paid to the intrinsic connection between the historical context of Western Hunan society and the formation of the tragedy, leaving scope for deeper examination of the roots of the tragedy.

Based on these observations, this paper examines the formation mechanism of tragedy. By integrating the historical backdrop and cultural characteristics of Western Hunan society, it first defines the fundamental features of the atypical tragedy in Border Town. It then analyzes the superficial manifestations of contingency within the tragedy. Finally, it delves into the underlying,

inevitable driving forces behind the tragedy's formation. This approach reveals how the work achieves profound tragic implications through its gentle and restrained narrative, offering a new perspective for understanding the literary value and ideological depth of Border Town.

2. The Fundamental Characteristics of the Atypical Tragedy in Border Town

The tragedy in Border Town does not stem from a single event or central conflict. Instead, it slowly unfolds within the flow of daily life and under the shadow of traditional ethical order, revealing modern characteristics distinct from traditional tragedy. Its uniqueness is primarily manifested in three aspects.

(1) Non-Conflictual Tragic Form

In Border Town, overt scenes of conflict are virtually absent, diverging from traditional tragedies that rely on stark oppositions between good and evil and intense struggles. For instance, in terms of plot, Cui Cui and Nuosong's love faces no explicit human obstruction, yet it continually slips away amidst silent probing and passive waiting; Though Tianbao and Nuosong face emotional choices, they consistently maintain brotherly deference and understanding, never engaging in direct competition. Such conflicts are not resolved but internalized as characters' emotional hesitation, delayed action, and time-consuming indecision. Beneath the surface of seemingly tranquil life, these elements accumulate steadily, ultimately steering the characters toward an irreversible tragic conclusion.

The profound nature of Border Town's non-conflictual tragic form aligns precisely with the core shift in modern tragic theory. Tragedy in the modern world no longer manifests as the heroic struggle against fate, but more commonly as the alienation of the individual from totalizing existence, the loss of meaning, and the futility of action (Lukács 1916) [3]. The tragedy in Shen Congwen's fiction is summarized as “a sense of loss within a lyrical structure” (Qian Liqun 2000). This type of tragedy is not driven by external conflict; its core lies precisely in characters quietly drifting toward an inevitable, fateful loss beneath the surface of harmonious existence [4].

(2) The Tragic Structure of No Clear Culprit

The profound tragedy of Border Town also lies in its construction of a narrative structure featuring “no clear culprit.” From the perspective of who bears responsibility for the tragedy, whether it be the innkeeper Shunshun, CuiCui's grandfather, Tianbao, or Nuosong, none harbored malicious intent. Everyone’s actions possessed rationality within their own circumstances and ethical norms. Yet the cumulative effect of these individually rational choices ultimately converges toward an irreversible tragic conclusion.

This narrative design resonates with Marxist tragedy theory, wherein tragedy's essence lies in “the tragic conflict between the historical necessity and the actual impossibility of its realization” (Engels, 1859) [5]. In Border Town, the “inevitable demands of history” can be understood as humanity's legitimate pursuit of natural, free love and the individual's yearning to realize life's value. The “impossibility of realization” stems from the resistance of Xiangxi's small-scale peasant society—a structure that, though warm and harmonious, is also closed and stagnant. It preserves simple ethics but lacks the flexibility to accommodate individual emotional autonomy or breakthroughs in destiny. The traditional patriarchal authority embodied by Shunshun, the unspoken marriage rules shaped by property and prestige, and the collective character of Xiangxi people—marked by restraint, passivity, and submissiveness—together weave an invisible web of constraints. Every character in the novel is a node within this social web, simultaneously bearing the weight of this structure and unconsciously sustaining its operation. Thus, this tragedy cannot be attributed to any single individual but must be ascribed to the historical limitations of the entire small-scale peasant society structure in Western Hunan.

(3) The Tragic Conclusion of “Unfinished Possibility”

The ending of Border Town stands out for its famously open-ended nature: “This man might never return, or he might come back ‘tomorrow’!” “This is not a conclusion in the traditional sense—neither

a happy ending of ‘completion’ nor a fatalistic” destruction, “but rather an eternal state of” pending. “Cui Cui's life is frozen in the waiting at the ferry crossing, her future entirely tied to an unknown, contingent return. This ending of” unfinished possibility" constitutes another core feature of the tragic artistry in Border Town.

From the perspective of tragic theory, this reflects modern literature's redefinition of the tragic conclusion. It aligns with existentialist philosophy's portrayal of the human condition: life possesses no pre-given meaning or inevitable outcome, but unfolds through waiting, choosing, and confronting uncertainty. Jean-Paul Sartre argued that humans are thrown into existence amid freedom and contingency, compelled to bear the responsibility of self-creation and the accompanying anxiety. The conclusion of Border Town captures this existential “suspension” through poetic narrative. Cui Cui's waiting is no longer a progression toward certain hope, but rather a state of existence—an eternal oscillation between faint hope and silent despair. The tragedy lies within this suspension itself. Whether Nuosong returns is merely a superficial contingency. At a deeper level, even if he does return, the chasms of time, past misunderstandings, and the shadow of death make it impossible for their feelings to truly “fulfill” themselves. Even if he does not return, waiting has become an inescapable definition of Cui Cui's life. The open ending effectively closes off all possibilities of “perfection.”

3. The Contingency of Tragedy in Border Town

The tragedy in Border Town was not predetermined from the outset but unfolded gradually through a series of contingent factors that triggered and propelled its progression. These contingencies are not meaningless plot coincidences but rather superficial catalysts deeply embedded within the tragic structure. Their contingency manifests primarily in three aspects.

(1) The Contingency of Emotion

In Border Town, the contingency of emotion stems primarily from its perpetually unformed, unconfirmed state—existing in a primal, pre-verbalized condition. Before being structured through explicit dialogue, promises, or social rituals, characters' emotions float in a fragile equilibrium dependent on context, timing, and tacit understanding. Their trajectory lacks inherent, stable certainty.

The bond between Cui Cui and Nuosong epitomizes this “undefined existence.” Their affection blossoms amidst the mountainous wilderness and ferry crossings of western Hunan, nourished by songs, glances, and shared imaginings, yet never confirmed or solidified through explicit verbal exchange. Both tacitly embraced a premodern, almost naturalistic view of love's growth, believing true feelings would ripen in time if left undisturbed. Yet they overlooked how this reliance on time and circumstance inherently carried immense risks of chance. This notion assumes an unchanging, accommodating external world where tacit understanding can withstand all disturbances. Yet when external conditions shift—such as Tianbao's marriage proposal or the old ferryman's inquiries—the emotional harmony built on silence and waiting becomes easily defocused and derailed [6].

Furthermore, in the relationships between Cui Cui, Tianbao, and Nuosong, the contingency of affection manifests as the coexistence and mutual interference of multiple “parallel possibilities.” Tianbao's affection for Cui Cui is equally sincere and justified. His emergence reveals the multifaceted possibilities of emotion before its institutionalization. These beautiful yet conflicting feelings, entangled in the absence of clear rules and personal resolve, directly intensify the uncertainty of the relationship and sow the crucial seeds for this tragic love story [7].

(2) The Contingency of Actions and Events

When confronted with emotional choices and ethical dilemmas, the novel's central characters consistently adopt attitudes of avoidance, procrastination, and “letting things take their natural course.” They never actively pursue clear-cut actions to clarify their relationships. This passive approach keeps emotional conflicts perpetually ambiguous, creating openings for chance events to intervene. Tianbao's departure and drowning epitomize this interplay of action and chance. He neither suffered a clear defeat in romantic competition nor faced direct rejection from Cuicui. Instead, he chose to leave passively at a moment when emotional trajectories remained unresolved and brotherly bonds

still held potential for reconciliation. His drowning was an accident—not an inevitable plot development—yet it irreversibly severed an emotional dynamic that had harbored multiple possibilities.

Far from resolving any emotional conflicts, Tianbao's death forced the suspension of relationships that could have been clarified through communication. Confronted with this fait accompli, the characters in the book lost their space for active choice, left only to passively endure the chain reaction. Nuosong's departure unfolded against this backdrop. While appearing as his own choice, it was fundamentally a passive retreat driven by guilt toward his elder brother, familial ethical pressures, and emotional uncertainty. Individual subjective choices lost meaning in the face of the unexpected; chance events supplanted personal agency, becoming the pivotal turning point that deepened the tragedy.

(3) The Contingency of the Conclusion

The contingency of the conclusion in Border Town is vividly manifested in the profound contradiction between the open-ended form of the ending and the inevitability of its fated direction. On the surface, whether Nuosong returns home and whether Cui Cui's long wait at the ferry brings the desired outcome seem entirely dependent on future, unpredictable changes. The work thus presents a uniquely open-ended and uncertain conclusion, serving as a distinctive expression of its tragic artistry. Yet a deeper analysis of the text reveals that behind this seemingly variable contingency lies an inescapable tragic inevitability. Contingency is merely the external manifestation of tragedy, incapable of altering its predetermined core.

Regardless of whether Nuosong ultimately embarks on his journey home, the love between Cui Cui and him can scarcely achieve true fulfillment: the relentless passage of time, the quiet shifts in their respective life circumstances, and the lingering regrets and barriers from the past have long since stripped their initial pure affection of the soil needed for growth, rendering it impossible for their relationship to return to its original form. Cui Cui's waiting is fundamentally a frozen state of existence. Bound by traditional constraints, she never actively seeks her own happiness, passively enduring fate's arrangements day after day at the ferry crossing. The accident of the ending merely dictated the specific form of the tragedy. Its core essence—the loss of love, the stagnation of life, the extinction of all future possibilities—had long been predetermined by the era's backdrop and the closed, rigid peasant society structure of western Hunan.

4. The Formation Process of the Tragedy in Border Town

If chance events serve as the superficial triggers of the tragedy in Border Town, then the underlying, inevitable forces hidden within the narrative continuously propel the tragedy forward over time, gradually steering the characters' destinies toward their predetermined conclusion. These deep-seated factors unfold primarily through the following three dimensions.

(1) A Love Denied by the Times

The love between Cui Cui and Nuosong, though sincere, pure, and born of nature, remained perpetually rejected by the times. This rejection stemmed not from malicious obstruction by others, but from the inherent structure of Xiangxi society and the traditional logic of marriage—a reality dictated by circumstance. In terms of social standing and economic circumstances, Nong Song's family owned a mill, making them a prosperous household in Chadong. This represented the relatively stable economic foundation and clear prospects for life characteristic of Western Hunan society. In contrast, Cui Cui and her grandmother relied solely on the ferry for their livelihood, belonging to the working class. They possessed no fixed assets and lacked the social resources or family backing that could translate into marital security. Though the text does not explicitly emphasize this class disparity, it creates an invisible barrier to marital possibility—a tangible obstacle within traditional marriage norms that cannot be overlooked.

More crucially, Cui Cui's values regarding love fundamentally diverged from the prevailing social norms of Western Hunan at the time. Raised amidst nature's landscapes far removed from worldly

calculations, nurtured by the simple ferry life, she possessed no conscious awareness of material wealth or social status. Her love was built purely upon mutual emotional resonance and spiritual connection. In contrast, traditional Xiangxi marriage logic remained firmly anchored in the practical consideration of matching social standing, heavily constrained by the ethical norms of parental decree and matchmaker's words. This profound value misalignment meant that Cui and Nuosong's love lacked any foundation for social recognition from the very beginning. It could only struggle to grow on the fringes of conventional norms, ultimately unable to escape the tragic fate of being swept away by the torrent of the times.

(2) The Tragedy of Thought and Perception

The emotional tragedy between Cui Cui and Nuosong primarily stems from the limitations of individual perception, shaped by prolonged confinement within a closed environment. Cui Cui's emotional understanding remained stuck at the level of intuitive sensation. While she keenly sensed Nuosong's affection, she lacked the ability to translate these feelings into clear self-judgment, let alone actively express her own choices. Faced with Nuosong's tentative advances, she consistently responded with bashful evasion; confronted by her grandfather's inquiries, she maintained silence throughout, entrusting the course of her emotions entirely to others' initiative and the passage of time [8] [9].

Nuosong also exhibited similar cognitive limitations in handling his feelings. His affection for Cuicui was conveyed more through hints and actions than direct words, lacking the courage to actively pursue her or the awareness to communicate clearly. When his brother died unexpectedly and their feelings faced ethical opposition, he did not attempt to bridge the gap through explanation or persistence. Instead, he chose to leave—a retreat born of guilt, ethical constraints, and unfulfilled emotions. With both parties failing to articulate their feelings clearly, the relationship remained perpetually suspended. Misunderstandings deepened, ultimately leading what could have been a fulfilling connection to its end in silence and hesitation. This cognitive limitation fundamentally reflects the lack of self-awareness and proactive agency within a closed environment, serving as an internal foreshadowing of the tragedy to come.

(3) The Tragedy of the Era

The deepest roots of the tragedy in Border Town lie in the inherent limitations and contradictions of the era's structure itself. The world of western Hunan depicted in the novel superficially maintains a stable and gentle ethical order, yet it has reached the end of its pastoral civilization. It faces the faint penetration of modern civilization and the self-imposed rigidity of the traditional order. Traditional patriarchal authority, embodied by Shunshun, still wields control over marriage and daily life, steadfastly upholding conventional ethical norms and survival logic. Yet the younger generation, represented by Cuicui and Nuosong, has begun to develop an awareness of personal choice in matters of the heart, yearning to break free from traditional constraints and pursue love freely. These two forces do not clash directly, but their structural misalignment leaves the younger generation's emotional aspirations without fertile ground for realization.

In this era, individuals found themselves trapped in an inescapable value dilemma. Traditional society emphasized obedience and restraint, lacking flexible mechanisms to navigate complex emotional relationships and thus unable to provide space for free love to flourish. Meanwhile, modern concepts like proactive expression and individual rights had not yet truly penetrated the rural society of Western Hunan, failing to offer characters new solutions. Unable to fully rely on the old order for self-realization yet powerless to rewrite their destinies through new means, individuals stagnate passively between these two value systems. Thus, the tragedy of Border Town stems not from a single accidental misstep, but from the inevitable failure of a transitional social structure to provide viable paths for human emotions and lives—a microcosm of pastoral civilization's demise amid historical upheaval.

The tragedy of Border Town exists not in a single dimension but as a complex interweaving of superficial contingency and underlying inevitability. Through its non-conflictual form, structure devoid of clear agents of responsibility, and conclusion marked by “unfinished possibility,” the work

transcends traditional tragic narrative paradigms, constructing a poetic tragedy imbued with modern literary qualities. The uncertainty of emotions, the suddenness of events, and the openness of the conclusion form the surface triggers of the tragedy. Meanwhile, the limitations of individual cognition, the misalignment between the value of love and the era, and the structural predicaments of a society in transition collectively constitute the inevitable driving forces of the tragedy. The interaction between these two layers allows the tragedy to slowly take shape within a gentle and restrained narrative.

Through his delicate portrayal of the tragic love story between Cui Cui and Nuosong, Shen Congwen not only reveals the beauty of humanity and the pastoral poetry of the Xiangxi world, but also profoundly exposes the temporal limitations of pastoral civilization. The tragedy of Border Town is fundamentally the tragedy of traditional civilization during a period of historical transformation—when old social structures and ethical orders fail to respond to individual emotional needs, and when new values have not yet developed sufficient enlightening power, individual destinies can only drift passively in the cracks of the times Cui Cui's waiting is not merely the regret of personal love, but also the collective melancholy of a generation unable to grasp their own destiny amid historical change.

Thus, the tragedy of Border Town does not stem from explicit evil or direct conflict, but is rooted in the historical context, reflecting the inherent contradictions faced by traditional pastoral civilization during a period of historical transformation. Through restrained and subtle narrative techniques, Shen Congwen internalizes this era's predicament into the emotional tragedy of his characters, allowing the work's tragic quality to unfold within its calm and measured storytelling.

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