



A Coarse Recovery: Tactile Writing in Scar Literature

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the evolution of tactile writing in modern Chinese literature by contrasting its suppression during the Cultural Revolution with its revival in Scar Literature. It argues that collectivist political discourse effaced the private, sensory body, leading to the absence of touch in texts from that era. The subsequent return of tactile writing was central to Scar Literature's humanist project of representing trauma and restoring individual subjectivity. Characterized as a "coarse recovery"—often binary and direct—this revival nonetheless served as a vital bridge, reconnecting literature with embodied human experience and paving the way for greater artistic depth.

Subject Areas

Culture

Keywords

Scar Literature, Tactile Writing, The Body, Trauma, Cultural Revolution

1. Introduction

The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty believed that "the body—as a subject in a social context, in its discriminating use of language and the postures it represents—adheres to the everyday world encountered through perception." [1] This insight initiated a new way of thinking about the relationship between the spiritual subject and the world. Jacques Derrida's concept of "tactile-centrism" further overturns the traditional hierarchy of the senses, arguing that touch, in fact, precedes vision and other senses in constructing our understanding of the world, and therefore possesses an absolute primacy" [2]. In literature, "tactile imagination allows readers to instantly place themselves within the world of the text, bringing

a verisimilitude that acts directly upon the body's senses, while also enriching the layers of the text and offering readers a multifaceted aesthetic experience" [3]. In the novel, "tactile writing" has always been a crucial component. Tactile writing refers to the process of transforming physiological experience into textual expression by writing about the body's sensory perception of material things (such as temperature, texture, pressure, etc.). It is an evocation of the reader's own bodily memory, a fusion of material experience and spiritual connotation. It is not only a direct medium for conveying a character's inner world but also a method for endowing a virtual world with physical reality. Therefore, on the level of literary critical methodology, tactile writing represents a new dimension for textual analysis. "A deep exploration of the meanings contained within touch is an imperative for artistic research, and it is also a way for people to more deeply understand artistic works and artistic practice." [4] Observing the narrative of the "Scars" (伤痕文学, Scar Literature) of the New Era from the perspective of "tactile writing" allows us to see the bodily experiences and the affective symptomatology constructed and expressed by this group of writers. This paper will trace the resurgence of this literary mode by identifying instances of tactile writing in representative works of the period. The analysis will focus on keywords describing sensations such as temperature, texture, pressure, and pain, carefully distinguishing these individualized, embodied accounts from generic, non-somatic descriptions within their narrative contexts. Based on this analysis, the paper will then map the frequency and nature of this tactile writing—examining both the experiencing subject and the objective sensation—to illuminate the process of its literary revival.

2. Absence—The Occlusion by Collectivist Narrative

Novels from the "Cultural Revolution" period exhibit, on a creative level, the effacement of the "individual" by a mass political-cultural movement. Its purpose of serving political propaganda and its formulaic writing paradigms made it impossible for an author's personal bodily experiences to be conveyed through tactile writing. Hao Ran's *The Golden Road* (《金光大道》), as a "model novel" (*yangban xiaoshuo*), represented the standard for both form and content in novelistic creation at the time, while *The Battle History of Hong Nan* (《虹南作战史》) was a typical collectively authored work from this period. Therefore, these two books can represent the general state of the novel during the "Cultural Revolution", and by examining them, we can understand the status of tactile writing in the fiction of that era.

First, the frequency of tactile writing in these two novels is low, and it is especially absent in *The Golden Road*. For example, in chapter four: "The sound gave Qin Fu, who was standing on the basket, such a fright that he jumped. He tried to step down from the basket, but in his haste, his torn trouser cuff got caught on it. With a pull and a tug, 'thump', he tumbled and fell flat on his back." And: "Suddenly, Deng Jiukuan rushed out from inside, grabbed the 'foreign landlord' by the

collar, swung his arm wide, and gave him a slap.” In scenes like these, which would clearly produce a sensation of pain, there is no description of touch whatsoever. Furthermore, in a description such as, “A sturdy man vaulted over the green wooden slat fence and ran to his side in a few steps. A blast of hot air rushed into his face, and a pair of firm, large hands grabbed his arms. Only then did he see clearly that it was Gao Daquan”, although it involves bodily contact, it does not engage with an individual’s feedback to the tactile sensation. “A blast of hot air” (*retengteng*) and “firm” (*jieshi*) are more like descriptions of the objects producing the sensation, rather than Gao Daquan’s own haptic perception of the hot air and the hands (such as feeling “hot” or the “roughness” of the arms).

Second, the few instances of tactile description that do appear in these two novels tend to be embedded in clichéd phrasing. For instance, the phrase “so limp my bones turned to jelly” (*gutou dou su le*) in chapter two is used as a proverbial expression. The phrase “legs and feet frozen stiff” (*dong ma le tuijiao*) in chapter eight is a conjecture about why “(Deng Jiukuan’s) movements were a bit clumsy”, not a conscious description of a person’s tactile sense. The situation is the same in *The Battle History of Hong Nan*; the introduction, which describes the two protagonists An and Lei breaking through an enemy blockade and engaging in fierce combat, is a scene rich in action yet still lacks tactile description.

Finally, the occasional tactile descriptions in these two works display distinct characteristics of the era. Or again in *The Battle History of Hong Nan*, the “greasy touch” of a rich peasant’s hands and the “coarse-grained texture” of a poor peasant’s hands show tactile writing being highly correlated with class status. The same correlation appears in Hao Ran’s *Bright Sunny Skies* (《艳阳天》): the hand of the landlord Ma Xiaobian is “as clammy and cold as a snake’s skin”. Hao Ran frankly admitted in an interview titled “Answering a Reporter’s Questions”: “When writing the hands of the poor and lower-middle peasants, one must write the thickness of history, the power of revolution.” Clearly, this type of tactile description serves more as a confirmation of a predetermined class image. And this tactile perception has already been determined by the individual’s class standpoint. While it is true that people of different identities may have different tactile experiences, this type of tactile writing clearly lacks artistic authenticity.

The absence of tactile writing in “Cultural Revolution” literature is, in essence, a literary manifestation of the political context of that special historical period. The core mission of “Cultural Revolution” literature was to propagate the ideology of class struggle and to emphasize the supremacy of collectivism. As Marx believed, a true collective is one that allows the individual to attain freedom through the collective. “However, the collectivism of the ‘Cultural Revolution’ period, prioritizing collective interest above all else, led to the constant expansion of the collective organization’s authority and the ceaseless shrinking of the individual sphere. The collective gradually became detached from the individual, and the individual became lost within the collective.” [5] Consequently, collectivist narratives often followed the “three prominences” principle: “give prominence to

positive characters among all characters, to heroic characters among positive characters, and to the principal heroic character among heroic characters.” But touch, as the most personal and private sensory experience, is in direct conflict with collectivist narrative. Thus, the mechanistic and distorted collectivist narrative of the “Cultural Revolution” period systematically stripped away the privacy, distinctiveness, and resistance of individual tactile sensation, reducing it to a part of the collective will. As the most private of senses (e.g., the touch between lovers in *Waves* [《波动》]), touch was criticized as “petty-bourgeois sentimentality” or “poisonous weeds of humanism” for its direct link to individual emotional memory. The official critical apparatus (such as the theory of “theme-first” [*zhuti xianxing*]) demanded the deletion of sensory descriptions “irrelevant to the collective”, such as excising details in a novel about a hero whose “shoulders bled from carrying a sack of grain in the rain”, because it exposed physical vulnerability and undermined the political symbol of the “perfect hero”.

To be sure, literary works from this period do contain passages that might appear to qualify as corporeal writing. In *The Golden Road*, for instance, we find a description of the “burning heat from the friction” of a carrying pole on Gao Daquan’s shoulder. However, this sensation is swiftly sublimated into an abstract entity divorced from individual feeling: “This heatwave becomes the kindling of revolution, spreading across thirty-six villages.” Such depictions fundamentally contradict the intimate nature of touch and the purpose of tactile writing, which is to convey authentic bodily experience. Here, the tactile sensation serves as nothing more than a vessel for political fervor. This practice of converting an objective physical feeling into political discourse is clearly not intended to explore individual subjectivity. Therefore, these texts that engage with the body and touch do not constitute exceptions to the general absence of genuine tactile writing in this era; rather, they confirm it.

3. Return—The Awakening of Human Tactility in Scars

In “Cultural Revolution” novels, tactile writing is scarce, but descriptions of color and sound do not suffer from the same low frequency. Visual and auditory writing did not experience the same kind of rupture as tactile writing, which shows that the “return of tactile writing” was a literary phenomenon with unique characteristics of its era. The starting point of this return was “Scar Literature”, the first wave of novelistic creation in the New Era. The very name “Scar Literature” originates directly from its exposure and critique of the recent catastrophe of the “Cultural Revolution”. In their ideological orientation, Scar novels exhibit a profound humanism, championing the call for humanity, the affirmation of human value, and the defense of human dignity. Naturally, tactile writing, as a way of presenting “Man, writ large”, returned in the novels of the Scar movement. Liu Xinwu’s “The Class Teacher” (《班主任》) is considered the inaugural work of New Era literature, while Lu Xinhua’s “The Scar” (《伤痕》) stands as the paradigmatic text of “Scar Literature”. Indeed, the very term “Scar Literature” derives from the critical

discourse that erupted around Lu's story. Given their thematic similarities and representative status, these two works serve as prime exemplars of the movement.

Bei Dao's "Waves" (《波动》), by contrast, offers a distinctive case. Although it also narrates the trauma of intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, its narrative focus on youthful romance and its use of interwoven storylines from multiple characters set it apart from the first two works. Analyzing this singular text is therefore essential, as it helps to illuminate the diverse forms and modalities that tactile writing assumed within the broader scope of Scar Literature.

Lu Xinhua's *The Scar* (《伤痕》), as the representative work of "Scar Literature", displays a richness of tactile writing. "She felt her temples throbbed with a dull ache"; "extended to her a warm hand of friendship"; "a sense of loneliness and desolation pressed down on him again, especially the little girl's cry for 'Mama' in her dream, which, like a sharp knife, stabbed her heart anew". Passages like these demonstrate that tactile writing is not merely an expression of bodily sensation (the aching temples) but is also a device for representing a character's psychology (the stabbed heart, the warm hand). The evocation of touch in the novel is not limited to individual experience but also frequently arises from physical contact between people, as in: "For the first time, she leaned against him as they walked, letting his deep, youthful breath warm her own heart, which was so cold and heavy it was about to suffocate." This interplay between "warm breath" and a "cold heart" would have been impossible in "Cultural Revolution" literature. Another pioneering and quintessential work of "Scar Literature", Liu Xinwu's *The Class Teacher* (《班主任》), likewise confirms the return of tactile writing. The following are some representative examples of tactile writing from *The Class Teacher*: "It was as hot as if trapped in a steamer basket"; "a deck of worn, greasy playing cards"; "an invisible force struck his throat"; "it plucked the strings of love and hate in Teacher Zhang's heart with such violence, such a tremor, that he could barely control himself".

Bei Dao's short story *Waves* (《波动》), though written during the Cultural Revolution, was published in the New Era and thus bears the hallmarks of Scar Literature. Befitting his identity as a poet, his work is characterized by a pronounced mobilization of the senses, and tactile writing is no exception: "The cigarette paper rustled between his coarse fingers"; "I tiptoed and rested my chin on the cool datewood cabinet, gazing at the eye socket sealed under the black plaster and the pair of large-boned, trembling hands"; "I stood still, resting my hands on the cold stone balustrade"; "I walked back along a row of white poplars, caressing each trunk with my hand. Perhaps her body heat still lingered there; no, her body heat was zero, it was snow and ice". This type of tactile writing is especially potent in Bei Dao's descriptions of physical contact between men and women, demonstrating a breakthrough of previous creative taboos: "I pulled her to me. She acquiesced silently. Her lips were ice-cold, and her clothes were a bit thin"; "His hand was as cautious as if touching porcelain". The profusion of tactile writing in *Waves* proves that during the years of the "Cultural Revolution", tactile writing

did not completely disappear from the literary world, nor did it reappear immediately after the “Cultural Revolution” ended. On the contrary, it persisted in a considerable amount of “underground literature” (*dixia wenxue*) from the period, becoming the buried embers for the return of tactile writing.

The “return of tactile writing” was a widespread phenomenon in Scar Literature. In Kong Jiesheng’s *On the Other Side of the Little River* (《在小河那边》), there is Yan Liang’s feeling of his heart being “gnawed at” and a “stinging sensation”. In Mo Yingfeng’s *The General’s Chant* (《将军吟》), the general feels in his heart “a kind of pain, as if smeared with boiling oil, which not only could not be shaken off but slowly spread, searing his heart”. In the original manuscript of Yu Luojin’s *A Winter’s Tale* (《一个冬天的童话》), descriptions of sex such as “the unexpected pain in my lower body, which again made me feel as if I had been struck a sudden blow”, and so on, are all rich examples of the deployment of tactile writing.

The return of tactile writing did not happen instantaneously with a shift in the political winds. Its return was not *ex nihilo* but was a continuous thread moving from darkness to light. Several important factors propelled its return. First, tactile writing is a continuation and reactivation of a literary tradition. The tradition of realism in modern literature (such as Lu Xun’s writing on physical suffering) and in Seventeen-Year Period [TN: 1949-1966] literature already contained a focus on bodily sensation. During the “Cultural Revolution”, however, this tradition was suppressed by political slogans and conceptualized narratives. Scar Literature, by restoring tactile writing, reconnected this broken literary lineage. Touch became a medium linking historical trauma with individual memory, transforming abstract political harm into perceptible physical and emotional experience, and thereby achieving the return of literary authenticity. Second, the ideological liberation of the period unshackled sensory narrative. The post—“Cultural Revolution” era saw a rebellion against dogmatism. Touch, as the most fundamental sense and the one least easily distorted by ideology, became a breach through which writers could break creative taboos. The warmth of a handshake in *The Scar* and the coldness of skin in *Waves* both use tactile details to convey the individual pain that had been concealed by political discourse, responding to the call for a “return to common sense” during the ideological liberation. Of course, the expressive needs of survivors themselves called for the return of tactile writing. Many authors of Scar Literature were themselves survivors of the “Cultural Revolution”, and their writing possesses a powerful character of “testimony”. Tactile memories (such as the physical pain of struggle sessions) often form the core fragments of traumatic memory. This kind of writing is not just an artistic technique but an unavoidable choice for exposing and denouncing, a way of externalizing traumatic experience by recreating bodily sensations. As seen in *Waves*, characters confirm each other’s existence through physical contact, and in this way, touch becomes a force against the void of history, fulfilling the survivor’s urgent need to “inscribe history with the body”.

Thus, the pursuit of “Man, writ large” propelled the reconstruction of the sensory subject in “Scar Literature”. The aim of Scar Literature was to rediscover the value of the “human”, and tactile writing did just that by reconstructing the human’s sensory subjectivity. When a writer describes a character’s perception of hot and cold, pain, and touch, they are, in substance, declaring that “a person is no longer a political symbol, but a living being of flesh and blood”. For example, the traumatic tactility of the sent-down youth in *On the Other Side of the Little River* both symbolizes the resilience of survival and subverts the myth of the perfect physique of the “heroic figures” in “Cultural Revolution” literature. This emphasis on the reality of the physical body directly served the literary slogan of the “liberation of man”. The return of tactile writing was not a technical choice but was born from a movement to rebuild a literary ethics.

4. Revelation—Trauma and Coarseness in Tactility

The “Cultural Revolution” is the most fundamental traumatic memory of New Era literature. The main current of New Era literature, including “Scar Literature”, was a critique, denunciation, and reflection upon the “Cultural Revolution”. Therefore, the tactile writing that served the purpose of exposing trauma exhibited a kind of traumatic quality, a quality that manifested in many ways. First, the types of touch described, based on a traumatic keynote, share certain similarities, most obviously “cold”, “warm”, and “pain”. The contrast between cold and warm usually appears in the contact between people, functioning as a metaphor for an individual’s loneliness and melancholy before and the alienation and subsequent recovery of interpersonal relationships after the massive and complex political movement. Pain, meanwhile, is not merely a response to physical violence but appears more as “heartache” (*xintong*), aptly reflecting the memory of the disaster and the traumatic experience latent within that memory. Second, concrete traumatic touch and metaphorical physical scars became direct evidence of political violence. In *Waves*, the scar on Xiao Ling’s wrist is described as “like an earthworm crawling on the skin”. Through this tactile visualization, the trauma of the “Cultural Revolution” is embodied as a physical mark. Similarly, in *Hibiscus Town* (《芙蓉镇》), Gu Yanshan’s war scars are juxtaposed with his new scars from the “Cultural Revolution”, intensifying the continuity of historical tragedy. Furthermore, touch is no longer confined to surface description but is intertwined with psychological states. Sensory experience serves to deepen psychological perception. For instance, in *Waves*, when Yang Xun touches Xiao Ling’s hair, touch is transformed into a metaphor for spiritual dependence. In *The Scar*, “the coarse texture of the letter paper pricked her fingertips”, externalizing Xiaohua’s inner remorse and struggle. Because the works of Scar Literature touched upon the human bonds and family affections that had been suppressed and destroyed by long years of class struggle and political movements, touch took on the function of rebuilding interpersonal ties. Against a backdrop where human relationships had been torn asunder by politics, touch became a medium for mending emotions. In

The Scar, Wang Xiaohua touches her mother's remains, and in *The Class Teacher*, Teacher Zhang holds Song Baoqi's hand; both use physical contact to transmit warmth, symbolizing the recovery of humanity after the end of a unique political environment.

As a form of traumatic writing, the tactile writing of "Scar Literature" not only directly denounces the impact of the "Cultural Revolution" on the intellectual community and records the violence suffered by individuals, but also serves as a cry for the human ethics and individual consciousness that the "Cultural Revolution" destroyed—and this cry is itself a critique of the trauma of the "Cultural Revolution". The tactile writing in "Scar Literature" for the first time placed the "human" at the center of literature. Though imperfect, it opened a path for the exploration of humanity in New Era literature. From the physical pain in *The Scar* to the depiction of spiritual dilemmas in later works, it marked Chinese literature's journey from a "political thaw" to the "awakening of the human". Tactile writing also shattered the taboo of "disembodiment" in "Cultural Revolution" literature, ending the suppression of sensory experience by political slogans and laying the foundation for literature to recover its "flesh and blood".

However, the tactile writing of "Scar Literature" still possesses a certain coarseness (*culi*). This coarseness stems from the impact of the "Cultural Revolution" on literary development, but also from the thematic limitations of "Scar Literature" itself. It was merely a sensory denunciation rather than a rational reflection, opposing the class-based antagonism of the "Cultural Revolution" with a simplistic binary of "good versus evil". Consequently, the tactile imagery in Scar Literature often remains at a binary level, with the coldness representing indifference, the heat representing friendship or pain, and the pain representing trauma recurring repeatedly. This is, in fact, a simplification of the symbolic system. This lack of rich tactile engagement reflects the failure of tactile writing during this period to deeply excavate the multiple connotations of touch, reducing description to a simple vehicle for political denunciation. For example, at the end of *The Scar*, Wang Xiaohua's tactile sensation of "her whole body seethed with hot blood" marks an abrupt shift from private grief to the political fervor of "advancing with the Party". The abruptness of this emotional shift exposes the author's path dependency on the model of political discourse. Although "tactile writing" focused on expressing individual bodily experience, it had not yet been thoroughly liberated from political discourse.

Furthermore, the object of "tactile writing" in this period—that is, the tactile sensation itself—lacks significant differentiation. To be sure, distinctions exist in the tactile writing associated with men and women, laborers and intellectuals, the old and the young, or cadres and "Red Guards". However, these differences can largely be reduced to a binary: the sympathy exchanged between "victims" and the abuse inflicted upon "victims" by "perpetrators".

Consequently, the tactile experiences borne by bodies of different genders and identities exhibit a strong tendency toward convergence. After all, the impact of

the Cultural Revolution was pervasive, and within the overarching narrative structure aimed at denouncing this catastrophe, individual differences were necessarily diminished.

Just as “Scar Literature” itself demonstrated a transitional character—artistically rather coarse, direct, and emotional, writing about people but not yet about human nature—the tactile writing of this period also displayed its limitations: it was coarse, conformist, and shadowed by the literature of the “Cultural Revolution”. The tactile writing of Scar Literature laid bare the pain of history but could not fully peer into the sinews of trauma. It broke through the frozen soil of ideology, but its tilling was still coarse-grained. Yet it was precisely this coarse recovery that stimulated the deepening of literature in the 1980s. Later, Reflection Literature (e.g., *Hibiscus Town*) inherited the principle of authenticity from tactile writing and delved deeper into the systemic roots of historical tragedy. By the time of Root-Seeking Literature (e.g., *Red Sorghum*), bodily experience was elevated to the level of a cultural bloodline, used to explore the traumatic memory in the collective unconscious of the nation. This coarse recovery became a key link connecting the ruins of “Cultural Revolution” literature with the reconstruction of New Era literature. With the tremor of the body, it reawakened forgotten senses; with the warmth of humanity, it melted the hard ice of ideology, ultimately laying the first foundation stone for Chinese literature’s journey toward a deeper concern for life.

5. Conclusion

This essay has argued that the re-emergence of “tactile writing” in Scar Literature marks a pivotal, albeit “coarse”, recovery of the human body and individual subjectivity in Chinese literature. After a period of deliberate effacement during the Cultural Revolution—where collectivist narratives and political dogmatism stripped literature of authentic sensory experience—Scar Literature initiated a profound return to the “flesh and blood” reality of its characters. By re-engaging with the fundamental sensations of pain, warmth, and cold, authors gave voice to a generation’s trauma, transforming abstract political suffering into palpable, physical memory. This tactile turn was not merely an aesthetic choice but an ethical and political act of rebellion, serving as a powerful form of testimony that reclaimed the individual from the slogans of the collective will. However, as this analysis has shown, this recovery was imperfect. The tactile writing of Scar Literature, while emotionally direct, often relied on simple binaries and had not yet fully escaped the gravity of political discourse, revealing its transitional nature. This “coarseness” is precisely its significance. It represents the crucial first tremor that broke through the frozen ideological soil, a necessary and foundational step that reawakened literature’s senses. In its very imperfection, the tactile writing of the Scar movement laid the groundwork for the more nuanced explorations of history, humanity, and the body in the subsequent waves of New Era literature, ultimately serving as the essential, if rough-hewn, foundation stone for the

reconstruction of a modern Chinese literary humanism.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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