

# A Study of the Modern Spirit and the Construction of Subjectivity in Contemporary Chinese Literature



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**Abstract:** Since the beginning of the New Era, Chinese literature has been undergoing a profound and complex process of modernization. Contemporary writers have actively responded to the challenges and opportunities brought about by the changing times through sustained and rich literary creation. Their works not only demonstrate a continuous exploration and expression of the diverse spirit of modernity but also reflect a conscious pursuit and gradual establishment of literary subjectivity. It is precisely the intertwining and mutual reinforcement of these two dimensions during the transformation process that have jointly shaped the unique spiritual character of contemporary Chinese literature. Based on this, this paper, starting from the connotations of the modern spirit and the construction of subjectivity as well as their intrinsic connection, systematically elaborates on the diverse modes of expression of the modern spirit in contemporary Chinese literature and the specific practical pathways for the construction of subjectivity, thereby providing an integrated analytical framework for understanding the modernization of contemporary literature.

**Keywords:** contemporary Chinese literature, modern spirit, subjectivity, criticality, humanism

## Introduction

The development of contemporary Chinese literature is inextricably linked to our nation's march toward modernization. Literature does not merely serve as a mirror reflecting various social changes; rather, it actively shapes the spirit of the age and influences how people perceive themselves. In recent years, a group of highly active writers has emerged on the literary scene. Through their diverse perspectives and writing styles, they have infused contemporary literary works with new vitality and more complex meanings. Their works, on the one hand, connect with certain strands of literary tradition through a modern spirit; on the other hand, they have made bold experiments and breakthroughs in storytelling methods and content. It is precisely this practice—rooted in the local context yet daring to innovate—that has made the landscape of contemporary literature exceptionally rich and diverse.

## 1. The Theoretical Implications of the Modern Spirit and the Construction of Subjectivity in Contemporary Chinese Literature

### 1.1 The literary implications of the modern spirit

The modern spirit in Chinese contemporary literature is, first and foremost, an attitude of viewing the world through a lens of reflection and questioning. Simply put, literature no longer merely follows the prevailing trends of the times or passively records reality; instead, it calmly—and even sharply—examines the various phenomena emerging during the process of modernization. For instance, while material living standards have improved, does the relentless pursuit of material wealth lead to spiritual emptiness? Society is racing forward at breakneck speed, yet individuals often feel lonely, lost, and unable to find meaning in life. Writers strive to look beyond the superficial bustle and popular discourse to touch upon the genuine inner struggles of people in this era. Secondly, the modern spirit is

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also reflected in literature's intense focus on the human condition. Works shift the narrative center to ordinary people, delving into their mundane daily lives, complex inner workings, and their specific experiences, choices, and inner struggles amidst the sweeping currents of the times. Literature begins to approach the joys and sorrows of every life with a serious and sincere attitude. Finally, this spirit is also reflected in literature's acknowledgment that the world and human beings are inherently complex, contradictory, and at times even absurd. Consequently, literary works emphasize the sincere portrayal of the predicaments people face, aiming to stimulate reflection and encourage readers to explore further possibilities. These works consistently maintain an open and inclusive mindset toward the future, even calling for a future imbued with greater humanistic care (Dong, 2008).

### **1.2 The implications of constructing literary subjectivity**

For writers, this means that their writing must not merely parrot others' views or simply serve as a mouthpiece for slogans or popular notions. Instead, they must draw from their own authentic life experiences and independent thinking to write about what they truly care about and understand, thereby developing their own unique perspective and mode of expression. At the same time, an increasing number of writers are consciously drawing on our traditional culture, local wisdom, and the unique life experiences of contemporary Chinese people to find resources and inspiration for addressing the various challenges and confusions brought about by modern life. Within literary works, this construction is reflected in the characters. Whereas many characters in the past were more like pawns manipulated by fate, today's characters possess more complex inner worlds; they begin to think for themselves, make choices, and take responsibility for those choices. They struggle in adversity, reflect on their circumstances, and seek the meaning of their existence. All these efforts ultimately aim to enable our literature to speak a language that is both rooted in the Chinese soil and imbued with a modern

perspective. Literary works no longer blindly follow the West nor simply revert to the past; rather, by absorbing influences from both China and abroad, they create a literary landscape with Chinese characteristics that can truly express the spiritual world of modern Chinese people.

### **1.3 The symbiotic relationship between the modern spirit and the construction of subjectivity**

The modern spirit and literary subjectivity are, in fact, mutually reinforcing and interdependent. The fundamental ideas inherent in the modern spirit—such as the belief that every individual matters, the courage to question old notions and authority, the willingness to explore the unknown, and the effort to understand the complexities of human nature—provide literature with the most fundamental driving force and intellectual nourishment for its quest for independence and its desire to make its own voice heard at every level. Conversely, the construction of literary subjectivity itself is the most vivid, powerful, and creative manifestation of the modern spirit within the literary realm. When a writer develops a unique writing style and independent thinking, this act embodies the practice of a modern stance—one that critically examines reality, reflects on history, and cares for humanity. The quality of a work's characters—whether they are vivid, complex, and profound—directly reveals the depth of the work's modern understanding of humanity. This is the true manifestation of the modern spirit in the concrete shaping of characters.

## **2. Diverse Expressions of the Modern Spirit in Contemporary Chinese Literature**

### **2.1 Highlighting the modern spirit through individual narratives**

Many contemporary literary works focus on the stories of ordinary people, depicting how they go about their daily lives, how they face difficulties, how they find small joys, their inner conflicts, their dreams, and their disappointments. Literary works capture these moments with remarkable authenticity, employing profound insight and artistic refinement to

depict the most concrete details of daily life. Through these depictions, literature reveals a fundamental truth: in today's rapidly urbanizing, market-driven, and globalized society, each individual must grapple with the obsolescence of old traditions, the transformation of interpersonal relationships, the loss of personal identity, and the sense that life has lost its meaning. This style of writing, which delves ever deeper into personal stories, is in itself a conscious reflection upon and transcendence of the long-standing literary model that focused solely on grand collective narratives while completely ignoring individual stories. Such literary works firmly remind us that every unique life has its own value and dignity—a common-sense notion that, at the time, had to be articulated through the medium of literature (Huang, 2000).

## **2.2 Presenting the modern spirit through social criticism**

Contemporary literature has inherited realism's characteristic of speaking out boldly and offering criticism. It examines all facets of society, scrutinizing, analyzing, revealing, and critiquing them. This criticism targets both external social issues and the inner struggles of the human heart. However, contemporary literary works do not simply reject everything outright, nor do they offer emotional accusations; instead, they issue warnings and reminders based on careful observation, genuine empathy, and serious reflection. In this way, contemporary literature seeks to pierce through seemingly idyllic illusions, lay bare existing contradictions, and unearth the root causes of problems, thereby prompting readers to reflect on these issues themselves and awakening a sense of social responsibility. In doing so, contemporary literature assumes the role of a civilized critic within its own domain; at times, this influence rapidly extends beyond academic circles, transforming into a cultural phenomenon that captures the attention of society as a whole (Wen & Li, 2015). This precisely demonstrates literature's capacity to engage with reality and its spiritual character capable of propelling society forward. For example, in Jia

Pingwa's "A Brief Stay," the narrative centers on a group of single women who are financially independent or even highly successful. At their core is Hai Ruo, the owner of a tea house, who, like an older sister, brings together a dozen or so women to form a small circle known as the "Twelve Beauties of Xijing." Among them are Yu Benwen, who runs a hot pot restaurant; Xiang Qiyu, who operates an energy cabin spa; Ying Lihou, a landlord living off rental income; and Si Yinan, who sells rosewood furniture. They frequently gather at Hai Ruo's "Zanzuo" tea house to drink tea and chat. Their lives appear glamorous and sophisticated, but beneath the surface, they are rife with scheming and loneliness. For instance, Ying Lihou borrowed 10 million yuan in high-interest loans from a certain Mr. Hu, with her sisters Yan Nianchu and Dean Wang acting as guarantors. In the end, Mr. Hu absconded, Yan Nianchu played a trick when renegotiating the contract, changing her status from "joint guarantor" to a mere guarantor in an attempt to distance herself from liability, which led to a rift between the sisters. Through the anxiety, betrayal, and loneliness lurking behind these women's glamorous facades, the book critiques consumerism and the materialistic ethos, showing how they gradually erode genuine human connection and leave the individual's spiritual world barren.

## **2.3 Conveying the modern spirit through humanistic care**

Nowadays, many people feel that traditional values no longer apply; life has been fragmented into isolated segments, and the pace is so fast it leaves one breathless; As technology advances and everything becomes obsessed with efficiency, human relationships may actually grow colder. In the face of these circumstances, many contemporary literary works express a search for a spiritual home, a yearning for human warmth, compassion and reverence for life itself, as well as a beautiful vision of harmony between humanity and nature, and between humanity and history. This concern has transcended the mere exposure of social problems or criticism of the darker aspects of human nature;

Contemporary literary works focus more on those who are spiritually adrift in modern society, helping them learn how to overcome their immediate challenges to restore an ideal harmony (Han & Wang, 2002), and even offering emotional comfort, a place to find value, moral support, and a yearning for something higher and better. It is precisely because of this concern that the modern spirit has retained its warm and constructive aspects, that ultimate care, and its enduring dimension of goodness. Take Chen Yan's "Stage Setup" as an example. This work focuses on the group of migrant workers laboring silently behind the scenes. The protagonist, Diao Shunzi, leads a team of brothers working as stagehands for a theater troupe—setting up the stage, installing lighting, hanging curtains, preparing everything before the performance, and dismantling and cleaning up afterward. The work is both exhausting and dirty, often requiring late nights, and the pay is meager. Yet Shunzi is an honest, down-to-earth man of his word. No matter how much the troupe delays payment, he always finds a way to cover the costs and pay his brothers first. No matter how difficult the stage setup, he grits his teeth and gets it done on time. When the author writes about them, he doesn't treat them as pitiable underdogs to be pitied, but truly immerses himself in their lives, capturing their joys and sorrows, their sense of loyalty and responsibility. These people sweating in the shadows, out of the spotlight, have their own dignity; their labor deserves respect just as much. The rough yet genuine bonds of friendship among them are precisely what makes this era so precious.

### **3. Practical Pathways for the Construction of Subjectivity in Contemporary Chinese Literature**

#### **3.1 Writers' sense of autonomy and cultural consciousness**

In terms of writers' sense of autonomy, an increasing number of writers in contemporary literature are no longer content with merely depicting reality or following prevailing trends; they no longer focus on "others," but instead become "experiencers" (Ye, 2002), choosing to write about subjects they

genuinely feel connected to and have accumulated experience with. Their judgments of the people and events in their stories are increasingly based on their own independent observations and reflections. Furthermore, they strive to develop a unique linguistic style and overall tone in their works. By selecting themes rooted in personal experience, regardless of the content, their writing possesses a spiritual impact and appeal (Lei, 2010). In terms of cultural self-awareness, people's attitudes toward traditional and Western cultures have become more complex and discerning than before. Simply put, writers no longer dismiss the heritage of their ancestors as outdated relics of no use, nor do they view the Western model as inherently superior in every respect and blindly imitate it. On the contrary, many writers have begun to consciously look back and re-examine our own cultural roots. They seek inspiration and nourishment from local customs and traditions, the wisdom of everyday life passed down through generations, the rich forms of folk art, and the unique—and sometimes even contradictory—experiences and insights arising from China's rapid modernization. What writers are pondering is how to connect the good, vibrant elements of these traditions with the lives and emotions of modern people, transforming them into compelling stories that address today's spiritual confusion, or into aesthetic expressions with our own distinctive character.

#### **3.2 The awakening of the individual and the establishment of values**

An excellent work without characters is like a living person without a soul—a mere walking corpse. Characters are an essential element that writers must consider in their creative process (Song, 2016). In many novels and stories today, writers are no longer content to create characters who are entirely at the mercy of fate or who merely serve as plot devices. Specifically, the standout characters in many contemporary works often possess complex inner lives, filled with contradictions and self-doubt. Unlike the simplistic "good guys" or "bad guys" of the past, they act according to their own logic and

reasons, unbound by the author's arbitrary will. Consequently, what they pursue is often what they genuinely believe in, rather than what others or society impose upon them. When faced with unfair treatment, the pressures of life, or emotional turmoil, they begin to reflect on—and even resist—the fate, circumstances, and rules imposed upon them. Readers, too, prefer characters who have their own thoughts, struggle with their own dilemmas, and make their own decisions. It is precisely this resilience and authenticity—this determination to stay true to oneself even if it means getting battered and bruised—that particularly resonates with today's readers.

### **3.3 Local discourse and the establishment of national identity**

A trend has emerged in contemporary literary creation: writers are consciously looking back and putting down roots. By “looking back,” we mean re-examining our own cultural traditions, historical memories, and literary resources to see what nourishment they offer for the present. “Putting down roots” means delving deeper to experience and understand the concrete, everyday lives, emotions, and destinies of ordinary people in contemporary China, while paying close attention to the massive transformations unfolding on this land and the living conditions of its people. Writers are striving to find a new mode of discourse and a fresh approach to storytelling. This exploration manifests in many ways: linguistically, there is a greater emphasis on the inherent beauty and expressiveness of the Chinese language, rather than merely adopting the sentence structures of translated works; in terms of narrative material, many works focus on social phenomena, family ethics, and urban-rural transformations that are distinctly Chinese; In terms of spiritual essence, numerous works attempt to address the predicament of traditional cultural values in modern society, or explore the shocks, adjustments, and eventual settling of the human spirit amidst the process of Chinese-style modernization. Overall, contemporary literary works place greater emphasis on generating an independent discourse system from

within Chinese culture, establishing semantic sovereignty (Zou & Chen, 2026), and ultimately participating in the dialogue of world literature with their own unique voice. For example, Mo Yan's *\*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out\** tells the story of a landlord named Ximen Nao, who was executed by firing squad during the land reform campaign. Feeling wronged, he causes a commotion in the underworld, only to be punished by the King of Hell to undergo six cycles of reincarnation. He is successively reborn as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, and a monkey, before finally being reborn as a human. Through these six reincarnations, he witnesses and personally experiences the tumultuous changes in rural China spanning a full fifty years, from the 1950s to the early 21st century. The retrospective perspective is particularly evident in this book. The entire concept of the “Six Realms of Reincarnation” draws directly from Buddhist ideas and folk legends familiar to the Chinese people. The King of Hell, the judges, and the ox-headed and horse-faced demons described in the book are all figures the common people have heard about for generations. When Mo Yan wrote this book, he even deliberately adopted the style of ancient chapter-based novels. The book is also filled with clapper-rhythm recitations, nursery rhymes, folk tales, and all sorts of customs and traditions surrounding weddings and funerals—these are all treasures carefully unearthed from the soil of our own culture. “Rooting downward” means writing solidly about events on Chinese soil. The story takes place in the northeastern countryside of Gaomi, Shandong, and focuses entirely on farmers who toil with their faces to the yellow earth and their backs to the sky—how they struggle to survive through one political campaign and policy shift after another. Most ingeniously, the protagonist spends most of the time viewing the world through the eyes of animals: observing human greed through the eyes of a donkey, human loyalty through the eyes of an ox, and so on. This perspective, rooted deep in the soil, paradoxically reveals human nature with extraordinary clarity, portraying the absurdity and

weight of decades of history with profound depth.

### Conclusion

In summary, the development of contemporary Chinese literature over the past few decades can be viewed as a rich tapestry woven from the two main threads of modern spirit and the construction of subjectivity. We observe that contemporary writers are increasingly demonstrating cultural lucidity and artistic independence; the characters they create in their works have become exceptionally authentic and complex. It is precisely through such creative practices that our literature has gradually forged its own distinctive mode of expression—one that is deeply rooted in the land beneath our feet while possessing a broad modern perspective, and that addresses the spiritual dilemmas shared by all humanity.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

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