Abstract

Shen Congwen (1902-1988) lived in the outlying Xiangxi or Western Hunan Province of China. His life was a colourful one, filled with wonder. He was a member of a traveling company of soldiers, and although he only had primary school education, he managed to rise and made a name for himself in China's literary history, courtesy of his extensive volume of work that arguably included the best short stories and novels in contemporary Chinese literature, hence becoming a well-known fiction writer throughout China.

Shen Congwen had more than 200 pieces of fiction and prose writings to his name, totaling more than 3 million words. His writings focused mainly on the countryside and the city, but his regional fiction depicting the rural and agrarian society of Xiangxi won him the highest acclaim. He used the twin experiences of his memorable childhood and rich army life, when he interacted with or met many country folk, to formulate the characters in his stories and let them present one exciting tale after another. This allows readers to witness his unprecedented creativity and to be amazed by his literary skills. His works provide important clues to the local customs and conditions of Xiangxi.

Calling himself a "countryman", Shen Congwen vividly portrayed various rural characters in his works. It would be very meaningful if one could have an in-depth and all-round inquiry into these rural folk. Unfortunately, scholars researching Shen Congwen's rural characters are only confined to the small portion of their analytical assessments, hence to be able to probe further into the nature of these rural characters in his works would not only be of vital significance, but is also an imperative task to be accomplished.

The first chapter of this thesis states the aim and method of my research; the second outlines Shen Congwen's birth and background, as well as how they moulded the uniqueness of his "countryman" character; the third examines Shen Congwen's fiction works to determine the identities of the rural folk in his short stories and novels and compares, analyses and studies the way other scholars classify the rural folk; the fourth states the criteria by which other scholars classify the rural folk and by using these criteria, I studied and analysed the special characteristics of the rural folk in Shen Congwen's works; the fifth shows how Shen Congwen attempted to convey certain feelings and thoughts through his rural characters; the sixth touches on Shen Congwen's skilled portrayal and fine descriptions of his rural characters; the seventh summarizes the analysis of the previous six chapters, and gives an objective judgement of the way other scholars criticize Shen Congwen's lack of knowledge of the real world. This section addresses criticism that his characters are portrayed very superficially. Also, it once again asserts Shen Congwen's accomplished portrayal of the country folk.