

# ***On the Way of Shaping the Image of the Underclass Minor Intellectuals in Ba Jin's "Cold Nights"***

## ***-Taking the Character Wang Wenxuan as an Example***

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**Abstract:** "Cold Nights" is a long novel written by the contemporary Chinese author Ba Jin in the 1990s, which is called The Civilian Epic. The book mainly portrays the characters of Wang Wenxuan, Zeng Shusheng and Wang's mother. It highlights the misery of the fate of intellectuals at the bottom of society in the war-torn environment and indicts the unreasonable social system. In this essay, the question of "the way author Ba Jin portrays the underclass intellectuals in "Cold Nights"" is studied and explored. How Ba Jin portrays the characters of small intellectuals who are down and out and the significance of such characterization are also analyzed. Conclusions are drawn by means of a close reading of the text and on the basis of extensive literature references. Ba Jin uses both opposites in contrast and like metaphors. The typical character of Wang Wenxuan is a vivid portrayal of the humiliated, humble and cowardly intellectuals of the lower class. It also extends from the single figure of Wang Wenxuan to the portrayal of a group of small intellectuals in wartime, expanding the universal significance of Wang's characterization.

**Keywords:** "Cold Nights", underclass minor intellectuals, Wang Wenxuan

## **1. Introduction**

"Cold Nights" is a long novel written by Ba Jin, one of the contemporary Chinese authors, in the 1990s, which is called The Civilian Epic. One of the themes of this work is to criticize social reality, which is that Place the family tragedy in the real social context of the 'great rear' of the Kuomintang during the war and reflect a series of social problems [1]. The work, "Cold Nights", offers an alternative narrative about wartime China that takes on the theme of physical anxiety as a vehicle for the representation of wartime experiences. In many ways, this novel shows the anxiety of ordinary Chinese people over basic survival needs, overwork, and deteriorating physical health. The consequences are the shattering of the self, the disintegration of pre-war values, and the conflict between the individual and the social environment in wartime China [2].

Wang Wenxuan, Zeng Shusheng, and Wang's mother are the main characters in the book. The novel's main protagonists, Wang Wenxuan and Zeng Shusheng, are a well-educated young couple who wish to utilize their education to manage a "rural, family-oriented" school to impart knowledge to more youngsters. However, when the Japanese invasion war broke out, Wang Wenxuan's family

fled to Chongqing. Under the ravages of war, the family's originally warm and happy home became shaky. The conflict between Wang's mother and her daughter-in-law, Zeng Shusheng, becomes more and more intense, and Zeng Shusheng leaves for Lanzhou with her lover, Chen Fengguang, in a fit of anger. Wang Wenxuan's health also deteriorated, and he eventually died on the eve of victory in the war. In his book, author Ba Jin vividly portrays the image of a group of small intellectuals at the bottom of a war-torn society. They are loyal, honest, and hard-working but cannot escape a tragic fate.

In recent years, the academic community has conducted various interpretations and studies on "'Cold Nights'". They mainly focus on the creation method, personality comparison and aesthetic characteristics and use theories such as feminism, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies to try to make a new interpretation of this classic [3]. The research directions are classified into three categories. The first type is to analyze the character characteristics and causes of the main characters in the book in the context of the times, including the analysis of the images of Wang Wenxuan, Zeng Shusheng and Wang's mother. The second type analyzes the narrative structure of the book "'Cold Nights'" with the knowledge of psychology and sociology. The third type is a comparative analysis of "Cold Nights", which is subdivided into three directions: a vertical comparison of Ba Jin's works in different periods, a horizontal study of "Cold Nights" with the works of other contemporaries, and a comparative analysis of the differences in editions of "Cold Nights". This thesis takes the character traits of Wang Wenxuan, a specific character, as an entry point to analyze the characteristics of his image and the causes of his tragic fate. Although there were more articles of the same type from 2000 to 2009, this paper extends the analysis of Wang Wenxuan's characterization to consider the characteristics of a group of small intellectuals in wartime, covering an area less analyzed in similar articles.

To sum up, the subject of this paper is the writing techniques and their significance in shaping the character traits of Wang Wenxuan, one of the main characters by Ba Jin. Textual analysis and close reading of the text are used, and a large amount of reading literature is referred to in order to obtain more rigorous and perfect analysis results.

## **2. Heterogeneous Contrast, Highlighting Individuality**

### **2.1. Contrasting Acceptance of Humiliation and Resistance to New Ideas**

As one of the main characters in "Cold Nights", Wang Wenxuan is a quiet, cowardly and humble man who gives in to the demands of life and whose most striking character traits are his cowardice and pessimism [4]. He was originally an intellectual with a good education. When he was young, he had the lofty ideal of joining the cause of education and reform. However, the chaos of the times made it difficult for him to develop his ambition, and he had to stoop to the negligible position of a newspaper proofreader [5]. His cowardice and humility are reflected in every aspect of his life. In his relationship with his wife, Zeng Shusheng, Wang Wenxuan hardly ever shows the manly spirit he should have as a husband.

When Zeng Shusheng ran away from home angrily, Wang Wenxuan was so remorseful that he looked around for his wife "in shock and despair". When he overheard his wife making out with another man, he just "felt his heart sting" and stared at her back. Even to ask for his wife's forgiveness, he faltered and hesitated for fear of rejection and finally left with his head hanging. Faced with the sharp conflict between his mother-in-law and daughter-in-law at home, Wang Wenxuan can only cowardly please both sides in order to settle things.

His wife, Zeng Shusheng, once complained about Wang Wenxuan: "You're so patient, you can endure anything." In Wang Wenxuan's view, the only way to resist suffering is to endure it. This bottomless patience and unconditional submissiveness pushed Wang Wenxuan step by step into the

abyss of misery. The character defects of cowardice and patience make Wang Wenxuan's life choice only a tragedy of destiny.

On the contrary, Zeng Shusheng, in the same background and family atmosphere, refuses to give in to the status quo but chooses to fight and flee. She is "plump and young and full of life", and by nature, she loves freedom and is lively, unwilling to endure loneliness and emptiness. She still has conjugal love and longing for Wang Wenxuan, but she is more concerned with the realization of her own life value. After several struggles, she still chooses to go to Lanzhou and start a new life.

Unlike the traditional criticism of Zeng Shusheng's act of "abandoning his family" in "Cold Nights", the individualist altruistic humanitarian discourse does not have an overwhelmingly dominant position; they are in a relationship of equal dialogue. This approach inherits the consistent theme of Ba Jin's works - on the basis of criticizing the feudal system and the evil nature of ethical concepts, the individualistic concept since May Fourth is allowed to be in continuous dialogue with the humanitarian code, allowing different value discourses to argue for the rationality of their respective existence and to show their respective limitations [6].

Zeng Shusheng's decisiveness and courage to save himself are further contrasted with Wang Wenxuan's weakness. In dealing with the relationship between husband and wife, Zeng Shusheng believes that it is better to separate than to continue to live together, while Wang Wenxuan is bent on denying himself and tries to maintain his shattered relationship with his wife by making self-mutilating concessions. On the choice of her personal future, Zeng Shusheng, as a woman, has the courage to leave the old and seek the new, while Wang Wenxuan, even though he has grievances, can only endure them bitterly, cowering in front of the status quo that is pressing his every step of the way.

The contrast between Zeng Shusheng's vitality and Wang Wenxuan's degradation of life is clear. The author tries to further strengthen Wang Wenxuan's characterization of cowardice and weakness, and his fear of self-restraint through the contrasting characters, highlighting the cowardice and patience of Wang Wenxuan's character with the different perceptions and attitudes of the husband and wife at the family level and pointing out the core causes of his tragic fate.

## **2.2. The Contrast Between Those Who Are down and out and Those Who Are Powerful and Wealthy**

Against the backdrop of the war situation, Wang Wenxuan, a small intellectual, lives a poor material life. His low social status and meager financial resources make his personality more and more insignificant. In front of his powerful superiors and his young and promising rivals, Wang Wenxuan can only be submissive without dignity.

Wang Wenxuan was working as a proofreader in a book company, and "the smell of ink irritated his nose so strongly that today it made him nauseous. However, he had to put up with it." Wang Wenxuan inwardly cursed the injustice of the company's superior, Director Zhou, who deducted the salaries of the employees, "but he even tried to hold back his breath, not daring to make a sound." From these descriptions of mental activities, it is easy to see how humble and cowardly Wang Wenxuan is: he is exploited by the heavy workload and becomes ill, but even though he is full of grievances, he does not dare to show any of them, to keep the job that he got by the strong recommendation of his fellow villagers. However, powerful people such as the general manager, director Zhou, Wu and other people treat staff as contemptuous as the treatment of mole crickets. The bonus of thousands of dollars, the starry-eyed praise and the ingratiation are enough to ensure that they can live a happy, nourishing, and glamorous life even in the war-torn era.

Chen Fengguang, Zeng Shusheng's lover, held a management position at the Dachan Bank. As mentioned earlier, Wang Wenxuan's salary was not enough to make ends meet, yet Chen Fengguang was able to take Zeng Shusheng to fancy restaurants and cabaret theaters frequently and buy her

expensive cakes as birthday presents. At the time of the imminent fall of the accompanying capital Chongqing, Director Chen even had the means to obtain a ticket to Lanzhou. This shows the strength of his financial resources. Chen Fengguang was also more generous, resolute and decisive in dealing with the world. He kept convincing Zeng Shusheng to give up her “single-minded and cowardly sick husband and her extremely selfish and stubbornly conservative mother-in-law.” He leaves his home, which is always swaying with gray and dim lights, to pursue a new and promising life.

Chen Fengguang’s seemingly more courageous and resourceful character is, in fact, the backbone of power and money as capital. The author intends to compare powerful and wealthy people such as Chen with Wang Wenxuan, not only to improve further Wang Wenxuan’s poor and desolate character from the social level but also to reflect the social root causes of the poverty of the small intellectuals represented by Wang Wenxuan with the huge difference in the life patterns of people from different classes. Wang Wenxuan’s own humble and cowardly character is certainly one of the major reasons for his miserable fate, while the huge gap between the rich and the poor and the unjust social order also blocks the narrow passage for ordinary people to move up and improve their lives.

### 3. Similar Metaphors Highlighting Commonalities

Tang Boqing is Wang Wenxuan’s high school classmate, and their first meeting after many years is in front of a cold tavern. Tang’s wife died in childbirth while she was alone in the countryside. Tang Boqing could not accept this tragic reality, and in recent years, he has been in a poor situation, so he has to drink every day to kill his sorrow. The second time they met was at a tavern, where Tang Boqing’s appearance was already haggard, and his mental state was even more depressed than before. When he was so drunk that he was unconscious, he was unfortunately hit by a big truck and died immediately.

The tragic fate of Tang Boqing leads Wang Wenxuan to think of his own situation, and he feels heavy and melancholy while sympathizing with it. The perspective of the characters’ fate reflects not only the “pessimism” factor in Wang Wenxuan but also a more abstract and surreal meaning, the feeling of powerlessness that one cannot escape from the strange circle of fate despite struggling in front of it. The sad ending of Tang Boqing, a fellow student, is put into the eyes of Wang Wenxuan, which creates a layer of sadness linked to his own fate [7]. In addition, the death of Tang Boqing also cast an indelible psychological shadow on Wang Wenxuan, who “woke up and understood” after witnessing his friend’s tragic death. This not only illustrates the shock of Tang Boqing’s death to Wang Wenxuan but also foreshadows the tragic end of Wang Wenxuan.

Both Wang Wenxuan and Tang Boqing were once well-educated but now find it difficult to make ends meet with their education. The tragic situation shared by Wang Wenxuan and Tang Boqing begs the question of the value of so-called knowledge and education in changing lives in a time of war and chaos. Not only does knowledge fail to improve living conditions, but it misleads people. Knowledge gives a modern humanistic ideal, but it is difficult for the ideal to survive in real society. What Ba Jin wants to highlight is that in a society of power, knowledge itself is meaningless, and when knowledge is attached to power that it really becomes wealth [8].

### 4. A Portrait of the Intellectuals at the Bottom in of a War-torn Society

It is said Ba Jin that writing the book “Cold Nights” was like “writing a biography of an acquaintance”. The experiences and encounters of the main character Wang Wenxuan were not invented out of thin air by the author but happened in real life around Ba Jin. Ba Jin’s friend Miao Chongqun was a prose writer with a unique writing style, and he was also just an obscure intellectual who “never bothered anyone and was not taken seriously anywhere.” He eventually died of hemoptysis due to worsening lung disease. In “Cold Nights”, Zhong Lao dies of cholera, and the book’s chaotic and filthy hospitals

and inactive government officials can be found in Chongqing, the capital of the 1950s. The purpose of Ba Jin's "Cold Nights" is "to accuse the old society and the old system."

In the wartime capital of the great backwater, the well-being of the intellectuals was challenged by many factors. The war disturbed the entire society, and almost everyone was in a state of upheaval and turmoil. On the one hand, under special socio-economic conditions, Chongqing played out numerous stories of rising and falling classes. It was difficult for educated people to maintain the decent life they had before the war, and they were directly faced with the problem of "settling down". On the other hand, under the threat of war and in the midst of the ups and downs of life, the self-identity of the scholars also faced shocks [9].

Wen Xuan represents the group of intellectuals in the lower and middle classes of society, who are peaceful, upright and kind, but for no reason are polished by this perverse reality to the point of losing their hope in life [10]. They endure injustice and work hard but are at the mercy of the bureaucratic elites who hoard the money. It is true that the character traits of tolerance, humiliation and obedience contributed to their tragic fate. Wang Wenxuan was downgraded from an "intellectual elite" to an "insignificant scholar" and was forced from being a rebel of the social system to becoming a subordinate of social power, a transformation that reflects the social identity and personality defects of modern Chinese intellectuals [7]. However, the formation of such characters was, to a certain extent, caused by the social environment of the time. Ba Jin "criticized them but sympathized with each and every one of them; it was the unreasonable old social system that made them suffer so much." At a time when the fate of the country was uncertain, when people's livelihood was in decline, and when the country was in turmoil, the dignitaries took the opportunity to make a fortune out of the national tragedy. The warring times subverted society's protection of individuals, and Wang Wenxuan's tragic fate was predetermined.

The author draws on a wide range of real life, and in his work, he also intends to create images of lower-class intellectuals with similar experiences and personalities as Wang Wenxuan, such as Tang Boqing and Zhong Lao, in essence, to highlight the universal characteristics of typical characters. They are all well-educated and have great ambitions to save the country, and they are unwilling to bend to the wishes of others in the world. They bring convenience to others by demanding themselves. This sense of self-moral restraint only makes them more confined in the murky and dark social reality. However, the real root cause of their tragedy lies in the unfair and unreasonable social system. The author expands the universal significance of Wang Wenxuan's typical character by shaping a group of small intellectuals, elevating the causes of Wang Wenxuan's tragic fate from the individual level to the social and group level, and deepening the tragic meaning of Wang Wenxuan's character.

## 5. Discussion

Wang Wenxuan, one of the protagonists of "Cold Nights", suffers at both ends in a family environment where his mother and wife are in sharp conflict, and in society, he suffers from harsh criticism and abuse from his superiors. He is brimming with information but has nowhere to display nor to put his talent to use in service to his nation. Under the weight of the cruel reality, he is forced to develop the character traits of tolerance, humiliation and obsequiousness. Ba Jin uses the contrast of opposites, first from the perspective of family, and then from the more courageous and decisive character traits of his wife, Zeng Shusheng, to highlight Wang Wenxuan's cowardly and weak character from the contrast between his inner personality and thinking concepts. It reveals the inner causes of his tragic fate. The contrast between the quality of life, thinking and personal ability of Director Chen and Director Zhou, who are in power, and Wang Wenxuan, who is the representative of the downtrodden, complements the description of Wang Wenxuan's social situation and makes the characterization more three-dimensional and complete.



On the basis of the contrast of opposites, Ba Jin uses the metaphor of the same kind of writing to suggest the fate of Wang Wenxuan through the encounter with Tang Boqing, a character with similar life experiences as Wang Wenxuan. The tragic fate of these two characters is raised to the consideration of the tragic fate of the intellectuals at the bottom of the wartime hierarchy. It explores the universal impact of the war-torn environment and the unreasonable social system on the fate of honest intellectuals in turbulent times.

The alternate use of the two approaches of contrast enables the author to highlight and refine Wang Wenxuan's character traits from both the positive and negative sides with a variety of writing techniques. At the same time, the author's reflections and complaints about the unreasonable social system are expressed through Wang Wenxuan's character of enduring humiliation and his tragic end of dying of lung disease due to lack of money for medical treatment and the tragic fate of small intellectuals in general during the war.

## 6. Conclusions

The author Ba Jin portrays the character of Wang Wenxuan as a peaceful, reclusive and cowardly person from two perspectives: "contrast" and "similar metaphor". The analysis of the causes of the tragic fate of Tang Boqing and Wang Wenxuan rises the discussion of the irrationality of the social structure, portrays a universal group of small intellectuals in wartime, and enriches the personality characteristics of the intellectuals at the bottom from the macro level. Through the portrayal of this character, Ba Jin has realized his indictment of the real society.

This dissertation provides a new perspective for the academic study of "Cold Nights" that is, taking the character of Wang Wenxuan as an example, it analyses and explores Ba Jin's writing techniques for portraying the wartime intellectuals of the lower class and concludes that the author uses three approaches, namely, "contrast of opposites," "metaphor of the same kind," and "group portrayal" to shape and perfect the characteristics of Wang Wenxuan's image of a minor intellectual. It is conducive to broadening the research ideas and deepening the readers' knowledge and understanding of Ba Jin's writing techniques. However, there are still shortcomings in the thesis. For example, the analysis of Ba Jin's approach to character creation is limited to one work, "Cold Nights", and the number of research subjects is limited. In future research, we can analyse the uniqueness of Ba Jin's characterization of Wang Wenxuan in "Cold Nights" in comparison with the characterization in Ba Jin's literary works of different periods and in the works of different contemporaneous writers. The vertical and horizontal comparisons of multiple textual objects are used to improve the knowledge of Ba Jin's characterization techniques of the lower-class intellectuals from a more comprehensive perspective.

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