

An exploration of creative reading and critical approaches in Chinese creative writing workshops

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Abstract. Reading and criticism are integral components of Chinese creative writing workshops. Their role extends beyond interpreting and evaluating literary works to transforming reading experiences into creative knowledge and writing practices. Drawing on literature analysis and comparative interpretation, this paper examines the theoretical positioning and practical methods of creative criticism in workshops from three perspectives: objectives, processes, and outcomes. The discussion brings together English-language creative writing textbooks, critical writings by modern Chinese authors, and the traditional Chinese practice of literary commentary. The paper argues that creative criticism should aim to develop a poetics of composition. Through close textual reading and the analysis of writing elements, it should engage participants' creative experience, aesthetic sensibilities, and critical thinking, enabling them to develop critical expressions with distinctive personal styles. On this basis, the paper proposes a critical model of "close reading–collaborative reading–deep reading", operationalized through five stages: the creative signification stage, the creative comparison stage, the creative reception stage, the creative reflection stage, and the creative practice stage. The model connects individual reading and peer discussion with imitation, rewriting, and manuscript revision. It offers useful methodological guidance for teaching creative criticism in Chinese creative writing workshops.

Keywords: creative writing, creative reading, creative criticism, writing workshop, poetics of composition

1. Introduction

In recent years, academic research on Chinese creative writing has focused primarily on theories of composition and writing pedagogy, while relatively little attention has been paid to the theoretical and practical dimensions of creative criticism. Conceptually, creative criticism encompasses both the close reading and appreciation of works by canonical and contemporary writers and the mutual reading and critique of peers' work within creative writing workshops. How these two types of activities can be integrated into creative writing training is the central question addressed in this paper. To explore this issue, it is first necessary to clarify two misconceptions about creative reading and criticism.

The first misconception is that the core of creative writing lies in the study of compositional techniques, whereas reading and criticism are the concerns of traditional Chinese language and literature departments and literary critics, with little relevance to creative writing. For example, the creative writing instructional series translated and published by China Renmin University Press consists largely of studies and instruction in

compositional techniques organized by literary genre. At present, the translated book *How to Read Like a Writer: 10 Lessons to Elevate Your Reading and Writing Practice* [1] is one of the relatively few authoritative works in this series that addresses theories and methods of reading and criticism.

In fact, creative reading occupies a vital and indispensable place in workshops, permeating every stage of the writing process, from the stimulation of creativity to the composition and revision of works. It complements and reinforces the creative process. Creative reading not only helps writers accumulate literary knowledge and deepen their understanding of literary history but, more importantly, enables them to draw nourishment from literature and learn the craft of writing. As *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Wenxin Diaolong) observes, "Only after playing a thousand tunes can one understand music; only after examining a thousand swords can one recognize a weapon. Thus, to achieve comprehensive insight, one must first observe widely". Writing does not take place in a creative vacuum; it must be grounded in the reading of specific texts. Without knowing how to read effectively, writers cannot improve their writing skills in a targeted manner or develop a clear understanding of and standards for what constitutes a good literary work or good writing. Nor can they establish their own writing styles and conceptions of authorship by learning from diverse sources and discerning what is most valuable among them.

Creative writing workshops in English-speaking countries generally offer dedicated courses in creative reading and criticism, closely integrating them with creative writing training. For example, Monash University's 2025 course handbook lists a course titled "*Introducing Literature: Ways of Reading*"¹. The University of Chicago offers undergraduates a series of general education courses in the arts titled "*Reading as a Writer*", while its workshop courses also combine close reading with discussions of students' own work². In *The Practice of Creative Writing: A Guide for Students*, Heather Sellers notes that "a creative writing workshop is not just a community of practice, but also a space for creative reading" [2]. In her doctoral dissertation, *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline*, Dianne J. Donnelly likewise emphasizes that reading and criticism are essential components of creative writing workshop pedagogy. In this context, the writer-instructor should serve as an exemplary reader, demonstrating to workshop participants how to read on the basis of their own reading and writing experience [3].

The second misconception is that traditional Chinese language and literature departments already offer courses in literary criticism and reading, which can be directly incorporated into creative writing workshops without further investigation. Literary history, literary theory, and textual analysis are indeed important components of Chinese language and literature curricula and provide a knowledge base for creative writing. However, this does not mean that existing approaches to teaching literary criticism can be applied to workshop practice without adaptation. The two differ fundamentally in their pedagogical emphases, educational objectives, and methods of implementation.

Traditional Chinese language and literature education is primarily concerned with literary knowledge, with critical theory serving as a means of transmitting that knowledge. Its objective is to cultivate literary critics or so-called literary theorists. In *Literary History as an Academic Discipline: Methods, Approaches, and Ideals of Literary Education*, Pingyuan Chen repeatedly points out that the goal of Chinese language and literature departments is not to train writers. Literature is taught not as a skill but as a body of knowledge. Since 1903, literary history has occupied a central position in literary education as a whole [4]. Essentially, Chinese

¹ Monash University. (2025). ATS1903—Introducing literature: Ways of reading. Monash University Handbook. <https://handbook.monash.edu/2025/units/ATS1903?year=2025>

² University of Chicago. (n.d.). Creative writing courses. <https://creativewriting.uchicago.edu/courses/creative-writing-courses>

language and literature education at contemporary Chinese universities remains an education centered on literary history. Literary history, in turn, constitutes a body of knowledge in which literary works are linked through criticism and critical theories. In other words, education in Chinese language and literature is fundamentally an education in critical theories and methods. In Chen's view, these departments train scholars, that is, literary critics. By contrast, within the educational philosophy of creative writing as an academic discipline, writing pedagogy provides the foundation, creativity theory forms the core, and theories of composition and reading and criticism constitute two complementary pillars. The ultimate goal is to cultivate creative writers with creative thinking. Within this framework, although reading and criticism are important theoretical components of creative writing workshops, they are not directed exclusively toward academic paper writing. Rather than constituting a process of imparting and memorizing a body of knowledge, they form a practical system guided by creativity theory and developed in interaction with theories of composition, with the aim of informing creative practice and cultivating writers. For this reason, the theories of reading and criticism employed in creative writing workshops must adapt existing literary critical methods to the needs of creative practice. They must also align with creativity theory and theories of composition to establish a distinctive position and methodological paradigm of their own. Using literature analysis and comparative interpretation, this paper examines creative reading and criticism in terms of objectives, processes, and outcomes and, on this basis, proposes a methodological model for workshop teaching.

2. The objective of creative criticism: toward a poetics of composition

Reading and criticism are essential links connecting writers, literary works, and readers. As René Wellek observes, "The function of reading and criticism is to understand and evaluate literature" [5]. In his essay *"The Function of Criticism"*, T. S. Eliot emphasizes that the purpose of criticism is to elucidate works of art and cultivate readers' capacity for appreciation [6]. Mikel Dufrenne summarizes the mission of criticism as follows: "Explanation, that is, the revelation of a work's meaning; interpretation; and judgment, that is, the evaluation of its value" [7].

Different schools of literary criticism define the objectives of criticism in different ways. From the perspective of sociohistorical criticism, literary works serve as historical, political, or sociological materials, and literature reflects the life of a particular society. Accordingly, critics in this tradition emphasize examining literary works within their specific historical contexts. Their aim is to identify and assess the ideological orientations of writers and their works, the enlightening value of their ideas, and their educational significance for society. In schools such as gender criticism, postcolonial criticism, and psychoanalytic criticism, theoretical frameworks provide specific lines of inquiry for reading. Critics deliberately draw on feminist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic, and other psychological or political theories to uncover deeper meanings in texts. Such approaches treat literature as a cultural specimen and a source of material for investigating social, cultural, and political issues, rather than placing its aesthetic value at the center of analysis. By contrast, for traditional Chinese literary commentators, the purpose of criticism is to discern and convey the author's true intentions and help readers understand canonical works. For example, when explaining his own purpose in writing literary commentaries, Shengtian Jin stated, "I am deeply concerned that readers may fail to engage their minds, allowing the author's intentions to be entirely lost. Unaware of the painstaking effort involved, they would truly do a disservice to the master craftsman. Therefore, despite my lack of talent and discernment, I have undertaken these commentaries" [8].

In comparison, reading and criticism in creative writing workshops can move beyond cultural interpretation and discussions of authorial intention to focus on questions of composition. By reading and

critiquing others' works, particularly canonical works by earlier writers, participants can distill creative experience into theories of composition. The ultimate aim is to develop a poetics of composition that serves as a guide to their own writing.

Creative Reading directed toward a poetics of composition can be traced back to Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his 1837 address "*The American Scholar*", delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard University, Emerson referred to both Creative Writing and Creative Reading. D. G. Myers suggests that Emerson may have defined creative reading in this way to emphasize the importance of avoiding passive engagement with texts and instead cultivating an active approach to reading [9]. This active engagement is manifested in the orientation of reading toward composition: readers ask how a work is expressed and brought into being, and they use the insights gained from reading to inform their own writing and inspire the creation of new works.

Emerson's ideas readily bring to mind Dorothea Brande, who devoted an entire chapter to "*Reading as a Writer*" in her celebrated book *Becoming a Writer*, published in 1934. Brande argues that becoming a writer requires not only cultivating a writerly temperament that combines childlike openness with maturity and learning to observe and think like a writer, but also, more importantly, maintaining the habits of regular reading and disciplined writing. Her recommended approach is to imagine oneself already a writer and read from a writer's perspective, asking why the author has written in a particular way, what makes that approach effective, and what can be learned from it. Through rereading, learners can progressively deepen their analysis. The first reading is appreciative, identifying insights that may inform their own writing. The second is critical, involving more in-depth analysis and reflection. Most importantly, readers should deliberately imitate what they have read, using reading as an essential means of learning the craft of writing and accumulating material and inspiration for their own work [10].

Since Brande, "reading like a writer" has become one of the core principles of creative writing. For example, Donnelly regards Writerly Reading as a foundational principle of creative writing pedagogy [11]. One of the most influential works in this area is *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them* by Francine Prose, an American writer and creative writing instructor. The book opens with a classic question in creative writing: Can writing be taught? Prose argues that reading the works of earlier writers and literary masters is one of the principal ways to learn the craft of writing. She compares writing to the cultivation and care of roses by a gardener. Reading, in this analogy, is like visiting the gardens of master gardeners; novice writers should first observe how these accomplished practitioners cultivate roses so beautiful and fragrant [12].

Reading canonical works can thus be understood as a form of dialogue with earlier writers through their texts. The process of reading and criticism in creative writing workshops parallels the process of creative composition. Through texts, readers engage in dialogue with writers and work backward from the finished text to reconstruct the writing process. Reading thereby informs composition, with the ultimate goal of generating new works.

3. The process of creative criticism: from structuralism to constructivism

Creative criticism in creative writing workshops focuses on texts, treating writers' works as models for learning the craft of writing. It employs structuralist analysis to examine the elements of a work and the relationships among them, then combines these insights with participants' own creative experience, styles, and purposes to develop new critical insights and forms of expression.

The process of creative criticism begins with close reading, through which readers identify the elements of writing. Prose recommends slowing down and examining works closely at every level, from individual words,

sentences, and paragraphs to narrative techniques, characters, dialogue, and details. Readers should consider questions such as: Why has the author written in this way? What is the author trying to convey? What effect does this approach produce? What insights can it offer for one's own writing? She illustrates these principles with works by a range of writers. For example, she discusses the rhythm of sentences, particularly the stylistic use of long sentences, through Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* and *American Pastoral*. She examines paragraph structure through the works of Russian writer Isaac Babel and explores characterization through George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and the works of Jane Austen. She encourages readers to learn from John le Carré how dialogue can advance a plot, to observe how Flannery O'Connor skillfully employs details, to study how James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield use actions and gestures to create vivid characters, and to learn about the design of narrative perspective from Gustave Flaubert. She also analyzes works by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and Anton Chekhov, reminding readers to approach literary works anew from the perspective of learning the craft of writing [12].

A similar approach can be found in *The Elements of Writing: The Complete How-To Guide to Writing, with 100 Short Case Studies and Tips from Masters in All Genres* [13], by Charles Euchner, a writer and creative writing instructor. The book draws on excerpts from works by writers ranging from Homer and Aristotle to Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, Tom Wolfe, Elizabeth Gilbert, and C. S. Lewis. Covering a variety of genres, including fiction, drama, and essays, it demonstrates how master writers handle different elements of writing, including narrative techniques, characterization, and scene design, as well as specific linguistic elements such as diction and sentence construction. For example, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Robert Caro's biographical works, Homer's *The Odyssey*, and Andre Agassi's *Open* are used to illustrate the narrative arc. The Sherlock Holmes stories, Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* serve as examples of how to develop character profiles, use archetypes in characterization, and construct character arcs. The screenplay *Casablanca*, Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*, and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* illustrate the management of beats and pacing in writing.

Creative Writing: A Workbook with Readings [14], a British creative writing textbook edited by Linda Anderson, follows a similar approach. The book is divided into two parts. The first covers five areas: the creative process, fiction writing, poetry writing, life writing, and going public. Each section introduces theories and techniques of writing through an examination of specific elements. The second part consists of reading materials related to the techniques and concepts discussed in the first, most of which are excerpts from works by established writers. The purpose of these readings is to deepen readers' understanding of writing techniques and help them master their application.

For example, the section on characterization in fiction writing includes a dialogue-rich chapter from Bernard MacLaverty's novel *Cal*. The passage develops the relationships among Cal, Crilly, and Marcella through their conversations. The textbook provides the following reading prompts: Read the chapter carefully and observe the distinct speech styles and behavioral patterns of the three characters engaged in dialogue. Whose style is concise, and who tends to speak at length? Who uses formal language, and who frequently resorts to slang? How does the way each character speaks change when addressing different people? Pay particular attention to their jokes, meaningful silences, and ways of persuading others. By considering these questions, readers can explore and learn how to use both the content and manner of speech to develop characters [14].

Similarly, the section on narrative perspective in fiction writing uses Hemingway's "*The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife*". The textbook offers the following reading prompts: Read the story carefully. Do you think the characters' thoughts can be conveyed in ways other than through their psychological states? Cite examples from the text to support your answer. The story employs third-person narration. How does Hemingway control

the information conveyed to readers, and why has he arranged it this way? Is this approach effective? Could you rewrite the story from a different perspective? Try comparing the differences between the two versions [14].

In fact, many writing guides produced by Chinese writers for creative writing instruction essentially adopt an approach grounded in creative reading and creative criticism: they teach readers how to write by teaching them how to read. Well-known examples include *The Fiction Classroom* (*Xiaoshuo Ketang*) and *The Inner World: Lectures on Wang Anyi's Fiction* (*Xinling Shijie: Wang Anyi Xiaoshuo Jianggao*) by Anyi Wang, *Close Reading of the Classics* (*Xidu Jingdian*) and *The Code of Fiction* (*Xiaoshuo Mima*) by Yuan Ma, and *The Fiction Class* (*Xiaoshuo Ke*) by Feiyu Bi. These lecture-based works by established writers are, in essence, lectures on reading and criticism. A particularly representative example is *Xiaoshuo Bailei* by writer Dachun Zhang. Using the reading of canonical works as its starting point, the book addresses specific problems of writing by drawing on different texts as examples and examining the techniques of fiction from multiple perspectives. For instance, it explores the thematics of fiction through a comparative reading of Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, and Milan Kundera's *Testaments Betrayed*. It examines the sense of pace in fiction through Lao She's *Broken Spear* and Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*. Through readings of *Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, and *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, it distills an understanding of action in traditional Chinese fiction, exploring how precise verbs can be crafted to create the pleasure of reading and propel the plot forward. Finally, through *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai*, it raises the question of whether the language of fiction is meant to be heard or seen, examining the advantages and disadvantages of using dialect in fiction [15].

In summary, whether in English-language creative writing textbooks on creative reading or in Chinese writers' guides to the practice, the approach is broadly similar: canonical works are selected to facilitate the targeted study of writing techniques. Readers are encouraged to use divergent and critical thinking to consider why writers make particular choices and what effects those choices produce, and then to draw on creative thinking to explore how these techniques might be imitated and how they might be developed in innovative ways. Responses to these questions ultimately take the form of creative criticism essays or creative reading notes. Such creative texts extend canonical works and constitute a form of secondary creative engagement with them.

4. The outcomes of creative criticism in workshops: aestheticized and imaginative creative texts

The ultimate purpose of creative criticism in workshops is to help participants produce their own literary works. In this process, critical essays, reading notes, and reflections on creative practice serve as intermediate outcomes.

4.1. The nature and characteristics of writers' criticism

In terms of its nature, creative criticism essays constitute a form of peer criticism in which writers critique the works of fellow writers. According to Albert Thibaudet, "There are three kinds of criticism today: spontaneous criticism, professional criticism, and master criticism" [16]. The first, also known as oral criticism or criticism of the moment, is a form of criticism practiced by educated readers. Its practitioners are people who enjoy reading and possess relatively strong cultural literacy and powers of appreciation. They comment on the works they read out of personal interest, generally expressing their views orally in conversations with friends, though they sometimes use the media, including newspapers, blogs, and online platforms such as WeChat public

accounts, to communicate their attitudes and opinions. This form of criticism has a low threshold for participation and is produced on a large scale, but its content tends to be fragmented and predominantly subjective and impressionistic. The second type is professional criticism, also known as criticism by academics. Its practitioners are primarily professional critics affiliated with institutional settings such as universities and writers' associations. They strive for rigor, emphasize the production of theoretical discourse, and often feel a sense of responsibility toward literary history. Nevertheless, they must also guard against allowing abstract terminology to substitute for concrete textual analysis. The third type is known as artistic criticism or writers' criticism, a form of peer criticism. Drawing on their own creative experience, writers produce criticism characterized by aesthetic refinement and distinctive personal styles. Thibaudet holds this form of criticism in particularly high regard, considering it a mode of criticism that operates at the very heart of art, because it is itself a form of re-creation distinguished by innovation and aesthetic appeal. Reading and criticism in creative writing workshops constitute a practical form of this type of criticism.

In terms of its characteristics, writers' criticism places considerable emphasis on intuitive experience and takes the form of dialogue and experiential engagement. When one writer reads another's work, the experience resembles that of a chef tasting a dish prepared by another chef. The chef's perspective naturally differs from that of an ordinary diner or a food critic. Diners primarily care about satisfying their hunger and enjoying the food, whereas food critics are more specialized diners who generally lack firsthand cooking experience but compare a variety of dishes using their more refined senses of smell and taste. Professional chefs, by contrast, often draw on their own culinary experience and sensibilities to engage in dialogue with their peers, identifying subtle details that ordinary diners might overlook.

This experiential and dialogic approach shares certain affinities with the impressionistic mode of criticism discussed by Guangqian Zhu in *On Beauty (Tan Mei)*. In this work, Zhu distinguishes four types of critics. The first assumes the role of a mentor. Such critics hold an ideal of art that they themselves are unable to realize through creative practice, and they impose this ideal on others. The second assumes the role of a judge. These critics have a set of rules in mind and use them to evaluate all works: those that conform to the rules are deemed beautiful, while those that violate them are deemed ugly. The third assumes the role of an interpreter or translator. Just as an interpreter translates a foreign language into a local one to make it intelligible, these critics help readers understand information about writers and their works. The fourth type practices impressionistic criticism. Such critics occupy the position of gourmets: they seek aesthetic pleasure and describe the impressions left by what they experience. They reject judge-like criticism because it assumes the existence of universal standards of beauty and ugliness, whereas impressionistic critics maintain that each individual should judge according to personal taste. They also reject translation-like criticism because it is objective and scientific in orientation. For impressionistic critics, criticism is an artistic and subjective practice. Rather than merely serving dishes to diners like a restaurant attendant, the critic should personally taste the food [17].

4.2. Creative experience and aesthetic expression

In the reading and criticism activities of creative writing workshops, instructors should therefore encourage students to draw on the full range of their sensory experiences and insights into the creative process, engaging with writers' works wholeheartedly and discovering their most distinctive artistic effects. The fiction criticism of Jianwu Li, a writer active during the Republican period, provides a representative example. Li wrote plays, fiction, and essays, and his aesthetic sensitivity to literature was therefore exceptional. After reading a work by Zi Ye, he wrote: "Zi Ye's fiction has always seemed like a young tree scorched by fire. It lacks the narrative grace of *The Field of Life and Death* and the liveliness of the language in *One Thousand and Eighty Burdens*

... Here, nothing is visible except suffering and the will to rise above it. We may well use the words 'tragic grandeur' to describe it" [18]. Here, Jianwu Li uses the metaphor of a "tree scorched by fire", which evokes visual and olfactory sensations, to convey his immediate response to Zi Ye's fiction. Through comparison, he further articulates his overall impression of the work as one of tragic grandeur.

In another example, Li commented on Xian'ai Jian's *Collected Stories of the City Below* as follows: "Although the author's world is not extensive, it is exceptionally desolate yet serene. I would not call it bleak, because within the range of his perceptions, it seems like a small river flowing across level ground, long exposed to the warmth of the sun, yet retaining a clear and refreshing charm" [18]. Li uses the expression "desolate yet serene" to capture his response to the author's prose, yet the sensibility conveyed by this phrase is remarkably subtle. When reading and criticizing the works of other writers, Li draws on his accumulated creative experience to empathize with their artistic intentions, penetrate to the heart of their works, and identify the qualities that make them most affecting. Such experience can provide valuable clues for textual analysis, but these insights must still be grounded in specific textual evidence and remain open to discussion and scrutiny by other readers.

In addition to Jianwu Li, Wenxuan Cao is also skilled at identifying the distinctive qualities of literary works by combining an overall understanding of the text with his own creative experience and insights. For example, in *Fifteen Lectures on Classical Writers (Jingdian Zuojia Shiwu Jiang)*, Cao uses the expression "language washed clean by water" to characterize his impression of Wang Zengqi's fiction. He argues that Wang's greatest achievement lies in his language, which possesses a distinctive personal style. Accordingly, Cao approaches his assessment primarily from the perspective of linguistic appreciation. His engagement with Wang's fiction is less a matter of reading in the ordinary sense than of immersing himself in and savoring the works through an embodied act of *taste*. He engages his sense of smell to savor the fragrance of the language, his sense of taste to appreciate its rhythms, his sense of touch to feel the currents flowing between the lines, and his sense of sight to take in the vivid panoramas of characters and regional customs. Cao describes Wang's language as suffused with a captivating, primordial, fairy-tale-like moral sensibility, beneath which lies a distant and mysterious beauty. All these qualities convey an ethos of *wuwei* (non-action): restrained, gentle, and tranquil [19].

For example, when reading Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged*, Wenxuan Cao's immediate impression was one of "repeated frustration": "Repeated frustration, one instance after another, constitutes *Fortress Besieged*. To be frustrated in this way is to make an effort that comes to nothing, to see a hope suddenly shattered, or to watch something that seemed absolutely certain, just when you are congratulating yourself on your success, suddenly turn into an illusion that has vanished. Open *Fortress Besieged*, and you will find one trap of frustration after another. As far as Fang Hung-chien is concerned, his entire story consists of one instance of frustration after another ... To borrow the words of *Fortress Besieged*, an ideal is not merely a temptation but also a source of irony. Before it is realized, it is a beautiful object of desire; once it has been achieved, it becomes a cruel point of comparison. Ultimately, frustration is a form of human existence, and *Fortress Besieged* is an abridged account of this condition" [19]. Cao uses the term "repeated frustration" to connect the episodes in *Fortress Besieged* and uncover the novel's underlying themes. This interpretation stems partly from Cao's own insight as a writer and partly from his use of the novel as a vehicle for expressing his own worldview and values. As Anatole France observes, "A good critic tells of the adventures of his soul among masterpieces. There is no such thing as objective art, just as there is no such thing as objective criticism ... In speaking of Shakespeare, Racine, Pascal, or Goethe, I am really speaking of myself" [5].

In addition to drawing on his own sensibilities, Cao frequently interprets literary works through the experience he has gained from writing fairy tales. For example, in his criticism of the fiction of Italo Calvino,

Franz Kafka, and Jorge Luis Borges, he repeatedly invokes the notion of "fairy-tale qualities". He argues that these writers' creative characteristics and modes of conception and expression possess such qualities, which manifest themselves in an allegorical dimension. This allegorical quality also becomes an important criterion in his evaluation of fiction [19]. Cao's experience as a fairy-tale writer may have shaped his attention to the "fairy-tale atmosphere" of these works.

Writers have different creative experiences and aesthetic preferences, and their readings of fellow writers' works therefore often bear distinctive personal marks. In addition to the examples of Jianwu Li and Wenxuan Cao, Virginia Woolf's *The Common Reader* is another exemplary case. Drawing on her own experience as a woman writer, Woolf reads works such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and Jane Austen's *The Watsons*. Through intuition and exceptional artistic sensitivity, she consistently identifies details overlooked by many critics. Building on her extensive reading, she also deliberately explores broader and more profound themes, including the limitations of women's writing and the relationship between literature and gender [20]. Calvino's *Why Read the Classics?* is another representative example. Calvino's own writing is characterized by an expansive imagination and a strong experimental spirit. His interpretations of literary works are similarly wide-ranging and unconventional. Although they may appear spontaneous, they often reveal deeper meanings [21].

Creative criticism essays can therefore possess both individuality and creativity. Literary scholarship emphasizes the academic rigor of criticism and the evidence supporting its arguments, whereas creative writing workshops also value the artistry of critical expression. These two requirements can complement each other: criticism with a distinctive personal style must still be supported by accurate quotations and sufficiently developed explanations. In other words, writers' criticism takes the writer as its subject, and the writing of reading and criticism is itself a form of creative writing.

4.3. The aesthetic tradition of Chinese literary criticism

Indeed, traditional Chinese literary criticism is generally characterized by vivid imagery and aesthetic expression, with criticism itself constituting a creative text that re-creates the work under discussion. These characteristics are particularly evident in the commentary tradition surrounding poetry. Representative works include Rong Zhong's *Shipin (Grades of Poets)*, Yu Yan's *Canglang Shihua (Canglang's Remarks on Poetry)*, Tu Sikuong's *The Twenty-Four Modes of Poetry*, and Guowei Wang's *Renjian Cihua (Words on Poetry in the Human World)*. The critical writings of these commentators are themselves poetic in nature. For example, when commenting on Lingyun Xie, Rong Zhong makes extensive use of analogy and emphasizes intuitive understanding and the appreciation of poetic resonance, effectively using poetry to critique poetry. *The Twenty-Four Modes of Poetry* organizes its discussion around twenty-four aesthetic qualities, illustrating each through a range of images. For instance, it uses images of cranes, colorful clouds, lofty figures in paintings, and lotus leaves, expressed in rhyming four-character verses, to evoke an ethereal and unrestrained poetic style. To convey the ideal of refinement and purity in poetry, it employs metaphors such as the refining of gold and silver, a clear pool reflecting the light of spring, and an ancient mirror revealing the human spirit. The result is an exceptionally subtle and evocative mode of criticism.

Beyond the criticism of poetry, traditional Chinese commentators also frequently use analogy in their readings of fiction, demonstrating considerable creativity. In his introductory essay "*On the Method of Reading the Fifth Most Talented Book*", written as a commentary on the opening of *Water Margin*, Shengtan Jin identifies numerous narrative techniques in the novel: "*Water Margin* employs many methods of composition ... including the method of the grass snake and gray thread ... the method of broad strokes ... and the method of the needle wrapped in cotton, with a hidden thorn. For example, when Hua Rong asks Song

Jiang to have his shackles removed, Song Jiang refuses; likewise, when Chao Gai repeatedly insists on going down the mountain, Song Jiang repeatedly persuades him to stay. The final time Chao Gai insists, however, Song Jiang no longer tries to stop him. These are examples of the method of the needle wrapped in cotton, with a hidden thorn. Beyond the brushwork and ink, a sharp blade suddenly thrusts straight in" [8].

These comments rely on ingenious metaphors and differ markedly from the academic terminology of Western narratology, revealing instead a form of practical wisdom grounded in everyday experience. The tradition of aesthetic criticism in ancient China continues to find expression today. Works such as Li Zehou's *The Path of Beauty*, Taiwanese writer Xun Jiang's *The Beauty of Chinese Literature* series, and Taiwanese novelist Bai Xianrong's *A Detailed Guide to Dream of the Red Chamber* each demonstrate, from different perspectives, the connection between aesthetic experience and the interpretation of canonical works. Creative writing workshops should therefore encourage participants not only to write lyrical and narrative works creatively but also to produce reading and criticism texts with creativity.

5. Discussion: constructing a pyramid model of creative criticism

Creative writing upholds the primacy of creativity and adheres to a literary perspective grounded in the ontology of creativity. Whether concerned with theories of composition, writing pedagogy, or reading and criticism, all these areas develop under the guidance of this ontological perspective. From a methodological standpoint, creative reading takes creative texts as its objects of study. An important criterion for criticism is the evaluation of a text's creative value in relation to its objectives and expressive effects. The purpose of criticism is to identify creative elements, discern the effects and conditions of applicability of different creative choices, and thereby establish internal standards for composition that can guide the production of new creative works. The critical process requires workshop participants to draw fully on their sensitivity to literary and artistic creativity and their own creative experience. Under the guidance of workshop instructors, individual close-reading criticism is combined with peer criticism among workshop participants.

Drawing on René Wellek's view that every literary work is "a stratified structure of signs and meanings" [22], this paper proposes a multilayered, pyramid-shaped methodological model of creative criticism. Grounded in the text, the model seeks to integrate critical approaches centered on the author, the reader, and the sociocultural context. It creatively incorporates, combines, and adapts various critical schools, including reader-response theory, reception aesthetics, impressionistic criticism, archetypal criticism, psychological criticism, and sociocultural criticism, thereby establishing a multidimensional approach to literary criticism.

The model comprises three levels: close reading as the foundational level, collaborative reading as the intermediate level, and deep reading as the generative level. In practical workshop settings, these three levels are further divided into five steps that proceed progressively, ultimately transforming reading and criticism into writing practice. Each step approaches creativity from a particular perspective and draws on different critical methods developed throughout literary history, adapting and integrating them through a process of re-creation. Specifically, close reading corresponds to the creative signification and creative comparison stages; collaborative reading corresponds to the creative reception and creative reflection stages; and deep reading emphasizes transforming the insights gained from the preceding stages into one's own writing practice. The three levels can be revisited in either direction and need not be completed in a rigid, linear sequence.

The creativity of any literary work is never abstract or detached from its textual realization. A creative text is first and foremost a complete, organic system of signs. Accordingly, the first level is the creative signification stage, which begins with close reading and involves identifying and analyzing textual elements such as characters, space, plot, structure, and linguistic style. This foundational and crucial stage enables

readers to develop an initial understanding of the work as an organic whole and to analyze its constituent elements.

The second level is the creative comparison stage. The creative value of a work is primarily reflected in its originality and novelty. It is therefore necessary to situate an individual work within literary history, particularly the history of literary genres, and apply genre-based approaches flexibly to identify the conventions of tradition that the work follows. Methods drawn from comparative literature can then be used to investigate what genuinely distinguishes the work from others of the same genre and to assess the extent of its innovation. The purpose of this stage is to move beyond the analysis of an isolated work and evaluate and understand its creative and innovative value more objectively within the broader evolution of literary history and the continuum of literary tradition. The creative signification and creative comparison stages focus primarily on textual analysis, generally conducted by individual workshop participants under the instructor's guidance and informed by their own creative and reading experiences.

To make full use of the communicative advantages of creative writing workshops, it is necessary to proceed to the third and fourth levels: the creative reception stage and the creative reflection stage. These stages are carried out through collaborative reading in small groups and in the workshop as a whole. Drawing on reception aesthetics and reader-response theory, participants identify gaps in canonical works or works submitted by their peers and raise questions open to debate. They discuss issues relating to textual structure, as well as the ideological and ethical values embodied in the works. Participants are encouraged to draw on impressionistic and affective approaches to criticism to articulate their immediate impressions and responses to a text. Under the instructor's guidance, they then explore its deeper meanings and broader contexts, including its social, historical, and cultural background, engaging with more profound questions concerning values, ideology, and philosophical reflection. This process also draws on methods associated with cultural criticism.

Finally, since the purpose of reading and criticism is to inform writing, the process culminates in the highest level: the creative practice stage. At this stage, participants learn from and adapt valuable elements of the texts they have read, integrating them with their own creative insights and experience. They approach writing as a craft that can be learned and practiced through imitation, undertaking exercises in rewriting and stylistic imitation or accumulating material and inspiration for future work.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined creative reading and criticism in Chinese creative writing workshops in terms of their objectives, processes, and outcomes. Its central argument is that workshop criticism should not simply reproduce the aims of conventional literary criticism instruction. Whereas the latter often emphasizes literary knowledge and interpretation, creative criticism asks how a work is made, why particular expressive choices are effective, and how the insights gained from reading can inform new writing. In this sense, reading is not separate from composition but an integral part of the creative process. The pedagogical objective is to help participants develop a poetics of composition through attentive reading, critical judgment, and continued writing practice.

The discussion of English-language creative writing textbooks, modern Chinese writers' criticism, and traditional Chinese literary commentary also indicates that this approach requires both analytical precision and creative responsiveness. Close reading helps participants examine language, plot, characterization, and narrative perspective, while comparative reading situates these choices within literary traditions and conventions. The examples of writers' criticism show how creative experience, aesthetic intuition, and

imaginative expression can enrich critical writing without replacing careful attention to textual evidence. In the workshop, individual observations can be developed through peer dialogue, and insights gained from reading can be tested through imitation, rewriting, and manuscript revision. Reading and criticism thus become not only ways of understanding existing works but also activities that contribute directly to the making of new ones.

The proposed pyramid model brings these findings together through three levels—close reading, collaborative reading, and deep reading—and five stages: creative signification, creative comparison, creative reception, creative reflection, and creative practice. Through these five steps and three levels, workshop criticism, under the instructor's guidance and with the discovery and discussion of creative value at its core, proceeds from individuals to the workshop collective, from individual works to groups of works situated within literary history, and from reading and criticism to writing practice. In this way, creativity theory, theories of composition, writing pedagogy, and theories of reading and criticism are organically integrated, resulting in an effective and practical approach to creative criticism in writing workshops.

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