

On the Pastoral Narratives of CHEN Yingzhen's *The General's Clan*

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Abstract. As a representative of Taiwan's pastoral literature writers, CHEN Yingzhen, with a compassionate style and unique insight, focuses on and portrays the living conditions and spiritual state of the common people in his work "The General's Clan". The novel reveals rural characters' vigorous and resilient attitude as well as rural society's backwardness and decadence through details such as movements, expressions and postures. Images like doves and the moon symbolize the beauty of life and the goodness of human nature. The tragic ending in a comic atmosphere makes the novel's narrative more compelling. The use of contrast between the present and the past serves as a unique narrative structure, unveiling the subtle relationship between the uncertain history and personal fate. With a strong sense of patriotism, Chen depicts Taiwanese living conditions in the countryside and their spiritual attitudes.

Keywords: The General's Clan; pastoral narrative; realism; nationalism

1. Introduction

The pastoral narrative in *The General's Clan* not only profoundly conveys the author's protest against the darkness and ugliness of society, but also expresses his praise for the noble virtues of ordinary people. In a special and perceptible form, Chen combines "pastoral" within the spiritual realm of Taiwanese history and reality. In contrast to his early days when he "only gazed at the isolated individual, the fragile heart dripping with miserable blood, and felt self-pity." Chen has "learned to stand at a higher level, to be calmer and objective, and thus to analyze more deeply the things around him." Starting from the "pastoral narrative", the paper focuses on the narrative techniques, narrative structures, and ideological connotation of the "pastoral narrative" in *The General's Clan*, trying to explore how Chen writes about the fate of ordinary rural people, and how he expresses his pursuit of a cultural homeland and a spiritual home.

2. Narrative Technique: The Integration of Detailed Description and Metaphorical Images

Detailed descriptions "can make the content more diverse and colorful." The *General's Clan* contains both prominent descriptions of the triangle-face man, the little skinny girl, the hero, and the heroine, and detailed portraits of the "Kang Band". Gogol once said, "Laughter is a much deeper thing than people think." As a unique aesthetic symbol, laughter also represents "a literary spirit". In *The General's Clan*, laughter serves as a unique narrative element facilitating the exposure of the characters' inner world. The author is good at depicting different types of laughter. The first one that can be noticed is the lonely "smile" of the triangle face, a forty-year-old veteran who arrived in Taiwan alone. whenever the musicians joked about him, "The triangle face is a true Liu Xiahui (an upright gentleman)!", he would always just "smile". The "smile" is a mixture of the emptiness of wandering around, as well as the complex sadness of not giving in to old age and longing to return home. He can only relieve the bitter anxiety of survival by "laughing". Another one is his helpless "laugh". "He touched and scratched his head, which was half bald, and then laughed". In the face of the little skinny girl, he has accepted the reality of his old age, showing a helpless smile. In addition, a relieved smile can be noted on the face of the man. Moreover, in the reunion with the girl, the triangle face showed an embarrassed smile. "He did not say anything, only smiled lightly", and then when the two communicated frankly, the smile of relief appeared. They ran to death together. The

details of the "laughter" of the triangle face constitute a key element in the interpretation of "The General's Clan". The smile, ranging from being lonely to helpless to relieved, reveals the journey of the triangle face from being stubborn to accepting reality.

Secondly, Chen Yingzhen uses a lot of action descriptions in the novel to analyze the change in the little skinny girl's mind step by step. "Yi sat there, holding her folded legs, and cried very quietly." The girl had a strong feeling of grievance, which came from her inner struggles, containing both thoughts about her family and fate, and worries about her future. But later, "Yi took a deep breath, lowered her head, and supported her chin with the right hand that held the cigarette. She drew many small distorted circles on the sand with her left hand." She understood the family to a certain extent, and used "drawing circles" to express her sorrow of being unable to return home and reunite with her families, as well as her bitterness of the inevitable tragedy and homelessness. In the end, when her love came, the little skinny girl, feeling helpless for her body "is no longer clean". She "laughed loudly, fetched her cap and put it on, waved her silver baton, and walked in front of him in the goose step. She walked toward death. A series of action descriptions, such as "retrieved", "put on", "waved" and "walked the goose step", hides the fact that although the little thin girl did not get rid of the discrimination against her, but she kept looking for relief in the process of continuous abuse. In the suffering, she tried to reconcile with herself, but failed to do so. Thus, she embraced death with an uplifting gesture, maintaining the purity of her soul and her dignity.

In the end, the author also describes the living environment and the attitude of the characters in the "Kang Band" to deepen the theme of the work. The "Kang Band" is a representative of those who play music for people's weddings and funerals to earn a living. During their free time, they would listen to the stories made up by the triangle face. In the difficult environment, the band members lived a messy life whose spiritual world was empty, while the triangle face and the little skinny girl were able to maintain their inner beauty and faith in life despite being in the same bad situation. The author devotes his attention and sympathy to the details of the main characters, the triangle face, the little girl, and the Kang Band, which not only highlight the image of rural people, but also reflect the difficulties they face in struggling for survival. The capture of details is also evident in Chen Yingzhen's other pastoral novels. Regardless of the depiction of the poor family who came from Miaoli to Taipei in *The Noodle Stall* or the narration of Wu Jinxiang's inner torment in *The Village Teacher*, the author does not criticize ironically, but reveals a deep and heart-warming human love in a bitter atmosphere.

Images such as "doves and the moon" appear more than once in "The General's Clan", enriching and deepening the novel with their metaphorical connotations. "Doves" are often regarded as a symbol of a pure and noble soul. Beneath the clean feathers, doves are quiet and resilient. Virgil likened himself to the "dove of Dione". Kenzaburo Oe's "The Dove" carries the connotation of "hope from despair". The pigeon in Chen Yingzhen's writing is resilient and vigorous despite the loneliness and hardship. There are four scenes of pigeons in the novel. The triangle face and the little skinny girl are just like the hovering pigeons, who have experienced the hardships of the underclass during the years of wandering, but they still have a strong and pure soul. Born in a poor family, the little skinny girl was sold by her family to survive, but she insisted on not selling her body. As for the triangle face, he did not lose his pigeon-like humanity and used the only 30,000 yuan of military pension to help the little skinny girl pay off her debts. What is worth noting is that there are three depictions of pigeons circling in the air. The reluctance of the pigeons to leave symbolizes the main characters' attachment to their families, which explains the psychological factor behind the act of giving his pension. In the end, they were destined to reunite at a funeral music performance, and they gave up their lives with the "King's March" to pursue the world of holiness and freedom. It is clear that the "dove" represents their pure love, and at the same time, indicates their determination to die for the purity of their souls.

The moon symbolizes the loneliness of homesickness. One night, with "the moon shattering into shiny fish scales in the sea", the triangle face told the little skinny girl the story of a little monkey being homesick. He could not help saying: "It's late, stop thinking nonsense. Don't I want to go

home?" Homesickness can be found everywhere in his words. Like millions of compatriots who wander from the mainland to Taiwan, the triangle face has an endless nostalgia. However, the reality prevented him from returning and he could only continue to roam. This story moved the little girl. "The moon lighted on the two funny figures as well as the two lines of lonely footprints." In the night where the moon soothed them, the triangle face and the little girl, shared the similar difficulties and gave birth to beautiful emotions. The moon, intertwined with darkness and brightness, coexisting with fragmentation and perfection, also appears in Lu Xun's works such as *Forging the Swords*, *My Brothers*, and *My Old Home*. Different from Lu Xun's moon, Chen Yingzhen's moon is more tender, filled with the goodness of humanity and the beauty of life.

The involvement of metaphorical images adds a soothing and elegant atmosphere to the novel while presenting the heavy life and themes. Through the images "doves" and "the moon", the author's deep humanistic sentiments are revealed. Although the two underclass characters grow up on different lands with their own traits, the author, in portraying the triangle face and the little skinny girl, shows his strong sympathy for the grassroots people, revealing their love, sincerity, and selflessness in the description of the bitter reality. Such sympathy and concern reflect the author's thought that "the first thing to do is to give warm comfort to those who are lost, humiliated, trampled, and neglected, bringing them courage to struggle, to hope, and to rise again." He said, "An artist is first of all a kind person and a thinker of humanism. Then he may become a literary artist who embraces the goodness and evil of all people." *The General's Clan* explores the beauty and truth of human from the triangle face and the little skinny girl, presenting the rural landscapes and customs while expressing the attachment to and reflections on the countryside.

3. Narrative Structure: The Intersection of Tragic Endings and Contrasts between the Present and the Past

"Chen Yingzhen's charm lies in the fact that his fictional narratives are filled with a strong poetic sense as well as a sad yet gentle charm." *The Generals' Clan* has a joyful tone, with only the ending being tragic. Such a narrative structure is conducive to demonstrating the infectious power of vernacular stories. At the beginning of the novel, the author sets the tone for the whole book with a joyful funeral: "Especially on the day of the funeral, the sun shone so splendidly that the funeral family was covered with a mysterious joyfulness." The contrast between sadness and happiness brings readers a unique aesthetic feeling. In the end, the author similarly depicts the picture which was supposed to be sad with a joyful language. When the hero and heroine, the triangle face and the little thin girl, went to their death for the pure union in the afterlife, "their joyful shadows disappeared over the long sloping embankment." "Young farmers and children of the village waved to them in the fields, cheering for them." That coincides with the death of Mrs. Xianglin in Lu Xun's novel *The New Year's Sacrifice*, whose ending is also full of tragedy. In the heavy snow, people wish themselves a happy new year, and Mrs. Xianglin's tragic fate against such a backdrop highlights the emotional tension by using a happy scene to express the sadness, "suggesting the universal but real painful life point - the loneliness of human existence and the helplessness of 'not being able to control one's own life'". The "waves of laughter" at the end of *The General's Clan* seem to be joyful, but in fact, the tragedy of the story has been implied in the ending, creating great textual tension between sorrow and joy.

The narrative structure of *The General's Clan* is unique in that the author uses "flashbacks" to write the story across five years, creating a contrast between the present and the past. "Flashback is a narrative method of reverse chronology." The present tense of the work is that the triangle face found the little skinny girl in a funeral band, and both of them commit suicide after reuniting and sharing their heartfelt feelings. With flashbacks, stories that happened five years ago are interspersed into the text. For example, the triangle face recognized the little skinny girl immediately by her graceful standing posture as she stood in front of him five years ago. Therefore, his consciousness flashed back to the scene when they were telling monkey stories and sharing their nostalgia on the beach. The

flashback naturally contrasts the past and present states of the hero and heroine, reflecting their changes and constancy, thus making the narrative ups and downs and becoming more artistically complete.

Five years have changed the appearance of the little skinny girl and the triangle face, but what remains the same is their tragic fate and inherent virtue. Five years ago, the little skinny girl was stunted due to her poor family, but now, five years later, she is much fatter. Chen Yingzhen focuses on her changeless way of standing, "placing the weight of her body on the left leg", to show her spiritual beauty and indestructible vitality under the ravages of reality. The triangle face gradually aged in such a state of life, from being "a little bald" five years ago to now "ugly and lonely", but he did not truly realize that he was getting old. One is still ample in appearance despite the pain of life, and the other is decaying with age in the years of migration. The passage of time brings irresistible changes to their lives.

In the contrast between the present and the past, the triangle face and the little skinny girl, just like the relics of the times, have no way out in the miserable world, which highlights the cruel reality that individuals cannot escape their destiny before the times and history. Five years ago, the triangle face just arrived in Taiwan. Five years later, he continued to live on blowing trumpets to funeral families. The little skinny girl was sold as a prostitute five years ago, and escaped to the Kang Band. During the five years, the little skinny girl struggled to live on with the veteran pension, but nothing about her hard life got any better. Time brings the hero and heroine the changing appearance and the pain of being homeless. Such pain hurts just like the wandering characters who have no one to rely on. In the contrast between the present and the past, the author implicitly praises the goodness and beauty of human nature in the rural characters, revealing the feelings of loss that individuals cannot fight against the long-held backward thinking.

4. Theme and Connotation: Reflection on the Realism and Nationalism

Chen believes that "literature and art are innately inseparable from reality, ... , rooted in reality, and it is only literature and art that get inspiration from reality that comes vividly." Having lived in small towns and villages as a child, Chen was intrinsically interested in and aware of the people of the lower class. He has suffered many hardships: from leaving his birth parents at the age of two and being adopted by his third uncle's family to moving his family from time to time as a result of the war. These experiences gave rise to a sense of uncertainty in Chen Yingzhen's heart, while the fertile land where he grew up was "partly sunken into a strait due to the movement of the earth's crust. Bred far away from the main land, he has long been under colonial rule. All these factors led Chen to "comprehensively examine the plight of Taiwan's countryside and people under the comprehensive economic and cultural domination of foreigners", so he started to write "the real life of Chinese compatriots and Chinese customs that he sees and feels every day".

In *The General's Clan*, the pastoral as spatial field, presents the life of the people at the bottom under a history of dark age. As a young man, the "triangle face" spends his youth in the army and has been sent away with a mere 30,000 *yuan* for his retirement from the army, living a lonely life. The little skinny girl, a native Taiwanese, is sold twice because of her family's poverty, and the big fat man with the same accent as the "triangle face", on whom she pins her hopes, is also alienated as a minion. The author does not detail the depiction of their experiences directly. However, from the several conversations between them, the darkness and viciousness of the society at that time and the hardship and misery of the people's lives are all revealed. With his early life experience living in rural areas and his rich emotion and assonance, Chen adopted a perspective of enlightenment and observation, which is quite similar to Lu Xun's writing style. He discloses the attitude of stoicism and conformity of Taiwanese women in the early years when facing their fate. The author reflects the reality of life with a critical view of society, confronts the irrational phenomena of society, and presents himself as a man who has the ability to think, love, and criticize. His work is the guiding star

that urges Taiwan to forge towards a better future by requiring the individuals to fight against the evilness and to find the brightness.

The concern for rural reality highlights Chen Yingzhen's deep understanding and sympathy for "people" based on socio-historical analysis. In the novel, the "triangle face" and the little skinny girl do not compromise their lives in the dark environment. The little thin girl took the 30,000 yuan from the "triangle face" and went back, but she still could not escape the fate of being sold. In this abusive environment, the little thin girl became more emaciated, but she always insisted on selling her smiles and not selling her body. The "triangle face" turns himself into a lamp, giving light to the little skinny girl in the darkness, and lighting up his unrestrained life. In order to rescue the little thin girl, he silently gave her the money he had exchanged for his youth. This is done possibly out of his sympathy. "He was obviously just in no way heartbroken about those money for retirement, but he does not know why he couldn't stop shedding tears." Confronted with the dark and burdensome social reality, the triangle face, with his goodwill, and the little thin girl, with her unyielding spirit, both compose the piece of music in which they struggle against the suffering with their tenacity. Therefore, it is reasonable to find that the two end up in death for the sake of purity and the dignity of human beings. The author "delves into the history of society, from their angles, from the center of their consciousness, and examines the great impact of this history of suffering and corruption on the reality of their minds." Chen's continuous exploration in the backwardness and ignorance of the pastoral life shows his determination in awakening people and reminding them of hope, goodwill and justice as human beings, to rebuild with wisdom and perseverance a world more fit for humans' long living."

According to Chen Yingzhen, "from the very beginning, pastoral literature clearly announced its characteristics of China, nationalism, patriotism, and opposition to imperialism." Therefore, although his work is based on the customs and culture of China, he exceeds the constraints of rural and folksy subjects and is filled with a strong sense of nationalism. In *The General's Clan*, the protagonists, the "triangle face" and the little skinny girl, are depicted in details. Their identities, one from the mainland of China and one from Taiwan, entails the changes and differences in history, culture and geography after Taiwan's return in 1945. As a native patriotic elite in Taiwan, Chen Yingzhen tried to promote exchanges and cooperation between the mainland and Taiwan through the establishment of the "China Unification Alliance" to safeguard national reunification and oppose secession. Since then, he has spent his life working tirelessly to promote the reunification of the motherland, and his literary creations are naturally imbued with a strong sense of patriotism. The triangle face and the little thin girl's helping each other not only demonstrates the true goodness of human nature, but more importantly, it is a metaphor for the desire of the people of mainland China and Taiwan to bridge the gap and devote themselves to love each other. They die proudly like "generals", but in fact they symbolize that the mainland and Taiwan will finally get out of the strife and move towards integration. The image of the retired "veteran" is more like a symbol linking the mainland and Taiwan compatriots. The veteran is unrestrained superficially, but is kind and gentle inside. He is drifting and miserable but maintains the simplest feelings for his hometown, "This green island is like a boat, floating in the moonlit night..." This painful feeling of separation between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait reaches its peak in the song of the little thin girl who is confused and out of tune.

Chen once said, "A nation of separation and confrontation is a nation of mutilation and grief. As a writer, I am very sensitive to this and have always reflected the pain caused by this separation from a literary aesthetic perspective." "I want our nation to be reunited." "The influence of his time, his schooling experience, and his family nurtured Chen Yingzhen's patriotic feelings for China in his youth. Later, the spiritual shimmer of the 'Taipei Guling Street Old Bookstore' and the baptism of the revolutionary spirit of his imprisonment in 1968-1975 inspired and strengthened his stance as Chinese." This sincere nationalist view of pastoral literature is shown to the fullest in *The General's Clan*, and is also always presented in his thoughts and literary creations. Chen Yingzhen's examination of reality and his strong feelings for his homeland are embedded in many novels, including "The Hometown", "My Younger Brother Kangxiong", and "The Aging Tears".

5. Conclusion

Chen Yingzhen is to be considered not merely as a thinker but also as a practitioner of pastoral narratives. "Chen Yingzhen is to be considered not merely as a thinker but also as a practitioner of pastoral narratives. "His thought contemplates not only the critique but also the 'effect' of the critique, not only the 'man' (which is the root of his spiritual thought) but also the 'man ' in which he is placed socially, historically, and politically." Confronted with the setbacks of his aspirations, Chen Yingzhen insists on his pastoral narratives, portraying the true goodness of human nature with details, creating a poetic style with metaphors, and highlighting "all the sufferings and shocking 'death' imposed on people's hearts by history and reality with a tragic ending and contrast between the present and the past, which reveals the writer's compassionate feelings and his condemnation of all the 'evils' that cause suffering." With a delicate and plain pastoral narrative perspective, a subtle narrative strategy, and a heartfelt narrative structure, *The General's Clan* tells the story of the person from the mainland of China with a triangle face and a skinny Taiwanese local girl, building a unique narrative scene of pastoral literature. The pastoral narrative of *The General's Clan* can not only be reflected from the author's consideration in narration, but also conceals his ultimate concern for the lives of his compatriots and his hope for the reunification of his country, as well as his thoughts on the general environment of life and society, based on reality.

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