

## The Study of Thomas Pynchon's Fiction in China

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**Keywords:** Thomas Pynchon; Historical Narrative; Politicized Writing of Postmodern Technology; Politicized Writing of Sex and Gender

**Abstract:** Thomas Pynchon's fiction is an important study object in the field of foreign literature study in China. Pynchon's fiction is known for its obscure language and complicated content among the scholars, but this is also the charm of Thomas Pynchon's fiction. The scholars in the United States started Pynchon research early in the 1960s. The studies of Pynchon in China lags behind that in other countries, and its focus has shifted from the early studies on its narrative skills, stylistic styles and traditional quest motif to its expression of the historical, cultural, religious, ethnic, political, and gender issues of the contemporary society. After combing the current studies of Pynchon fiction in China, it is not difficult to find that Chinese scholars have conducted various in-depth studies on the historical narratives in Pynchon's fiction, the politicized writing of postmodern science and technology, and the politicized writing of sex and gender. And the study of Pynchon's fiction in China has taken a new height, which will provide new perspectives for the readers to meditate on the survival of modern humans through the eyes of Thomas Pynchon.

### Introduction

Thomas Pynchon can be described as a genius of contemporary American literary. In 1974, his novel *Gravity's Rainbow* won the National Book Award; in 1975, he won the Howells Medal of National Institute and American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2005, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow* were listed among the 100 best fiction in the world since the birth of the weekly publication of *Time*. Harold Bloom, a famous American literary critic, lists Pynchon among the four famous American novelists in contemporary America.

As early as the 1960s, the scholars in the United States set off a wave of research on Thomas Pynchon's fiction, which has continued to this day. Scholars in Chinese academic circles also began to study Pynchon's fiction in the 1990s, starting with Qian Mansu and Liu Xuelan. The total number of articles published in Chinese journals on Pynchon's fiction has reached more than 160, and there are 5 monographs. There are more than 40 master theses and doctoral dissertations that can be retrieved from National Library of China. Thomas Pynchon has become an important research object in the field of foreign literature research in China.

### Summary of Pynchon Studies by Chinese Scholars

Looking at the studies regarding Pynchon's fiction in the past 20 years, the study in Chinese academic circles has been lagged behind American scholars in terms of content and perspective. In 1993, Qian Mansu published an article entitled "All the Secret is to Keep Bouncing" in the fourth issue of *Foreign Literature Review*. "If a man still has within him a pious desire for holiness, he must struggle to find his own god and project meaning into this world"<sup>[1]</sup> This may be the beginning of the studies of motif of quest. Since then, there have been four articles published by Liu Xuelan on *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, which has been viewed as the prelude of Pynchon studies in China. The earlier achievements mainly focused on the writing style and narrative mode

of Pynchon's fiction, which was also a hot issue in American academic circles at that time. After Liu Xuelan, Chinese academic circle had a few years of gestation when there were not many constructive studies. After 2003, the study of Pynchon's fiction in Chinese academic circle entered a booming stage. Ye Huanian, Sun Wanjun, Dan Hansong, Chen Shidan, Wang Jianping, Liu Fengshan, and others published a series of high-level research articles. The studies have shifted from the initial pursuit of formal aesthetics such as entropy, polysemy, uncertainty, and narrative maze to political aesthetics, historical writing, marginal culture, interpretation of ethnic discourse, interpretation of McCarthyist discourse, etc. The study of political, social, cultural issues has become another focus of Pynchon studies.

There are five monographs in China that focus on Pynchon's fiction, including Sun Wanjun's *Chaos and Order in Pynchon's Fiction* (2008), *The Reflector of American Culture - Thomas Pynchon* (2011) and Liu Fengshan's *A World Behind Fantasy: A Study of Thomas Pynchon's Fiction* (2011), *A Study of Thomas Pynchon's Fiction in a Postmodern Context* (2013) and Wang Jianping's *Thomas Pynchon: A Critical Study* (2015). The five books provide the Chinese scholars with different research perspectives and methods, and their research priorities are also different.

Sun Wanjun's *The Reflector of American Culture - Thomas Pynchon* (2011) mainly studied Pynchon's first five novels from two aspects: ideological theme and narrative style, including also Pynchon's early short stories. The core of Sun Wanjun's studies is the topic of entropy, narrative mode of quest, mainstream cultural structure, technological rationality in Pynchon's fiction. They also involve the question of totalitarian tendencies in the Western world, the rigid metaphysical thinking mode, and the current situation of American society and cultural diversity<sup>[2]</sup>.

Compared with Sun Wanjun's research, Liu Fengshan's *A Study of Thomas Pynchon's Fiction in a Postmodern Context* (2013) has a relatively broad scope, covering Pynchon's six short stories, seven novels, and important social commentaries. It mainly focuses on such topics in Pynchon's fiction as contemporary warfare, development of modern science and technology, American democracy, ethnic conflicts, gender ethics, family relations, religious and cultural changes, which are also the hot issues in American literary criticism today throughout the world<sup>[3]</sup>.

Wang Jianping's *Thomas Pynchon: A Critical Study* (2015) explores the form of formal experiments, political aesthetics and historical consciousness in Pynchon's fiction. Through the important historical periods and events in the United States, Wang analyzes its dominant cultural logic and value orientation, finally reveals the essence of the late capitalist society. Compared with Sun and Liu, Wang Jianping's study focuses on the social, economic, legal and cultural structure of late capitalism<sup>[4]</sup>.

The studies focus on Pynchon's fiction among Chinese scholars in the past five years are seen in the following academic articles: "A Dialogue between Margin and Center: The Colonial Discourse in Thomas Pynchon's Fiction" by Liu Fengshan and Guo Jide in 2014<sup>[5]</sup>, "Behind the Metaphor - Decoding the Political Discourse of McCarthyism in *The Crying of Lot 49*" by Duan Guohua and Liu Fengshan in 2014<sup>[6]</sup>, and Hou Guijie's two articles on Thomas Pynchon's fiction, "A Study on Intertextuality of Narrative Discourse in Pynchon's Three Early Novels"<sup>[7]</sup> and "A Study on Defamiliarization of Narrative Techniques in Pynchon's Early Fictions"<sup>[8]</sup>, Li Rongrui's two articles, "Spatializing Time: The Mass Media's Politics of Memory in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*"<sup>[9]</sup> and "Cognitive Mapping of the City Space: The Rewrite of the Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction of Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*"<sup>[10]</sup> It is not difficult to find out that Chinese scholars mainly focus on the writing techniques, and there is only one reference to the political writing in historical narrative in recent years.

This study is based on dialogues between authoritative discourse and marginal discourse in Thomas Pynchon's fiction in the postmodern context. The politicized writing of postmodern science and technology, and the politicized writing of sex and gender are uniquely interpreted in a realistic way, with the aim to present the diverse themes of Pynchon's fiction and reveal the rich world hidden within them.

## Historical Narrative

Regarding the topic of historical narrative in Pynchon's fiction, Wang Jianping pointed out in his article that "*The Crying of Lot 49* cuts into the fissure of historical discourse, directs attention to the nature of historical writing, and questions the validity of production mode which establishes the grand narration"<sup>[11]</sup>. *A Study of Thomas Pynchon's Fiction in a Postmodern Context* provides another perspective of interpretation, that Pynchon's fiction does not intend to destroy traditional authoritative narratives but rather to ask the reader to join in the construction of the reality, to question the various authoritative discourses while constructing each one's own reality<sup>[12]</sup>. The author believes that any Pynchon's fiction reveals profound and absolutely true things in real life by his postmodern presentation, thus pulling Pynchon's and even American postmodernist literary studies from purely formal aesthetic speculation back to the themes of social reality, such as the postal system Tristero hidden in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the Thanatoids who are dead but refuse to be dead in *Vineyard*, the wandering Hereros led by Enzian in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the Firelily episode included in Mondaugen's fantastic story in *V. etc.*. Through the grand historical narratives of the Western world, Pynchon helps the readers discover historical incidents that have long been marginalized by official narratives, expressing his realist care for the historical "others".

In *A Study of Thomas Pynchon's Fiction in a Postmodern Context*, the author points out the great influence of philosophical trend of deconstruction on Pynchon's fiction. That is, Pynchon's fiction is ambiguous and lack a center of the absolute meaning. However, this does not mean that his novels were stripped of meaning centers. What Pynchon did was to turn one center into multiple centers. Pynchon consciously weakens the boundary between the two opposing sides, and eliminated the absolute opposition between the center and the margin, as well as in its literary themes. This provides a good perspective for Chinese scholars to further study Pynchon's fiction, to avoid the theoretical constraints of "deconstructing" the reality of literary works under the label of postmodernism. The meaning of "meaningless" under the text taps into the writing of social realities by postmodernist literature.

Some Chinese scholars studied Pynchon's fiction with respect to contemporary political issues in the United States. Wang Jianping's "*Vineyard: The Media Politics and Power Pedigree of Postmodern Society*" explores into Reagan politics in the 1980s and the political chaos in the 1960s. He analyzed the Thanatoids in the novel to explain the new media's super rationality. The erosion of civil liberties under the super rational power system is touched upon in his analysis<sup>[13]</sup>. Liu Fengshan made a more specific and detailed illustration on this topic in *A Study of Thomas Pynchon's Fiction in a Postmodern Context*. The successes and failures of the New Left movement, the tricks government took to manipulate films, music and drugs which were advertised as freedom and alternatives by youth to constrain the younger generation in anti-cultural movement, and the rampant McCarthyism are interpreted from new perspectives.

### **Political Writing of Postmodern Technology**

Compared to the studies on such topics as language style and narrative skills, the studies on the scientific and technological topics of Pynchon's fiction are not so common in China at present. Sun Wanjun's "On The Enchantment in Pynchon's Postmodern Works" explores in the topic of science and technology by focusing on the changes in the relationship between man and nature, and between man and man<sup>[14]</sup>. In the article "Technical Ethics of *Gravity's Rainbow*", Wang Jianping elaborates on Pynchon's ethics of science and technology in this novel: on the one hand, Pynchon affirmed the value of the Enlightenment and the progress brought by the development of science and technology; on the other hand, we also saw the consequences of the expansion of technology in Western society<sup>[15]</sup>. Regarding the function of mass media in *Vineyard*, Li Rongrui argues that Pynchon views the mass media as a way to reflect on the decline of liberal ideals and the rise of right-wing conservatism in postmodern America after the 1960s<sup>[16]</sup>.

Liu Fengshan points out that the development of science and technology is like the nature of money. There is no virtue or evil itself, it depends on its user. This is basically consistent with the conclusions of Wang Jianping, Sun Wanjun and others. However, Liu Fengshan holds that as the development of science and technology has brought more and more freedom to human beings, and

that human beings have become more materialized, and more dependent on science and technology. Humanity itself becomes an extension of technological products. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Metzger couldn't identify the world of the movie he starred in and the real world. In *Vineyard*, Frenesi relies on the data stored in the computer system to perceive her existence, while Franz thinks that film is a tool for scientists to study the trajectory of rockets. In *Gravity's Rainbow* Gerard thinks that film and media bear the function of determining the existence of people. Liu argues that Pynchon politicizes the development of technology to help the readers realize the development nature of science and technology from the perspective of political institutions.

We argues that Pynchon does not advocate the irrational nature of scientific and technological development, but rather questions the irrational practice of using scientific rationality to meet the interests of authoritative institutions with sacrificing human interests. This also drives the readers to question the purpose of exploring nature, manipulating nature and taking advantage of nature. Human has been alienated by contemporary science and technology, and the post-human era is coming. This is another new perspective by which to study the scientific rationality of Pynchon's fiction.

### **Political Writing of Sex and Gender**

The subject of sex and sexuality is common in contemporary American literature, especially in Pynchon's fiction. Chinese scholars often neglected this topic, and they didn't realize the political and cultural implications behind the sex and gender narratives in Pynchon's fiction. Liu Fengshan discusses the topic of sex and sexuality in *A World Behind Fantasy: A Study of Thomas Pynchon's Fiction*<sup>[17]</sup>, which undoubtedly has a theoretical value for Chinese Pynchon studies and the contemporary American literature study in China. Liu believes that sex and sexuality in Pynchon's writing has become a tool for political oppression by authoritative institutions, but in turn, sex has become a tool for "others" to resist political oppression. Abnormal sexual behavior, which is a taboo among Chinese scholars in a way, proves to be one of the revolutionary features of Pynchon's fiction and has been used as a way to resist oppression.

In Pynchon's fiction, there is not only detailed portray of the vigorous sexual liberation movement in contemporary America, but also the revelation of women's desire for power. We believe that Pynchon's interpretation of the opposition between normal sexual behavior and abnormal sexual behavior reveals power relationship. Sex exists as a tool of oppression in Pynchon's novels, and sex, in turn, exists as a means of political resistance. Seemingly contradictory, but it is a way of resisting oppression and expressing self freedom against the authoritative narrative discourse. Combined with colonial politics in the Western world, "Pynchon's concatenated depiction of human sexuality and European colonial history reveals the oppressive nature of European colonial behavior from another angle, and just like the oppressive mechanism implied in human sexual behavior, it features both political repression and spirit repression"<sup>[18]</sup>.

Hidden behind the male narrative of Pynchon's fiction is the issue of contemporary female identity construction which deserves the attention of Chinese scholars. The scholars worldwide who do literature studies on women's self-construction usually choose the works of female writers as the study object. However, in Pynchon's novel, which is very masculine, are countless narratives on contemporary women's identity construction. Women figures in Pynchon's fiction, such as Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Frenesi in *Vineyard*, etc., are given specific political significance. This provides Chinese scholars another view to look at Pynchon's fiction.

In Pynchon's writing, women do not possess the so-called virtues traditionally imposed on them by the traditional hierarchic male culture, but rather the essential characteristics of women as human beings. The disadvantage of western feminists is their belief that women's liberation lies in women's ability to gain the discourse power, that women should take advantage of overriding men to express their voices by the subversion of authoritative narrative mode. They want to find ways to abandon the identity framework set for women by patriarchal rationality, and then establish another opposite identity structure. However, they should know that any kind of non-essential characteristics identity imposed on women will turn women into the controlled objects of particular

authority which results in the fact that women can never achieve the freedom they seek.

In the context of women's fighting for their rights, the subversion of male traditional images is well reflected in Pynchon's novels. While women are becoming more and more masculine, American men began to doubt their identities. The worship of rockets in Pynchon's fiction is actually a metaphor for the post-war American male intention of reconstructing their male authority. Women in Pynchon's fiction is his reflection on the traditional narrative discourse of the binary opposition between male and female favored by patriarchal authority. The fictional meta-antagonistic traditional narrative discourse in Pynchon's fiction is exactly what the feminists have been doing. The male characters in Pynchon's works are portrayed as naive, immature, and irresponsible, but it is these male characters who play the dual role of parents in families without mothers. This is constructive for Pynchon's revolutionary meditation on modern gender relations. This is also what Chinese scholars of Pynchon fiction should explore into.

## **Conclusion**

Postmodernist literary critics usually hold that postmodernist literature has focused on deconstructing and subverting the existing texts and various grand narratives without paying attention to the real issues of the contemporary society. Affected by this, contemporary American literature studies generally ignore the writing of social realities in contemporary American literature. However, Pynchon is not lost in the swamp of pure speculation. In his fiction, he clearly expresses his realistic attitude towards history, war, colonization, the development of postmodern science and technology, American democracy, and ethnic conflicts in the United States and the entire Western world while taking advantage of the postmodernist literal forms. Chinese scholars have apparently noticed the postmodernist historical writing in Pynchon's fiction, the reconstruction of American democratic myths, the postmodern reflection of contemporary technology, the politicization of sex and sexuality, and the politics of postmodern genders, but they need more detailed studies.

## **Acknowledgments**

This study was a part of a provincial research project "Contemporary American Dystopian Fiction Research" (J15WD35) for Shandong Universities' Humanities and Social Sciences, and a part of the Key Research Project of Liaocheng University "American Dystopian Fiction Research" (321021605).

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