

The Evolution of Narrative Ethics in Modern Chinese Novels and the Expression of the Spirit of the Times——A Case Study of Classic Texts from the May Fourth Movement to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression

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ABSTRACT Guided by the research question of how narrative ethics evolved in modern Chinese novels from the May Fourth Movement to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, this paper investigates the transformation of ethical structures in classic literary texts. Through close reading and quantitative analysis, the study examines the moral stance of narrative subjects, the presentation of ethical conflicts, the expression paths of value judgments, and moral orientations across different historical periods. The findings show that the narrative ethics of modern Chinese novels experienced a core shift from individual liberation ethics to group national salvation ethics. Significant changes occurred in narrative subject stance, ethical conflict types, and value-judgment expression. This evolution is not only a literary response to historical themes such as May Fourth enlightenment and wartime national salvation, but also reflects the reconstruction of ethical concepts in modern Chinese society. Future research may expand the corpus and integrate interdisciplinary theories to further deepen the study of narrative ethics and the spirit of the times in modern Chinese literature.

INDEX TERMS modern chinese novels, narrative ethics, ethical evolution, spirit of the times, literary analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

A. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

THE emergence and development of modern Chinese novels have always been in sync with the changes of the times [1]. The May Fourth New Culture Movement broke the ethical narrative framework of traditional literature, and the national crisis during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression reshaped the value orientation of literature [2]. The outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression rapidly transformed the narrative of New Literature from enlightenment to national salvation [3, 4]. Showing the living landscape of people in war novels is a field that integrates the richness and extremeness of human nature [5]. The War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression brought about extreme living conditions for people, in which the complexity and particularity of human beings were profoundly revealed,

with various and detailed manifestations [6]. Narrative ethics presents the individual's life perception in the text and the special narrative expression of different ethical characteristics, which is a field with enormous cultural interpretation space [7, 8].

With the ethical turn in the theoretical circle, traditional moral and ethical criticism has generated various forms such as cultural and ideological criticism. These critical frameworks now analyze the woven textures of narrative through a lens that integrates with modern ethical discourse [9]. Narrative ethical criticism is also such an emerging critical method. From the perspective of classical narratology, narrative is mainly divided into the story level and the discourse level. Therefore, narrative ethics mainly studies the ethics of narrative form or the ethics of narrative content [10-12].

From the May Fourth Movement to the War of Resistance

Against Japanese Aggression, Chinese society experienced a historical transformation from ideological enlightenment to national salvation. How did this transformation affect the construction of novel narrative ethics? How did the evolution of narrative ethics carry and express the spirit of the times? These questions constitute the core of this paper.

B. RESEARCH STATUS

Looking at the domestic and foreign research on narrative ethics, it mainly focuses on the distinction between the ethical level of the story and the ethical level of the discourse. The ethical discussion in the reading process is naturally integrated into the former two, and there are very few literatures that separately discuss reading ethics. In the articles on theoretical research of narrative ethics, there are also relevant discussions on this classification: Tang Weisheng's "Narrative Ethics: Story, Discourse and Reading" (2010) proposes three levels of narrative ethics research: story, discourse and reading [13]; Wu Maoguo's "Narrative Ethics in the Context of Ethical Turn" (2014) points out that at the level of literary research, narrative ethics explores "story ethics" and "narrative ethics" [14]; Li Yuanqiao's "Discrimination of Four Literary Theoretical Concepts Around 'Ethics'" (2015) points out that Newton's "narrative ethics" focuses on "narrative" while Liu Xiaofeng's "narrative ethics" focuses on "ethics" [15].

In terms of monographs, Milan Kundera's philosophical essay "The Art of the Novel" (1992), full of wisdom and speculation, injects philosophical speculation into the field of poetics, especially thinking about "the wisdom of the novel" from the perspective of "existence", making form a way to explore meaning [16]. Under the light of existence, Kundera combines the ethics of form with the ethics of story, and regards novel writing as a process of exploring the possibilities of human existence. This makes the story ethics in literary works no longer slaves to real moral ethics, but becomes ethical knots representing various survival possibilities on the web of existence [17, 18]. In domestic research, Liu Xiaofeng continues Kundera's affirmation of the exploration of complex narrative ethics in novels. His philosophical essay "Heavy Body" (1998) is "the first work exploring narrative ethics in the Chinese academic circle" [19]. He touches on the narrative experience of modern ethics, distinguishes between rational ethics and narrative ethics, people's ethical grand narrative and liberal ethical individual narrative, and interprets modern Western novels from the perspective of narrative ethics in the form of complex narrative [20, 21]. Zhu Yafeng's "Narrative Ethics: The Modern Form of Novel Narrative Research" (2009) analyzes the relationship between ethical issues and four grammars of literary criticism [11]. Zhang Wenhong's "Narrative Ethics and Ethical Narrative" (2006) distinguishes and defines the two easily confused terms "narrative ethics" and "ethical narrative". She believes that "narrative ethics" is an interactive interpretive judgment of ethical thematic studies and artistic poetic narrative intentions, and the analysis of

the evolution of narrative ethics is slightly insufficient [22].

C. DEFICIENCIES OF EXISTING RESEARCH

- 1) Lack of systematic research on the evolution of narrative ethics from the May Fourth Movement to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression;
- 2) Insufficient application of quantitative analysis methods;
- 3) Insufficient in-depth exploration of the interactive relationship between narrative ethics and the spirit of the times.

D. RESEARCH IDEAS AND METHODS

1) Research Ideas

This paper takes "era change - ethical concept transformation - narrative ethics evolution - expression of the spirit of the times" as the logical main line.

- 1) Define the core dimensions of narrative ethics (narrative subject stance, type of ethical conflict, way of value judgment, moral orientation);
- 2) Select classic texts from three periods: the May Fourth Period (1919-1927), the Left League Period (1928-1936), and the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period (1937-1945), and sort out the characteristics of narrative ethics in each period through close text reading and quantitative analysis;
- 3) Analyze the internal driving forces of the evolution of narrative ethics and the expression logic of the spirit of the times;
- 4) Summarize the historical laws and contemporary enlightenment of the evolution of narrative ethics.

2) Research Methods

(1) Close Text Reading: Select 20 classic texts for in-depth interpretation and extract information related to narrative ethics.

(2) Quantitative Analysis: Code and count the core dimensions of narrative ethics in the selected texts, make quantitative tables, and intuitively present the evolutionary characteristics.

E. RESEARCH INNOVATIONS

1) Innovation in Research Perspective

For the first time, systematically sort out the evolution of narrative ethics in modern Chinese novels from the May Fourth Movement to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, construct an analytical framework of "four dimensions", and realize the integrity and systematicness of the research.

2) Innovation in Research Methods

Introduce quantitative analysis methods into narrative ethics research, and intuitively present the evolutionary laws through charts, making up for the deficiencies of traditional qualitative research.

II. CORE DIMENSIONS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK OF NARRATIVE ETHICS

A. DEFINITION OF NARRATIVE ETHICS

The concept of narrative ethics first appeared in the doctoral dissertation “Narrative Ethics” by American scholar Adam Zachary Newton. In the dissertation, Newton described narrative ethics as a theoretical perspective that studies the ethical consequences of narrating stories and fictional characters, as well as the interaction that combines narrators, audiences, witnesses, and readers in this process. It can be seen that Newton’s earliest definition of narrative ethics covers the entire process of narrative, including the narrative subject, narrative text, and narrative reception.

Narrative ethics refers to the ethical discourse displayed intentionally or unintentionally in the narrative process. The so-called “zero-degree narrative” proposed by Roland Barthes does not imply an ethical vacuum but rather a deliberate refusal of explicit moral commentary by the narrator. Ethics are inherent in the act of narration itself—choices of plot, character perspective, and narrative structure all implicitly convey value judgments. For example, Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” adopts a first-person “madman” perspective (a form of seemingly neutral narrative presentation) but inherently carries a critical ethical stance toward feudal “cannibalistic ethics”. This study’s coding system identifies such implicit ethical orientations by analyzing narrative strategies, character relationships, and thematic tensions, even in texts that deliberately avoid direct moralizing. Therefore, “what narrative ethics intends to study is the impact of different narrative techniques on ethical discourse”.

B. CORE ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS OF NARRATIVE ETHICS

Combined with the characteristics of modern Chinese novels, this paper divides narrative ethics into four core dimensions:

1) Narrative Subject Stance: Refers to the moral stance of the narrator or implied author, which is divided into three types: individual-oriented, group-oriented, and family-country-oriented. Notably, these stances are not mutually exclusive; many texts in the Left League period simultaneously embody individualist enlightenment themes and group-oriented revolutionary ideas, reflecting the complex ideological landscape of the era.

2) Type of Ethical Conflict: The main moral contradictions presented in the text, which are divided into three types: conflict between the individual and tradition, conflict between the individual and society, and conflict between the individual and the nation. In reality, these conflicts often intersect: for instance, during the War of Resistance period, opposing feudal patriarchy (individual vs. tradition) was closely intertwined with resisting Japanese aggression (individual vs. nation), and such overlapping relationships are fully considered in the coding and analysis.

3) Way of Value Judgment: Refers to the path through which the text expresses ethical values, which is divided into three types: metaphorical, dialogical, and direct.

4) Moral Orientation: Refers to the ethical values advocated by the text in the end, which is divided into three types: individual liberation, social justice, and national righteousness.

These four dimensions are interrelated and together constitute a complete system of narrative ethics, providing a clear analytical framework for this study.

III. EVOLUTIONARY CHARACTERISTICS OF NOVEL NARRATIVE ETHICS FROM THE MAY FOURTH MOVEMENT TO THE WAR OF RESISTANCE AGAINST JAPANESE AGGRESSION (QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS)

A. SAMPLE SELECTION AND CODING INSTRUCTIONS

This paper selects 20 classic texts as research samples, covering three periods: the May Fourth Movement, the Left League, and the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. The specific samples are as follows:

1) May Fourth Period (1919-1927): “Diary of a Madman” (Lu Xun), “Regret for the Past” (Lu Xun), “Sinking” (Yu Dafu), “Spring Fever in the Night” (Yu Dafu), “Old Friends by the Seaside” (Lu Yin), “The Spider’s Web” (Xu Dishan)

2) Left League Period (1928-1936): “Midnight” (Mao Dun), “Spring Silkworms” (Mao Dun), “Lin Family’s Shop” (Mao Dun), “The Slave Mother” (Rou Shi), “Shanghai Foxtrot” (Mu Shiying), “Field of Life and Death” (Xiao Hong), “Village in August” (Xiao Jun)

3) War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period (1937-1945): “Xiao Erhei’s Marriage” (Zhao Shuli), “Lotus Lake” (Sun Li), “Heroes of Lüliang” (Ma Feng, Xi Rong), “New Heroes and Heroines” (Kong Jue, Yuan Jing), “Cold Night” (Ba Jin), “The Children of the Richest Man” (Lu Ling), “The Golden Cangue” (Eileen Chang)

Coding Instructions: Code and assign values to each text according to the four core dimensions of narrative ethics. Calculate the dimension mean and distribution ratio of samples in each period, and make quantitative tables.

- Narrative Subject Stance: Individual-oriented = 1, Group-oriented = 2, Family-country-oriented = 3;
- Type of Ethical Conflict: Individual vs. Tradition = 1, Individual vs. Society = 2, Individual vs. Nation = 3;
- Way of Value Judgment: Metaphorical = 1, Dialogical = 2, Direct = 3;
- Moral Orientation: Individual Liberation = 1, Social Justice = 2, National Righteousness = 3.

B. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS RESULTS

The narrative subject stance in each period is shown in Table 1. The narrative subject stance shows an obvious evolutionary trend, which reflects the transformation of the era theme from individual enlightenment to social revolution and then to national salvation: The May Fourth Period was dominated by individual-oriented stance (83.3%), the Left League Period shifted to group-oriented stance (57.1%), and

the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period was mainly family-country-oriented (57.1%). 3 out of 7 texts in the Left League period (42.9%) simultaneously display individualist themes, reflecting internal ideological debates.

The types of ethical conflicts in each period are shown in Table 2. The types of ethical conflicts are highly consistent with the era themes, showing an evolutionary trajectory from “inward resistance” to “outward struggle”: The May Fourth Period focused on the conflict between the individual and traditional ethics (66.7%), the Left League Period emphasized the conflict between the individual and social injustice (71.4%), and the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period was dominated by the conflict between the individual and national crisis (71.4%). Overlapping conflicts account for 30% of the total sample, reflecting the nuanced interweaving of ethical contradictions in modern Chinese literature.

The ways of value judgment in each period are shown in Table 3, presenting an evolution from indirect to direct: The May Fourth Period was dominated by metaphorical way (66.7%), such as “Diary of a Madman” using the perspective of a “madman” to metaphorize the cannibalistic nature of feudal ethics; in the Left League Period, the proportion of dialogical and direct ways increased, and it began to directly criticize social reality; in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period, the direct way became the mainstream (57.1%), such as “Heroes of Lüliang” directly advocating national righteousness.

The moral orientation in each period (Table 4) is highly consistent with the narrative subject stance (Table 1), clearly showing the core value evolution of narrative ethics: From “individual liberation” in the May Fourth Period (83.3%), to “social justice” in the Left League Period (57.1%), and then to “national righteousness” in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period (57.1%). “Group-oriented” moral orientation includes both class-based collective consciousness and broader social solidarity,

C. EVOLUTIONARY CONTEXT TABLE

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the above conclusions, the Evolutionary Context Table of Novel Narrative Ethics from the May Fourth Movement to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (Table 5) is made, which intuitively presents the evolutionary path of the four core dimensions of narrative ethics.

IV. DRIVING FORCES OF THE EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE ETHICS AND THE EXPRESSION OF THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

A. INTERNAL DRIVING FORCES OF THE EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE ETHICS

1) Promotion of Social Changes

- The May Fourth New Culture Movement put forward the slogans of “Democracy” and “Science”, broke the shackles of feudal ethics, awakened individual con-

sciousness, and gave birth to narrative ethics centered on “individual liberation”;

- In the 1930s, social contradictions in China intensified and class oppression worsened. Left League literature responded to the call of the times and shifted narrative ethics to “social justice”, while retaining individualist enlightenment themes in many works, reflecting the era’s ideological complexity;
- After the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, national crisis became the primary issue. The mission of literature shifted from “enlightenment” to “national salvation”, and narrative ethics thus focused on “national righteousness”, with traditional and social conflicts overlapping with national contradictions.

2) Transformation of Ethical Concepts

- During the May Fourth Period, traditional ethical concepts collapsed, and modern ethical concepts had not yet been established. “Individual-oriented” ethics became the mainstream of the times;
- During the Left League Period, Marxist ethical thought was introduced, and “group-oriented” ethics gradually occupied a dominant position;
- During the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, nationalist ethical concepts emerged, and “family-country-oriented” ethics became a national consensus.

3) Evolution of Literary Functions

- During the May Fourth Period, literature was entrusted with the function of “enlightening the people”, and individual consciousness was awakened through metaphorical narratives;
- During the Left League Period, literature became a “tool for revolutionary struggle”, which needed to directly criticize social reality and mobilize the masses;
- During the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, the “propaganda and mobilization” function of literature was pushed to the extreme, and direct narrative became an effective way to convey national righteousness.

B. EXPRESSION OF THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES BY NARRATIVE ETHICS

1) May Fourth Period: Literary Presentation of the Enlightenment Spirit

May Fourth novels expressed the enlightenment spirit with “individual liberation ethics”, and conveyed the era spirit of “democracy” and “freedom” through metaphorical narratives, promoting the development of the ideological emancipation movement:

- “Diary of a Madman” called for breaking traditional shackles through the madman’s accusation against the “cannibalistic ethics”;

TABLE 1. Distribution of Narrative Subject Stance in Each Period (Unit: Number of Texts, %)

Period	Individual-oriented	Group-oriented	Family-country-oriented	Texts with Overlapping Stances	Total
May Fourth Period	5 (83.3%)	1 (16.7%)	0 (0%)	1 (16.7%)	6
Left League Period	2 (28.6%)	4 (57.1%)	1 (14.3%)	3 (42.9%)	7
War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period	1 (14.3%)	2 (28.6%)	4 (57.1%)	2 (28.6%)	7
Total	8 (40%)	7 (35%)	5 (25%)	6 (30%)	20

Note: “Texts with Overlapping Stances” refer to works where two or more stances coexist (e.g., Left League texts combining individual-oriented and group-oriented themes). These texts are counted in both “dominant stance” and “overlapping” columns, but the total number of unique texts per period remains unchanged (6/7/7). The percentage of overlapping texts is calculated as (number of overlapping texts / total texts in the period) × 100%.

TABLE 2. Distribution of Types of Ethical Conflicts in Each Period (Unit: Number of Texts, %)

Period	Conflict between Individual and Tradition	Conflict between Individual and Society	Conflict between Individual and Nation	Texts with Overlapping Conflicts	Total
May Fourth Period	4 (66.7%)	2 (33.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (16.7%)	6
Left League Period	1 (14.3%)	5 (71.4%)	1 (14.3%)	2 (28.6%)	7
War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period	0 (0%)	2 (28.6%)	5 (71.4%)	3 (42.9%)	7
Total	5 (25%)	9 (45%)	6 (30%)	6 (30%)	20

Note: “Texts with Overlapping Conflicts” refer to works where two or more conflict types coexist (e.g., War of Resistance texts combining “individual vs. tradition” and “individual vs. nation”). These texts are counted in both “dominant conflict” and “overlapping” columns, but the total number of unique texts per period remains unchanged (6/7/7). The percentage of overlapping texts is calculated as (number of overlapping texts / total texts in the period) × 100%.

TABLE 3. Distribution of Ways of Value Judgment in Each Period (Unit: Number of Texts, %)

Period	Metaphorical	Dialogical	Direct	Total
May Fourth Period (6 texts)	4 (66.7%)	2 (33.3%)	0 (0%)	6
Left League Period (7 texts)	2 (28.6%)	3 (42.9%)	2 (28.5%)	7
War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period (7 texts)	1 (14.3%)	2 (28.6%)	4 (57.1%)	7
Total (20 texts)	7 (35%)	7 (35%)	6 (30%)	20

TABLE 4. Distribution of Moral Orientation in Each Period (Unit: Number of Texts, %)

Period	Individual Liberation	Social Justice	National Righteousness	Total
May Fourth Period (6 texts)	5 (83.3%)	1 (16.7%)	0 (0%)	6
Left League Period (7 texts)	2 (28.6%)	4 (57.1%)	1 (14.3%)	7
War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period (7 texts)	1 (14.3%)	2 (28.6%)	4 (57.1%)	7
Total (20 texts)	8 (40%)	7 (35%)	5 (25%)	20

Note: In the Left League period, “social justice” specifically refers to class-based ethical demands, while “group-oriented” in narrative subject stance includes broader collective actions. This distinction ensures nuanced differentiation between “group” and “class” concepts.

TABLE 5. Comparison Table of Evolutionary Dimensions of Novel Narrative Ethics from the May Fourth Movement to the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression

Core Dimensions	May Fourth Period	Left League Period	War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period	Evolutionary Trend
Narrative Subject Stance	Individual-oriented (83.3%)	Group-oriented (57.1%)	Family-country-oriented (57.1%)	Individual → Group → Family and Country
Type of Ethical Conflict	Conflict between Individual and Tradition (66.7%)	Individual vs. Society (71.4%)	Individual vs. Nation (71.4%) (overlapping contradictions)	Inward Resistance → Outward Struggle
Way of Value Judgment	Metaphorical (66.7%)	Dialogical (42.9%) + Direct (28.5%)	Direct (57.1%)	Indirect Metaphor → Direct Expression
Moral Orientation	Individual Liberation (83.3%)	Social Justice (57.1%)	National Righteousness (57.1%)	Individual Liberation → Social Justice → National Salvation

- “Regret for the Past” revealed the difficulty of individual liberation through the tragic love between Zijun and Juansheng;
- The protagonist in “Sinking” resisted the oppression of human nature by feudal ethics with the attitude of a “superfluous person”. His straightforward writing of personal emotions and desires is the ultimate expression of the enlightenment theme of “the discovery of man”;
- Through the life predicament of women such as Lusha in “Old Friends by the Seaside”, it explores the awakening and struggle of women in the gap between tradition and modernity, highlighting the era demand for women’s liberation.

2) Left League Period: Artistic Interpretation of the Revolutionary Spirit

Left League novels directly conveyed the revolutionary spirit with “group national salvation ethics” through dialogical and direct narratives:

- “Midnight” showed the predicament of national capitalists and the awakening of the working class through Wu Sunfu’s tragedy, reflecting the conflict between individual interests and social progress;
- “Spring Silkworms” exposed the double oppression of feudal landlords and imperialism through Lao Tongbao’s bankruptcy, advocating social justice while depicting individual suffering;
- Centered on the “wife-selling” system, “The Slave Mother” directly criticized the exploitation of lower-class women by the feudal system through the tragic experience of Chunbaoniang, calling for social justice and emphasizing individual dignity;
- “Field of Life and Death” took the miserable life of rural areas in Northeast China as the background, showing the struggle and resistance of farmers under oppression, implying the inevitability of group awakening while respecting individual survival desires;
- “Village in August” directly described the struggle of the Northeast Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Corps, initially combining individual fate with national liberation, and laying the foundation for literary narratives during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.

3) War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period: Concentrated Manifestation of the National Spirit

Novels during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression expressed the national spirit with “family-country-oriented ethics”. The narrative ethics of this period took “national righteousness” as the core moral orientation, and closely combined individual fate with national fate:

- “Lotus Lake” showed the patriotic feelings of ordinary people through the growth process of women in the Jizhong Anti-Japanese Base Area;
- “Heroes of Lüliang” shaped a series of anti-Japanese hero images in the form of chaptered novels, directly advocating national righteousness;
- “Xiao Erhei’s Marriage” combined anti-feudalism with resisting Japan and saving the nation. Through the love story of Xiao Erhei and Xiao Qin, it not only criticized the feudal patriarchal system but also conveyed the era requirement of “uniting to resist Japan”;
- “New Heroes and Heroines” took the anti-Japanese struggle in the Jizhong area as the background, showing the national spirit of the military and civilians working together to resist foreign aggression;
- Wang Wenxuan’s tragedy in “Cold Night” is not only a tragedy of personal character but also a portrayal of the living predicament of intellectuals in the war background;

- The distorted life of Cao Qiqiao in “The Golden Cangue” reflects the double destruction of human nature by feudal ethics and the shadow of war.

V. HISTORICAL LAWS AND CONTEMPORARY ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE ETHICS

A. SUMMARY OF HISTORICAL LAWS

1) Era changes determine the core shift of narrative ethics:

The three major era themes of May Fourth enlightenment, Left League revolution, and War of Resistance national salvation correspond to “individual liberation ethics”, “group national salvation ethics”, and “family-country-oriented ethics” respectively, proving that literary narrative ethics have always been a mirror of the spirit of the times.

2) The ethical evolution presents the characteristics of “gradual integration”:

From the focus on individuals in the May Fourth Period, to the combination of individuals and groups in the Left League Period, and then to the unity of individuals, groups, and the country in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period, the value dimension of narrative ethics has been continuously expanded.

3) The expression path is highly adapted to the needs of the times:

Metaphorical narratives adapted to the enlightenment needs of “awakening the people” in the May Fourth Period, and direct narratives met the publicity needs of “mobilizing the people” in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression Period.

B. CONTEMPORARY ENLIGHTENMENT

1) Adhere to the interactive relationship between literature and the times:

Contemporary literature should learn from the experience of modern novels, base itself on the era themes, construct narrative ethics with realistic concern, and avoid being divorced from reality and closed-door creation.

2) Balance individual values and collective values:

The evolution of narrative ethics in modern novels shows that individual liberation, group interests, and family-country feelings are not oppositional. Contemporary literature should promote collectivism and family-country feelings on the basis of respecting individual values, and realize the harmonious unity of individuals and society.

3) Innovate the artistic form of ethical expression:

On the basis of inheriting the narrative experience of modern novels, contemporary literature should innovate the path of ethical expression, integrate moral demands into vivid stories and vivid characters, avoid rigid preaching, and realize the unity of ideological content and artistic expression.

VI. CONCLUSION

Through close text reading and quantitative analysis of 20 classic novels from the May Fourth Movement to the War

of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, this paper maps the evolutionary trajectory of narrative ethics as a complex social tapestry interwoven with the rise of the industry. By analyzing how literary themes mirror the structural transition from traditional hand-weaving to mechanized garment production, the research clearly presents the shifting ethical patterns that define this historical period: The narrative subject stance has shifted from individual-oriented to family-country-oriented, the type of ethical conflict has transformed from the opposition between the individual and tradition to the opposition between the individual and the nation, the way of value judgment has changed from metaphorical to direct, and the moral orientation has evolved from individual liberation to national righteousness. This evolution is characterized by gradual integration rather than linear replacement, reflecting internal ideological debates and nuanced thematic overlaps across periods. This evolution is not only the result of the joint action of social changes, the transformation of ethical concepts, and the evolution of literary functions but also the literary expression of the May Fourth enlightenment spirit, the Left League revolutionary spirit, and the War of Resistance national spirit.

The study finds that the evolution of narrative ethics in modern Chinese novels has distinct historical inevitability, and its core law lies in “the resonance between literary narratives and the spirit of the times”. This law not only provides a new perspective for understanding the spiritual core of modern Chinese literature but also provides important enlightenment for the development of contemporary literature: contemporary literature should be based on the times, pay attention to reality, seek a balance between individual values and collective values, and between artistic expression and ideological connotation, construct narrative ethics with contemporary Chinese characteristics, and contribute literary strength to the inheritance and development of the spirit of the times.

This study still has certain limitations: the sample selection mainly focuses on mainstream writers, and the narrative ethics of marginal writers are insufficiently concerned; the quantitative analysis focuses on dimension statistics, and the exploration of the internal ethical tension of the text needs to be deepened. Future research can expand the sample scope and integrate more interdisciplinary theories to further deepen and broaden the research on narrative ethics. Future research will expand the sample size to 50+ texts, including works by marginal writers and regional literary representatives, to enhance statistical significance. Additionally, interdisciplinary theories such as narrative sociology and ethical statistics will be integrated to further refine the analytical framework.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Shengxiao Wang designed, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Shengxiao Wang conducted the study, critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, and gave final approval of the version

to be published. Shengxiao Wang participated fully in the work, take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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