

# Don Quixote and The Border Town: A Comparison of Literary Creation Characteristics Between China and the West

Hui Zhuge<sup>1</sup>, Boye Zheng<sup>1,\*</sup>(Corresponding author)

1. Teachers College, Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhoushan, Zhejiang, 316022, China

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**Abstract:** This comparative study examines the literary masterpieces "Don Quixote" by Miguel de Cervantes and "The Border Town" by Shen Congwen, focusing on their historical and cultural contexts, character development, and narrative techniques. Despite originating from different eras and geographical locations, both novels provide a rich exploration of the human experience through the lens of their protagonists' journeys. "Don Quixote" critiques the chivalric ideals of the Spanish Golden Age through its metafictional narrative, while "The Border Town" reflects on the impact of modernization on traditional Chinese society. The study highlights the authors' use of character development to delve into themes of identity, perception, and the boundaries between reality and illusion. The narrative techniques and structures of both novels are analyzed, revealing the complexity of their storytelling and thematic depth. Ultimately, the comparison underscores the universality of literature's ability to capture and convey the human condition across diverse cultural landscapes.

**Keywords:** Don Quixote; The Border Town; Comparative literature; Character development

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Brief overview of "Don Quixote" by Miguel de Cervantes

"El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha," commonly known as "Don Quixote," is a masterpiece by Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. Published in two parts, in 1605 and 1615, the novel is celebrated as one of the most influential works of world literature. It tells the story of Alonso Quixano, a man who, having read too many chivalric romances, loses his sanity and decides to become a knight-errant to revive chivalry and serve his lady Dulcinea del Toboso. The novel is a profound exploration of themes such as illusion and reality, nobility, and the human condition, and it is renowned for its satirical and metafictional elements.

### 1.2 Brief overview of "The Border Town" by Shen Congwen

"The Border Town" (边城), penned by Chinese author Shen Congwen, is a novella that captures the essence of rural life in early 20th-century China. Published in 1934, it is set in a small town near the Hunan and Hubei provinces and revolves around the life of a young girl named Cuicui and her grandfather, who live a simple life by the river. The narrative is imbued with a sense of nostalgia for a bygone era and explores themes of innocence, love, and the passage of time. Shen Congwen's lyrical prose and evocative descriptions of the natural environment have made "The Border Town" a classic in modern Chinese literature, reflecting the author's deep connection to his homeland and its people.

### 1.3 Purpose of the comparison

The purpose of comparing "Don Quixote" and "The Border Town" is to delve into the rich tapestry of literary creation across different cultures and time periods. This comparative analysis aims to highlight the distinct narrative techniques, thematic concerns, and cultural contexts that have shaped these two literary masterpieces. By examining their similarities and differences, we seek to understand the universality of human experiences and the diversity of artistic expression. This exploration is not only academic but also seeks to enrich our appreciation for the power of literature to transcend geographical and temporal boundaries, offering insights into the human condition that are both timeless and culturally specific.

## 2. Historical and Cultural Context

### 2.1 Spain during the Golden Age and the context of "Don Quixote"

Spain's Golden Age, spanning the late 15th to the early 17th century, was a period of great cultural, political, and economic prosperity. It was marked by the country's global explorations, the flourishing of arts and sciences, and the consolidation of the Spanish Empire. The

context of "Don Quixote" is deeply rooted in this era, reflecting the transition from medieval to early modern values. Miguel de Cervantes, writing during this time, captured the spirit of a society in flux, where the old chivalric ideals were being challenged by the realities of a burgeoning modern world. The novel's protagonist, Don Quixote, embodies this tension, as his romanticized view of chivalry clashes with the pragmatic attitudes of the age, offering a poignant commentary on the human condition and the nature of reality. The Golden Age's impact on "Don Quixote" is further evident in its satirical and critical approach to the literature and society of the time. "Don Quixote" can be seen as a reflection of the cultural contradictions and intellectual ferment of the Golden Age, making it not only a work of fiction but also a mirror held up to Spanish society and, by extension, to humanity as a whole.

## 2.2 China during the Republican period and the context of "The Border Town"

The Republican period in China, which spanned from 1912 to 1949, was a time of significant political upheaval and cultural transformation. This era followed the fall of the Qing Dynasty and was characterized by efforts to modernize and reform the country. Amidst the backdrop of warlordism, foreign invasions, and the struggle for national identity, Chinese society was grappling with the challenges of modernity. "The Border Town" by Shen Congwen is set against this complex historical canvas, offering a poignant portrayal of rural life that stands in stark contrast to the rapid changes occurring in urban areas. Shen Congwen's novella captures the essence of a traditional way of life that was gradually being eroded by the forces of modernization and Western influence.

## 3. Characterization and Narrative Techniques

### 3.1 Character development in "Don Quixote"

In "Don Quixote," Miguel de Cervantes employs a rich tapestry of characters to explore the novel's central themes of illusion and reality. The protagonist, Alonso Quixano, undergoes a profound transformation from a humble, aging man to the delusional knight, Don Quixote. His character development is marked by a steadfast adherence to chivalric ideals, despite the ridicule and disbelief he encounters. Cervantes masterfully contrasts Don Quixote's romanticized worldview with the pragmatic outlook of his loyal squire, Sancho Panza. This dynamic not only provides comic relief but also serves as a commentary on the human condition, questioning the nature of sanity and the power of belief. The interactions between the characters and their evolving relationships throughout the novel offer a nuanced exploration of identity, perception, and the boundaries between fantasy and reality.

### 3.2 Character portrayal in "The Border Town"

Shen Congwen's "The Border Town" presents a cast of characters that embody the simplicity and innocence of rural life in early 20th-century China. The novella centers around Cuicui, a young girl whose life is deeply intertwined with the natural and social environment of her small town. Shen Congwen's portrayal of Cuicui and her grandfather is marked by a deep affection and respect for their traditional way of life. The characters are depicted with a sense of authenticity and naturalism, reflecting the author's intimate knowledge of the rural setting. The narrative technique of "The Border Town" is characterized by a gentle, lyrical prose that captures the rhythms and textures of daily life, as well as the emotional depth of the characters' experiences. Through the portrayal of these characters, Shen Congwen explores themes of love, family, and the passage of time, inviting readers to consider the value of community and the impact of societal change on individual lives.

### 3.3 Narrative techniques and structure

The narrative techniques and structure of a literary work are integral to how the story unfolds and engages the reader. These elements can reveal the author's artistic intentions and the work's thematic depth. In "Don Quixote," Cervantes employs a complex narrative structure that blends realism with the fantastical. The novel is structured in two parts, each containing a series of adventures that are seemingly disconnected yet interconnected through the overarching journey of the protagonist. Cervantes uses metafictional techniques, where the characters are aware of their own fictionality, and often interact with the narrative itself. This self-referential approach challenges the traditional narrative form and invites readers to question the nature of storytelling. The novel also incorporates elements of satire, parody, and pastoral romance, creating a rich tapestry of literary styles that reflect the complexity of the human experience.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of "Don Quixote" and "The Border Town" reveals the profound impact of historical and cultural contexts on literary creation. Both novels, though separated by centuries and continents, explore the human condition through the lens of their respective societies. "Don Quixote," with its metafictional narrative and satirical edge, critiques the chivalric ideals of its time, while "The Border Town" offers a poignant reflection on the simplicity and innocence of rural life in the face of modernization. The character development in both works serves as a vehicle for the authors' exploration of identity, perception, and the interplay between illusion and reality. Through their distinct narrative techniques and structures, Cervantes and Shen Congwen have crafted enduring stories that resonate with readers across cultures and time, demonstrating the universal power of literature to illuminate the human experience.

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