

A Fractured Vision of Modernity: The “Poetic” Turn and the Writing of Urban Space in 1980s Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction

Danqi An*

College of Foreign Languages, Yanbian University, Yanbian 133002, China

**Corresponding author: Danqi An.*

Abstract

Since the 1980s, with the advancement of reform and opening up and the rapid changes in social structure, Chinese literary creation has entered the reflection and reconstruction of the existing narrative paradigm and aesthetic order. This article takes Chinese avant-garde novels in the 1980s as the object of study, focusses on the “broken modern picture” presented by them, and examines the intrinsic isomorphism between the poetic turn and urban space writing. The study adopts the text-reading method, and with the help of the theoretical perspective of spatial poetics, it takes works by Can Xue, Ma Yuan, and Ge Fei as cases for comparing and identifying the spatial heterogeneity in their fiction. The study found that avant-garde novels respond to the crisis of modernity with narrative “subtraction”: through the poetic stripping of language and the fragmentation and reorganisation of structure, to dispel the oppression of grand narratives; urban space, as a symbolic field, becomes a key intermediary for writers to transform fragmented reality experience into modern art patterns. This article believes that the poetic practice of avant-garde novels is not only a local experiment of spatial poetics, but also an important path for Chinese writers to rebuild sensory experience and subject speech after the collapse of the narrative framework.

Keywords

avant-garde literature, poetic fiction, the 1980s, urban experience, poetics of space

1. Introduction

This study focusses on the modernity picture presented by Chinese avant-garde novels in the 1980s under the background of social transformation. The reform and opening up in 1978 reshaped the social structure and ideological map at an unprecedented speed. The rapid expansion of cities and the flow of population, and the traditional local cultural imagination were impacted by an urbanisation process full of opportunities but full of contradictions. How literature should speak about this unfamiliar reality became a difficulty shared by writers of the period. At bottom, it was a “crisis of modernity”: history no longer advanced in a straight line, and individuals caught in the great transition slipped into a loss of subjectivity, even a kind of “aphasia.” Avant-garde literature stepped onto the stage at exactly this point. It was at once a revolt against traditional realism and a response to the crisis itself.

The cultural ferment of the 1980s pushed the shift further. Western modern and postmodern theories poured in. Waves of translation, the “Culture Fever,” and the so-called “methodology fever” fed off one another, supplying direct intellectual resources for a change in literary thinking. Writers were no longer content with the question of what to write. They argued instead over how to write, and they pursued “form” as a conscious goal, a shift that later studies have described in terms of the “ideology of form” and a broader transformation of literary thought [1,2]. In this atmosphere the avant-garde novelists adopted a “poetic” strategy. Lyricized language let them push away the certainties of the external world and turn toward inner perception. Fragment and intuition became their means of catching what modern experience could not put into words. Existing scholarship, though, has mostly read this poeticization as a formalist experiment [3], or has studied urban writing in isolation with the focus placed on the 1990s and after. Few works have linked the two within the framework of the poetics of space, and that gap is what this study tries to fill.

Following this line of thought, the study unfolds along three threads: the meaning of “fractured modernity,” the inner mechanism of the “poetic” turn, and the changing character of urban space. In terms of methods, this article uses literature analysis to carefully read relevant theories and texts, taking the spatial theories of Lefebvre and Bachelard as the fulcrum, and drawing on modern criticism to analyse the representative works of Can Xue, Ma Yuan, and Ge Fei one by one.

2. Theorizing Poetic Modernity and Urban Space

2.1 The Fractured Vision of Modernity

The “broken modernity” in this article is not to deny the “modernity” itself, nor to simply judge it as a failure; what it wants to reveal is the inherent fracture, incoherence and irresolving contradictions inherent in modernity. In the Chinese context of the 1980s, the fracturing showed itself from several directions almost at once.

One fracture lay at the level of the subject. Individuals were pulled out of a once highly unified collectivism, yet a stable, self-sufficient modern subjectivity could not be built in so short a time. What followed was widespread anxiety over social identity, together with a sense of emotional and spiritual drift. Social structure was meanwhile being reorganized. The old work-unit system and the urban–rural divide began to loosen before new networks of social relations had taken shape, leaving people suspended in an anomic borderland. A further rupture ran through historical narrative. Once the linear, teleological view of revolutionary history was dismantled, the past seemed to shatter into fragments of uncertain meaning. The bridge joining past, present, and future was cut, and a deep sense of temporal disorder followed.

With fractured modernity as an inescapable background, avant-garde fiction no longer held to the ambition of traditional realism, the ambition to unify the world and supply it with explanation. Coherent plot, clearly drawn characters, and explicit themes were set aside. The narrative structure itself was instead deliberately fragmented. Causal chains broke, and the motives behind characters’ actions turned opaque. The fictional world took on an irrational, absurd, at times nightmarish texture. This kind of “broken” at the formal level is not a skill show-off, but a different perspective to embody the experience of reality, which directly reflects the unreasonableness of the world under the crisis of modernity, and the lack of adaptation of the spiritual subject.

2.2 The Stylistic Aesthetics of the Poetic Turn

Poeticization can be regarded as a unique aesthetic path polished by the avant-garde novel to talk about “broken modernity”. Its core is to shift from “reproduction” logic to “performance” logic: no longer obsessed with the precise copying of the outside world, but focussing on conveying the inner feelings and emotions of the subject. Condensation and strangeness of language is one of the most important techniques. It interrupts the inertia of everyday language with the metaphor of omission, jump and strangeness, forcing readers to re-examine the relationship between language and reality. The second is the emergence and juxtaposition of images. A large number of isolated, grotesque and irrational images in the novel are not connected by the logical chain, but create tension through collisions like poetry, implying the hidden inner consciousness of the characters. In addition, writing also emphasises the depiction of hearing, smell, touch and other non-visual senses, creating an immersive experience full of physical feelings, and directly conveying the chaotic and repressed sensory impact of modern life.

If the poeticization of language is a micro strategy, the poeticisation of narrative is a subversion of the traditional novel model in macrostructure, which is mainly reflected in three aspects. One is the non-linearity of the timeline. Writers frequently use flashbacks, pre-narratives, time stagnation and even cycles to transform physical time into subjective “psychological time”. The second is the subjectivisation and unreliability of the perspective. The narrator is often divided, paranoid and even mixed with polyvoices. Readers cannot obtain a stable and omniscient observation point and are forced to fall into the narrative maze. The third is the openness and polysem of the structure. Novels often have no clear beginning and ending, the plot is fragmented, and refuse to provide definite meaning or solution. Therefore, the text becomes an ambiguous “event” waiting for readers to participate in the construction.

2.3 A Semiotic Analysis of Urban Space

In the theoretical framework of urban space writing, space is no longer regarded as a static container, but the product and reproduction of social relations. In recent years, “space shift” has gradually become an important trend in domestic fiction and narrative research, and continues to advance toward the local context [4,5,6]. Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space holds that space is a site where social relations are reproduced, and that capitalist modernity levels difference through abstract space [7]. Beyond Lefebvre, Soja’s account of “Thirdspace” and postmodern geography establishes space as an ontological dimension standing beside history and society, which adds one more coordinate for reading urban experience [8]. The city, the most tangible material symbol of modernity, carries a double character of its own. It points to opportunity, freedom, and revolt against tradition; it is also, by nature, a gathering ground for capital, disciplinary power, and interpersonal estrangement. Recent studies of urban literature stress, in a similar spirit, that Chinese urban writing has unfolded from the start amid the shocks of modernity and the disputes and counter-movements those shocks provoked [9]. Avant-garde fiction seized on the darker face. The city in its pages looks like a vast, invisible cage, a peculiar construct packed with the weight of power, ideological control, and individual alienation — a “lived space” that is at once “conceived” and suffocating.

When voicing this critical perception, avant-garde writers habitually condensed urban space into imagery and symbol, and two figures stand out: the labyrinth and the ruin. The labyrinth lays open the disorder, complexity, and unknowability of the modern city. Streets lose their power to direct, buildings blur, and characters circle, get lost, and find no exit. The figure records the confusion of physical space, and it also stands for the tangled mesh of social structure and the individual’s loss of bearings. The ruin points instead to historical rupture and the draining away of meaning. The city appears decayed, filthy, on the edge of collapse; the past is forgotten, the future out of reach, and only a meaningless circling of the present remains. It projects outward the spiritual “uprooting” of individuals in an age of emptied values. Such writing echoes Bachelard’s poetics of space and its reflections on space, memory, and dream. Urban space is thereby turned into an “interior space” that carries traumatic memory and desperate imagining.

3. The Resonance between the Poetic Turn and Urban Space: Textual Analysis

3.1 Urban Rootlessness and the Imagery of Drifting in Can Xue’s *Yellow Mud Street*

Can Xue’s *Yellow Mud Street* concentrates the themes of urban rootlessness and drifting with unusual force. The Street in the novel is not a specific geographical coordinate, but more like a block suspended in nothingness. Its existence itself refers to the state of rootlessness and drifting. In the whole street, “filth” is undoubtedly the most central image. Can Xue depicts sewage overflowing, with stench and decay everywhere in Yellow Mud Street, in extremely sensory strokes, and this deliberate spread of “filth” precisely disintegrates all kinds of idealised imaginations about the city in traditional aesthetics. The behaviour of the street residents is absurd and morbid, repeatedly falling into the cycle of self-harm and harming each other. What this form of survival reveals is the dilemma of individuals being uprooted under the cover of modernity. The street is therefore not merely a description of environment but an exposure of the darker side of human nature and of survival anxiety. Critics in China and abroad have identified this concern with individual alienation and an unsparing reality as central to Can Xue’s avant-garde writing [10,11].

Furthermore, the character’s “drift” is not so much a physical displacement as a “root loss” state of being cut off at the spiritual level. This situation just responds to the common situation in the early stage of modern

transformation, that is, individuals break away from the shelter of traditional rural society and collectivism, and immediately fall into the dilemma of “being abandoned” in the philosophical sense. In this regard, Yellow Mud Street is almost a specimen standing on the spiritual ruins, which puts out the dilemma of the soul having nowhere to put it after the grand ideal is broken, together with the fundamental doubts about the existence itself. Therefore, what the work presents is no longer an urban problem in the sense of social news, but a fable about the universal survival of modern people through poetic processing.

3.2 Urban Labyrinth and Ruptured Narrative in Ma Yuan's *The Temptation of Gangdise*

Ma Yuan's *The Temptation of Gangdise* all but abandons the linear logic of traditional realist narration. Its overall structure is labyrinthine rather than linear. It has no clear protagonist, and no complete causal plot can be traced; what stands in their place is an intricate non-linear narrative.

Spatiotemporal dislocation and fragmented collage are the concrete means by which the narrative unfolds. The order of time and place is scrambled, and the various fragments keep recombining and interweaving. Readers' expectation of a coherent story is disappointed again and again, until reading itself becomes the experience of feeling one's way through a maze. Once narrative is spatialized in this manner, time seems to congeal or to fall into a loop. Readers can only search for meaning inside the textual labyrinth, much as individuals try to find their bearings in the labyrinth of the modern city.

Metafictional devices deepen the sense of maze and rupture. Ma Yuan exposes the act of writing inside the text, dissolves the boundaries of narration, and at times even puts questions to the reader. Such self-reference breaks the line between fiction and reality, and it lays bare the fictive nature of language in the construction of the real. Some scholars have summed up this manner of writing as the “narrative trap” [12], a device that returns the power of judgment to readers and foregrounds the openness and plurality of the text. Before a structure of this kind, the continuous sense of time promised by modernity comes apart. What replaces it is a fragmented experience of time, one that maps directly onto the rupture and discontinuity of subjective experience in urban life. “Subjective experience in urban life” here means the lived perception and inner awareness that individuals form, in the modern city, of their own existence, of passing time, and of the situation around them. Once the external world has itself broken apart, that perception can no longer be gathered into a coherent whole; it can only shuttle between moments that do not connect. Ma Yuan's narration mirrors exactly this fracturing at the level of experience.

3.3 Urban Noise and Alienated Language in Ge Fei's Early Fiction

Ge Fei's early fiction, with *The Brown Flock* as the salient case, conveys the absurd yet stifling taste of urban life through a distinctive verbal texture and images stacked layer upon layer. The story is often taken as a model of “fiction becoming poetry.” Through disordered events it passes on an experience in which the world is an enigma, the true and the false cannot be told apart, and reality feels like illusion. What it really sets out to handle is the wasteland and the nothingness deep inside modern civilization.

In its language, the story blends two manners, “sage narration” and labyrinthine narrative. Time and space cross back and forth, the real and the illusory trade places, and the whole text breathes a mysterious, abstruse air. Images of “brown,” “bird flocks,” and “silence” recur throughout. They are not depictions of objective things; they have passed through subjective psychology and turned into “phantasms.” The flock of birds, for instance, is deliberately charged with unreality, as if it pointed to some transcendence beyond reach, or to a longing one wishes to escape yet cannot. And it is exactly this unreality that, in turn, presses out the heaviness of the real.

What such language produces is an effect of “alienation.” Viewed from an existentialist angle, the characters nearly lose their subjectivity and turn into something abstract. In their absurd situation they give off a deep and unplaceable estrangement, and that estrangement is carried by the oppressive quality of the language itself. By letting one narration negate the narration before it, and by leaving deliberate blanks at the “crucial points,” Ge Fei builds a labyrinthine visual and psychological sensation tinged with dense mysticism [13]. These blanks and breaks can be read as a literary translation of the “noise” and the pressure of urban life. The city here is no longer a clamorous external entity; it has been internalized into a silence and an oppression of the spirit. He writes memory in fine detail and then erases it over and over, at bottom an attempt to catch the

fleeting fragments of modern experience, and his verbal style is the aesthetic form that this act of catching takes.

4. The Cultural Significance of the Poetic Turn

4.1 The Inner Link between the Poetic Turn and Modernity

The poetic turn of avant-garde fiction cannot be read only as stylistic experiment. At a deeper level it formed an aesthetic response to the fragmented condition of modernity. Under the broad horizon of fractured modernity, traditional realist narration could hardly hold together an experiential world split into pieces, and the once stable bond between language and the real had likewise cracked. Pioneer writers walk the road of poeticisation largely to find some “lost order” within the language. This “order” does not point to a set of external social norms, but specifically refers to several foundations that tend to disintegrate under the impact of modernity: the originally stable alleged association between language and reality, the meaningful framework sufficient to accommodate scattered experience, and the coherent world picture and main position guaranteed by grand narratives. When history and society can no longer provide a support for meaning, writing returns to the texture of language itself, intending to rebuild an alternative order that can be temporarily inhabited in rhythm, image and structure.

From the perspective of cultural criticism, this turn itself has the meaning of “self-redemption”. With the help of the strangeness of language and the emergence of images, the pioneer novel disturbs the perception mode that tends to be automated, forcing readers to stop and re-examine the meaning of existence. Therefore, this poetic language has become a tool of resistance-resisting the alienation and mediocrity brought about by modernity [14], trying to explore a new narrative order in the fragments, and also finding a temporary foothold for the spirit.

4.2 The Literary Reconstruction of Urban Space

The urban spaces depicted in avant-garde literature have undergone a profound literary transformation. Space was not handled as an objective physical given; it was charged instead with strong subjective emotion and spiritual symbolism. This accords with the central insight of the poetics of space, namely that space is itself the field where the subject perceives and where meaning is projected.

Through image-driven writing, the city was rebuilt as a meeting point of memory and imagination. Can Xue’s “Yellow Mud Street”, Ma Yuan’s “Gangdise”, and the maze-like spaces in Ge Fei’s pages are far more than geographic coordinates; they come closer to metaphors of spiritual predicament. The reconstruction uncovered the loneliness, anxiety, and alienation that individuals bear in the modern city. At the same time it handed an aesthetic dimension back to the city and made it a major resource for literary imagination. Facing the shock of modernity, avant-garde writers “deconstructed” and “reconstructed” the city by rendering it as symbol and labyrinth, trying to find, inside the world of literature, a place where this vast and unfamiliar modern experience could be set down.

5. Conclusion

From this examination of 1980s Chinese avant-garde fiction, conclusions emerge on three levels. The poetic turn proves to be the core strategy by which avant-garde fiction answered the crisis of fractured modernity. In language, defamiliarization and the juxtaposition of images carried out the move from representation to expression; in narrative, non-linear time and unreliable perspective dismantled traditional causal logic, while absurd, nightmarish imagery reached straight for the inner truth of existence. Urban space, in turn, served as the central vehicle for this picture of crisis. Endowed with the twin images of labyrinth and ruin, it stitched the outer crisis of social transformation to the inner crisis of the subject. The two movements, finally, resonated with each other. The poetic strategy let writers pass through the physical surface of the city and remake it as a poetic space dense with spiritual symbols, while the broken, alienated experience of the city supplied the most fitting soil for such anti-traditional artistic exploration. On this basis it is reasonable to infer that the poeticization of avant-garde fiction never stopped at formal experiment. It amounted to a deep change in the view of the world and of the real.

It is on this judgment that the value of the interdisciplinary lens of the poetics of space becomes visible. The lens allows the “language experiments” long dismissed as formalism to be tied, on firm theoretical ground, to urbanization, the crisis of modernity, and the wider socio-historical context. It advances the field’s grasp of the cultural content of avant-garde fiction, and it clarifies further what this “turn” meant within literary history. The turn was indeed an aesthetic rupture. More than that, it marked an important starting point for Chinese literature’s movement from rural narration toward the writing of modern urban experience, laying the ground for the later literary reflection on modernity, the city, and subjectivity.

Along this line, two directions deserve closer attention. One concerns the evolution of a tradition. The poetic lineage and the critical consciousness of the city lived on after the 1990s in continued and altered forms, and how this thread has unfolded still calls for finer tracking. The other concerns the present. China’s urbanization has entered a deeper stage, and digital technology together with globalization now produces spatial experiences and problems of modernity quite unlike those of the past. Revisiting the early predictions of “loss of roots,” “disorientation,” and “alienation” during the “poetic shift” of the 1980s at this time continues to offer invaluable insights into the current state of the spiritual landscape and helps us consider how literature can rebuild its modes of expression in the new, “fragmented” reality.

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