

## **The Exploration of Cultural Region, Value, and Time in Shen Congwen and Faulkner's Novels**

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The paper aims at the comparison of the novels of the Chinese writer Shen Congwen and the American writer William Faulkner from an intercultural communication perspective. These two writers started off from very different regions of the globe but both became world-famous in the 20th century. The paper concentrates on an analysis of cultural region, value, and time in the two writers' novels and argues that those three elements have played a vital role in helping us understand the writers' novels as well as intercultural communication issues.

Shen Congwen is one of the most representative modern writers in the twentieth century from China. He was once nominated as the candidate for Nobel Prize for Literature and gained his fame both at home and abroad. Since Shen Congwen's novels focus on the regional life of his home town, most of his works are imbued with the folklores and customs of his native western Hunan, and he has often been compared to William Faulkner, one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1950. Faulkner is considered as one of the most important "Southern writers" as well as the one of the greatest American writers of all time. Many researchers have mentioned some similarities between the two writers' novels. For instance, Jeffrey C. Kinkley, a professor of Asian studies at St. John's University in New York as well as the leading American scholar devoted to Shen Congwen research, regards that "West Hunan" in Shen Congwen's novels is an imaginary kingdom, which is like "the Yoknapatawpha world" in Faulkner's works. Another famous scholar Xia Zhiqing points out both Shen Congwen and Faulkner show interest in the naive and innocent nature of human beings. However, there have been no research papers or books focusing on the comparative study of the two writers' novels from an intercultural communication perspective. Thus, this paper aims for this perspective; to be more specific, it concentrates on an analysis of cultural region, value, and time in the two writers' novels and argues that the three elements have played a vital role in helping us understand the writers' novels as well as intercultural communication issues. The research method adopted in the paper is a kind of parallel comparison, illustrating the similarities as well as differences of the two writers' novels from the aspects mentioned above.

### **Cultural Region**

Region as a kind of cultural space is a specific area occupied by people sharing recognizable and distinctive cultural characteristics as well as cultural heritage. Consequently, the cultural region consists of a large cultural space which can represent an entire culture system and reflect cultural traits, beliefs, values, and complexes. As St. Clair (2008) explains:

Cultures have a geographical dwelling, or a space. They have ontological structures. Furthermore, they are united to a geographical environment, and respond to it. The human environment and the natural environment can never be separated. Human beings leave their ontological markers on their environment. Their reciprocal relation creates geographical milieu and cultural milieu. (p. 2 )

Cultural region has played a significant role in Shen Congwen and William Faulkner's novels. The commonality of Shen Congwen and Faulkner lies in their strong attachment to their particular regions where they were born and nurtured, which are respectively "West Hunan world" and "Yoknapatawpha world." The regional life and people portrayed by Shen Congwen and Faulkner possess unique cultural characteristics as well as universal ontological significance.

Most of Shen Congwen's works concentrate on the depiction of the people in western Hunan, where he was born and bred. Region has played a very important role in the writing of Shen Congwen, who becomes obsessed with his region's customs, speech, manner, history, folklore and belief. "West Hunan" (also known as "Xiangxi") is a mountainous region close to the border of Guizhou, in which the upper areas are occupied by Miao minority people and the lower by Han (or a mixture). This region is part of the ancient state of Chu, known for its Chu Wu culture. The area was regarded by the more northern cultures of the time as barbaric and uncivilized. However, Shen Congwen has rediscovered the unique value of Chu Wu culture, the life mode of native western Hunan and its moral strength. Although he portrays his region for its particularities, his works also reflect common Chinese rural life as well as some universal features of human beings.

For Faulkner, most of his novels are set in Yoknapatawpha County, termed as "postage stamp" by the writer. In one of his interviews, Faulkner talked about the significance of his invention of Yoknapatawpha County in his fiction by saying "Beginning with Sartoris I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it...It opened up a gold mine of other people, so I created a cosmos of my own..." (Faulkner, 1958, p. 41).

Yoknapatawpha County is a literary imaginary area in Faulkner's works based on the Lafayette County in Mississippi, of which his hometown Oxford is the county seat. Faulkner was raised in Oxford and spent most of his life time in Oxford, thus he was greatly influenced by the history of his family and the region in which he lived as well as the history and culture of the Old South as a whole. Malcolm Cowley (1967) in *The Portable Faulkner* illustrated the deep influence Oxford had exerted in Faulkner's works:

The Pattern was based on what he saw in Oxford or remembered from his childhood; on scraps of family tradition (the Falkners, as they spelled the name, and had played their part in the history of the state); on kitchen dialogues between the black cook and her amiable husband; on Saturday-afternoon gossip in Courthouse Square; on stories told by men in overalls squatting on their heels while they passed around a fruit jar full of white corn liquor; on all the sources familiar to a small-town Mississippi boy—But the whole of it was elaborated, transformed, given convulsive

life by his emotions; until by simple intensity of feeling the figures in it became a little more than human, became heroic or diabolical, became symbols of the old South, of war and reconstruction, of commerce and machinery destroying the standards of the past. There in Oxford, Faulkner performed a labor of imagination that has not been equaled in our time, and a double labor: first, to invent a Mississippi country that was like a mythical kingdom, but was complete and living in all its details; second, to make his story of Yoknapatawpha County stand as a parable or legend of all the Deep South. (p. viii)

Malcolm Cowley (1967) believes Yoknapatawpha actually serves as a mythical kingdom as well as a “parable or legend of all the Deep South” (p. xx). Using Oxford as a background, Faulkner not only depicts its geographical and cultural milieu, but also the common situation which human beings have been confronted with. As Hoffman (1961) commented, he wrote “from and about a part of country that has always fascinated the readers the world over; the South has its own sources of profound interests, and Faulkner soon became known as pre-eminently a ‘novelist of the South’” (p. 17).

As has been revealed above, both Shen Congwen and Faulkner focus on the portrayals of two particular regions “West Hunan” and “Yoknapatawpha,” and the two areas are the starting points and footstones of their literary worlds, which reflect the unique cultural values in their novels.

#### Cultural Value

Shen Congwen is profoundly influenced by the Chinese traditional cultural concept of harmony. He tends to look at humanity and nature in total harmony and in eternal inseparability, while Faulkner holds a firm belief in individualism, which is the typical reflection of American culture value.

In the traditional Chinese culture, the notion of “harmony” is a crucial term. The concept of “Supreme harmony” or “Great Harmony” (Tai he) was first mentioned in *The Book of Changes (Zhou yi)*. Fung Yu-Lan (2007) in his book *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* stated:

Harmony of this sort, which includes not only human society, but permeates the entire universe, is called the Supreme Harmony. In “Appendix I” of the *Yi*, it says: “How vast is the originating power of [the hexagram], Ch’ien....Unitedly to protect the Supreme Harmony: this is indeed profitable and auspicious.” (p. 286)

In short, harmony is a very important concept in traditional Chinese culture, and it embodies the supreme ideal of Chinese culture that regards “All things are nurtured together without injuring one another; all courses are pursued together without collision” (Fung, 2007, p. 286).

The literary ideal of Shen Congwen’s novels is the pursuit and portrayal of the harmonious relationship from the point of view of humans and of nature, as well as human

beings themselves in society. In his “West Hunan” works, the relation between human beings and nature is intimate and harmonious instead of being hostile and indifferent. Human nature is a key word in Shen Congwen’s works, and he has a unique interpretation of it. What he appeals for is a kind of human nature which embodies the affinity between human beings and nature. In his representative works such as novels *Border City* and *The Long River*, the short story collection *Lamp of Spring* and *Black Phoenix*, he has portrayed a large number of characters who are natural beings, full of natural temperament, vigor, and robustness. Shen Congwen even addresses them (2002) in such a poetic way: “They are like light, heat, spring water, and fruit, and in fact they are everything in the universe” (p. 168). Many critics speak highly of Shen Congwen’s novels for portraying characters with beautiful souls, who have the personalities of being natural, naïve, and sincere. In his famous novel *Border City*, Shen Congwen explains his motivation in writing novels by saying what he attempts to depict is a kind of human being’s lifestyle, a kind of elegant, healthy, natural lifestyle which suits the human nature. The lifestyle that reflects the affinity between nature and human being is the highest lifestyle Shen Congwen has pursued. Actually, what permeates his “West Hunan” novels is a kind of healthy and natural lifestyle of the rural folks in his native region, and in their daily lives; they just follow the rhythms of nature, and have a harmonious relationship with family and sex by learning from the laws of nature.

While Faulkner’s novels concentrate on the core belief of individualism. In Faulkner’s view, individualism is the true representation of human nature, and he regards that human beings can only be saved by maintaining their individualistic personalities. Faulkner even asserts that he would be a preacher of individualism and he holds a firm belief that the uniqueness of each individual is of paramount value, and thus in Faulkner’s view, an individual or “I” identity should be placed in the first position.

Hofstede (1991) defines individualism as “societies in which ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family” (p. 51). According to Hofstede, the individual is the most important unit in society and the value of the individual is of vital importance. Most individualism can be observed elsewhere in the world; however, it has served as one of the fundamental values of American culture, and this individualistic view can be traced back to the early history of American culture. At the beginning of the nation, most people were immigrants from Europe. When faced with a desolate and uninhabited wilderness, they developed their habits of survival based on individualism, and great importance was attached to self-dependence. Later on, America won its independence from England, and founded a federal country based on the principle that “all men are created equal.” Individualism was reinforced by Emerson’s transcendentalism which laid great emphasis on the unique value of each individual life. Therefore, as Gannon (2001) underscores, “Equality of opportunity, independence, initiative, and self-reliance are some of the values that have remained as basic American ideals throughout history. All of these values are expressive of a high degree of individualism” (p. 213).

Christianity has also exerted a profound influence on individualism, as Samovar and Porter (2004) note, “The western concept of the importance of the individual...can be linked partially to Christianity.” Woodward (1999, p. 55) also points out, “Christianity discovers individuality in the sense that it stresses personal conversion” and he further illustrates, “the

Gospels are replete with scenes in which Jesus works one-on-one healing this woman's sickness, forgiving that man's sins, and calling each to personal conversion." Furthermore, the significance of human beings is particularly stressed in the Bible. According to the Old Testament, human beings are important because God create them in his image, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." In this sense, God has a special relationship with each person, and each person is significant to him. Therefore, individualism in American culture has rich resources both in history and religion.

In his novels, Faulkner depicts a series of characters, who can be regarded as individualistic heroes. These characters are mainly based on his great-grandfather William C. Falkner, a legendary figure who was a colonel in the civil war, the owner of a railroad and a member of the state legislature, and in the end was killed by a business rival. His great-grandfather was the original character in many of Faulkner's novels such as *Sartoris*, *The Unvanquished*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Go Down, Moses* and many other stories. According to William Van O'Connor (1959), they have become "part of the legend of the Old South, and they have played an important part in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha saga" (p. 5). The characters like the Compsons, the Sartoris, the McCaslines are Faulkner's "Mississippi aristocrats," who are enterprising, independent and ambitious.

Under the influence of Christian beliefs, Faulkner advocates the dignity and equality of every individual in his works, and in novels such as *The Hamlet*, *Go Down, Moses*, and *Light in August*, John Pilkington argued (1983), "Especially Faulkner insisted upon the dignity of every man whatever his color or condition in life; he continually affirmed that the poor, the sick, the elderly, the young, the mentally retarded, even the criminal, have yet their claim to the rights of man" (p. xii).

However, many of Faulkner's novels deal with the theme which individualism has been threatened by various forces such as traditions, taboos, prejudice as well as the modern society. For example, Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and Ike McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses* both live in plantation families, and their lives are somewhat controlled by the burden of their heritage. Quentin sees himself as the inheritor of a tradition of the Old South, and isolates himself from real life; he is oppressed by the thought that the Old South has become degenerate, and as a consequence, he commits suicide. Ike is also assumed to take an inherited responsibility of looking after the McCaslin plantation passed down to him, but unlike Quentin, Ike tries to get rid of the evil heritage of his family which was built on slavery, and chooses to make a living as a carpenter.

The race taboo or prejudice is another hazard to individualism. Faulkner's novels reveal that many of his characters, both the whites and the blacks have been prisoners of racial prejudice. In one short story "The Fire and the Hearth" from *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner depicts the white boy and black boy sleeping in the same bed. Suddenly one day, the white boy realizes he is a white person and refuses to sleep with the black boy. The racial taboo also destroyed Joe Christmas in *Light in August* (1932), who could not confirm his real individual identity of being a white person or a black person his whole life and is more likely to be regarded as a Negro.

Faulkner believes that modern society also deprives human beings of their personalities;

Popeye in *Sanctuary* (1932) is a good example. In the novel, he is depicted as the representation of a mechanical existence with an empty soul: "...His face had a queer, bloodless color, as though seen by electric light; against the sunny silence, in his slanted straw hat and his slightly akimbo arms, he had that vicious depthless quality of stamped tin" (p. 2). In this sense, Popeye has been dehumanized by modern society and has become a hollow person who has lost his own personality as an individual, as well as his ability to love.

From the above analysis we can see that Shen Congwen's novels mainly focus on the expression of Chinese traditional cultural value of harmony. For Faulkner, on the other hand, individualism is the most cherished American heritage; he believes that human beings can only be saved by maintaining their individualistic personalities. Despite the differences between the two Chinese and American cultural values, they both denote humanistic appeal.

### Cultural Time

Space is closely related to time, since time is embedded in cultural space. As St. Clair and Wang point out (2008), "Time exists within space. The present is embedded in the past and the future is embedded in the present. This model of the stratification of cultural space is also predicated on dialectic between the past and the present in the practical consciousness of the co-present" (p. xx).

As has been discussed above, both Shen Congwen and Faulkner identify themselves with their cultural regions of "West Hunan world" and "Yokanatawpha County." In a sense, the two regions are closely related to the past. In Shen Congwen's famous novel *Fengzi*, he speaks highly of the world that is full of love and harmony, and regards it as the childhood period of human beings. Faulkner also cherishes the past of the Old South, a kind of "Edenic past," as termed by Fredrick J. Hoffman (1961) who wrote, "It is a past removed from historical time, an Eden coexisting with society yet never mistaken for society by those who come to it for refreshment and purification" (p. 27). The "Edenic past" has been described in a large number of Faulkner's characters in *The Bear*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Light in August*, and *Requiem for a Nun*. Among them, Lena Grove is an ideal character, "whose existence in 'pure' Edenic past is marked by her absolute immunity from the stresses and strains of human involvement" (p. 27).

The reason why Shen Congwen and Faulkner's characters identify themselves strongly with the past in "West Hunan world" and "Yokanatawpha county" lies in the fact that the past has served as a kind of rich resource and has helped reshape the present. Again as St. Clair (2008) pointed out, "As the layers of cultural space are laminated, the present enfolds into the co-present before being redefining or modifying the old-past" (p. 62).

However, with the passage of time, the old ways of living, the traditional values of the old world that both Shen Congwen and Faulkner cherished, have been eroded by the commercialization and mechanization of the present time they live in. Shen Congwen criticizes the materialism erosion sharply in "West Hunan World" by writing: "the beautiful song and beautiful bodies have disappeared, and women paid more and more attention to money now" (p. 202). While Faulkner's novels also portray the tragic degeneration and corruption of the Old South and the rise and invasion of the insidious northern industrialized

force such as Snopes, as John Pilkington (1983) remarked,

He deplores the materialism that he felt had eroded human values, he saw with the dismay the breakdown of the parental responsibility in the home, the growth of religious bigotry in the churches, the failure of the courts to dispense justice evenhandedly, the ever-widening racial division in the community. He chronicled with regret the decay of the leadership exercised by aristocratic men like his ancestors and their defeat by the rising class of amoral businessmen. (p. 296)

Although both Shen Congwen and Faulkner's works deal with the issue of contrast between past and present, Faulkner's novels focus more on the influence of the past upon the present. Last year, during a visit to the Center for Faulkner Studies at Southeast Missouri State University as a visiting scholar, this author had an interview on Faulkner with the director of the Center, Professor Robert W. Hamblin. One question that was raised was "What do you think of the themes revealed in the mythology of Yoknapatawpha?" Professor Hamblin particularly stressed the dominant theme of Faulkner's novels: Was the tension between past and present?:

There are hundreds of scholars who study Faulkner's themes, and they find many themes. One of the most prominent ones is the influence of the past upon the present. As one of his characters, Gavin Stevens, says, "The past is never dead, it is not even past." In the American South, in addition to the legacy of slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the struggle of poor people for justice and equality, there are a lot of past influences upon the present, and one of Faulkner's grand themes is how his characters negotiate the past and present. As with any cultural history, there are a lot of things from the past that you cherish, you admire, you preserve. But there are also parts of the past we need to get rid of, things we have to change or transcend in order to move on, just as in our personal lives there are unhappy and tragic events that we have to put aside and move on; and I think it is this need to escape to the past and move on to the present and future that engages many of Faulkner's characters. Sometimes the past can be treated as a positive heritage, because there are a lot of traditions we do need to preserve and cherish. But much of the past has been a burden, a curse, like slavery, so the tension between past and present is one of Faulkner's major themes.

Not only Prof. Hamblin, but also many Faulkner researchers share a similar view to that quoted above. Hoffman (1961) even argues that the tension of past and present has affected the personality and psychology and action of some characters in Faulkner's novels, "The pressure of past upon present is seen in a variety of complex and interesting ways as affecting the psychology and morality of individual actions" (p. 24). Faulkner has depicted many tragic figures who are under the pressure of the tension between past and present. Among them, Gail Hightower of *Light in August* is one representative character.

Gail Hightower is a figure who is "trapped on history," a history "about the Civil War and

his grandfather, a cavalryman, who was killed” (p. 56). He is so controlled by the glorious past of his grandfather that he has denied his real life, paying no attention to anybody, including his wife. Even though he lives in the present, his mind is in the past. He had once been a minister, and always seems to mix the present with the past, “It was as if he couldn’t get religion and that galloping cavalry and his dead grandfather shot from the galloping horse untangled from each other, even in the pulpit. And that he could not untangle them in his private life, at home either, perhaps” (p. 56). As a result, he was dismissed from his position and betrayed by his wife who became a prostitute later.

The above passage illustrates the approaches of dealing with the issue of time in the two writers’ novels. In fact, Shen Congwen and Faulkner have adopted different attitudes towards the past. Shen Congwen identifies himself strongly with the pure and harmonious state of the past in “West Hunan World,” and believes it to be the representation of the perfect status of human civilization, while Faulkner holds a dialectical attitude towards the past in the Old South. On the one hand, he cherishes the traditional values in the Old South such as “individualism,” “courage,” “pride,” “sympathy,” “perseverance” and “sacrifice”; on the other hand, he realizes the inhuman moral crisis hidden in the slavery-based Old South culture and passes his sharp criticism upon the strict paternal system, the women’s ostensible moral value, and racial discrimination within the culture, and reveals that these elements have led to the degeneration of the South.

### Conclusion

Literary works can serve as good materials for research into intercultural communication; however, the perspective has often been ignored. This paper aims at the study of the cultural region, value and time in the novels of Shen Congwen and Faulkner and argues that the cultural regions of “West Hunan” and “Yoknapatawpha” created by the two writers serve as the myths of the past that convey the core values of harmony and individualism in Chinese and American cultures respectively. Nevertheless, the two writers take different approaches to past and present: Shen Congwen is more fascinated with the past, while Faulkner depicts the tension of past and present and reveals how the influence of the past upon the present affects his characters’ psychology and personality.

In short, as great literary writers of the twentieth century, the two writers started off from their respective regions and became world famous by illustrating the unique Chinese and American cultural resources. Despite the differences derived from their different cultural backgrounds, the two writers show their common humanistic concern and express their optimistic hope towards the future of human beings. As Faulkner (1954) declares in his Nobel Prize address, “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail” (p. 4).

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Shen Congwen (1902-1988) is one of the most influential writers in China's modern history. His novel *Border Town* was banned under Mao's regime, only to become an inspiration to a new generation of Chinese writers in the late twentieth century. [Read more.](#) Product details. The writing and translation are beautiful. It's a simple story and not overly exciting, but the author paints a picture of a time and place that is enchanting. The culture and innocence of that time is so different from ours in the US, perhaps that's why some people aren't keen on this book. I found the notes at the end.