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Trauma Writing and Ethical Resonance in Disaster Literature from the Life Community Perspective: A Case Study of *The Emissary* and *Distant Signals*

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Abstract

Taking *The Emissary*, a landmark work of Japanese post-3.11 compound disaster literature, and *Distant Signals*, a representative Chinese novel themed on the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, as comparative cases, this paper adopts the parallel research paradigm of comparative literature, integrating close textual analysis with cross-cultural interpretation to examine their trauma representation mechanisms and ethical connotations. While the two texts present distinctly divergent narrative modes shaped by their respective historical and cultural contexts—one constructs trauma through restrained ellipsis rooted in the Japanese mono no aware aesthetic tradition, the other portrays disaster reality through straightforward realist depiction—they ultimately converge on a shared ethical framework of "reverence for life, mutual aid and coexistence, and trauma transcendence". This paper further explores feasible approaches to advancing cross-cultural literary dialogue and ethical empathy in East Asian disaster literature, and offers solid empirical support for cross-regional and cross-disaster comparative literary studies.

Keywords

Trauma writing; literary ethics; East Asian literary dialogue; comparative literature; area and country studies

1. Introduction

From the perspective of a life community, post-disaster literary works across East Asia serve as critical carriers for collective emotional memory and spiritual reflection. The deep-rooted cultural commonalities in the region lay a solid foundation for cross-regional literary exchange and ethical consensus. As two canonical texts, Japan's *The Emissary* and China's *Distant Signals* present distinctive narrative perspectives and profound ethical implications, which deserve systematic comparative exploration.

Set in post-3.11 compound disaster Japan, *The Emissary* depicts a dystopian social landscape with a highly closed social operation. Under the national isolation policy implemented by the government, all international flights are suspended, cutting Japan off from the rest of the world completely, so that people can no longer physically confirm the proposition that "the earth is round". The harm of isolationism and totalitarianism finally converges and manifests in the dimension of language: loanwords in Japanese are prohibited (yet the novel deliberately breaks this ban by using a large number of foreign loanwords), English learning has long been forbidden, singing foreign songs in public

for more than 40 seconds is deemed a criminal offense, and no foreign novels are translated and published in Japan anymore (Qin, 2021). Radiation has distorted the laws of life: the elderly suffer from longevity and remain robust yet are not merely condemned to endless labour. Instead, they are forced to care for the dying young generation, reversing the natural generational order, while the young are physically fragile and die at an early age. Yoko Tawada's homophonic pun on kentōshi (献灯使, "emissary of offering lanterns") and kentōshi (遣唐使, "imperial envoys to the Tang Dynasty") endows the overseas mission with historical weight as a civilizational appeal for help, turning the emissaries into a symbol of hope and redemption.

Distant Signals unfolds against the backdrop of the Wenchuan earthquake. Principal Tan Hengjie and his students are buried under the collapsed teaching building. Trapped underground, he encourages the children to stay calm and teaches them to send distress signals through tapping on rubble and shouting. Outside the ruins, his daughter Tan Xiaoqi races against time to search for survivors. The faint but persistent "distant signals" finally guide the rescue team to locate the trapped students. In both texts, ordinary people—elders secretly sending emissaries abroad, a principal shielding students with his body, rescuers and strangers offering help spontaneously—eulogize human courage, resilience, and warmth in the face of catastrophe.

Methodologically, it attempts interdisciplinary integration; in terms of problem awareness, it highlights the interaction between specific texts and broader cultural structures. This study compares the two novels on three axes—narrative strategy, emotional delivery, and ethical core. It draws upon area studies to contextualise these differences within Japanese and Chinese cultural traditions, anchoring its analysis in concrete textual work. Through in-depth analysis from a small entry point, this paper provides an empirical case for cross-regional and cross-disaster comparative literary research. It interprets the trauma writing and ethical resonance in the two novels, excavates their shared emotional structure and ethical appeals, and expands the interpretive space of disaster-literature research through micro-level textual analysis.

2. Definition of Core Concepts and Interdisciplinary Theoretical Support

Both works are rooted in specific disaster contexts. Disaster literature, in essence, uses linguistic art to focus on the life events, existential conditions, and living state of human beings who experience and perceive the destruction of human civilization and individual lives by natural forces at accidental times and places. It needs to reproduce the sudden fury of natural disasters, the scenes of landslides and ground cracks, and the desolate state of ruins; it also conveys the confused mentality, sorrowful emotions, and rational spirit of learning lessons from pain when human beings face the rampage of nature. In short, disaster literature is not only a thematic category and creative phenomenon, but also a conceptual expression and aesthetic refinement derived from academic induction and theoretical reflection (Fan, 2014). This definition indicates that disaster literature inherently has universal value beyond individuals and regions. Whether people who suffer from disasters, authors who narrate the events, or readers who engage with the texts, everyone is an organic part of a community with a shared future for mankind, and every choice people make is closely linked to the fate of all human beings (Nie, 2022). Furthermore, the East Asian cultural sphere refers to an organic cultural system composed of multiple cultural groups (national cultures, regional cultures) that share identical or similar core cultural characteristics and maintain functional interconnections (Guo, 2014). On this basis, this paper places the two novels in the context of the East Asian cultural sphere and the macro vision of a community with a shared future for mankind. It traces the spiritual echoes between the texts by virtue of cultural commonalities, and interprets the differences in their narratives with the theory of cultural particularity.

3. A Comparative Study of Trauma Writing in *The Emissary* and *Distant Signals*

Rooted in the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, respectively, the two works carry unique epochal memories and civilizational reflections. Close textual reading shows that there is deep ethical consensus at the core of their trauma writing. Meanwhile, different cultural contexts shape disparities in their narrative strategies and redemption paths, which provides valuable samples for cross-regional comparative literary research.

3.1 Differences in Narrative Strategies: Restrained Ellipsis vs Direct Presentation

In terms of expressive form, *The Emissary* constructs its trauma narrative on the basis of mono no aware aesthetics. It portrays the collapse of spiritual home through speechless silence and fragmented memories. The text adopts

"intransitive writing", avoiding direct depiction of disaster scenes and conveying traumatic suffering through restraint and ellipsis. This writing technique fits trauma narration well: trauma narration itself has an intermediate nature, hovering between transitivity and intransitivity, activity and passivity.

If trauma narrative is regarded as an imitation or testimony of traumatic experience, the narrator indeed reenacts or re-experiences the trauma through the writing process and recalls the scene of the traumatic event. The object of his narration is a past history, but he relives that history in the present, or that history has re-entered his memory. He does not recall by entirely autonomous choice; rather, traumatic historical events forcibly intrude upon his memory (Lin, 2008). Accordingly, instead of directly depicting death to show radiation damage, the novel presents it through subtle details such as centenarians who linger in life but suffer from persistent insomnia. This narrative approach allows the traumatic undertone to permeate the text with quiet sorrow rather than exaggerated emotional outbursts.

In contrast, *Distant Signals* adopts a realistic writing style to visualize disaster trauma in a straightforward manner: collapsed buildings, thin and oppressive air under the ruins, and sharp physical pain, presenting the brutal physical destruction caused by the earthquake with unvarnished authenticity. The two distinct narrative modes—the implicit storytelling shaped by mono no aware and the explicit realistic depiction—interpret catastrophic trauma through subtle aesthetic sentiment and straightforward factual power, respectively.

3.2 Differences in Emotional Delivery: Internalized Sorrow vs Outward Catharsis

In terms of emotional expression, *The Emissary* follows the core tenet of mono no aware, which emphasizes restrained sorrow and gentle lamentation without blatant grievance. It internalizes traumatic feelings in quietness rather than releasing them outwardly. By comparison, *Distant Signals* adheres to the realist writing ethos of facing suffering squarely and reproducing real disaster scenarios. It lays bare characters' grief, anxiety, and inner struggles through lifelike scenes and genuine emotional responses. Fundamentally, this contrast embodies the essential divergence between implicit trauma narrative rooted in Japanese mono no aware aesthetics and explicit trauma narrative grounded in Chinese realism.

In terms of disaster scene construction, the divergence similarly polarizes into "intransitive" and "transitive" approaches: *The Emissary* shifts the narrative focus from the moment of disaster to the everyday existence after it, making disaster an invisible backdrop and trauma a slow spiritual erosion; *Distant Signals* anchors itself in the concrete scene, unfolding violence and brutality without reservation so that the disaster itself is the focal point of the narrative. In the pathway of transmitting pain, *The Emissary* focuses on spiritual disintegration—aphasia, amnesia, loneliness—conveyed metaphorically through natural imagery and quotidian details, achieving the aesthetic realm of "sorrow without injury". *Distant Signals* roots pain in physical devastation and real-life separations, rendered directly so that readers confront the weight of trauma without deciphering metaphors.

3.3 Shared Ethical Core: Reverence for Life as the Starting Point

Despite these differences, both novels take the body as the primary site for writing trauma. In *The Emissary*, trauma is internalized as chronic physiological decay: protagonist Mumei's fragile bones and inability to chew reveal an abnormal vulnerability. The ritualistic care of great-grandfather Yoshirō, who meticulously chops food for Mumei, becomes an ethical practice of countering life's slow extinction through quotidian care.

In *Distant Signals*, the body endures instantaneous, extreme trials, and the principal's act of protecting two students regardless of his own safety becomes the most elemental ethical bedrock. Both works proceed from the body to affirm the same ethical premise: reverence for and protection of life itself is the unavoidable point of departure for any disaster narrative, which enables the textual dialogue between the two works.

The trauma writing in *The Emissary* is deeply rooted in the mono no aware tradition. Mono no aware is a core concept in traditional Japanese aesthetics, referring to the delicate, wistful, yet tender emotion that arises when one confronts the vicissitudes of nature and human affairs. As the foremost of Japan's three major traditional aesthetic concepts, mono no aware has long occupied an exceedingly important position in Japanese literary, film, and television creation. This national aesthetic sensibility has consciously influenced the creative thinking and aesthetic tastes of generations of Japanese artists and serves as a core concept in the aesthetic formation of Japanese national culture (Zhang, 2023). It perceives the beauty of the moment and a faint melancholy amid impermanence, extending empathy and compassion to all things.

Motoori Norinaga's fundamental logic in proposing mono no aware is an aesthetic logic. This logic does not directly conflict with the logic of ethics. Hence, the "aware" felt by individual characters described in monogatari is,

in this sense, generalized or universalized and becomes mono no aware (Wang, 2024). This life-ethics, internalizing suffering and transforming it into aesthetic experience, paves the spiritual foundation of Japanese disaster writing.

When placed in comparison, the two works are not essential oppositions but two cultural answers to the same proposition: *Distant Signals* foregrounds realist life-solicitude and mutual care, while *The Emissary* foregrounds mono no aware sensibility, quiet guardianship, and melancholy.

This divergence reflects distinct geographical environments, historical sediments, and cultural genes. Japan's island environment, filled with impermanence, nurtured a tradition of restraint and inward-looking expression from The Tale of Genji to Kawabata Yasunari, making *The Emissary*'s choice of silence and ellipsis a natural continuation of aestheticized suffering. China's vast territory, repeatedly afflicted by disasters, forged a realist spiritual lineage of confronting reality, using literature to convey the Dao, and consolidating strength through remembrance, as seen from The Book of Songs and Records of the Grand Historian to contemporary disaster writing.

The ultimate aim of country and area studies is to understand the civilizational differences, cultural diversity, and their roots across different regions. Both culture and civilization are the crystallizations of human wisdom and creativity within specific productive processes. Comparatively speaking, civilization is broader in extension than culture: culture emphasizes the spiritual dimension of values, whereas civilization is a comprehensive system encompassing values, behaviors, and institutions (Zhao, 2023).

Unlike *The Emissary*'s reserved nature, *Distant Signals* presents an ethic of survival and mutual aid that erupts spontaneously in collective crisis, translating abstract "dignity of life" into concrete acts of "mutual survival protection". This ethic, rooted in the traditional Chinese notion that "human life is of paramount importance", transforms into a powerful code of conduct within contemporary collectivist narratives.

Ethics and morality have always been, and must always be, present. For as postmodernism deconstructs monolithic authority and emphasizes pluralism, the multiplicity of value choices has led to a certain degree of ethical disorder and confusion. This constitutes a crisis of postmodern ethics, but simultaneously, it represents a rare opportunity for it (Su & Dong, 2024). Within this context, *The Emissary* refracts postmodern reflections on technological modernity and civilizational unity through fragmented and allegorical brushstrokes, while *Distant Signals* steadfastly upholds a realist value core to reconstruct the spiritual conviction of life's paramountcy and collective mutual aid.

In *The Emissary*, redemption relies on individual sacrifice and the warmth between people, embodying the Japanese idea of stoically facing impermanence. In *Distant Signals*, redemption depends on the concerted efforts of everyone, embodying the Chinese notion of "life ceaselessly renewing itself, generation after generation." Both texts, however, converge on the same core: revering life, caring for others, and hoping for the perpetuation of human civilization. They focus on the most vulnerable ordinary people, earnestly writing about protection, empathy, and dignity without sensationalizing suffering. Despite different temperaments—quiet compassion versus down-to-earth warmth—the ideas converge on treasuring life and acknowledging pain. The forms differ, but the essence is identical: relying on mutual assistance to break through the isolation imposed by disaster, using the warmth of human solidarity to counter the wounds of trauma—the most universally resonant emotional chord of humanity confronting disaster.

4. Research Insights and Practical Dimensions

Although Chinese and Japanese post-disaster literatures are rooted in distinct historical contexts and cultural substrata, they share remarkably strong commonalities in their spiritual core and ethical reflections. Both *The Emissary* and *Distant Signals* foreground reverence for life, mutual support, and self-redemption through trauma—values that are common spiritual pursuits of all humanity and build a crucial bridge for cross-cultural exchange across East Asian literature.

Truly outstanding disaster literature balances unique national cultural attributes and universal human experiences. It retains one-of-a-kind local disaster memories through culturally embedded narrative strategies, while exploring common human existential dilemmas and the intrinsic value of life. Its importance goes far beyond recording catastrophic events. More crucially, it enables international readers to empathize with disaster-affected communities, recognize the interconnectedness of human destinies, and develop a nuanced grasp of the human community with a shared future. Both works reflect on how humans can overcome psychological trauma and achieve spiritual reconstruction, offering valuable literary insights for post-disaster social recovery and public psychological rehabilitation.

Against the background of an increasingly globalized risk society, this study carries tangible practical value. The two texts' depictions of trauma healing and reverence for life resonate broadly with people who have endured disaster hardships and can deliver meaningful spiritual comfort. Their consistent ethical core helps alleviate cross-cultural

misunderstandings and facilitate unimpeded literary communication, which aligns closely with the core proposition of building a human community with a shared future.

For practical implementation, new media forms including short videos, audiobooks, and e-books can be utilized to popularize disaster literature and realize high-quality cross-cultural dissemination. Meanwhile, interdisciplinary writing and translation practices that integrate foreign language studies and literary research can maintain linguistic accuracy while fully unpacking the national trauma memories, regional cultural backgrounds and ethical implications embedded in the texts. It delivers positive practical implications for constructing regional cultural communities and advancing the vision of a human community with a shared future.

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