



Exploration of Qu Yuan's Spiritual World through Fear-Expression

Ze Liu

School of Chinese Studies, Dalian Foreign Languages University, Dalian, China

E-mail addresses: liuzeworkmail@163.com

Abstract. Studies of ancient Chinese literature cannot overlook Qu Yuan (340-278BC), the earliest known poet in China, owing to the ingenuity in his writing as well as his spirits with long-lasting impact. In his works, the words used to describe personal feelings are immensely meaningful and meticulous, whose effect can be soul-stirring and high-valued. While presenting his mental state, Qu Yuan repeatedly uses “fear” to express his mental development. Through intensive reading of the representative works, especially by chanting and digesting the “fears”, the paper perceives such distinguishable Quzi spirits as his self-cultivation effort, self-sacrifice feeling and lofty aspiration to realize ideal politics so as to further explore the subtle gradual change of his mind, to sketch the journey of his spiritual world.

Keywords: Qu Yuan; fears; Quzi spirits; spiritual world

1 Introduction

Qu Yuan (340-278BC), also respectfully addressed as Quzi, impresses people that he is a man with strong mental power, which is born with as shown by the poetic sentence “I (Qu Yuan) have sumptuous born inner beauty”^[1], which becomes deeply ingrained with age because “I train persistently acquired ability as well”^[1]. According to Qu Yuan's Biography, a book relating his intellectual aptitude as well as experiences, Qu Yuan, with extraordinary brilliance and strong confidence, would rather die than change his original intention or surrender while confronting with vile snobs' contumely and the King's suspicion. His original intention, repeatedly mentioned in his works, virtually refers to his lifelong ideal of ideal politics, for which he would determine to die. However, although facing death unflinchingly, Qu Yuan refers to “fears” frequently whereby his subjective feelings are expressed, as can be exemplified by some sentences in his poetic works.

Statistically among Qu Yuan's books that elaborate his personal traces and feelings, there're twelve poetic sentences involved with his “fears”, eight in Lisao, two in Xisong, one in Xiwangri and Yuanyou respectively. What does he “fear”? The objects cover a lot of aspects: fear of fast-going time, fear of old age, fear of the king's untimely-death, fear of ruin to Chu country, fear of failure of fame-achievement, fear of

his premature death out of persecution, etc^[7]. The “fears”, covering both object and self, across time and space, showed his mind, once heavily preoccupied, got caught up in intensive struggle within himself. Its progressive layers revealed that the “fears” started from Qu Yuan himself, related to the king, expanded to the country, and finally came back to himself again. Evidently the series of “fears” subtly delineate Qu Yuan's inner world, presenting a true portrayal of his complex psychological contradictions. This also confirms his lifelong faith of “I love beauty and chastity to the degree of self-discipline” ^[1]. Starting from the concrete dissection of the “fears”, the paper tries to explore Quzi spirits so as to perceive the subtle gradual change of Qu Yuan's spiritual world.

2 Exploration of Qu Yuan's Self-cultivation Effort

A poetic sentence chosen from Lisao reveals that Quzi likes to “step back to trim my (Qu Yuan's) original clothes” ^[1], especially every time when he was frustrated. “Original clothes” literally refer to the clothes worn before into the officialdom, symbolically stand for the effort to improve one's self-cultivation to maintain his pure humanity. Firstly, such effort can be analyzed from his high concern for himself, because the majority of the “fears” are aroused from Qu Yuan the person proper. All his life, Qu Yuan pursues beauty, not just that of exterior beauty of “original clothes”, but that of the interior beauty of moral integrity. The “fears” in the sentences like “fear age not waiting for me” ^[1] “fear the ruthless metabolism of time sequence” ^[1] show his sigh for the fleeting time, his worry about the gaining-on old age. “Fear age not waiting for me” revealed that he feared not only that his days are numbered, but also that he had not enough time to cultivate integrity and thus resulting in its degeneration. It is such kind of psychological state that reflects Qu Yuan's unalterable pursuit of beauty. He loved all the beautiful things, including beneficial birds, scented herbs, and beautiful dress. Furthermore, he figuratively compared those beautiful things to lofty and loyal qualities, to men of virtue and integrity. He knew well the truth in the sentence of “neither virtue can be exacted from exterior, nor fame gained resorting to fraud” ^[1]. Therefore, “I (Qu Yuan) pick magnolia on the hillside in the morning and Su Mang on the island in the evening” ^[1] “I cloak myself with Jiang Li and angelica, and garland myself by clustering leaves of orchids” ^[1]. The temporal adverbials implied that he loved to do these things every day, every year. Both “Magnolia” and “Su Mang” are used figuratively to symbolize lofty moral cultivation, because the former, a kind of fragrant wood, blossoms with pure flowers in spring while the latter, a kind of green grass can survive even skinned or in cold winter. “Jiang Li” “angelica” and “orchid” are used to symbolize virtuous gentlemen because they are all characterized by sweet smell, secluded growing places and too modest to compete with others. Such delicate symbolic style shows that the poet habitually pursues virtue of pure beauty fervently and strengthens his moral cultivation persistently the whole life. Secondly, Qu Yuan pursues good fame, which proves true from the poetic line “I fear the failure to achieve a long fame” ^[1]. “Long fame” equaling to “good fame”, consists of achievements of morality, merits and authorship that can make a man's fame last long, which

actually are also known as “the three immortals” advocated by Confucian school. Hence display the goals of the poet’s lofty cultivation, which is also illustrated by Lin Yunming’s words,

Conjecturing that those snobs then ganged up for their personal interests, I (Qu Yuan) found they didn’t understand why I felt not honored to be promoted, but feared to lose my long fame. Even though such pursuit would arouse their jealousy, I would rather die only if I could relieve Chu people from persecution. [5]

Therefore, Qu Yuan has been busy with moral-construction and quest for beauty all his life. Such pursuit is relentless: first step begins with self-planning, to self-improvement and to self-actualization; second forms “the personality to love beauty naturally” [1]; third proceeds to “the harmonious relationship between the monarch and subjects” [1]; final step aims to realize the ideal of “ideal politics” [1]. The procedure coincides with Confucian concept of “self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, bringing peace to all under heaven”. Simultaneously, the fears resulting from his spiritual struggles reveal that his self-cultivation extends to a large scope, even to that of self-amendment. He dared to look straight at and examine his psychological state again and again, which can be illustrated by such facts as “regretting not having made out the road” [1], as reconsidering “Nv Xu’s advice” [1], as persistently interrogating his own soul by “Ling Fen’s auspicious divination” [1]. However, nothing could shake his right pursuit engraved in the depth of his heart, just as confronted in reality with vile snobs, evil gangs and Ling Xiu, when “his sound remonstrance was turned down and even himself being condemned, he would be able to step back to trim his original clothes” [1]. Such kind of “original clothes”, actually are concretely exemplified by “cloaking myself with Jiang Li and angelica, and garlanding myself by clustering leaves of orchids” [1], by “tailoring my jacket with lotus leaves, my skirt with lotus flowers” [1], by “heightening my cap and lengthening my accessories to my heart’s content” [1]. As previously mentioned, the authentic symbolic meaning of “original clothes” is fiercely sticking to his original intention, to the pursuit of good fame, and to the perseverance of right path. Hong Xingzu once said, “The poet (Qu Yuan) gathers lotus leaves and flowers to make clothes. The purer the clothes are, the more distinguishable the character is” [3]. Its connotation is as good as what is expressed in He Yisun’s *Saofa*, “what makes a man a gentleman is self-cultivation, while a vile snob, self-indulgence.” [2] This not only proves what Quzi loves and maintains persistently is the pure moral, to which he still adheres after self-introspection in adversaries, but also explains his extremely precious moralization and character.

3 Exploration of Qu Yuan’s Self-sacrifice Feelings

Among the objects of “fears” mentioned above, nearly half concern about self-cultivation and pursuit of good fame, for which Quzi never begrudges his life. However, what puzzles us is his fear of old age. The arrival of old age, admittedly leads to, yet not equal to death. Old age, to Qu Yuan who does not fear death at all, is greatly different from death. He mentions death repeatedly in his writing. In *Lisao* only, there

are quite a number of poetic sentences referring to death directly, such as “So long as my (Qu Yuan's) cherished things are good, I wouldn't regret even if I had to die a dozen times”^[1] “I'd rather die a violent death or even become a wandering ghost than join the vile mob”^[1] “I will keep my conscience clean and die for justice, which is the most admirable quality originally appreciated by previous sages”^[1] “Looking back at my old aspiration, I wouldn't regret even if I were put in danger or even in the face of death”^[1] as well as indirectly, such as “since I can't cater to the worldly men, I would act as Peng Xian does”^[1] “even if I were cut up, I wouldn't change my beauty-pursuit nature”^[1] “now that nobody is worth collaborating with in implementing the ideal politics, I would just follow Peng Xian to his dwelling place (tomb)”^[1], and so on. “Peng Xian”, a sage in Shang dynasty, drowned himself when his sound advice was turned down. In the latter three sentences, though Quzi does not say “death” explicitly, but expresses the same determination to die as the former ones. What to die for? The answer is to die for his country, for his ideal, for right path as well as for his original intention, which are easily found among his works. However, when he talks about his “fears”, why does he frequently parallel them with undaunted “death”? Actually on Quzi's value balance, national affairs, family matters and virtue cultivation are heavier than his life^[4], which is his lifetime unchanging integrity and benchmark. He Yisun said, “Unalterable quality taken as lifelong integrity by Quzi, makes him persist his beauty-pursuit to the end.”^[2] Obviously it's not hard to understand that Qu Yuan would rather die than give them up. However, he fears old age, as exemplified by the sentences like “Time flies as water flows, too fast for man to follow, that I fear age not waiting for me”^[1] “Old age is gaining on, that I fear the failure to achieve long fame”^[1]. Evidently, what makes him highly regretted is that old age leaves him no chance to achieve good fame, to freely express feelings of bettering his country. He detests the situation in which the arrival of old age crumbles away his original intention and ideals that are important to the degree of beyond life and death, yet toward which he has been looking forward, which truly explains the very reason for his fear of old age. As for this aspect of Quzi's character, He Yisun made a sophisticated and thoughtful summary as follows,

Quzi did not fear death but old age, not cry for the loss of life but for disachievement..... Frustrated all his life, Quzi had been suffering from ‘you (king of Chu) miss me, yet suspect me’. All the time Quzi had ever feared old age, not death, but he finally stopped his endeavor and even took his own life before getting old. How can ordinary people understand such a mind?^[2]

What a hundreds-of-generations-later confidant of Quzi he is! The above analysis makes it clear that the fear of old age is not contradictory to non-fear of death, which just justifies Quzi's self-sacrifice feelings, because both have the same starting point: the concern over “state” “sound politics” and “original clothes”. Similarly “self-sacrifice” and “self-cultivation” mentioned above are not opposites of each other too, since all the “self-cultivation” is for the preparation of ideal realization. Each time of “fear of old age” comes from nothing more than the inability to accomplish the lifelong pursuit owing to the limited life time; each time of “self-sacrifice” under “non-fear of death” is actually a full mental preparation for disillusionment.

4 Exploration of Qu Yuan's Lofty Aspiration to Realize Ideal Politics

His ideal of "ideal politics" starts with his high concern for the king of Chu state, as shown in the sentence chosen from Lisao, "Heaven is my witness that I (Qu Yuan) endure and persist only for the sake of Lingxiu (the king)" [1]. Qu Yuan's whole life is composed of the original intention, ideal politics, the king and the country, for which he would choose resolutely to suffer miseries, or even to die. Naturally, both "self-cultivation" and "self-sacrifice" are for a common purpose: the ideal politics, which is the key backbone of Quzi spirit, its core being the rise and fall of Chu. Among the 12 poetic sentences expressing "fears", although only one sentence of "What fears me is not the disaster upon myself, but the overthrown of the king's cart!" [1] directly talks about his fear concerning Chu ("king's cart" stands for the country), the rest sentences like "What though my sound remonstrance was turned down and myself was condemned, I would step back to trim my original clothes" [1] "My lord, you just go forward on sturdy steed, I'm willing to be your pawn!" [1] "Bustling up as a pawn, I'm devoted to supporting my king to catch those previous sages' traces" [1] "Now that nobody is worth collaborating with in implementing the ideal politics, I will just follow Peng Xian to his dwelling place (tomb)" [1] all express his love for his country. In fact, as for such kind of feeling, Qu Yuan has already made implicit cues in the initial sentence of Lisao, "I'm a descendant of Emperor Gao Yang" [1], in which he aims to account for his same lineage as the king, instead of showing off his nobility of birth. He wants to impress that state affairs are virtually family matters. Such a "family-country" feeling, confronted with fierce political struggles, especially in his ideological dilemmas, has been supporting him to endure misunderstandings and persecutions of the ruling clique, and overcoming the contradictions between advancing and retreating, fighting and surrendering, staying and going. Whether in his fugue realm of "reaching heaven after keeping climbing" [1] or in real world of "my heart flying back to the remote place" [1], he would frequently look back to the place of hometown because of this strong family-state feeling, as illustrated by the words in Collation on Chucideng,

The set of Quzi spirit shows his sense of responsibility on and concern about his country and people, which can be illustrated by the sentences like "I fear the overthrown of the king's cart" "I lament my life full of ordeals". [5]

Lin Yunming, the author of the book, can be regarded as a soul mate of Quzi! Since personal life and national security were melted into one, no wonder Qu Yuan took his own life eventually. *Historical Records • Chu Family* records, "In 21 years of Qing Xiang King Age, Bai Qi, a general of Qin, conquered Ying, capital of Chu, burned the tombs of the deceased king, subsequently dispersed the troops of King of Chu. Just then Qu Yuan drowned himself in the Miluo River." [6] What made him commit suicide was neither those evil snobs who had marginalized Qu Yuan, nor the troubled career that tortured him, nor the fact of being exiled. Analysis showed that the opposition party existed all the time, and he was exiled not once and not only in Qing Xiang King Age, more than that, however the vile snobs made smearing campaigns towards him, he would bear all the shame and obloquy, because Chu country

was still present, which was the footing land for the tough orchid, a symbol of Quzi himself. Once Chu fell, he lost the only spiritual sustenance.

5 Conclusion

The above analysis and dissection of the “fears” reveal that the core of Quzi spirits is not just confined to such personal aspects as personal image, moral quality as well as mental development of spiritual realm, yet beyond ego, expands to the king, to the people and the country. A spot shows a leopard, and one small taste reveals a tripod. Careful studies of the trajectory change of “fears” in Qu Yuan’s works, which are closely related to psychological activities, makes us appreciate what power a single word possesses. The power is soul-stirring, even worth a thousand pieces of gold! Furthermore, the profound connotation of the research makes known the greatness of Qu Yuan's personal qualities so as to perceive his mental journey from “self-cultivation” to “self-sacrifice”, and finally to “martyrdom for ideal politics”.

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