

A Brief Analysis on the Parody of “Fu, Bi and Xing” Artistic Techniques in China Men

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Abstract: Fu, Bi and Xing play an extremely important role in the Chinese poetics system. Zai Yang, one of the four greatest poets of Yuan Dynasty, once called Fu, Bi and Xing “the source of poetics and the criterion of creation”. Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston’s second work, *China Men*, combines historical truth with fiction, as well as legends with news through the parody of “Fu, Bi and Xing” artistic techniques. Chapters in the book lay foundation step by step and finally reach the writing theme directly. While completing the writing, the author also uncovers the hidden Chinese American history and rebuilds the once distorted image of Chinese American males.

1. Introduction

China Men is the second work of Maxine Hong Kingston, an American Chinese writer. In an interview, Kingston expressed that it is “written with a man’s point of view” and a book “about men”. Men in this book refer to Chinese-American men. From the aspect of its content, this work presents the true situation of the stigmatized Chinese-American men. It also has its own characteristics in terms of structure; the purpose of this book is not telling a complete story like traditional fictions. The book is divided into 18 chapters; chapter themes include folklore, history, news, allusions, anecdotes and narrations from the subjects’ perspective. Historical truth and fictions, legends and news are intertwined and mixed, which brings readers a new experience. Maxine Hong Kingston is deeply influenced by Chinese classical literature. A careful analysis of the 18 chapters in *China Men* reveals that the layout of chapters in this book is a parody of Fu, Bi and Xing artistic techniques in Chinese poetry.

2. Fu, Bi and Xing

Fu, Bi and Xing play an extremely important role in the Chinese poetics system. Zai Yang, one of the four great poets of Yuan Dynasty, once called Fu, Bi and Xing “the source of poetics and the criterion of creation”. Some scholars say that in Chinese culture, the most typical way of thinking is Fu, Bi and Xing, which can reflect the unique national character and produce profound impacts on literature and culture. Fu means plain and direct narration and elaboration; Bi means making analogy, which is equivalent to metaphor or simile; Xing, also known as Qi Xing, foretells other things, and then leads to the things, thoughts and feelings that the poet wants to express through association. Next, based on the analysis of the 18 chapters in *China Men* through Fu, Bi and Xing artistic techniques, the author analyzes the internal relationship between the chapters, and examines how Kingston uncovered the hidden history of Chinese Americans through writing and rebuilt the distorted image of Chinese men.

3. Content of the Book

Chapters in this book are classified and divided into seven parts according to their contents.

(1) On Discovery

On Fathers

The Father from China

- (2) The Ghost Mate
The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains
- (3) On Mortality
On Mortality Again
The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains
- (4) The Laws
Alaska China Men
The Making of More Americans
- (5) The Wild Man of the Green Swamp
The Adventures of Lo Bin Sun
The American Father
- (6) The Li Sao: An Elegy
The Brother in Vietnam
- (7) The Hundred-Year-Old Man
On Listening

In the book, chapters of The Father from China, The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains, The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, The Making of More Americans, The American Father and The Brother in Vietnam play the part of “Fu”, that is, the main storyline of the book. Other chapters play the role of “Bi” or “Xing”.

4. The Parody of “Fu, Bi and Xing” Artistic Techniques in the Book

In part (1), two short stories of “Bi and Xing” are told at first: “On Discovery” and “On Fathers”. “On Discovery” is a rewriting of the classical Chinese novel *Flowers in the Mirror*. It describes the story of Auchin Tang, who came to a kingdom of females and was forced to dress up as a woman. Eventually the hero became feminized. At the end of the story, it is said that there was a kingdom of females in 441 AD, but it was in North America. This story tells about the feminization of Chinese men and mentions that the kingdom of females should be in North America. In fact, it is a metaphor which shows the fact that Chinese men were castrated, feminized and marginalized in the United States. “On Fathers” tells the story that “I” and my younger brothers and sisters made a mistake in recognizing our father. This is not plausible in common sense. Kingston’s description is a satire which shows that Chinese men were masked by the mainstream society. Their individual characteristics were disappearing, and their faces were so blurred that even their children could not recognize them. Maxine Hong Kingston depicts the plight of Chinese men in American society by means of Bi and Xing. The first story of Fu is “The Father from China”. The father had a laundry and lived in distress. He was silent and had grumpy temper. He never talked about the past or about China; he never looked forward to the future. On New Year’s Eve, he liked to call Miss Timing because “she’s just recording.” He “doesn’t need to talk to her,” and she can tell the present moment accurately, never slipping back into the past or into the future. The father “fixes himself in the present moment”. These behaviors include two metaphors. The father was reticent and did not talk about the past, which showed the Chinese people lost their right to speak. The father only concerned the present; he had no future prospects, which represented the breakdown of the American Dream. How did father become so? In China, the father was a smart young man who taught in the countryside school and could write poems. He went to the United States with good wishes. He thought it was “a peaceful country, a free country”. “America, the Golden Mountain, is a beautiful country”. After the father came to the United States, he tried to make money and integrate into the American society. He even picked an American name “Ed” for himself. The father saved money and sent money to his wife, and finally helped her to move to the United States after 15 years. At the moment they were looking forward to their future life in the United States, he was cheated by his partner and lost the share of his laundry. But the father was not beaten by the failure. He took his wife to California to start his life there again. Then the first chapter stops abruptly; readers have not found out why his father became passive and silent later. Kingston inspires readers’ interest like the traditional serial novels; “if you want to know what happened afterwards,

read the next chapter.” When reading the book, readers can travel the road that these Chinese male ancestors have taken.

Fu in part (2) is “The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains”. This part tells the story of the great-grandfather. The great-grandfather was persuaded to leave for the United States by the agent lived in his village. The agent promised that life in the United States was beautiful. They could have free fares, free meals, free clothes and free shelter; they would not be dismissed, just like attending college. But from the moment the great-grandfather got on board, everything was different from what he had heard. Chinese men on board were locked under the deck and the bunks looked just like the layers of coffins in the morgue. Someone died in the journey. When they got off the ship, the foreign devils hung a sign around each person’s neck, and beat people who fell behind with whips. After arriving at the plantation, they had to endure heavy work every day. Chinese laborers were forbidden to talk to each other while working. When they were sick, their wages would be deducted. The money they could get after the hard work was not at all like what the agent promised at first. “Ghost Mate” before this chapter explains this beautiful lie in advance in the form of “Bi”. The story of “ghost mate” is a very common type of Chinese folk tales. Men (scholars, craftsmen and farmers) encounter beautiful women (fox fairy or ghost), and are seduced by the women. Maxine Hong Kingston uses beautiful women and their illusions as the metaphor of the promises made by the United States. But like the ending of the “Ghost Mate”, these promises were illusory, and the ending of these men was extremely tragic. The views of Chinese ancestors could be represented by the last two sentences of the story. “East or west, home is the best”. “Love in dreams cannot last long”. “Home is the best” shows their feelings for the homeland; “Fancy lovers never last” shows their disappointment toward life in America.

Fu in part (3) is The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The grandpa’s story is the most important achievement of Chinese workers in American history: participating in the construction of the Pacific Railroad connecting the North and South of the United States. The Pacific Railroad of the United States is more than 3000 kilometers long and traverses the entire North American continent. It is the first trans-continental railway in the world, and has made tremendous contributions to the economic development of the United States. In a sense, it is this railway that has made the modern America. Under the conditions at that time, the construction process was extremely difficult. The section of railway across the steep Sierra Nevada Mountains is the most difficult part for the construction of the Pacific Railroad. For quite a long time, the fact that the most dangerous section of this great railway was built by mainly Chinese workers was little known. The grandpa’s story reproduces the history of Chinese workers, which is cruel, tragic and admirable. But instead of being recognized and accepted by American society, Chinese workers were persecuted and expelled after the railway was built. They experienced all kinds of hardships and ultimately failed, just like the thoughts expressed in the two short stories “On Mortality” and “On Mortality Again”, which played a role of Bi and Xing before the major storyline events.

“The Laws” in part (4) plays the role of “Bi and Xing”. This chapter lists a series of bills against Chinese immigrants enacted by the American government from the 1960s to the late 1970s in chronological order. These cold bills outline the situation of Chinese of being excluded and oppressed for more than a century, and show the social background of Chinese’ living in the United States for more than 100 years. “Alaska China Men” is a small-scale anecdote which represents the Chinese people’s lives under the persecution of the series of anti-Chinese laws. The “Fu” section is the chapter is “The Making of More Americans”. It tells the lives of Chinese parents in the United States during the period of Chinese exclusion. Characters include Si Gong who became a ghost but still lingered in the sTables, Shao Sha who was entangled by his mother’s ghost, Gao Goong who never returned home in any case, and Bin Shu who finally went crazy and went back to China. It seems very difficult to find the feature of “stability” in these roles. They missed their homeland and relatives, but they could not and dared not go back because of various laws against Chinese; they wanted to stay in America, but they had doubts and could not find the sense of belonging because of all kinds of exclusion. They are homeless people who drift between China and the United States.

Fu in part (5) is “The American Father”. The author focuses on depicting the father again. Unlike

the story of “The Father from China”, the father in this chapter was born in San Francisco. The changing identity reflects the fact that American laws excluded Chinese immigrants. In order to stay in the United States, Chinese immigrants use various methods to cope with officers from the immigration department. This chapter is a continuation of “The Father from China”. After being cheated, the father went to Stockton, California, and worked in a casino run by his fellow countrymen. The casino was closed down during the World War II; the father lost his job again and began to languish. Two failures at work hit his father hard. From then on, he became silent and was very irritable sometimes. Later, the father finally pulled himself together and opened a laundry. He “regained his vitality” and “finally owned his house and shop in the United States”. The stories before this chapter play the role of Bi and Xing. “The Wild Man of the Green Swamp” tells a Chinese who would rather die in the United States; the rewritten “Adventures of Lo Bin Sun” describes Lo Bin Sun’s feelings about the island where he was once lived. All these show the feelings of Chinese immigrants towards the United States, pointing out that Chinese are not aliens who only want to earn money but unwilling to stay here or bring their wives and children to the United States. They also want to stay in the land where they have contributed, but because of the oppression and exclusion of the mainstream society, they cannot speak out. Although the father owned a house and a shop in the United States, he still could not get fair treatment. Therefore, he chose to resist with silence.

The “Brother in Vietnam” in part (6) is the end of the main storyline. Maxine Hong Kingston once mentioned that the book of China Men is the history of Chinese male ancestors. The main story ends with the second generation of Chinese men born in the United States. It can be regarded as the continuation of the history of Chinese in the United States. At the same time, it shows that the author advocates the way of peaceful resistance. “The Brother in Vietnam” describes two wars, the World War II and the Vietnam War. The excluded Chinese men received conscription orders during the wars, and the younger brother even received a “Q permit for communications experts” because of the Vietnam War. Since then, the government has “confirmed that his family members are real Americans”; they are 100% “super” Americans. Through the character of the younger brother, Kingston wrote ironically, “I really benefit from the Vietnam War.” These are the true history of Chinese men in the United States. They reclaimed land in Hawaii; they built railways across the North and South; they suffered from exclusion and persecution; they struggled to stay in the United States and gain legal status. However, they were finally recognized by the American government in the disaster of “war”. Maxine Hong Kingston, in the name of the father, depicted the history of Chinese men in the United States, and justified for Chinese men. This part also expresses an important idea of Kingston: opposing war and calling for peace. This is the theme expressed in the Bi and Xing part of “The Li Sao: An Elegy”.

There is no main storyline in part (7). The book ends in the way of “Bi and Xing”, and provides readers with broader space of thinking. The two stories in this part are all related to history. “The Hundred-Year-Old Man” represents the more than 100 years of history of Chinese in the United States; “On Listening” implies the uncertainty of history. How to tell history and how to describe details, are powers of the person who narrates the story. In this case, Chinese Americans can strive for the right to speak, break the unfair narration of the mainstream, and reconstruct the history of Chinese in America. Chinese-American men are heroes who were excluded, oppressed and marginalized; they were also participants and contributors to American history.

5. Conclusion

Through Maxine Hong Kingston’s parody of Fu, Bi and Xing, chapters of the book refer to each other and lay the foundation step by step. The author ingeniously blends history, reality and legends into a harmonious and unified theme, which makes the book both readable and full of endless charm. Through the description and narration of daily affairs, legends, legal provisions and news reports in the “Bi and Xing” section, Kingston paves the way for the following “Fu”: the narration of the main story. Through reading the Bi and Xing section, readers can know the background of the times, understand the psychological states of roles, and comprehend the author’s views and

attitudes. In this way, readers can have a deeper understanding on the main storyline, and feel the author's efforts in re-writing the Chinese Americans' history and rebuilding their images.

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