Examination of Literary Techniques of Comparative Narration -Take "The Great River Flows Eastward" as an Example

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Abstract

As a landmark full-length novel, *The Great River Flows Eastward* by the renowned author Ane is the first online novel to be shortlisted for a national-level literary and artistic award. Centering on China's reform and development over the two decades from 1978 to 1998, the novel narrates the development trajectories of state-owned enterprises, village-run collectives, individual businesses, and foreign-invested enterprises in China amid profound era-specific transformations. Through the struggling stories of four protagonists, it boasts a grand narrative perspective and in-depth insights. In the novel, the author employs the literary technique of multi-dimensional comparative narration, placing character roles, expressive intentions, and plotlines within meticulously constructed comparative contexts. This approach not only successfully shapes vivid character images and profound social backgrounds but also conveys the author's reflections on the nation, ethnicity, and the times.

Keywords

The Great River Flows Eastward, Comparative narration, Literary techniques, Placing character roles

Introduction

Comparison is a crucial narrative device that plays an irreplaceable role in the rhetoric and structure of texts, boasting unique and indispensable functions. As a widely adopted narrative method in literary and artistic creation, comparative narration differs from direct narration in that it enriches the form and connotation of works, rendering them more profound and thereby offering readers greater space for reflection and re-creation.

Saussure argued that binary opposition is the most natural and economical code, the primitive thinking of children, and the earliest and most fundamental practice in their language learning and application [1]. In fact, the philosophy of Yin and Yang - mutually exclusive yet complementary, and bipolar opposition yet coexistent - has long been a cognitive attitude toward the world and the universe in ancient Chinese culture. From the perspective of materialist dialectics, contradictory oppositions that are ubiquitous, interdependent, and mutually constraining exist in objective society. It serves as the key to constructing dramatic conflicts and capturing audiences' interest in literature and art. From the traditional Chinese "binary" thinking mode of Yin-Yang complementarity to Einstein's theory of relativity, and from the design of contrasts such as "elegance/vulgarity, emptiness/reality, movement/ stillness" in classical Chinese literature and opera to the frequent use of contrasts like "heaven/hell, life/death, male/female" in Western mythology, it is evident that comparison is a fundamental and vital expressive device in literary and artistic creation. In traditional Chinese literary and artistic works, the device of comparison is employed with exceptional frequency and rigor, a fact highly praised by the American scholar Professor Andrew H. Plaks, who specifically emphasized the significant role of comparative narration in traditional Chinese literature and art [2].

The so-called comparison refers to a rhetorical strategy in writing and speech that combines two opposite, relative, or related phenomena to mutually reflect and set off each other, thereby highlighting and emphasizing a specific meaning [3]. Chinese people are adept at a comparative way of thinking, as evidenced by the

traditional aesthetic preference for "antithesis" and "parallelism" in classic Chinese literary works. This dual-structural characteristic is an embodiment of dynamic and holistic thinking.

The important status of comparative aesthetics in traditional Chinese literary theory is self-evident in poetry. Even in novels and operas with relatively loose structures, there are always inherent tendencies toward comparison. It is not only a key to reading and interpreting literary works but also a central principle for authors in constructing their creations. When two or more things or images are placed in comparative narration, their relationship is not necessarily oppositional. Rather, it is precisely because Chinese people tend to place two or more things together that the foundation for comparison is laid, making comparative narration possible. From a linguistic perspective, this comparative aesthetics is undoubtedly one of the most direct reflections of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation. In modern Chinese, numerous vocabulary items - such as "flying wing to wing" (expressing mutual devotion), "paired as a couple" (expressing marital harmony), "innocent childhood sweethearts" (expressing pure love), and "mutual affection" (expressing reciprocal love) - convey positive connotations through dual-structural forms. Additionally, common reduplicated compound words like "deeply affectionate", "harmonious and happy", and "sweet and intimate" further illustrate the dual-structural habit in traditional Chinese linguistic aesthetics.

An examination of the comparative narration in The Great River Flows Eastward

Parallel comparison of narrative contexts

Parallel comparison refers to the juxtaposition of two or more relatively independent plotlines occurring in different time-spaces or the same time but different places, which set off each other to form a contrast [4,5].

(1) Parallel comparison of macro contexts

When talking about the origin of *The Great River Flows Eastward*, Ane stated: "I write novels because I have something to say - I want to share what I have seen, heard, and felt over the years." Instead of following the conventional economic novel model that centered on a single character to connect various economic events, Ane ambitiously sought to depict the development history of various economic groups in China over those two decades. She explained: "In the initial stage of conceiving the novel, I had already set four protagonists in my mind: Song Yunhui from a large state-owned enterprise, Lei Dongbao as the leader of a village-run enterprise, Yang Xun who grew from a traveling vendor to a private entrepreneur, and Liang Shenshen, a returnee entrepreneur. No one attempting to write about the changes over the decades of reform and opening up could ignore these four typical economic entities. After defining the characters, I focused on the relationships between them - developing from kinship to neighborhood interactions - to construct this lengthy novel."

Borne out of this vision, *The Great River Flows Eastward* adopts a four-thread parallel narrative structure to arrange its characters and plots, resembling a quartet performance interspersed with multi-part ensembles. The entire novel's structure is formed by the juxtaposition of four sub-narratives - each centered around Song Yunhui, Lei Dongbao, Yang Xun, and Liang Shenshen - creating an integrated narrative space. By placing these four protagonists, each representing distinct social groups, within the same historical and social context, the novel constructs a parallel comparative narrative structure within a macro social context. Although the sub-narratives intersect to some extent in content or chronological order, they remain relatively independent and complete overall.

This four-thread parallel narrative model encapsulates a broader historical background and richer plot details, featuring characters with strong representativeness. Through these multi-dimensional characters, the model comprehensively depicts the earth-shaking transformations in Chinese society during the early stages of reform and opening up from diverse perspectives. The first sub-narrative traces Song Yunhui's growth and transformation: seizing the opportunity of the resumption of the college entrance examination in 1978 through hard work, he fulfilled his dream of attending university. After graduation, he joined a large state-owned factory and gradually rose from a technician to a middle and senior manager. While achieving career success, he also had to cope with various family changes. The second sub-narrative recounts Lei Dongbao's entrepreneurship in Xiaolei Village: leading the villagers to divide land, establishing brick kilns, and later forming engineering teams,

prefabrication factories, wire factories, and pig farms, he enabled Xiaolei Village to become prosperous ahead of others. Despite facing significant setbacks such as talent shortages, fund shortages, and a copper factory explosion, he forged ahead with an indomitable spirit. However, in the new era context, Lei Dongbao's simplistic and arbitrary approach ultimately led to his elimination by the times. The third sub-narrative focuses on Yang Xun, a representative of the individual economy, and his ups and downs amid the tide of reform and opening up. Clever and daring, Yang Xun rose from peddling steamed buns in villages to owning his own enterprises, a journey filled with hardships and setbacks. Faced with difficulties, he remained calm and strategic, resolving problems efficiently and seizing the initiative time and again. The fourth sub-narrative centers on Liang Shenshen, Song Yunhui's second wife, who comes from a privileged background and possesses outstanding abilities, representing foreign-invested enterprises in China. With strong financial resources and professional expertise, she carved out her own successful career.

These four sub-narratives flow parallel to each other like four streams within the macro social context, showcasing the personalities and styles of different characters and groups over the first 20 years of reform and opening up.

(2) Parallel comparison of micro contexts

By extracting and organizing the plots within each sub-narrative of *The Great River Flows Eastward*, one can clearly identify numerous more microcosmic sub-narratives centered on each protagonist. As these plots develop and intersect, they construct a comparative narrative structure that enhances character distinctiveness and deepens thematic implications. Taking Song Yunhui's growth as an example, this section analyzes the novel's more nuanced parallel comparative world.

The Great River Flows Eastward narrates events chronologically from 1978 to 1998, covering 20 years of social changes in contemporary China. Born and raised in a remote rural area, Song Yunhui adeptly seized opportunities and strived unremittingly amid the great social transformation. Through hardships and trials, he gradually grew from an innocent 17-year-old to a technical backbone and influential figure in a large state-owned enterprise. The novel vividly and powerfully portrays his trajectory from immaturity to maturity.

Many Bildungsromans feature protagonists leaving home, with hardships and enlightenment intertwined in the process of departure. Thus, leaving the shelter of family and venturing into the wider world serves as a crucial opportunity for the protagonist's growth. In *The Great River Flows Eastward*, Song Yunhui is also depicted as leaving home three times. Throughout these departures, his self-awareness gradually became clearer and more developed: Although the difficulties he faced grew increasingly severe, and the responsibilities and capabilities required of him intensified, his prospects also became progressively brighter. It can be said that the parallel comparative narration of these three departures marks three pivotal stages in the transformation of Song Yunhui's worldview and life fate. It lays three important milestones in his growth journey.

Song Yunhui's first departure was to secure the qualification to attend high school. After graduating from junior high school, he was denied the right to attend high school due to his family's problematic class background. Upon hearing that participating in rural support work would allow him to continue his studies, he voluntarily applied to be sent to a more remote mountain village, where he raised pigs while studying diligently on his own. Later, when the college entrance examination was resumed, Song Yunhui and his sister seized this life-changing opportunity and both scored above the admission line, only to face malicious suppression during the enrollment process. Overwhelmed by grief and anger, Song Yunhui lost his temper and shouted at his father, leading his father to attempt suicide out of shame, narrowly escaping death. The profound impact of his father's near-death experience led Song Yunhui to realize a crucial truth for his future development that "One must never take a wrong step". This lesson became a lifelong guiding principle, laying the foundation for his later prudent and sophisticated demeanor, meticulous thinking, and ability to navigate power struggles seamlessly, leaving no room for opponents to exploit.

Song Yunhui's second departure was to attend university. Stepping out of the countryside, he opened the door to a new world. From the moment he boarded the train, Song Yunhui embarked on his "rebirth". In the melting pot of university, his ideological cognition and personal circumstances underwent radical changes. The first major transformation was that he finally shed the burden of his family's class background. Among the eight roommates, his family background was relatively

insignificant. This was a crucial turning point for his future prospects. Freed from mental worries, he dared to be the first in his class to apply for membership in the Communist Youth League and to work as a counselor at the affiliated primary school, which also allowed him to meet Liang Shenshen, his future second wife. He also dared to envision a future that he had previously been unqualified to dream of. The second important change was the development of a good habit of collecting *People's Daily* and paying attention to national policy trends. Having grown up in a remote rural area, he initially could not understand the political topics discussed by his peers upon entering university. In contrast, the later Song Yunhui - with a keen awareness of policies and regulations, a broad perspective on world affairs, and a grasp of international dynamics - was completely transformed, almost unrecog-nizable from his former self. This habit benefited him throughout his life: It not only provided valuable information and assistance to his brother-in-law Lei Dongbao but also enabled him to make foresighted and rational decisions at key junctures in his career. However, Song Yunhui was far from a philistine who only exploited policy loopholes. During his four years at university, he cherished every moment, leveraging his natural talent and diligence to maintain excellent academic performance. He had an almost obsessive dedication to his professional skills, which he later brought to the extreme in his work, earning the nickname "Song Yunhui who never gets tired". His growth model thus combined sudden enlightenment with the steady accumulation of Yu Gong moving mountains.

Song Yunhui's third departure was not from his birth family but from the small family he had established himself - to build a new factory in Donghai. This departure, a mix of voluntary choice and necessity, marked a new starting point in both his career and personal life. Undoubtedly perceptive, Song Yunhui had witnessed the harsh realities of officialdom, the darkness of human nature, and the fickleness of the world through years of power struggles in Jinzhou Chemical Factory. He realized that Secretary Shui would not hesitate to abandon his allies Yu Shanqing and Song's father-in-law to protect himself. Reflecting on his own future under Secretary Shui's control, he lamented: "Working oneself to death now is really like a mouse on a spinning wheel - utterly meaningless, even somewhat absurd. I am pursuing my ideals, but those in high positions are exploiting my naivety. If there is such a state as 'disillusionment', I am almost there now." Yet Song Yunhui was also rational. He understood that for the tree of ideals to bear fruit, it must be rooted in the soil of reality. He had to retain his leadership and right to speak, as these were the guarantees for realizing his ideals and thus, he decided to go to Donghai.

In summary, these "departure" choices served as indispensable narrative drivers for the novel's plot development, promoting the renewal and development of Song Yunhui's cognitive structure and constructing the novel's microcosmic parallel comparative narrative style. Readers can clearly perceive and believe in Song Yunhui's growing self-awareness and maturity. Ultimately, it forms a vivid, flesh-and-blood positive character image in their minds, while the novel's plot progresses accordingly.

Metaphorical comparison of expressive intentions

Metaphorical comparison refers to the use of metaphor to analogize tangible images with intangible meanings, thereby implicitly and vividly conveying the significance embodied in the novel. Metaphors: "shape our perception and constitute our relationships with the world and others", and "everything we experience and do every day is filled with metaphors" [6]. This view by the renowned American linguist George Lakoff articulates the relationship between metaphors and life, as well as metaphors and human interactions [7]. It can be said that we live in a world of metaphors, and metaphor is a way of engaging with the world. In *The Great River Flows Eastward*, metaphors are naturally integrated into the protagonists' daily lives, existing silently within the novel. By focusing on the novel's plots and images, we can discover that metaphors subtly participate in the entire narrative expression, enabling readers to better perceive changes in the novel's central theme [8,9].

Ane herself served as a senior executive in a private enterprise for a long time, and her professional experience provided rich and authentic writing materials for the novel. Throughout the work, the special era of reform is brought close to readers, making them unconsciously draw metaphorical comparisons between the novel and reality, highlighting the novel's essence of being rooted in the times and life.

(1) Metaphorical comparison of the relationship between technology and management

The novel repeatedly depicts the contrast and contradiction between Song Yunhui's excellent technical capabilities and his lack of social experience before he fully matures. As a newcomer to the workplace, Song Yunhui relied on his technical expertise, yet even with the ability and authority, the senior employees under him refused to follow his instructions - a metaphor for the ecological environment of China's workplace both then and now. Under Secretary Shui's guidance, he devised a work breakdown structure to visualize progress and introduced public supervision, which effectively prevented slacking off. A key reason Secretary Shui was able to hold absolute power was his proficiency in personnel management and leadership: He used Song Yunhui's technical capabilities to compensate for his own technical shortcomings, and leveraged Yu Shanqing's sophistication to negotiate with Min Zhongsheng, enabling him to achieve unparalleled success. A talented technician can be an excellent employee; one who understands management and personnel can be an excellent leader. These two points are metaphorically compared and confirmed through the characters of Song Yunhui and Secretary Shui.

(2) Metaphorical comparison of the relationship between conservatism and reform

Conservatives are short-sighted, content with the status quo, and unwilling to pursue bold reforms. Reformers, by contrast, are foresighted, forging ahead, eager to break old conventions, and dare to take risks. When reformers encroach on the interests of conservatives, conflicts are inevitable. The three protagonists in the novel are all pioneers of reform, and they inevitably encountered enormous resistance from conservatives during their growth. Song Yunhui's allies included Xiao La, Secretary Shui, and Secretary Xu - individuals with ideals who strived to realize them. Conversely, the conservatives, such as Factory Director Ma, Factory Director Fei, and Chief Engineer Liu, generally held high positions, were approaching retirement, and hoped to complete their final terms smoothly without major mistakes. However, the emergence of new things and the demise of old ones are inevitable trends in social development. Despite twists and turns in the process, the future is bright, and conservatives will ultimately withdraw from the historical stage. The novel's plot progresses toward this outcome, metaphorically conveying the theme that reform and innovation are the mainstream of the times, and any force that hinders the development of new things and the transformation of the times will eventually be eliminated by history.

(3) Metaphorical comparison of the relationship between growth and reflection

Liang Shenshen is an outstanding female image created by the author - rarely retaining a pure and just heart amid the market economy. Despite her prominent family background and high-quality social network, she maintained integrity and refused to use privileges no matter how arduous the circumstances. She deeply regretted failing to discover and stop her father's corruption in a timely manner, and was even more unwilling to watch her beloved husband increasingly accept various temptations in the vanity fair, ultimately becoming a corrupt bureaucrat who drifted with the current like Secretary Shui and her father. She feared that Song Yunhui would gradually lose his original aspiration and drift apart from her. She tried various ways to remind and persuade him, openly telling him that she loved a passionate, flesh-and-blood person with genuine feelings. Yet Song Yunhui was not without confusion and loss. With the growth of his position and experience, he no longer regarded Secretary Shui as a "treacherous minister" in the complex network of the system. Instead, he even claimed to be "Secretary Shui's direct disciple", highly admiring Secretary Shui's methods. However, he never abandoned his personal principles and bottom line, nor did he approve of Secretary Shui's character. His discussions with Liang Shenshen deeply touched his soul. It is evident that deep in his heart, Song Yunhui always retained a soul that tried to resist vulgarity - only its voice was overshadowed by his strong desire to change his fate. In the words of Liang Shenshen's grandfather, Song Yunhui's work environment had been too complex over the years, and he had been moving too fast to reflect properly. In this regard, Song Yunhui formed a structural metaphorical contrast with China's rapidly developing economic and social environment. The impact and reflection brought by Liang Shenshen, as well as the contrast between them, provided powerful motivation for him to rediscover his original aspiration.

Thus, under the scorching sun of August, Song Yunhui

and Liang Shenshen returned to their hometown with their two lovely children, retracing the plank road that Song Yunhui had taken decades earlier to leave the countryside, enter university, and embark on his life journey. They hoped that this ritual would help them rediscover their original aspirations and return to rationality. As they pursued this journey of recollection, reflection, and communication, they finally resolved their misunderstandings and reached a consensus: Personal fate and social development are interdependent and inseparable. Reflections on individual life are also reflections on social progress. Society must develop, but development brings various problems that require constant reflection and timely correction. This applies to individuals as well. As enlightened individuals, they strived to uphold their original aspirations in this impetuous era, safeguarding a green and beautiful natural world and a pure and noble spiritual world for their children's future. At this point, Song Yunhui truly achieved his spiritual growth.

Paired comparison of character roles

Ane stated: "Growing up in China during that era of great transformation and development, many of my peers and I were fortunate to achieve remarkable success. However, looking back, I also see much blindness, inadequacy, and regret. In the process of construction, who have we abandoned, deprived, or forgotten? Who among our companions has fallen behind, or even stumbled? Our material living standards have improved significantly, but our spiritual world seems to have deviated from sublimity, dignity, and truth, increasingly eroded by materialism. How should we take the next step?" This reflects the author's earnest reflection on the relationships between history and reality, and between spirit and materialism - reflections that are well manifested in the novel. Against the backdrop of economic development, different individuals and groups exhibited distinct personalities and choices. The novel intentionally adopts comparative narration to depict the personalities and behaviors of these different roles, even artificially creating social environments and plotlines for "paired" character comparisons, allowing readers to more clearly perceive the real changes in society and human nature.

(1) Paired comparison of same-sex roles

Song Yunhui, from a large state-owned enterprise, and Lei Dongbao, the prosperity leader of a village-run collective enterprise, represent contrasting economic development models and personality traits. In terms of economic models, these two types of enterprises differ vastly in production scale, technical equipment level, state policy support, and even economic benefits. In the initial stage of economic development after reform and opening up - and even today - state-owned enterprises, especially large ones, are more likely to receive state policy and economic support, assistance, and even bailouts. They generally have larger production scales and higher technical equipment levels than private enterprises, naturally making it easier to achieve better economic and social benefits.

Correspondingly, Song Yunhui, from a large state-owned enterprise, received formal higher education and quickly became a chemical technology expert and person in charge of key national projects shortly after taking office. Young and promising, he was refined yet resilient, handling affairs appropriately with superb professional skills - an iconic elite of the era with both ability and charm. In contrast, Lei Dongbao was decisive and responsible, but lacked much cultural knowledge. A retired soldier, he had a rough personality and a straightforward, strong-willed temperament. As the party secretary of Xiaolei Village, he relied on this "strength" and courage to innovate, forging a path of development and improving people's livelihood for the village. His flaws were obvious: Impulsive, arbitrary, and lacking in understanding of national policies and in-depth thinking about economic development - foreshadowing the subsequent plots of him and Xiaolei Village.

In fact, are not the personality traits of these two male protagonist's stereotypes of the images of leaders of large state-owned enterprises and village-run collective enterprises? As winners of layers of screening and elimination, leaders of state-owned enterprises often have impressive resumes, professional knowledge, and skills, conforming to the aesthetic scrutiny of "elites". In contrast, village-run enterprises undergo fierce competition. Those that survive are inevitably led by determined, daring individuals from among the villagers, naturally making them prone to obvious personality limitations. Thus, the character positioning of Song Yunhui and Lei Dongbao aligns with readers' psychological expectations and achieves a strong paired comparison effect. Although both survived hardships in the early stages of reform and opening up, their ultimate

trajectories and fates in the novel seem to implicitly highlight the importance of learning and the glorious value of ideology.

The setting of the main female characters in the novel is also carefully designed - in a sense, a creative choice by the author for intentional "paired" comparisons. To cite two examples (Liang Shenshen and Cheng Kaiyan), although both were born into official families, they had vastly different personalities. Cheng Kaiyan was spoiled since childhood, lacking sufficient self-care ability, being unambitious, and having no independent opinions when facing problems - resulting in little common language with her husband. When Song Yunhui's mother fell ill in bed, Cheng Kaiyan failed to fulfill her responsibilities as a wife and daughter-in-law, only complaining to her family and relying on her father's official authority to maintain her marriage, which in fact accelerated the process of her divorce from Song Yunhui. In contrast, Liang Shenshen, who had lived abroad for many years, was 8 years younger than Song Yunhui and had always maintained a teacher-student relationship with him. However, her independent personality, rational thinking, and excellent problem-solving abilities displayed during their interactions deeply attracted Song Yunhui, ultimately leading to their union. The second pair of "paired" roles is Yang Li and Ren Xia'er - Yang Xun's younger sister and wife, respectively. Although both graduated from prestigious universities, Yang Li was unrealistic and inexperienced in social interactions, quite disconnected from social needs. Ren Xia'er, by contrast, had her own plans, possessed high professional quality. She was pragmatic and realistic, gradually becoming a virtuous helper in Yang Xun's family and a valuable assistant in his career.

It is evident that the contrasting depictions of these main characters - even through deliberately exaggerated "paired" methods, these depictions enhance the distinctiveness of the roles in comparison, promote the development of the novel's plot, and strengthen the expressive effect [10].

(2) Paired comparison of opposite-sex roles

Comparison of opposite-sex roles in CareerYang Xun, a private entrepreneur who traveled extensively, and Liang Shenshen, a returnee entrepreneur, had different birth and growth environments. Initially, they were attracted to each other's qualities that they themselves lacked. Forced by circumstances to support his family from a young age, Yang Xun sold steamed buns in neighboring towns, dropped out of school to reduce his mother's burden, and ventured to Northeast China alone to sell cables to fund his younger siblings' education. In contrast, Liang Shenshen grew up in a wealthy family, was sent to the United States for education at a young age, and obtained an inheritance through legal means after her grandmother's death. The two collaborated in entrepreneurship through Song Yunhui's introduction. However, Yang Xun's irregular property income led to the breakdown of trust between them. The transition from active cooperation to relationship breakdown not only reflects the differences in personality and ways of thinking among individuals from different living and growth environments but also essentially metaphorizes the huge gap between the two economic models they represent. On one hand, Yang Xun and the small and medium-sized private enterprises behind him had to be meticulous to survive, and even often teetered on the edge of legal and institutional norms in the initial stage of entrepreneurship. On the other hand, returnee entrepreneurs and multinational groups represented by Liang Shenshen with strong financial backgrounds and favorable inherent conditions. They could not understand or appreciate the helplessness and shrewdness of small and medium-sized private entrepreneurs like Yang Xun, and even showed disdain for them.

Comparison of opposite-sex roles in emotion, the main line of the novel focuses on economic and social development over 20 years, with emotional stories playing a supporting role - yet the author attached great importance to writing this part. Marguerite Duras once said: "There is no novel without love." To fully depict emotional content - or more precisely, to fully showcase human nature through emotional descriptions - the author paired each male protagonist with two emotional partners: Song Yunhui with Cheng Kaiyan and Liang Shenshen; Lei Dongbao with Song Yunping and Wei Chunhong; Yang Xun with Dai Fengjiao and Ren Xia'er. This model of one man paired with two women differs from the common romance novel trope of one woman paired with two or more men in many online female writers' works. Additionally, the two women in each male's marital life do not exist simultaneously but sequentially, without violating ethical norms. To maintain male dominance, Ane portrayed a group of subordinate female images in the novel, who more or less relied on men for their livelihood. Thus, in the early stages of reform and

opening up, the traditional family division of labor - "men outside, women inside" - still dominated society.

Take the character of Cheng Kaiyan, for example. She married Song Yunhui through some maneuvering, as she had desired. Although she loved her husband wholeheartedly, she always remained in a passive position in the marriage, with few opportunities to communicate with him. The novel repeatedly mentions that Cheng Kaiyan disliked studying, was unambitious, and indulged in trivial gossip all day - foreshadowing the conflicts between her and Song Yunhui. Later, the novel's comparative narration of daily life details such as Cheng Kaiyan getting her eyebrows tattooed and buying clothes reflects Song Yunhui's true feelings. In the section about eyebrow tattooing, the author devoted considerable ink: When Song Yunhui learned over the phone that Cheng Kaiyan had gotten her eyebrows tattooed, he imagined a terrifying appearance without seeing her in person. He even specially called his father-in-law, Factory Director Cheng, to complain about this trivial matter; after seeing her in person, he still maintained a dismissive and dissatisfied attitude. The comparative narration of these interactive details seems to depict Cheng Kaiyan as vulgar. But in fact, it reflects the growing distance between them in their emotional relationship and Cheng Kaiyan's marginalization. Later, Song Yunhui, who had become a powerful figure, coldly took full control of their divorce. In this marriage, Song Yunhui transformed from being manipulated initially to manipulating his father-in-law's family in the end, successfully emerging as a conspirator. However, the author's emotional balance favored the strong Song Yunhui. Cheng Kaiyan's spoiled nature, lack of self-care ability, poor aesthetic judgment, and lack of ambition made her a loser in life, unable to even maintain a relationship with her daughter.

The narrative of Lei Dongbao and Wei Chunhong's relationship follows a similar pattern. Wei Chunhong's deep affection for Lei Dongbao is undeniable, yet Lei Dongbao often resented her aging and haggard appearance. Every time he visited Chunhong's restaurant, he only came to eat and sleep, and even their marriage was a mere formality to help the village-run enterprise secure bank loans.

It is evident that behind the romantic relationships in the novel lies considerations of practical survival (Song Yunping and Lei Dongbao's marriage to find a strong partner to change her family's bullied status), political career (Song Yunhui with Cheng Kaiyan and Liang Shenshen), and career development (Yang Xun with Ren Xia'er) before and after reform and opening up. In other words, the novel adopts a comparative narration of men's and women's emotional tendencies. It depicts how, driven by interests, the secularization and extinction of human nature prevailed among a large number of people during that specific period of economic and social development.

(3) Comparison of characters' multidimensionality

The narrative of character growth in *The Great River Flows Eastward* emphasizes the "multidimensionality of human nature" inherent in realistic themes. Returning to reality, the novel fully explores and comparatively narrates the strengths and weaknesses of characters, making each role appear authentic and down-to-earth. For example, the character of Yang Xun fully embodies this trait. Dropping out of school at a young age, he shared the responsibility of supporting his younger siblings with his mother, experiencing the hardships of peddling steamed buns to make a living. Through relentless efforts, he became an individual household in the electrical appliance market. He once engaged in speculative activities such as selling shoddy products for immediate interests. But after the incident, he also showed courage and determination by burning the shoddy products to demonstrate the integrity of individual entrepreneurs. Yang Xun's mental journey is highly representative: In that era of rapid change and shifting aspirations, he could be tempted by greed, but also turn over a new leaf. He was a small individual struggling to grow and strive amid the tide of the times, and a great man who became self-reliant and returned to his original aspiration after experiencing setbacks.

Even some supporting characters in the novel fully reflect the complexity and multidimensionality of human nature, with impressive characterizations. For instance, although the character of Old Husu is unpopular - first making trouble out of Song's family background to falsely accuse Song Yunping and her brother, then obstructing the reform efforts in Xiaolei Village - does he have no merits? Not at all. When the villagers were skeptical about the household contract responsibility system, Old Husu was one of the first to sign the contract, promoting the implementation of this major reform. When everyone was at a loss about debt collection, he

successfully resolved the issue with his rich life experience. Later, he also performed excellently in selling rabbit hair for the village. It can be said that the novel's portrayal of this character successfully reflects the three-dimensionality and complexity of human nature - he undoubtedly possessed many strengths and wisdom. We cannot help but sigh: If such a person could always stand on the positive side, what a positive impact he could have on the villagers and society. But is this not the true personality and portrayal of a certain group of people in human society?

Through the novel's comparative narration and analysis of the personality traits of different roles, we can clearly perceive that the author does not pursue the portrayal of perfect characters as an aesthetic value. Instead, she fully demonstrates the multidimensionality of human nature, presenting the authenticity of different roles and that era. In this novel, the calm and steady Song Yunhui also has the arrogance of an intellectual, inevitably appearing condescending in interpersonal interactions. The daring and hardworking Lei Dongbao cannot escape the stereotype of a reckless man who acts arbitrarily and is conceited. The dedicated and selfless former party secretary of Xiaolei Village ultimately met a tragic end, committing suicide in shame after embezzling public funds. The shrewd and cunning Old Husu also worked tirelessly to recover debts for Xiaolei Village and develop the long-haired rabbit industry. The responsible and progressive county party secretary eventually embarked on the path of corruption and embezzlement. Human nature is never one-dimensional or static, and there is no absolute dividing line between good and bad people. Reform and opening up were not only reforms at the national economic and political levels but also conflicts of ideas and concepts among the masses. Amid the tide of the times, changes in everyone's outlook on life, values, and emotions were complex and unpredictable.

Conclusion

It is evident that *The Great River Flows Eastward* employs the multi-dimensional literary device of comparative narration to effectively integrate the growth trajectories of characters with the broader context of era-specific transformation. By conducting an in-depth dissection of human nature and reflecting on society, the novel radiates extraordinary wisdom and charm, demonstrating the profound power of narrative techniques. Those turbulent two decades portrayed the emotions and fates of several generations: Countless ordinary individuals, striving for a living and pursuing their dreams, were like tiny streams that converged at the historical crossroads of reform and opening up. Ultimately, they merged into the surging river of history, flowing forward irreversibly.

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