

A True Record of Changing Times

- Realistic Narrative and Emotional Expression in Cao Zhenglu's Nar

Ruoyao Liu^{1,a,*}

¹Beijing Normal University, Zhuhai, Guangdong, 519000, China

a. 2005060084@mail.bnuz.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: Cao Zhenglu's novel *Nar* (There/International) is considered to be one of the representative works of modern Chinese Diceng (Underclass) literature, published in 2004, depicting the impact on the underclass people against the backdrop of the reform of state-owned enterprises at the beginning of China's reform and opening up. Starting from Cao's *Nar*, this paper presents the background of the writing of *Nar* by sorting out the birth and basic meaning of underclass writing. It focuses on the narrative's realism and the narrative-based emotional expression in *Nar*. Analyses the narrative characteristics of *Nar*, which uses modernist narrative techniques alongside the realistic narrative, and the artistic characteristics of *Nar*'s unique narrative perspective. Using *Nar* as an example, explore the intensity of the emotional expression caused by the intense rhythm of the narrative and the unique artistic and literary value of Cao's novel in its use of metaphor and symbolic expression of emotion. As a representative work of Cao Zhenglu, *Nar* faithfully reflects the combination of realism and modernism in Cao's fictional writing, allowing Chinese modernist literature to be reborn under his pen, freeing it from the shackles of "pure literature" that had been pursued for some time in the past for realist works.

Keywords: Cao Zhenglu, realism, narrative form, emotional expression

1. Introduction

The fast developments of the 1990s had a tremendous influence on many facets of Chinese literature, including literary creation, which has formed new connections with societal lives. Writing on the underclass, previously prevalent in ancient China, has taken on new significance in this social setting [1]. For the underclass, represented by those who have migrated to the cities, the literature of the underclass in the new era focuses on the social situation they encounter and is spiritually integrated into the underclass, uncovering the meaning and practical causes of the underclass' real-life sufferings. When Cao Zhenglu's *Nar* was first written, it was considered an important work in this genre of underclass literature. Today *Nar* has become one of the masterpieces of underclass writing.

Cao Zhenglu's work and writing of the underclass is an important part of the research on contemporary Chinese literature. Research about *Nar* was mainly focused on the period from 2004 to 2010 after its publication, with the focus on the characteristics of left-wing literature embodied in *Nar*, the revival of Chinese contemporary realist literature represented by *Nar*, the relationship between *Nar* and the writing of the underclass, and the reflection and mapping of *Nar* on the real

world. However, in the last five years, the number of studies on the above has declined, mostly since the development of society has led to a gradual deviation of the content of underclass writing from the current reality. This paper will analyze the characteristics of *Nar* as one of the masterpieces of underclass literature and its influence on the novel's content in terms of its narrative and emotional expression. It will also briefly discuss the fictional style of Cao Zhenglu and the artistic and literary characteristics of *Nar*.

2. Cao Zhenglu's *Nar* and the Writing of the Underclass

Since the reform and opening up of China, the country has been enjoying the benefits of rapid industrialization and modernization while at the same time suffering from its various impacts. The economic construction activities in society have led to drastic changes in the social structure of China's past; from the "Household responsibility system" to the reform and opening up, Chinese peasants gradually broke away from their original way of life and production, which was bound to the land. They flocked to the cities to work, forming a huge and unprecedented "wave of migrant workers". This resulted in a massive and unprecedented wave of migrant workers.

It is against this backdrop that literary trends reflecting the current situation of this group of people and expressing their immediate interests have emerged. With Shenzhen as a starting point, various literary works targeting urban workers, the underclass and more have gradually become a literary craze sweeping the country, as the government attaches importance to people's livelihood and the media focuses on them. The psychological narrative of the underclass literature of the new period, especially since the 1990s, focuses on an accurate grasp of history and close attention to the real life of the underclass people [2]. When Cao's *Nar* was released, it also set off a wave of popularity. *Nar* is considered a prime example of underclass literature, which emerged as a genre that focused on depicting the material struggles of impoverished communities with a realistic approach akin to working-class literature. This genre evolved further with the advent of "new immigrant literature" and continued to depict the lives of the underclass while also exploring the experiences of immigrants and the working class. Cao has depicted the material life of the underclass, and based on the realism of "working-class literature", he has conducted more rational thinking and exploration. In portraying the struggles of the industrial sector during the transition period, the struggles of the underclass and the gradual collapse of traditional society, Cao himself conveys a reflection on the process of modernizing Chinese society. Moreover, as he does so, Cao also tries to propose solutions to things from his own perspective, holding a skeptical attitude towards the social justice of the time, hoping that his literary writing will have a positive impact on the development of reform [3].

Cao Zhenglu is an intellectual, a former university professor, and unlike most of the authors of "working-class literature" who are realistic workers, he writes as an intellectual targeting the underclass. However, his novel *Nar* presents a realistic approach like a research report, which truly reveals the impact and suffering of ordinary people undergoing social transformation, and is inseparably related to his own experience as a worker and his unique perspective of survival after moving to Shenzhen. From the perspective of an intellectual, he expresses his sympathy for the underclass and his thoughts on society, reflecting on social reality from two perspectives, as opposed to the "working-class literature".

Nar is a continuation of the traditional realist tone of "working-class literature" and a return to the realistic and critical literary themes of traditional realism. Cao inherits the rational thinking of history and the exploration of the problems of China's social transformation; so that his novels avoid, to a certain extent, the hollow presentation of suffering in some of his underclass writings; and not only inherit the core of traditional realism but also break through the shackles of past realist literature to a certain extent, making his underclass literature a continuation and representative of realist literature in the new era.

3. The Realistic Narrative in *Nar*

3.1. Realism and Underclass Writing

Li Yunlei - a scholar of underclass writing - has mentioned that underclass writing is a kind of serious literary creation that inherits the tradition of left-wing literature, democracy and liberalism in the 20th century, depicting people and events in the underclass life and maintaining a critical and reflective attitude towards reality [4]. This view also mentions that the form of underclass writing is dominated by realism while not excluding exploration and innovation. As mentioned above, Cao Zhenglu's writing incorporates his unique innovations and ideas. While maintaining the principles of realism as a typical reflection of real life and the portrayal of typical social figures, *Nar* reflects the author's own ideological tendencies and feelings. Cao introduces the modernist literary exploration of the character's heart in this creation, combining the repressed social situation that the underclass writing wants to express with the modernist expression and exploration of the character's inner repression, making *Nar* seem to lack a part of calmness from the emotional point of view compared to the traditional realist novels.

As a writer who has experienced most of the important periods of transition and development since the founding of New China, Cao holds unique revolutionary ideals and beliefs in the face of the realities of society. His concern for social reality has led to realism in his works that makes him reflect on the problems of social development from the perspective of social reality, see the impact of the problems from the perspective of the underclass, and try to propose his own solutions when confronted with the problems that emerged after the reform and opening up. In a 2005 interview, Cao described Zhu Weiguo (uncle), the protagonist in *Nar*, as a tragic hero, a "new socialist" who wants to represent workers but is instead questioned as an imperfect person. Cao uses Zhu's perspective to show and satirize the shortcomings in economic development, depicting the unreasonable weight of power under reality and some of the abnormal capital after the reform and opening up - for example, the uneven distribution of power during the reform of state-owned enterprises and the inability of workers to protect their own interests, as reflected in the novel. Moreover, the death of Zhu Weiguo reveals that reality that workers have tried to resist the changed circumstance around Chinese workers since the restructuring of the nation-owned company, but the existing resistance way of workers does not affect any more [5]. The social reality represented by Zhu is the misfortune of China's modernization process. Cao's underclass writing uses this misfortune as the ground for realist literary creation, offering his own critique and understanding of the social reality that has caused the misery.

3.2. The Use of a Narrative Perspective

Cao's novel is characterized by its distinctive presentation of the reality of the social transition period. Through the contrast between urban and rural areas, the macroscopic changes in the social transition period are contrasted. This dichotomy is most directly illustrated by the experiences of the characters and their sufferings. Zhu and "I" stand in such an antagonistic situation at the beginning of *Nar*, Zhu being a representative of the simple workers from the countryside, while "I" is an intellectual youth tainted with the city atmosphere. The narrative of "I" is the main narrative perspective in *Nar*, where "I", as the narrator, first hides behind others, then abandons the identity of "intellectual" and refuses to work for the newspaper. As the narrator, he first hides behind others and then gives up his identity as an "intellectual", refuses to publish articles for the newspaper that use the workers' suffering as a gimmick, resigns from the newspaper, and decides to stand with the working class represented by Zhu, symbolizing the confusion of a generation of intellectuals after the rise of the reform tide [6]. However, this perspective is different from the third-party perspective of most realist works, as "I" has already understood Zhu and entered his spiritual world later in the novel, becoming a participant

in facing the difficult social reality together with him. This perspective of “I” is not an ordinary observer but another form of a participant’s perspective. In the first part of the play, Zhu’s plight is shown objectively, and the conflict between the reality of society and Zhu’s thoughts is also reflected through the perspective of “I”. The transformation of “I” in the later stages is both a reflection of the author’s identity as an intellectual and a solution to the social problems raised in *Nar*. The narrative task and role undertaken by the character of “I” itself follow the characteristics of Chinese realist narratives that have been advocating reflection and analysis since the novels of root-seeking culture, shifting the analysis of history and culture to the reflection on social reality, which is more in line with the reflection on society pursued by the literary trend after the reform and opening up.

By partially limiting the use of narrative perspective and introducing different viewpoint characters, the novel’s expression is made more realistic and allows it to achieve a balance between realism and artistry. The story of *Nar*, with Zhu as the protagonist, does not follow a completely linear narrative. Zhu’s identity as a worker_cadre divides the storyline into two perspectives: Zhu Weiguo, the worker who works for the interests of the workers, and Zhu Weiguo, the “beneficiary” of the reform. Zhu, as a cadre, is the “beneficiary” of the reforms. The various blows Zhu encounters at the top of the two narratives correspond to the ‘antagonistic’ realities mentioned above. The narrative perspective of *Nar* is an important way in which the author brings the novel into reality and is one of the hallmarks of the realist narrative of *Nar*.

4. The Expression of Emotions in *Nar*

4.1. The Passion and Poignancy of the Narrative Rhythm

The reality and conflicts in the narrative present an equally sharp emotional tone in *Nar*; the complex reality is truly reflected through the characters’ words, actions and psychology. Zhu’s suicide is the final manifestation of the conflict in the whole text, and Zhu’s suicide is also the final result of the conflict in reality. The overall narrative tone of *Nar* can be categorized as a gradual change from calm to passionate and acute, corresponding to the development of the novel as a whole and the changes in the characters, showing the real-life dilemmas and conflicts faced by the characters.

At the beginning of the novel, Cao Zhenglu narrates the beginning of events from “my” perspective. The tone of the narrative at this point is still calm as “I” am still a bystander, and it can be said that “I” only seems to present Zhu Weiguo’s actions indifferently [7]. The scolding of Zhu Weiguo by Du Yuemei - Zhu’s former apprentice, a female worker who was forced to sell herself to make ends meet after being laid off - can be considered the first expression of passionate narrative in the whole text, as a result of which Zhu finally sets the goal of petitioning to fight for the workers. The conflict is very real. This conflict is very realistic and epitomizes the vast number of laid-off workers, and at the same time, symbolizes the change of mentality of the characters, including Zhu Weiguo. “Zhu’s eyes were so grey that he could not see anything. He only heard the sledgehammer banging on his ears, and his head was in chaos” [8]. Zhu realizes that he has to take responsibility for the future of the workers in the midst of Du Yuemei’s curses and that he needs to face the reality of their possible lay-off and bankruptcy to find a better way out for himself.

The second change in narrative tone that sealed Zhu’s fate came at the end of Zhu’s petition when he learned that he had become a “vested interest” in the eyes of the workers rather than a representative of them. Zhu’s spirit is crushed by the shock of reality, and he is overwhelmed by pain and anger. At this point, as Zhu collapses, the novel’s narrative becomes more intense, with conflicts and contradictions coming to a head, and “I” also leave my role as an indifferent observer and begin to join the narrative. Along with Zhu’s struggle, the narrator’s mind grows, which not only achieves a progressive effect in terms of emotional expression but also shows the relevance of Zhu’s tragic struggle in one way [9]. The escalation of the narrative’s passionate and poignant tone corresponds

to the increase in realistic suffering, and at the same time advances and represents the development of the character's emotions, reinforcing the purpose of the emotional expression of *Nar*.

4.2. Metaphor and Symbolism in Emotional Expression

One of the most discussed features of Cao Zhenglü's art is his use of metaphor and irony. Cao's use of metaphor, on the one hand, links imagery to real existence and presents in-depth social changes in China's transition period, adding to the overall realism of the novel while facilitating the expression of his inner richness of emotion. The use of metaphor and symbolism in *There*, one of his masterpieces, constitutes Cao's stance on reflecting the plight of the underclass and revealing the conflict between urban and rural areas.

Nar is considered by many to be "left-wing literature", and it is natural to view *Nar* from the viewpoint that "the tradition of 'left-wing literature' is a kind of flesh-and-blood gesture concerned with the sorrows and joys of the underclass, observing the reality and inequalities of society with a critical spirituality, and calling for the ideals of social justice and fairness with a distinct class stance" [10]. In the case of *Nar*, the word "Nar" is a metaphor in itself, as a metamorphosis of "International", carrying "my" grandmother, both Zhu Weiguo's mother, a vague memory of the past and the author's realistic quest. It is a metaphor for the author's pursuit of reality and the author's thoughts on reality. How does International come true? How can the social conflicts under the restructuring of state enterprises be resolved, and how can the masses, represented by Zhu Weiguo, escape from their plight? The metaphorical meaning of the title of *Nar* sets the basic emotional stance and is the basis for its being considered "left-wing literature" of the new era.

For Luodi, a German Shepherd known as "the righteous dog", Zhu Weiguo abandoned it hundreds of kilometres after it frightened Du Yuemei, and after it struggled to return home, faced with the prospect of being abandoned again, it chose to kill itself to prove that it would rather die than be abandoned again. Its image and story are also important metaphors and symbols. Cao Zhenglü says of the story about Luodi: "If the story of the dog were removed, it would be completely mired in the narrative of the factory store, which would fail artistically and would be mediocre in its depth of thought." The image of Luodi can, for the most part, be seen as a mapping of the image of Zhu Weiguo. The character of both, and the tragic ending of both, are one and the same. Zhu insists on petitioning countless times, while Luodi insists on trekking hundreds of kilometers all the way back to Zhu. Luodi's choice to die in order to avoid being abandoned again and Zhu's suicide have the same meaning; in their desperation, they both choose to prove their will by dying. This imagery of Luodi contains the author's critical sentiment, as even an animal cannot survive in this social reality, and the harm and oppression around him can only be expressed through death, which is one of the directions of the novel's tragic and critical sentiment.

5. Conclusions

Cao Zhenglü's *Nar* is an important work in the literature of the new era. It inherits some characteristics of realism, incorporates Cao's own writing style, is influenced by his intellectual background and personal feelings, presents the social transformation problems of the early reform and opening-up period, records the special social conditions of the transition period, and expresses the author's unique thinking about them in literary form. It has a unique perspective in its narrative and emotional expression, depicting the struggling state of existence of the people at the bottom and showing the responsibility of being an intellectual to the social reality. Through the analysis of the above, this article explores the narrative uniqueness of *Nar* in comparison to traditional realist novels and the impact of the unique narrative perspective in *Nar* on its artistry and realism. Through the analysis of the narrative rhythm, metaphors and imagery of *Nar*, it is concluded that Cao uses

metaphors to set the tone of emotions in *Nar* and then strengthens the expression of emotions through the change of narrative rhythm, which ultimately makes *Nar* achieve an artistic effect of both strong reality and intense emotional conflict. In the analyze of the novel's realism, both realism and narrative perspective are used to analysis the novel's realistic meaning, highlighting the focus of the analysis from the perspective of the text's content. In the analysis of the expression of emotion, the unique narrative rhythm is chosen as the perspective and the impact of narrative rhythm on the expression of emotion and the role of this in *Nar*. This article only examines one work and lacks a comparative analysis of Cao's other works, which is generally not comprehensive enough to represent all of Cao's creative techniques and characteristics.

References

- [1] Wei, P. (2021). *The Return and Development of Realism——Cao Zhenglu's Novel Creation Theory* [Master's thesis, Hubei University].
- [2] Zhang, Y. (2020). The sociological imagination: globalization and the new period since *The Psychological Narrative of Underclass Literature*. *Journal of Zaozhuang University*, 37(01), 36-43.
- [3] Li, C. (2022). *The Artistic Characteristics of Cao Zhenglu's Novels* [Master's thesis, Northeast Normal University].. <https://doi.org/10.27011/d.cnki.gdbsu.2022.001084>.
- [4] Liu, J., & Li, Y. (2008). Understory literature, or a new aesthetic principle. *Shanghai Literature*, (364), 74-81.
- [5] Park, J. (2014). The Imagination of Community in Diceng Literature - Focusing on Cao Zhenglu's *Nar*. *The Journal of Modern Chinese Literature*, 71, 83-110.
- [6] Wang, D. (2019). *The vision of the intellectuals in the period of social transformation--Cao Zhenglu's Creation Theory* [Master's thesis, East China Normal University].
- [7] Ma, Z., & Jin, H. (2020). The Narrative of Suffering and its Multiple Gestures in Realist Fiction of the New Century: Themes and Narrative Strategies in the Writing of *There and The Neem Tree* as the Centre of Observation. *Dongyue Tribune*, (03), 89-97.
- [8] Cao, Z. (2004). *Nar*. *Dangdai Bimonthly*, (05).
- [9] Zhang, Y. (2008). In Cao Zhenglu's "Underclass Narrative", *Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art*, (131), 31-36. <https://doi.org/10.16532/j.cnki.1002-9583.2008.03.009>.
- [10] Ji, Y. (2005). The Revival of the "Left-Wing Literature" Tradition and Its Power: A Review of Cao Zhenglu's Novel "Nar". *Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art*, (01), 50-53. <https://doi.org/10.16532/j.cnki.1002-9583.2005.01.007>.