

The Avant-Garde Turn: On Sun Ganlu's Novel A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains

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ABSTRACT

Writing the full-length novel *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, Sun Ganlu adopts a groundbreaking avant-garde stance, completing a remarkable shift from avant-garde literary experimentation to revolutionary historical narration. The successful publication of this work not only marks a transition in the writer's personal creation, but also delivers a creative transformation scheme of avant-garde aesthetics for genre literary narration. With the self-awareness of "returning to the historical scene", Sun Ganlu frees revolutionary historical narration from the conventional grand framework. Through three-dimensional innovations in themes, narration and style, he builds a new textual form integrating popularity, avant-garde quality and historical profundity. This avant-garde shift originates not merely from the writer's subjective awareness, but is also profoundly shaped by the changes of the times, market pressures and literary traditions. Furthermore, in this work, Sun Ganlu not only achieves innovations in revolutionary literary narration, but also accomplishes the transposition of artistic classics and the depiction of Shanghai's spatial cultural memory. Given the insufficient multi-dimensional academic research on Sun Ganlu's *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, this paper takes the "avant-garde turn" as the entry point under integrated literary and contextual considerations, examines the specific manifestations of this shift in the novel, dissects its underlying causes, and explores the literary value of the work.

KEYWORDS

Sun Ganlu; *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*; Avant-Garde; Revolutionary Historical Fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sun Ganlu is one of the "Five Tigers" of China's contemporary avant-garde literature. He burst onto the literary scene in 1985 with *Visiting the Dreamscape*. His early works such as *I Am a Young Wine Jar* and *Letters to the Messenger* feature radical formal experimentation marked by unconventional poetic language, fragmented imagery-driven narration, and the deconstruction of time and space that blurs reality and illusion. These works shattered the creative boundaries of traditional fiction and forged a uniquely avant-garde writing style of his own.

As avant-garde literature evolved, however, its drawbacks—an overzealous pursuit of formal craftsmanship paired with hollow content—grew increasingly prominent, landing most avant-garde writers in a creative bottleneck. Against this literary backdrop, Sun Ganlu achieved a breakthrough and renewal in his writing. In 2022, he published *Panorama of a Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains*, a full-length revolutionary historical novel crafted as a key literary work dedicated to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Set against the strategic transfer of Shanghai underground Party members in 1933, the novel recounts the revolutionary tale of underground agents surmounting immense hardships to complete covert missions. Boasting extraordinary literary merit

and ideological depth, it won the 11th Mao Dun Literature Prize and the 16th Spiritual Civilization Construction "Five-One Project" Award, cementing Sun Ganlu's pivotal standing in contemporary Chinese literary history[1-3].

Breaking entirely free from the dreamlike, virtual narrative framework of his early writing, this novel is rooted in authentic revolutionary historical contexts. While retaining the innovative core of avant-garde literature, it caters to the aesthetic tastes and reading demands of modern audiences, achieving an in-depth integration of avant-garde formal experimentation and mainstream historical narration. It stands as a watershed work in Sun Ganlu's creative career and offers a brand-new paradigm for the transformation and evolution of contemporary avant-garde literature.

Existing academic research reveals that as of April 2025, only 60 basic Chinese scholarly papers have been published on *Panorama of a Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains*, most of which are short journal and newspaper articles. There is a lack of master's and doctoral dissertations, academic monographs, and any foreign-language research outputs. Current studies largely remain superficial, focusing on the author's creative transformation, artistic characteristics, thematic motifs and character portrayals, without an in-depth exploration of the internal logic and profound value behind the work's avant-garde shift, leaving clear gaps in the research system.

Taking "the turn of avant-garde writing" as its core entry point, this paper draws on the conceptual evolution of avant-garde literature and its defining traits of subversion, rebellion and exploratory spirit. Adopting close textual reading, comparative analysis and literature review as research methodologies, it systematically sorts out the innovative shifts in *Panorama of a Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* across thematic selection, narrative techniques, linguistic style and characterization. It conducts comparative analyses of the disparities between the author's early and late writing, as well as distinctions between this novel and traditional revolutionary fiction and other avant-garde historical novels, so as to thoroughly investigate the underlying drivers and unique literary value of Sun's avant-garde transformation.

This study carries substantial academic and practical significance. Theoretically, it enriches the research framework on the transformation of avant-garde literature and red historical narratives, clarifying the spiritual core and developmental trajectory of avant-garde literature in the new era. From a literary historical perspective, it refines the research thread tracing the integrated development of avant-garde literature and main-theme literature in the new century, and defines the work's place in literary history. Practically, it enables an in-depth excavation of the historical connotations and humanistic value embedded in red texts to carry forward the revolutionary spirit. It also delivers critical creative references and methodological insights for contemporary writers seeking to break free from the predicaments of pure literary creation and reconcile artistic literary merit with the spirit of the times.

2. MULTIDIMENSIONAL MANIFESTATIONS OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Turn Sun Ganlu's literary creation presents a distinct transformation, moving from formalist literary experimentation to narrating revolutionary historical stories. As his magnum opus marking this transition, the full-length novel *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* caused an enormous stir in literary circles. This transformative work represents both a breakthrough for the writer himself and an innovation against the confines of genre literature. Therefore, studying the concrete manifestations of this shift lays a foundation for in-depth research on the novel.

2.1. The Thematic Shift: From Spiritual Exploration to Historical Writing

Sun Ganlu emerged on the literary scene as an avant-garde writer in 1985. His early works are closely tied to avant-garde experiments, centering on the absurdity of existence and modern people's spiritual predicaments, dedicated to spiritual exploration.[4] Unlike the dreamlike writing confined to a

linguistic utopia in his earlier works, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* revolves around the history of underground revolutionary activities in Shanghai. This shift means the writer turns from metaphysical spiritual exploration to concrete, profound historical narration, and more importantly, signals that his avant-garde explorations have evolved from the absolute worship of form to a dialectical dialogue between form and history.

2.1.1. The Construction of a Spiritual Utopia

Chinese avant-garde literature rose in the 1980s, and Sun Ganlu made his name with works such as *Visiting a Dream*, *Ask Women to Guess Riddles* and *Letters of the Messenger*. The themes of his writing in this period largely revolve around individuals' inner spiritual worlds, subconsciousness and dreamscapes, aiming to construct a poetic metaphorical "maze of dreams" to explore humanity's spiritual realm. For instance, *Letters of the Messenger* consists of multiple definitions of the character "letter", boasting exquisite, ornate language, yet its protagonist the messenger bears no clear identity or concrete trajectory of action. Tasked with delivering letters, the messenger never reaches his destination. The novel states: "The contents of the letters have long rotted away, leaving only the addresses on the envelopes like scars." Through the messenger's wandering journey, the writer metaphorizes modern people's spiritual homelessness, framing the messenger's trek as the universal predicament of human existence-cyclical futility in the pursuit of meaning. *Visiting a Dream* narrates a man who enters a dreamlike city and asks passersby for directions to a place called the Paper-Cut Courtyard. Later, he meets a man in an orange grove[5-8], who recounts the city's history and legends of the God of Harvest before leading him to the Paper-Cut Courtyard. Through depictions of dreams and reality, Sun Ganlu portrays spiritual drifters in the city, revealing the alienation of urban dwellers and rendering individuals as rootless wanderers. In summary, Sun Ganlu's early works do not depict concrete social life or historical events in the traditional literary sense; instead, they serve as vehicles for the author's profound reflections on human nature, language and the meaning of existence. The ahistorical, asocial tendency of his thematic choices challenged conventional literary narration, committed to exploring the expressive power of language and the depths of human spirit, yet distanced itself from specific historical contexts to a certain extent. Chen Xiaoming once criticized the avant-garde school: "Standing at the intersection of historical memories, they are mere onlookers, fascinated by sensory allure yet destructive. They cease to make promises to things outside themselves, and their elaborately collaged flashy surfaces point to a transitional, playful, dramatic historical void." However, in his new work *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, the writer adopts an entirely new thematic approach.

2.1.2. Writing Historical Subjects

The release of *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* in 2022 marked a major thematic shift in Sun Ganlu's creation: from constructing abstract spiritual labyrinths to depicting the turbulent wartime Shanghai of the 1930s. Set against the strategic relocation of the Party Central Committee from Shanghai to Ruijin, Jiangxi in 1933, the novel draws readers into the mysterious, volatile era of revolutionary history. Centered on the "A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains Plan", the story follows members of Shanghai's special underground task force as they engage in thrilling life-or-death struggles against enemies amid brutal white terror. At this stage, [9-11]Sun Ganlu turns his gaze to events of grand historical significance and authentic historical backdrops. The novel delivers meticulous portrayals of the social landscapes of Shanghai, Guangzhou, Nanjing and other cities in the 1930s, covering urban streets, architectural styles, customs, culture, political situations and more. This choice of revolutionary historical subject matter stands in stark contrast to the ahistorical tendency of his early writing. Grounded in rigorous historical research including archive reviews and field investigations, the novel even embeds real-life figures and events, endowing the text with authentic texture. Meanwhile, its characters depart from the symbolic archetypes of his early works, each possessing distinct historical identities and social attributes. The protagonist Chen Qianli, for example, combines intellectual temperament with revolutionary faith, while his underground comrades Lao Fang, Ling Wen and others undertake specific roles: intelligence liaison, cover

operations, and so on. Admittedly, numerous contemporary writers have turned to historical subjects, yet their creations differ markedly from Sun Ganlu's *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*. Yu Hua's *To Live* frames historical changes such as the Reform and Opening-Up as a backdrop to tell tales of folk suffering. Ge Fei's *The South of the Yangtze River Trilogy*, though set against a century of Chinese revolution, retains utopian romanticism-characters' actions are governed by karmic cycles, and historical details serve abstract human nature. Sun Ganlu adopts a different attitude toward history in *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*. He treats historical sites with archival rigor, devoting extensive time and energy to reviewing historical documents. Additionally, he skillfully adopts genre-style historical writing: while shifting to revolutionary historical themes, he integrates spy fiction elements, borrowing suspense, reasoning and plot twists typical of genre novels to turn revolutionary narration into a battlefield of intellectual contestation, striking a new aesthetic balance between genre accessibility and solemnity. For example, the novel opens with a twelve-day rescue mission to build an urgent sense of tension, driving the plot forward through layered decryption of intelligence codes, timelines and character identities. The lingering mystery of "who is the mole" externalizes trials of revolutionary faith as examinations of human nature.

2.2. The Narrative Shift: From Formal Experimentation to the Construction of Historical Narration

Sun Ganlu's early works prioritize formal experimentation, presenting narrative labyrinths defined by linguistic carnival. In contrast, [12]*A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* witnesses a dramatic shift in narrative strategy: the carnival-like linguistic experiments of his youth are subsumed within a grand historical framework, giving rise to a "restrained avant-garde quality". This transformation manifests not only in adjusted narrative language, but also in reconstructed dimensions of revolutionary expression through multi-threaded structures, the interweaving of reality and fiction, and shifting narrative perspectives.

2.2.1. Calm and Restrained Narrative Language

Fu Yichen once remarked: "Literature is an art of language. [13]No matter how form evolves, language remains its essence. Even within the broader landscape of world literature, few writers achieve ultimate mastery of language. Among China's avant-garde authors, only Sun Ganlu persists in linguistic exploration." It is undeniable that Sun Ganlu has long conducted linguistic experiments, establishing himself as a master of language. In early works like *Letters of the Messenger* and *Visiting a Dream*, he deconstructs traditional narrative logic through highly poetic language, with sentences breaking free from plot progression to form stacks of imagery and metaphorical revelry. The opening line of *Visiting a Dream* reads: "A hand drew another hand across my eyelids." Such linguistic play severs the bond between signifier and signified, rendering the text a closed symbolic labyrinth that leaves readers confused. By comparison, the narrative language of *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* reflects restraint, as poetic expression yields ground to historical authenticity. Take the scene of secret agent You Tianxiao interrogating Wei Dafu: "You Tianxiao spoke without originality, his voice distant, as if heard underwater from someone speaking on the surface." The metaphor conveys oppressive tension with poetic flair without departing from realistic narrative logic, immersing readers in the historical moment. Restrained language does not, however, abandon condensed imagery. In the chapter *Miss Tao*, captured Ling Wen and Dong Huiwen await interrogation: "A gray pigeon perched on barbed wire strung atop the high wall outside the window, and silence fell over the cell." Far more than easing tension and slowing the narrative pace, the pigeon stands witness to the unspoken evils hidden beneath Shanghai's darkness, a metaphor for the cruelty of underground spy work. Furthermore, traditional revolutionary historical novels adopt straightforward, impassioned realist language. Works such as *Defend Yan'an* feature impassioned declarations: "What kind of Communists are we? What kind of revolutionary soldiers? ... We swear: we will fight to the last man to recapture Yan'an!" Similarly, *Red Sun* brims with rallying cries: "If you're a hero, step forward and fight! Hiding far away firing empty shots-what kind of warrior are

you? Our bayonets and bullets will never lie idle. One day, we too will have artillery!" Sun Ganlu's restrained prose stands apart from this plain, fervent style, echoing Roland Barthes' concept of "writing degree zero" from his landmark work *Writing Degree Zero*, which advocates dispassionate, emotionless narration. When depicting Ling Wen's death, the writer avoids graphic violence, summarizing the scene succinctly: "Yi Junnian stood before Aunt Qi's doorway for a moment. Aunt Qi woke and paced back and forth in her room, searching for something. After a moment's thought, he tore a scrap from the door couplet and wiped blood from his hands." Though graphic brutality is omitted, the calm narration strikes a deep chord with readers[14].

2.2.2. Multi-Threaded Parallel Narrative Structure

Sun Ganlu's early works reject the linear narration of conventional fiction, instead adopting fragmented disjointed collage. *Breath*, for instance, unfolds through reminiscence of a snowy night, fragmenting protagonist Luo Ke's romantic experiences into disjointed memory snippets that slowly sink into quiet sorrow and beauty. The core thread of *Letters of the Messenger* consists of fifty-three repetitive definitions of the word "letter", each triggering a narrative pause or thematic shift, guiding readers to the next passage. In contrast, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* follows the linear narration typical of traditional revolutionary historical novels. Centered on the 1933 transfer of the Party Central Committee in Shanghai, it constructs a dual opposing thread between revolutionaries and enemies. From the underground Party's perspective, agents work to root out the hidden spy "Xishi" and safeguard the evacuation of core figure "Haohan". From the Kuomintang secret service's perspective, operatives hunt special envoy "Laokai" and uncover the secrets of the "A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains Plan". The two threads race against one another in the pursuit of uncovering moles and exposing the truth, converging finally on the core secrets of the transfer operation. Crucially, the adoption of linear narration does not mean the writer abandons his earlier collage techniques. The novel builds internal cohesion through a twelve-day countdown to the spy mission, linking every fragmented episode to the nation's history and future embodied in the "thousand miles of rivers and mountains". Additionally, each chapter bears a specific date marker, amplifying suspense while stringing scattered historical fragments into a dynamic interconnected network. Beyond the core plot, the novel intersperses historical flashbacks to the 1930 Guangzhou Uprising and the 1931 Gu Shuzhang betrayal, forming an archival structure of juxtaposed timelines[15-16].

2.2.3. Narrative Technique Blending Reality and Fiction

David Der-wei Wang has repeatedly written on the interplay of history and fiction, arguing that historical discourse and novelistic narration are closely intertwined forms. Their connection stems not only from mirrored narrative modes, but also overlapping explorations of human experience—whether fantastical or empirical, fictional or ideological. How literary fiction reproduces historical truth is a critical concern for writers during composition. Sun Ganlu indulges in surreal imagination in his early works, detached from historical reality and realistic logic to create illusory worlds within language alone. *Letters of the Messenger* contains the line: "The messenger woke up alongside that figure called God on an ordinary morning." By contrast, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* strikes a balance between historical truth and literary imagination. Rooted in the well-documented strategic relocation of the Party Central Committee from Shanghai to Ruijin in 1933, the novel strives for precise, authentic depictions of historical details ranging from character costumes and architectural styles to social customs and political events. To complete the work, Sun Ganlu visited the Longhua Memorial Hall to consult archives, combing through extensive historical documents and newspapers from 1930s Shanghai. He states: "I mapped out every day of that month in full detail, recording both lunar and solar calendars, whether Shanghai had floods in the preceding two years, even newspaper advertisements of the time. I cross-referenced hydrological data for the Wusongkou, where Chen Qianli's ship anchored upon his arrival in Shanghai." Nevertheless, history can never be fully revisited or perfectly restored, so literary renderings of history can only be imaginative reconstructions of factual events. For this reason, the writer deliberately embeds traces of fiction within historical gaps to showcase the charm of literary imagination. The pivotal "A Thousand Miles

of Rivers and Mountains Plan" leaves no trace in historical archives; the identity of key figure "Laokai" remains ambiguous, and two characters codenamed "Xishi" linger in obscurity. Yet this literary fiction carries greater historical humility than Mai Jia's spy novel *The Message*. Where *The Message* amplifies dramatic tension through closed-room reasoning, Sun Ganlu bends fictional elements to serve historical texture. In the chapter *Horse Racing Tickets*, archival research reveals the opera troupe's actual performance was not *Turandot*, yet the writer altered the play to amplify Kuomintang cruelty and suffocating atmosphere, all for the line: "Executioners are forever busy."

2.2.4. Flexible Shifting Narrative Perspectives

Perspective refers to the vantage point from which a writer observes characters and narrates stories. In Chinese Narratology, Yang Yi distinguishes omniscient and limited perspectives, noting: "Perspectives may be omniscient or limited, internal or external. Essentially, they represent the angle, depth and layers through which the work presents the world." Gérard Genette further differentiates zero focalization, internal focalization and external focalization in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Sun Ganlu's early novels often adopt vague first-person or impersonal viewpoints. The messenger in *Letters of the Messenger* functions simultaneously as narrator and character, forming a self-referential closed loop. *I Am a Young Wine Jar* unfolds through the first-person recollections of "I". While this perspective strengthens linguistic subjectivity, readers are forced to hunt for symbolic meaning within signifiers. Traditional revolutionary historical novels rely largely on omniscient or hero-centered viewpoints. *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*, for example, uses an omniscient narrator to comprehensively depict the militia's bandit suppression operations, covering strategic deployments, enemy and ally dynamics, and character psychology. *Railway Guerrillas* centers on core heroes Liu Hong and Wang Qiang, framing the plot around their combat experiences. *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, by contrast, fluidly deploys multiple perspectives. Sun Ganlu primarily employs an omniscient viewpoint, narrating from an all-seeing, panoramic lens. Amid the spy backdrop, the narrator possesses fuller knowledge than both characters and readers, grasping the overall plot development, rhythm and trajectory, delving beneath linguistic flourishes to expose deeply hidden emotions in characters' inner lives. Beyond this overarching omniscience, the novel repeatedly shifts narrative focus to construct a polyphonic historical panorama. Underground Party leader Chen Qianli, female writer Ling Wen, Kuomintang secret agent Ye Qinian and other figures each take turns as focal points, with multiple retellings of the same event woven throughout the text. The Sha Road gunfight, for instance, sees underground operatives captured and imprisoned in Longhua, subjected to separate torture and interrogation. The fragmented memories of each Party member gradually piece together a blurred account of what transpired. The narrative shift in *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* embodies Sun Ganlu's creative fusion of avant-garde form and historical content. Through calm restrained language, multi-threaded parallel structures, reality-fiction interweaving and flexible shifting perspectives, the writer neither abandons explorations of narrative possibility nor detaches formal experimentation from history, imbuing form with historical weight. This transformation proves that avant-garde quality is not merely synonymous with formal experimentation—it can carve new territory through dialogue with history.

2.3. The Stylistic Shift: From Surreal Mists to Historical Realism

Debuting as an avant-garde writer, Sun Ganlu maintained an experimental literary stance throughout his career until *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, which signals a profound stylistic transformation from surreal writing to historical realism. This shift does not constitute a simple rejection of his earlier style; instead, the writer reconciles the tension between avant-garde aesthetics and historical narration to forge a new stylistic paradigm blending austerity with lyricism, detachment with engagement.

2.3.1. From Signifier Carnival to Historical Concreteness

Sun Ganlu's early works are defined by signifier carnival, with sentences severed from narrative logic to become pure play of imagery. Visiting a Dream states: "This living room seems to be the embodiment of night." Letters of the Messenger reads: "That is the sky of migratory birds. They have circled within the messenger's melancholy vision for centuries." Such narration exhibits self-referential linguistic traits. In stark contrast, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* prioritizes tangible, concrete language, infusing linguistic meaning with certainty through historical context. A depiction of the sea in the early hours: "Around three in the morning, the wind and waves eased, and thick fog blanketed the sea, blotting out all starlight. The steamship wandered through an endless black void as if in a dream." Personified imagery turns poetic language into a carrier of historical metaphor. When writing of underground operatives passing intelligence, the writer compares the tip of a pen gliding across paper to a knife slicing skin, merging violent imagery with revolutionary action. Retaining the defamiliarization technique characteristic of his early avant-garde writing, this rhetoric gains concrete historical grounding. This stylistic strategy of "dancing in chains" strikes a delicate balance between avant-garde poetics and realist writing. Furthermore, the labyrinthine language of his early works strips emotion of significance, with character relationships isolated beneath ornate verbal ornamentation. *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, however, delivers unprecedented emotional depth. The code phrase "These people are the rivers and mountains" tightly links revolutionary endeavor to the well-being of the people. A martyr's final plea-"Take another look at Longhua, at Shanghai for me"-embodies revolutionaries' longing for their homeland in tangible imagery, counteracting the alienation of grand narration through individual inner emotion. This approach develops personal sentiment alongside spiritual faith, avoiding excessive emotional outpouring common to revolutionary historical narratives while conveying profound compassion through restrained prose. Scene descriptions also reveal distinct aesthetic shifts. Depictions of death in early works appear as abstract symbols: Letters of the Messenger merely concludes of a character: "He perished from an unsent turn of phrase." In contrast, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* endows death with tangible historical weight. The interrogation scene preceding Wei Dafu's execution reads: "The lamp flooded his body with heat, drawing sweat and throbbing pain in his head. The light suddenly morphed into a deafening roar echoing in his ears." This bodily narrative translates revolutionary sacrifice into perceptible physical experience. Such stylistic adjustments grant avant-garde literature tangible historical presence.

2.3.2. From Formal Play to Genre Fusion

As previously discussed, Sun Ganlu's early works reject genre conventions, shun historical reality, and immerse themselves in metaphysical linguistic play. Notably, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* achieves striking stylistic breakthroughs, fusing the readability of genre fiction with the experimental spirit of avant-garde literature. Set against underground revolutionary struggles in 1930s Shanghai, the novel recounts the underground Party's battle of wits against Kuomintang forces, firmly positioning it as a work of revolutionary mainstream literature. It simultaneously integrates spy thriller tropes: Miss Tao hiding confidential letters in the lining of her cheongsam, intelligence conveyed through newspaper classifieds, and codenames such as "Laokai". The handling of spy identities stands out in particular. The novel opens revealing that a Kuomintang mole codenamed "Xishi" has infiltrated underground ranks, yet conceals the mole's identity for most of the plot. After a false "Xishi" is exposed, readers learn of two separate figures bearing the codename, with the genuine "Xishi" unmasked only in the novel's latter half. The dual-mole device amplifies the spy thriller dimension. Beyond merging revolutionary historical narration and spy suspense frameworks, the novel weaves in avant-garde literary traits. While narrating the core "*A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains Plan*", Sun Ganlu intersperses flashbacks to the 1930 Guangzhou Uprising and 1931 Gu Shuzhang betrayal, carrying forward his early collage techniques. Motifs such as the white dove symbolizing Lao Fang's sacrificial retreat and the foreign concessions of Shanghai as colonial emblems echo hallmarks of his early avant-garde fiction. The collision of genre formulas and avant-

garde style generates an aesthetic of "familiar defamiliarization". Though adopting revolutionary historical subject matter, the novel avoids the monumental monument-style writing typical of traditional revolutionary historical fiction, instead prioritizing microcosmic depictions. Sun Ganlu devotes delicate brushstrokes to overlooked minor details nestled within historical folds: the angle of teacups at underground rendezvous, stitching patterns concealing intelligence inside cheongsams, a martyr's lingering memory of a bowl of plain noodles before execution. These minutiae, ignored in grand traditional revolutionary narratives, acquire epic solemnity through fine-grained description. Yet this micro-writing never devolves into triviality. When Chen Qianli's thoughts drift to his brother Chen Qianyuan, the writer observes: "It is hard to discern a person's true features—they are layered and painted by the history they carry." Instantly elevating individual fleeting experience into a cross-temporal historical fable, the micro and macro converge in a single moment. This narrative strategy of capturing the grand through the minute avoids hollow sublimity in traditional revolutionary narration while infusing avant-garde literature with historical gravity. The stylistic transformation of *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* marks Sun Ganlu's evolution from linguistic experimenter to poet of history. Reconciling the radicalism of avant-garde aesthetics with the realism of historical writing, he crafts a singular style at once austere yet impassioned, precise yet lyrical. This style neither abandons his youthful experiments nor compromises realism; instead, it carves a third path amid the tensions between literature and history, form and content, individual and era. It proves the true vitality of avant-garde spirit lies in unceasing self-renewal.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE CAUSES BEHIND THE AVANT-GARDE SHIFT

As a representative figure of contemporary Chinese avant-garde literature, Sun Ganlu's writing has long been defined by linguistic experimentation, narrative traps and postmodern characteristics. Yet in *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, this avant-garde quality undergoes a dramatic shift, distinct both from the epic narration and politicized expression of traditional revolutionary historical novels and the extreme formal experimentation of the writer's early works. This transformation is no accident, but a product of multiple interwoven factors. This section explores the drivers of the avant-garde turn in *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* from two angles: shifts in sociocultural context and evolution of the writer's creative philosophy.

3.1. The Marketized Literary Context

The avant-garde literature of the 1980s deployed radical formal experimentation to counter traditional realism, yet its ahistorical, asocial tendencies faced severe marginalization amid marketization in the 1990s. Full-scale market reforms reshaped the operational logic of the literary field, and avant-garde literature's singular focus on formal experimentation gradually slipped to the margins. Pierre Bourdieu argued that power struggles within the literary field revolve around symbolic capital, yet symbolic capital depreciated under pervasive marketization. As elite pure literature detached from mass reading tastes, Sun Ganlu's early linguistically experimental works, inaccessible to mainstream readers, slid into obscurity. Meanwhile, literature became commodified under consumer culture. Faced with depreciating symbolic capital and the impact of consumerism, Sun Ganlu recognized the need to adjust his narrative strategies to rebuild connections between literature and reality. Crucially, the 21st century's media convergence and mass cultural demands spurred transformations in narrative paradigms. Adaptation demands from film, television and online media reshaped literary production toward cross-media storytelling. In interviews, Sun Ganlu noted the nationwide resonance of genre historical works such as *Bright Sword*, recognizing the mass communication potential of historical themes and beginning to contemplate rewriting revolutionary history through avant-garde techniques. *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* caters to the trend of literary adaptation for screen: its detailed renderings of 1930s Shanghai and dramatic character dynamics provide natural raw material for film and television translation. Street scenes unfold like cinematic tracking shots: "East of the

market lay an extremely narrow alley. The alley's right side abutted the market's rear wall, while a fence lined the left, from which strange spice aromas drifted through gaps." Character dialogue brims with dramatic tension: "'Where did you obtain this intelligence?' Wei Dafu pressed urgently. Yi Junnian fell silent for a moment: 'We have insiders within the organization.'" Such elements reflect the writer's foresight of cross-media dissemination, laying groundwork for screen adaptation. Sun Ganlu's composition of *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* responds not only to the crisis of pure literature's marginalization but also aligns with mainstream national cultural discourse. Wrapped in a spy suspense genre shell with an avant-garde core, the novel satisfies mass demand for readable storytelling while retaining literary prestige through archival rigor, balancing symbolic capital and economic capital. This strategy of "avant-garde packaging for mainstream discourse" represents a practical application of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital conversion.

3.2. The Evolution of Creative Philosophy

Sun Ganlu's early writing was renowned for anti-narrative techniques, suspending conventional narrative logic in favor of stacked imagery and self-referential language. Cheng Guangwei observed that avant-garde fiction champions the doctrine that "form and language constitute literary ontology", and Sun Ganlu's early works suspend narrative ethics through the supremacy of language. In contrast, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* reveals the writer's renewed focus on narrative depth and ideological expression. Sun Ganlu stated: "A century of turbulent eras has birthed countless figures, ideological trends and heart-stirring tales. To write from this vantage point, to engage with these monumental historical events and extraordinary characters, is a writer's great fortune." This awakening triggered profound transformations in his creative outlook. First, his evolving understanding of time stands apart from the disordered fragmented timelines of early works. Through the evacuation of core Party figures, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* constructs an urgent historical chronology. The novel opens with the line: "The fifteenth day of the twelfth lunar month, barely ten days before New Year's Eve", immediately establishing a sense of time pressure. Second, his narrative focus shifts: abandoning lines such as "There, a needle sews time with pure water" characteristic of linguistic carnival, the novel turns to serious exploration of revolutionaries' ethical dilemmas. Chen Qianli's inner turmoil after making critical decisions exemplifies this shift: "He scrutinized his own heart—had he acted too rashly? Had he overlooked the safety of his comrades? In weighing mission completion against the lives of his fellow agents, had he fixated excessively on the former and neglected the latter?" Third, the writer reconsiders the very definition of avant-garde art. Sun Ganlu remarked: "After turning sixty, my thinking underwent profound shifts, yet if asked to label my school, I still consider myself an avant-garde writer—I have never changed." For Sun Ganlu, avant-garde identity is not a fixed label, but a commitment to constant self-transcendence. Writing *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* represents his expansion of avant-garde literature's connotation: avant-garde quality resides not solely in formal innovation, but in unique insights into history, culture and human nature. The avant-garde turn in *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* constitutes Sun Ganlu's proactive choice shaped by shifting times, personal creative evolution, market pressures and literary tradition. This transformation marks the writer's leap from formal experimentation to profound ideological depth, while mirroring contemporary writers' new artistic explorations of their era. Through dialogue with traditional revolutionary fiction and transcendence of his own early writing, Sun Ganlu proves that avant-garde identity is no static label, but a dynamic, open literary practice.

4. THE LITERARY VALUE OF A THOUSAND MILES OF RIVERS AND MOUNTAINS

Distinguished by its unique narrative strategies and cultural connotations, Sun Ganlu's full-length novel *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* stands as a pivotal work marking the

transformation of contemporary Chinese avant-garde literature. Breaking free from the bounds of his early extreme formal experimentation, it pioneers new literary pathways through dialogue with traditional revolutionary fiction. Its significance manifests in dual dimensions: reflection on and expansion of avant-garde literature itself, alongside multi-layered responses to cultural tradition, social reality and reader reception. This section elaborates the novel's value through literary innovation and cultural metaphor.

4.1. Literary Innovation in Revolutionary Narration

1980s avant-garde literature was often criticized as formalist excess, its radical linguistic experiments accused of severing literature's ties to history and reality, even descending into historical nihilism. One of the celebrated "Five Avant-Garde Writers", Sun Ganlu built his reputation on linguistically experimental, fragmented, poetic works such as *Visiting a Dream* and *Letters of the Messenger*, emphasizing textually unreadable signifier play. The narrative strategies of *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, however, carve a new literary path balancing avant-garde experimentation and historical weight.

4.1.1. Balancing Formal Experimentation and Historical Writing

As elaborated above, Sun Ganlu does not abandon avant-garde formal techniques in *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, including manipulation of narrative time through flashbacks and prolepsis, collage of multiple viewpoints, and dense poetic language. Yet he anchors these formal experiments in historical presence, granting them substantive value. Based on the real 1933 underground Party "A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains Plan", the novel weaves authentic historical events-the transfer of the Central Party Library, the sacrifice of Longhua martyrs-into fictional narration, endowing avant-garde literature with profound historical gravity. It intersperses pseudo-historical materials including telegrams, meeting minutes and newspaper excerpts, echoing the avant-garde collage tradition on a formal level while infusing fictional storytelling with empirical historical texture. Recurring motifs of maps, codes and secret signals function simultaneously as core spy thriller elements and metaphors for the essence of historical writing: history resembles encrypted archives, decipherable only through formal experimentation to reveal its complexity. Furthermore, the novel adopts a dialectical view of reality and fiction, avoiding the simplistic grand narratives of traditional revolutionary writing while resisting postmodern nihilism. Sun Ganlu deliberately downplays the macro significance of the Central Committee's relocation to Ruijin, instead focusing on the fates of ordinary individuals amid historical upheaval. Chen Qianli doubts his own judgments; Ling Wen wavers after witnessing comrades' deaths; even antagonist Ye Qian is no one-dimensional villain, his malice tempered by nostalgia for lost youthful ideals. Through extensive inner monologues and minute detail, the writer depicts revolutionaries' crises of faith, emotional loneliness and physical suffering. This technique of capturing the grand through the minute avoids instrumentalized depictions of history and returns revolutionary endeavor to the concrete choices of living human beings.

4.1.2. Aesthetic Breakthroughs in Genre Fiction

Beyond balancing formal experimentation and historical writing, the novel's groundbreaking achievement lies in its creative transformation of genre fiction, elevating the aesthetics of mainstream literature and deepening the ideological dimension of spy novels, offering a model for genre fusion in contemporary literature. As an innovative practice of contemporary revolutionary historical narration, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* organically integrates multiple narrative elements. Constructing worldly, textured secular spaces, it diverges from traditional revolutionary historical writing's compression of everyday life. The writer situates revolutionary action within vividly mundane urban landscapes of Shanghai, Guangzhou and beyond, tracing revolutionaries of varied occupations-bank clerks, literati-shuttling between teahouses, alleyways and apartments to de-ideologize revolutionary history. In constructing emotional discourse, the novel weaves a multi-

dimensional spectrum of sentiment to expand humanistic depth within revolutionary narration. Unlike traditional revolutionary historical fiction that instrumentalizes emotional elements, it renders delicate portrayals of love, kinship, mentorship and other interpersonal bonds. The romances between Chen Qianli and Ye Tao, Ling Wen and Long Dong retain restraint within revolutionary context while affirming individual emotion's subjectivity. Fraternal affection between the Chen brothers unfolds through mundane daily details, constructing tension between blood ties and revolutionary ethics amid divergent beliefs. Particularly profound is the depiction of shifting emotional bonds: the collapse of the teacher-student bond between Chen Qianli and Ye Qian, from mutual affinity to political division, mirrors spiritual fractures wrought by epochal upheaval. The fleeting romance between Yi Junnian and Xiaofenghuang collides spy identity with secular affection, opening gray zones of human interpretation beyond simplistic revolutionary/anti-revolutionary binaries. The integration of everyday life and human experience into narration constitutes a dual transcendence of revolutionary historical writing: worldly material spaces translate revolutionary discourse into lived experience, while multi-layered emotional spectra three-dimensionally expand humanistic discourse. This narrative strategy establishes solid realist foundations for revolutionary sublimity, blending historical rationality and poetic sensibility to forge a new paradigm of revolutionary historical narration balancing historical depth and human warmth, offering a replicable textual model for aesthetic transformation in contemporary revolutionary historical creation. On the other hand, micro-writing set against sweeping historical backdrops reconstructs the aesthetic paradigm of spy genre fiction, embedding localized specific operations within the broader context of modern Chinese history, granting grand historical narratives tangible microcosmic expression while sketching key turning points and developmental trajectories of modern China. Rooted in authentic historical events, the novel transcends purely technical spy plot limitations to achieve panoramic historical vision. Its protagonists are ordinary citizens of varying ages and backgrounds, restricted to operating in public and semi-public spaces—markets, libraries, teahouses, docks—under constant enemy surveillance. These constraints create narrative challenges, yet the writer excavates maximal narrative potential within such limits, transforming possibility into realized plot. Through extreme, imaginative covert operations, the novel fully symbolizes and visualizes the revolutionary history connected to the transfer mission. In terms of plot progression, Sun Ganlu follows core genre conventions of suspense and resolution to drive narrative development, yet complicates genre tropes and details through avant-garde formal experimentation, most prominently in the mole character "Xishi". The mole constitutes a pivotal plot thread. Conventional genre logic dictates that exposing "Xishi" would resolve enemy plots and conclude the novel. Instead, intelligence reveals a Kuomintang spy codenamed "Xishi" infiltrating underground ranks, yet analysis of the intelligence highlights contradictions: the mole alternately appears to be a long-term deep cover agent or a recent defector. Researchers argue this narrative choice abandons the "werewolf game" structure dominating prior spy fiction, establishing clear reading expectations through genre conventions only to subvert them unexpectedly, a form of anti-formula and anti-genre storytelling. Revolutionary upheaval, grand history, spy narration and avant-garde aesthetics converge within a single revolutionary historical novel through genre storytelling, satisfying mass readership while remaining fundamentally distinct from commercial bestsellers. Sun Ganlu employs new formal techniques to summon spiritual power and faith.

4.2. Cultural Metaphor of History and Urban Memory

In *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*, 1930s Shanghai transcends mere physical space to become an imaginative landscape saturated with cultural metaphor. Drawing on avant-garde narrative techniques, the writer fuses Wang Ximeng's Northern Song landscape scroll, modern revolutionary memory and contemporary urban spirit, refining cultural codes transcending specific eras within historical folds.

4.2.1. Revolutionary Transposition of Artistic Classics

A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains refers to Wang Ximeng's famous Northern Song scroll painting, renowned for its delicate brushwork and expansive depictions of the motherland's magnificent landscapes. Borrowing this title for his full-length novel, Sun Ganlu draws parallels between the artwork and the secret underground revolutionary plan, embodying the aspiration of revolutionary martyrs to unify the nation and secure a peaceful life for the people. As the core motif of the entire text, "*A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*" undergoes semantic evolution from artistic classic to revolutionary symbol, generating unique dual resonance. On one hand, the writer borrows the painting's scattered perspective technique and translates it into narrative strategy-diverse shifting viewpoints and multi-threaded parallel plot structures. More profoundly, the motif carries political metaphor. Underground operatives name their secret evacuation operation the "*A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains Plan*", infusing revolutionary connotations into literati landscape painting's poetic depiction of national territory. This becomes explicit in a rendezvous exchange: "I seek a Song Dynasty painting." "That will be difficult to find." "I must locate it, as entrusted by another." "Which painting do you seek?" "A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains." "Open the window and look outside." "These people are the rivers and mountains." The dialogue metaphorizes the people as the true nation, framing revolutionary struggle as the Communists' quest to secure happiness and benefit for the broad masses. This metaphorical transformation embodies a thread of cultural inheritance: Wang Ximeng's praise for the motherland's landscapes and revolutionaries' defense of national sovereignty represent distinct historical manifestations of the same spiritual lineage. Additionally, protagonist Chen Qianli's given name dismantles the phrase "thousand miles of rivers and mountains", merging traditional scholar-official patriotism with modern revolutionary rationality to embody the fusion of ancient and contemporary cultural genes.

4.2.2. Depiction of Spatial Cultural Memory

Guo Chunlin argued that all of Sun Ganlu's writing, even his seemingly avant-garde linguistic practice, should be contextualized within the broader history of modern Shanghai to interpret his depictions of the city and cultural memory accurately. While spanning Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou and other locales, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* centers geographically on Shanghai, rendering it fundamentally a novel of the city. Yet Sun Ganlu's portrayal of Shanghai diverges sharply from depictions in other literary works: distinct from the grotesque prosperity of late Qing Han Bangqing's Shanghai, the lustful metropolis of Shanghai School writers, the ancient, desolate historical Shanghai of Eileen Chang, and the trendy modern Shanghai popular in recent years. Having grown up in Shanghai, the writer possesses intimate knowledge of its geography, recurring to its iconic landmarks throughout the novel, even titling multiple chapters after place names: Xingchang Pharmacy, Maochang Coal Shop, Tiannan Teahouse and more. He elaborately depicts Shanghai's food and clothing culture: Cui Wentai savoring offal stew before a secret mission, Chef Dong serving Chen Qianyuan braised pork head, Miss Tao's tailored Shanghai cheongsams-all embody Jiangnan regional characteristics, unlocking preserved cultural memories of Shanghai for readers. The novel does not merely recount Shanghai's cultural memory; it situates tense underground Party-Kuomintang struggle within the city's prosperous, advanced modern urban landscape, endowing Shanghai with political metaphor and revealing its hidden alternate dimension. The novel repeatedly references the Avenue Joffre in the French Concession, a semi-autonomous colonial territory serving as a gray zone for revolutionary activity. Revolutionaries exploited jurisdictional loopholes within the concessions to operate, symbolically reclaiming colonial space through their resistance. As the transformative work of Sun Ganlu's creative career, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* carries significance extending far beyond its textual boundaries. It redefines the boundaries of avant-garde literature, reinterprets genre fiction through modernity, inherits traditional culture and awakens urban memory. Through multi-layered dialogue between form and content, tradition and modernity, critique and construction, the novel not only completes the writer's personal creative transition but also offers cross-textual insights for contemporary literature navigating

complex intersections of discursive power to pursue ideological, spiritual and aesthetic creation while preserving individual artistic temperament and aesthetic traits.

5. SUMMARY

As the transformative magnum opus of Sun Ganlu's writing career, *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* marks a groundbreaking breakthrough in his personal creation while charting new directions for the development of contemporary literature. Through comprehensive innovation in theme, narration and style, the novel realizes the creative integration of avant-garde literature and revolutionary historical narration, injecting new vitality into contemporary writing. Its unique genre fusion and profound social and cultural value establish it as an important work in the history of contemporary Chinese literature.

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