



# On the Dilemma of Women from the Perspective of the Chinese and Korean Adaptation of “Startling at Every Step”

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**Abstract.** Modern Chinese cultural researchers generally believe that the “trans fiction” has a “utopian” color: as the protagonist, the strider - usually male - can use modern history and scientific knowledge to change the historical process, so as to achieve the realization of his own value in a fantasy historical environment. This paper points out that this Utopia narrative has limitations in the gender dimension through careful reading of the novel and film and television texts of “Startling at Every Step”; The theorists believe that when female transgressors try to rewrite the historical process, they are often subject to patriarchy, which makes their “utopian” desire to change history become futile. This paper attempts to rethink the cultural significance of the cross novel from the female perspective.

**Keywords:** time travel drama · utopia · women

## 1 Introduction

As the most important narrative form in network culture and contemporary entertainment, “through literature” has a long tradition. “Transcendental Literature” tells the story that a modern person enters another historical time and space through special circumstances and participates in the world and historical creation of another time and space. Strictly speaking, travel literature has no clear origin. From Tao Yuanming’s The Peach Blossom Garden in the Eastern Jin Dynasty to the English writer H. G. Wells’s The Time Machine and the American writer Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, Time travel is an enduring literary theme.

Carlos Rojas, an American scholar, pointed out that the trans fiction has a utopian color. Crossing novels upset our original linear view of time, and finally gave us the ability to “dream” [1]. Although LuoPeng’s interpretation is relatively general, it reminds us that we can’t simply regard cross narration as a form of entertainment, but it is the cultural logic behind it. Later, Xu Shuang pointed out that as a “Utopia”, the trans literature could also be a “heterotopia” that could transcend the body and gender, taking the Promotion of Princess Crown as an example. Xu Shuang borrows the concept of Michael Foucault and points out that The Promotion of Princess Crown brings readers a physical imagination that transcends gender restrictions. The gender leap that is difficult to achieve in reality

is not only realized in the form of novels, but also participates in the creation of history in a way of “androgyny” [2]. Gwennaël Gaffric, taking the example of Lingao Qiming, pointed out that this utopian imagination also contains a larger national appeal, that is, nostalgia for the prosperity of imperial China and redemption for the loss of modern China. Gaffric believes that, like many cross roads novels, movies and TV plays featuring male interlopers, “Lin Gao Qi Ming” has created a utopia that rewrites history - the interlopers cross and change history with modern scientific knowledge and political ideas, and achieve the Chinese empire in his mind. This rewriting of history, whether for authors or readers, has hit the “pain point” in contemporary national narrative [3]. Of course, there is no lack of academic circles to denounce it as the voice of “fawning on others” [4]. However, this Utopian power is gradually being accepted by serious literature. As the writer Li Er pointed out, fiction itself is the embodiment of the spirit of freedom, which not only allows us to have a deeper understanding of reality, but also may enable our words to have a power to intervene in reality, so that we can accurately understand ourselves from another perspective [5].

The research of the above scholars has a positive evaluation on the novel of “Crossing”. They all believe that “Crossing” is not a simple escape from reality, but a richer imaginative rebellion against the existing ideology, political structure and power order. “Crossing” means the possibility of re structuring, imagining and expressing these relationships in a new historical context. Therefore, they all recognize that crossing novels have a certain “Utopian color” and give the protagonist the privilege of changing history. However, the privilege of changing history and the “Utopian color” given by this privilege are often because the examples they use are all texts with male interlopers as the protagonists and narrators. Reflecting on the above studies from the perspective of gender studies, the situation and feelings of women in cross literature are their blind spots, which leads to their lack of critical thinking on cross literature. We have to ask, when women go through the pre modern historical environment, as women who have always been in a subordinate position, do they still have the privilege to change history? And if the literature of traversal is utopian, how can we understand the contradiction between making the traverser a subject of history and the patriarchy she is in? Below, I will answer these two questions by taking the Chinese and Korean versions of the TV series “Startling at Every Step” as examples.

## 2 The Adaptation of “Startling at Every Step”

Researchers who travel through novels have noticed how women’s consciousness has contributed to the emergence of female oriented themes such as “Women Honoring Literature”, “Women Powering Literature”, and “Farming Literature” [6]. However, the critics have not noticed that the female romance in the novel also has a strong sense of empowerment. But the uniqueness of “Startling at Every Step” lies in that the female consciousness it presents is not to portray women as “masculine women” such as “strong women” or “respected women”, but to wrap up the “modernity” enlightenment of female interlopers on male characters in novels or plays with the shell of “romance”. When modern political concepts such as “equality” and “democracy” are integrated into the emotional entanglement between female interlopers and male superiors, Love has become a driving force to change history.

Startling at Every Step was created by Tonghua, a writer. In 2005, it was published on Jinjiang original literature website. It creatively built the literary theme of “crossing through” on the background of the Qing court. Both the Chinese and Korean versions of Startling at Every Step were adapted from Tonghua’s novels. Whether it is the novel of “Startling at Every Step” or the text of two TV plays adapted from China and South Korea, it belongs to “Qing Chuan Wen”. Interestingly, Tong Hua, the author of the original book, claimed that he preferred the freedom granted to women by the “Tang Dynasty” [7], but placed “Heart Striking at Every Step” in the historical context of the Qing court’s “nine sons seizing the throne” [8]. This choice itself has rich gender class implications - as Gao Hanning pointed out, most of the “Qing Chuan Wen” interlocutors are women, and most of them are love novels, and most of them deal with the emotional problems of modern urban women [9].

Zhang Xiao in “Startling at Every Step” and Gao Xiazhen in “Startling at Every Step · Li” both entered the historical context of fantasy - the Qing Dynasty of China and the Korean Korean Dynasty - with a modern independent female attitude. Both texts are about urban white-collar women who “wear their souls” into the bodies of noble girls and fall in love with the royal family. The story mode of “startling step by step” still retains the “utopian imagination” of the novel: Zhang Xiao’s emotional experience in the Qing Dynasty is rich, and she has experienced three princes, first in love with the eighth master, fourth master, and finally the fourteenth master. Gao Xiazhen also experienced three princes in the Korean Dynasty, namely, the eighth prince, the fourth prince and the fourteenth prince. “Love” turns her stratum and body that she can pass through into a power that can change history. Zhang Xiao in Startling Every Step wants to change history, and she wants to save the people around her who she loves. She thinks the first thing to change is people’s ideas. She knew that with her own strength, she could not let everyone hear such thoughts, let alone instill them, so she decided to start instilling ideas from the people with power. She and the thirteen elder brothers who had a good relationship with her indoctrinated that people were all equal and free. They were born without the distinction of superiority, inferiority, nobility and inferiority. Even the Son of Heaven has no right to manipulate other people’s lives at will. Brother 13 thought deeply about what Ruoxi said, and he was re imbued with the idea of equality and freedom. With this thought, Brother 13 thought about the things around him again, and then passed on the words to Brother 14. Ruoxi succeeded in the first step of instilling new ideas, but not everyone could listen. But at least, Ruoxi has succeeded in spreading this idea. Gao Xiazhen in “Heart Striking Li” also wants to change history. The rain offering must choose one of the princes to be the sacrificial master. Cui Zhimeng tricked Wang Qin into choosing Zhao’s bamboo card. Since the fourth prince Zhao had scar on his face, his body did not match the body of the heir to the king. Xie Shu (Gao Xiazhen) thought of solving Zhao’s scar through modern makeup, and restored her identity as the heir. In this way, Gao Xiazhen successfully made the fourth prince pray for rain with her own hands, feet and makeup techniques. Even if Gao Xiazhen did not help the Fourth Prince, the Fourth Prince would pray for rain himself, and it would still rain. However, Gao Xiazhen can help the Four Princes to calm down the anger of the people on the side. He can follow the history, rather than change it.

For the female owners of “Startling at Every Step” and “Startling at Every Step · Li”, they have the intention to change history, which fully shows that they do not want to let brothers to kill each other. And to a certain extent, it also changes our understanding of history. Because our traditional view of history believes that history is a conspiracy and a benefit, which injects a feeling into history. In other words, to change history is not history itself, but the concept of history. Alarming step by step is the possibility for women to rewrite history. There are utopian ideas. Women want to improve their status, catering to the imagination of women leading cultural production, and even leading the historical process. In this sense, it is utopian to be alarmed step by step, which is not only an escape from reality, but also an inspiration to women themselves. After careful reading, we realize that Utopian imagination is at least a failure in the play. This failure also means that we should be skeptical of the optimistic imagination of overseas Sinology researchers. On the one hand, women want to rewrite history, but let history progress as before. Shaoxing Opera provides the possibility that some women can rewrite history. What we want to do is to provide the imagination that some women can rewrite history. At the same time, we also find the limitations of this imagination. Both “Startling at Every Step” and “Startling at Every Step · Li” deal with the fate of female interlopers in a fatalistic way, which implicitly seems to deny the possibility of women becoming a historical theme. The change they want to make just allows history to follow the original path.

### 3 Conclusions

Both the Chinese version of “Startling at Every Step” and the Korean version of “Startling at Every Step · Li” have gone through history and wanted to change history, but ultimately both of them could not change. They can’t escape from the final fatalism. When female interlopers try to rewrite the historical process, they are often subject to patriarchy, which makes their “utopian” desire to change history futile. Everything originates from the women’s dilemma they are in. Whether they are crossing through as women or in a weak power relationship, women were in a low position at that time and could not change their situation through their own power. Even if they knew history, they could not change the situation of people around them. Perhaps women try to influence the influential figures in the fantasy world through their thoughts. To influence men with the foresight of history, she can only become a producer of ideas by surpassing the power in physical and natural sense. Women must be superhuman to be heard.

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