

# Analysis of Characterization and Humanistic Care in Underclass Literature in Urban Literature

-- Using Jia Pingwa's "Gao Xing" as an Example

Shenghua Yin<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Chinese Literature Department, Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou, 450000, China

<sup>a</sup>Email: shenghuayin1113@163.com

**Abstract:** Jia Pingwa is a writer who cares deeply about the underclass, and his novel *Gao Xing* is another of his creative heights, following *Ruined City* and *The Qin Cavern*. Jia Pingwa tells the story of peasant workers' journey to the city in this novel. This paper discusses Jia Pingwa's literary portrayal of the character of the underclass scavenger, his ingenious use of narrative perspective in creating the underclass story, and the social criticism and humanistic concern shown in his work through analysis of the text of *Gao Xing* and a review of relevant literature. Jia Pingwa uses an optimistic and humorous human attitude and comedic language and plot to present the tragedy of underclass life, reflecting the plight of the underclass people and their spiritual pursuit under urbanisation. The novel deeply reflects his close concern for the social problems that still exist in the prosperous city and his deep concern for the underclass people.

**Keywords:** Underclass literature, Underclass, Characterisation, Humanistic concern, GaoXing.

## 1. Introduction

Jia Pingwa is a writer with a great sense of the countryside. In his new novel, *Gao Xing*, Jia Pingwa tells a story of countrymen enter the city. With a realistic attitude and a warm-hearted writing style, he shows a picture of the sad and joyful life of the people at the bottom of the city, and paying close attention to their spiritual world at the same time. "I want to write about Liu Xiaoxing and the countryside-to-city group like Liu Gaoxing, how they came into the city, how they earn their living in the city, how they feel cognizant of the city, how they have their destiny and how this era has given them a sense of destiny..." [1] The significance of *Gao Xing* lies not only in the portrayal of typical and literary characters of the underclass, but also in its realistic reproduction of the life of the underclass and its deep social criticism and concern for the underclass.

## 2. The Shaping of A Literary Subject

In the novel, the prototype of "Liu Gaoxing" is Jia Pingwa's real-life friend Liu Shuzhen, and the scenes and experiences of the characters in the book are drawn from real life. He lives with Wufu, Huangba and Xinghu in a ramshackle building in an urban village, his room is made of bricks; he gets tangled up in front of Furong Garden because of the 50 yuan entrance fee; he goes to the junkyard early in the morning in order to "grab the scrap", and late at night, despite his image and dignity, he fights with others to unload the truck... ..despite living in a glamorous and prosperous city, they are just invisible people drifting on the edge of the city.

But Liu Gaoxing is not a typical migrant worker, for his figure also contains Jia Pingwa's self-integration and the integration of his ideal personality and artistic imagination.

Liu Gaoxing has Jia Pingwa's literary temperament in himself. He went to high school and remembered the couplet on the door of the Guan Gong Temple in Qingfeng Town: "Yao and Shun are all capable, but people should be self-

reliant; generals have no seeds, but I treat them equally." He also used this to encourage himself and spoke in a literary manner, for example, "A gentleman seeks the way, but a vile character seeks food!" [1] He would meticulously correct misspellings on street plaques. Liu Gaoxing played the flute as a pastime and was also very conscious of his image: his daily dress was a suit and leather shoes, and he used a cowhide purse, which made the restaurant owner think he was a scholar on a grassroots study tour and treat him with respect; his association of the Bodhisattva with Meng Yichun was quite romantic. Liu's narcissism is a perfect example of a literary man's narcissism, which is a far cry from the usual image of a scavenger. [2]

Jia Pingwa also imbues Liu Gaoxing with a spirit of "chivalry and magnanimity". [3] He is courageous and has a sense of justice, for instance, when he complains about the insult to Cuihua and cleverly helps her to get her identity card back; when he gives Meng Yichun some of the money he earns to help her accomplish her goal of catching her brother's murderer; when he lies on the front cover of a car to stop the owner of a car that hit a child and tried to hit and run, he bets his life on it, and so on. Despite having seen the hypocrisy of the city and the dishonourable things his friends did without his knowledge, Liu Gaoxing remained true to his dreams of justice, responsibility and becoming a "city dweller", a lotus flower who "emerged from the mud of the city without staining his heart" as described by Jia Pingwa. He is the lotus flower who "emerged from the mud of the city without staining his heart". Jia Pingwa said, "To live cleanly in a dirty place, this is Liu Gaoxing."

"I want to be happy, I am Liu Gaoxing, the more people call me happy the happier I can be" [1], this is the origin of Liu Gaoxing's name, his "happy" spirit and optimistic and humorous attitude are Liu Gaoxing's weapons against the difficult city life. He imagines that in the future, after he has "made a big name for himself", he will bow to every blade of grass and every tree in Xinglong Street, and even the birds will be chirping "Gaoxing! Gaoxing! Gaoxing!" He also

imagines the taste of abalone, shark's fin and bird's nest in his mind when he eats rice, noodles and grits. With the wisdom and courage of the countryside, Liu Gaoxing brings his "chivalrous" spirit to bear in the city, battling with the city. This simple spiritual power also reveals how Jia Pingwa faces the personal situation of being in the city but wandering between the city and the countryside: although he has entered the city in terms of material and identity, Jia Pingwa's "roots" lie in the countryside, which makes it difficult for him to identify with the city spiritually. This has made it difficult for him to identify with the city, and his deep-rooted peasant consciousness, moral values and behaviour are to a certain extent alien to those in the city. He says: "At root we are still peasants, and although you go to the city and try your best to get rid of the peasant consciousness, you can't get rid of the imprint you have made." [4] He loves his hometown, but at the same time sees the ills of the countryside; he calls passionately for urban civilisation, but often feels confused and worried. Jia Pingwa therefore felt that he had never been able to fully integrate into the city, and that he felt a sense of loneliness and alienation in the face of the city, which makes it difficult for him to find his spiritual home. [5] He finds in Liu Gaoxing that his spirituality enables him to face the city without confusion, fear and shrinkage, but with integrity and authenticity.

### 3. On The "Liu Gaoxing Perspective" in Gao Xing

Jia Pingwa chose to unfold the story from Liu Gaoxing's perspective, recreating the underclass life and marginal life of the urban rag-picking community through the experiences and feelings of a rag-picker. "I did everything in my power to suppress the extremely exaggerated and distorted vapid and high-flown narrative that seems to be painful to read, to make the story more lifelike, detailed, soft and warm." [1]

Liu Gaoxing takes us on a journey through the real underclass life of the city, using a cheerful and playful tone to show us the dilemma and helplessness of underclass life: trying to enter the hotel lobby but being stopped by the doorman, "He doesn't think I'm a ragpicker, does he?" "He let me in, but I had to go in barefoot." The first-person point of view allows readers to directly feel the embarrassment of being disliked and discriminated against; he is insulted by the resident who says, "You rag, I'm asking you a question!" [1] Liu thinks, What the hell are you talking about? I put down the old newspaper, I don't want to accept it, how can a rag picker become a rag? I didn't stop when she was shouting after me. If this description had been changed to a third-person narrative perspective, with a more objective and rational omniscient point of view, the intense anger and self-respect in Liu Gaoxing's heart would have been difficult to show powerfully, and readers would not have been able to intuitively feel the bitterness of the people at the bottom of the city.

In addition, the author portrays Wu Fu, a character full of local sentiments and peasant consciousness, through the mouth of Liu Gaoxing. Compared to Liu Gaoxing, Wufu is a more realistic and profound character of the urban underclass. "His mouth was open, his muscles stiff, and it was still a bit cool, but he was sweating again and again". When he was being ordered around by the skinny monkey and targeted by the doorman, he could only sulk and whine, not daring to fight back. His words and actions also carry a deep rural imprint:

"Wu Fu squatted on a stool, his shoes had holes in the front and the uppers were so dirty that three flies landed on them to wash their faces." [1] Eating noodles in a noodle shop while ordering two more bowls of noodle soup, causing people to stare. He also thought hospital was a "black clinic", and only taking a few painkillers when he was uncomfortable or having his eyebrows "bled" by Liu Gaoxing. Unlike Liu Gaoxing, who has ambitions to become a city dweller and later honour his ancestors, Wu Fu only wants to earn more money so that his family can live a better life. He often misses Qingfeng Town, his wife and, during the wheat harvest season, his family's wheat fields. Faced with the dizzying and disorienting city life, Wu Fu lives a constrained life, unable to understand the city and even less able to integrate into it, just relying on Liu Gaoxing. His end seems to suggest the fate of most migrant workers in the process: their lives end in a life of toil and hardship, and in the end they find it difficult to achieve happiness and a sense of belonging to the city.

After several drafts, Jia Pingwa finally takes Liu Gaoxing as the narrator, using the first-person restricted perspective as the narrative perspective, giving the underclass characters the right to tell their own stories and speak for themselves, so that what the reader reads is not the underclass world from the perspective of the intellectual elite, but a more realistic underclass world where suffering and happiness coexist. Gaoxing achieves a self-awareness of the underlying narrative. [6]

### 4. Social Criticism And Humanism in A Living Narrative

In Liu Gaoxing's narrative, we see the neglected and discriminated world of the underclass in the city, where there are not only rulers like Dana and the "King of Rags", but also people like Liu Gaoxing and Wu Fu, who spend their days scavenging for rubbish, living in the streets and alleys, begging for a living like Shi Renao, or like Meng Yichun, who is a prostitute. [7] They are like people who live on the edge of the city. They are like lonely ghosts wandering on the fringes of the city, uncared for and uninterested. Jia Pingwa looks at this group with a compassionate eye, and from the standpoint of a humanist, he writes about their state of existence and spiritual world, writing about the tragedies of the underclass, as small as dust, showing his strong social criticism and concern for the underclass.

Jia Pingwa writes in the afterword to Gao Xing: "If I had not entered the city in 1972 by that fortuitous opportunity of going to university as workers, peasants and soldiers. I would certainly have been a peasant too, and by the time I was in my fifties, I would certainly have come to collect rubbish, and what shape would that have taken? Such emotions made me lament bitterly over the poverty, humility, loneliness and all the discrimination suffered by these people who had left the land in the city, and something depressing was always swaying my pen." [1] Despite having lived in the city for decades and having greatly enriched and improved material conditions, Jia Pingwa did not develop a sense of superiority over the peasants and the urban underclass, but treated them as friends, willing to sincerely understand their lives, write down their sufferings and misfortunes, and stand in their shoes to speak out for them. In Gao Xing, he uses the words of Liu Gaoxing to express that "the difference in life's circumstances is not a difference in quality or wisdom, but in opportunity, just as the same porcelain tile is stuck on the

potting bench, while some are stuck in the toilet." Such a viewpoint is a call for "equality" for the lower class, a satire of the city people's contempt and discrimination against the lower class, a rebuke of the indifference of society at large, and a search for social justice. It also uses the words of Liu Gaoxing to educate Wu Fu: "The peasants are not less intelligent than the city people, they only lack the insight." "People are not untouchable, but untouchable is self-generated." [1] The call goes out to the underclass and the peasants not to belittle themselves and to "live with their heads up" in the city.

As urbanisation continues to accelerate and cities become better and better built, more and more urban waste can seem to be seen as a sign of its increasing power. But as people sing the praises of the city's prosperity and the beauty of life, who would think of the people who deal with all this urban waste? "What would Xi'an be like without those sanitation workers and us?" This is the question that Liu Gaoxing asked as he looked at the newspaper. Their work is as necessary and solemn to the city as the human breath, but it is easily overlooked, which has led to their lives going unnoticed and the problems of survival, health care and education for the huge underclass not being properly addressed. Living in a dirty and humble urban village, collecting old clothes to wear, being "not qualified to get sick", and not being able to get timely medical treatment for Wu Fu at the last moment of his life because he could not raise enough money for medical treatment, the common living conditions of migrant workers are all shown in the novel. In his afterword, Jia Pingwa asks, "Why is there such a class of working people in China? ..... Who will stop this class and who will manage it? Can working in the city really make the peasants rich? ....." [1], expressing his concern for the development of urban and rural areas and the survival of urban migrant workers, as well as his hatred and disgust for phenomena such as anti-humanity, "money first" and the destruction of moral conscience in urban development. The exhibition also expresses the hatred and disgust of urban development. How the city and the countryside should develop together and how the survival of migrant workers and the underclass can be improved are the major questions of the times.

The life of the underclass in the cities is a miserable one. They do the dirtiest and toughest jobs, live in shabby, dilapidated buildings and earn a meagre income. In the cold city, they not only have to support themselves, but also have to set aside a lot of money for their families in the countryside. WuFu will treat himself harshly because of the bad income they have earned that day, and some migrant workers will die because they cannot collect the wages that they might have. Taking into account their various helplessness and misfortunes, Jia Pingwa stands out from a caring point of view, using a compassionate and sympathetic attitude and a lifelike writing style to lightly bring out the unethical and unlawful scenarios of Liu Gaoxing collecting discarded medical plastic products and selling them for secondary processing, Wufu and Huangba visiting a private prostitute, and Meng Yichun soliciting for prostitution. [8-10]

Scavengers and prostitutes are frowned upon and despised by the townspeople. These two professions are not only unrespectable, but even against the moral law. Jia Pingwa, however, writes with warmth about the love between a

scavenger and a prostitute, giving a sympathetic eye to their life experiences and encounters. After learning that she is a prostitute, he treats her as a "Buddhist prostitute" in the guise of a bodhisattva with bones. The name Meng Yichun is meant to be the subtitle of the English writer Hardy's *Tess*, 'A Pure Woman', which also suggests that despite being a prostitute, her mind and spirit were untainted. [11] The love between Liu Gaoxing and Meng Yichun is simple and pure, as the two underprivileged but arrogant people meet in the materialistic city and are drawn to each other by their spiritual resonance. Liu Gaoxing gives Meng Yichun meticulous care and financial support, while Meng Yichun is Liu Xiaoxing's spiritual support. In the huge pond of the city, they are two duckweeds clinging to each other.

## 5. Conclusion

The "alternative" urban scavenger Liu Gaoxing is portrayed in *Gao Xing*, he is not only a narrator of the life of scavengers and the underclass, but also an exposé and questioner of social problems, and in his case, an embodiment of ideal humanity. By cleverly using the narrative perspective to push the underclass characters to speak out for themselves, Jia Pingwa achieves a combination of 'telling' and 'showing' in his narrative. The tragedies of the underclass shown in the comedic narrative also express Jia Pingwa's concern for the social and humanitarian crises lurking beneath the surface of today's prosperous cities, as well as his infinite care and sympathy for the underclass people who suffer from hardship and discrimination.

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