

“BETWEEN ELEGANCE AND EARTHINESS”: ON THE WRITING AESTHETICS OF ACADEMIC AND FOLK LITERATURE

WenPing Li

School of Arts and Social Sciences, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong Region 999077, China.

Abstract: Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, contemporary Chinese literature has gradually developed two representative writing orientations: academic writing and folk writing. These two literary approaches demonstrate significant differences in language style, narrative strategy, thematic sources, and aesthetic orientation, yet they share profound commonalities in their commitment to realism, humanistic concern, and reflection on social transformation. Yuan Ping’s *Xiao Shijing* can be regarded as a representative example of academic writing, characterized by intellectual refinement, cultural literacy, and structural sophistication, while Zhu Renfeng’s *Jinshui Hujia* exemplifies folk-oriented rural writing rooted in lived experience, colloquial realism, and emotional immediacy. By taking these two works as comparative case studies, this paper examines their differences in writing techniques from four perspectives: language expression, narrative strategy, material selection, and aesthetic orientation. It further argues that despite stylistic divergence, both writing traditions converge in their literary spirit through shared realism, concern for human complexity, and sensitivity to the transformations of contemporary Chinese society. This comparative study contributes to a deeper understanding of the coexistence, interaction, and potential mutual enrichment between elite literary writing and folk narrative traditions in contemporary Chinese literature.

Keywords: Academic writing; Folk writing; Spiritual convergence; Writing techniques; Contemporary Chinese literature

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the new century, contemporary Chinese literature has shown increasingly diversified creative tendencies [1,2]. Among them, academic writing and folk writing have gradually emerged as two representative literary orientations with distinctive aesthetic characteristics and cultural identities. Although these two categories are not absolutely separated in literary practice, they have formed relatively recognizable creative paradigms due to differences in educational background, life experience, intellectual resources, and aesthetic preferences. Academic writing in contemporary Chinese literature generally refers to literary creation shaped by writers with systematic academic training [2,3], particularly those deeply influenced by university culture, literary theory, and intellectual discourse. Such writing often emphasizes textual craftsmanship, structural consciousness, conceptual reflection, and refined language expression. In contrast, folk writing is more closely connected with grassroots life, local cultural traditions, and lived social experience [4]. It tends to value narrative authenticity, emotional directness, colloquial vitality, and the representation of ordinary people’s destinies. The discussion concerning academic writing and folk writing has long occupied an important position in contemporary Chinese literary criticism. At its core, this debate is not merely about stylistic distinction but also about differing understandings of literary function, social responsibility, cultural identity, and aesthetic value. Academic writing is often associated with intellectual depth and formal sophistication, whereas folk writing is frequently linked to realism, emotional resonance, and the vitality of everyday life. Yuan Ping’s *Xiao Shijing* and Zhu Renfeng’s *Jinshui Hujia* provide highly representative examples of these two literary orientations [5,6]. *Xiao Shijing* focuses on the intellectual world of educated urban subjects and reflects the aesthetic characteristics of academic literary writing through elegant expression, cultural allusion, and subtle psychological observation. By contrast, *Jinshui Hujia* is deeply rooted in rural social transformation and presents the life experiences of ordinary people through plain narrative language, vivid local details, and emotionally accessible storytelling. By placing these two works in comparative dialogue, this paper aims to analyze the differences between academic and folk writing in terms of literary technique while also revealing their deeper spiritual convergence. Such an inquiry contributes to a broader understanding of the internal diversity and developmental possibilities of contemporary Chinese literature.

2 THE STYLISTIC DIVERGENCE BETWEEN ACADEMIC REFINEMENT AND FOLK REALISM

The most apparent distinction between academic-oriented writing and folk-oriented writing lies in their different ways of organizing language, narrative, material experience, and aesthetic value [2,4,7,8]. In *Xiao Shijing* and *Jinshui Hujia*, such distinction is not merely a difference in surface style, but reflects two different literary mechanisms through which life is transformed into text. Yuan Ping’s writing is shaped by intellectual cultivation, literary tradition, and textual self-consciousness, whereas Zhu Renfeng’s writing is sustained by local experience, folk ethics, and narrative vitality. The

former tends to refine life through language, structure, and reflection; the latter tends to approach life through story, emotion, and concrete experience. In terms of language, Xiao Shijing presents a highly cultivated literary texture. Yuan Ping's prose is characterized by careful diction, rhetorical subtlety, and a visible connection with classical literary resources [5]. The work frequently employs allusion, irony, implication, and intertextual resonance, placing ordinary daily experience within a broader cultural and literary framework. Its language does not merely describe reality; rather, it reorganizes reality through literary form and intellectual mediation. Emotional expression is seldom direct or excessive. Instead, it is often concealed within refined wording, restrained tone, and reflective observation. This linguistic mode gives the text density, elegance, and cultural depth, while also requiring readers to possess a certain degree of literary and cultural sensitivity. By contrast, the language of Jinshui Hujia is closer to everyday speech, local communication, and the expressive habits of rural society. Zhu Renfeng does not deliberately pursue ornate diction or complex rhetorical design. Instead, the narrative absorbs colloquial expressions, local idioms, rural speech patterns [4,6], and the natural rhythm of daily conversation. Such language is closely connected with the social identity of the characters and the living environment to which they belong. It preserves the roughness, warmth, and immediacy of folk expression. The value of this language lies not in formal elegance, but in its capacity to restore the living scene of rural society and to preserve the original vitality of folk life. If Yuan Ping's language embodies an elegance shaped by literary cultivation, Zhu Renfeng's language manifests an authenticity generated from lived experience. The divergence between the two works is also evident in narrative strategy [7-9]. Xiao Shijing does not primarily rely on dramatic conflict or rapid plot development. Its narrative often unfolds through daily details, psychological nuances, intellectual reflection, and subtle interpersonal relations among educated subjects. The rhythm is relatively restrained, and the narrative focus is directed more toward spiritual states than external events. This mode of narration reflects the influence of academic and intellectual writing, which tends to emphasize structural consciousness, reflective depth, and the inner complexity of characters. The text is less concerned with telling a complete story in the conventional sense than with revealing the delicate tensions between ideals and reality, elegance and worldliness, self-esteem and compromise.

Jinshui Hujia, however, follows a more recognizable realist narrative logic. Its storytelling is organized around the life course of characters, family relations, village affairs, and the transformation of rural society. Events usually unfold along a relatively clear temporal sequence. Marriage, kinship, neighborhood conflict, livelihood, migration, and social change constitute important narrative materials. The story advances through concrete life situations and visible changes in human relationships. This kind of narration is closely related to the folk tradition of storytelling. It emphasizes clarity, continuity, and readability, allowing readers to enter the emotional world of the characters through familiar social experiences and recognizable ethical relations. The difference in material sources further demonstrates the distinction between the two literary modes. Xiao Shijing draws much of its material from the world of intellectuals, including university classrooms, academic communities, scholarly relationships, cultural identity, and the tension between humanistic ideals and practical reality. Its literary world is therefore marked by a certain circle-based quality. It is concerned with the spiritual predicament of educated subjects and with the subtle transformation of intellectual dignity under contemporary social conditions. The work reveals not only the elegance of academic life, but also its anxieties, contradictions, and hidden compromises.

In contrast, Jinshui Hujia draws its material from rural society and local life [4,6]. Family conflicts, village ethics, folk customs, labor, livelihood, and social transformation constitute the basic texture of the novel. Its literary world is not built upon abstract concepts, but upon concrete details of everyday existence. Through the destinies of ordinary people, the work records the structural changes of rural life under modernization and urbanization. These materials are not merely background elements; they constitute the foundation of the work's narrative force. They give the novel its earthiness, emotional density, and social breadth. The aesthetic orientation of the two works also differs significantly. Xiao Shijing tends toward restraint, implication, irony, and intellectual reflection. Its aesthetic appeal lies in the tension between elegance and reality, between cultural aspiration and worldly experience. It avoids excessive emotional exposure and often leaves meaning within the space of suggestion. This produces an aesthetic effect of subtlety, distance, and reflective depth. Jinshui Hujia, by contrast, is more direct in emotional expression. It does not avoid suffering, warmth, conflict, or moral judgment. Its aesthetic power derives from emotional resonance, narrative accessibility, and the sincere representation of ordinary life. It is closer to the ethical and emotional structure of folk society. Therefore, the divergence between academic refinement and folk realism should not be understood as a simple opposition between high and low, elegant and vulgar, or intellectual and popular. Rather, it reflects two different routes of literary formation. Academic writing transforms life through cultural mediation and formal refinement, while folk writing approaches life through experiential authenticity and emotional immediacy. One seeks depth through reflection; the other seeks vitality through closeness to life. Together, they constitute two important dimensions of contemporary Chinese literary creation.

3 THE SPIRITUAL CONVERGENCE OF REALISM AND HUMAN CONCERN

The comparison between Xiao Shijing and Jinshui Hujia also invites further reflection on the possible interaction between academic-oriented writing and folk-oriented writing. If these two literary orientations are understood merely as opposites, their respective value may be confined by rigid classification. However, if they are regarded as two complementary resources within contemporary Chinese literature, their interaction may offer a productive path for future literary development. Academic writing possesses evident strengths. It usually demonstrates stronger

consciousness of form, language, structure, and conceptual depth. Writers of this type are often able to organize experience with greater textual precision and to elevate concrete life materials into reflective literary expression. Xiao Shijing demonstrates this advantage. Its language, structure, and intellectual atmosphere show how academic writing can provide literature with cultural depth and aesthetic refinement. It reminds readers that literature is not merely a record of life, but also an artistic transformation of life through language, memory, and thought.

However, academic writing also faces potential limitations. When it remains too enclosed within intellectual circles, it may become distant from broader social life. Excessive refinement may weaken the vitality of lived experience, and excessive conceptualization may reduce the emotional immediacy of literature. If academic writing loses contact with ordinary life, its elegance may become self-contained and insufficiently grounded in reality. Therefore, academic writing needs to reconnect with concrete social experience, local life, and the emotional structure of ordinary people. Only in this way can intellectual refinement acquire a more solid foundation in reality. Folk writing, by contrast, possesses strong life energy. It is close to ordinary people, local society, and everyday emotions. Its strength lies in authenticity, narrative vitality, and emotional resonance. Jinshui Hujia shows how folk writing can preserve the warmth and density of lived experience. It allows literature to remain connected with the rhythm of daily life and with the ethical structure of local communities. This is an important resource for contemporary literature, especially in an age when literary writing may easily become abstract, urbanized, or detached from grassroots reality.

At the same time, folk writing also has its own limitations. If it relies solely on raw experience and natural storytelling, it may sometimes appear loose in structure or insufficient in artistic concentration. Real life itself does not automatically become literature; it must undergo selection, organization, refinement, and reflection [7-9]. Therefore, folk writing may benefit from the formal awareness of academic writing. It may strengthen its narrative structure, deepen its psychological description, and enhance its thematic concentration while preserving its original vitality. The relationship between academic writing and folk writing should therefore be understood as one of mutual correction and mutual nourishment. Academic writing can learn from folk writing how to return to life, absorb emotional warmth, and restore the concrete texture of ordinary existence. Folk writing can learn from academic writing how to refine language, organize narrative, and deepen thematic expression. The former provides technique and reflection; the latter provides vitality and reality.

Their interaction may help overcome the limitations of each mode and contribute to a more open and dynamic literary ecology. In this sense, the opposition between elegance and earthiness should not be regarded as a fixed binary. Elegance without life may become hollow, while earthiness without artistic refinement may remain insufficiently transformed. Contemporary Chinese literature needs both the height of intellectual reflection and the warmth of lived experience. It needs both the formal consciousness of academic writing and the emotional vitality of folk writing. The future development of literature may lie not in choosing one side over the other, but in creating a more inclusive literary structure in which different writing resources can interact, supplement, and transform one another.

4 BEHIND AESTHETICS: SOCIAL STRUCTURAL CHANGES REFLECTED IN THE TWO WORKS

Beyond their aesthetic differences, Xiao Shijing and Jinshui Hujia also reveal deeper changes in contemporary Chinese social structure. The former presents the transformation of academic circles, while the latter reflects the restructuring of rural and urban society. Their literary value therefore does not lie only in narrative style or aesthetic form, but also in their ability to register the hidden movement of social relations, value systems, and power structures. Through different fictional spaces, the two works disclose how individuals are shaped, constrained, and displaced by changing social orders.

4.1 Xiao Shijing: The Structural Transformation of Academic Circles

Xiao Shijing presents an academic world that is no longer sustained primarily by pure intellectual authority. In the traditional imagination, the university is often associated with scholarship, moral cultivation, and the transmission of knowledge. However, the work reveals that the internal structure of academic circles has undergone a significant transformation. Academic authority is gradually weakened, while administrative power, personal connections, project resources, professional titles, and institutional evaluation systems become increasingly important forces in the distribution of status and opportunity. In this sense, academic space is not represented as a purely spiritual or intellectual field, but as a complex social field shaped by power, resources, and interpersonal calculation.

This change also produces a more rigid hierarchical structure within the university. Senior professors and administrative managers usually occupy the upper level of the academic order. Middle-aged teachers, facing pressure from promotion, evaluation, and survival, often have to adapt themselves to institutional rules and seek advancement within the existing system. Young idealists, by contrast, are more easily marginalized. Their intellectual enthusiasm and moral expectations may not find sufficient support in a structure increasingly governed by practical interests. As a result, the channels of upward mobility become narrower, and the academic circle becomes more enclosed. Xiao Shijing therefore does not merely describe individual frustration; it reveals the structural pressure behind such frustration.

More importantly, the work reflects the alienation of academic values. The traditional ideal of “teaching the Way and pursuing scholarship” gradually loses its central position. Utilitarianism, worldly calculation, and institutional competition become more dominant value orientations. Scholarship is no longer only a spiritual vocation, but may also become a means of livelihood, a tool for status acquisition, or a stepping stone for social advancement. The symbolic

aura of the ivory tower is thus gradually dissolved. Through this representation, Xiao Shijing shows the tension between academic idealism and institutional reality, and further exposes the spiritual dilemma of intellectuals in contemporary society.

4.2 Jinshui Hujia: The Structural Transformation of Rural-Urban Society

Compared with Xiao Shijing, Jinshui Hujia turns its attention to the transformation of rural and urban social life. The work reflects the reconstruction of social space under the influence of urbanization, migration, and economic change. The traditional binary boundary between city and countryside is gradually broken. Demolition, urban expansion, and rural labor migration push rural populations into cities, producing a one-way movement from fixed local settlements to mobile urban spaces. The stable form of rural dwelling is therefore dissolved, and a new cross-regional and cross-urban-rural social space begins to emerge.

This spatial change further leads to the disintegration of traditional social relations. In the classical rural order, interpersonal relationships are usually maintained through blood ties, geographical proximity, clan ethics, and neighborhood familiarity. Such a society depends on long-term coexistence and shared moral norms. However, with migration and dispersed living, neighborhood bonds become loose, and clan-based regulation gradually loses its practical force. After entering the city, rural individuals are often placed within an unfamiliar social environment. They move from a society of acquaintances into a society of strangers, where interpersonal relations are more easily shaped by interest, competition, and individual survival. Jinshui Hujia thus captures not only the external movement of people, but also the internal transformation of social relations.

The work also reveals the transformation of gender structure in rural-urban society. The traditional patriarchal order of the countryside is no longer completely stable. Women gain more opportunities to work outside, engage in business, and pursue economic independence. Their consciousness of self-reliance begins to awaken in the process of social mobility. However, this awakening does not mean that gender oppression has disappeared. Women may still be trapped in workplace hidden rules, family dependence, gender prejudice, and unequal social expectations. Therefore, the female experience represented in Jinshui Hujia is not a simple story of liberation, but a complex condition in which traditional constraints and modern awakening coexist.

In this sense, Jinshui Hujia provides a vivid literary record of the restructuring of grassroots society. It shows how urbanization changes not only physical space, but also social relations, ethical order, and gender consciousness. Its folk-oriented narrative is therefore not limited to the preservation of local memory. It also becomes a means of observing the profound transformation of contemporary Chinese society from within ordinary life. Taken together, Xiao Shijing and Jinshui Hujia reveal two different but interconnected dimensions of social change. Xiao Shijing reflects the transformation of the intellectual and institutional order, while Jinshui Hujia presents the reconstruction of rural-urban life and grassroots relations. One looks at the changing structure of academic circles; the other observes the changing structure of local society. Behind their aesthetic forms lies a shared concern with the fate of individuals under structural transformation. Their significance therefore lies not only in literary expression, but also in their capacity to illuminate the social logic behind contemporary Chinese experience.

5 CONCLUSION

The significance of reading Yuan Ping's Xiao Shijing and Zhu Renfeng's Jinshui Hujia together lies in its illumination of two important writing orientations within contemporary Chinese literature. This analysis not only clarifies their differences in language style, narrative organization, material selection, and aesthetic tendency, but also reveals their shared concern with social reality, human complexity, and the transformation of everyday life in modern China. Through the examination of academic refinement and folk realism, the two works show that contemporary Chinese literary creation does not develop through a simple opposition between elegance and earthiness, but through the coexistence and interaction of different literary resources. In this sense, the dialogue between academic-oriented writing and folk-oriented writing provides a useful perspective for understanding the diversity, vitality, and realist tradition of contemporary Chinese literature.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

REFERENCES

- [1] Hong Zicheng. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010.
- [2] Chen Sihe. *A Course in the History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2008.
- [3] David Der-wei Wang. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
- [4] Ding Fan. *A History of Chinese Rural Novels*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007.
- [5] Yuan Ping. *The Little Book of Poetry*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2022.
- [6] Zhu Renfeng. *The Hu Family Near the Water*. Nanchang: Baihuazhou Literature and Art Publishing House, 2022.

-
- [7] M M Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Holquist Michael. Translated by Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.
- [8] Gérard Genette. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- [9] Wayne C Booth. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.