

An exploration of "things" in the rural space of Cao Wenxuan's "Youmaidi"—Taking "Grass House", "Fine Rice" and "Bronze and Sunflower" as examples

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Abstract

In Cao Wenxuan's novel, a unique spatial system called "Oil Cone Street" has been formed, through which he poetically depicts all living beings and infuses beauty into every object he writes about. Under the theoretical perspective of contemporary object narrative research, what are the prominent manifestations of the representation of objects in the novel? Furthermore, what rural sentiments are embedded behind these manifestations? Starting from this question as a logical point, the research focuses on analyzing the categorization of objects in the novel in order to explore the hidden childhood experiences and rural memories conveyed through these objects.

Keywords

Cao Wenxuan; Object Narratives; Symbolic Objects; Action Objects; Substantive Objects

1. Introduction

In 2016, Paige Adamna, Chair of the Hans Christian Andersen Award jury, commented on Cao Wenxuan: with prose as lyrical and flowing as water, he presents authentic yet sorrow-laden moments drawn from the raw texture of life. Observing with the depth of the soul, he captures subtle emotional threads, offering a poetic portrayal of all living beings and imbuing them with profound aesthetic beauty. (Xu Yan, 2000, pp. 68–72)

Set in the rural village of Damadi, *Bronze and Sunflower* (2005) tells the story of a city girl, Sunflower, who follows her father to the countryside. After her father tragically dies, she is left an orphan with no one to rely on, and is taken in by the poorest family in the village—Bronze's family—growing up alongside the mute boy Bronze.

Throughout their childhood, the two children endure numerous hardships, including difficulty attending school, famine, the collapse of their house, and the death of their grandmother. At the age of twelve, fate calls Sunflower back to the city. From then on, Bronze often gazes toward the distant reed marshes, silently looking in the direction of the city where Sunflower now lives. While the narrative centers on the intertwined lives of these two children, a closer reading reveals that their fates are deeply rooted in the soil of Damadi. The characters' lives are intimately connected to the rural environment and the everyday material conditions of the land.

(1) Kuihua came to barley village, where her father died unexpectedly — The small boat and the river;

(2) Kuihua and Bronze's Companion — The Old Elm Tree and the Old Ox;

(3) The long-term living environment of Kuihua and Bronze — Reed marsh, sunflower field and thatched cottage;

(4) The symbols of Kuahua and Bronze's upbringing — Books, reed flower shoes, ice necklaces, paper lanterns;

(5) The Memory of Kuihua, Bronze Family and the Whole Dabie Village — Stories and Ballads.

Although the novel appears to narrate the story of Bronze and Sunflower, a closer examination reveals that it is, in fact, an account of the destinies of all things—natural and manmade—in Damadi Village. The names of the two children themselves evoke not only the most resilient plants and artifacts of the land but also the most beautiful art crafted by a father's hands from bronze. Thus, both the natural landscape and the cultural textures of rural life are rendered with distinct narrative care. In Cao Wenxuan's portrayal, the fate of human beings is inextricably bound to the fate of things.

2. Objects in the Youmadi System: Daily Life, Tools, and Spiritual Carriers

Jean Baudrillard, in *The Consumer Society* (1998), examines everyday objects in modern society from the perspective of consumption. Georg Lukács (1971), building upon Marx's theory of alienated labor, introduces the concept of reification, a theoretical insight suggesting that human beings become subject to the control of objects. Arthur C. Danto, in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (2012), explores the question: "Why is one of two seemingly identical things a work of art, while the other is not?" (p. 2). In all of these theories and phenomena, the concept of "objects" is intimately connected to the everyday objects of our lived experience. The term everyday functions as a qualifier: it refers to things that are routine, ordinary, and regularly used (objects) or done (activities) on a daily basis. It stands in contrast to terms such as sublime, grand, or mythical. Thus, everyday objects are those secular, ordinary items that are closely linked to daily human life (Xie Tingting, 2020). The existence of objects is not independent of space; rather, objects attain

meaning and form as part of a spatial system. Therefore, examining objects requires starting from their presence in everyday life and classifying them according to the specific forms they take.

Henri Lefebvre, in his influential work *The Production of Space* (1991), proposes the trialectics of spatiality, overturning the traditional dominance of time and linear narrative in the interpretation of space. He creatively divides space into three dimensions: physical space, mental space, and social space. This framework allows space to transcend its original disciplinary limitations within geography and offers new interpretive possibilities for literary studies.

Physical space refers to basic locational spaces and is most closely tied to clothing, food, shelter, and tools; mental space exists within abstract thought or imagination, encompassing dreams, fantasies, and other mental constructs; social space is primarily constituted by public realms, where everyday objects manifest as sites of social interaction—public venues, roads, transportation systems, and culturally distributed material forms.

Cao Wenxuan has used various names—such as Baishuidang Brigade, Xiangshui Bay, Xiaodou Village, and Wuqiao Town—to depict the living spaces in his fictional narratives. However, these place names generally remain broad and generic references to “the water towns of northern Jiangsu,” “this land,” “the village,” or “this place” (Liu Xinyue & Cao Wenxuan, 2019). Nonetheless, within the author’s creative vision, he had long conceived the idea of assigning a unified name to this imagined land.

To gather all kinds of people within this small piece of land, to observe their appearances and glimpse into their hearts. Many years ago, I already had the desire to set all the stories in one single location, but I struggled to find a place name that I truly liked. For this reason, I even consulted relevant departments and looked up village names from several counties, yet I couldn’t find an ideal one. It felt as though that place name had existed for many years, and its very existence was meant to wait for me to one day come upon it. The moment I saw it, I recognized it instantly—it was the setting I had been searching for. (pp. 118–119)

Later, in three of Cao Wenxuan’s award-winning works—*Straw House*, *Ximi*, and *Bronze and Sunflower*—this fictional place was formally named Youmadi. The author actively constructed what may be called the “Youmadi system,” centered around the town of Youmadi and surrounded by several small villages. For example, *Xiangxiang Du* (Fragrant Rice Ferry) appears in *Ximi* (2003), *Damadi* (Barley Field) in *Bronze and Sunflower* (2005), and *Tianjiawan* (Tian Family Bay) in *Little Tail* (2014).

Youmadi was a large town with a steamboat dock. The educated youth from the city would take a steamboat from the county seat to Youmadi, and from there, they were divided into male and female groups and sent off to various villages surrounding the town. (Cao Wenxuan, 2005, p. 4)

First, objects related to daily necessities such as clothing, food, housing, and transportation.

In **Bronze and Sunflower**, the story unfolds as Sunflower, a city girl, comes to the village of Damadi after her father's unexpected death. She gradually grows up in the household of Bronze, the poorest boy in the village. The villagers live in thatched cottages; the natural landscape includes reed marshes and lotus ponds. Small wooden boats are the village's exclusive means of transportation, inseparable from the rivers, which can be both tranquil and turbulent. Scarcity of food is one of the main sources of hardship in the novel. The family's relentless pursuit of food becomes a recurring theme: they usually eat coarse rice, and Bronze and Sunflower chew on reed roots dug from the ground to survive. To improve the family's diet, Bronze even braves the storm to hunt wild ducks in the reeds—only to be wrongly accused of stealing a duck. The family continually strategizes to avoid starvation, waiting for the government to distribute new rice. Even in her final years, the grandmother collects cotton at her sister's house to exchange for grain.

In Cao Wenxuan's novels, children often have their favorite personal belongings. For instance, Sunflower cherishes her reed-flower shoes, the cotton clothes made by her grandmother, and the ice necklace crafted by Bronze. These are not only wearable items but also deeply treasured possessions. In **Ximi**, Meiwén always carries a hair clip from the city and a suitcase full of memories. These objects of daily life—clothing, food, shelter, and tools—witness the everyday growth of children.

Second, tools and instruments.

In Cao Wenxuan's "Youmadi" world, the dominant instruments of rural life are tools of production—sickles, hoes, and looms made from local materials. These tools sustain the village's daily labor and rhythm of life. In **Ximi**, the most prominently described tool is Ximi's knife. Though used in daily tasks, it is also a beloved object due to Ximi's passion for carving. He often uses it to engrave on wood, tree roots, and even furniture. The novel notes: among these "creations" were people, objects, things from the sky, the earth, and the water... Meiwén saw in them the world as envisioned by Ximi—a vibrant, richly diverse world (Cao Wenxuan, 2005, p.73). The knife is thus paired with wood and branches. At one point, Ximi and Meiwén search for a rare piece of wood to complete a carving.

In addition, music is a shared passion. One of Meiwén's companions plays the harmonica daily. In **Straw House**, the harmonica is replaced by the teacher's flute. In Cao Wenxuan's writing, each person seems to possess their own private universe—be it Sunflower's school life, Bronze's duck-herding tools in the reeds, or the drawing pens and hoes of the older generation. People and objects coexist harmoniously in these spaces.

Third, objects of the spirit.

Beyond material life, "Youmadi" also hosts spiritual objects, most notably rural folk songs, which resound across the land. These songs act as important carriers of

rural cultural spirit and are frequently featured in Cao Wenxuan's trilogy. For example, in **Straw House**, Sang Sang hums a rural tune (pp. 92 - 93)...

*My sister is fifteen and I am sixteen,
My mother made porridge for my sister.
Dad sleeps in a cradle,
No milk to eat and he cried.
Remember grandpa married grandma,
I set off firecrackers in front of the sedan.*

In the vast expanse of the wilderness, a little girl sings a nursery rhyme on the open earth—this act not only reveals her mental and emotional state but also signifies the transmission of a spiritual tradition. In *Bronze and Sunflower*, many people from the city arrive at the “reeds that had remained silent for countless centuries” to establish a May Seventh Cadre School. They not only build houses, reclaim land, and dig ponds for fish, but also “sing songs—urban songs, sung in the urban way. Their voices were loud and clear, causing the people of Damai Village to perk up their ears and listen.” There is also a song Sunflower's grandmother teaches her: “At the foot of the southern mountain sits a jar of oil; a girl and her sister-in-law bet on who can do the best hairstyle. The girl styles hers into a coiled dragon bun; the sister-in-law styles hers like a goat horn curl” (p. 75).

Apart from folk songs, other forms of spiritual expression remain present in Youmadi: Sunflower's father's paintings and Meiwen's father's wood carvings have been preserved in their respective unique forms. If these are tangible spiritual artifacts, the intangible ones appear in the recurring dreams found across the narratives.

For example, Bronze, waiting in the sunflower field for Sunflower's return, collapses from heatstroke due to his physical weakness and dreams of Sunflower running toward him. Simin dreams constantly: “Simin began dreaming more and more. These dreams were colorful and chaotic, like swallows gathering to migrate south in the autumn—flickering, shimmering, occupying all his nights. The people in these dreams were blurry and ever-shifting, and even included many faces he had never seen before.” When Mei Mei takes Simin to explore the outer world, they gradually enter a state of illusion, through which they perceive the material world more clearly. Lastly, in Simin, detailed description is devoted to the architecture, especially the four columns of a building. From the micro perspective, the author captures the material's texture, color, and ornamental patterns, leaving no detail overlooked. From the macro perspective, he frames the object as a whole, bringing forth its overall aesthetic appeal. Cao Wenxuan infuses an ancient, refined sense of elegance into the writing of objects, narrating an eternal voice that blends nobility and grace.

The columns of the four corridors appear to originate from the same mountain forest, displaying a brown hue. The term "blackish-brown" is merely a general description, as their coloration is remarkably complex—some areas exhibit scorched yellow tones, others show yellowish-brown hues, while certain sections approach pure black. Within

scorched-yellow zones, distinct black streaks emerge, while brown and black surfaces may occasionally reveal flashes of scorched yellow. Their texture resembles that of a stone combining hardness with smoothness. Every surface, from tip to toe, appears flawless without a single scar or insect bite. The wood radiates a lustrous yet not dazzling sheen, embodying a dark, time-honored quality. Unlike common timber, its touch conveys no warmth but rather a crisp autumn chill. (Cao Wenxuan, 2011, p.101)

3. Natural objects

A wide array of natural phenomena and elements—ranging from the sun, moon, and stars, to wind, rain, thunder, and lightning; from majestic mountains and great rivers to flowers, trees, birds, and animals—serve as subjects of depiction in the novels. The portrayal of natural landscapes in these works generally encompasses several layers: First, the depiction of celestial phenomena and astronomical objects such as the sun, moon, and stars. In Cao Wenxuan’s novels *Straw House*, *Bronze and Sunflower*, and *Fine Rice*, the sun, moon, stars, and wind consistently serve as environmental companions to the land of “Youmadi.” These elements are intimately intertwined with the characters’ daily labor and rural life. In *Fine Rice*, the moon is frequently described—not only as a device to enhance the narrative atmosphere, but also as a vessel for the characters’ emotional expressions.

Second, the portrayal of natural elements such as flowers, plants, trees, rocks, and rivers. Landscape writing constitutes the core materiality of nature’s construction. In *Bronze and Sunflower*, the young protagonist Bronze takes pleasure in observing the frogs of Damaidi, the “Spinning Damsels” (纺纱娘), stilt birds, sailboats, and windmills. He often traverses the fields atop a water buffalo, his head held high. Despite being unable to attend school and lacking peers his own age, Bronze remains optimistic and resilient: “he owns the river, the reeds, the buffalo, and countless flowers, birds, fish, and insects—many of which he cannot even name” (Yao Yuqing, 2023).

In *Straw House* (Cao Wenxuan, 2011), the character Xima observes that “there were crops and vegetation everywhere, birds and wild rabbits in abundance. There were many rivers, large and small, and many boats of different sizes. He enjoyed watching cormorants diving for fish, hearing the long, lowing calls of cattle from afar, watching hunters and their long-legged, lean hounds chasing rabbits through wheat or cotton fields, and listening to the plaintive, intermittent cries of water birds hidden in the reeds...” (p.182).

W.J.T. Mitchell contends that “a place is a specific site: space is practiced place, animated by movement, action, narrative, and signification. A landscape, then, transforms a location into a visual field, turning place and space into image” (p.289). In this light, natural landscapes bestow visibility upon space.

Let us begin with **water**. In *Straw House*(2009), Cao Wenxuan narrates a story that unfolds beside a river:

"The frozen river had now melted into a joyous stream. Bathed in sunlight, it gave off a light mist. The water, flowing with a slight urgency, bent the reeds lining the riverbank. Yellow finches, like musical notes, wavered gently as they perched on the reed stalks."(p5)

The river becomes a silent witness to the characters' joys and sorrows, gains and losses. Reflecting on his own writing process, Cao Wenxuan once remarked:

"In my imaginative world, water flows everywhere. Straw House and my other works were all born from water. Whenever I begin to write, my illusions are immediately activated: shimmering light on water, murmuring streams, an expanse of water. Water nourishes my soul—and also my words." (2011, p. 257)

The vivid and dreamlike riverscapes painted by Cao Wenxuan thus emerge as emblematic symbols of the natural space of *Youmadi*.

Then let us consider plants—flowers, grasses, and trees. In *Straw House*(2009), Cao Wenxuan offers a memorable description of a natural scene:

"The autumn clouds, soft as cotton, drifted gently into the distance. The withered leaves of the phoenix tree fluttered in the autumn breeze. Suddenly, the boy Sang Sang felt a desire to cry, and he began to sob quietly."(P.46)

The imagery of autumn, white clouds, phoenix trees, falling leaves, and autumn wind composes a group of motifs rich in classical resonance. Under Cao Wenxuan's careful arrangement, these natural elements reveal a subtle aesthetic charm. In his choice of botanical imagery, Cao frequently evokes sunflowers, persimmon trees, blue flowers, maple trees, mugwort, old locust trees, and reeds, among others—with sunflowers and reeds appearing with the highest frequency. The image of the sunflower is most prominent in *Bronze and Sunflower*, where it carries both symbolic and narrative weight.

Reeds appear throughout Cao's works. In *Bronze and Sunflower*, there is a vast expanse of reeds that forms the backdrop of the story; in *Straw House*, Du Xiaokang and his father Du Yonghe herd ducks through the reed marshes; in *Ximi*, the protagonist's secret hideout is a lookout tower nestled within a reed field. These spaces become places of reflection, action, and memory.

Additionally, *Bronze and Sunflower* features an old locust tree, a silent companion in *Bronze's* life. Cao Wenxuan's affinity for plant imagery also extends into character names: *Ximi* (fine rice), *Kuihua* (sunflower), and *Sang Sang*—all derived from natural or botanical elements. These names reflect the author's poetic imagination and his intimate connection between the natural world and human identity.

Lastly, let us examine the depiction of animals.

Animals are indispensable figures in children's literature, ranging from fables and fairy tales to animal-centered novels. The roles and representations of animals vary across genres. In fables and fairy tales, animals often speak and act with distinctly human personalities and thought patterns. This anthropomorphized portrayal has long been subject to critique. The renowned ethologist Konrad Lorenz, for instance,

argued that such depictions are pure fabrication—many of the behaviors ascribed to animals in these stories are fundamentally inconsistent with their true nature. Thus, the criterion of objective animality—the accurate reflection of an animal’s essential nature—has become a standard in evaluating animal representations (Z.A. Zorina & I.I. Polettaeva, 2001).

In children’s novels, animals tend to fall into two main categories: 1. Ordinary animals coexisting with humans in daily life; 2. Animals as central protagonists in animal-specific narratives. In Cao Wenxuan’s rural fiction, animals coexist harmoniously with humans and are part of the shared emotional and material landscape. He frequently includes animals such as sheep, dogs, and white pigeons in his stories. Dogs, long considered loyal companions to humans, play particularly significant roles. In *Ximi*, Cao Wenxuan introduces Qiaoqiao, a dog rescued by the protagonist during a storm and taken in as a companion. Qiaoqiao becomes one of the most faithful presences in Ximi’s childhood and later risks its own safety to protect Ximi during a violent confrontation with Xiao Qizi. Though not always foregrounded, Qiaoqiao remains a consistent narrative thread throughout the novel.

Likewise, white pigeons are recurrent symbols in Cao Wenxuan’s works, most notably in *Straw House*, where Sang Sang’s pigeon stands out as a central motif. In Cao’s writing, animals can be intimate and endearing companions, or fellow sufferers in the human condition. They may symbolize loyalty and nobility, or conversely, take on antagonistic roles opposing human characters (Yu Hongkang, 2020).

4. The Physical Experience and Memory of the World of YouMaDi

Cao Wenxuan once remarked: “In my world, water flows everywhere. *Straw House* and all my other works are born of water. Whenever I begin to write, my visions are instantly activated: shimmering waves, murmuring streams, a luminous world of water. Water nourishes my soul, and also nourishes my words.” (Cao Wenxuan, 2011, p. 257) As this statement suggests, rivers are among the most frequently depicted natural elements in Cao Wenxuan’s fiction. In *Straw House*, for example, the Youmadi Primary School is surrounded by tranquil rivers; in *Simi*, a wide, meandering river borders Daoxiangdu. For Cao Wenxuan, who grew up living near water, rivers are like strands of jade embedded in the soil of his homeland. The surging, powerful flow of water is deeply intertwined with vitality and the force of life.

To the land, water is the milk of the earth, sustaining human existence. For Cao, water is, above all, something that flows: “When you look at it, you feel a sense of life. A river gives people a sense of vigor and spirit—you will be inspired by the river.” (p. 256) Beyond being life-giving, water is also a symbol of purity. Homes by the water are clean by nature: “As long as there is water, you cannot help but remain clean, because when you are faced with water—even if you are filthy—you feel uneasy, even ashamed.” (p. 256)

In the preface to *Straw House*, Cao Wenxuan also states: “My emotional condi-

tion—those sudden surges of joy or sadness, the ups and downs, the flashes of light and shadow—often lead me to recall scenes of myself playing alone in the fields.” (Cao Wenxuan, 2018, p. 1) “Youmadi” thus emerges as a symbolic image charged with cultural significance. It is not merely a setting for rural stories, but also a metaphor for ancient civilization, a poetic ecological lifestyle, or a crystallization of China’s deep-rooted rural consciousness.

As a result, when the young boy Sang Sang in *Straw House* prepares to leave Youmadi, where he has lived for many years, he is silent but tearful, overwhelmed with attachment and reluctant to part. After leaving, he finds himself repeatedly missing it. In a certain sense, the “pastoral” symbolizes the poetic dwelling place of humankind. Once it is lost or left behind, this innate bond to the land is severed. In the context of modern civilization, such loss may lead to the disappearance of the soul’s poetry, resulting in confusion, anxiety, and helplessness (Yu Hongkang, 2020).

If the first level of object narration signifies the metaphorical transformation of cultural attributes, then a further exploration of these attributes must trace them back to the memory and consciousness of the individual—that is, to the creative subject’s own experiential and cognitive background. In Cao Wenxuan’s novel *Bronze and Sunflower*, he introduces a kind of winter footwear known in Yancheng as *maoxie wozi* (reed-fluff shoes):

“First, high-quality reed flowers were collected, then evenly twisted into straw rope, and finally woven into shoes. These shoes were thick and warm, like cozy bird nests... Even when walking through snow in winter, they kept the feet warm.” (Cao Wenxuan, 2005, p. 76)

Coincidentally, anthropologists conducting fieldwork in the Huaibei Plain of Anhui Province encountered a similar item known as *maowozi*. The description closely parallels Cao’s literary depiction:

“The soles of the maowozi were made from carved wooden boards about 1.5 inches thick. The heel and forefoot areas were 2 inches thick, sometimes as much as 5 inches. These two parts supported the whole shoe... Some soles were also woven from hemp or reeds. The uppers were made from reed flowers, sometimes interwoven with cow hair. When finished, the maowozi were about 2 centimeters thick. They served as boots in winter or rain shoes during wet weather. For a long time, maowozi were the primary winter footwear in Huaibei. In other places, they were rarely seen... Locals were fond of them and even took pride in their uniqueness.” (Zhou Xing, 2006, p. 396)

The similarities in detail between the literary reed-fluff shoes and the ethnographic *maowozi* indicate a form of intertextuality between the two narratives. From a sociological-anthropological perspective, the long-term presence of such items in local folk society becomes a vessel of human memory, forming a “text of objects” through associative thinking. Cao Wenxuan has frankly acknowledged: “Although I live in the city, that space [of my childhood] has eternally remained in my memory.” (Cao Wenxuan, 2010, p. 115)

“The mnemonic function of objects,” as Chen Si argues, “is rooted in their categorical attributes; the stability of these categories ensures the continuity of the memories they carry.” (Chen Si, 2012, p. 44)

This remembered space may consist of daily utensils, natural environments, or architectural structures—all of which appear vividly in the author’s language. Jan Assmann points out that culturally symbolic awakened spaces can serve as frameworks for memory: “Even when they are absent—or precisely when they are absent—they are recalled and rooted in memory as ‘homelands.’” (Jan Assmann, 2015, p. 31) Such awakened spaces, marked by existential significance and collective identity, become spiritual homelands—forever longed for by those who live in nostalgia. (Gao Xing, 2020)

5. Conclusion

Whether referring to everyday objects or natural elements, they are inextricably linked to human spaces of activity. As such, they reflect, on a broader level, the ethnic and geographical values embedded in the work. British cultural theorist Raymond Williams argued that “the geographical landscape in novels is not merely a ‘container’ for narrative content; it is also a reflection of social structures and a cultural representation of the writer’s ‘structure of feeling’” (Zhao Yifan, 2006, p. 433). As Zhou Jianjun and Zhou Yafen (2012, p. 39) have noted, “The things that exist in literary works are often the result of the writer’s aesthetic perception and artistic imagination; in nature, they are artistic creations unique to the writer.”

In Cao Wenxuan’s novels, objects—be they natural elements or everyday items—serve not only as narrative tools but also as symbolic carriers of cultural memory, emotional resonance, and spatial imagination. Through the recurring depiction of rivers, plants, animals, and rural landscapes, he constructs a literary space imbued with the ethos of southern rural China. “Youmadi,” as a central fictional setting, is not simply a geographical backdrop but a poetic space of nostalgia, resilience, and human warmth. These objects and environments, while rooted in the specificities of place, transcend the local to reflect broader cultural, historical, and emotional structures. Ultimately, they embody the deep connections between memory, identity, and land—turning material things into vessels of spiritual meaning and collective imagination.

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