

Taking Wu Zhe's "Sa Ye / Run Freely" as an Example to See the Growth of Chinese Original Danmei Fictions

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Abstract—In the Chinese novels of the new century, danmei online fictions are often regarded as a special type. At present, most of the academic research on it is based on “women’s sexual fantasies”, ignoring that it is also a youth subculture with entertainment properties. It is of great significance to interpret danmei fictions from the perspective of growth. The popular novel “Sa Ye / Run Freely” takes the northern towns of modern society as the background of the story, and tells the story of two teenagers redeeming each other. Although it is produced as a danmei, it presents a relatively real growth state of Chinese young people. On the one hand, the author shows the marginal attributes and rebellious colors of the protagonists Jiang Cheng and Gu Fei in the process of growing up, and on the other hand, describes how they regulate themselves in the group, family, and system. As an attempt for teenagers, “Sa Ye / Run Freely” uses women to imagine the love and growth between men, and has a dialogue with the culture of the parents. It contains a kind of “Mulan”-style gender anxiety, which reflects the resistance and obedience of Chinese teenagers to the culture of their parents.

Keywords—danmei fictions, BL (Boys Love), subculture

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese danmei fictions are a cultural product of the globalized digital age, with the Internet as the main front. The word Danmei is derived from the Japanese kanji for the English word “aestheticism”, i.e., the aestheticist literature that was popular in the European literary scene in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Initially, the Japanese word for aestheticist literature was translated as Danmei (耽美) to refer to the Japanese aestheticist literary trend, and in the 1970s, the Japanese manga industry appropriated the term danmei to interpret male-male romance works created by women, and later used the term Boys Love (BL), to refer to male-male love stories created by women. “In the 1990s, the term Chinese danmei works spread from Hong Kong and Taiwan to mainland China, referring to works written by female authors, with female readers as a predefined group of recipients, and oriented towards female desires, it refers to stories written by female authors, with female readers as a predefined target group, and oriented towards female desires [1].

At present, most of the research on danmei novels is based on the premise of “women’s sexual fantasies”. From the perspective of gender expression, sex/gender is certainly a topic that cannot be avoided in the study of danmei novels, but as a kind of youth subculture with the nature of entertainment, it has received little attention. The danmei novel is a lineage of youth literature that has flourished since the new century. Whether it is the author, the protagonist, or the audience, most of them are in their

youth/teenage years, and its main theme cannot be separated from the word “growth”. Take Jinjiang Literary City (晋江文学城jjwxc.net, 2003–), the leading platform for online literature in mainland China, for example, its consumer group mainly consists of women aged 18–35 who have strong consumption power [2], with “students” taking up a large proportion. “Adolescence is a second stage of life full of storms and pressures, full of emotional chaos and commotion, characterized by obvious individual mental anxiety and social disorder”, young men and women at this stage have a restless heart, and at the same time have a kind of unaccountable perplexity about themselves and the future [3, 4]. The popularity of youth subculture reflects the attempts of young people to solve the contradictions in the social structure that they face in a subversive, rebellious and marginalized manner, and the programs they adopt are significantly different from the style and style of mainstream culture in various aspects such as the way of imagining, behaving, and discourse [5]. As a resident author of Jinjiang Literature City, Wu Zhe (巫哲) is especially good at creating campus themes. Most of his creations are based on modern cities, with most of them being campus themes, and most of his protagonists are students or young people who have just left society. In 2019, the popularity of Wu Zhe’s delayed-media novel “Sa Ye” (撒野Run Freely) made the author pay attention to the phenomenon that more “out-of-the-circle” danmei-media literature has a strong correlation with the imagery of “campus”. China’s first truly danmei movie, *Like Love* (类似爱情), was adapted from Angelina’s novel *You’re a Man and I Love You* (你是男的我也爱), which tells the love story between a male college student and his roommate, and in 2016, the web drama *Addicted* (上瘾), which has attracted unprecedented discussion on the Internet, also directly focuses on high school students as the protagonists, and pays attention to the social context of youth culture. Chinese scholar Yang Ling, in discussing the relationship between youth literature and danmei novels, points out that “the two are two of the most pioneering teams in popular literature and culture since the new century, and have a seemingly united relationship” [6].

Based on this, this paper argues that if we want to comprehensively examine the cultural value of danmei works, in addition to analyzing the sense of gender anxiety in delayed works, we should not ignore the inherent conflict of delayed novels as a youth subculture of entertainment. From the cognitive standpoint of youth/adolescent subculture, this paper will read the text of the popular Chinese danmei fictions “Sa Ye” carefully, dig out the

marginalization of youth culture in the text, and face up to the problem of “intergenerational communication” in Danmei novels.

II. GROTESQUE: THE COLOR OF REBELLION IN “SA YE” FROM THE CHARACTERIZATION

The novel tells the story of the mutual redemption of Jiang Cheng (蒋丞), an honor student in a key school, and Gu Fei (顾飞), a “steel mill bully” (钢厂小霸王). In them, there is a strong sense of resistance and rebellion.

Foster in *Faces of the Novel* categorizes characters into round characters and flat characters. One of the characteristics of flat characters is typecasting and flattening [7], and one of the character traits of round characters can be seen as danmei character development and growth. In general, it is a well-established “unspoken rule” in delinquent novels that characters are described by labels and types to make it easier for readers to make choices about their reading preferences. Therefore, danmei authors tend to neglect the creation of character arc, i.e., the creation of character’s nature. However, Wu Zhe carefully depicts the growth line of Jiang Cheng’s character, which gives him a “character arc” and makes him a round character.

Jiang Cheng is not a “good boy” in the conventional sense. He fights, misses classes, skips school, smokes cigarettes, and is returned to a small town in the north because of his rebelliousness and being an outcast. As a recurring image in the book, “steel mill” (钢厂) has a unique connotation. As a unique symbol of the northeastern city, the connotation of the steel mill has two layers. First, it serves to complement the novel’s period setting, and second, it suggests the marginalization of adolescents in the narrative of youthful growth in China’s post-industrial era. Jiang Cheng comes to the “steel mill” as an abandoned son who has been given up for adoption. Previously, he had been fighting, truanting from school, irritable, and uninformed, and was not a “good boy” in the eyes of his adoptive parents; from the moment he learns of his adopted status, he decides to end his relationship with his adoptive parents and return to the factory where he came from. From the moment he learned of his adopted status, he decided to end his relationship with his adoptive parents and return to his factory, the “Steel Mill”, which looked like a “runaway” for the sake of dignity of a rebellious child, and it was not until his adoptive mother sent all the belongings to the “Steel Mill” that he realized that he had really left. It was not until his foster mother sent all his belongings to the “steel mill” that he realized he had really left his “hometown”. He has a very strong character and is always competitive in competitions, relationships, and studies. In fact, as an “imperfect ordinary person”, Jiang Cheng’s personality is rather vague, with a potential tendency to violence.

By the same token, Gu Fei, a small-time gangster in the steel mill, is not a “bad kid” in the traditional sense. In the novel, Gu Fei appears as a sensitive and long-standing family caregiver. Gu Fei is a child born and raised in the “steel mill” and is known as the “steel mill bully”. At the same time, he had artistic hobbies such as making music, taking photographs, and writing poetry. As Howard Becker

states in the introduction to his book *The Outsiders: A Sociological Study of Transgression*, art and transgression are both “similar and highly universal”. The gangster and artistic temperament is also the setting for his rebelliousness.

The characters’ sense of anti-labeling exacerbates their alienation and emphasizes their sense of resistance. Whether it’s society, school, or family, Jiang Cheng is always resistant. The novel spends a great deal of time on how the two male protagonists, Jiang Cheng and Gu Fei, establish social relationships with strangers. The author highlights their incompatibility with their surroundings by repeatedly interspersing their conflicts with family members and social gangsters, thus exposing their family of origin, and at the same time uses a class activity, a basketball game full of youthful fervor, to bring Jiang Cheng and Gu Fei, who share the same situation, closer together, in order to emphasize that the protagonists, Jiang Cheng and Gu Fei, aspire to freedom. Gu Fei’s state of yearning for freedom.

The dark side of transgression is escape. Janice A. Radway, in *Reading Romance Fiction: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, points out that “escape” has a double meaning: a rejection of a certain environment, and an intention to construct a utopian future [8]. We are first and foremost concerned with this question: what environment are they in? Around 2015, the “sub-generation” of northeastern writers represented by Shuang Xuetao and Ban Yu began to enter the field of popular culture, and works such as Tie Xi Qu: *West of the Tracks* (铁西区), *The Looming Storm* (暴雪将至) are set against the backdrop of a wave of layoffs triggered by the state-owned enterprise reform of the 1990s, and take the “steel mill” as the backdrop of the reform of the state-owned enterprises. and construct the imagery of the “steel factory” and the cityscape of Northeast China with the dual meanings of “forgetting” and “marginalization” [9]. We can also see a lot of symbols related to the Northeast industry in *Scattered Fields*, such as the X Steel Kindergarten, X Steel Elementary School, X Steel Kiosk, Railroad Bridge, Coal Mine Hospital, etc. These symbols are unfamiliar to Jiang Cheng’s eyes. This is a strange, dead world in Jiang Cheng’s eyes. But to Gu Fei, this is his everyday life. It is important to emphasize here that the edges of town locations are effective in triggering emotional resonance in readers.

They bear the marks of former glory and prosperity, but present a dusty, dilapidated and gray atmosphere. Most of the people who live here are steel mill workers who lost their houses after the mill closed down, and most of them live a life of self-loathing and self-abandonment. Jiang Cheng’s father, Li Baoguo (李保国), is a typical representative of this group: A “steel mill special” with a thunderbolt hat, a loud voice, and a strange smell, he swears, smokes, drinks, plays cards, and gambles, steals on credit, and even runs away from his wife in domestic violence. Gu Fei’s father, similar to Li Baoguo, beat his young daughter into autism and drowned himself in a lake due to alcoholism. Group unemployment changes not only production and labor relations and family economic conditions, but also individual interpersonal interactions and attitudes toward life. The spatial symbols imply the marginalized people status of Jiang Cheng and Gu Fei.

III. METAPHORS AND SYMBOLISM OF GROWING UP IN “SA YE”

So, do they succeed in their resistance and grow up in the marginalized world? From the perspective of utopian future imagination, the answer is yes, but the uniqueness of the “Danmei” (BL) setting is that it gives this growth path the color of subcultural resistance and obedience, i.e., the growth of the characters is a kind of symbolic growth. The novel shows the restlessness and rebellion of the student body, but it does not change the inherent social formations, but rather conveys love, warmth, and inspiration in a rhetorical “wild” way.

Franco Moretti points out that the novel of coming-of-age has become an important literary form during the modern social transformation mainly because the danmei faced by the “youth” in the novels – i.e., how to balance the delicate relationship between the sense of independent self and the social system – can also be regarded as a metaphor for the problems faced by the modern society [10]. Girls are able to make use of the “male/male” combination to perform the process of male society, male love, and male socialization in the delayed fiction with ease, and the emotions behind the symbols are adapted. For example, the criminal investigation delayed novel “Mo Du” (默读) exposes the social reality with one case after another, and “Sha Po Lang” (杀破狼) and “2013” (二零一三) respond to the technological revolution with steampunk and post-apocalyptic zombies. Scattered Wild, on the other hand, touches on the pressure of the student population through the topics of family, examination, and employment. The plot of the college entrance examination, which is heavily colored in the novel, deserves our attention. “The college entrance examination is an important plot of the youth theme, and a large number of inspirational youth theme works focus on it. Most of the inspirational movies about high school entrance exams, such as “Young Style” (青春派 Qing Chun Pai) and “Biri Girl” (垫底辣妹 ビリギャル), end with the candidates successfully entering the university of their choice, while the main character’s life comes to an abrupt end after entering the university. The paradox behind similar “college entrance exam myth” narratives is that it seems as if the candidates’ lives will be changed as long as they fulfill their mission of taking the exam.

As polarized symbols in the examination system, “Straight A student” (学霸 xue ba) and “slacker student” (学渣 xue zha) symbolize the amount of power that academic ability occupies in class ratings. Whether the emphasis is on students’ academic performance, or whether the part of the test is omitted and the writing is shifted to romance and supernatural settings in the campus online novels, the students’ experience of life as independent individuals in the examination system is mostly flattened or even ignored. The more realistic part of Wu Zhe’s novel is that it deconstructs the gap between the system and reality of the “Straight A student” and the “slacker student”. As a slacker student with average learning ability, Gu Fei didn’t make the feat of “scum’s rebellion” because of his boyfriend, and Jiang Cheng, the so-called “scum”, was also a drop of water in the ocean after he got into a major university with a

lot of talents. The so-called “A student” Jiang Cheng, after he got into a major university with a lot of talent, is also a drop of water into the sea. The densely-packed examination routine reproduces the cruelty of self-flattening in the face of an unchangeable rating system for young people, and the default myth of the college entrance examination alienates individuals into “bullies” and “scums”. Wu Zhe’s unique concern is that he neither criticizes the importance of the college entrance examination as a talent selection system, nor lets this part of the life of the main character take up the whole life.

The novel presents the experience of the college entrance examination in an unforgettable way. In the part of preparation for the college entrance examination, Jiang Cheng prepares for the examination with all his heart and all his soul – desks piled high with exercise books of various subjects, various inspirational slogans and slogans, the eye-catching countdown to the college entrance examination, and the feeling of doing the questions in the college entrance examination, etc. These symbols inspire the collective memory, and make many people who have gone through the college entrance examination sigh with relief. At the end of the story, Jiang Cheng succeeds in law school and Gu Fei becomes a teacher. Interestingly, “law” and “education” are the “mainstream institutional consensus” for the society, either emerging or inherent in historical traditions, and norms are enforced through various forces. American scholar Arthur Asa Berger argues that “people read popular culture style novels primarily for fun and entertainment, but I would suggest that they get more out of these texts than they realize. All texts teach us something, whether about human personality, motivation, morality, or the nature of love. We read, in part, to escape from our daily existence to live indirectly through others - to have adventures, to meet all sorts of interesting people, to gain, insights that help us live better” [11]. Wu Zhe makes the abstract “redemption” more palpable, real and powerful with the survival status of the lower-class characters and the warmth of people’s feelings, and the popular romantic narrative still tells us that this is a story that has been embellished. Therefore, in terms of structural problems, the novel does not take a completely critical attitude, but responds to the depressing situation of individual loneliness through warmth. Even though the reality is written in a glorified way, the conflict of internal fragmentation can still be felt.

Campus themes are relatively common themes in danmei fictions, and it has actually become a part of people’s enjoyment in “Sa Ye”. It is worth asking what is the unique aura that this novel possesses. What is the ultimate reason for teenage women to indulge in boys love?

The love between the boys in “Sa Ye” points to an interactive relationship. In the discussion of the theory of love, Alain Badiou’s *The Polyphony of Love*, which takes Roland Barthes’s romance as a reference text, defines love as an event and one of the most famous and complex myths in Europe. Badiou argues that love deals not with the power relations between two people or the order of body/mind/desire, but with a larger proposition beyond the “world of the two”. In contrast to the previous love stories of “scum attacking, bitching and receiving” (渣攻贱受) and

“strong attacking, weak receiving” (强攻弱受), the strong love represented by Jiang Cheng and Gu Fei tends to emphasize that the conflict of “love” does not come from them, but rather from the fact that they are not in love. The conflict of “love” does not come from the order and power of who is attacking and who is receiving, and who is superior and who is inferior between the two of them. Their love obviously escapes from the binary identity, and points to the unshakeable “third party” which is the absolute authority from the real world.

The escape of binary identities is also reflected in the relationship between the danmei novel setting and the imagery of female growth, which uses the imagery of “gay symbols” to serve the sense of “transgression”. The world of delayed fiction utilizes “gay symbols” to project the desire of the self, which has two meanings: One is to establish the status of the viewing subject, and the other is to compensate for the desire to transgress. In the 21st century of information explosion, the generation Z, who are full of individuality, have long been uneasy with all kinds of rules and regulations in school, family, and society. This uneasiness is relieved in the novel, which can be a moment of pleasure. The rule of “Boys Love (BL)” serves as a metaphor representing rebellion and escape from the rules of the real world. Under the heterosexual norms and gender essentialism in the real world, homosexuality and sexuality are non-mainstream and marginalized. The situation of being “marginalized” by mainstream society is a regular occurrence for young boys and girls with a strong sense of self. The rules for the creation of male homosexuality in danmei fiction derive from an escape from the real world, which is the same as the existence of subterranean rules that “marginalize” homosexuals in reality.

As an attempt for teenagers, “Sa Ye” utilizes women to imagine the love and growth between men, and to engage in a dialogue with (parent culture), which is a kind of “Hua Mulan”-style (women dressed as men) gender anxiety, and a compromise of being placed in the norms. According to Prof. Zhang Xiaohong, after 200 years of women’s liberation, women still have not created their own social templates, and once a woman enters into social expression, she is either in the situation of Hua Mulan, [12, 13] or she has to go back to the female template or female norms in social expression. Thus, it is clear that the danmei fictions represented by “Sa Ye”, which goes to the public with a rebellious stance, also take over the patriarchal culture’s precepts with a positive consciousness. They often only offer symbolic resistance because of the underlying consistency and continuity between them and the parent culture, both negating and complementing the dominant culture, and sometimes appropriating its symbols to form their own style [14].

IV. CONCLUSION

In the eyes of adults, young people have not yet reached a level of mindfulness and responsibility where they can set reasonable norms for themselves. A similar situation occurs between the sexes. As a complex product, Chinese danmei fictions propose a path of mutual support in the quagmire towards hope and redemption with the symbol of “boys love”, behind which is a kind of youth care. In this paper, we take the opportunity to examine the complexity of the delayed novel by entering into the interior of the novel through the book “Sa Ye”, and digging out a kind of growth experience that is dominated by modern women but marginalized under the symbol of “male-male”.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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