



"Silence" and "Dialogue" from the Perspective of Consumerism: An Interpretation of Liu Yichang's *The Drunkard*

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Abstract. Modern Hong Kong literature led by Liu Yichang provides new perspective different from that of the mainland literature for Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s, Liu Yichang's long novels are marked by poetic styles, observing Hong Kong with the eyes of a dispersed person in it, deconstructing the depression, regression and concerns over the decline of serious literature that Hong Kong literature faces in the consumerist era. He expressed individualized feelings through *The Drunkard*, approaching the relationship entanglement and emotional conflicts with different people and events from the first-person perspective, based on "silence" and "dialogue" with others, he wrote works that are different from his other works full of Hong Kong flavor, demonstrating his efforts for the long-term development of Hong Kong literature in a way that calls for the return of serious literature, and show the stamp of individual's experience from south.

Keywords: Liu Yichang; Hong Kong Literature; Consumerism; Text Interpretation.

1 Introduction

Why did I write *The Drunkard*? - Liu Yichang once explained the intention behind in a class at The University of Hong Kong, analyzing the inner experience during the creation process from the author's perspective. As a representative of Hong Kong literature and writer from south, Liu Yichang put his personal life experiences and deep appreciation of Hong Kong literature into *The Drunkard*. The protagonist of the novel "I", achieves the individual existence tracing of what he calls "find himself when forgetting himself" from the first-person perspective. During the 1960s and 1970s, when Hong Kong literature entered into the "consumption era", Liu Yichang admitted that he wrote *The Drunkard* not only to entertain others but also to please himself [1], therefore, the author intended to closely read the dialogic significance generated between "I" as the subject and other objects of the paper.

The protagonist "I" is an alcoholic frustrated writer- the author intentionally sets it this way, a drunkard's talk at random after drinking is just a manifestation of speaking the truth after drinking, and this kind of "slip of the tongue" is also the manifestation of

writers who "want to say something" in a state of "silence" and want to argue with the literary ecology under the condition of commodification, vulgarization, and hidden decline of Hong Kong literature. Bakhtin believes that "one of the most basic forms of introducing and organizing various theories in the novel—embedded genre", "the novel allows the insertion of various different genres, whether literary genres (embedded stories, lyric dramas, long poems, short plays, etc.) or non-literary genres (genres of daily life, speeches, scientific genres, religious genres, etc.)" [2]. As "the first Chinese long stream of consciousness novel", *The Drunkard* is a development of the short stream of consciousness novels, these novel were created by the neo-sensualist writers represented by Liu Naou, Mu Shiyong and Shi Zhecun in genre, furthermore, as an experimental novel, Liu Yichang integrated narrative elements into it, forming a complete and long novel with a common thread, in writing techniques, Liu Yichang posed the question "Is there a possibility of an alliance between the novel and poetry" through the mouth of Mai Hemen in the novel, applied montage techniques and stream of consciousness transition of film editing in the narrative, and combined his personal language style to write "poetic novels". Liu Yichang's deep analysis of his own creation means that *The Drunkard* is worthy of deep exploration from a textual perspective, his setting of character images and the connections established between different characters will act as a way for the writer to express his true inner feelings and his dissatisfaction with Hong Kong literature books through a unique writing mechanism. Therefore, the author will stand in the position of "me", the drunkard, which is different from someone's point of the spatial narrative in Liu Yichang's works[3], investigating the portrayal of Hong Kong and its deeper implications in his experimental novels from the perspective of narrative space, and carefully analyze the deep meaning of the work from a textual perspective.

2 Silence After Getting Drunk: How the Individual's Speech Manifests

There are 43 chapters in *The Drunkard*, among which 36 chapters mention the central symbol of alcohol that is applied throughout the full text. The author repeatedly mentioned "Alcohol is not a good thing," but the protagonist is an alcoholic writer, the novel interweaves sobriety and intoxication, presenting the state of "me" who seems to be raving but be actually vigorously shouting. "I" experiences many events after getting drunk: the opening is the on-topic "I'm drunk," and "solid laughter" appear repeatedly, pointing to stiffness and loss rather than ease and joy, therefore, the symbol of "alcohol" represents pain, struggle, and loneliness. The author used a poetic form to give language a new expression, wrote "my" dreams in a chanting style, without punctuation or paragraphs, interspersed with repeated release: "I threw the money in his/her face," followed by the description of real life: anger that cannot be spoken in dream and wants to be vented after getting drunk is stopped abruptly, and "I" had a sexual relationship with an unknown woman who is "not only not beautiful, but very ugly."

The author used an interwoven approach to describe how "I" create, alcohol becomes the chain connecting the stream of consciousness. The phrase "Alcohol is not a good

thing and should be given up" is repeatedly mentioned, and appear in five positions together, the writer combines "me" drinking, writing, inner thoughts, and external disturbances into one, alcohol affects "my" mind, throughout the novel, "my" conversations with others and inner murmur all like gibberish, they are reflections of emotional excitement in the real world, while they are confused and intoxicated for the individual's inner world, for example, after getting drunk, "I" was injured by someone, the thought that came to mind "walking like a pigeon/doing rumba" while looking at the backs of the nurse and doctor." The montage technique is used, the stream-of-consciousness technique of Joyce, Proust, and others are unconsciously learned, making "my" consciousness jump and spin irregularly like a vortex, and each node is composed of "alcohol" as a transition point.

After getting drunk, "I" often fall into silent state in the real world, accompanied by blank memories. "I" forget how me had a sexual relationship with a strange woman, forgets why I was beaten on the head and fell into danger, and forget how "I" exasperate the landlady who missed her son. While alcohol as the central symbol running through the full text, "my" blank memories become the key point in deconstructing the entire novel, blank means the occurrence of events and is the core writing that makes this novel have three functions: the functional layer, the action layer, and the narrative layer, "These three layers are connected step by step," Roland Barthes pointed out in *S/Z*, "A function has meaning only when it occupies a place in the totality of an agent's action" [4]. Alcohol and blank memories are corresponding functional symbols, which divide the text content into two states: sobriety and trance, the events "I" see and experience and whether "me" is in a "silence" state correspond to the meanings of these two symbols, instead, the unconscious stream after getting drunk (or after fainting) is conscious stream, it is "me" to denounce, reveal, and resist factors such as Hong Kong literature, gender relations, individual survival, and war in a non-awake state and obtain the way of forgiveness. "My" descriptions of Hong Kong society, such as "the crowds in Mong Kok" and "the abstract art exhibition at the City Hall," appear in the disordered thoughts like a symphony, although to some extent that these descriptions express a close attitude towards Hong Kong at the narrative level, it is precisely this close attitude that contrasts with the author's statement about the difficulty of a writer's creation, "I" live in Hong Kong, am close to and care about Hong Kong, but "I" am not accepted by the Hong Kong literary ecosystem and can only suppress self-expression, and smooth the edge of wanting to be an avant-garde writer to adapt to the commercialized Hong Kong urban culture. Some scholars have also pointed out that in Liu Yichang's works, nostalgia "constitutes a presence of absence through its very absence" [5] is one of the ways in which he addresses modern anxieties by channeling emotions into nostalgia.

3 Creation Loss: Persistence and Degeneration of Literature

Liu Yichang emphasized why he wrote *The Drunkard*, one of the reasons was that "although there were some good works since the May Fourth Movement, there were very few truly excellent works," and "the works of some outstanding writers such as Duanmu

Hongliang, Tai Jingnong, and Mu Shiyong have not received the attention it deserves for a long time[1]. "The writer does not judge whether there were few truly excellent works since the May Fourth Movement and whether Mu Shiyong and others could be considered "outstanding writers" temporarily, however, this statement reflects what he wanted to express when he moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong in the face of the literary situation in Hong Kong in the 1960s: literature needs new good works that are meaningful rather than merely measured by monetary value, and good works should be seen. Therefore, except for "I" as author's existence in the text, there are also Mai Hemeng, who "stands by" me to explore and persist in the meaning of literary creation, and Mo Yu, a director of Mandarin films who specializes in copying Hollywood techniques and persuades "me" to write vulgar novels for money to be vulgar and court fame and fortune from a material perspective.

The two constitute the opposite roles in Greimas' matrix theory. "I" always evades when communicating with Mai Hemeng, but is full of hesitation when faced with Mo Yu's invitation, Mai Hemeng's literary ideal are antithetical to that of Mo Yu, "I" am dragged between the two, becoming a symbol of contradiction and weakness in the text. Mai Hemeng asks me, "Why can't we produce a great work like *War and Peace* in such a great era?" this is also the author's own question of Hong Kong literature and even mainland literature in the 1960s. A scholar has analyzed Liu Yichang's involvement in periodical publications during his Shanghai period and his subsequent writing and creative activities after moving to Hong Kong[6]. From this, I can infer that the act of founding a periodical by the protagonist "I" in *The Drunkard* is not without basis. The discussion between "I" and Mai Hemeng reflects Liu Yichang's view on writing novels: "There has only been one Tolstoy in Russian history," "What I mean is: the organization of a novel add poetry"... "I" drinks while communicating with Mai Hemeng, and only engages in in-depth discussions under his repeated questioning, they agreed to found "Avant-Garde Literature" to oppose the commercialized and materialized Hong Kong literature and turn from vulgarity to serious literature from the start, but they had a disagreement after struggle, and "Avant-Garde Literature" inevitably ended up with stopping publication, meanwhile, "I" agreed to Mo Yu's request to write vulgar scripts and turned to writing pornographic novels like "Pan Jinlian as a Landlord" to obtain survival resources. The contradiction between "me" and Mai Hemeng and "our" response to Mo Yu are just compromise to literary creation under survival pressure: "Almost all Hong Kong literary workers have written commercialized texts today."

Some scholars have suggested that Liu Yichang presents marginal alienation writing in *The Drunkard*[7], the protagonist has no name from beginning to end and is at the center of anxiety, and the cause of this anxiety is just the identity of a "person from south." Liu Yichang once published a magazine of the same name in Shanghai, the author believes that the content written in the text is a projection of the author's own experience, the blank of "me" name constitutes the negativity of the text, although Iser discusses the role of blank, vacancy, and negation in the textual call structure from the perspective of plot, the author believes that Liu Yichang's blank of "our" name also constitutes the cause of the textual asymmetry, readers not only understand the explicit part of the text through his self-description during the reading process, but also uncover the hidden "me" as a representative of the "self" excluded from the entire urbanization

process of Hong Kong. Liu Yichang narrates others' affairs in the first person, but adopts his own perspective, this narrative method, which Todorov calls omniscient and omnipotent, is just his way of "entertaining himself." Wayne Booth first introduced the concept of "implied author"[8] in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Liu Yichang projected the identity of a self-dispersed writer onto "me", he wrote this novel about a distant literary journey from Shanghai to Hong Kong, the raving "slip of the tongue" of "me" is the author's deconstruction of literature that the author exceeds logic. "I" am a creative loser who has writing talent but has to turn to vulgar literature, Isn't Liu Yichang's creative path similar to that of "me" also a copy of the creators who are excluded from literature in the utilitarian society of Hong Kong? The last paragraph of the text states:

That afternoon, I wrote in my diary, "I" will give up drinking from today." But I had a few glasses of brandy in a restaurant in the evening.

In the end, "I" failed to give up drinking, just as serious literature failed to return to the literary ecosystem, "alcohol" is still an escapable utopia for creating vulgar literature to obtain survival resources, an excuse that cannot be forgiven for making indiscreet remarks after drinking, and also a shackle that individuals cannot express in their "silence" state.

4 Unlucky in Love: Sexual Liberation or Constraint

The writer links the different bonds between "me" and four women to how "I" chooses to escape and break in a state of "sexual repression". The first woman appears in the second chapter of the text, as mentioned above by the author, "I" had sex with an unknown woman after getting drunk, "I" criticized her appearance in disgust inwardly after waking up:

"The ugliest things were fine wrinkles around her eyes, there are some new wrinkles, without filling it with fragrant powder, her aging cannot be concealed. She was no longer young, probably in her early forties, but under the dim light, with too much rouge and powder, if appreciate her with drunk eyes, she still seemed like a blooming flower."

The author excelled at endowing the protagonist with a subjective gaze to describe the appearance of characters. Some scholars have analyzed *Intersection* and *The Drunkard*, pointing out that the author adopted an approach of parallel description of two storylines in *Intersection* [9]. In *Intersection*, the observation and criticism of Yaxing and Chunyu Bai towards themselves in the mirror are also full of subjectivity and imagination, "I" thought the unknown woman was "the skin seems very fair and delicate" after getting drunk, but after waking up, "she sighed with fishy stench", and "I" just wanted to vomit. In the marginal creation that is excluded by literature, "women" and "alcohol" have become symbols for expressing the self, and are "commodity-like" existences that can only be judged and are used to relieve "sexual repression".

The second woman is Zhang Lili. "Zhang Lili is a snobbish woman" - "I" both admire Zhang Lili and are resentful towards her for not getting her. Schopenhauer mentioned in *The World as Will and Representation*: "All desire is born of need, and therefore of lack, and therefore of pain.[10]" "I" need to be included, if this is not achieved

in literature, if I don't receive such treatment in literature, I will project my self-awareness onto gender relations, Zhang Lili's rejection of "I" further causes the repressed emotions in "my" heart, therefore, "I threw money in her face" in the dream, This is the only way to release one's suppressed "silence" and nowhere to vent, it is similar to Ah Q's "spiritual victory method", but "my" venting in the dream does not require any real cost, moreover, it cannot achieve any real victory: "I" still have to give up serious literary creation after sobering up and turn to producing vulgar literature to cater to the Hong Kong literary market to obtain survival resources.

The third woman is the daughter of the landlady, a seventeen-year-old girl named Sima Li. "I" had a conversation with Sima Li after sobering up, the text says that "I" like seventeen-year-old girls, so "I" like Sima Li, but "I" have rejected her countless times. The text describes Sima Li as "lying on my bed like a snake", the snake is the incarnation of Satan in western literature, "my" description of her as fallen and evil, and regarding her as a "demon" is an escape from the sinful thoughts that are difficult to face in a state of sexual repression. The identity anxiety expressed in *The Drunkard* also sends assimilation signal to the outside world while constructing Hong Kong in the 1960s as a city full of evil, this evil is expressed in *The Drunkard* through the narration of "my" sexual or non-sexual relationships with women of different ages.

The last woman is Yang Lu. "I" listened to Yang Lu's story, how her family pushed her into the abyss of degeneration, she could no longer escape in the alienated Hong Kong society from this time on. My judgment when facing Yang Lu was completely opposite to that of Sima Li, "Yang Lu is an insulted and damaged victim." - Liu Yichang is good at inserting stream-of-consciousness descriptions into his texts, the stirring desire I felt towards sixteen-year-old Yang Lu was glorified as "eager to be a hero in the body of a sixteen-year-old girl", just like Ge Weilong in Zhang Ailing's works, who was alone in Hong Kong society, he is only sixteen or seventeen, nevertheless, they had to face the desires of men, their bodies are the survival support, and men like 'me' are one of the culprits pushing them into the abyss, but "I" arrogantly label my actions as "saving" to console myself.

The author maintains the "Hong Kong flavor" in the novel through such writing, presenting the people in the "consumer society", under the dual repression of the loss of individual discourse power in survival and the sexual needs brought about by the lack of money and attention, forming the discourse expression of the text. "Articles become commodities. Love becomes commodities.[11]" It is the stimulation of commercialization that arouses the desires of creators like me, and repeatedly extinguish them and never truly possess them, *The Drunkard* repeatedly constructs such textual meanings in the form of "dreams", forming an internal relationship between dream and reality, and between silence and dialogue.

5 Self-dialogues: Self-association and Re-expression

As a modern city that was under colonial rule over a long period of time, Hong Kong absorbed many writers who came from the mainland after the New Literature Movement, these "writers from south" either resided in Hong Kong for a long or short period

of time, gradually transformed Hong Kong literature from a branch of mainland literature into a literary creation place with Southeast Asian flavor and local characteristics. During this process, influenced by factors such as war, economy, and culture, Hong Kong's modernist literature has a heterogeneous characteristic. Modernist trends represented by Liu Yichang, Ma Lang, and Kun Nan gradually emerged in Hong Kong, and writers began to explore the meaning of the individual's existence and reflect on it.

In *The Drunkard*, "I" came to Hong Kong after the war, the individual gradually lost direction in the rapid urbanization process around them, they jumped between resistance and compromise every day, their past ambition and sense of responsibility could not resist the erosion of carnal desires and the drag of survival difficulties, the switching between the states of "awake" and "drunk", as well as the blurring of the boundary between the two caused by the author's stream-of-consciousness technique, pushed Hong Kong modernism to a climax.

The Hong Kong society of the 20th century had homogeneities with that of Shanghai. Li Oufan quoted Andrew Field's paper *Shanghai Modern*, said that "dancing is a natural behavior that can release inner energy, a civic activity that can effectively attract the opposite sex" [12], it is a partial portrayal of the society of Shanghai in 1930s, the dance halls of Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s were also "concentration camp of sin", and everyone inside "had two dirty hands". Liu Yichang's literary creation from Shanghai to Hong Kong is a social reflection of the two places in similar processes in different eras, war and colonialism made his literary creation can be regarded as a form of personal re-expression.

Some scholars pointed out in research on Hong Kong modernism in the context of consumer culture, Hong Kong literature under the marginal position also provided writers with multiple possibilities for exploration [13]. Liu Yichang's identification of the gradual industrialization of literature is actually a call for the return of serious literature; various symptoms of the spiritually empty readership are all caused by "supply of products of different natures and levels to the reading and listening public", Liu Yichang believed that he only used the stream-of-consciousness technique to write this book, this book could not be regarded as a stream-of-consciousness novel like those of Western modernist writers, its core, as Adorno pointed out in his reconstruction of modern art forms, is to subvert ideology through the transformation of art forms [13]. Liu Yichang had a real artistic perception and cutting-edge creativity, thus creating a drunkard figure who not only has a "shadow" of himself but also can be regarded as a universal collective in *The Drunkard*, the impact of this creation goes further than the commonly held "China's first long stream-of-consciousness novel".

6 Conclusion

By tracing and analyzing the overall process of Liu Yichang's creation of *The Drunkard*, on the basis of not deviating from the creative background and individual experience expression, interpretation with different perspectives can be had for the textual creation. Qiyun Tang argues that he not only played the role of a rebel against the neo-classical tradition but also became a pioneer in the realistic portrayal of contemporary

Chinese urban society[14]. As an indispensable part of Hong Kong's modernist literature, apart from *The Drunkard*, Liu Yichang's other "old tales retold" literary creations all have the common points: seeking inner truth, attempting to get rid of the "silence" state caused by the abnormal literary creation environment, and calling back the group's various expression of literary ideology. Liu Yichang, with his rich imagination, depicts stream-of-consciousness and dreamlike temporal spaces that blur the boundaries between reality and fiction. At the same time, he creatively constructs a "literary utopia" in his novels that stands in opposition to the commercialized and vulgarized literary reality of Hong Kong[15]. The textual identification to the real world and its connection with modern art suggest that this work is not simply a show-off stream-of-consciousness novel, nor is it a "popular novel" that is detached from reality and lacks logic, instead, it is a "scholar's novel" with deep thinking and rich meaning. A scholar points out that in his writing, Liu drew upon the common characteristics of Neo-Sensationist fiction—such as the dominance of urban settings, the intensification of objects, and human alienation—while also delving deeply into Hong Kong's urban life and emphasizing individual introspective consciousness[16]. "Silence" is not only writers from south the situation of the southern-coming writers in this environment, but also fragmented creators who are generally in the state of literary industrialization, marginalization, and heterogeneity, this work is not only the dialogue between "self" and "other" as scholars said [17], but also the dialogue between the author and himself, the dialogue with the literature Hong Kong in the 1960s, and the dialogue with numerous literary producers.

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