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Three Sets of Characteristics of Chinese Anti-pandemic Literature: Realism Versus Postmodernism; Instrumentality Versus Artistry; and Nationalism Versus Liberalism

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Abstract

Through analyzing and studying a large number of Chinese anti-pandemic literary works, this paper finds that Chinese anti-pandemic literature exhibits three sets of distinctly opposing characteristics in terms of its creation method, literary value, and ideology. In terms of creative methods, official publications are mostly realist works, embodying realistic depictions of life, profound analyses of human nature, and reflections of social problems. On the other hand, Internet works have postmodernist features such as fragmentation and popularization. In terms of literary value, anti-pandemic literature demonstrates a powerful instrumentality, soothing people's spirits through the power of literature, conveying to readers the knowledge and experience of fighting pandemics, and promoting the spirit of human solidarity, but it has artistic inadequacies such as the modulation and snackification of literary creation, and the roughness of language. In terms of ideology, anti-pandemic literature calls on people to pay attention to the rights of vulnerable groups in society, reflect on the government's actions during the pandemic, and explore the relationship between people and the government. But more than that, it reflects the rivalry between China and the United States in terms of ideology and anti-pandemic narrative. The struggle between nationalism and liberalism is at its core. Overall, the emergence of Chinese anti-pandemic literature not only fills the gap in pandemic-related literature but also provides people with a perspective to see the deeper reality behind the pandemic through the manifestation of creation method, literary value, and ideology.

1. Introduction

In December 2019, an outbreak of novel coronavirus pneumonia occurred in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. The outbreak led to a series of crises in China, such as a shortage of medical resources and a surge in deaths, but the Chinese government took strong preventive and control measures. In this special period of history, people in the cultural field acted actively in the hope of doing their part to fight the pandemic. Many writers, poets, critics, journalists, bloggers and other people in the field of cultural studies actively participated in the fight against the pandemic in their own ways, and some writers and literary organizations initiated some literary activities and creative projects. In addition to this, some health care workers and volunteers created literature from their own perspectives, and Chinese netizens also created non-serious and flexible literature in a playful and flirtatious way. From 2019 to 2023, when the Chinese government lifted the pandemic control, various types of literature had also emerged, such as poetry, novels, essays, documentaries, and other types of works. Some of these works depict the details of people's lives, some record the hardships and touching moments of fighting the pandemic, and some explore the impact and revelation of the pandemic on human nature. At the same time, some works have caused great controversy in China because of their political orientation. All of these provide a more detailed and comprehensive background and context for the creation of China's new pandemic literature.

The COVID-19 pandemic was long and widespread, involving almost everyone in China, and leading to the production of a much larger and more diverse body of literature. Not only did it provide moral support in the fight against the pandemic, but it also had a profound impact on social and literary creation in the post-epidemic era. But it is also apparent that after the epidemic, the anti- pandemic literature was discontinued or even disappeared. So, what motivates the emergence of such literary works in China during a major disaster? Furthermore, what exactly is their significance? What role do they play? In what ways is their literary value reflected? What are the reasons for their disappearance or the interruption of their creation after a disaster? Will they be able to bridge the social gap and bring reflection and inspiration to humanity before the next disaster comes? These questions deserve to be explored.

At the present time, relatively few people have examined Chinese anti-pandemic literature independently as a distinct genre or used it as a unique perspective in literary studies. Therefore, it is important to determine whether its scope and definition is of theoretical or literary historical importance.

G. M. Zhang (2020) argues that the term “pandemic literature” did not receive sufficient attention before the outbreak of the COVID -19 and was often generalized and blended into the categories of suffering narration, disaster literature, and catastrophe literature, and was rarely examined on its own as a distinct genre or using it as a unique perspective in broader literary studies” (p. 27). In addition, he argues that pandemic literature has yet to be rigorously defined and needs to be elevated to an important concept from both the point of view of literary history and literary theory. Wang (2020) puts forward the concept of “anti-pandemic literature and art”, in which he considered all the artwork of Chinese artists created to combat the pandemic to be anti-pandemic literature and art. He also believed that there are stages in the development of anti-pandemic literature and art, and that China’s anti-pandemic literature and art are still in the first stage, where it is bound to obey the overall needs of the society and embody the will of the country and the people. The anti-pandemic literature and art actually assumed “the responsibility of national mobilization” (p.4). Both Zhang’s (2020) and Wang’s (2020) discussions of pandemic literature or anti-epidemic literature and art took place in the early stages of China's COVID -19 pandemic, during which important works such as the Wuhan Diary were published, but in limited quantities, and thus the texts explored in Zhang (2020) and Wang (2020) are mostly exemplified by pre-COVID-19 pandemic works, as well as by Western literary works.

Xie (2021) believes that literary works with the pandemic as the background, with their focus on the fight against the pandemic and suffering, and emphasis on expressing the emotional will of human beings embodied in anti-pandemic activities are anti-pandemic literature. Although Xie (2021) exemplifies several dramas reflecting the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in his paper, the examples are still dominated by works before the COVID-19 pandemic, and in addition to a large number of ancient literary works, he also exemplifies literary works from the SARS period in China as well as a large number of Western literary works, but he does not collect and analyze a large number of works from the COVID-19 pandemic period. Wang (2021) organizes diary-type works in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and names them anti-epidemic diaries to study the phenomenon of diary writing during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of communication studies. The article takes *Dr. Zha’s Diary of Fighting COVID-19* (2020) and *Words of the Pandemic Fighters* (2020), published in China, as cases, and does not deal with *Wuhan Diary* (2020) and *Diary of the Wuhan Lockdown (2020)*, which were published on the Internet in China and outside China. Cheng (2021) argues that anti-pandemic literature consists of the documentary diaries, poems, and the large quantities

of prose that accompanied the development of the pandemic. Taking the short story "Fruit Bats" (2020) as an example, he discusses the relationship between human beings and nature, ecology and human development, etc. Zhou (2021) argues that concepts such as "epidemic literature," "anti-pandemic literature," and "COVID -19 writing" emerged during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 211), but these works all fall under the category of disaster writing. He also believes that the most important thing is not to record and witness the disaster, but to refine new values and construct new cognitive experiences of the disaster while reflecting on the disaster, as well as "to look at the social, spiritual and hidden trauma in the post-pandemic period" (p. 216).

Outside of China, a small number of scholars have paid attention to Chinese anti-pandemic literature and offered their own perspectives. Adlakha (2020) places the incident of Chinese writer Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* (2020) into the historical context of the New Culture Movement or the birth of 'enlightenment' in early 20th century China, seeing it as a paradigm shift in the Communist Party of China (CPC) seeking political legitimacy through 'social stability' during the reform era. From a Western perspective, he defines Fang Fang as a patriot and the Chinese people's criticism of Fang Fang as a "cyber–Cultural Revolution" (p. 28). However, he did not perform an in-depth analysis of the reflection of the Chinese, but instead chose to reflect on them with a belittling and critical attitude. Tantawy (2021) analyzes 3 characteristics of reportage literature in Chinese anti- pandemic literature: literary, journalistic, and political, taking *2020 China's Battle against the Coronavirus: A Daily Log (2020)* as an example. However, most of the paper discusses the history and development of reportage literature in China and summarizes the text after quoting a large part of it and fails to pinpoint the unique features of reportage literature during the pandemic.

The researchers reckon that among the many definitions of literature during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, anti-epidemic literature is the more appropriate one. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were also many plague-themed novels in China, such as Chi Li's novella *The Chaos of Cholera* (1997), Liu Jianwei's *SARS Crisis* (2003). In literary works devoted to plague disasters, the definition of anti-pandemic literature can be further narrowed. The Chinese anti-pandemic literature studied refers to the literary works created and published during the outbreak of COVID-19 in China with the theme of fighting the pandemic, including various literary forms such as novels, essays, poems, dramas, and documentary writing. Set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, these works reflect the changes in people's lives, work, studies, and social relationships in the midst of the pandemic. At the same time, these works

also show people's thoughts, reflections and appeals on the pandemic, including the inquiry into the causes of the pandemic, the evaluation of the pandemic prevention measures, the praise and concern for the medical staff, the sympathy and assistance for the affected people, and so on. With their authenticity, depth, breadth and reflection of contemporary life, these works reflect the vitality and creativity of Chinese society and people in the face of the pandemic in the new era.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all aspects of the world is unprecedented, and the world has no choice but to enter the post-pandemic era. In literature, we need to reflect and understand more seriously the occurrence and development of anti-pandemic literature and whether it provides guidelines that allow us to learn lessons. We believe it is necessary to study Chinese anti-pandemic literature as a whole by collecting a large number of anti-pandemic literary works as well as reading the limited research literature on anti-pandemic literature, and to discover its characteristics in terms of creative approach, literary value, and ideology by analyzing its form and content as well as its social impact, and ultimately to provide suggestions and thoughts for its artistic progress and breakthrough.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data Collection

This study focuses on the characteristics of literature featuring anti-pandemic themes that appeared in China during the period 2019-2023. The specific time period is from December 1, 2019, when the first case was reported, to January 8, 2023, when China classified the COVID-19 as a class B infectious disease, which is the complete duration of the COVID-19 pandemic in China.

China has extremely strict control over publications, which is reflected in the approval of book numbers. The general process is that domestic publishers declare their selections to the General Administration of Press and Publication, and the book number is approved to the publisher only after the author's book manuscript is vetted at all levels. (Gao, 2017) Thus in this it is convenient for us to collect data. With pandemic as the keyword, by searching the publisher's website and Baidu, the biggest Chinese internet search engine, we obtained a large amount of publishing information.

Table 1

Anti-pandemic Literature 2020-2023

Categories	Work	Quantities
Diary	武汉日记 (Wuhan diary); 查医生援鄂日记 (Dr. Zha's Diary of fighting COVID-19); 武汉封城日记 (Wuhan lockdown); 坚定: 一个外国人的武汉日记 (Confidence comes from effectiveness: A foreigner's Wuhan diary); 英雄城记 (City of heroes); 天使日记 (The angel's diaries); 战疫日记 (Diary of fighting the pandemic); 武汉女孩阿念日记 (Diary of Ah Nian, a girl from Wuhan); 武汉战疫日记 (The battle for Wuhan: Diaries of journalists on the COVID-19 frontline); 武汉抗疫日记 (The battle for Wuhan); 凯哥日记 (Kai's diary); 抗疫者说 (Words of the pandemic fighters)	11
Documentary Literature	金银潭抗疫纪事 (Chronicle of the fight against pandemic at Jinyintan Hospital); 2020 中国战疫日志 (2020 China's battle against the coronavirus: A daily log); 众志成城防疫抗疫 (Unity is strength: Preventing and combating the pandemic); 呼吸在一米之外 (Breathe a meter away); 崇高使命: 白衣战士武汉、湖北防疫抗疫纪实 (Noble mission: Chronicle of white-coated warriors in Wuhan and Hubei preventing and fighting the pandemic); 方舱记忆 (Fangcang: Makeshift hospital); 武汉，我们来了 (Wuhan, here we come); 武汉封城: 坚守与逆行 (Wuhan Lockdown: Heroes who stay the course and in harm's way)；疫中人(People in the pandemic); Wuhan: Deadly quiet city	10
Poetry	战疫之歌 (Odes to the war against COVID-19); 世界抗疫诗精选 (World pandemic poetry); 春天不会迟到 (Spring won't be late)	3
Fiction	果蝠 (Fruit bat); 逆行天使 (The Retrograde Angel)	2
Children's Literature	新型冠状病毒走啦 (Get out, COVID-19); 等爸爸回家 (Waiting for daddy to come home)	2
Internet Literature	抗疫网络文学选集 (Internet anti-pandemic literature collection)	1

Since the Internet anti-pandemic literature works are not official publications and they are scattered across Sina Weibo or reports on the Paper News and Sohu News and so on, the authors collected and organized them into an anthology of Internet anti-pandemic literature.

2.2 Method and research steps

This paper is a qualitative study, combining theories of literature, sociology and political science to observe, categorize and analyze anti-pandemic literature as a whole, mainly through the comparative method to discover their similarities and differences.

Literary research begins with observing the external characteristics, that is, the way literary works are created, and the analysis reveals that a large number of anti-pandemic literary works in China can be divided into two different forms, realism and postmodernism. Chinese literature has a tradition of realism since ancient times. Modern Chinese literature is strongly identified with western realism, and realist literature is the mainstream form of Chinese literature, so a large amount of anti-pandemic literature appears in the form of realism, and the study analyzes five realist features of anti-epidemic literature. For the postmodernist anti-pandemic literature, mainly Internet anti-pandemic literature, the authors believe that it is very much in line with Jameson's (1991, 2005) point of view. First of all, Fredric R. Jameson is an important scholar who cannot be circumvented to study Western postmodernist art, and his writings and theories provide an overview of the development of postmodernist culture around the world. He was also the first scholar to bring postmodern literary theories to China, which had a great impact on Chinese literary theories. Secondly, Jameson (1991) believes that in postmodern culture, due to the influence of popularization, the artist's expression is in crisis, the depth of language disappears, and always seeks satisfaction in copying, which is reflected in the way of literary creation characterized mainly by pastiche. Chinese Internet anti-pandemic literature fully embodies the above characteristics.

The next step is to discover its internal characteristics, that is, its literary value. The authors adopt the views of Mao Zedong, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping, three supreme leaders of the Chinese Communist Party in different periods, on Chinese literature and art to prove and analyze the instrumentality of Chinese anti-pandemic literature. At the same time, the authors find that the emphasis on instrumentality in anti-pandemic literature in special periods has led to various defects in its artistic value.

Finally, its social impact is discussed. mainly through a comparative analysis of the collection of Chinese and Western news reports on Chinese anti-epidemic literature and the controversies they have caused. This part of the study is dominated by the Fangfang's *Wuhan Diary* (2020) incident and Guo Jing's *Wuhan Lockdown* (2020), which were supported by the West. These works criticized Chinese collectivism and yearned

for American-style freedom. The study employs the views of Samir Amin, an Egyptian scholar and one of the leading figures of neo-Marxism, whose critique of American liberalism and identification with the nationalism of Third World countries is consistent with the situation of ideological conflict between China and the United States during the pandemic.

3. Creation method: realism versus postmodernism

Among the officially published works of Chinese anti-pandemic literature, most of them are realistic works.

First of all, this is closely related to the development of Chinese literature. The concept of realism has been widely accepted in China since it was introduced from Europe around the May Fourth Movement and at the same time, it has been combined with the Chinese literary tradition of “Writings Are for Conveying Truth”, thus forming a nationalized, localized and utilitarian theory of realism, and becoming an established norm and principle of literary creation, which enjoys a high and even exclusive status in China. It is considered to be the most reasonable, valuable, and reflective of the laws of artistic creation (Jiang, 2010, pp. 2-3). This can completely explain why most Chinese authors use realism as their creative method such as diary or documentary writing when describing the fight against the pandemic.

In these works, the realistic features are mainly reflected in the following aspects.

First, it describes real social life. Anti-pandemic literature is usually based on the writer’s social background. For example, it describes the living conditions and emotional changes of people during the pandemic and shows the impact of the pandemic on various aspects of society, economy, politics, and culture. For example, in *Dr. Zha’s Diary of Fighting COVID-19* (2020), it is written that Shanghai Hospital supported Wuhan during the outbreak of the pandemic:

> “Our colleagues are all warriors, all of them can step forward when our motherland is in need, only to remain true to our original aspiration and mission as medical doctors” (Cha, 2020, p. 71).
>
> (我们的同事都是战士, 在祖国需要时, 都能挺身而出, 为的只是自己作为医者初心和使命。)

In the book, the author compares the pandemic to a military operation and the doctors to soldiers; in addition, a large number of military terms are used such as frontline, battle, expedition, and backing. This way of writing emphasizes the danger and tension of the epidemic.

Second, anti-pandemic literature reflects the social issues exposed during the outbreak, Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* (2020), for example, describes a great deal about social welfare, health care coverage, etc., presenting the pandemic's revelations and corresponding discussions on social reality. Another example, in *Words of the Pandemic Fighters* (2020):

> "Those kiosks and snack bars that have been advised to close during the day will still open secretly at night; the granny who collects garbage will reappear in any corner at any time; the homeless who are not eligible for shelter are lodging in underground garages and just won't leave ..... Aren't they afraid of getting sick or dying? No, they are afraid too, but what can they do? They have to live" (p. 184).
>
> (那些白天被劝导关门的小卖部、小吃店，到了晚上仍会偷偷开张；拣渣子的婆婆，不定什么时候又会出现在哪个角落；无家可归但不符合收容条件的流浪汉，赖在某高圈的地下车库就是不走.....他们就不怕得病，不怕死吗？不，他们也怕，但能有什么办法呢?他们要活下去啊。)

Third, it pursues realistic character images. One example is *Dr. Zha's Diary of Fighting COVID-19* (2020), which includes depictions of medical workers, patients, volunteers, etc. This work strives to make these character images more realistic, three-dimensional, and touching, and uses these images to showcase the diversity and complexity of society.

Fourth, it explores human nature. Anti-pandemic literature also demonstrates its commitment to realism in exploring human nature, portraying people's emotional experiences such as panic, fear, love, and sacrifice during the pandemic, reflecting human nature and coping methods when faced with difficulties and crises. For example, *Dr. Zha's Diary of Fighting COVID -19* (2020) describes Dr. Cha calling the deceased's husband:

> “Unfortunately, she was still gone at 7:30 a.m. When I called to inform her husband, the man cried on the phone ..... He asked if he could see his wife one last time and take her cell phone as a memento. I wasn’t sure if his request could be fulfilled at this particular time. I wanted to comfort him, but any words were feeble at this point, and I could hardly stop my tears before I went on, so I had to hang up the phone hastily” (Zha, 2020, p. 18).
>
> (不幸的是，他在清晨 7:30 还是走了，当我打电话通知她的爱人时，一个大男人在电话中哭了……他询问能否见病人最后一面，并且留下爱人的手机做个纪念。我不确定在这特殊时期他的要求能否满足。我很想安慰他，但这时候任何话都很无力，在说下去我的泪水也快止不住了，我只能匆匆挂断电话。)

In Chinese culture, men are not allowed to shed tears easily, but through Dr. Cha’s narration, we can experience the husband's deep love for his wife, and at the same time feel the doctor’s pain and despair.

Fifth, it explores a community with a shared future for mankind. By focusing on the global impact of the pandemic on humanity, anti-pandemic literature presents the concept and practice of a community and the concept of a shared future for mankind, emphasizing that countries should unite and cooperate to jointly respond to global challenges.

Moreover, there are also works that concern history and memory. presenting the status and role of humanity in history and providing historical experience and enlightenment for people in facing future crises.

In summary, the realistic features of COVID-19 literature are manifested through the real social background, character images, historical background, and expression techniques, showcasing the impact of the pandemic on society and presenting a realistic, diverse, and complex social world.

It is worth noting that, in contrast to formal publications, literary creation on the internet shows a markedly postmodern creative style as the following examples illustrate.

(1) One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that the community he lived in was shut down. (@K, A pastiche of Kafka's The Metamorphosis)
(Luo, 2022)

(一天早晨, 格里高尔·萨姆沙从不安的睡梦中醒来, 发现自己小区被封了。)

(2) One day, I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He said, please wear your mask. (@苏张张, A pastiche of Marguerite Duras's The Lover)
(Luo, 2022)

(我已经老了。有一天, 在一处公共场所的大厅里, 有一个男人向我走来, 他对我说: 请戴好口罩。)

Although a huge number of such works are controversial because of the shortness of the word count and the obvious traces of parody, they are still considered to be literary works. For one thing, literary creation does not limit the number of words, and secondly, since ancient Greece and up to the present day, imitation has been considered a classic principle of artistic creation.

But above all, the Internet anti-pandemic literature's "imitation" is characterized by fragmentation. Jameson (1991) argues that "The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche" (p. 16). Jameson replaced "imitation" with the term "pastiche" to characterize postmodernism. This large body of anti-pandemic literary "fragments" mimic or pastiche the openings of classic literary works, classic movie lines, poetic quotations, etc., constituting a carnival of online literary creation. They challenge realism, which focuses on grand narratives, and deconstruct modernism, which pays a special attention to the depth of thought.

The second is its entertaining character. If the officially published anti-pandemic literature is a "metanarrative", to function through inclusion and exclusion, to establish order and principles, and to silence other voices in the name of a common goal (Storey, 2006, p. 251), then these online anti-pandemic works assume the mass narrative which has a spiritual entertainment function. Mellard (1980) claims that postmodern literary works

are artifacts that are playful in nature. He said that “in the event that myth, archetype, and language are subverted — as they have been by sophisticated modernists — the novelist may then turn for subject and authority or validation to the act of writing itself” (p. 138). In the above parody of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, apart from the specific imagery of “morning, sleep, waking up, oneself”, people’s experiences and Gregory’s alienation into a beetle have some form of commonality, which also creates a literary resonance. This kind of creation is a type of formal copy and deconstruction, but at the same time the kernel or to the reader’s feelings have a striking similarity. And then the netizens were inspired and in turn found more literature to pastiche, with a playful attitude, replacing the intellectual pain and melancholy of the modernist kind with hedonism (Jameson, 2005).

Of course, online anti-pandemic literature also has other postmodern characteristics, such as its popularization, in which a large number of Internet users participate in the mass reproduction of elegant works of art as assembly-line commodities, which is also in line with what Jameson (1991) calls “aesthetic populism” (p. 24), and the behavior that leads to this is that parody was replaced by pastiche. Parody is intertextual with the original text and can even reshape it. However, pastiche implies no moral judgment or societal norms. Ultimately, this leads to a disappearance of literary depth and distance.

Online anti-pandemic literature is widely recognized by the Chinese mainstream media as a way to relieve anxiety (Lin, 2002) and even likened to a “spiritual refuge” (Liu, 2021). This is the opposite emotion to the heavy and serious pandemics in news reports and the mainstream realist narratives, and it lowers people’s tense and uneasy emotions. Some articles even argue that these works use a poetic approach to dispel the gloom and dilemma of reality in order to highlight the glory of the human spirit (He, 2022). This means that anti-pandemic literature, whether realist works or postmodernist online literature, has a clear “instrumental” character in addition to its artistic character.

4. Literary value: instrumentality versus artistry

Although Mao Zedong’s *Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art* was published in 1942, its tremendous influence on the Chinese literary and artistic community still plays a role. At the beginning of his speech, Mao Zedong positioned literature and art as the cultural front, and it was a component part of the whole

revolutionary machinery, an essential part of the Chinese people's struggle for liberation (Mao,1991, p. 863). At the same time, literature and art also assume the responsibility of enlightenment. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the people's literature and arts transformed from cogs and screws for the revolutionary cause to both weapons for the construction of the four modernizations and tools for educating the people (Gu, 2022). Since then, this concept has been inherited and developed, and Hu Jintao, former president of China, believes that literature and art have a special mission: "contribute wisdom and strength to promote the great development and prosperity of socialist culture and build a socialist cultural power" (Hu, 2011, pp. 45-48). Xi Jinping believes that the literary and artistic circles should "create more excellent works that reflect the essence of Chinese culture, reflect the aesthetic pursuit of Chinese people, spread contemporary Chinese values, and conform to the trend of world progress, so that China's literature and art can stand out in the world with distinctive Chinese characteristics, and Chinese style" (Xi, 2016, pp. 7-12). This is a functional characteristic that extends the basis of the aesthetics of literature and art, but this is not unique to China, and from the history of the world's literary development, literature and art have not only an aesthetic function, but have instrumental or functional characteristics as well. During the COVID -19 pandemic, the above literary theories or views have had a tremendous impact on anti-pandemic literature and are characterized by the following features.

The first is as a tool of spiritual soothing.

The impact of the COVID -19 pandemic on Chinese society is enormous. The lives of the Chinese people are facing unprecedented challenges. Fear and despair are spreading in society, and the spiritual significance of literature is to help people fight against fear and disappointment. He Xiangyang, director of the Creative Research Department of the Chinese Writers' Association, said that literature fights the pandemic with the aim of allowing people to regain faith and endure the test (Liu, 2021). In a short period of time, a large number of literary works were produced by Chinese writers and ordinary people, all with the clear purpose of fighting the pandemic and saving the world. In this time of crisis, they are as practical as masks, respirators and vaccines. This reflects the traditional Chinese spirit of "Writings Are for Conveying Truth", where literature serves as a refuge in this national and state disaster, where people rediscover themselves,

search for humanistic values that have been crushed by consumer society, and guard their spiritual world.

The second is as a tool of popular science.

During the pandemic, many medical and nursing workers participated in literary creation. Many of their diaries and essays introduced not only medical and nursing work, but also knowledge of the virus, pathology, nursing and treatment of related professions, and were written in colloquial language close to life rather than specialized terms that were difficult for ordinary people to understand. To a certain extent, their writings popularized scientific knowledge of the pandemic, the symptoms of the virus, and different methods for treatment, reducing people's fear of the virus and increasing their confidence in treatment. For example, *Dr. Zha's Diary of Fighting COVID -19* (2020), in the diary entry of January 26, described the 3 ways of transmission of the corona virus, and in the entries of February 1 and 2 described the ECMO technique, as well as intensive care. Entries such as February 27 described pneumothorax caused by the coronavirus and how to treat it, and so on.

The third is as a tool of publicity.

Anti-pandemic literature promotes government policies and builds the image of political parties. Some of the literature emphasizes the importance of following government policies and guidelines to prevent the spread of the virus. This serves as a tool to promote government actions and decisions. A considerable number of works also highlight the self-sacrificing spirit of Communist Party members during the pandemic. For example, in *Dr. Zha's Diary of Fighting* COVID -19 (2020), Communist Party members all actively apply to work on the front line, while many ordinary medical workers, in the process of fighting the pandemic, apply to join the Chinese Communist Party, and these plots establish a positive image of the party.

The literature also highlights heroic individuals. To be more precise, many works of literature highlight the efforts of frontline workers and medical staff, who are portrayed as heroic individuals fighting against the virus. This helps to build a positive image of these workers and promotes the government's efforts to fight the pandemic. Many of the anti-pandemic literary works are collections of essays written about civilian heroes from all walks of life during the pandemic, such as couriers, security guards, sanitation workers,

and vendors. Through shocking events and details, their high moral and patriotic sentiments are showcased. The stories of these ordinary people's dedication to the country have influenced the public and inspired a sense of honor, which in turn has led to more active participation in the fight against the pandemic.

In addition to the above, the anti-pandemic literature also promotes a sense of national unity, emphasizing the need for everyone to work together to overcome the virus. For example, Fan Xing, a professor at Wuhan University's Faculty of Literature, praised China's anti-pandemic work, *City of Heroes* (2020). In this work, the valuable experience accumulated during the anti-pandemic period and the vigor of the people have also been engraved in the memory of this heroic city as another spiritual symbol of the rise of a nation, which will be passed on from generation to generation (Fan, 2021). The pandemic made the Chinese people, who had not experienced war for more than half a century, undergo a spiritual baptism similar to that in wartime, and anti-pandemic literature serves as a tool to promote a sense of social responsibility and national pride. in addition to mobilizing people to actively face and fight against the disaster, it further deepened people's identification with the country and with the Chinese national identity.

Overall, China's anti-pandemic literature serves as a tool of publicity by promoting government policies, highlighting heroic individuals, promoting national unity, and encouraging public awareness.

The strength of the instrumental nature of Chinese anti-pandemic literature does not negate its artistic value, and many excellent works are sincere and refined, but as a whole, there are three inadequacies in the artistry of Chinese anti-pandemic literature.

The first is the modular literary creation.

Chinese anti-pandemic literature is a literary carnival. Among the huge number of works, diaries, reportage literature and poetry are the mainstream works of literature. They share some common features in terms of mode of expression, perspective of presentation, emotional experience, typical characters, and ideological connotations, mostly disaster - rescue/criticism/glorification mode, and the theme is too straightforward.

For example, *Chronicle of the Pandemic Resistance in Jingyintan Hospital*, *Sublime Mission - Chronicle of the White-clothed Warriors' Pandemic Resistance in Wuhan and Hubei*, *Wuhan, Here We Come* and *Angel's Diary*, all reflect the reality of China's resistance to the pandemic through the personal experiences of doctors or

nurses in the medical teams from different parts of China who went to Wuhan, and although their personal encounters are different, they are all in a mode of disaster-expedition-initial battle-fierce battle-successful. These works are almost the same template as *Dr. Zha's Diary of Fighting COVID -19. Breathing a Meter Away* and *Diary of China's Pandemic War* are all stories about ordinary people's fight against the pandemic, basically using the disaster-pain-struggle/dedication model. *Kai's Diary* and *Confidence Comes from Effectiveness: A Foreigner's Wuhan Diary* are all written by foreigners in China, and use the model of disaster - Western smearing - refute lies and provide truth.

The second is the snackification of literary creation.

The speed of publication and dissemination of anti-pandemic literature is quite fast. This is due firstly to the instantaneous nature of the internet and secondly to the need for the anti-pandemic campaign to increase the speed of publication. However, both the positive anti-pandemic literature and the politically significant anti-pandemic literature, which was so popular in the West, no longer became the focus and topic of the literary world after the pandemic gradually subsided. The influence of these works is gradually interrupted or disappeared. This also means that anti-pandemic literature has the immediacy of news reporting, but lacks the aesthetic value of literature. G. M. Zhang (2020) argues that human beings have an innate weakness for forgetting, and that it is necessary for writers in the post-pandemic era to remind themselves that they must not forget all the warnings, revelations, and impacts of the pandemic, and they must never artificially cut off the inevitable link between the pandemic and literature. Therefore, how to improve the artistry of the anti-pandemic literature and avoid snackification becomes an issue that needs to be considered from multiple perspectives. But at the same time, we must also recognize that anti-pandemic literature has made a significant contribution to the humanities by capturing and presenting human thoughts and emotions in real time, forming an invaluable archival resource during this major catastrophe which affected all of humanity.

The third is the roughness of the literary language.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic made people appreciate the fragility and transience of life, which also inspired a wave of national literary creation. Doctors, nurses, social workers, and volunteers were the main authors of this anti-pandemic literary

creation, and their diary style or poems expressed sincere emotions and heroic sentiments, but their use of literary language was rather crude. Even for a professional writer like Fang Fang, there is meticulous expression and emotional rendering in *Wuhan Diary* (2020), but on the whole, it is straightforward documentary language without much beautiful literary expression. Most of the reviews of this book from a literary point of view by Western readers are like "poorly written, lacks details, insight and depth. More like blogs than personal diary entries. An opportunistic attempt to gain fame and money out of a pandemic situation" (Cao & Chen, 2021).

Another example is *Dr. Zha's Diary of Fighting* COVID-19 (2020), a famous work of anti-pandemic literature that has been translated into many languages, in which the events recorded are similar and the vocabulary used is shallow and straightforward. The book repeatedly records that a hotel in Shanghai provided exquisite food to the medical staff, and repeatedly uses network buzzwords such as *feeding* and *Mr. Tony*. The portrayal of the incident does not reflect artistic creation and grasp, but is only a true record, and the frequent use of internet buzzwords reflects the poor vocabulary.

Therefore, the problems of anti-pandemic literature deserve deep consideration. Since pandemics have recurred in the history of mankind and may still pose a crisis for humanity in the future, and anti-pandemic literature should not just appear during a pandemic, like a quick meal or a cheap tool, but should be able to bring reflection and enlightenment to humanity for a long time. Through the study of pandemic literature, literary creators can be inspired to upgrade the creation of pandemic literature in the post-pandemic period, from simply recording the pandemic to reflecting on it, from monotonous heroic narratives to the metamorphosis of ordinary people to heroes, from plain publicity of positive energy to a three-dimensional battle between good and evil, from straightforward language to infectious literary language, and so on.

In addition, some works that could not be published in mainland China were chosen to be published in the West or Taiwan, and they were evaluated within China as tools for the West to attack China's fight against the pandemic. Thus, both government-published and private works, while instrumental in nature, displayed political tendencies and even rose to the level of political rivalry.

5. Ideology: nationalism versus liberalism

Demonstrating China's control over the outbreak is found when Chinese authorities used anti-pandemic literature to showcase the government's effective management of the outbreak. The government has highlighted its success in containing the virus and providing medical support to the affected population, projecting an image of competency and stability.

Some have caused great controversy in China, which in turn extends to the realm of political rivalry between China and the West, especially China and the United States. Among these, Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* (2020) is a good example of the cause of controversy. The controversy began when Xi Jinping asked Chinese writers to "tell the Chinese story, spread the Chinese voice, expound the Chinese spirit, and show the Chinese style, so that foreign people can deepen their understanding of China and enhance their understanding of China through the works of Chinese writers and artists" (Xi, 2015, P. 17). However, Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary* (2020) turned things around.

The controversy is first and foremost about its authenticity.

In her diary, Fang Fang used a lot of words such as *heard, possibly, a doctor friend said, seems*. For example, in her diary on February 14, 2020, she wrote:

> "Two days ago, I heard a dialysis patient jumped off a building" and "In the afternoon, I heard that two people in a group of dialysis patients had died". (Fang, 2020)
>
> (前两天听到一位透析病人跳楼……下午听说一个透析病人群里，已经有两个人死了。)

But during that period, Wuhan city where Fang Fang lived was in lockdown and she was quarantined at home. She used her phone and internet to get her information and did not see the situation with her own eyes or ask for proof, and there is not enough evidence to support her statement, which was misleading to readers. Professor Zhang Yiwu of the Peking University, who has publicly lamented Fang Fang, has questioned the validity of the two most impactful events in her diary: the death of a nurse, and the funeral parlor full of cell phones, about neither of which Fang Fang could produce evidence of their veracity (Y. W. Zhang, 2020).

Despite concerns over the veracity of the content in Fang Fang's journals, they have been heavily quoted in foreign mainstream media, further stoking the flames of a political rivalry. *The New York Times*, BBC, CNN, and major European media outlets have not only quoted from the diary, but also reported on Fang Fang, who has been the subject of much controversy in China. Cui Hongjian, director of the Institute of European Studies at the Chinese Academy of International Studies, said: "from mid-April to late May, European public opinion on China appeared to be more intensively critical and accusatory, showing signs of merging with some U.S. public opinion on China, mainly related to China's 'delaying the pandemic', 'deceiving the international community' and 'concealing pandemic data', as well as demanding 'accountability' and 'claims' " (Cui, 2020). In this context, *Wuhan Diary* was quickly translated into English and German within two weeks of its completion and released by Harper Collins in the US and Hoffmann und Campe in Germany, respectively. This made Fang Fang the center of public controversy, and she was criticized for "passing the knife to the West" (Y. Q. Zhang, 2020), which forced her to close her blog and delete her posts. At the time, Amazon.com, the world's largest book seller, described Fang Fang as a Chinese dissident in its presentation of this new book, and China is a nation where authorities use technology to closely monitor citizens and tightly control the media. and concluded that "blending the eerie and dystopian, the profound and the quotidian, Wuhan diary is a remarkable record of our times and a unique look at life in confinement in an authoritarian nation" ("Chinese writer faces backlash," 2020).

In addition to a large number of Chinese scholars and citizens, Hu Xijin, a prominent Chinese commentator and editor-in-chief of the *Global Times*, also wrote an article criticizing her, writing "*Wuhan Diary* is not an ordinary documentary literature exchange, and it will definitely be captured by international politics. Most likely, in the stormy future, the Chinese people, including those who had supported Fang Fang, will pay for Fang Fang's fame in the West with so much more of our lost interests" (Yang, 2020).

In response to this phenomenon, Michael Berry, the English translator of *Wuhan Diary*, says the storm of public opinion highlights the complexity and divisiveness of contemporary China as an ideological tug-of-war. He argues that the controversy must also be seen in the context of global politics, where those who manipulate public opinion hope to shift public attention from blame for the pandemic to U.S.-China relations ("English translator of *Wuhan Diary*," 2023).

The debate culminated with a speech in Chinese by Matthew Pottinger, the White House deputy national security adviser. In his speech, he warned that China's continued control of free speech and ignoring the real voices of the people could lead to a crisis in governance. He also called for less nationalism and more populism in China (Yao, 2020). However, this argument is not intended to oppose elitism or create a rational platform for popular discussion, but rather to imply the superiority of American-style liberalism. As mentioned above, modern Chinese literature was once used as "cogs and screws", and similarly, the Chinese government emphasized that individuals should be screws in the construction of socialism, and it's clear that Fang Fang didn't agree with this. In her diary of March 8, she replied to a letter from a high school student, advising him to transform "from a stiff, numb, rusty screw to a real human being" (Fang, 2020). By this point, her admiration for American-style liberalism had become very apparent.

In addition to Fang Fang, Guo Jing's *Diary of the Wuhan Lockdown (2020)*, published in Taiwan, and Murong Xuecun's *Deadly Quiet City* (2022), published in Australia, both contain criticisms of the government's closure of the city, resulting in the restriction of personal freedom and the abuse of rights. For example, Guo Jing (2020) wrote in her diary:

> The lockdown is bringing panic, and the panic is deepening the isolation between people. Many cities are beginning to require that masks must be worn in public. This appears to be for pneumonia prevention and control, but actually brings about an abuse of power.
>
> (Guo Jing, 2020, p. 53)
>
> (封锁带来了恐慌, 而恐慌在加深人们之间的隔离。很多城市开始要求必须在公共场合戴口罩。这看上去是为了肺炎的防控, 实际上带来的是权力的滥用。)

She attributes the cause of the panic to the lockdown rather than the dangerous pandemic and considers the order to wear a mask as an abuse of power, completely ignoring the danger of the virus and the scientific decisions of the government. This American-styled liberal emotional outpouring appears prolifically in Guo Jing's work. Amin (2007, pp. 36-37) directly criticizes American liberalism for its harm to the world, arguing that liberals only use the idea of individual freedom to justify the irrationality of

capitalist development. (pp. 36-37) This liberalism “advocates individual liberation and personal freedom, and as a result, contributes to the general proliferation of extreme individualism and egoism” (Cao, 2018, pp. 137-146). This is already common in third world countries and is most directly reflected in the challenges faced by Chinese vaccines after they have been donated or exported to countries around the world. Their negative reception in different countries flaunts the advancement, correctness and superiority of the West and thus triggers national conflicts.

In addition, Fang Fang and Guojing’s diary descriptions of the restrictions on personal freedoms during the pandemic and consider it dictatorial, express a desire for American-style democracy. However, Amin (2007) argues that “democracy is the first absolute condition for social progress” (p. 27), but it does not come in only one form and depends on the specific conditions of a country. For example, the American democracy to which liberals aspire is “far from being a possible instrument of social progress” (p. 48) because it is subordinate to the market and to the capital operators of the Western powers, leaving its citizens with only a marginalized and abstracted democracy (p. 31). This can be reflected in the reality of the failure of the U.S. fight against the pandemic, as the policy of coexistence with the virus resulted in a huge number of deaths, more than any other nation in the world. While the policy of coexistence aligned with the American values of freedom and democracy, the negative side of American liberalism led to the deaths of individuals who might have survived had America adopted more effective policies to combat the virus. While Amin (2007) argues that American liberalism has led it to enacted “pogroms” (p. 6) against Third World countries, it can be argued that the pandemic demonstrated the American government’s willingness to perform similar actions against its own people in service to the markets and financial institutions that control the nation.

Shortly after Guo Jing’s book was published, Athitpat (2020) conducted a scholarly study of Guo Jing’s *Diary of the Wuhan Lockdown* (2020) using a wide range of Western theories about freedom. For example, the liberal ideas of John Locke and Isaiah Berlin. Since Locke’s oeuvre is held as sacred in the United States and has deeply influenced American politicians such as Thomas Jefferson, his libertarianism can be considered the cornerstone of liberal thought in the United States. On the other hand, Isaiah Berlin’s paradoxical theory of freedom has been much debated in academia, particularly with regard to the relationship between reason and freedom, Athitpat (2020) rationally stated

that “The government lockdown measures are not the cause of deprivation of people’s freedom. However, implementing the measures resulting from government operation exceeds one of its functions and not performing another function. Both of these causes act as a barrier for the people to access freedom; furthermore, there are the main reasons for destroying people’s trust with the government.” (p. 175). This study, however, focuses on a very personal and emotional text. Furthermore, it accentuates the erosion of Western-style freedoms of speech and bodily autonomy, thereby amplifying criticisms of the Chinese government’s shortcomings, all while overlooking the nation’s unique circumstances, the challenges posed by the pandemic, and the complexities of its prevention and control. Moreover, there are many references in Chinese and foreign media to the author Guo Jing as a feminist. For instance, Radio Free Asia, which is affiliated with the U.S. Agency for Global Media, mentioned Guo Jing’s status as a feminist several times in its introduction of her book. In China, this is also a sign of Western ideology, because after 1949, China’s success in women’s rights could have served as a model for the whole world, but China has given up exporting its ideology, and has even given up defending its own right to speak at home, so that American-style feminism which was considered quite harmful to China entered and quietly attacked and smeared China (“How did “feminism” become a Western ideological tool,” 2017).

In contrast to the Western media or foreign scholars’ enthusiasm for these illiberal or neoliberal works, the Chinese government and the mainstream media have hardly spoken out, and the massive criticism of these works on the Internet is almost one-sided. Some Western scholars have argued that many Chinese identify with the narrative of China’s victory over the pandemic, and this has led to an increase in nationalist behavior. It doesn’t even take the Chinese government to step in and deal with voices that are critical of the government now; the nationalists on the Internet do it themselves (“China in Fang Fang’s Diary,” 2020). Calling patriots and rational netizens nationalists is another manifestation of Western ideology. In discussing the root causes of political unrest in the Arab region, Amin (2011) argues that the globalized neo-liberalism and U.S. hegemony are important causes of political unrest in the Arab region, and that the Egyptian people’s democratic movement in 2011 reflects that “the Egyptian people are tired of U.S. hegemony, and that the Egyptians are nationalist patriots” (Amin, 2011). As opposed to the Western stigmatization of nationalism, Amin’s point of view shows that nationalism is a resistance to American liberalism, which also applies to the Chinese netizens’ critique

of Fang Fang's diary. The theory of liberalism and its accompanying ideological ideas promise to liberate all of humanity, which Amin argues will not be achieved, but instead lead to inequality and polarization among peoples (Amin, 2007, p. 18). Although Amin's emphasis is on the economic and social polarization of people, the incidents of Fang Fang and Guo Jing's diaries show that this point of view is equally applicable in the realm of thought. Thus, the awakening and resistance of patriotic nationalists in the ideological realm pushed this anti-pandemic literature to a climax. As the controversy festered, Amazon also changed the politically explicit presentation of *Wuhan Diary* to a more moderate or semantically ambiguous one: "Blending the intimate and the epic, the profound and the quotidian, *Wuhan Diary* is a remarkable record of an extraordinary time" (From one of China's, 2023).

In summary, the ideological characters of Chinese anti-pandemic literature exist, and the political rivalry between China and the United States that it triggered has had a great impact on Chinese society. The debate between China and the United States on nationalism, the ideological confrontation between China and the United States, and even the debate on American-style democracy have expanded the connotation and extension of anti-pandemic, which is destined to become content that cannot be ignored in Chinese literary history. But at the same time, there are also examples that have overcome the constraints of geopolitical narratives. This is mainly reflected in the fact that during the pandemic, a large number of foreigners witnessed the real situation of the pandemic in China and recorded it, Jorah Kai Wood's *Kai's Diary* (2020) records the real situation of Chongqing's fight against the pandemic in English, and Adham Sayed's *Confidence Comes from Effectiveness: A Foreigner's Wuhan Diary (2020)* introduced the Wuhan fight against the pandemic in Arabic. These texts were first published on the Internet, then translated into Chinese and officially published, before being translated into several languages. They do not follow the prejudice and malice of Western ideology towards China, but rather, they are a true record of the reality of China's fight against the pandemic and a rebuttal of the stigmatization of China's fight against the pandemic by Western media. This transcends ideology and embodies mankind's pursuit of righteousness and justice.

6. Conclusion and recommendation

We believe that anti-pandemic literature is a new category in the history of modern Chinese literature, with a tremendous impact on Chinese society. In the post-pandemic period, studying and analyzing it not only opens up a new field of literary research, but also has great practical significance, because in addition to being literary work, anti-pandemic literature also has instrumental and political attributes. By collecting and analyzing the literary works that appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic in China from 2020-2023, we found three sets of significant characteristics. The first is their realistic writing style, which not only provides a stark depiction of the pandemic, but also reveals the immediacy of the human condition, and this sense of truth can have a powerful impact on readers. At the same time the postmodernist character of network anti-pandemic literature enriches anti-pandemic literature and adds a relaxing and lively color to the serious anti-pandemic atmosphere. The second is their instrumental character, not only soothing people's spirits and promoting science against the pandemic, but also serving as a tool for the government to shape a competent image, which indirectly deepens people's national identity, their pride in the nation, and their identity as Chinese. The third is the political antagonisms caused by the anti-pandemic literature, especially the ideological struggle between China and the United States. The struggle expanded the connotation and extension of the anti-pandemic literature, and thus became a heavy piece in the history of Chinese literature. These three sets of characteristics are closely linked, with realist works serving as a tool to publicize policies and encourage the people, and postmodernist-type works serving as a tool to relieve the psychological pressure on the people, but with the West using certain Chinese anti-pandemic literature as a tool to promote and propagate liberalism and to stigmatize China's fight against the pandemic, the Chinese people have responded and countered from an ideological position. They reflect the complexity of literature as a whole, proving that literature is more than just a language art, and that it has had and will to continue to have significant connections and impacts on human society, ideology, and politics. At the same time, these three sets of characteristics with both advantages and disadvantages reflect the budding status of Chinese anti-pandemic literature and provide a basis for the development and optimization of Chinese anti- pandemic literature in the post-pandemic era. However, at the same time, we found the limitations of anti-pandemic literary works. That is, the patterned

creation method, the snackification of content and the rough and ready language have seriously affected their aesthetic value and influence after the pandemic.

Anti-pandemic literature is large in quantity and rich in connotation and is of great value for in-depth study. This paper explores the characteristics of disaster literature, specifically anti-pandemic literature and its similarities and differences with plague-themed literature mentioned in the introduction, as well as compares and contrasts Chinese anti-pandemic literature with Western anti-pandemic literature of the same period in terms of thematic ideas, expressive perspectives and political implications. For example, the *New York Times Magazine* published a collection of short stories reflecting the pandemic in 2020: *The Decameron Project: 29 New Stories from the Pandemic (2020)*. Compared to Chinese anti-pandemic literature, which is mainly characterized by realism, American authors have written in the form of fiction. It is possible to study the two comparatively in many ways. In addition, the liberal and neoliberal characteristics of anti-pandemic literature published by Chinese authors in foreign countries can be further studied from the perspective of postcolonialism or Marx's ideological critique. The mass publication of anti-pandemic literature was also a carnival, so the various types of symbols and their refracted meanings can also be found in Bakhtin's ideological perspective. In the post-pandemic era, although anti-pandemic literature has entered a period of decline, this does not mean that it will come to an end; on the contrary, it provides an opportunity for reflection. Through the research and criticism of scholars, as well as the exploration and innovation of literary creators, the ideological level and artistic quality of China's anti-epidemic literature will surely be improved!

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