

On the Imagery of “Fanggaotu” and Its Literary Implications in Zhang Wei’s Latest Work the River Bay

Xinran Wang

School of Chinese Language and Literature, Jiangsu Normal University, Xuzhou, China.

211707454@qq.com

Abstract. The novel *The River Bay* is the latest full-length masterpiece by Zhang Wei, a famous writer and winner of the Mao Dun Literature Award, who has been working on it for five years. In this work, Zhang Wei continues his tradition in his novels of expressing thematic ideas through the creation of imagery. “Fanggaotu” (“Visiting the masters”) is not only a physical imagery, but also a deep symbolic meaning and clue, which plays an important role in shaping the characters, creating a natural context and enhancing aesthetic meaning.

Keywords: River bay; Fanggaotu; Imagery.

1. Introduction

Published by Flower City Press in 2022, *The River Bay* is another masterpiece of writer Zhang Wei's novel, which is “closed and submerged”. Through the personal experience of the main character Fu Yixian, *The River Bay* presents the complex history and reality of the peninsula from a macro perspective. Beneath the surface of decency, Fu Yibin's marriage and spirit remain unsettled. He devotes himself to his painter friend's “fanggaotu”, searching for “masters” and “aliens” in the city. In the end, he also makes his own choice: to get away from the downtown area and find a beautiful river bay to settle his soul. *The River Bay* starts off with “fanggaotu”. On the surface, it writes about Fu Yibin's search for “masters”. In fact, it reflects the spiritual loss and perseverance of people in the new era.

“Escape and return, wandering and redemption, reality and romance, criticism and salutation, all these ostensibly contradictory, enriching, refuting, and multidimensional spiritual themes constitute the philosophical depth of Zhang Wei's novels. The lyrical style, the bizarre imagery, the personalized language and narrative style are his extremely recognizable aesthetic character.”[1] Wu Yiqin, vice chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association, believes that *The River Bay* is another family novel following *You Are on the Highland*, which continues Zhang Wei's consistent style while also possesses new pursuits and explorations.

2. Overview of the Imagery “Fanggaotu”

Imagery, an aesthetic category created in ancient China, can be traced back to the earliest days of Zhou Yi: “To create an image is to exhaust the meaning.” That is to say, “Imagery is objective objects that incorporate subjective feelings, or subjective feelings that are expressed through objective objects.”[2] Zhang Wei is deeply influenced by traditional Chinese literature, and has established himself in poetry creation. His novels are also full of poetic spirituality and lyrical temperament. Zhang Wei believes that “any form of literature is poetry itself. Novels are certainly poetry, and should have the quality of poetry. The ethereal brush, as well as the artistic conception, is poetry. Poetry is most concerned with artistic conception.”[3]

Therefore, in his novels, Zhang Wei carefully creates various imagery communities, such as ancient ships, old mills, vineyards, land, wilderness, forests and so on, to construct the ideal kingdom in his mind, which expresses the writer's personal ideological tendencies and makes his works overflow with a strong lyricism and utopian idealism. At the same time, because of the “philosophy” and “polysemy” of the imagery itself, it also “requires a careful researcher to decipher it like a

cryptographer deciphering an unfamiliar code” [4], allowing the reader to ponder and seek to understand the ideological core of Zhang Wei’s novel’s imagery step by step.

In Zhang Wei’s *The River Bay*, “fanggaotu” is an imagery that runs through the whole text, echoing and recurring in the text, thus leading to two central concepts of the novel with symbolic significance – “river bay” and “masters”, and playing an important symbolic role in the novel’s theme. “On the surface, it is a place of leisure, but it can go back to the complex cultural system represented by the peach colony. In fact, it is a product of modernity and a solution to the crisis of modernity. It is a peach colony that keeps going back and forth, while returning to the sea and melting into heaven and earth. It is a larger landscape between heaven and earth.”[1] So says Ye Zhudi, editor-in-chief of *Exploration and Free Views*.

The “fanggaotu” mentioned at the beginning of *The River Bay* consists of two core elements: The first is “the lush mountains and dangerous rocks, a path interrupted at times, then reappearing and circling upwards. There is a small piece of flat land at the highest point, where there is a grass hut, a stone bench, a zither and a letter of book”; The second is a master “with wide robes and big sleeves, living in a remote place in the mountains, with a blurred face and a high bun”, “cooking tea in a humble grass hut and playing the zither by the stream”. This environmental and humanistic imagery is the spiritual highland that the main character Fu Yibian constantly thinks about and visits throughout the novel. This thought process of the main character also contains the theme the writer wants to express, that is modern people’s continuous exploration of the ideal living home and spiritual home.

The book *The River Bay* is also a more ambitious “fanggaotu”. It is a search for the masters who are spiritually “independent and elegant” in the modern society by thinkers represented by Fu Yixian. With the social changes of modernization, industrialization and urbanization, as well as the rapid improvement of living standards, various new problems have also emerged: the expansion of materialistic desires, the proliferation of lust, the loss of faith, the indifference of human relations, the prevalence of egoism, and the disorder of social order... As a writer with keen insight and contemporary vision, from *The Ancient Ship*, *The September Fables*, to *Pak Wai*, to *The Secret History of Aiyobor*, Zhang Wei always shows his deep concern for the wave of modernity and his insistence on independent personality in the face of the conflict between tradition and modernity, nature and technology, conscience and temptation. In *The River Bay*, Zhang Wei creates different images of “masters”. Through the self-narrative nature of the main character Fu Yixian’s constant thinking and searching for “masters” and “aliens”, he expresses his inner conflict and pondering in the midst of the great changes in history.

3. Analysis of the “Master’s” Image in “Fanggaotu”

In the novel, words like “masters” and “aliens” appear 31 times in total, connecting the whole novel. This is also the spiritual pursuit of the main character Fu Yixian, namely – “A person’s rigidity, persistence and insight, courage and heart that do not follow the common view, is probably the core content of an alien.” “An ‘alien’ is a person who possesses the self, who is not outside the trend, nor in the trend, but above it.”

Fu Yixian, as the son of the wrongly accused “false district chief” suspect, a wanderer who has experienced a tragic family development history, is able to get in the agency and is about to be promoted to deputy director thanks to his female boss, which seems to be a joyous occasion in the eyes of common people. But Fu Yixian has always maintained his inner perseverance and reflection. He has always been an intellectual who is tired of institutions and modernization, somewhat nostalgic and rich in sentiment. He goes from aspiring to the life aspirations of “masters”, to searching for “masters” around him, to thinking about the existence of “masters” in modern times, and finally to becoming a “master” himself. He resigns, moves away from the city, settles his soul in the river bay, and writes his family history. This also echoes the “turning” of the river bay, which can be described as the turning and perseverance of a modern urbanite’s mind.

In addition to the main character, Fu Yixian, the writer has also created a number of distinctive characters in the book to complete and complement the image group of the “masters” from different sides.

Fu Yixin and his secret love, Luo Jia, both share the same tragic two-generation family history. When they were in college, they met in a haystack smelling of artemisia, and their lonely hearts were comforted. Fu Yixin has always regarded Luo Jia as a “master” because of her beauty, mystery and her unique “love preservation method”. However, the child who was once “a light to guide me”, the child who was born in a broken temple on the top of a mountain and who was at odds with the cruel bandits who killed her ancestors, the young girl who wrote to and from her stepfather over and over again, questioning the “bloodstained history”, the “princess” who was so attached to animals such as donkeys and dogs, loses her conscience and turns into a “queen” who is above all, controlling everything and “making money out of everything”. Perhaps the “queen” of the business empire is what Luo Jia craves after she learns that “the great grievances of black and white cannot be appealed”. This also makes Fu Yixin tired of and part ways with Luo Jia. Compared Fu Yixin to Luo Jia, although both of them have similar family sufferings and life marks, the two inherit and carry forward different kernels. Fu Yixin pursues the “master” style in “fanggaotu”, which is an out-of-this-world way to stay away from the hustle and bustle and hold on to her soul, while Luo Jia pursues career success and embodies the traditional idea of actively entering the world, and the “master” seems to be manifested only in her detached and independent view of marriage.

Yu Zhie and Su Buhui, as close friends of the main character, are also the practitioners and pioneers of Fu Yixin’s ideal of “master”, who stray from the world and beyond, pursuing material life while yearning for a rich spiritual life. They are the first to leave the institution to start a travel company, buy the river bay, and discuss with Fu Yixin their interests outside the world. Their dream of the river bay is interrupted by the death of Su Buhui, and Fu Yixin takes over as the next generation owner of the river bay and the new generation of “master”. The development of the river bay has also left a “bald spot” at the top of the hill unresolved, symbolizing the worldly temptations and spiritual confusion of the pioneers of the river bay.

He Dian and Geng Yang, both of whom are highly esteemed figures, have their differences. He Dian is a typical master with a classical temperament, with the pseudonym “He Liyan”, who studies ancient writing and is proficient in Chinese medicine. He Dian is an intellectual who is not in the ivory tower but in the garden, being the ideal image of a master in “fanggaotu”.

For the civet gold business empire explosion case, the author does not write directly, but leaves certain hints. When everyone adopts the attitude of protecting themselves and keeping their mouths shut or even distorting the facts, Geng Yang, as an ordinary janitor who witnessed the scene, is the only one who dares to speak the truth, even when he gets his index finger twisted off, continues to be stigmatized, and is expelled from employment so that he has to collect garbage for a living, he refuses to give in. He represents the master's temperament of “hiding in the city” - a “maverick” who dares to speak out in the face of power and oppression, and who sticks to his truth and conscience.

Faced with the noise and impatience of the times, Zhang Wei, as a thinker with a sense of social mission, strives to find a practical way out for the future of Chinese contemporary society and culture. The portrayal of these “masters” in his works coincides with the Chinese tradition’s spiritual tenet that “In times of impoverishment, scholars should preserve their moral integrity; In times of success, they should benefit the whole world.” Whether it is Geng Yang and He Dian, who are hidden in the city, or Fu Yixian, who live far away from the downtown area, they all embody Zhang Wei’s pursuit of the ancient “gentleman” and “great man” of “cultivating oneself and helping others”.

4. Aesthetic Implications of “Fanggaotu”

Zhang Wei’s portrayal of the group of “masters” in “fanggaotu” is also characteristic of Chinese painting, especially Chinese literati painting. It is a special expression of The River Bay to link the whole text and shape the characters through the imagery of “fanggaotu”.

First of all, it is the combination of realism and realism, rich in charm. When shaping his characters, Zhang Wei brings into play the tradition of “conveying the spirit with images” and “combining the image with the spirit” in Chinese painting theory. In general, novels focus on expressing the characters’ personalities, following the principle of typicalizing and dimensionalizing characters. However, Zhang Wei focuses more on the “temperament” and “quality” of people when building his characters. The aesthetic characteristic of Chinese painting lies in the emphasis on the spirituality of the characters. Zhang Wei takes two different approaches to portraying different characters in *The River Bay*: impressionistic and realistic. For some characters, especially the more typical “masters”, Zhang Wei mainly adopts the traditional technique of impressionism, not directly showing their typical characters, but exploring their psychological meteorology from details such as their behavior and speech, language and actions. For example, Zhang Wei writes about Luo Jia’s “bemused eyes” and “solemn written words,” unfolding his family history from the side, but rarely gives a direct and typical overview of Luo Jia’s character. This is especially true when writing about He Dian and Geng Yang, using few words to express much. Geng Yang’s words – “I regret that I should not be on duty. Originally, I intended to get up early to go to the market and then visit the child’s grandma’s house.” – show the image of this simple, kind and unworldly “master”. As for the female boss, Yuan Yuan, female sports team members, female researchers, De Lei Ling and other people, Zhang Wei portrays these characters in a more direct and clear way, which is also intended to distinguish the difference between “masters” and “common people”.

Secondly, it is the shaping of the “realm of the self”. Chinese landscape painting attaches great importance to the embodiment of the spirit of the subject in his works, and Zhang Wei continues his tradition of self-referential “family history” and “spiritual history” in *The River Bay*. The two family histories are linked through the combination of Luo Jia and Fu Yi Tiao, thus showing the historical situation of three generations of the peninsula. And the first-person narrative of the main character Fu Yixian, an independent thinker in the midst of a disturbance, is also a projection of Zhang Wei’s personal thoughts: “I may forever remain an outsider to this hot, bustling society.”[5] The realistic dilemmas in Zhang Wei’s novels not only are a kind of realistic reproduction, but also contain the author’s reflections. He narrates the reality while injecting his own spirit and sending his own thoughts. There are hidden thoughts behind Fu Yixian’s spiritual exploration throughout the novel. The information explosion and materialistic expansion of the Internet era has become an assault on the human spirit. Yet, Fu Yixian insist on “hidden marriage” in love, being faithful to Luo Jia; He never flatters at work, being tired of it; Most importantly, he never loses himself in the flood of the times. Facing various temptations such as money, power and love, he can always maintain a sober and independent self-control. This is also in line with Zhang Wei’s belief that “literature is the writing of people” and “literature is faith”, which is full of humanistic concerns.

Finally, it focuses on shaping the landscape atmosphere of “the nature of the mountain is my nature, and the feeling of the mountain is my feeling”. The scenes are blended with feelings. The imagery of the landscape in “fanggaotu” is the writer’s ideal “living home”, and its realistic expression in the novel is the “river bay”. According to Jung’s theory of the “cultural collective unconscious”, the archetype is “the content of the collective unconscious”, and the collective unconscious is “the content and manner of behavior that are largely similar to those of all individuals in all places.”[6] The idealized landscape imagery portrayed in “fanggaotu” can be traced back to the utopian landscape and idyllic imagery shaped by Tao Yuanming, a poet of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, represented by the “peach colony”. The non-existent fantasy of the “working farmers and running dogs and chickens” and the “bamboos and mulberries” in “The Peach Colony” has been repeatedly depicted by the scholars for a long time. It has gradually become a spiritual home for the writers’ sentiments, a cultural prototype of a utopia in a chaotic world. The cultural psychology behind the “peach colony” is the Taoist’s “country of nothingness” of tranquility and inactivity. By creating a fantasy space that is different from the city, the center and the mainstream in space and time, it is able to escape from the shackles of the world and political persecution, so as to realize the lifestyle of “people living poetically on the earth”.

Zhang Wei's literary creations have an obvious ecological consciousness, and his praise of nature and criticism of modern civilization often become the core themes of his creations. Zhang Wei once said, "In addition to the lack of reverence for God and nature, contemporary literature also lacks contact with other living beings in nature. It is as if people in this period are truly loners, dictators between heaven and earth." With the deepening of modernization and the advent of the Internet information age, facing the reality that the beauty of the natural environment is gradually being destroyed by artificial development, he attempts to counter the destruction of the ecological environment by constructing a natural "peach colony": the Luqing river, the forest, the vineyard, the land, the wilderness, the sea... In *The River Bay*, Zhang Wei's main character Fu Yixian finally chooses to say goodbye to "the jungle of steel, banquet traffic, smart phones and light pollution", "the sound of knives and forks and tall glasses", and returns to a "place of longing, hope and sunshine" - the river bay.

In the novel, the river bay is a modern farming village at the edge of the city with "mountains and forests, water waves, fragrant bushes, flying birds, and swimming fish". This is echoed by the "fanggaotu" hanging in the stone room in the center of the river bay, suggesting that the river bay in the novel is a realistic representation of the landscape in "fanggaotu". The river bay, the "peach colony" that seems to be out of place in modern life, is founded by Fu Yibin's close friend Yu Zhie and Su Buhui. It ends midway due to the death of Su Buhui, and the eventual takeover of the main character Fu Yibian also leaves us room for imagination, as well as the writer's thoughts - where will the "peach colony", the beautiful landscape on which our ancestors secluded in the mountains and rivers, end up in modern society?

5. Conclusion

The River Bay continues the tradition of "family history" narratives in Zhang Wei's novels since *The Ancient Ship*, but with new reflections on history and reality. The family narratives in *The Ancient Ship*, *The Secret Pharmacist*, and *The Secret History of Aiyue Castle* focus on two generations of fathers and sons, and the protagonists are historically experienced. The family narrative of *The River Bay*, on the other hand, is presented as a family narrative of three generations, and the family narrative is mainly interpolated and supplemented by the narrative and records of the third generation of the main character, presenting the complexity and cruelty of the history of the peninsula for more than half a century while telling the history of the family from three generations, and accusing the "evil" of history. The historical background is written as the background of reality. Fu Yixian's thinking and pursuit of the "masters" in real life is also a search for the goodness of human nature that can counteract the evil of history and the material desire of reality. From the natural transition from historical writing to the presentation of reality, Zhang Wei expresses more new thinking and exploration of history and reality. Coming from the depths of historical suffering, the third generation seeks its own value and meaning in the new modern society, thus giving a new atmosphere to the river bay. This is a realistic journey of discovery that leads us through the pain of history, out of the dilemma of reality, and finally in the realization of spiritual perseverance. And this is exactly what "fanggaotu" shows us - where are the masters? Only through the "big mountains and dangerous rocks, a path interrupted from time to time", through all kinds of spiritual trials and tribulations, can we reach the "river bay" of life. This is the meaning and value of *The River Bay*, which is also Zhang Wei's new attempt and exploration of Chinese literature in the 21st century.

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