ABSTRACT

Shen Congwen has been regarded as one of the most important regional fiction writers in modern Chinese literature. He has published numerous fictional and autobiographical accounts of his home region West Hunan. Of Shen Congwen’s many works, it is the travelogues, biographical sketches, and stories about the rural lives, the country folks and the legends that caught the heart of thousand of readers. Not surprisingly, it is in these works that Shen Congwen grapples most profoundly with the meaning of his personal past and his people’s history. Yet in these works we encounter abstract psychological, cosmological and other concerns too.

Shen Congwen espoused the doctrine of realism in theory, as did most of his contemporaries. He is a writer in the realist tradition, but he does not limit himself to realistic writing. He loved utopian ideals and the realm of myth. His regional myth of frontier superiority could not be more explicit. He writes about the myths, but he is also a realistic writer. The West Hunan he reconstructs must not be regarded merely as a geographical wonderland but as a topographical locus that demands multiple readings. Hunan is depicted as a barbarous country, full of wars, poverty, and banditry. It is also a place full of mythical landscapes, characters and events as mentioned in Qu Yuan’s Songs of the South and Tao Qian’s Peach Blossom Spring. His writings about Hunan are not so much a representation effort to enliven the irretrievable past as really a creation of an imaginary past on behalf of the present. The “irretrievable past” is realism while the imaginary past is the myth. Therefore, the transformation of myths and realism constitutes one of the most sophisticated parts of Shen Congwen’s regional fiction.

This thesis attempts to define Shen Congwen’s discourse of myth and realism variations. In the first 3 chapters I try to propose a poetics of myth and realism variation. In Chapters 4 to 9, I introduce a new reading of Shen Congwen’s regional fiction in terms of the realistic and mythical structure of his works. Many of Shen Congwen’s stories, including “Feng Zi”, “After Rain”, “Fish”, “Husband”, “Gui Sheng”, “Meijin, Baozi, and the White Kid”, “The Inn” and many other novels and scrutinized. My study finds that all simplistic approaches are unfair to his works and this study provides fruitful approaches to reading Shen’s works. The transformations between mythical and realistic stories can help us to understand the complex effect of Shen Congwen’s fiction as art. His intellectual dimensions address aesthetics psychological and moral questions as often as social theory and ideology. Even when he is writing social events, one cannot assume Shen to have his eye only on the social problems. Above all, Shen Congwen does not limit himself to realistic literary modes when portraying realistic events and characters. At the same time he invents myths which are stories no true but myth embodies feeling and concept. The realistic and mythical elements play an important role in Shen’s native-soil writing which does not just present stories of vainly seeking lost childhood or inaccessible homeland. The boundary of myth and realism is difficult to draw a line. When we read his works symbolically, as I have shown, we can find Taoism, absurdity and existentialism in his fiction. Therefore, I hope my discussion will open up a new perspective on Shen’s fictive native land.