

Study on the Lack of Artistic Feature of "Sorrow with Harmony, Elegance with much Satire" in Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades with Reference of the Scholars

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Abstract: As one of the four major condemnation novels in the late Qing Dynasty, Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades has inherited and developed the satirical art of The Scholars, and has shown different satirical features due to influences of the author and the times. Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades lacks the artistic characteristic of "sorrow with harmony, elegance with much satire" in The Scholars, and shows features of a large amount of laughter in the book, weakened condemnation, the mixture of realism with anecdotes and jokes and the lack of compassion.

1. Introduction

Condemnation novels of the late Qing Dynasty have studied and inherited the great satirical literary work of The Scholars in layout arrangement and satirical art. Xun Lu once commented the artistic features of condemnation novels. "These novels reveal hidden facts and expose evil events. They strictly criticize politic affairs and even social customs. The purpose of these novels is to realize salvation, which is the same with that of satirical fictions. But their languages are too blunt, with no white space or profound meaning. Some novels exaggerate ugly phenomena to cater readers. In terms of literariness, these novels are greatly inferior to satirical fictions. So they can be called as condemnation novels." [1] Later scholars believed that the comment actually underestimated the artistic charm of condemnation novels. But condemnation novels in the late Qing Dynasty are quite different from The Scholars in terms of irony skills and overall artistic style. In particular, condemnation novels are lack of the artistic feature of "sorrow with harmony, elegance with much satire". The author chooses one of the four major condemnation novels, The Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades, to compare with The Scholars, and summarizes their differences in narrative postures, satirical arts and realism approaches.

In the History of Late Qing Fiction, A Ying holds that Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades is obviously influenced by The Scholars in art form; at the same time, "with respect to the content, Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades actually contains a New Version of the Scholars." [2] He believes that compared with the Exposure of the Official World, Bizarre Happenings is less vivid in describing bureaucracy, but it is very successful in picturing talents lived in metropolis infested with foreign adventurers. Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades describes ugly and strange features of businessmen, politicians, scholars, citizens and people from other social strata. Compared with The Scholars, the condemnation objects are more wider in Bizarre Happenings. The two fictions have similar satire objects, and can be attributed to social satire novels in a broad sense. So the author believes it is possible to compare these two books.

"Sorrow with harmony, elegance with much satire" is put forward by Xun Lu in the Brief History of Chinese Fiction. In the article of "Satirical Novels of the Qing Dynasty", Lu made a brief summary of the history of "cynical and sarcastic novels" from the Jin and Tang Dynasties to Ming Dynasty before The Scholars, and believed that these works were "very unkind", or full of "malicious and selfish words; authors chose to attack the world through his pen when unfair things happened."

Meanwhile, dictions in these books were "blunt and impolite, even can be regarded as abuses." While in *The Scholars*, the author Jing-zi Wu "held the position of justice, and criticized maladies of the times, especially in the circle of scholars. The fiction shows the feature of sorrow with harmony, elegance with much satire. Therefore, the novel can be seen as the first satirical book in real sense." [1] Since then, "sorrow with harmony, elegance with much satire" has become the classic summary of the artistic characteristics of *The Scholars*. The author holds that the main elements of that feature are as follows: indignation and sympathy for ridiculous behaviors of scholars; humorous and satirical narration to express sympathy; sarcasm is expressed through a gentle narrative attitude.

As one of the four major condemnation novels in the late Qing Dynasty, *Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades* has developed and enriched the art of satire, meanwhile studied and inherited the subtle art of satire in *The Scholars*. However, in terms of its overall artistic style, the book is lacking of the artistic characteristic of "sorrow with harmony, elegance with much satire". Its main features are listed as follows. In the book, condemnation is expressed through laughter, rather than the combination of "elegance" and "satire"; the mixture of realism with anecdotes and jokes, as well as the weakened condemnation leads to the lack of "sorrow" in "harmony".

2. A Large Amount of Laughter and Weakened Condemnation

He Jin summed up the motive of novel creation in his Postscript to *The Scholars*: "However, most readers take the book as a topic of conversation. Their hearts are not touched. Thus, I once said, 'If a person can not feel regret while reading *The Scholars*, the book is wasted; if a person can not feel fear and abstaining while reading *Fantastic Tales By Ji Xiaolan*, the book is also wasted.'" [3] He holds that the purpose and significance of this book is to warn the world and make readers feel "regret". It can be seen that while writing, Jing-zi Wu observe the absurd reality of scholars in light of traditional Confucianism value system. His creative attitude is formed on the basis of the poem teaching tradition. Novel is the embodiment of his thinking, grief, indignation, ridiculing and criticism on the reality.

After about 170 years, Jian-ren Wu recorded an ugly real world which greatly varied from Jing-zi Wu's description. Different from Jing-zi Wu's serious, critical perspective and contemplative attitude, Jian-ren Wu and other novelists in the late Qing Dynasty chose to express their condemnation on "bizarre happenings" through wild laughter. Readers can find laughter everywhere in their books. The intensity of laughter seems to overwhelm the denunciation in novels. As some scholars have pointed out, "for popular condemnation novelists like Bo-yuan Li and Jian-ren Wu, the most powerful emotional indicator in describing the world is not crying or angry, but laughter." [4] This kind of laughter is not only reflected in narrator's humorous description, but also in jokes and anecdotes appeared in the novel. The latter will be discussed in detail in section two.

We compare the descriptions of so-called celebrity gatherings in the two novels to find out the complexity of values behind author's narrative postures.

The twelfth chapter of *The Scholars* describes the Ying-dou Lake banquet held by famous scholars; the eighteenth chapter writes the West Lake banquet. People present in these parties were elegance in appearance, but ugly in reality. The banquet of Ying-dou Lake is described as follows. "Niu Pu-yi chanted poems, Iron-armed Chang performed his sword dance, Chen Ho-fu cracked jokes, the Lou brothers appeared extremely cultured and Chu Hsien-fu extremely elegant, while Yang Chih-chung looked venerable and Chuan Wu-yung eccentric: thus the party was unique. The cabin windows on both sides were opened so that they could hear music from the small boats as they drifted towards the lake. And presently a feast was spread and a dozen servants in wide gowns and tall caps poured wine and served the dishes. It goes without saying that the food was rare, the wine and tea were fragrant, and they drank till the moon was up. Then fifty or sixty lanterns were lit on the small boats and were reflected with the moonlight in the water, making it as bright as day. The music sounded even more clearly in the stillness, its strains echoing for miles around, so that watchers on shore stared at the revellers as if they were immortals, and none but envied them. Thus they boated all night." [5] The author does not say a word about this absurd farce; but after reading, the funny, ridiculous banquet, as

well as the manners and appearances of celebrities, could impress readers deeply. The narrator's comments and attitudes are hidden behind the text. Jing-zi Wu does not express his feelings and opinions directly; instead, he acts as a calm and objective narrator. But it is not difficult for readers to find out the narrator's feelings and judgment. In words like "graceful", "handsome and romantic" as well as "dignified-looking and warmhearted", readers can find the gentle, clever irony. Since they have already known the behaviors and characters of these "celebrities" through preceding part of the text, when read these words of praise, readers are bound to feel funny and laugh out. In that process, readers are experiencing the same thought process with the narrator.

The 35th chapter of *Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades* also vividly describes a party held by a group of vulgar, ugly and clumsy "celebrities". In this party, guests showed all sorts of ugly behaviors; their conversations were similar to farces emerge in endlessly. The responses of the protagonist, "a narrow escape", were "laughter". These poets, who were ignorant and incompetent, could not tell the assumed names of Fu Du, Mu Du and Shang-yin Li; some of them were proud and pretended to be erudite since they had learnt children's books like *The Whip and Spur*. As the attendees and witnesses of this gathering, "a narrow escape" had following responses.

"I couldn't help laughing ... It suddenly occurred to me that laughing to someone's face was impolite, so I stopped laughing and tried to keep a straight face." [6]

"I tried so hard to hold back my laughter, but their conversation was too ridiculous. My stomach seemed to burst with laughter." [6]

"When I heard these words, I could not help laughing. Gnashing my teeth could not help me to hold back my laughter." [6]

It can be seen that the author expressed his own opinion on this farce through the laughter of the protagonist. That approach is different from Jing-zi Wu's gentle and implicit irony. "Laughter" is the most commonly used and most powerful condemnation weapon in the fiction. However, this weapon has its own emotional meanings, which weakens the effects of "condemnation".

In the thirty-sixth chapter, "a narrow escape" was extricated from the farce through a falsehood telegram excuse. He was still laughing at the funny, ignorant and belly-laughing remarks of the celebrities when came back. Lu-sheng Cai said, "these people are shameless. If I heard these conversations, I would become angry! What are you laughing about?" [6] On the same chapter, Zi-an Jin asked why Lu-sheng Cai was unwilling to inscribe on Yu-sheng Tang's painting, which would relieve poverty to a large extent. Cai expressed that Tang was so ugly that inscribing poems on his works was a stain on his pen and ink and a shame on his name. The answer of "a narrow escape" is worth pondering: "this is not the case. They were nobody; I also look down upon them. The only difference between us is that I want to laugh when I heard their nonsense dialogue, while he could become angry under the same situation. We have different tempers." [6] It can be seen that "a narrow escape" know that his attitude toward this ugly comic of celebrities is quite different from that of Lu-sheng Cai. One is "laughter" while the other is "angry" and "hatred".

We cannot help wondering what the author's attitude is. Since the novel is self-narrative to some extent, can we hold that the laughter of "a narrow escape" also represents the author's attitude? If "laughter" reflects Jia-ren Wu's humorous attitude toward the ugliness of these "refined scholars", Cai's "hatred" is closer to Jing-zi Wu's serious, sad and critical attitude toward those celebrities in *The Scholars*. At the same time, can we hold that coexist of "laughter" and "hatred" reflect the instability and hesitation of the author's inner values when facing the absurd world full of "bizarre happenings"? What are value judgment standards holding by novelists in the late Qing Dynasty represented by Jian-ren Wu? David Wang thinks that Xun Lu's attitude toward condemning novels has been questioned by writers of the late Qing Dynasty. "Condemnation novels are not always as serious as they claim; readers do not need to look for meanings between the lines at all times. While the institutions of an era are changing, and new values are threatening existing values, those people who hold critical positions toward traditions do not have an advantage over the objects they criticize." [4] This is undoubtedly a very objective point of view on criticism, so we cannot believe that the traditional serious criticism attitude is necessarily better than laughter toward the ugly world. This is also the main reason of why narrators of *The Scholars* and *Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over*

Two Decades hold different value systems when facing the reality. [4]

3. Mixture of Realism with Anecdotes and Jokes

When analyze the structure and plot arrangement of Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades, it can be found that clues which connect the plot development are actually very simple. New stories and strange tales happen due to the intense curiosity of "a narrow escape"; characters in the story tell oddities and jokes one after another. The combination of narration and jokes cannot be found in *The Scholars*. So the Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades is more like a collection of "bizarre happenings" that the author has seen, heard, collected or personally experienced. Complex plots and characters in the compilation of strange stories and jokes are somewhat forced and stiff.

Some scholars have pointed out that the "introduction of jokes into novels" is a prominent feature of "new novel". [7] (In the preface of *A Collection of Classic Chinese Jokes*, Jian-ren Wu put forward to the concept of "joke novels".) They also believed that jokes published in novel magazines at that time and novelists' enthusiasm in joke creation provide the necessary premise for jokes to enter novels. [7] Xun Lu summarized the structure and narrative features of joke-ridden condemn novels as follows. "The descriptions are exaggerating, and sometimes unfaithful to the truth. Human power cannot make a difference. They are just subjects for ridicule." [1]

In the relationships among jokes, reality and satire, *The Scholars* and Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades show completely different features of style. "Jing-zi Wu wrote the novel as a joke; Jian-ren Wu and Bo-yuan Li were not satisfied with writing the novel as a joke. In their novels, characters tell jokes about the society and the officialdom by themselves." [7] Many jokes were not closely related to the main plot, or even irrelevant. Authors wrote them just for attracting or catering readers. The feature of literature marketization is obviously reflected.

Some scholars believe that the ugly style of condemnation novels in the late Qing Dynasty was also influenced by novels of gods and spirits. It is naturally reminiscent of this kind of work in describing human world and evil spirits in the same scene. [4]

Anecdotes and jokes in the text, the tradition of mystery novels, and the author's interest and persistence in ugliness, make the realism in Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades different from the traditional realism. The book shows a mixture of realism and absurd, which makes readers doubt its degree of realism. "The 'bizarre happenings' wrote by Jian-ren Wu and Bo-yuan Li reminds us of the proverb 'become inured to the unusual'. A person who has experienced so many bizarre happenings would regard weirdness as ordinary. As intellectuals expressed, writers of the late Qing Dynasty refused to copying the reality in their works. Through describing the fictional reality, they deviated from the usual sense of reality in a more aggressive way." [4] The excessive pursuit of "bizarre happenings" and the loading of jokes make the reality of novels replaced by parts of storytelling and fiction. Breaking away from realism and the truth, the intensity of condemnation and irony is weakened accordingly.

Apart from above two dimensions, Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades also lacks compassion that runs through the whole book of *The Scholars*. This kind of compassion is closely related to the serious and critical attitude held by the author when he describes the absurd reality. The lack of compassion is also reflected in the weakening of humanitarian spirit in narration. Although the narrator "a narrow escape" participated in stories as the first person, he adopted the posture of a bystander, held the attitude of curiosity and used his laughter to keep him out of the ugly reality. Readers can feel the narrator's emotional indifference, which is contrary to the reading experience of *The Scholars*. In that book, although the narrator hides behind the story, readers can laugh and cry with him through the objective and non-critical narration.

The thirty-second to thirty-fifth chapters of Bizarre Happenings mainly tell the story of a doctor named Duan-fu Wang. "A narrow escape" met him in Shanghai. The doctor tried to rescue Qiju, a girl who was sold to a brothel by her husband's brother. The heroic adventure is narrated by "a narrow escape" as the first person; in the whole process, "a narrow escape" is also the veritable protagonist.

But the story looks like his blunt intrusion into a heroic story. In spite of the protagonist's moral behaviors, a kind of stand-by attitude and onlooker's narrative position are obviously reflected in the narrative discourse. The spirit of humanitarianism is weakened.

From above discussion, it is easy to find out that the narrative posture and realist techniques of *Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades* are different from those of *The Scholars*. Why most novelists in the late Qing Dynasty cannot realize the artistic style of "sorrow with harmony, elegance with much satire"? Ping-yuan Chen holds that it was related to oppression in the real environment. "For new novelists, the real environment is too harsh. They cannot really appreciate the charm of light, non-malicious laughter. What they need is vicious, angry and bitter laughter. This is a special aesthetic mentality which naturally formed under the special political environment." [8] Therefore, the author's intention in writing this paper is not to accuse *Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades* in its lacking of artistic characteristics, but to show changes in satire art with times through the comparison of two novels..

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