

The Expectation for a Son to Mature into a Paternity

- A study of Chinese men's anxiety towards the discourse of paternity based on the novel <The South-Goods Shop>

Zhe Cai*

Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Nanjing Forestry University, Nanjing, 210037, China

* Corresponding author email: niddcup1020@gmail.com

Abstract: <The South-Goods Shop> provides a rich and detailed portrayal of the lives of men in rural counties and villages of China in the latter half of the 20th century. Through this text, one can observe the discourse of masculinity mainly characterized by "paternity," as well as the contexts in which various survival needs and cultural experiences are generated. By exploring the dynamic of male growth and life experiences in the continuous pursuit of trusting connections between self and others, under the anxiety of "paternity" identity that haunts them, the situation of suppression and objectification faced by men can be revealed. In this process, the simultaneous attention to the stage-specific expression of male identity and that of the family space constitutes the main line of reasoning in this paper.

Keywords: <The South-Goods Shop>; Identity Anxiety; Masculinity; Family Space.

1. Introduction

Based on Ninghai County, which is under the administration of Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, <The South-Goods Shop> presents the public life and social history in the space-time with the actions of Lu Qiulin, a high school graduate, as the main line and the actions of various people as the clue. The novel presents numerous cognitive anxiety and action disorders about men's identity issues such as "father", "son", "husband" and "patriarch". Moreover, the presentation of these identity issues is not based on the recognition of dual cognitive models to present isolated point-to-point interpersonal interaction. Instead, it uses the thinking of relational network and action network to show how the subjects anchor themselves actively or passively in the relational network, and various situations of the anchoring mode are also presented separately, including how the subjects deal with the deviations and dislocations of the identities they face.

What the novel <The South-Goods Shop> aims to observe is the complex context of the generation and practice of the "paternity" discourse in rural counties and villages of eastern Jiangnan in China during the post-Cultural Revolution era, the era of strict household registration management, and the initial stage of reform and opening up, focusing on the anxious expression and generation of the "paternity" identity by men. <The South-Goods Shop> provides a rich variety of male samples, who have different cognitions of the "paternity" identity construction based on various specific contexts, but all reflect the friction between the marriage discourse that prioritizes ideal orientation such as monogamy and free love, and the traditional arranged marriage system that prioritizes the distribution and increase of living material resources. The friction between the various Western modern discourses that have flowed into China since the May Fourth Movement and the pre-modern Chinese social and cultural experiences that occur in conjunction with them, as well as the friction between various situational and differentiated expressions, are all reflected in the novel.

In this regard, examining the issue of the construction of male identity through the text <The South-Goods Shop> inevitably requires a steadfast commitment to the perspective of situational awareness and cognitive analysis of locally generated knowledge[1]. The context that this article points to has the potential for expansion and transfer, and it still possesses the power to shed light on contemporary gender issues in Chinese society.

2. The Generation of the Discourse of "Paternity" - The Ideal Masculinity of the Man Being Identified

It can and must first be made clear here that the main generation and practice situation of "paternity" discourse is related to the basic structural characteristics of "internal independence" and "external connection" in the family space. As a result, "paternity" not only tends to express the male identity discourse in the internal space of the family, such as the ownership of family property, kinship and other discourses, but also involves the coupling expression of the male subject's external social identity discourse, such as the level of labor force and the mobilization of social resources. Here, we can distinguish "paternity" from "patriarch", which contains the attribute of possession of absolute authority. "paternity" is not a synonym of "patriarch". "patriarch" is only an interpretation of "paternity" of the male in the dynamic situation of "self-other-environment". In <The South-Goods Shop>, there is "widower", which is also an interpretation of "paternity", at the same level of expression as "patriarch".

In the space-time to be observed through <The South-Goods Shop>, the people of the countryside often expect men to become the ideal "paternity". The ideal "paternity" model constructed in this way includes three specific requirements for men: the man should be able to provide sufficient and stable income for the family; the man should be able to mobilize social and political discourse resources to build a barrier against the invasion of "outsiders" for the family space; the man should not inflict violence on family members.

These requirements have a clear survival goal of safety, while also serving as a normative identification of the ideal masculinity in society. The growth of a man is a dynamic process of dealing with the anxiety caused by such masculinity. Before examining the dynamic process of male growth, it is necessary to return to the era in which these three demands were generated and understand how they came into being. At the same time, it is necessary to consider why these requirements are not directed towards so-called "female" but seem to be precisely anchored to the "male" group, and understand the basic problem of "what is 'male'" is in this context, thereby recognizing the paradox and dilemma of a series of gender discourse generation.

2.1. The Emergence of "Male" Identity

In response to the question of "what is 'male'", attention can be drawn to a series of experiences related to social material and economic production in this particular time and space. From agrarian civilization to heavy industrial civilization, the production tools for primary survival resources have always placed stringent physical demands on users, particularly among the lower-middle class workers and peasants. In early commercial activities, capital flowed alongside individuals physically engaged in trade. Within government departments, males constitute the majority of employees, which can be seen as a political legacy of warfare history. Overall, the preliminary formation of male identity emerges in the context of a series of discourses that revolve around the acquisition of survival resources and will remain in a continuous dynamic state[2].

In response to the question of why the three requirements for constructing the ideal "paternity" should be directed at "male" group, it should be noted that during that time resources, people had a profound embodied experience regarding the lack of survival data, with hunger being the most intuitive experience. In <The South-Goods Shop>, the experience of hunger among peasants from the 1950s to the 1980s can be observed. This is evident through Qiulin's grandmother's efforts to prepare and hide broad beans for Grandpa's consumption throughout the year, as well as Du Yi's work in fear of food shortage and starvation despite being ill. Even when Qiulin joined work at the South Store, he would frequently wake up hungry in the middle of night. For a long time, ensuring enough food was always a concern for people in townships and counties due to their relatively weak agriculture in Yangtze River Delta[3]. Considering this social experience alongside male identity formation within production discourse mentioned earlier, young and middle-aged men were considered crucial members who could acquire survival resources beyond individual needs while others such as elderly individuals, women, and children relied on them to fill their lack of survival resources. Therefore, men who were perceived capable or having potential to gather sufficient data were expected to become "paternity", acting as transfer stations for survival resources. Consequently, it can also be understood that family space was established as an organizational unit responsible for maintaining survival during this period. However, this situation also gave rise to two hidden dangers leading towards alienation among men. Firstly, there would be a shift from "paternity" towards "patriarch," where the paternity would mistakenly believe he possessed superior ownership over these survival resources within his family and would use it as leverage for arbitrary actions. Secondly, the other risk is that other family members

would regard the act of supporting the family by "paternity" as a transcendental duty, and would force "paternity" to remain silent and meet the various requirements of other family members unconditionally.

2.2. "Paternity" as the Pillar of Family Space

The analysis of the two questions of the emergence of "male" Identity is primarily focused on the act of securing living resources, and also answers the first requirement raised when constructing the ideal model of "paternity," namely, how the discourse of "the male being able to provide a sufficient and stable income source for the family" came about. To understand the origins of the other two requirements, it is necessary to examine the institutional and cultural contexts of the era as the environment for action, as well as the overall experience of living in a crisis of survival where individual private lives are easily subjected to the violent gaze of others' public political actions.

In premodern and even contemporary rural counties in China, the subject is always in a closely connected action environment with the surrounding area, and the most intuitive experience is that individual private life is easily subject to scrutiny and collective discussion by the villagers. In addition, there is the crisis experience of the Cultural Revolution, in which the subject is forced to be identified with a predetermined class identity based on the language of class struggle, and the identity is required to be publicly disclosed, so that anyone can use it as a handle to forcefully intervene in the subject's life with violent discourse[4]. Many subjects are facing the danger of being dragged into a public trial space and subjected to violent targeting at any time. After the Cultural Revolution, the one-way household registration system was implemented, and for the villagers, the space they lived in had become the bottom space in the language of household registration system, and did not have a way to flow to other spaces[5]. This made the villagers' lives increasingly fixed in a specific territory in the continuing temporal and spatial trajectory, exacerbating the situation of individual private life being subject to public scrutiny, and a relatively autonomous family space can be seen as a countermeasure to this situation.

Based on the existence of human relationships, family is almost the smallest and most stable private living space. It is the fundamental living space unit upon which people can maintain trust in others and not to be fully wary of encroachment by others. The existence of the family space does not guarantee that it will not be interfered with by external others, which leads to the anxiety of the subject being interfered with by others. On the one hand, it requires that "paternity" exists with enough strength to resist the violent interference of others and persist in its willingness to maintain the gentle nature of the family space; on the other hand, the anxiety of being interfered with by others also affects "paternity" towards the two extreme deviations of "patriarch" or silence. In general, the initial intention of constructing the ideal model of "paternity" is to generate a family space that is a safe house-like in order to maintain relative internal independence in the face of external social interference by others, and the existence of this family space is an important situational condition for the ideal "elder" identity discourse to stand and function.

3. From "Child" to "Son" - The Emergence of Male Anxiety

For a man, the requirement to be the ideal "paternity" shapes the phased expression of identity during his upbringing. In "The South-Goods Shop", men's awareness of their own identity includes child, son and "paternity", and sometimes includes "patriarch" or widower. These identity discourses, based on the fundamental demand of maintaining a relationship of mutual trust between self and others, are in dynamic continuum rather than static dispersion. The demand of maintaining self-other harmony exists beyond the binary gender discourse of men and women, and is the most basic but also the highest pursuit in the discourse expression of "society-identity" toward which the subject is oriented. For a subject, he will gain the experience of mutual trust between self and others in the childhood stage, and then will find that this experience is not the only expression of the relationship between self and others. Such a discovery would mark the departure from childhood, and the experience of maintaining a relationship of mutual trust between self and others would be repeatedly called upon in later life.

3.1. Childhood and its End

The narrative of the male subject's childhood experience in <The South-Goods Shop> is highly restrained, which is only presented in the narratives of Ma and Qi Haisheng. It is precisely through these unremarkable narrative sections that the identity of a male as a "child" and as a "son" is distinguished in stages of growth.

In the narrative of Qi Haisheng, it can be found that before he began to doubt whether he was the biological child of Mr. Qi and Xiu Juan, he had a harmonious relationship with his parents and was deeply loved and cared for. "When Qi Haisheng was brought into the family, Mr. Qi looked at him and grew increasingly delighted... As Qi Haisheng peed, he splashed Mr. Qi all over. Mr. Qi murmured: 'Child's urine, smells nice.' He was almost willing to serve as a cow or a horse for Qi Haisheng." [6] What Qi Haisheng had to do was to relax and enjoy the trust and care injected by his parents. Similarly, Mr. Ma "held the lottery on his full moon day, with books, official seals, and silver ingots laid out on a table, but Mr. Ma deliberately didn't pick any of them, instead going to touch the abacus hanging on the wall beside." [6] The parents did not stop him either, and before his father took him in as an apprentice at the age of six, the parents allowed him to observe the shop's customers and practice using an abacus according to his own preferences. During the brief childhood, the parent's uninterrupted trust in the subject enables the subject to clarify his social intentions and experience being trusted and receiving vital resources without pressure, starting from the position of being trusted and receiving vital resources without pressure.

With this experience, the subject forms a bond of mutual trust with others. When the child realizes that there are other expressions of relationship between himself and his parents besides the violence-free trust relationship, the innocent "child" identity will immediately collapse. For Qi Haisheng, the moment when his child identity collapsed was when he noticed the difference in appearance between himself and his younger brother and became suspicious of the parent-child relationship; for Mr. Ma, it was when his father formally took him as a disciple and told him not to call him father, but only "teacher." After experiencing such moments, their child

identities begin to evolve towards the next stage. Before they grow into the pillars of the family, they will continue to live as anxious "sons" and always long for and consciously pursue experiences of mutual trust with others without any gaps.

3.2. The Loss of Father and The Anxiety of Son

"Son" is a consenting expression of "paternity's apprentice," a status intended to serve as a male transition to "paternity". The male characters who carry a larger narrative weight in <The South-Goods Shop> have embodied experiences of "loss of father" [7], which refers to the withdrawal of reliable "paternity" from the family space: Qiulin's father was wrongly accused and imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution, and the father and son never met again; Du Yi's father losing his labor capacity early since the illness caused by farming; Mr. Ma was about to complete his apprenticeship and become a full-fledged merchant, but his father died in a sea voyage while on a business trip; Mr. Qi's father died of illness; Qi Haisheng realized that there were many hidden facts in his father-son relationship. <The South-Goods Shop> observes the causes of male "loss of father" across generations, mainly because in a society where men are the main labor force, men face higher risks of illness and accidental death. At the same time, in the government bureaucracy system dominated by men, men are also enveloped by the heavier political crisis shadow. The experience of "loss of father" makes these young men feel immense pressure, and they are forced to urgently demand to become an existence that can fill the void left by their original family and support the young new family in the near future.

These men's embodied "loss of father" experiences have an impact on the emphasis of their anxiety expression in their growth towards "paternity": For Qiulin, his father's wrongful imprisonment makes him perceive the violence of political discourse, forming a cautious character, and keeping a vague distance from political discourse in his work development; Du Yi, who was once the eldest son of a poor farming family, the experience of hunger and poverty, and his father's early decline made him bear the burden of the family too early, showing a fixation on accumulating wealth for himself and his family; Mr. Ma's father's experience of shipwreck made Ma particularly concerned with the stability of life, leading him to tend towards making arrangements for himself and family members to seek stability and completeness; Mr. Qi heard and saw the situation where his father was criticized after his death, and he has since deliberately avoided interacting with others, showing extreme indifference in his daily life. Referring to Brown and Duguid's cognitive practice theory of apprentices, it can be clarified that the immature subject, when in a practice community with the elder, is shaping their social identity towards its formation [8]. The fathers who left the stage early in The South-Goods Shop are transmitting a crisis-laden survival landscape to their sons in the form of "absent presence", influencing their social identity expression, especially reflected in the orientation they strive for in their practical activities.

Therefore, it is understandable that some men, such as Du Yi, upon assuming the role of "paternity," are unable to extricate themselves from the relentless pursuit of single-dimensional discourses such as asset levels. This leads to a diminished empathy for the suffering of family members beyond mere hunger and cold. By focusing solely on making family members' lives more affluent, they trample on the dignity of their loved ones, thus degenerating into a

reprehensible "patriarch."

4. The Silent "Widower" - The Dilemma of Male Silence

<The South-Goods Shop> devotes considerable ink to the male group of widowers, who receive little attention in social life, in order to reflect the living conditions of men who have lost their "paternity" identity. The two middle-aged widowers portrayed in <The South-Goods Shop> are Tofu-man, who runs a tofu shop, and Mr. Wu, who works in a south-goods store. After losing their wives, Tofu-man spends his days alone in his tofu shop, while Mr. Wu often has to endure the combined bullying of his domineering daughter-in-law and stingy son at home. Both widowers have long maintained silence in their old family spaces. By observing the suppressed and silent behavior of widowers in their old family spaces, as well as their subsequent attempts to break out, it is possible to reflect on the conditions for the survival of family spaces while glimpsing the obstacles that men must endure when trying to resolve their anxiety, which are approaching the limits of their survival.

4.1. The Collapse of the Family and the Limits of Silence

After its formation, a harmonious family space is like a multi-part harmonic music, with multiple subjects in the space taking on their respective parts. The subjects jointly resist the external noisy invasion and support each other to maintain a safe experience of mutual trust[9]. For Tofu-man, the old family space was unbearable because it lacked multiple subjects, which made the experience of mutual trust between subjects a mere empty talk. Only solitude accumulated from all directions to press upon Tofu-man. In Mr. Wu's case, his daughter-in-law and son hijacked his reputation in the neighborhood, that is, by appropriating the power of external public judgment discourse, so as to monopolize the right to define the sound of the family space. They would not allow Mr. Wu to consult or coordinate, forcing him to become a silent production machine in the family. For both widowers, the ideal family space of the past had already collapsed into a depressing space resembling a ruin. Their tolerance for the cramped space was getting weaker while the desire to escape was growing stronger. Tofu-man and Mr. Wu, in turn, eventually established new family space with a woman named Mi Li, where they regained the relationship of mutual trust between self and other.

While Tofu-man lived with Mi Li, Mi Li's husband, Da Ming, was also present, and the three of them always got along harmoniously. Da Ming did not object and was very calm about it. Da Ming's peacefulness was shown in the fact that he did not claim himself as the "paternity". Da Ming grew up with his foster father, a kind Buddhist monk, in a mountain temple. Da Ming " never left home, never saw the world, and never learned the skills to earn a living." [6] Since he was not able to produce and had not engaged in actions in the external society, he was not subject to the norms of monogamy. Therefore, the three of them were able to live together harmoniously. However, Da Ming eventually killed himself because Mi Li snatched his wine pot and served Tofu-man. For Da Ming, the family space he lived in constituted almost all of his social survival space. In view of this, Mi Li's forceful snatch of the wine pot meant to Da Ming that when danger struck, he would have nowhere to escape. Furthermore, Da

Ming's adoptive father had passed away early, and Da Ming hardly saw any possibility of maintaining trust relationships with others. At this moment, keeping silent and committing suicide, in Da Ming's view, were the only two options left. Although the two options were highly overlapping, death might be seen as a way out of the predicament and a form of liberation. Da Ming made his choice.

4.2. The Cost of Escaping the Trap of Objectification for Men

Da Ming's death suggests that even though the subject's desire to establish trusting connections with others may not always be fulfilled, at least the possibility of achieving this desire must be visible in order to sustain the willingness to continue living and engaging in social action. And the possibility of achieving this desire is based on the fact that the subject can face a relatively open social space where they can interact with various subjects as a reality. After Da Ming's death, Tofu-man eventually left Mi Li and moved out of Changting. He faced a situation where the villagers talked about him and the judgemental power of the public space in the village was almost unbearable for him. His reputation and livelihood were difficult to maintain, and he found himself in a similar confined living situation as Da Ming.

After Tofu-man left, Mr. Wu and Mi Li got together. Mr. Wu had eventually moved out of the house that was occupied by his son and daughter-in-law, then he created a new family space with Mi Li. Mr. Wu was able to maintain a long-term family relationship with Mi Li, since he had a stronger resistance to public judgment than Tofu-man: On the one hand, Mr. Wu and Mi Li's mutual love as single individuals was less subject to public criticism. On the other hand, Changting, a village, was just Mr. Wu's place of work, while his old and new families were both located in a county. After he married Mi Li, he retired early, and the potential attention he received in the county was much less than the concentrated attention he received in a village. Furthermore, Mr. Wu's institutional identity and his business skills ensured his livelihood. However, Mr. Wu still made many compromising concessions to his persistent and troublesome son and daughter-in-law in a fairly passive manner, such as handing over his savings and the ownership certificate of the house to his son and daughter-in-law, and taking early retirement, which had reduced his income. From beginning to end, he was just a silent object that should be exploited by his children in their eyes. The narrative of Mr. Wu's experiences reveals that as a "paternity", after being subjected to the discipline of "should not inflict violence on family members", he has to suffer the oppressive reality of being easily assetized, objectified, and deprived of the right to express himself but unable to directly resist.

5. Conclusion

The complex fragments of the world, either overlap at order or come at random. If a frame is given as a limit of vision, they will most likely shadow a series of seemingly solid names, such as male, son and father, which appear to be a priori existence in the crude view of distance. However, those who bear these identities often find themselves in difficult situations and struggle to voice their pain. If the solid names are actively approached and scrutinized, their causal trajectories will become clearly apparent, opening up a space for critical inquiry, and the plight of men will also receive the compassion it deserves. From children all the way to paternity,

the situation of men trapped by the anxiety about masculinity should be taken seriously as a clear issue, as a necessary cognitive and action link in the process of social equality.

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