On Cao Wenxuan’s View of War from the Novel, Fire Seal

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Abstract. In 1931, Japan launched a war of aggression against China, which lasted 14 years and caused huge losses to both sides. Cao Wenxuan’s novel, Fire Seal records part of the war of aggression against China. The novel praises human nature, opposes aggression, and embodies Cao Wenxuan's just and comprehensive view of war, which is of great significance to our understanding of war and war literature.

Introduction

On September 18, 1931, Japan launched the “the September 18th Incident,” marking the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War. By 1945, when the war ended, the 14-year-long war brought not only great trauma to China, but also disaster to Japan as well. However, many of us were biased in our understanding of the war. Some even thought that the damage was unilateral. In the novel Fire Seal, Cao Wenxuan, on the one hand, upholds a just view of war and believes that Japan’s invasion of China is unjust. On the other hand, he does not ignore the physical and psychological damage caused by the war to Japanese civilians, but views the war with a higher level and more comprehensive view of war.

War is a Continuation of Politics

War is an intense military confrontation between hostile parties that uses force in an organized and planned way for certain political and economic purposes. It is the highest form of struggle to resolve conflicts among classes, nationalities, political groups and countries. It is the continuation of politics through violent means [1]. Mao Zedong clearly pointed out in his work On Protracted that, the war cannot be separated from politics for a moment [2]. In a word, war is the continuation of politics through violent means. This is a core view of the essence of war expounded by classical Marxist writers. A concept opposite to “War” is “Peace.” war and peace are two different social states and historical phenomena with different qualities and basic characteristics. The former refers to the armed struggle between human social groups for certain political and economic purposes and has the essential characteristics of violent confrontation. Peace, on the other hand, is a non-war activity based on a certain political purpose and has the essential characteristics of non-violent confrontation [3].

War is a special product of the development of human society to a certain stage and a special phenomenon. It is anti-human and anti-social. War itself is evil. It tramples and distorts human nature. From the aspect of human nature, war itself is not worth praising. This is our basic standpoint. War is accompanied by human history, and so is literature. It is in the long history of mankind that literature and war have merged to form the literature to record war.

The Return of Human Nature in War Literature

Wars at all times and in all countries have produced many literary works. For example, Homer’s description of the Trojan War made the Iliad immortal, and the Russian-French war became the source of Tolstoy's War and Peace. The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is a literary and artistic expression of the struggle for supremacy in the last years of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Many literary works either directly describe war or depict people's life prospect and state at that time against the background of war.
Some scholars have made a basic analysis of war literature. Zhu Xiangqian believed: “Generally speaking, this is only a subject matter category. It refers to a kind of literature with war (and military life) as its main reflection object” [4]. It is generally accepted that war literature is literature that mainly reflects war and its people.

In our country’s war literature works, some belong to the category of war experience works. Some directly write directly on the battlefield and war, highlighting personal experience, such as Sun Li’s Lotus Lake; Some works deeply expose the chronic diseases of the nation, such as Ba Jin’s Cold Night. Some of them recreate author’s childhood life, such as Xiao Hong’s Biography of Hulan River. Some interpret history with the experience gained from the war, such as Feng Zhi’s Wu Zixu, all of which reflects “the experience of people's living conditions in the war” [5]. No matter how they are divided, these works all highlight the central position of human beings, and focus on and reflect human nature.

In theory, it is needless to say that war literature should highlight wars and people in wars. As Andrew Bennitt said, in the 19th century, the celebration of military heroism in a nationalist manner from the national standpoint gave way in the 20th century to contemporary appreciation of private grief and opposition to wars [6]. However, this situation varies in China due to many factors, especially political factors. The embodiment of human nature in Chinese war literature has experienced the process of “normal expression-repression-distortion-reversion.” In the new era, the great discussion on the rectification of literature and the justification of literature and art has cast off the shortcomings of literature political aesthetics, singleness of heroes and deification of characters in the “Cultural Revolution” period, and determined the purpose of literature to serve the common people. Many of our literary works tend to be liberalized and popularized, as does war literature. The description of war history tends to be rationalized. The shackles of literature and art gradually decreased, and they began to have their own independent status, gradually deepening the contemplation of literature and aesthetics. It is against this background that the new era begins with more and more reflection on the war and the humanity in the war. The literature of this period should describe “the positive and negative aspects of human nature and the comprehensiveness of human beings in an authentic way” [7]. However, after decades of development, China’s war literature has not been as said, “China is one of the countries that have experienced the most wars in the modern world. Our people have full feelings and experience of war and should produce excellent war literature,” [8] but something is still missing in our war literature. In response, Prof. Wang Fulin made an incisive summary. He believed that in the Chinese view of war, there was a judgment on the “nature first, noumenon second” of war, and a deficiency of “highlighting leaders and ignoring the people”, which led to our Chinese war literature “neglecting and belittling the lives of ordinary people” [9]. This points out the real deficiency in our war literature. At present, more and more war literature works should reflect not only the grand war scenes, but also the people and humanity in the war. The latter is not only the basic understanding of war literature, but also the return that we Chinese war literature need most. Cao Wenxuan’s view of war was formed on the basis of his concern for human beings.

The View of War in Fire Seal

The Image Metaphor in Fire Seal

Cao Wenxuan always mentions that his literary proposition is to provide a good foundation for human nature. This proposition also forms the basis of his view of war. His view of war is expressed through a series of images in Fire Seal. Fire seal is the symbol of the Japanese army in wartime. In the novel The Call of the Wilderness, Xiao Hong described it as follows: “Before he could give a loud call to the horse, the horse had already run to the front of him. He wanted to grab them and orchid them. As soon as he reached out, he drew back his hand. He saw the fire seal on the horse in the round Japanese army barracks…” [10]. Cao Wenxuan’s Fire Seal was inspired by this
description and extended the fire seal in literature. This extension is not only in content, but also in the level of significance.

The story revolves around Powa of Yehu Ridge, Xue’er (a horse Powa saved from the wolf) and Japanese officer Kohno. When the war broke out, Xue’er was forced to be a military horse and covered with the seal of fire belonging to the Japanese war horse. Japanese officer Kohno wanted to train Xue’er as a mount, but Xue’er persevered and was sent to pull a cart. After suffering, she returned to Powa. But the fire seal on it is despised by the villagers in Yehu Ridge. After that, Xue’er became the mount of the Chinese soldiers and helped them defeat Kohno and win its own dignity. Xue’er, as a horse, is extremely human. In its eyes Powa is its only master. Its loyal and humiliation image represents the Chinese people who suffered various hardships in the war, and its experience also reflects the situation of the Chinese people under fire. The fire seal was engraved both on Xue’er’s back and on the hearts of the Chinese people. It is not as simple as a mark. First of all, it represents an indelible memory of war. Secondly, it symbolizes the harm brought to the Chinese people by the Japanese invaders, which is not only material but also spiritual. The process of domestication of the pony born by Xue’er by Japanese officer Inaba reflects the invaders’ spiritual control over the Chinese people, and this control is irreversible. The pony born by Xue’er, because its owner Inaba was shot and then hid in the remote mountains and isolated from the world, may be implying such a fact. In addition, there are many figures in the novel that can be refined, such as the elderly Japanese artillery who lost his child, the Japanese veteran who abused horses, and the innocent and kind young officer Kojiro Inaba. As the book says, what the fire seal prints is everything we cannot forget.

A Just View of War

Cao Wenxuan’s view of war is neither a realist view of war that thinks war has nothing to do with morality, nor a pacifist view of war that opposes all forms of war, but a just view of war that “holds the point that some wars are immoral.” The peaceful war view developed from Grotius’s war view of “just war and unjust war” in the 17th century. In his view, the most important prerequisite for “just war” is to have a legitimate reason, which can only come from the rights and obligations stipulated in natural law, namely, to resist foreign aggression, recover what was improperly taken away, and punish those countries that refuse to correct their mistakes [11]. However, his theory was later replaced by the “absolute sovereignty view” that was quite popular in Europe and the United States, which holds that sovereign countries are right and just to wage war for any reason. The “just war theory” developed afterwards also formulated many other principles. Entering the middle of the 20th century, after a series of wars and changes in the international situation, the UN Charter finally defined the division between just wars and unjust wars, that is, any form of war of aggression is an unjust war, while the war of self-defense and the collective punishment of the aggressor countries are just wars. Through reading, we can find that Cao Wenxuan’s novel Fire Seal reflects his view of just war. This view of war is a basic humanitarianism, a humanitarian concern for the life and rights of individuals [12]. At the same time, it is also a view of war full of Chinese traditional concern for human beings. This view of war has existed for a long time in China. For example, Mencius’s discussion of just war argues that the justice of war comes from the people.

Japan’s war against China has not only failed to achieve the goal of “justice and peace,” but has also shown appalling contempt for the lives of the Chinese people. This war of aggression is unjust in itself. Cao Wenxuan realized this and described it from different angles in the novel.

A Comprehensive View of War

Fire Seal depicts the destruction of human nature on both sides by the war. The ending of Fire Seal is very standard and understandable: Japanese officer Kohno was defeated and killed. But personally, I don't think this “heinous” villain in our current words is as simple as the description. It was a man who was shot, but this man is only a symbol representing evil. It is well known that the explanation of the symbol cannot and will not be single, much less like previous literary works or film and television works, whose purpose is just to destroy the symbol. Since he is human, is that
what he was like from the beginning? It is obvious that war is the most profound and concentrated manifestation of human nature. In fact, we used to study human nature more from the tension and conflicts of characters in literary works, and mainly from the image depiction of characters and other aspects. However, as we have mentioned before, any literary work should be seen in the social and historical context, and should not be seen in isolation. We should also hold a historical attitude towards literary works depicting the Anti-Japanese War period. In the past, there were some problems in the description of the Kuomintang Army for various reasons, whether in literary works or film and television works, and this trend has been eased to some extent now. As for the image of Japanese troops, we should also have a correct understanding, which involves the description of people, especially the description of human nature. In this novel, the depiction of Kohno, Inaba and Japanese veterans leaves a deep impression on people, which can be said to show the whole picture of the war in a very comprehensive way. There also contains the description of the people in Yehuyu Ridge: the good people in the village changed their love for Xue’er, to groundless accusation against Xue’er. They treated this horse as an accomplice of the Japanese since it was forced to pull a cannon to attack the villagers. They regarded it a sign of the suffering brought by the war to the Chinese. In the novel we can see that this change is not only because the war has changed the fate of a horse, a person and a group of people, but also because the war has destroyed human nature and distorted people's good hearts. The description of this point in *Fire Seal* is dynamic, which breaks through the deliberate distortion of the opposite of war in previous war literature works, thus becoming more realistic.

**Summary**

As Cao Wenxuan wrote on the title page of *Fire Seal*: “The pursuit of ‘immortality’ is human nature that cannot be dispelled. What I pursue is only the ‘immortality’ of words.” Although this so-called “immortality” is an elusive goal, the vast majority of “immortality” works are basically related to the major concerns of mankind. Through the exploration of Cao Wenxuan’s view of war in *Fire Seal*, we find that war can raise various essential issues for modern and contemporary literature, such as war, literature itself, and human nature in literature as well. Most importantly, we are able to look at war from a dynamic perspective. And the reflection from the perspective of human nature is an interaction with the reflection of war and literary works. Perhaps from this perspective, this series of reflections can let us return to the origin and rethink many issues.

**References**


