



The Construction and Presentation of “Mobile” Characteristics of Chinese Literary Modernization in Han Bangqing’s Biographies of Flowers on the Sea

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Abstract. In the mid-to-late 19th century, Western countries led by Britain successively completed the industrial revolution through the renewal of production tools, which led to the influx of capitalist industry and commerce. Cities in China, led by Shanghai, were the first to open ports for trade, which not only impacted China’s traditional economy but also promoted the movement of Chinese literature towards modernization. Therefore, this article takes Han Bangqing’s “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea”, published in 1894, as a model, refers to Zhang Ailing’s translation, and uses different types of literature such as journals and papers as aids. It adopts the method of literature reading and various literature comparative analysis methods to analyze its construction and presentation of the “mobile” characteristics of modern Chinese literature. The study found that “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” reflects the movement and progress of Chinese literature towards modernization to a certain extent, whether it is in the author’s creative background or in the story details of the protagonist in the text and the literary techniques used in writing. Especially dialect literature with regional characteristics, which is profound and unique in depicting novel characters’ expressions and personalities, plays an indispensable role and provides a reference for the development of later Mandarin literature to a certain extent.

Keywords: Chinese Literature, Modernization, Biographies of Flowers on the Sea, Literary Techniques.

1 Introduction

Modernization is not a new concept but a change that is innovative while maintaining the essence. The “modernization” of Chinese literature is the change in the focus and perspective of creators under the influence of Western thought in the context of China’s modern traditional social model and then the transformation in content, skills, and language. American scholar John King Fairbank once stated that there were two opposing traditional forces within China during the late Qing Dynasty. One was open to the outside world, with advanced modern urban characteristics and life concepts, but was weak; the other was still deeply inland, serving traditional bureaucracy and political systems, and was powerful. Since the two forces cannot coexist, they will have fierce

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struggles, and the small force with pioneering spirit and innovative spirit gradually gains an advantage. Its foresight and influence will make its power continue to grow, thereby changing its marginal position and moving towards the center. This statement, to some extent, presents the essence behind the transition from tradition to modernity in Chinese culture and predicts the movement and transformation of Chinese literature from tradition to modernity.

The “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” was born in the commercialized background of “profit above all” in modern Shanghai, China. The main character in the story are prostitutes. Although they are at the bottom of the hierarchy, they have accepted the western thinking earlier than traditional women in order to consume and survive, such as Huang Cui Feng, who blackmails others in order to start an independent business; Shen Xiaohong is the person who dares to beat up “marital” intruder in front of the “husband” and has the sense of resistance. What is behind these realizations is also a reflection of the author, who is rooted in traditional society, changing his concepts under the influence of Western thinking.

Professor Chen Pingyuan of Peking University once said: “In the process of modernization of Chinese literature, there is a very core symbol - in the field of literature, novels move from the margin to the center, from the local to the outside of the city. In this process, novels also absorb the strengths of other genres and gradually become the most typical form of literature.” This statement, to some extent, explains the “mobile characteristics” of novels in the modernization process of Chinese literature. The “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” by Han Bangqing, a late Qing Dynasty literary figure, is considered by many scholars to represent “the starting point of modern Chinese literature” and “the pioneering work of modern popular novels, and the transfer point where the literary train shifts from classical to modern” [1]. Its writing language (unique Suzhou Wu language) and literary techniques (interlaced and hidden methods) are all “unprecedented” literary works. In terms of plot and content, “The novel takes the high-end brothels in Shanghai’s concession at the end of Qing Dynasty as the stage, describes various social activities here, reflects the bizarre appearance of Shanghai’s ten-mile foreign field, and can be called a long scroll of semi-colonial urban customs” [2]. Therefore, taking this masterpiece as a model to deeply analyze the “mobile” characteristics in the modernization process of Chinese literature is particularly persuasive.

However, there is a scarcity of research writings on Professor Chen Pingyuan’s comments, and even the research theories linking “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” with the “mobile characteristics” of modern Chinese literature are scarce. Therefore, it is very challenging and has a lot of research space to deeply analyze the details of the text and discuss its connection with the mobile characteristics of modern Chinese literature. The author will use the method of literature reading and the comprehensive comparison method of various types of literature, roughly based on the life experience and era characteristics of the author of “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea”, the mobility shown in the content of its story. This part includes the characteristics of combining novels with parallel texts contained in the drama characteristics combined during character dining gatherings, the construction characteristics of major buildings and the reflected modernization trend, and the Wu dialect in “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” and its impact on Mandarin literature. This article aims to use the “mobile characteristics” of

modern Chinese literature as a research theme, to dig out as much as possible persuasive theoretical basis from the details and background in the text, in order to verify Professor Chen Pingyuan's point of view. Finally, this article further summarizes the characteristics of modern Chinese literature, striving to provide new ideas and insights for future literary creation.

2 Basic Information of the Case

"Biographies of Flowers on the Sea" is a narrow-minded novel written by Han Bangqing from Songjiang Prefecture, Jiangsu (now Songjiang District, Shanghai) in the late Qing Dynasty (published in 1894), with the background of Shanghai's ten-mile foreign field. The plot of the novel involves multiple levels, such as officialdom, business, and brothels, and weaves a continuous and uncertain network of relationships between many customers and pimps. On the one hand, the content of the novel highlights the influx of modern Western capitalist industry and commerce into cities, impacting traditional economic structures and thinking patterns; on the other hand, it reveals that the bottom characters are eliminated in the dream of rootless flowers' invisible tragic fate.

After the mid-19th century, with the wave of the Industrial Revolution initiated by Britain, Western capitalist industry and commerce developed rapidly, and its influence gradually spread to the world. Shanghai, as the first city in China to open ports for trade, is particularly affected by modern Western civilization. The influx of Western civilization not only impacts the feudal small peasant economic system economically with commodity economy but also influences Chinese scholars to further reflect and optimize their literary works and creative thinking. For example, the overly contrived writing style in traditional works and the problem of rendering atmosphere are gradually replaced by logical rigor and conciseness in Western literature. Many phenomena have prompted Chinese literature to gradually lean towards the West, no longer being a thing in a corner, thereby constituting the "mobile characteristics" of modern Chinese literature.

3 The Life Experience and Era Characteristics of the Author of "Biographies of Flowers on the Sea"

3.1 Era Characteristics

After the opening of Shanghai for trade, the status of the commercial port significantly improved. Subsequently, the first industrial revolution broke out in Britain, and Western countries followed suit. Naturally, Shanghai was also affected by this trend. The self-sufficient small peasant economy collapsed, and it was replaced by currency trade. "Where can agricultural and industrial products be sold? The answer is Shanghai. What is the way out for people's occupations? The answer is Shanghai" [3].

The influx of commercialized economy has promoted the exchange of trade between China and the West; therefore, Shanghai has also absorbed Western objects (such as

carriages and matches) and entertainment methods (drinking afternoon tea and taking photos). These scenes are clearly displayed in “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea”. At that time, there was also such a saying, “In Shanghai, apart from riding in carriages, visiting gardens, watching operas, and visiting brothels, there is no fifth thing” [4]. Literature is derived from life, so the transformation and upgrade of lifestyle naturally drive the “movement” of Chinese literature such as novels.

3.2 Life Experience

Han Bangqing was born in 1856 and died at the age of 38. Although he was from a prestigious family and was extraordinarily talented, he repeatedly failed in his exams and had no hope of fame and fortune. The loneliness of this situation drove him to pay attention to the romance of the lower society. At this time, China happened to experience the Opium War, and the traditional feudal system was violently impacted by Western bourgeois thought. Han Bangqing was in an awkward situation when new and old thoughts alternated.” (Han Bangqing) took the exam in the autumn of Xinmao (1891), and I met him at the Songjiang Guild Hall in Dajiangjia Hutong” [5]. At the twilight of his life, he had not yet achieved fame and fortune. This kind of frustration and indignation made the author gradually let go and root himself in places of romance to relieve his sorrow. “Wandering on the road, playing in the soft red dust” [6]. Therefore, his life experience laid the groundwork for the unique and novel material of “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea”.

The rapid progress of modern commercialization and the booming development of the advertising industry have made the livelihood color of literary creation more intense. With the emergence of modern newspaper columns, novels have gradually broken away from the limitation of only staying in books, gradually presented in a simplified, modular form in newspapers, and implemented serials in periodicals. The person who took the lead in using newspapers as a medium to promote novels was Han Bangqing. He once advertised his “Strange Book of the Sea” more than ten times with the help of “Shen Bao”, which shows that the form of dissemination of late Qing novels is changing. The dissemination channels of modern Chinese literature are gradually moving from books to newspaper media.

4 The Mobility Displayed in the Story Content of “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea”

4.1 The Use of Opera and Allusions

In the nineteenth chapter of the original work, Tao Yufu and Li Shufang attended Li Zhuanhong’s birthday banquet together. Li Shufang could not adapt to the opera sounds at the banquet. After lunch, she returned to her residence. The “Tian Shui Pass” at the banquet made her condition worse. The reason is that “Tian Shui Pass” talks about Zhuge Liang, the prime minister of Shu Han, using fake Jiang Wei to spread the news that real Jiang Wei had already surrendered to other passes, forcing real Jiang Wei into

a dilemma and finally surrender. “This allusion of confusing the true with the false also implies that the sincere love between Li Shufang and Tao Yufu in the talented and beautiful people has turned into a fake in a society where material desires are rampant, and ranks are strict” [7]. Therefore, this drama aggravated her inner fear and unease, laying the groundwork for the tragedy in the later text.

In the forty-fifth chapter, Yin Chiyan called Zhang Xiuying and ignored Lin Cuifen, so there was a gap between the two. The “Changsheng Hall·Welcoming Image Crying Image” that appeared at the banquet has a deeper meaning. This work originally showed that although Tang Ming Huang and Yang Gui Fei were sworn to each other, the latter died at Mawei, so it expressed Tang Ming Huang’s infinite sadness and regret. “Zhou Shuangyu and Zhao Erbao are sweet and happy with their lovers in Yili Garden, but in the end one uses extortion tricks, one falls into being bullied by rascals, and owes a high debt” [8]. The author changes the single style of traditional novels using similar dramas and their allusions, realizing the movement of novels from a single narrative style to a multi-style combination of narrative and opera allusions.

4.2 The Characteristics of Parallel Prose Combination and New Changes in Content

The depiction of many scenes in the original work is not only in Mandarin and Suzhou dialect but also mixed with the color of parallel prose. Parallel prose was born in the Han Dynasty in China. It is an ancient literary style mainly based on four-word sentences and six-word sentences. It pays attention to neat antithesis and beautiful vocabulary. It often combines with poetry to highlight rhythm, but it is rarely integrated into novels. However, “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” uses this literary form, such as Yili Garden, which is centered on Qi Yunsou and provides many “couples” for sight-seeing, using four-word phrases such as “beaded curtains and painted buildings, uneven high and low” [9]. It reads smoothly and allows readers to have a clear view of the pavilions in the garden. The combination of parallel prose and novels makes the structure of the novel clearer, realizing the movement of novel content from one literary form to a combination of multiple literary forms.

Due to the opening of ports for trade, many Western objects have flooded into Shanghai. There are countless related records in the original work. Taking the “fire extinguishing by water dragon” in Chapter 11 as an example, “the belt has swollen early and is tight” [10]. In modern people’s eyes, it is common for a faucet to connect to a water pipe to extinguish a fire. However, the reason why it is described so detailed here is because people at that time first encountered this novel change. The progress of science and technology indirectly promotes the renovation of novel creation content.

5 The Wu Dialect in “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” and Its Reference Significance for the Development of Mandarin Literature

5.1 The Wu Dialect in “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea”

The reason why the author uses Wu dialect as the writing language is because he has learned from the experience that the writing language of “The Dream of Red Mansion” is Beijing dialect. The author believes that compared with popular Mandarin, the dialect can better highlight the character’s expression and tone. In the twenty-third chapter of the original work, facing Grandma Yao, who came to the brothel to find her husband and was annoyed, Wei Xiaxian, was not afraid but argued with reason. It shows that no matter what status the guests are at home, they are guests when they come to the brothel and are protected by the brothel owner. The brothel does not have the habit of hiding guests. It is absurd to come to the brothel to make a noise instead of looking for someone at home. A speech is eloquent and powerful, and it contains many words with Wu dialect characteristics, for example, “nai”, “mo”, and “wa”. Also, there is a sentence containing three words in Wu dialect like “nai ge jia zhu gong mo, gai ying dao nai fu lang qv xun wa” (You should go to your own house to find your husband.) [10]. The meaning of “nai” is the first person “you”, placed at the beginning of the sentence; “mo” and “wa” are both modal particles. These three words highlight Wei Xiaxian’s calmness and sobriety when facing Yao’s grandmother’s accusation. Their role is irreplaceable.

5.2 The Reference Significance of Dialects for the Development of Mandarin Literature

“Biographies of Flowers on the Sea”, the first masterpiece of Suzhou dialect, laid the theoretical foundation for the development of Mandarin literature in the future. Hu Shi once said, “Mandarin is nothing more than the most victorious dialect. Mandarin still needs to seek its new materials and new life from the literature of dialects” [11]. Dialect literature is the breeding ground for Mandarin literature, and Mandarin literature is the overall optimization of dialect literature. Although it was restricted by the popularity of language in the region at that time and the level of commercial development, Wu language novels were “especially disliked by readers” [12], but it was still a victory for the dialect movement. If more dialect literature can contribute to the construction and presentation of Mandarin literature in the future, then the role of “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” is undoubtedly groundbreaking.

5.3 The “Mobile Characteristics” of Modern Chinese Literature Reflected by “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea”

From a macro perspective, “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” depicts the modern prototype in the early days of Shanghai’s opening through various characters’ social lives in terms of content; in terms of skills, it abandons the tradition in traditional novels

where characters pay attention to background and blood ties, and instead, through a large number of gatherings, uses the method of “interlacing and hiding”, and shows through different characters’ resourcefulness that interest is the basic rule for maintaining relationships between people. Although prostitutes are low in status, they can also break away from clients and have a sense of independent entrepreneurship and resistance, which also breaks the traditional value concept that women can only rely on men for a stable and happy life. In terms of language, the reason why the author uses the Wu dialect is also because he saw the decline of the late Qing government, so he promoted the local language with Shanghai’s growing economic strength, thereby realizing the movement of novels from Mandarin to dialect literature.

6 Conclusion

This study found that Han Bangqing’s “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” indeed made a clear construction and presentation of the “mobile” characteristics of modern Chinese literature. This can be possibly explained by the following facts. Firstly, under the era background of the rapid development of Western capitalist industry and commerce and Shanghai as one of the first cities to open ports for trade, the author, who had “no hope of fame and fortune”, used brothels as a place to relieve sorrow, realizing the movement of the content of the work focusing on the lower-class citizens; secondly, the characteristics of parallel prose mixed in the original work realized the movement of the style of the work from a single narrative genre to a combination of narrative and parallel prose; furthermore, the unique Wu dialect realized the movement of the language of the work from Mandarin to dialect.

The main contribution of this study is to enhance readers’ understanding of the literary significance of “Biographies of Flowers on the Sea” and, to some extent, provide theoretical materials for researchers related to the importance of dialect literature for Mandarin literature. Finally, this study did not delve too much into the writing technique of “interlacing and hiding” in the original work. Its characteristic of “one wave after another” still has a milestone-like significance in modern Chinese literature. In the future, in-depth analysis can be carried out on this writing technique, which is conducive to further exploration of this topic.

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