

Spiritual Dialogue Across Time and Space: Study on Connotative Genealogy and Modernity Writing of Northeast Chinese Literature

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Abstract

Northeast Chinese literature is a distinctive literary category in modern and contemporary Chinese literature that embodies both regional characteristics and transcendent values. In its developmental context, the two core concepts of "Northeast Chinese literature" and "New Northeast Chinese literature" form a pattern of discontinuous continuity. From the perspective of conceptual history, this paper sorts out the generative logic of the two generations of Northeast Chinese literature, analyzes their spiritual dialogue relationship centered on "nostalgia" as the core motif and connected implicitly by modernist aesthetics. Meanwhile, it unearths the literary practices obscured by the mainstream literary history and restores the diverse and composite historical features of Northeast Chinese literature. On this basis, the paper further expounds the spiritual expansion of Northeast Chinese literature in the three dimensions of rural society, history and human nature, reveals its aesthetic transcendence path from regional writing to the exploration of universal human nature, and highlights the persistent inquiry of Northeast Chinese literature into individual destinies and the national spirit in the process of China's modernization.

Keywords

Northeast Chinese literature, connotative genealogy, nostalgia motif, modernist aesthetics, regional writing.

1. Introduction

From the perspective of the application of concepts in literary history, there are only two academically recognized concepts with stable connotations related to Northeast China in the modern and contemporary Chinese literary system: "Northeast Chinese literature" and "New Northeast Chinese literature", with no transitional or successive intermediate concepts or school designations between them.

This unique conceptual pattern reflects the extraordinary naming logic of "Northeast Chinese literature". It is not a literary category retroactively defined by administrative divisions or geographical and cultural differences, nor a school classification marked by cultural positions and aesthetic tastes like the Beijing School and the Shanghai School, but a special literary category endowed with a spiritual core in the historical context of national salvation and exile resistance. As the first literary concept named after a region and bearing great historical spirit in the history of modern Chinese literature, its emergence also provided a naming paradigm and reference experience for the designations of regional literature such as the Shanxi Rural Realist School and the Shaanxi Writer Group in later periods. Since the rise of the exiled writer group in the 1930s, Northeast China has no longer been merely a geographical indicator, but a symbolic field carrying national trauma, class mobilization and modernity anxiety. It is this symbolic power transcending regions that has endowed "Northeast Chinese literature" with sustained conceptual vitality, which was reactivated by "New Northeast Chinese literature" in

the 21st century, forming a pattern of discontinuous continuity with two peaks confronting each other and echoing from afar.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. The Composite Cultural Connotations of Northeast Chinese Literature: Transcending the Identity of Local Writers and Indigenous Themes

In 1935, Hu Feng first mentioned the regional writing characteristics of Northeast Chinese literature in the Postscript to Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life and Death*, pointing out that what her works presented was "only a remote village near Harbin, and it is the initial stage of awakening, yet here are the real suffering Chinese peasants, the real wild rise up". [1] In the following year, Hu Feng formally used the concept of "Northeast Chinese literature" for the first time in the Preface to *Spirits of the Mountains* and defined its connotation: "Our Northeast Chinese literature has grown up under the iron heel of the enemy. Its content is national, its form is national, and its spirit is national. It is a banner of our national liberation struggle, a bugle call of our national liberation struggle." [2] More notably, in this preface, Hu Feng revealed how Northeast Chinese literature "opened up the connection inside and outside the nation and formed a new discursive space for left-wing cultural politics between national discourse and class discourse" through the "metonymy from the literature of the weak nations in East Asia to Northeast Chinese literature". [2] This theoretical positioning made Northeast Chinese literature transcend pure regional writing from the very beginning and become a hub connecting the international left-wing perspective with the local national salvation practice.

During this period, Northeast Chinese writers such as Xiao Hong, Xiao Jun, Shu Qun, Bai Lang and Duanmu Liangliang exiled to Shanghai and received the support and recommendation of leading figures in the left-wing literary circle such as Lu Xun and Hu Feng, and their creations became the forerunner of anti-Japanese literature. Lu Xun personally wrote a preface to *Village in August*, stating that it "shows a part and the whole of China, the present and the future, the road to death and the road to life"; he highly praised *The Field of Life and Death* for depicting "the northern people's perseverance in life and struggle against death with profound insight". [3] It is worth noting that at this time, "Northeast Chinese literature" had formed a specific conceptual connotation—it specifically referred to the creations of writers exiled to the pass, with left-wing tendencies and focusing on anti-Japanese writing or nostalgia expression, rather than generally referring to all works of local writers in Northeast China.

In September 1936, *Recent Works by Northeast Writers* published by Huiwenge Bookstore further strengthened the group cognition of the "Northeast Writer Group". In 1946, Lan Hai (Tian Zhongji) devoted a special section to the Northeast Writer Group in *A History of Chinese Anti-Japanese War Literature and Art*, incorporating it into the anti-Japanese war literary and artistic system. In 1951, Wang Yao set up a special section of "Northeast Writer Group" in Chapter 8 of *Draft History of New Chinese Literature*, marking the official entry of Northeast Chinese literature into the disciplinary system of modern literature. After the 1980s, some scholars began to include Northeast-born non-exiled writers such as Mu Mutian and Yang Hui into the category of the "Northeast Writer Group" in the construction of regional literary history, which is a later expansion of the academic concept rather than the historical reality of the 1930s and 1940s.

Scholar Liu Xiaoli summarized this as follows: "Northeast Chinese literature" was not a simple regional label from its emergence, but the forerunner of Chinese anti-Japanese literature, a concept connecting nationalist literature, left-wing literature and rural literature at the same time, providing a method and dimension for understanding the Chinese spirit and Chinese

new literature at that time. We even cannot understand the Chinese new literature of the 1930s without the concept of Northeast Chinese literature. [4]

2.2. The Conceptual Evolution of New Northeast Chinese Literature and the Spiritual and Aesthetic Dialogue between the Two Generations of Northeast Chinese Literature

Entering the second decade of the 21st century, the rise of "New Northeast Chinese literature" represented by young writers such as Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu and Zheng zhi constituted the reappearance and paradigm expansion of the Northeast Chinese literary tradition in the contemporary era. Different from "Northeast Chinese literature" which had a clear conceptual connotation from its emergence in the 1930s, the proposal of "New Northeast Chinese literature" experienced an evolutionary process from a regional literary designation to conceptual formation. However, beneath the differences in their generative paths, they share a profound spiritual connection-both take "nostalgia" as the enduring motif and modernist aesthetics as the implicit link, completing a continuous dialogue on the predicament of modernity in their respective historical contexts. This dialogue not only confirms that the core value of Northeast Chinese literature has never been limited to the region itself, but also lies in its eternal inquiry into the spiritual predicament of the times and human beings.

The conceptual formation of the New Northeast Writer Group clearly presents a gradual evolutionary trajectory from regional literary designation to academic concept formation, which is in sharp contrast to the generative logic of the old Northeast Writer Group that "bore a composite spiritual mission once proposed". Around 2018, writers such as Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu and Zheng zhi entered the public and critical vision with their creations focusing on the Tiexi Industrial Zone in Shenyang, and were initially dubbed the "Three Swordsmen of Tiexi". This designation was entirely based on geographical space, growth background and writing objects, a typical regional marker, only referring to the writing of Northeast-born writers on the local industrial ruins and the lives of their fathers, and had not yet formed a literary concept with theoretical core and literary historical significance. It was not until scholar Huang Ping formally put forward the academic designation in *An Outline of the New Northeast Writer Group* and clearly pointed out that "New Northeast literature and art is not local literature and art, but the universal working-class nostalgia in local nostalgia" that this concept completed the transformation from a regional label to a theoretical category. Different from the Northeast Writer Group of the 1930s, which was jointly recognized by history and the literary circle in the national crisis and naturally carried spiritual cores such as exile, national salvation and resistance, the concept of the New Northeast Writer Group is post-hoc and constructive: there were first creative practices based on regional experience, then theoretical naming and connotation empowerment by the critical circle, and finally it transcended local narrative and became a spiritual sample reflecting the pains of China's post-industrial social transformation. Huang Ping further emphasized that "the New Northeast Writer Group does not ultimately refer to a group of Northeast-born writers, but a new realist writer group that absorbs the resources of modernist literature".[5] This statement also confirms the non-spontaneity and theoretical constructiveness of its conceptual formation, forming a fundamental difference from the naming logic of the old Northeast Writer Group which was "generated on the spot and endowed by history".

Despite the distinct generative logics, the two generations of Northeast Chinese literature have formed a hidden echo on the core motif of "nostalgia", and the connotation and direction of nostalgia show essential differences due to the different historical contexts, which has become a key entry point for understanding their spiritual genealogy. The nostalgia of the Northeast Writer Group in the 1930s was a homeland nostalgia against the background of national subjugation, an emotional expression born from the life experience of exiled writers

who lost their homeland and became "conquered people". Pang Zengyu pointed out in *The Lament of Exiles: On the Northeast Writer Group of the 1930s* that the nostalgia of Northeast writers "takes the loss of homeland as the background and national salvation as the direction, a combination of longing for home and the pain of the nation". [6] This nostalgia is closely attached to the land of Northeast China trampled by the Japanese invaders, connecting the longing for home, the grief and indignation at the loss of the country, and is deeply bound to the national mission of anti-Japanese national salvation. Nostalgia is resistance, and returning home is national salvation. Its essence is the dual pursuit of national subjectivity, land sovereignty and spiritual home. Duanmu Hongliang poured out in *Oath to the Land* with passionate language: "I hear her calling my name all the time, I hear her summoning me back all the time", which is a typical expression of this homeland nostalgia. The nostalgia of the New Northeast Writer Group, as accurately defined by Huang Ping, is the "universal working-class nostalgia hidden in local nostalgia". This nostalgia no longer points to the subjugation of the country and the occupation of the physical home, but to the dissipation of the unit system community, the loss of the working-class identity and the disintegration of the dignity of the fathers after the end of the planned economic system and the decline of industrial civilization. As the "post-generation" of laid-off workers, the New Northeast writers look back at the era of their fathers from the perspective of latecomers. Their nostalgia is a mourning for the lost collective memory, stable living order and spiritual belonging, a spiritual weightlessness of individuals facing historical fractures in the post-industrial society. The intergenerational perspective determines the retrospective and indirect nature of their nostalgia, which transcends the limitations of the Northeast region and becomes a universal spiritual predicament of ordinary people facing the transformation of the times in the era of globalization. The nostalgia of the older generation is the "pain of losing the land", an outward struggle and redemption; the nostalgia of the new generation is the "confusion of losing the root", an inward looking back and inquiry. The two kinds of nostalgia jointly construct the emotional background of Northeast Chinese literature spanning nearly a century.

At the level of aesthetic expression, both generations of Northeast Chinese literature implicitly contain modernist artistic genes, but due to the different spiritual cores, they present a distinct division between existential modernity and memorial modernity, which is also an important embodiment of Northeast Chinese literature transcending regional writing and possessing artistic depth. For a long time, the old Northeast Writer Group has been defined as the representative of anti-Japanese realism, but its artistic practice contains neglected modernist characteristics. Lu Xun commented in the Preface to *The Field of Life and Death* that Xiao Hong's writing "excels in narration over depiction, and depiction over lyricism". Her non-linear narrative and intuitive writing style of life itself broke the framework of traditional realistic novels. In her research on *The Field of Life and Death*, Zhang Li pointed out that Xiao Hong "carried out writing with the concept of life rather than the general aesthetic concept", and the presentation of the cycle of life and death and the absurdity of existence in her works implied an existential modernist core. [7] Xiao Hong wrote in *The Field of Life and Death* that "humans, like animals, are busy living and busy dying", piercing the essence of existence with minimal language. This direct presentation of the tragedy of life is the core characteristic of modernist literature. Duanmu Hongliang wrote about the land of Northeast China with a powerful symbolic system, combining rural narrative with lyrical epic, which also broke the single framework of realism. The modernism of the old Northeast writers originated from the sense of fragmentation of existence, an artistic capture of the absurdity of the world and the essence of existence after the national crisis and the violent trampling of life, serving the spiritual core of life awakening and national resistance. The modernism of the New Northeast Writer Group is a conscious and mature artistic choice—the cold and restrained narrative tone, the plot treatment with blank space, the black humorous language style and the

allegorical fate of characters constitute its iconic aesthetic characteristics. Wang Dewei commented on Shuang Xuetao's creation that he wrote the trauma of the times with the "allegory of Yanfen Street".[8] Ban Yu outlined the marginal people in the industrial ruins with the aesthetics of short sentences in *Winter Swimming*, and Zheng zhi touched the hidden pain of the times in his writing with a sense of fate. This modernism originated from the sense of fragmentation of history, a spiritual confusion presented in artistic form by the post-generation when facing the irrecoverable memories of their fathers and the irreparable historical fractures. The modernist aesthetics of the two, one rooted in the existential experience of life and death on the spot, the other relying on the memory reconstruction of intergenerational looking back, jointly contributed to the characteristics of Northeast Chinese literature with both realistic power and artistic height.

From conceptual formation to spiritual motif and then to aesthetic expression, the New Northeast Writer Group and the Northeast Writer Group of the 1930s have completed a spiritual dialogue across time and space. Both have broken away from the shackles of pure regional literature, and based on their respective era experiences, written about the spiritual predicament of the Chinese people in the process of modernization: the older generation of Northeast writers completed the awakening and resistance of existence in national salvation, and the new generation of Northeast writers explored the spiritual belonging and redemption in the post-industrial transformation. Northeast China has always been only the carrier of literature, not the end of literature. The two generations of writers have jointly proved that the real value of Northeast Chinese literature lies in its consistent writing of individual destinies under the great times, national memories and the common spiritual confusion of human beings in the most sharp and sincere way, which is also the core reason why Northeast Chinese literature can transcend the times and always possess research value.

2.3. Unincorporated Historical Practices: The Obscured Stages and Untapped Space of Northeast Chinese Literature

Beyond the core conceptual framework formed by "Northeast Chinese literature" and "New Northeast Chinese literature", there are still a large number of literary practices that have taken place but not received sufficient attention from the mainstream literary history in the centennial development context of Northeast Chinese literature. These real but long marginalized creations are not blank spaces in literary history, but important links obscured by the discourses of the times, naming logic and research perspectives, jointly constituting an academic space that can be deeply explored in the study of Northeast Chinese literature. From the overall context, these neglected stages are mainly concentrated in the early new Northeast Chinese literature from 1917 to the early 1930s, the indigenous literary practices from 1940 to 1949, and the industrial and realistic theme creations that took Northeast China as the writing center but were not named "Northeast Chinese literature" after 1949.

The period from the emergence of new literature in 1917 to the early 1930s was an important stage for the spontaneous germination and slow growth of new Northeast Chinese literature. During this period, the rise of local newspapers and periodicals and the popularization of new-style education promoted the emergence of a number of vernacular creations responding to the enlightenment spirit of the May Fourth Movement, presenting a state of initial integration of local consciousness and modern consciousness. However, due to the scattered writers, the lack of group momentum and the failure to enter the core historical narrative of national salvation, the writing of this stage has been in a scattered state for a long time and failed to enter the canonized genealogy of Northeast Chinese literature. Pang Zengyu pointed out in *On Modern and Contemporary Northeast Chinese Literature and Culture* that the practice of new Northeast Chinese literature before the 1930s has long been in a state of

scattered historical materials and lack of systematic sorting, becoming the first obscured link in the history of Northeast Chinese literature.

From the 1940s to the emergence of the "New Northeast Writer Group", Northeast Chinese literature has always existed, but has been repeatedly obscured by the narrative of literary history. Wang Dewei broke the linear staging of contemporary literature and revealed two repressed veins: one is the "hidden writing" in the Manchukuo period. Jue Qing wrote the nihilism of the colonial city with neurasthenic narrative and decadent aesthetics, which can be called "Harbin Modernity"; Yuan Xi, Mei Niang, Gu Ding and others were either pro-Manchukuo or ambiguous, and their writing could not be contained by the dichotomy of "resistance/surrender", becoming a "taboo" of political ethics and a "sealer" of historical materials after the war. The other is the "cross-era writing" from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. Xiao Jun was criticized after editing Culture News in Harbin, Mu Dan wrote Bitter Fruit witnessing the trauma of the civil war in Shenyang, Luo Binji's Family History of Jiang Buwei was not fully published until the 1990s, and Li Huiying lived in exile in Hong Kong and continued the anti-Japanese war narrative. These writers either suffered political liquidation or cross-regional dispersion, and their fates and texts were excluded from the canon of "mainland literature" due to the 1949 demarcation, the dominance of national narrative and the barrier of communication paths, becoming the missing ones in the "intermediate state" of literary history.[9]

The creation of Northeast Chinese literature after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 is a more representative but long "de-regionalized" important history. The writing of this period was not named "Northeast Chinese literature", but concentrated on presenting the core themes such as land reform, industrial construction, factory life and workers' growth in Northeast China, with a large number of works and prominent representativeness, constituting an important carrier of Northeast experience in the history of contemporary literature. Zhou Libo's *The Tempest* took the rural land reform in Northeast China as the writing object and became a classic of the times; Xiao Jun continued the writing of Northeast experience and paid continuous attention to local society and people's lives; Cao Ming's *The Locomotive* and *Riding the Wind and Breaking the Waves* focused on the construction of the Northeast industrial base and shaped the image of workers in the new era; works such as Li Yunde's *Boiling Mountains* took root in the industrial and mining scene and formed a distinct vein of Northeast industrial literature. These creations are rooted in the reality of Northeast China and closely follow the national narrative, but they are generally incorporated into the mainstream discourse of the times, their regional identity is weakened, and they have never been classified into the conceptual genealogy of "Northeast Chinese literature", becoming a special literary history stage with "experience but no designation".

In general, the early new Northeast Chinese literature, the indigenous writing in the 1940s and the Northeast industrial theme creation after 1949 jointly constitute the important but obscured literary practices in the history of Northeast Chinese literature. Re-excavating and interpreting these existing but insufficiently studied histories can not only complete the full development context of Northeast Chinese literature from germination, growth to evolution, but also restore its multi-layered, diverse and multi-stage historical features, endowing the conceptual connotation of Northeast Chinese literature with more profound and complete academic support.

2.4. Land · History · Human Heart: The Three-Dimensional Expansion and Spiritual Reorientation of Northeast Chinese Literature

The spiritual continuity from traditional Northeast Chinese literature to New Northeast Chinese literature, together with the long-obscured literary space, jointly constitutes the historical foundation of contemporary Northeast Chinese writing. Since the 1950s, the

narrative of Northeast Chinese literature has experienced intergenerational inheritance and aesthetic transformation, forming a quite influential phenomenon of New Northeast Chinese literature in the present. However, its creative practice is often narrowed down to cold and cruel trauma writing, and the homogeneous presentation of regional sufferings in some works implies the risks of trauma consumption and aesthetic solidification, which is easy to fall into a self-enclosed creative predicament. Based on the existing achievements and realistic limitations, the forward-looking analysis of the future development of Northeast Chinese literature is not only a continuation of its historical context, but also an inevitable requirement to promote its breakthrough of paradigms and achieve a dual breakthrough in ideology and aesthetics.

2.4.1. The Rural Road: The Fracture and Reconnection of Nostalgia

The early Northeast Writer Group represented by Xiao Hong fused the looking back at the homeland and life experience into a profound spiritual nostalgia, laying the spiritual foundation of Northeast rural literature. From the 1950s to the 1980s, under the stipulation of the mainstream narrative, the rural writing focusing on cultural root and individual emotion was absent for a long time, and the Northeast rural literary vein appeared an obvious fracture. Sun Huifen's *Purple Mountain* reconnected this interrupted rural tradition with a conscious sense of literary vein. Abandoning the spectacular display of trauma, the work returns to the inside of rural ethics, writes about spiritual return and value reconstruction in daily human feelings and family continuity, echoes the gentle and persistent gaze at the homeland from Xiao Hong's school, and allows the long-lost Northeast rural nostalgia to be placed again.

2.4.2. The Historical Dimension: The Obscured Past Events of Northeast China and the Vicissitudes of the Times

The vitality of Northeast Chinese literature lies not only in the capture of realistic sections, but also in the continuous excavation of historical depth. The vicissitudes of this land since modern times have provided literary narrative resources that are far from being fully explored. Qi Bangyuan's *The Great Flowing River* reflects the vicissitudes of the country through family memory, placing Northeast China in the displacement and perseverance of the great times; Chi Zijian's *Manchukuo* restores the obscured history of Manchukuo with a picture of all living beings, and salvages the warmth of history in daily life. Such writing reminds us that Northeast narrative should not stop at symbolic images such as layoffs and ruins, but should open up to a more distant historical scene, presenting the profound origin of land and life in the vicissitudes of the times.

2.4.3. The Realm of Human Nature: From Regional Symbols to the Literature of Universal Humanity

A truly mature regional writing will eventually transcend regional symbols and move towards the exploration of universal human nature. After the maturity of their creation, the New Northeast Writer Group has generally shown such an internal turn: Ban Yu's *Free and Easy Tour* fades the early coldness and sharpness, and instead gazes at the weak dignity and thoughts of the bottom individuals; Shuang Xuetao has gradually moved from regional trauma narrative to a more universal spiritual breakthrough and reflection on existence. His recent work *The Uninterrupted Man* further breaks away from regional coordinates, inquires into the essence of individual existence with allegorical and philosophical narrative, and shows a humanistic vision transcending regional limitations. While reconnecting the rural literary vein, Sun Huifen's *Purple Mountain* focuses on the depth of the human heart, writing about people's perseverance and confusion in the times in ethical choices, emotional entanglements and fate vicissitudes. Thus, Northeast Chinese literature has completed the aesthetic transcendence from "writing about Northeast China" to "writing about human beings themselves".

3. Summary

The centennial development of Northeast Chinese literature has formed a spiritual genealogy with "Northeast Chinese literature" and "New Northeast Chinese literature" as the core. Although the two have distinct generative logics, they have completed a spiritual dialogue across time and space with nostalgia as the emotional background and modernist aesthetics as the artistic link. Excavating the obscured early new literature, Manchukuo writing and industrial theme creation has completed the development context of Northeast Chinese literature and restored its diverse features. From the reconnection of rural nostalgia to the excavation of historical depth and then to the exploration of universal human nature, Northeast Chinese literature has realized the aesthetic transcendence from regional symbols to the literature of human beings. Its core value has always lain in writing the commonness of the times with regional experience and inquiring into the spiritual predicament of individuals and the nation in the process of modernization, which also makes Northeast Chinese literature transcend regional limitations and possess lasting literary historical research value and contemporary significance.

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