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Exploration of Scar Literature and Wang Zengqi

Ruoxi Chao[1,a,*]

[1]*Institute of Arts, Fuyang Normal University, Fuyang, Anhui, 236000, China*
a. 2022110255@stu.fynu.edu.cn
**corresponding author*

Abstract: In the 1980s, Chinese literature entered a new transformation era. While injecting profound historical connotations into Chinese literary circles, the new phase of literature also presented a complex form of intertwined literary discourse. As the pioneering writing during the period of transition between the old and the new, this article compares the Scar Literature of the 1980s with the literary works of Wang Zengqi (Wang is used to represent in the following text) during the same time. The author believes that the school of Scar Literature and Wang were in the same historical stage, but had varied creative styles. The former is more in line with the social landscape and occupies a mainstream position, while the latter seems to be detached but also highly praised. The author reflects on the differences in creative purpose and scope of writing objects between the two: Scar Literature depicts collective tragedies through political writing, and Wang conveys his literary ideals through personalized image shaping. At the same time, the author identifies the commonalities between both that are rich in humanitarian sentiment. The two literary creations of the 1980s were products of the needs of the times, jointly promoting the progress of human emotions in contemporary Chinese literature.

Keywords: Scar Literature, Wang Zengqi, Comparison.

1. Introduction

"In the 1980s, the Chinese mainland began to have secular works, which is Wang Zengqi's *The Love Story of a Young Monk*... The novel has not received any comments, which is normal, it is a 'monster' [1]. This is the evaluation of writer Acheng on Wang's *The Love Story of a Young Monk*. As a classic work that brought Wang back into public view, *The Love Story of a Young Monk* can be regarded as a typical literary creation style of Wang in the 1980s. However, Acheng's statement that Wang's works do not conform to the tone of the times is precisely what sets him stand out from the literary world covered in the heavy atmosphere at that time. When *The Love Story of a Young Monk* was issued, *Beijing Literature* tentatively expressed its agreement with the aesthetic and cognitive functions of the literature, Wang himself also said that "publishing it requires courage" [2,3]. Fortunately, this "alternative" work did not be resisted by readers, but instead opened up a "new expression" in the context of the special era of the 1980s.

In the early 1980s, when the shadow of the Great Cultural Revolution had not yet dispersed, intellectuals expressed their accusations of the ten-year catastrophe through words, and Scar Literature thus stepped onto the stage of literary history. In the 1980s, when the mainstream discourse order was dominated by "literature-politics", literary works were often trapped in a fixed political

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discourse bias, with intangible ties to the ideologies floating in the air, and the "secular spirit" was almost nowhere to be found. When the depressed emotions swept through the literary world, Wang brought back "beauty" to the world with "alternative" language and reverted the power of literature, which sparked critical thinking and discussion among critics. This paper compares the similarities and differences between Scar Literature and Wang's literary works in the 1980s. By focusing on the discussions of their creative styles, writing objects and humanitarian ideology, this essay explores the historical significance of writing from different perspectives in the same social context.

2. Scar Literature

At the beginning of literature in the 1980s, Scar Literature was a type of literary creation aimed at serving political tasks and ideological guidance, forming a grand historical narrative with intellectuals as the main writing. It is a collective discourse description of specific social environments.

"The 'Scar Literature' is the 'complaint literature' of the 1980s" [4]. The 'scar' in the Scar Literature mainly comes from the spiritual trauma brought about by the Great Cultural Revolution. The writers reveal the deep historical scar of the tragic fate of educated youth, trying to stitch the heart poisoned by reality through the catharsis of words. These two works, Liu Xinwu's *The Head Teacher* and *The Scar* written by Lu Xinhua, as the beginning of Scar Literature, jointly exposed the "internal injury of spirit" caused by the "distortion" of "the soul of a considerable number of teenagers" which blamed on the Great Cultural Revolution [5]. Under the implicit narrative background, the images in *The Head Teacher*, such as teacher Zhang Junshi, students named Song Baoqi and Xie Huimin, and other characters reflect the real-life person in the social education system at that time. In this work, literature has truly become a mirror reflecting social life. The writer Liu Xinwu tells the epitome of the eras from the individual perspective via texts.

The scar recounts the life experience and tragic fate of Wang Xiaohua, a female school graduate who broke up with her mother under the weight of the times. The text that depicts social reality has revealed the emotional struggles that were previously suppressed among the Chinese, leading to a revival of realism in literary writing. An individual's grieving fate is a reflection of the collective portrait. The writer Lu Xinhua reveals the wounds with bloody strokes and mourns the helpless life taken by the trend of times.

"'Literature' in a broad sense was a very active field in China in the 1980s. It maintained close interaction with the whole ideological, cultural and social movements, and kept a leading role on a wide range of topics" [6]. Therefore, the concept of "Literature" in the 1980s was far more than just artistic writing. Scar Literature is not "pure literature". This kind of work pays attention to the interaction with social history rather than the simple private personality writing, which is fraught with political overtones. The political aspect of Scar Literature is embodied in the portrayal of characters with rigid and abnormal ideologies who were influenced by the environment in ages. The description of Xie Huimin (Xie is used to represent in the following text) in *The Head Teacher* shows universal social psychology, thus the novel resonates with a large number of readers after its publication. In Xie's perception, "all the books which are not sold by bookstores and outside the library are reactionary books and dirty books". When teacher Zhang suggested that Xie take the lead in changing into short sleeves in hot weather, she thought it was an "abnormal" style. Xie also believes that the way of organizing life can only be carried out by reading "articles criticizing Song Jiang"... These "seemingly unexplained contradictions" between Xie and teacher Zhang are exactly the enlightenment discourse written by Liu Xinwu to help readers think about social problems. The morbid perceptual behavior of social groups in daily life is the consequence of people's lack of life aesthetic experience under the infiltration of political situations [7]. Different from "pure literature" as the carrier of writers' emotional expression, the political position and historical attitude in Scar Literature reflect a sense of mission of the time with distinctive characteristics. While condensing the

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appearance of the social group, Scar Literature expresses collective complaints in individual terms and directly attacks the social pain points with straightforward and sharp words to convey the moral of the times.

"Scar Literature" is not "sentimental literature", it is "not only the product of the law of literature development as well as a social and political culture which criticizing the 'the Great Cultural Revolution' and bringing order out of chaos, but also the 'pioneer' which reflecting the requirements of the times such as emancipating the mind, seeking truth from facts and looking ahead in unity" [8]. As an important part of the reconstruction of literary order in the new era, Scar Literature guides people to release negative emotions, and also shoulders the era's mission of encouraging people to emancipate their minds and express their feelings.

3. Wang Zengqi and The Love Story of a Young Monk

Wang Zengqi's literature in the 1980s was mainly the reconstruction of the rewriting of the old works. At the end of the turbulent decade, when Scar Literature, Introspection Literature, and Reform Literature were emerging one after another, Wang reappeared in the literary world with lissome and rustic traditional lyrical novels. After Wang's repeated teasing of fate, the spiritual core conveyed in his works is extremely separated from his own experience.

When Wang was young, he interrupted his studies several times because of the war. After leaving the campus, Wang came to Shanghai alone, but he fell into a desperate situation again. Notwithstanding Wang's various misfortunes in life, his words do not contain harsh criticisms or sharp inquiries about the world. When Wang returned at the age of 60, he brought the world works such as *The Love Story of a Young Monk* without scars and reflection, just wrote an innocent love story between a young monk Minghai and a peasant girl named Xiaoyingzi. If the emotional core delivered in writers' works can often be verified from their own experience, on the surface, *The Love Story of a Young Monk* seems to find no trace of Wang's life. However, this work resonates with the emotional depth found in *The Border Town* by Shen Congwen, who was Wang's teacher. Both authors seek to find their spiritual homeland during difficult times, choosing to heal their wounds through writing rather than simply releasing their suffering.

Wang Zengqi's novels do not follow conventional storytelling methods, instead, they emphasize artistic conception and are more inclined to a prose style with a rhythmic language flow. The atmospheric writing in Wang's novels does not limit the stereo of characterization. A prime example of his unique style is *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, which features a strong rural tone and colloquial expressions. The characters, brought to life through straightforward narration, are both vivid and engaging. "Renshan taught others that, to be a good monk, one should strive to acquire three qualities—none of which he himself possessed. First of all, he was very ugly and could be best described by these words: yellow and fat. His voice not like a bell either, but like a grunting sow. As to his mind, was he clever? Certainly not, otherwise, why did he always lose when gambling? He never wore his Buddhist outer garment in the temple, not even his dark grey Buddhist robe. Normally he dressed in only a short Buddhist jacket with his yellow belly exposed. No matter whether his shoes were old or new, he always shuffled them along instead of putting them on properly. He paid no attention to his appearance, going around the temple making a nasal noise like a pig" [9]. While written in words, the author Wang creates an incredibly vivid visual impact through simple and clear language, bringing characters to life on the page.

Wang Zengqi distanced himself from the social literature that was mandated by the times and instead chose to express his own personality. He placed greater emphasis on describing the inner beauty of individuals. As a result, Wang's writing style contrasted with the mainstream discourse of that era. "Of course we need militant works, as well as literature that depict modern heroes with rich human qualities, deeply and sensitively addressing societal issues and drawing attention to the need

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for change. Tragedy always seems better than comedy. In my works, I focus on portraying beauty and the inherent goodness of human nature. Beauty and human nature are essential at all times" [10]. Works that emphasize the "beauty of human nature" served as a counter to the grief writing prevalent at that time, bringing a fresh perspective to the literary world of the 1980s. Wang emerged from political constraints through sincere literature and became a representative of "heterogeneity" writing at the beginning of the new era, marked by his humanistic care.

4. Comparing Scar Literature with Wang Zengqi

Huang Ziping believes that "Two major trends can be identified in the literature of the early 1980s. Scar Literature and Introspection Literature attempt to continue the Seventeen-year Literature's tradition of revolutionary realism, but it is infused with sentimental emotions and romantic ideals reminiscent of the May Fourth Period... Additionally, while revisiting Wang Zengqi's old manuscripts and dreams, it reintroduces a long-neglected culture of literature—the new literary tradition of the 1940s was brought to the new time literature" [11]. This statement puts the Scar Literature in parallel with Wang's writing in the 1980s. While both have their unique styles, Scar Literature and Wang's work go forward hand in hand with the history of Chinese literature. Additionally, there are many points where they intersect, providing common ground for discussion.

4.1. Differences in Creative Purpose and Scope of Writing Objects

Scar Literature differs significantly from Wang Zengqi's writings in the 1980s regarding both the creative purpose and scope of writing objects.

Scar Literature connects the creation of literary works to political purposes, emphasizing its role as ideological guidance. This type of literature places a "non-literary" burden on its works, making it focus on political issues rather than literary ones. While creation is a form of artistic expression, it often lacks the innovation and exploration characteristic of true art, which is a serious area of criticism for Scar Literature. The writers of the 1980s were deeply influenced by their era, which undoubtedly limited their thinking. According to Shi Anshu, writers from that period developed a distinctive literary habit characterized by their keen awareness of politics. They consciously saw themselves as intermediaries, translating political changes into literary forms in a timely and direct way. This approach made politics more tangible and facilitated a deeper understanding of its implications [12]. When literary works are confined to the context of a paranoid class conflict, the emotional depth they convey becomes inherently limited. As a result, writings about "scar" may unconsciously align themselves with dominant power discourses, undermining the artistic expression that literature is capable of showcasing.

Wang Zengqi's works transcend traditional boundaries, allowing literature to regain its aesthetic significance. Wang's creations disregarded the implicit political demands of the 1980s literary scene, focusing instead on his personal literary ideals. Wang's literary ideals have sparked varied critiques, which can be summarized into two main points: first, that his work "lacks a sense of contemporary relevance and depth in historical context"; second, that "the content of his novels is overly idealistic and disconnected from the realities of life" [13,14]. Regarding the absence of "sense of times" in Wang's writings, this paper believes that it is related to the writer's concept of "writing novels with subtraction" [15]. The disconnection from contemporary relevance is not a flaw in his work, rather, it is the technique of "subtraction" that allows his writing to break with political dogma, thereby highlighting a more liberated and artistic literary beauty. Wang's literary creation is also grounded in reality. When discussing *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, Wang stated: "The production of *The Love Story of a Young Monk* reflects the sum of all kinds of feelings experienced by a Chinese individual like me in the 1980s" [16]. Unlike the fierce criticism in Scar Literature, Wang expresses his thoughts

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gently and implicitly in words. He has never been absent from the curtain of the times but only wants to lead people to find a place of peace in the background of disaster. Wang's works reflect his hopes for the beauty of the new era, as well as his appreciation for the beauty of the past.

In terms of the scope of writing objects, Scar Literature takes the tragic experiences of intellectuals as the writing theme, focusing on the collective expression of social issues within the context of its time; In contrast, Wang Zengqi deviated from the group symbolic narrative and emphasizes the portrayal of the individual with flesh and blood. The writing objects of Wang's literary works also returned to the images of the laboring people, which reflects the themes found in Seventeen-year Literature. Wang also challenges the narrow portrayal of heroic images of workers and peasants by focusing on their true and fundamental human needs and emotions, emphasizing a more genuine and complex depiction of human nature. Wang's works reflect his concern for readers and his responsibility as a writer to "serve the people".

4.2. Common Humanitarian Care

Although there are many differences in the creative purpose and scope of writing objects, both Scar Literature and Wang Zengqi's literary creations from the 1980s fundamentally focus on the emotions of "people" and demonstrate a deep humanitarian care for individuals.

After the Great Cultural Revolution, humanitarianism was revitalized in literature, bringing attention back to the fate and soul of humanity. Scar Literature effectively achieved ideological enlightenment through its strong group influence, while Introspection Literature further enhanced the subject identity and ideological emancipation of intellectuals, aligning with the humanistic care advocated by the trend of "Humanitarianism". Humanitarianism emerged as the most significant ideological theory in the early 1980s, reshaping the relationship between people and taking on the mission of deconstructing the class nature in literary creation.

"*The scar* is good because it is based on life and reality" [17]. This is the characteristic of *The scar*, as well as the style of Scar Literature. In the new political context, the characters such as "mother" in *The scar* can reclaim their lost revolutionary identity, which has been overshadowed by the traitor identity imposed by The Ultra-Leftist line. This shift signifies a return to individual value as a "person" and emphasizes restoring family ethics and kinship. Teacher Zhang Junshi, as an intellectual, enlightens and saves hollow teenagers through cultural education in *The head teacher*, stressing the central role and irreplaceable nature of human beings. Scar Literature writers rediscover and identify the identities of social members. When the existence and value of human beings are placed at the center of attention, it reflects the writers' humanitarian care.

Wang Zengqi's humanitarianism is shown through the character's disregard for rules. When human nature is unrestrained, the novels add a layer of humanistic care that is slightly odd but resonates warmly with readers. Taking *The Love Story of a Young Monk* as an example, the small characters in the marginal narrative, although depicted only with line drawings, seem vivid and three-dimensional, as if they were lifelike. "Shoujie", which means "to be initiated into monkhood or nunhood", was originally a concept in Buddhism that aimed to restrain human desires. However, throughout the novel, it takes on a more secular meaning. The monks in the temple ignore taboos and openly express their desires for food, money, and sex. At the Biqi Nunnery, various individuals display behaviors that diverge from traditional moral norms, yet such actions are regarded as acceptable within the community. For instance, there is an old monk who eats meat only during the Spring Festival. Renshan has account books and an abacus on the table, while Renhai is married, and Rendu has a reputation for having several mistresses. Although these behaviors are unusual for a temple, they are normalized at the Biqi Nunnery. The love between Minghai and Xiaoyingzi embodies a beauty that is pure and untouched by worldly influences. Their feelings for each other seem to stem from a childlike innocence, characterized by direct and impulsive expressions that are

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no trade-offs and spontaneous. “You mustn’t be an abbot, and you mustn’t be a tail-Samir either. I’ll be your wife. Do you agree?” [9]. Xiaoyingzi confronts her emotional needs head-on. Her straightforward confession is a choice rooted in her instincts, which gives it a strong sense of strength. Actions driven by instinct represent the truest expression of human nature and showcase its most genuine and simple aspect. This reflects the natural beauty of human nature that Wang aims to convey.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the context of the 1980s and the overall landscape of the literary world by introducing and analyzing Scar Literature and the works of Wang Zengqi from that period. It discusses and compares the similarities and differences between these two types of works. The findings suggest that while there are distinctions in their creative purposes and the scope of their subjects, both genres share similarities in their expression of humanitarian care. This analysis contributes to the study of “heterogeneous” literature that coexists with mainstream literature in the 1980s.

Scar Literature and Wang’s works are landmarks of 1980s’ literature, representing precious relics left by writers during a transformative era, and they collectively advance the historical process of modernizing Chinese literature. Scar Literature serves as a transitional form of writing that reflects the changes between old and new eras. It marks a departure from “politics” and signals a return to focusing on “people”. Wang maintains his distinctive writing style, using “beauty” to feedback and soothe the emotions of the times. Scar Literature often expresses people’s deep dissatisfaction with being trapped in a prolonged state of depression. In contrast, the works of Wang to guide readers out of grief and rediscover the most genuine and beautiful aspects of human nature that have become obscured by the passage of history. Writing in the same historical context serves not only as a collective mission to the times but also reflects individual needs.

The “secular work” is a simple expression that resonates with people’s feelings at times. A pure artistic impulse from the heart that distracts the outside world is an indispensable sincere existence in literature. As such, this impulse never feels out of place, nor does it require strict alignment with the prevailing tones of the times. The freedom of expression for writers should not be limited by vested literary frameworks. Both styles of writing can leave a significant mark on the history of literature, demonstrating the importance of their existence. Furthermore, the interaction and balance between different literary styles contribute to the creation of a rich and vibrant literary world in the 1980s.

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