

### An Analysis of “The Sentry” by Shen Congwen (1902-1988)

“The Sentry,”<sup>1</sup> written in 1926, is one of Shen Congwen’s earliest pieces of fiction. A short story about a soldier stationed at a seemingly haunted post, it was aptly described by David Der-Wei Wang as “a fascinating portrait of a lonely young soldier’s nocturnal journey through the realm of imagination.”<sup>2</sup> Unlike many of Shen Congwen’s more famous pieces of literature, “The Sentry” and the other short stories that accompany it in the eighth volume of his *Wenji* (Complete Works) seem to have never been published in a separate book. Why these were not formatted into their own collection upon completion is not known, but it may be due to the fact that much of what he wrote during this early period of his life was quickly churned out for profit. Shen Congwen himself called his pieces from the time “raw material,”<sup>3</sup> and drew from both personal experience and articles that he had read for inspiration. From short stories to plays about traditional Miao life, there is a rich diversity in these stories’ range of topics and formats, so much so that his biographer Jeffrey Kinkley described Shen Congwen’s works from this time as “a chaos of creativity.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite being a product of this period of experimentation, “The Sentry” is nonetheless rich with the characteristics that would become representative of Shen Congwen’s writing. It is clear that by this point in his life, he had already started to forge his own unique style. In its macabre atmosphere focusing on the supernatural, its unconventional narrative, and its

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<sup>1</sup> Shen Congwen. “Shaobing.” *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 116-129. All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 221.

<sup>3</sup> Kinkley, Jeffrey. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1987. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Kinkley, Jeffrey. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1987. 86.

description of military characters and rural peasant life, “The Sentry” gives us a fascinating look at the early roots of that style.

It is also worth noting that Shen Congwen was writing about China on a broader level than most other authors of the time. This may seem paradoxical given the subject matter of stories like “The Sentry,” which feature everyday country folk in uneventful circumstances; even more so when one considers how Shen Congwen was accused by both the Communist government and fellow writers for not writing about “important” topics like revolution and the need for cultural modernization. But an understanding of his works will make clear that Shen Congwen saw China as more than an entity merely defined by the social and political movements of the day. Rather than shrinking the role of literature to arguing narrow political statements or describing the lives of the rare few who would shape the course of history, he paints a much more inclusive picture of China as the sum total of myriad peoples living plain, and yet meaningful lives. He states that written history “will never sufficiently tell us what we should know.”<sup>5</sup> In his portraits of Chinese peasants living humble lives in rural towns, Shen Congwen tells the reader something of what he thinks they should know: that history is more than events revolving around political or economic trends; it is the entire human experience. By bringing to life “the sadness and happiness of some people in an era of time,”<sup>6</sup> Shen Congwen presents the reader with a portrait of this experience in his nativist literature.

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<sup>5</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 226.

<sup>6</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 226.

One of the most recognizable traits of Shen Congwen's writing that features in "The Sentry" is a focus on military characters. This is a theme that repeats throughout his subsequent works, and it has its roots in his own past. Born into a military family, Shen Congwen lived through one of the most turbulent and revolutionary periods of modern Chinese history. He pursued the life of a writer only after serving in the army of a provincial warlord for half a decade, and those experiences would influence his work greatly. Many of his stories feature soldiers, and yet the plots rarely dwell on the purely martial aspect of their lives. Instead, his stories follow soldiers in relatively mundane situations, showing a side of military life that is rarely discussed in such literature.

This is the case in "The Sentry." In the opening paragraphs, the narrator mentions the town's military multiple times, but always as one feature among many that together form the setting. Anecdotes are mentioned of generals consulting the gods before starting a campaign, soldiers interacting with their superiors, and villagers running afoul of bandits in the mountains. The plot itself describes an easily frightened young soldier who finds himself manning the worst post in the provincial town of Sandbar. The soldier, Shou (whose name can be translated to mean "Longevity" in English), is an amusing representative of the superstitious tendencies of traditional rural Chinese. Known for being a coward who nonetheless loves to discuss ghost stories, he is fearful in the extreme and believes wholeheartedly in every tall tale he hears. It is his misfortune to be stationed in a long dark corridor that is rumored to be populated by spirits. Throughout the night, Shou finds himself battling his own wild imagination as he tries in vain to set his mind on anything other than ghosts. The corridor itself is located in the compound of the town's magistrate. This detail reflects Shen Congwen's tendency to ignore the movers and

shakers of the time, and instead make unimpressive nobodies the main characters of his stories. It is likely that he drew his inspiration for Shou's task from his own past: in 1919, Shen Congwen worked for a time as a police clerk, where he had to "follow a patrolman through the prison at night to check off prisoner's names... [and] he had once more to listen to the screams of men being tortured."<sup>7</sup> Unpleasant memories of this period of his life very well may have been the inspiration behind "The Sentry."

The other key character in "The Sentry" is also a soldier: Shou's partner for the shift. He is introduced as having been sent over from the military training camp, and has a very stern, disciplined nature; he is a stereotypical military man whose countenance contrasts effectively with Shou's cowardice. Shen Congwen's portrayal of these two starkly different characters who find themselves sharing the same responsibility presents an interesting look at people in the military. The story opens with the narrator (himself quite possibly a soldier) giving a laughing affirmation to the question: "'Surely a soldier wouldn't fear ghosts?'"<sup>8</sup> He then explains through anecdote how the bravest soldiers, who have "no fear of death, or of blood, or of any cruel and gruesome thing," can nonetheless be terrified by the supernatural.<sup>9</sup> In "The Sentry," Shen Congwen deconstructs the popular notion of a soldier as a tough brute. While his partner fits the mainstream stereotype, Shou is introspective to the extreme, mulling over every possible horror that could befall him as they stand guard in the dark corridor. This portrayal of Shou is an example of Kinkley's assessment of Shen Congwen, who "typically paints the foot soldier as

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<sup>7</sup> Kinkley, Jeffrey. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1987. 58.

<sup>8</sup> Shen Congwen. "Shaobing." *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 116.

<sup>9</sup> Shen Congwen. "Shaobing." *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 117.

more innocent than most other Chinese of his era.”<sup>10</sup> Shou, the innocent foot soldier, wrestles with the paradox of his own fear, stating: “... *A soldier doesn't fear anything, even death! How can I be afraid of ghosts?*”<sup>11</sup> This paradox is at the heart of the story, leading the reader to question their own conceptions of what bravery and fear mean.

In “The Sentry,” fear is portrayed as something that can affect all people, regardless of occupation. The narrator explains how even the most courageous soldier can still be affected by normal human fears of the unexplained. When introducing Shou’s hometown, the narrator tells an interesting anecdote about how the town executioner “cuts off people’s heads as if it were second nature,” but then burns joss paper to appease the ghost of the man he just killed.<sup>12</sup> Shen Congwen is showing the reader that since they share this common human weakness, soldiers are not so different in nature from civilians. He is also “finding in condemnable human follies a confirmation of life.”<sup>13</sup> This confirmation of life is at the heart of much of Shen Congwen’s nativist literature, as I will further develop in this essay.

Like many of Shen Congwen’s fictional stories, “The Sentry” is set against the exoticized backdrop of a rural town with its own distinct characteristics. As an author, Shen Congwen carved out a niche that was defined by its focus on China’s rural areas, and he became known for his artistic portrayals of traditional countryside life. For this task, he drew in large part from his own background: half Miao and from an isolated part of the countryside, he had a unique heritage that set him apart from other writers of the time. For much of his work he “looked

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<sup>10</sup> Kinkley, Jeffrey. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1987. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Shen Congwen. “Shaobing.” *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 123.

<sup>12</sup> Shen Congwen. “Shaobing.” *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 117.

<sup>13</sup> Kinkley, Jeffrey. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1987. 203.

backward, aiming to recapture the landscape and lives of his provincial home.”<sup>14</sup> He enchanted his readers with stories describing a bucolic environment far from the city landscape where most contemporary literature was set. His style of writing would come to help form a distinct genre known as nativist literature (*xiangtu wenxue*). The defining trait of this genre was a realistic focus on China’s countryside, with rural farmers and other peasants featuring as the main characters.

It is important to note that while Shen Congwen became famous for his stories about China’s peasants, he was not the only author at the time writing about rural subjects. Others dealt with China’s massive agricultural population and set their stories in small towns and villages, but the style and purpose of those works largely differed from Shen Congwen’s literature. Within the nativist tradition, there was a divide between those whose works emphasized China’s need for modernization and those who instead wrote about traditional rural topics without criticizing their “backwardness.” Liu Hongtao, professor of literature at Beijing Normal University, calls these two sides “the Enlightenment tradition represented by Lu Xun” and “the cultural conservatism of Shen Congwen.”<sup>15</sup>

The stories featuring peasant characters that Lu Xun wrote are defined by a pessimistic view of traditional Chinese culture. They often feature peasants suffering from hardship as they stubbornly resist China’s transition into modern society. A classic example is “The True Story of Ah-Q,” which describes an uneducated peasant’s woes as his town gradually makes the shift

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<sup>14</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 201.

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<sup>15</sup> Liu Hongtao. *Mo Yan’s Fiction and the Chinese Nativist Literary Tradition*. World Literature Today, 2009. <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Mo+Yan's+fiction+and+the+Chinese+nativist+literary+tradition.-a0203229162>

from traditionalism into the modern era. The sobering conclusion finds the titular character thrown before a modernized court officer and executed via firing squad, a victim both of the new times and of his own resistance to progress. Another nativist work by Lu Xun that exemplifies the contrast between his style and Shen Congwen's is "Medicine," which tells the melancholy story of a peasant family's attempt to cure their ailing son. Relying on an old wives' tale, they concoct a traditional panacea made with the blood of a recently executed criminal. The superstitious cure proves ineffective, and the story ends with the mothers of both the sick son and the executed criminal grieving at their children's graves. Another nativist author whose works were meant to highlight the plight of China's traditional peasants was Wu Zuxiang. In his short story "Fan Village," Wu describes a rural region devastated by famine. Peasants wrecked by poverty are left helpless, their children "stretching their ugly, dirty faces in loud howls, crawling about in the wet dirt, or picking up fallen *kuei* flowers and stuffing them one by one into their mud-covered mouths."<sup>16</sup> The utter destitution of China's masses is driven home in the story's macabre ending: the main character, a starving woman named Hsien-tzu Sao, attempts to steal money from her own elderly mother while she sleeps. Accidentally waking her, Hsien-tzu Sao gets into a struggle for the money which ends with her stabbing her mother in the head. She accidentally sets the thatched hut containing her mother's corpse on fire and flees the scene with the money, an example of the depths to which people driven to desperation may descend. Another of Wu Zuxiang's nativist stories is "Let There Be Peace," which describes a good-hearted clerk's tragic fall into poverty. After losing his job and failing to find any other means of providing for his family in the town's broken economy, the clerk resorts to theft, only

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<sup>16</sup> -Wu Tsu-hsiang. "Fan Village." *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas: 1919-1949*. Ed. Joseph S. M. Lau, C.T. Hsia, Leo Ou-Fan Lee. Columbia University Press, New York. 1981. 404.

to be caught and whipped by his own neighbors. In this scene, Wu Zuxiang describes him and his wife as animal-like: “his wife started jumping around and bawling like a boar”, and the clerk himself howls “like a wounded wolf.” At the end of his beating, Wu Zuxiang writes, “his eyes glazed over, his face contorted and ugly, only a vestige of the human form remaining.”<sup>17</sup> The clerk’s tragic fall from humanity is completed when he dies at the end, where Wu Zuxiang describes his passing from consciousness as akin to an insect flying into a black hole.<sup>18</sup>

In stark contrast to Shen Congwen’s goal of finding confirmations of life and beauty in the simple lives of China’s peasants, Wu Zuxiang’s purpose in these and other stories is to illustrate the dehumanizing effect poverty has on people. He and Lu Xun saw their peasant subjects as tools for making cultural and political points, while Shen Congwen viewed them as characters larger than their own hardships. It is certainly not that Shen Congwen had a naively sugar-coated view of China’s lower class; in fact, he was more personally connected to that group and aware of their struggles than either Lu Xun or Wu Zuxiang. Many of his works feature death and macabre events, as I will discuss later, but successfully emphasizes life even in the midst of suffering and violence. Kinkley paraphrased Shen Congwen’s worldview thusly: “Beauty exists in things apparently ugly, primitive, even abhorrent.”<sup>19</sup> This outlook is noticeable in his literature, even in the works that feature suffering. Kinkley points out how his peasant characters “seldom dwell on their poverty,” but instead rejoice in “their own rich life of the

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<sup>17</sup> Wu Tsu-hsiang. “Let There Be Peace.” *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas: 1919-1949*. Ed. Joseph S. M. Lau, C.T. Hsia, Leo Ou-Fan Lee. Columbia University Press, New York. 1981. 396.

<sup>18</sup> Wu Tsu-hsiang. “Let There Be Peace.” *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas: 1919-1949*. Ed. Joseph S. M. Lau, C.T. Hsia, Leo Ou-Fan Lee. Columbia University Press, New York. 1981. 397.

<sup>19</sup> Kinkley, Jeffrey. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1987. 13.

mind.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps Shen Congwen found it encouraging to remember (or even fabricate) a China past, where good-hearted villagers remained deeply human despite war or famine. It seems that his readers found this outlook appealing, as Shen Congwen’s works would become a staple of Chinese readership in the tumultuous 30s and 40s. Rather than reflecting on the political woes and social tensions that marked this period, his literature presented people with a fresh and romantic image of the exotic countryside, where the small personal details of his characters superseded the nation’s calamities.

“The Sentry” takes place in a town called Sandbar, presumably set in Shen Congwen’s home region of West Hunan. Similar to the innocent, earthy peasants that feature in many of his other works, the villagers in Sandbar are portrayed as exaggeratedly traditional. It almost has the feel of a *National Geographic* article where a certain tribe or ethnicity is profiled in brief, their unique defining characteristics highlighted for a curious Western audience. While the group may face sobering challenges such as disease or high rates of infant mortality, the limited length and scope of such articles usually only allow for a surface-level introduction of the group’s most interesting and exotic traits. After all, when people pick up a travel magazine, what they are usually interested in is the place’s appealing features, not the weighty issues that plague the community. An engaging travelogue article filled with quirky and romantic anecdotes along with beautiful descriptions of the scenery that reaches out to a much larger audience is what the majority of Shen Congwen’s nativist works could be accurately compared to. This is in fact how many of his contemporary readers would have approached his stories. Kinkley writes, “As documenter of his native West Hunan, Shen Congwen brought the craft of

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<sup>20</sup> Kinkley, Jeffrey. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1987. 427.

the traditional literati poet, gazetteerist, and travel writer into the twentieth century.”<sup>21</sup> One gets the sense that Shen Congwen is taking the role of an insider who is describing the town to readers interested in the exotic, not unlike an anthropologist telling stories about his time spent among the natives of a far-off land. Shen Congwen does this tactfully and respectfully, never presenting his rural subjects as subhuman or inferior to their urban neighbors. In fact, most of his nativist stories glorify the rugged life of China’s rural peasantry. One example of this is his short story “The Lamp,” which describes a struggling, Shen Congwen-esque writer who rents out one of his rooms to an old army friend of his father. The writer cannot help but become captivated by the old soldier’s tales of his travels through the exotic frontiers. Shen Congwen called himself “a country boy and recorder of life,” and “developed a tradition of impressionistically documenting local places and their culture.”<sup>22</sup> Rather than lambasting traditional culture as Lu Xun and his followers did, Shen Congwen’s work is defined by what Liu Hongtao calls “the idealization of the primitive state of existence.”<sup>23</sup> His portrayals of country life achieve a sense of artistic nostalgia that enchants readers with beautiful landscapes, exotic social traditions, and engaging characters.

It is interesting to note that in “The Sentry,” no context is given for the two soldiers’ duties, nor any information whatsoever regarding what army they serve in, or even when the story takes place. This reflects a trademark of Shen Congwen’s literary style. Wang writes, “One of the most remarkable traits of Shen Congwen’s stories about army life is the apparent lack of

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<sup>21</sup> Kinkley, Jeffrey. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1987. 426.

<sup>22</sup> Kinkley, Jeffrey. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1987. 425.

<sup>23</sup> Liu Hongtao. *Mo Yan’s Fiction and the Chinese Nativist Literary Tradition*. World Literature Today, 2009.

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Mo+Yan's+fiction+and+the+Chinese+nativist+literary+tradition.-a0203229162>

context which justifies both the necessity of an action and the narrative format relating the action.”<sup>24</sup> Instead of focusing on the noteworthy events that shape history, attention is given to the characters themselves. Wang’s comment on Shen Congwen’s “Random Sketches” could just as suitably describe “The Sentry”: “Major and often negative forces that make history, such as war, violence, and death, are self-consciously repressed as extraneous to the main narrative; instead, marginal and aleatory incidents...become crucial.”<sup>25</sup>

This lack of detail gives “The Sentry” an interesting timelessness that contrasts with the specific peculiarity of Sandbar. While on the one hand the place is special due to the townspeople’s obsession with all things spiritual, the exact time of the events is uncertain; the story could be taking place in the Qing Dynasty just as easily as it could in the 1920s. This timelessness is a common feature of Shen Congwen’s fiction. Kinkley writes of his literature: “though rich both in personal nostalgia and in regional myth, [Shen Congwen’s works] generally show little formal sense of history.”<sup>26</sup> This is a crucial component to understanding Shen Congwen’s view of China’s rural population and his treatment of them in literature. He discussed the meaning of history in his book “Random Sketches,” a nonfiction account of his own personal travels. On his journey back to his home province, he was struck by the scene of men on the river bank tugging boats up the river, and reflected on the timelessness of their toil. Contrasting their lives against the modern view of history, he wrote, “Written history, besides telling us stories of mutual killing among certain groups of people in certain places on earth, will

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<sup>24</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 231.

<sup>25</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 225.

<sup>26</sup> Kinkley, Jeffrey. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1987. 23.

never sufficiently tell us what we should know. But this river has told me the sadness and happiness of some people in an era of time.”<sup>27</sup> Looking at his literature, it is clear that Shen means to express the “unwritten history” of the lives of the nameless people living traditional lives in the country, where they were removed from the events and concerns of what we tend to think of as important historical events. Writing of such people in another short story of his titled “The Inn,” Shen Congwen says, “There are such people everywhere, but city folk, even those of talent, could never imagine that they actually live in the same world with them.” He goes on to list a number of important and renowned figures from China and abroad, stating that even they “could never know that such people exist.”<sup>28</sup>

One of Shen Congwen’s central goals in his literature is therefore to finally give China’s “unknown” people a chance of being known and of having their stories told. By doing this, he is broadening the scope of history to include the forgotten and misrepresented peasants of China. He admits that this is a challenge, writing “Most people in China live under conditions that are not only forgotten by the average person but beyond the writer’s imagination. The country is so big that just waging civil war is a problem, let alone finding out about these people.”<sup>29</sup> In his short story “The Inn,” he tells a story about such a person, a widowed innkeeper named Black Cat. The story is nothing more than a short portrait of the main character’s brief relationship with a traveler, and yet it succeeds beautifully in giving the audience an intimate look into the life of someone detached from the grand narratives of history. While he was certainly no less

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<sup>27</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 226.

<sup>28</sup> Shen Congwen. “The New and the Old.” *Imperfect Paradise*. Ed. Jeffrey Kinkley. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu. 1995. 107.

<sup>29</sup> Shen Congwen. “The Inn.” *Imperfect Paradise*. Ed. Jeffrey Kinkley. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu. 1995. 18.

aware of the social problems that plagued China's peasantry during this time, Shen Congwen chose to show the value of their simple lives by creating similarly simple scenes with a lyrical touch. This goal is also clearly noticeable in "The Sentry." He could easily have given the story a historical context by discussing how and why Shou and his partner found themselves serving in the town's military; instead, he directs the reader's attention to the minute and personal details of their evening together on the night shift.

The specific trait that the narrator claims makes Sandbar unique from other parts of China is its extreme culture of superstition; it is described as a place where "ghost stories are the education of the town."<sup>30</sup> From court hearings to medicinal treatment, everything requires an inquiry of the spirits, accurately reflecting the superstitious culture that was still widespread across rural China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his short story "The New and the Old," Shen Congwen writes, "Remote border areas are ruled jointly by men and gods."<sup>31</sup> This culture of superstition is embodied in the main character Shou, who is described as "the most cowardly soldier of all." Introducing him, the narrator says, "During the week he loved to talk about ghosts, but he actually feared them greatly."<sup>32</sup> For the remainder of the story after he is introduced, Shou is the focus of the narrator's attention, and it is through his senses that the reader experiences the eerie corridor where Shou and his partner are stationed. The narrator describes the hall as "extremely dark and long," and repeatedly emphasizes its scary nature, saying, "Those who have to pass through it during the night all feel as though they are risking

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<sup>30</sup> Shen Congwen. "Shaobing." *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 117.

<sup>31</sup> Shen Congwen. "The New and the Old." *Imperfect Paradise*. Ed. Jeffrey Kinkley. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu. 1995. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Shen Congwen. "Shaobing." *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 119.

their lives.”<sup>33</sup> Detail is also given to the solitary lamp that hangs above the sentries’ heads. As they pace back and forth within its circle of light, it manipulates the partner’s shadow “so that it looked like a giant spirit following his movements.”<sup>34</sup> Every shadow and noise is interpreted by Shou to be some kind of spirit. Through the descriptions of Shou’s thoughts and fears, Shen Congwen builds up an intensely spooky atmosphere that permeates the entire plot of “The Sentry.”

It is in this haunted atmosphere that another defining feature of Shen Congwen’s literary style can be seen: his focus on the macabre. In many of his works, such as “Three Men and One Woman,” “The New and the Old,” and “Night,” to name just a few, he discusses unpleasant topics such as murder, nightmares, and necrophilia, weaving them into his otherwise idyllic narratives to create an unsettling contrast. Wang describes this tendency as an “almost compulsive desire to combine pastoral motifs with horror and pain in reality.”<sup>35</sup> The resulting effect however is quite different from the grimness of the “Enlightenment tradition” popularized by Lu Xun. Rather than shocking his readers with gruesome details to make a social or political point, Shen Congwen features horror in his literature because horror is a very real part of the human experience and as such, should not be avoided but rather explored. In “The Sentry,” he presents the reader with a town where horrific elements such as ghosts and executions are featured alongside normal issues like education, entertainment, and government affairs.

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<sup>33</sup> Shen Congwen. “Shaobing.” *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 119.

<sup>34</sup> Shen Congwen. “Shaobing.” *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 123.

<sup>35</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 205.

One element of this macabre setting that features strongly in other works of modern Chinese literature is the practice of execution via decapitation. Lu Xun is famous for his treatment of decapitation, which he used to illustrate the cultural “sickness” of the Chinese people. He once related an anecdote from when he was studying in Japan of seeing a photograph of a Chinese man being executed by Japanese soldiers. What troubled him most was the complacency of the Chinese crowd that had gathered to watch; he saw it as a spiritual deadness that had its roots in the backwards values of Chinese culture. The removal of one’s head also represents disunity, a problem that plagued politics in China through all of Lu Xun’s life, as exemplified in the drawn-out periods of warlordism and civil war. This motif appears in a number of Shen Congwen’s works, most prominently in “The New and the Old,” which tells the story of a traditional “headsman,” a soldier whose main role was to perform executions. It also appears in “The Sentry,” at the start of the narrator’s description of the town of Sandbar. However, Shen Congwen’s treatment of decapitation reflects a starkly different view from that of Lu Xun, who used it to represent political and cultural decay. In the case of “The Sentry,” it is used as an example of the townspeople’s shared bravery in the face of bloodshed, which contrasts with their irrational fear of the supernatural. The narrator includes a description of how people in the town regularly watch executions “as if they were watching a play.” This is an exception to David Der-Wei Wang’s statement that Shen Congwen “never treats decapitation as something enjoyable,” and testifies to the peculiar nature of the people of Sandbar.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 218.

Wang makes an interesting parallel between Shen Congwen's repeated treatment of decapitation and that of Lu Xun. While Lu Xun writes about decapitation to the point of near-obsession, Shen Congwen is different "in that he is far less worried about attaching any inherent meaning to the subject of decapitation and headlessness."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, his brief mention of decapitation as a form of execution in "The Sentry" hardly warrants analysis. Rather, it is a perfect example of Shen Congwen's style of narration that "[weaves] varied sensory images from natural and human environments into a fabric and giving them correspondences to one another."<sup>38</sup> The mention of execution in "The Sentry" comes at the start of the narrator's description of the rich culture of superstition that dominates Sandbar, with a whirlwind tour of different scenes, including a family taking their children to the temple, the town leaders performing ceremonies to dispel drought, and people of various occupations seeking divine advice as they seek to perform their responsibilities. Instead of being featured as a stand-alone concept, the practice of decapitation is simply another facet of life in Sandbar. This further testifies to Shen Congwen's broad view of human experience. Liu Hongtao points out how when writing about the countryside, Shen Congwen presents without condemnation "its insular but robust inhabitants even as they engage in murder, robber, drunken brawls, and debauchery."<sup>39</sup> These very activities feature prominently in "The True Story of Ah-Q," and yet Lu Xun uses them to criticize the brokenness of traditional Chinese society. Shen Congwen

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<sup>37</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 217

<sup>38</sup> Wang, David Der-wei. *Fictional Realism in Twentieth Century China. Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*. Columbia University Press, New York. 1992. 217

<sup>39</sup> Liu Hongtao. *Mo Yan's Fiction and the Chinese Nativist Literary Tradition*. World Literature Today, 2009. <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Mo+Yan's+fiction+and+the+Chinese+nativist+literary+tradition.-a0203229162>

instead includes these aspects as pieces that together help form a complete image of country life.

Besides the narrator's own descriptions of the eerie setting of "The Sentry," the story's macabre aspects are almost all either figments of Shou's imagination or rumors that he has heard, such as that of a man who became demon-possessed. According to the talk of the town, the man "went under a spell and started punching himself hard in the face, white froth pouring from his mouth as he raved in a loud voice about ghosts. Following this, the man came to, fell sick, and died soon after."<sup>40</sup> Shou anxiously anticipates something similar happening to him as he stands guard in the dark corridor. Upon hearing an unidentifiable sound coming from the darkness of one end of the hall, he immediately interprets it to be something otherworldly. While his partner simply dismisses it as either a raven or cat, Shou dwells on the sound to the point of obsession; when he hears the sound again after his partner leaves, he runs through a mental list of all possible sources, deciding against investigating out of fear of coming across "a ghost with a hanging tongue, hollow eye sockets, a bloody nose, and..." Being met with only silence after calling out into the darkness, he despondently concludes: "I'm definitely dying today!"<sup>41</sup>

Through his descriptions of Shou's surroundings and his accompanying fears, Shen Congwen creates a rich atmosphere that draws the reader in to the story. As Shou awaits the end of his shift, the reader wonders along with Shou as to what his fate will be. When at one point he starts to suspect that his partner might be a spirit, the reader wonders if this will prove

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<sup>40</sup> Shen Congwen. "Shaobing." *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 128.

<sup>41</sup> Shen Congwen. "Shaobing." *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 127.

to be true or not. The possibility is quickly dismissed however, showing that Shen Congwen is interested in telling more than just a clichéd ghost story. When unexplained sounds convince Shou that he's about to meet his end, the reader eagerly awaits the reveal. But despite Shou's certainty of his own demise, the moment passes and he remains physically unharmed. He hears sounds and dwells on disturbing rumors, only to make it through the entire story without suffering any actual harm. For all of the tension that Shen Congwen creates, nothing supernatural ever happens. Herein lies one of the most interesting features of "The Sentry": it plays with the concept of what a story should be. Shen Congwen builds up a sense of anticipation in the reader, only to end with a frustratingly non-committal ending. Having finally convinced himself that should any ghosts appear, he could defend himself with his bayonet, Shou stops worrying. The narrator states that following this, "any ghosts lurking nearby" decided to not bother him, and so "from then on out, not even the sound of a blade of grass falling to the ground was heard." The ending remains somewhat unclear however, due to the narrator's concluding statement: "In the end, no ghosts came- at least, not before Shou's partner came back, staggering slightly from all of the food he ate."<sup>42</sup> The reader is left to wonder what this implies. One could assume that his partner was in fact a ghost, but such an unrealistic twist would be uncharacteristic of Shen Congwen's literature, since one of the defining characteristic of nativism is its attempt to move away from the highly symbolic and fantastic elements that featured heavily in other styles of literature. Rather than describing incredible happenings that would not occur in real life, nativist authors at the time tried to capture a true sense of reality, meaning that any ending involving blatant supernatural

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<sup>42</sup> Shen Congwen. "Shaobing." *Shen Congwen Wenji*. Sanlian Shudian, Hong Kong. 1982. 129.

intervention would be unlikely in a Shen Congwen story. Another possible interpretation is that Shou simply mistakes his returning partner for a ghost, which could then result in a potentially amusing encounter. While both possible endings are interesting, neither of them leaves the reader with a satisfyingly conclusive ending. This is a prime example of Shen Congwen's style of iterative narration. In contrast to a standard narrative which would require a conclusion, an iterative narrative is one that disregards the conventional norms of telling a story with a clear beginning and end. Rather, it presents a world in fragments without a definite timeline. In the case of "The Sentry," Shen Congwen illustrates a moment in time, independent of the events preceding and following it.

Shen Congwen's works present the reader with an artistic experience, one that relies not solely on interesting events, but also on atmosphere and realism. "The Sentry" is a prime example of this. By denying the reader any shocking or gruesome events that one would expect from the story's haunting atmosphere, Shen Congwen is challenging the reader to re-think what it is they should be looking for in literature. Rather than merely consisting of a plot, his concept of literature elevates the importance of atmosphere, so that the reader is immersed in the setting of the story. His trademark usage of pastoral locations matched with macabre and military motifs, as well as his focus on rural China, all make "The Sentry" a true and fascinating example of Shen Congwen's literary style.

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