

A Brief Analysis of Chinese and Western Cultures Through a Comparison of Ghost Images in White Deer Plain and One Hundred Years of Solitude

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ABSTRACT

Taking magic realism literature as the breakthrough point, this study compares and analyzes the ghost images in Chen Zhongshi's *White Deer Plain* and Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and explores the differences between Chinese and western cultural psychology reflected by them. Chinese ghost writing is rooted in Confucian ethics and Buddhist reincarnation, emphasizing the opposition between yin and yang and ethical oppression; Latin American ghosts embody the idea of separation of soul and flesh, showing the harmony of life-death coexistence. *White Deer Plain* criticizes the alienation of human nature by feudal ethical codes through depicting vengeful ghosts' resistance; *One Hundred Years of Solitude* uses ghostly interactions as a metaphor for the symptom of loneliness in Latin American culture. Together, they reveal the dilemma of traditional cultural modernization-China needs to break the ethical shackles, and Latin America needs to be alert to cultural faults. The core points to the protection of national spiritual roots and the reconstruction of cultural belonging. The essence of the difference of ghost images is the development of cultural genes, while its commonness highlights the profound reflection on the subjectivity of local culture in the context of globalization.

KEYWORDS

One hundred years of solitude; White deer plain; Cultural differences between China and the west

1 Introduction

The publication of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the 1960s brought the voice of magical realism to the world, and since then, magical realism has exerted an unstoppable influence on the creation of world literature. This literary storm also swept through China. From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, the dominant literary trend in China was scar literature. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chinese literature was undergoing a major transformation. Realist writing could no longer inject fresh vitality into Chinese literature, and the emergence of magical realism as a new literary approach provided Chinese writers with new avenues for exploration. Writer Chen Zhongshi absorbed and reflected on magical realism, rooted it in local characteristics, and found a path for his ethnic culture, enabling magical realism to take root and flourish in the fertile soil of Chinese culture, blooming into vibrant flowers. The turbulent times experienced by Latin America and China are strikingly similar. The foreign colonial invasions that Colombia endured over a century, as described in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and the invasions China suffered in the first half of the 20th century share strong parallels. In this historically similar context, magical realism continued to develop across the vast oceans, giving rise to literature uniquely rooted in each region. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was published nearly thirty years before *White Deer Plain*. While the two works share significant similarities, they also have many differences. The primary reason is that the cultural roots of the two works are different. In *White Deer Plain*, Chen Zhongshi incorporates the distinctive characteristics of the Chinese nation, imbued with the unique cultural psyche of Chinese civilization, presenting a national secret history of China in an objective narrative style. At the beginning of *White Deer Plain*, there is a quote from Balzac: "A novel is a nation's secret history." *White Deer Plain* is indeed a secret history of the Chinese nation. The evil white wolves, mysterious white deer spirits, rampant plagues, and strange ghosts depicted in the novel imbue the entire work with a magical realism that does not feel out of place, as these are indeed legends that have been passed down for generations in China.

The rich magical realism in *White Deer Plain* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has captivated countless readers and academic researchers. Comparing these two novels, there are countless topics worth exploring, with the underlying culture being so profound and vast. The descriptions of mysterious legends and eerie psychic phenomena abound. Among the numerous magical elements, the appearance of ghosts and demons is particularly frequent in both novels. This reflects the differences in views on ghosts and deities between Latin American and Chinese cultures, as well as broader cultural and psychological disparities between the East and West.

2 The origins of ghosts in traditional Chinese culture

The concept of ghosts in China can be traced back to ancient times. The character "ghost" originally referred to the souls of the deceased, as believed by certain religious and superstitious people. Annotations on Explaining Characters and Analyzing Words explains "hun (soul) and po (spirit)" as follows: "Hun is yang qi; po is yin shen. Yang is referred to as qi

(energy), and yin as shen (spirit); yet yin contains yang." White Deer Plain The Book of Rites-Record of Sacrifices states: "All living beings must die, and upon death, they return to the earth; this is called a ghost." White Deer Plain The ancients believed that when people die, they become ghosts. People are in the Yang and ghosts belong to Yin. Yin and Yang are incompatible, and Yin and Yang are separated. There is a difference between life and death, so ghosts are more negative in Chinese culture, and they are in a state of binary opposition to people, that is, the living. In The Analects, there is also the saying: "Do not talk about strange phenomena, force, chaos, or spirits; respect ghosts and gods but keep them at a distance." Confucianism represented by Confucius is silent about ghosts, and it is not afraid and far away from ghosts. These concepts of ghosts reflect the original beliefs of Chinese people in ghosts and gods, and the introduction of Buddhism has brought Chinese people's fear of ghosts one step closer. The idea of retribution of cause and effect and reincarnation of life and death in Buddhism makes people think that people will take revenge on the world after death. If they do evil in front of them, they will receive corresponding retribution after death. The theme of ghost revenge is not uncommon in Chinese literature. It can be seen that the view of ghosts and gods is the embodiment of people's values, which is quite different in different cultural and social environments. Qin Keqing in A Dream of Red Mansions is not the so-called ghost image. She entrusted a dream to Wang Xifeng and told Wang Xifeng some things to pay attention to in the future. It is precisely because of the friendly relationship between Wang Xifeng and Qin Keqing that Qin Keqing didn't become a ghost, which is also a Buddhist thought of cause and effect. Therefore, the concept of ghosts is restricted by different cultures, and it is also influenced by people's cognition, showing great differences. White Deer Plain presents the world with the Chinese view of ghosts and gods; One Hundred Years of Solitude carries the concept of ghosts and gods in Latin America. The culture on the other side of the ocean must have different characteristics from Chinese civilization, and it also has its similarities as human civilization.

3 Analysis of ghost images in white deer plain

The first description of ghosts in White Deer Plain appears in the first chapter of the work, where it is described that Bai Jiaxuan's sixth wife could see the appearances of the five wives he had married before her, and she told Bai Jiaxuan that those five women were choking her, beating her, and tormenting her in every possible way. At first, Bai Jiaxuan thought Hu Shi was simply having a nightmare and not actually seeing ghosts. However, after dawn, Madam Hu accurately described the appearances of the five women., shocking Bai Jiaxuan into believing he had truly encountered ghosts. He immediately summoned a judge to exorcise the spirits, but unfortunately, even after the ghosts were captured, Hu Shi died shortly thereafter. The most vividly depicted part of White Deer Plain is the description of Tian Xiao'e's vengeful spirit. Tian Xiao'e is portrayed as an ugly, pale-faced, and deeply resentful female ghost who often appears in the village at night, causing panic and unease among the villagers. The characterization of Tian Xiao'e is deeply meaningful. She is portrayed as a promiscuous woman who is not accepted by the people of BaiLu Village. Tian Xiao'e first appears when Lu San's wife is dying of the plague. She asks Lu San why he killed his own daughter-in-law. Lu San is deeply shocked because he had not told anyone that he was the one who killed Tian Xiao'e. As the plague raged on, Tian Xiao'e possessed Lu San's body, conversed with Bai Jiaxuan, and went to the most authoritative place in BaiLu Village—the ancestral hall—to accuse the villagers of ostracizing her before her death and of being murdered by Lu San. She demanded that the villagers build a temple for her, promising to forgive BaiLu Village and take the plague away. This description of Tian Xiao'e is the most fantastical part of the entire work. Beyond the horror, one feels a sense of pity for Tian Xiao'e.

It is clear that Tian Xiao'e's revenge and her intense confrontation with the world are not caused by the inherent evil in her, as the people of BaiLu Village believe. She also wanted to integrate into the life of BaiLu Village, but the villagers did not accept her. This kind of confrontation between humans and ghosts is, in essence, a confrontation between humans. The text describes it as follows:

Who did I offend in BaiLu Village? I haven't stolen a single cotton flower from anyone, nor a single bundle of straw or firewood. I haven't insulted an elder, nor pushed a child. Why can't BaiLu Village tolerate me?

Tian Xiao'e was not accepted because of the conflict between her personal lust and the Confucian ethical norms adhered to by BaiLu Village at that time. When the author Chen Zhongshi talked about Tian Xiao'e's portrayal, he mentioned that in the list of countless female role models that show feudal morality, the first thing I felt was the most basic destruction of a woman's nature, which resulted in a figure who was a protester and rebel purely out of human instinct. Dead feudal morality traps living people, and Tian Xiao'e's personal instinct is also suppressed in this way. She is first of all Guo Juren's concubine, but in fact, Guo Juren's sex slave is not a life that normal people will pursue at all. What she pursues is personal freedom, but she is regarded as unfeminine. What happened before her death led to the appearance of ghosts after her death. It seems that only such a fierce conflict between people and ghosts can make people think and reflect on the rationality of ethical norms at that time, and then they will question the rationality of such norms. The more the narrator takes Tian Xiao'e's death for granted, the more it reflects the indifference and irrationality of Confucian ethical norms. Therefore, the binary confrontation and conflict between people and ghosts in White Deer Plain not only has the fear and opposition of ghosts in Chinese culture, but also reflects the conflict between people and ethical

norms.

4 Tracing the image of western ghosts

This is how Fraser describes death and people's perception of death in his book *The Golden Branch*. He believes that an animal is alive and can move because there is a little person in the animal's body to keep him alive, and the animal moves because the little person in the body makes him move. And the little person in this animal thinks it is the soul. Therefore, in their culture, people die because the villain leaves the body, and the villain and the body are exactly the same. What the human body is, what the soul is. Therefore, after death, the soul is another way of human existence and another way of life. Therefore, what appears in western culture is not a fear of ghosts, nor a state of opposition to ghosts. This difference can also be intuitively felt from Halloween in the west. People can play all kinds of horrible ghosts and wander in the streets. The ghosts presented in many western literary works are not fearful images. For example, after the death of Scrooge's partner in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, he didn't avenge him because of his feud with Scrooge before his death, but chose to take Scrooge in the right direction.

There are many places where ghosts and death are described in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. At the beginning of the novel, the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar, the companion of Buendía, the first protagonist, is depicted. The article describes it as follows: Ursula went to the yard to drink water, and saw Prudencio Aguilar standing by the large jar. His body was bruised and purple, his expression sorrowful, as he struggled to plug the hole in his throat with a bundle of reeds. She felt no fear, only sympathy. There are many other instances in the book that describe supernatural phenomena, such as Amaranta seeing the Grim Reaper, Meredith's ascension, the fairy tormenting Fernanda, and Prudencio's ghost returning years later. It is evident that the supernatural beings in this context are not in opposition to humans; rather, they coexist harmoniously with them. The ghosts' return is not about seeking revenge or seeking justice; they, like humans, fear being forgotten. They possess the same emotions and sense of life as the living, and they yearn to establish emotional connections with the living. When describing Prudencio's ghost reappearing:

One early morning, an old man with white hair and a trembling gait entered his bedroom... That man was Prudencio Aguilar... After his death, he often missed the living and longed for a companion. He was deeply afraid of the approaching death in the underworld and eventually grew fond of his most fierce enemy. After his death, Prudencio Aguilar had become emaciated, yet he still visited him twice a day to chat. They talked about cockfighting and even agreed to establish a chicken farm together to raise fierce fighting cocks. This was not for the sake of competing for victory at the cockfighting arena, as they no longer needed such victories at that point, but rather to have something to pass the time on the dull Sundays in the realm of the dead.

The interactions between humans and ghosts here actually depict the inner loneliness of people in Latin America at the time. This loneliness is alleviated by conversing with ghosts, a ethereal entity, to pass the time. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the depiction of humans and ghosts emphasizes harmony between them. This is not only due to cultural differences but also a manifestation of the theme of loneliness, which does not require such intense conflict.

5 Comparative analysis of ghostly images in the two works

Comparing the ghost images in the two works, they have both commonalities and individualities. First, both depict that people become ghosts after death, which is another form of life existence and the start of life in another time and space. Influenced by Buddhist thought, China also believes in the cycle of life and death, and people can be reincarnated again after death. Similarly, in Latin culture and western culture, it is believed that death leads to another country, whether heaven or hell. The ghosts shown by the second two have human feelings, and they can think, love and hate just like people. The ghosts in *White Deer Plain*, whether Bai Jiaxuan's first five wives or Tian Xiaoe, are full of human feelings, showing the same love and hate as people; Ghosts in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are as afraid of loneliness and forgetting as people, and have the same feelings as people. But the same two also show their individuality due to regional and cultural differences. First of all, it is reflected in the way ghosts exist; In *White Deer Plain*, ghosts can only exist through dreams or possessing living people, while in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, people can appear alone without the help of a third party. We can know that what is emphasized in western culture is the separation of spirit and flesh. A person consists of the one manifested through appearance and the little person inside the body. The body and the soul are relatively independent, which is not emphasized in Chinese culture. In Chinese culture, it is believed that "all living beings become ghosts after death," and there is a pursuit of a harmonious balance between the spirit and the flesh, with neither being opposed to the other. Finally, it is reflected in the binary relationship between people and ghosts. The relationship between people and ghosts reflected in *White Deer Plain* is in a state of extreme opposition. When people die as ghosts, ghosts are labeled as evil, and people and ghosts are incompatible. This actually reflects the opposition between life and death, and people cannot be resurrected after death. Ghosts in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are regarded as the continuation of life, which is another starting point of life. People and ghosts are the same, but they exist in different

spaces, so people and ghosts can naturally live in harmony. The difference between the two also reflects the difference between the author's desire to express and show. One is to show the 'cannibalism' of feudal ethics; The other is the theme of using ghosts to describe the inner loneliness of characters.

6 Behind writing ghosts-reflections on traditional culture

Although the two express different concepts of ghosts and spirits, what lies behind them is a reflection on traditional culture. Ghosts, as a kind of supernatural phenomenon that cannot be proven by science, are a symbol of backward culture. Whether it is Tian Xiao'e's possession, the appearance of the white deer spirit, or the white wolf, all of them are the true manifestation of people's psychological distortions and the true nature of humanity under the dual pressure of traditional culture and living environment (Liang Fuxing, 2002). What both *White Deer Plain* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* aim to convey is the reflection on traditional culture, and the search for the sense of belonging to one's own culture and the collective consciousness of the nation. In *White Deer Plain*, under the influence of various new ideas brought by the revolution, the social order that people had adhered to for thousands of years vanished in an instant, giving way to chaos. Both novels depict revolutions and wars. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Colonel Aureliano keeps pondering during the war: What is the meaning of war? However, his comrades never realize the importance of this question. They do not know why they are doing what they do, they have no spiritual home, they do not communicate, they are alone in their solitude, and they suspect each other. Similarly, Hei Wa in *White Deer Plain* initially has no idea what the revolution is about or what its significance is. In his view, revolution means smashing the ancestral temple. The ten brothers who joined the Peasants' Association with him also quickly backed down. A collective without social consciousness, a lonely collective, is difficult to survive. They are unsociable, dislike communication, and thus find it harder to unite. When local primitive culture encounters external Western modern culture, they are at a loss. They resist this sense of loneliness, yet fail to recognize themselves and find their position. Some even abandon the local culture of Latin America, blindly pursue modern culture or remain conservative and complacent, and eventually get abandoned by the times. In the midst of turbulent times of change, it is crucial to find the belonging of one's national spirit and the way forward for national culture. We should criticize and reflect on traditional culture and oppose ignorance; isolation cannot bring progress. The image of ghosts in *White Deer Plain* is precisely a criticism of some backward elements in traditional culture. These backward elements lead people to attribute plagues to ghosts, a supernatural phenomenon. It is also because of some unreasonable elements in traditional culture (the non-acceptance and rejection of Tian Xiao'e) that such intense confrontation arises. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, people's forgetting and loss of tradition eventually lead to the disappearance of the Buendía family and the town of Macondo. A nation needs its own cultural foundation and a true sense of cultural belonging and identity.

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