East Asian: Idylls Shen Congwen’s *Border Town* and Mishima Yukio’s *The Sound of Waves*

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Two of the world’s most remarkable idylls were written in East Asia, two decades apart: *Border Town* (Bian Cheng 《边城》) (1934) by Shen Congwen (沈从文, 1902-1988) and *The Sound of Waves* (Shiosai 《潮骚》) (1954) by Mishima Yukio (三岛由纪夫, 1925-1970). The two authors were very different in personality, biography, and political persuasion, but both were geniuses of twentieth century literature. Each was considered for a Nobel Prize in Literature, though neither...
was awarded it. The appeal of their two pastoral novellas bears comparative analysis, of which this short essay can only make a brief beginning. There is no record that Mishima read _Border Town_ in Japanese, although it was translated. In fact, _The Sound of Waves_ was inspired by the Greek tale of Daphnis and Chloe, a pastoral elegy (in verse) from the second century A.D. attributed to Longus (朗戈斯), about star-crossed young lovers. [2] Many a Western romance is indebted to that legendary story, including Shakespeare’s _Romeo and Juliet_. Mishima had lived in Greece in 1952; _The Sound of Waves_ has been called the culmination of his “Greek fever.” [3] Curiously, or perhaps not, Shen Congwen also wrote, not long after penning _Border Town_, that his goal in writing was to create a “little Greek temple”, one dedicated to humanity.[4] Both authors sought consciously to create a well-proportioned image of the “healthy” life. Mishima, whose work and life were generally dominated by darker and more abnormal forces, was in _The Sound of Waves_ “determined to demonstrate to himself not only that he was capable of creating a world so different from his own but even that he had a place in it.” [5]

It was probably the turmoil of the Chinese literary scene in the 1930s, and the happiness of being newly wed, that spurred Shen Congwen to write a novella perfectly embodying the Crescent Society’s (新月社) ideals of “health and dignity”.

The two novellas have nearly opposite positions in the different authors’ respective literary outputs. _Border Town_ is often regarded as Shen Congwen’s “representative work”. He wrote many works of teenage love and even of the sexual awakening of rural girls (as in “Sansan” 三三 and “Xiaoxiao” 萧萧), and his love of and ethnographic attention to the mores of West Hunan as a setting for so
much of his fiction caused him, decades later, to be called a “native soil” (xiangtu, 乡士) writer. Mishima on the contrary is best known for stories of perversion, death, and nihilism, filled with urban intellectual, political, and literary allusions, and also a code of values embracing death. *The Sound of Waves* is his only pastoral work, an aberration within his creative output. However, it was a bestseller and the subject of many movies. For a time, paradoxically, it did represent the face of Mishima Yukio to his Japanese public. Its very popularity seems to have embarrassed Mishima for having so celebrated the “normal”; the novella’s success may have been a factor making him decide to write no more works like it. Shen Congwen’s *Border Town*, too, was one of his best-loved works, but political attacks on its idyllic qualities led him to respond to its popularity defensively, and perhaps that is why he, too, never again wrote quite so idealistic a work.

The two novellas are called pastoral for several reasons, including the thematic, the structural, and the linguistic. The two novellas offer rather comparable bird’s eye portraits of a stable, self-sufficient village society. Shen Congwen nostalgically recalled Chadong (茶峒), the setting of his *Border Town*, from his travels in the army to a small town called Chadong (茶峒). It was not so different from many another small town and village he had known from childhood. Mishima Yukio, the son of a fisheries official, selected Kamishima (神島) [in the novella he calls it Utajima (歌島)] on the advice of a friend. Mishima traveled there in 1953, getting to know its fishermen and indeed its lighthouse keeper. Both authors trace the topography of their localities with loving care, with attention to scenic outlooks, temples, and shrines. (The god Pan looks out for the
lovers in *Daphnis and Chloe*; the god of the sea (海神) worshiped at the Yashiro Shrine (八代神社) and the spirit of Prince Deki, in *The Sound of Waves*; a white pagoda symbolizes village wellbeing in *Border Town*, and in its prominence it may be compared also to the lighthouse (灯塔) in *The Sound of Waves*. It has been said that one could practically draw a map of their novellas’ respective localities using the authors’ descriptions. Daily routines, of chopping wood and guiding a ferry in Chadong, of coastal fishing and diving for shellfish and seaweed (the latter by the women of Utajima) are the focus of the villagers’ simple lives. Festivals, like the Dragon Boat festival (端午节) in West Hunan and the Lantern Festival (盂兰盆节) in Utajima, mark the rhythms of life and of nature. The village communities are small and isolated from the big cities. The Young Men’s Association (青年会) of Utajima calls its newsletter *Orphan Island* (孤儿岛). But the communities are isolated mostly by their open and conservative mores, and also by choice, for these novellas are *modern* pastorals. Villagers in their era may make modern choices. Chadong is an island of peace within a country beset by warlordism, ruled by an elite who came out of the turmoil of the 1911 revolution. It is after all at a crossroads between three provinces, a *border* where different people meet, and where goods have to be transferred from boats to make the trip upstream. (It is also a border in a temporal sense.) Utajima still has memories of losses it suffered in the Pacific War. Utajima, too, lies athwart major shipping lines of the Pacific by the Gulf of Ise (伊勢湾); its folk view great ocean liners, even foreign ones, from afar, through binoculars. Shen Congwen’s works are full of expressions of the superiority of rural integrity to commercial urban life, and the country folk’s unconscious realization of that; the
remarkable thing about the characters of *The Sound of Waves* is that they venture out into the wider world, but then choose to return to the simpler, less complicated life of the island.

The two novellas are idyllic also in their elegance, simplicity, and sense of proportion in form and language. The plots, characters, and dramatic conflicts are not complicated: the story line is a tale of "first love," a love of beautiful adolescents overcoming obstructions thrown up by human society (even pastoral village society), nature, and fate. This first love is also a passage of discovery, for Cuicui (翠翠), the mid-teen heroine of *Border Town*, and Shinji (新治) and Hatsue (初江), the late-teenage lovers (in a not fully carnal sense) of *The Sound of Waves*. Because they do not know what love is, this innocence, or "ignorance," is itself an "obstacle" that slows the pace of their eventual union—or in the case of *Border Town*, frustrated union. This ignorance of the carnal world is one held in common with *Daphnis and Chloe*, Mishima’s inspiration. And yet it is Shen Congwen’s novella that seems to embody the Greek (and Chinese) concept of fate, for Cuicui’s loss in love in a way recapitulates that of her unlucky mother and father. [6] In a surprise in the final line of *The Sound of Waves*, Shinji thinks to himself that it was not the photograph of herself that Hatsue gave him and the love (or prayers) it symbolized that brought him safely through a typhoon in which he risked his life, but his own strength.

The young lovers are beautiful of body and pure of thought, and their beauty is a dark beauty, unappreciated by the urban societies of China and Japan. The simple boatmen and ferrymen of West Hunan (湘西) (and their daughters), like the fishermen and female divers of Japan, are burned dark by the sun. It is an emblem of their labor, their
stamina, and their allegiance to nature. They are relatively blank and unintellectual, like the blank slates of Rousseau. Writes Shen Congwen of Cuicui: “Wind and sun have tanned the growing girl’s skin, her eyes resting on green hills are as clear as crystal. Nature is her mother and teacher, making her innocent, lively and untamed as some small wild creature.”

Wrote Mishima Yukio of Shinji: “Skin can be burned no darker by the sun than his was burned. He had the well-shaped nose characteristic of the people of his island, and his lips were cracked and chapped. His dark eyes were exceeding clear, but their clarity was not that of intellectuality—it was a gift that the sea bestows upon those who make their livelihood upon it.”

Nature is a nurturing force, but it also brings danger, in the rapids of West Hunan’s rivers and in the typhoons of Japan’s seas. Even in its danger, though, nature ratifies the vitality and authenticity of the non-urban people who survive its challenges. Mishima, with his homosexual tendencies, is like the ancient Greeks in attending to the beauty of his male hero as much as to that of his female hero. The obstacles to their love thus include the lighthouse keepers’ citified daughter, who while studying in faraway Tokyo has become obsessed with her plainness and jealous of Hatsue. The other obstacle is Yasuo (安夫), the arrogant and lazy son of a relatively rich man of the island, who thinks he will be betrothed to Hatsue. Shen Congwen depicts
Cuicui as a dark beauty raised by nature, and he in effect splits his male ideal into two: a brave, athletic, and plainspoken elder brother Tianbao (天保), who represents the Han martial tradition of brotherhood, honor, straightforwardness, and chivalry, and Nuosong (雛送), who in his quiet male beauty and singing technique represents a more exotic, seemingly "feminine" tradition of the Miao and other tribal peoples. It is to the latter that Cuicui is unconsciously attracted, in her dreams.

The structure of *Border Town* and *The Sound of Waves* are surprisingly similar for works that have such different endings. Although lovers come in pairs, each novella has a main protagonist, whose emotional maturation is the focus of the narrative. In *Border Town* it is Cuicui, the girl. In *The Sound of Waves*, it is the boy, Shinji, who must prove his strength as well as learn to accommodate the new physical feelings of love welling up within him. Hatsue must learn to deal with those feelings, too, but the narrative does not enter her mind so insistently. Cuicui and Shinji are poor—poor by comparison not only to their competitors in love, but also their "true matches," Nuosong and Hatsue respectively, though these heaven-intended lovers are in both novellas strong, simple (and beautiful) young folk who do not appear so "rich" in the besotted eyes of Cuicui and Shinji, only to more objective village society. It is because of their better-off competitors, Captain Wang's daughter and Yasuo (安夫), that Cuicui and Shinji become aware of the disadvantages of poverty. And no wonder Shinji and Cuicui are confused. They are strong and handsome themselves, and each is romantically pursued by another who is also socially above them: Cuicui by Tianbao, Nuosong's elder brother, and Shinji by the lighthouse keeper's daughter. Cuicui and
Shinji could have these others as their mates if they wanted them. In both novellas, the fact that Cuicui and Shinji are “meant for” someone other than those who pursue them, is revealed subtly, though not mysteriously, seemingly because of Cuicui and Shinji’s initial incomprehension of what love is all about. Love is a feeling, and they mistake it for something else. Cuicui gets angry and feels insulted when she first lays eyes on Nuosong. Shinji is simply bewildered by the sudden appearance of Hatsue on his island, so that he stares at her in a way that even he comes to realize was rude. It is through the order of the narrative that the reader realizes the priority of the affections of Nuosong (not Tianbao) and Hatsue (not the lighthouse keeper’s daughter), which lie still in the future, over the affections of those other mates. Nuosong and Hatsue are, in the narrative, the first object of the opposite sex encountered, and the reader therefore is biased, like the main protagonists, toward them, as the protagonists’ “first love”—their fated love. It is, in both cases, a tacit love that soon becomes conscious, and is no longer ambiguous, but frustrated. The greater structural dissimilarity between Border Town and The Sound of Waves lies not so much the happy ending of the latter and the ambiguous ending of the former, the differences in the roles played by the minor characters, or even the differences in courtship customs (Cuicui is wooed by evening serenades—but hears them only in her dreams). Rather, the main difference is that the relationship between Cuicui and her guardian (her grandfather, the old ferryman) is much more important than the relationship between Shinji and his widowed mother, though, she, too, tries to make the match that her son wants, and through her clumsy meddling risks ruining the relationship, as does Cuicui’s grandfather’s. Ironically, it
is Border Town, not The Sound of Waves, that pairs the theme of awakening to romantic love with the theme of awareness of the inevitability of death (the grandfather’s). Readers of Mishima may indeed think it odd that no one in this work of his dies or suffers.

The language of Border Town is pellucid and almost classical in feel, though fully vernacular in vocabulary. The work is typically considered a capstone of Shen’s style; The Sound of Waves is similarly credited for its elegance and the quaint dialect of its island characters, which offers a contrast to the ornate and dense style of Mishima’s other major novels. Both Shen’s and Mishima’s novellas contain folk songs and folk premonitions that make themselves known in dreams and omens. It is Shen Congwen’s work, in fact, that stays closer to the Greek concept of “pastoral” as the alternating verses sung between a boy and a girl, since this “serenading” is the traditional means of courtship in Chadong’s world (which has ethnographically vague tribal cultural overtones). Shen in this work does not represent the love songs in his own verse, as he has in stories such as “Long Zhu” (龙珠). However, characters in Border Town speak less directly, even to their loved ones, than those in The Sound of Waves. Shen Congwen’s folk convey some of their most important thoughts about love and death through stories, metaphors, and jokes, thus stirring memories, and perhaps unconscious associations, as well as obvious double-entendres.

Class considerations do not have their usual weight in these village societies. Shunshun (順順) and the lighthouse keepers are content to let their children “marry down.” The interesting thing about social class in The Sound of Waves is that the heroine, Hatsue, is the daughter of the richest man in town, Terukichi (照吉), who owns two
coastal freighters. But her class advantage has been erased by the plot. Her father during her childhood let her be adopted out to another family of oyster divers on another island, and she has only now come back from effective orphan status. (Daphnis and Chloe, were orphans, raised by sheep and goats. Shinji, who lost his father in a storm, and Cuicui, raised by her grandfather, are orphans, too.) Hatsue has learned the honest trade of ocean diving, one as dangerous and arduous as that of the males, and she has quickly acquired collective village mores, as in an incident in which she wins a diving contest run by a peddler and gives the prize to the woman she hopes will one day be her mother-in-law.

Many articles and monographs have been written about the deeper meanings of Border Town and The Sound of Waves, which I will not go into now. The simplicity of both novellas is surely deceptive. They had deep personal meaning for their urbanized authors, and surely both of them wanted to create modern myths of their own, like those of the ancient Greeks, to engender further debates about the nature of beauty in life and in literary style. They wrote with an unusual sense of proportion, while taking up the form of the novella. Freudian psychology and symbolism enter into Border Town, and Mishima’s masculine and patriotic ideals enter The Sound of Waves. The characters change in reaction to the crises in their lives; Mishima’s negative characters even reform themselves, after observing the superior integrity of their rivals. (In Border Town, as in most of Shen’s works, it is difficult to find representations of evil.) The novellas are filled with omens and signs, which upon reflection often seem misleading. The view of nature is complex, and it is Border Town, ironically, that more consistently dangles before the reader.
hints of tragic fate and suicide, and it is Shen’s novella that eschews a happy ending. Both novellas, for all their respect, even reverence, for local custom, tradition, and piety, make heroes and heroines of those who dare to go against local expectations of them, and sometimes even custom. Shen Congwen would have us believe that girls might often choose their mate in his part of China, but in both novellas, the young people’s freedom to choose their own romantic partner contravene the usual practice of China and Japan in their day.

In this essay, I would speculate that part of the appeal of Border Town and The Sound of Waves, apart from the elegance of their respective styles and the universality of their plots, is due to their rich adumbration of the concept of “love” in a traditional and yet new and modern context. Shen Congwen of course once explained that Border Town was about “love.” But both novellas depict at least two kinds of love.

One kind of love is romantic love, something that in the twentieth century was often seen as new, “modern,” and exciting. In these works, it is appropriately depicted between beautiful young people. And yet it is their first love, and so it does not offend the traditional sense that mates should be loyal to each other for life, without premarital choice or experimentation among alternatives. By that conception, love is marriage, and it is fated. The romances of Cuicui and Nuosong, Hatsue and Shinji, are passionate and of the heart, but they are also Platonic (or almost so, in the Japanese case, since the couple kiss and embrace while naked but deliberately draw back from full sexual relations), and certainly protective of virginity (an obsessive concept for Mishima, though not for Shen Congwen). Moreover, the two romances are supported by their respective village
communities, which are closely bound together by common projects [water distribution and festivals in *The Sound of Waves*; the rebuilding of the pagoda (白塔) and again, festivals, in *Border Town*], and by shared information—that is, gossip.

The other kind of love is a more all-embracing love, a paternalistic love that nevertheless is not "paternalistic." The old ferryman loves his granddaughter as any ideal father would love his daughter. Her lifetime happiness is his only consideration. He mismanages the situation through understandable human error, and cannot undo accidents or "fate," but his patience is a virtue, too. He does not use paternalistic power to push Cuicui into an early marriage with Tianbao, or into a premature marriage with Nuosong. Moreover, the wharfmaster Shunshun ultimately displays a kind of paternalistic benevolence toward Cuicui, too, which may be counted as a growth in his character. Understandably, he develops an antipathy toward the ferry family after his son Tianbao dies in the rapids, and he has always had his eye out for a more profitable marital alliance with Captain Wang, whose daughter has a mill for dowry. He had two sons, and so could have taken both the mill and the ferry into his family, but when Tianbao dies, Shunshun must make a choice. And yet, he too, ultimately leaves the choice of Nuosong’s mate up to him—with help from Nuosong himself, who keeps going out on boat trips. When the storm comes, the pagoda collapses, and Cuicui’s grandfather dies, all the prior encumbrances and obstacles of her fate are symbolically removed. Shunshun moves her into his house, the whole community rebuilds the pagoda, and Nuosong, it appears, will be free to wed Cuicui after all—if he chooses to, in the end.
One might not have expected Mishima Yukio to choose a maternal rather than a paternal figure as the guardian of his hero Shinji, but he is after all retelling the story of Daphnis and Chloe, two orphans raised in the wild by sheep and goats, and Shinji is not really orphaned in Japanese society unless he is without a father. Shinji’s mother, as in Border Town, wants only what is best for her son, and she in theory controls his future; as the sole guardian, her maternal love and authority take the place of paternal love and authority. Like the old ferryman, she risks her self-esteem before the village authorities so that her child can be happy. In The Sound of Waves, it is the village as a whole, largely a community of women again, in this case (Hatsue and Shinji’s mother’s fellow divers, and the womenfolk who take turns drawing water with them), who support the true love and fated marriage. A timid “committee” of them even accompanies Shinji’s mother when she goes to Hatsue’s father’s house to protest his obstruction of the young people’s romance. The odd turn in the plot is that Hatsue’s father, Terukichi (who had after all once abandoned her and allowed her to be adopted by another family before taking her back) has truly grown in character, even more than Shunshun. In a true if belated manifestation of paternal love, he has already decided to let Hatsue have her way in marriage, because Shinji proved himself brave and capable during a typhoon, and Yasuo did not. Indeed, it was Terukichi’s paternal wisdom to put the two boys out to sea together on the same boat, entrusting them to the paternal love and surveillance of the trusted sea captain of one of his own oceangoing boats, that allowed the two boys to be tried in competition, as if they were rowing Dragon Boats and swimming for ducks in Shen Congwen’s border town. It is in the society of men that
Shinji has proved himself through a willingness to face death, and the paternal benevolence that brought this about reminds us of the side of Mishima that is more familiar from his other works.

Love, innocence, loyalty, courage, and class-blindness have special East Asian colorations in the works of Shen Congwen and Mishima Yukio that retain strong appeal among East Asian audiences caught up in eras of rapid social change. Those same values have a timeless and universal appeal that endears and surely will continue to endear *Border Town* and *The Sound of Waves*, and indeed *Daphnis and Chloe*, to readers of all nations and all eras.

Notes:
[1] Mishima of course spectacularly committed ritual suicide after taking over the headquarters of Japan's Self-Defense Agency. Shen Congwen attempted suicide in 1949.
[2] The original Greek legend is much longer and more confusing than Mishima's elegant plot, or Shen Congwen's; the Greek young folk encounter multiple obstacles to their love.
[3] John Nathan, *Mishima: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1974), p.120.
[4] 沈从文，《从文小说习作选》代序，《沈从文文集》（香港，广州：三联，花城出版社，1985），第十一卷，第42页。
[5] Nathan, p. 121.
[6] The theme of love suicides is seen in other of Shen's works, as if it came from Miao or other tribal legend, and this, too, is a theme held in common with the Japanese literary tradition.
[7] Shen Congwen, “The Border Town,” in *The Border Town and Other Stories*, trans. Gladys Yang (Beijing: Panda Books, 1981), p.7. 沈从文，《边城》，《沈从文文集》（香港，广州：三联，花城出版社，1983），第七卷，第75页。
[8] Yukio Mishima, *The Sound of Waves*, trans. Meredith Weatherby (New York: Berkley Medallion, 1961), p.7. 中文翻译：三岛由纪夫，潮骚（E书时空，http://www.eshunet.com/），第一卷。
[9] In *The Sound of Waves*, the atoning lighthouse keeper’s daughter seems to threaten suicide if her parents do not act to right the wrong she has done to Hatsue and Shinji, and bring them together again.
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