

Concealment and Idealization: The Origin and Variation of Character

Images in The Marriage of Young Blacky

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Abstract

Zhao Shuli's breakthrough work *The Marriage of Young Blacky* is adapted from a real rural love-murder case—the Yue Dongzhi Case. Nevertheless, the author rewrote the devastating tragedy of family ruin into a comedy ending with “lovers finally getting married”. Existing studies of this classic text mostly focus on how Zhao Shuli transformed tragedy into comedy. This article further explores what the narrative conceals and whom it beautifies behind such rewriting. By situating *The Marriage of Young Blacky* within its generative process from the prototype event to the literary text, and through close textual comparison and narrative analysis, this paper reveals that the happy reunion ending is not merely an artistic choice, but a deliberately oriented practice of narrative politics. The findings indicate that to achieve the ideological effect of a reunion finale, Zhao Shuli tactically legitimized the villagers, who originally functioned as onlookers and accomplices in the real case. Meanwhile, he systematically reconstructed the power relations behind character images through the comedic shaping of Second Sage, the desire narrative of Third Fairy, and the simplified depiction of village cadres' problems. This paper argues that the rewriting of *The Marriage of Young Blacky* reveals a core paradox in the transition of modern Chinese literature from enlightenment to revolution: in constructing a legitimate subjective identity of “the people”, how the darkness and trauma of pre-revolutionary history are deliberately assimilated and erased. This conclusion not only offers a new interpretive perspective for re-examining Zhao Shuli's “problem novels”, but also provides a crucial textual case for understanding the narrative grammar of revolutionary literature in the 20th century.

Keywords: *The Marriage of Young Blacky*; prototype; character portrayal; happy ending

1. The Perplexing Case of Yue Dongzhi

In March and April 1943, Zhao Shuli conducted field research in Liao County, Shanxi Province. During this period, he heard about the tragedy of Yue Dongzhi, who was persecuted to death by village cadres for pursuing free love. Zhao then launched an investigation and

created *The Marriage of Young Blacky* in May based on this real-life incident.

The case of Yue Dongzhi lacks of clarity from the very beginning, and it has become even more mysterious with the passage of time. According to the article *How Zhao Shuli Processed the Source Material for The Marriage of Young Blacky* by Dong Junlun, the general facts of the case are outlined as follows:

Zhi Yingxiang, originally from Wu'an County, Hebei Province, moved to Liao County because her hometown was close to the enemy stronghold. Her mother was a devout follower of the Three Teachings Holy Sect, which advocated strict separation between men and women. Adhering to this doctrine, she forced her husband to leave home and wander outside. One day, she met a merchant in his forties on the road. Coveting the man's wealth, she betrothed her daughter to him without consent. Zhi Yingxiang strongly opposed the arranged marriage, sparking a fierce quarrel between mother and daughter. Meanwhile, Zhi Yingxiang's two elder brothers had long disapproved of their mother's religious beliefs and frequently argued with her over money spent on religious rituals. Plagued by these family conflicts, Zhi Yingxiang's mother hanged herself.

Yue Dongzhi, a nineteen-year-old handsome young man, served as the militia captain of the village. His parents had arranged a child bride for him at the age of nine, and he was constantly at odds over this forced engagement. After the death of Zhi Yingxiang's mother, Yue Dongzhi and Zhi Yingxiang fell in love with each other.

The village chief, the son of a rich peasant, had long been infatuated with Zhi Yingxiang but was rejected by her. He therefore bore a grudge against Yue Dongzhi. In addition, the youth league secretary and two other village cadres—all relatives of the village chief—also opposed the relationship between Yue Dongzhi and Zhi Yingxiang. On one occasion, these officials held a secret meeting, intending to accuse Yue Dongzhi of moral corruption. When Yue resisted the false accusation, he was accidentally beaten to death during the confrontation. ((Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Shandong Normal College, 1960, pp. 21–23))

Dong Junlun's account is rather sketchy, and its authenticity cannot be fully verified. Nevertheless, one suspicious detail stands out in this brief narration: the cause of the mother's suicide. Two reasons account for this doubt. First, from the perspective of common sense, it was highly unlikely for the mother to take her own life merely due to family conflict. As a domineering rural woman who embraced religious superstition, drove her husband away, and arbitrarily arranged her daughter's marriage, she hardly seemed emotionally fragile enough to commit suicide over ordinary domestic discord. Second, even if the account were true, the mother, despite her reprehensible deeds, was ultimately a pitiful victim consumed by feudal ideology who reaped the bitter fruits of her own actions. Arranged marriages and feudal

superstition were prevalent in rural traditional society(Li, 2005; Wang, 2018); she had done nothing to severely violate rural ethics and customs, yet she was driven to despair and became the first victim of this tragedy. Her death carried profound tragic undertones, evoking far more sympathy than satire. However, when comparing the real-life prototype to the literary depiction in the novel, if Dong's record reflects the true facts of the case, it becomes nearly impossible to equate the bold, frivolous, and shrewish Third Fairy in the novel with the suicidal mother in real life. The two figures are drastically misaligned in life fate and personal temperament.

Perhaps Dong Junlun also sensed that the mother's death was overly foolish and atypical of common rural experiences, and thus added the following account:

In the village Zhao Shuli visited, there lived yet another mother and daughter... This mother was far less naive than Zhi Yingxiang's mother. She was a local witch who engaged in daily spiritual rituals. Moreover, she took advantage of her supernatural posturing to seduce men in pursuit of immoral pleasures. Her daughter once pursued a legitimate romantic relationship with a young man, only to be obstructed strongly by her mother. For this reason, Zhao Shuli modelled the character of Zhi Yingxiang's mother after this woman, because she was somewhat more typical in ordinary rural society than Zhiyingxiang's actual mother(Huang,2010,p.23).

Nevertheless, Zhao Shuli himself was dissatisfied with Dong Junlun's account in their interview:

Once, a journalist from Literary Gazette interviewed me about how I wrote The Marriage of Young Blacky. I gave a detailed explanation, specifying the real-life prototypes behind the characters of Third Fairy and Second Zhuge, yet I also noted that the fictional figures did not entirely correspond to any single real person. Unexpectedly, the journalist published my remarks, which led to undesirable outcome. This illustrates that literary characterization is best grounded on real-life prototypes, though a single fictional character is usually shaped by multiple prototypes rather than one(Zhao,2018,p.499)

Zhao Shuli's remarks, on the one hand, indirectly acknowledged that the documented account of the Yue Dongzhi case in Dong's writing was largely consistent with the facts; on the other hand, by emphasizing his own literary philosophy, he evaded revealing the authentic details of the case. Judging from available historical materials, the writer never elaborated on the Yue Dongzhi case itself. Instead, he focused far more on how his fiction could appeal to ordinary rural readers and fulfill political functions. In terms of characterization, he chiefly stressed the integration of individuality and universality. On one level, Third Fairy was neither identical to Zhi Yingxiang's mother nor any single real-life individual; she was a composite image blended from numerous rural women. On another level, Third Fairy still possessed

distinctive personal traits and drew recognizable archetypal foundations from real-life models. Meanwhile, Zhao Shuli always spoke of Third Fairy in a casual, detached tone: “Characters like Third Fairy are easy to portray. I have seen many such women, so I could write about her without any hesitation or restraint” (Dong, 2018, p. 499), and “The Third Fairy in *The Marriage of Young Blacky* has her counterparts not only in my village but in many other villages as well” (Dong, 2018, p. 521). In other words, Third Fairy represented a commonplace, unremarkable social type. Portraying such a figure came naturally to him, requiring no deliberate deliberation, let alone intense or complicated emotional engagement. This depiction stands vastly removed from the tragic fate of Zhi Yingxiang’s mother, who died by suicide.

If what Dong Junlun describes reflects the facts of the case, then we cannot help but ask, with meticulous scrutiny: For Zhao Shuli, who was deeply familiar with rural realities and cared for peasants like his own family, would allowing the “so foolish” Zhi Yingxiang’s mother to be overwhelmed by the licentiousness of the Third Fairy? Is it too ruthless?

Nevertheless, existing studies have long relied primarily on Dong Junlun’s account as a foundational source when discussing the prototype of *The Marriage of Young Blacky*. Most studies explore how the image of Third Fairy was reshaped based on the prototype of Zhi Yingxiang’s mother, while the suicide of the mother has been largely overlooked or dismissed as insignificant. Admittedly, an investigation into the Yue Dongzhi case is not to reconstruct a completely authentic portrait of Zhi Yingxiang’s mother, and the interpretation of the novel itself does not have to mechanically treat the real-life prototype as rigid evidence for argumentation. Even so, the present author argues that the Yue case remains profoundly meaningful, for it conceals a series of valuable underlying questions: What emotions might the writer have experienced when confronted with such a tragic event? What core social issues did he ultimately choose to address through the novel? In this creative process, which dimensions of historical reality did he intentionally or unintentionally, willingly or reluctantly abandon?

Since the 1990s, historical materials related to *The Marriage of Young Blacky* have gradually accumulated, bringing to light a version of the Yue Dongzhi case that differs from Dong Junlun’s account. These newly discovered records are more detailed and logically more coherent. Although the various complicated narratives still fail to reach a definitive conclusion about the case, they collectively offer many vital supplements to Dong’s earlier description. Broadly speaking, the new evidence falls into three main points.

First, the handling of the case was far from just. Collusion among local officials prevented a fair verdict over Yue Dongzhi’s death. Both the Yue and Zhi families were ruined, while the culpable village cadres escaped with trivial punishment by claiming legal mitigation on the grounds of being “underage”. Second, Zhi Yingxiang’s mother was likely her stepmother. She

was frivolous, mean-spirited, and greedy, presenting an entirely negative image whether acting as a spiritual medium or arranging her stepdaughter's marriage. Contrary to Dong's account, she did not commit suicide in a muddled, impulsive manner, nor was she the decisive cause of the subsequent tragedy.

Third, Zhi Yingxiang's father was not forced into exile. Though honest and timid, he remained at home, acting as a mediator between his wife and daughter. At times he even assumed the stance of a stern father, accusing Yue Dongzhi and local cadres of seducing his daughter (Wang, 2015, pp. 27; Zuoquan county records, 1999, pp. 700-701; Shanxi Academy of Local Chronicles, 2009, p. 59; Yi, 2011, pp. 154-156).

Regardless of which version aligns more closely with the historical facts of the Yue Dongzhi case, establishing a final verdict on the incident is not the ultimate aim of this study. As one scholar observes, "All analysis of the real event behind *The Marriage of Young Blacky* serve to demonstrate the obscurity and unverifiability of this ambiguous historical terrain, and to illustrate how Zhao Shuli discovered and kindled the torch of free love within such an obscure space." (Zhang, 2019, p. 32)

What merits attention is that this comparative examination further confirms that Zhao Shuli thoroughly rewrote the story of Yue Dongzhi in *The Marriage of Young Blacky*. Zhao transformed the original tragic ruin of two families into a happy reunion with marriage and karmic justice, and turned the ill-fated lovers into Xiaoqin and Young Blacky, who bravely resist feudal constraints with the support of new policies. The most prominent revisions lie in the portrayals of Second Zhuge, Third Fairy, village cadres, and the collective villagers. The simple, honest, patriarchal elderly farmer of the Yue family was remade into a fortune-telling "soothsayer"; Zhi Yingxiang's mother, whether depicted as a suicidal woman or one who sought to sell her daughter, was characterized from a deceitful spiritual medium into a rural woman who ultimately acknowledges and corrects her faults. The cruel village chief was rewritten into an impartial maintainer of justice dispatched from outside the village, while the villagers, who merely watched the original tragedy as onlookers, were reshaped into powerful promoters of revolutionary victory.

2. Thematic Deviation under Dual Tasks

Why did Zhao Shuli rewrite the tragedy of Yue Dongzhi? How did this newly fashioned narrative, which deviated from historical reality, preserve its critical sharpness while maintaining plausibility in everyday life?

Present studies have attributed Zhao Shuli's rewriting of the original story to three major reasons. First, although the new marriage law had been promulgated, free love and marriage still faced immense obstacles in rural society. Deeply shocked and indignant by this reality,

Zhao Shuli arranged the eventual triumph of free love under the protection of the marriage law as the central plot of the novel. As implied in critical commentary, “Is the author celebrating the victory of free love here? Not at all! He is celebrating the victory of a new society”(Zhou,1946).Second, following the Yue Dongzhi incident, parents on both sides and local villagers unanimously condemned the young couple for defying arranged marriage rooted in parental authority and matchmaker’s words. Such public apathy and even cruelty made Zhao Shuli acutely aware of the urgency of enlightening the rural populace. Though he resented the cruel village cadres, he positioned anti-feudalism as the overt theme of the novel to persuade rural readers, so that “all superstitious and eccentric women would fear being labeled ‘Third Fairy’.”Third, the original tragic ending was considered too bleak. As observed in relevant studies, “When writing about anti-feudal themes, Zhao believed that positive characters ought to be given a way out. In the original real-life ending, the protagonists were destroyed by feudal conventions; presented in that form, the story could not guide young people on how to struggle against feudal customs.” For this reason, Zhao Shuli revised the historical case and steered the narrative toward a happy reunion ending.

Nevertheless, a close reading of the text raises a crucial question: does the novel truly realize the above-stated intentions?

The fundamental cause of Yue Dongzhi’s death lay in the corruption of village cadres. Yet Zhao Shuli claimed that the primary purpose of the novel was to oppose feudal superstition. In this thematic shift, the principal contradiction inherent in the real-life event was deliberately diverted. If the novel’s core aim was to critique feudal superstition, then the entire village population—as indifferent onlookers and rigid upholders of traditional morality—ought to have been criticized collectively. Instead, the narrative directs its condemnation solely toward two symbolic villager figures, Third Fairy and Second Zhuge, while the other villagers are left entirely unchallenged.

Furthermore, if Third Fairy and Second Zhuge are intended to serve as representative archetypes, the novel should comprehensively denounce their feudal dispositions. In reality, however, it elaborately emphasizes their non-typical, personal motives for obstructing independent marriage: Second Zhuge is blinded by excessive paternal affection, while Third Fairy is tormented by selfish desires. Consequently, the two so-called “village representatives” lose their universal symbolic significance.

Accordingly, although the full truth of the Yue Dongzhi case remains uncertain—even Zhao Shuli himself inevitably received filtered and reshaped information during his investigation—it is clear that the real historical incident and the fictional narrative in *The Marriage of Young Blacky* have become two entirely independent stories. Moreover, the

version of *The Marriage of Young Blacky* that Zhao Shuli intended to create arguably differs from the actual textual outcome of the finished novel.

Then why does such contradiction arise?

The author holds that since the novel takes the Yue Dongzhi case as its prototype while undergoing extensive revisions to fulfill political functions, logical inconsistencies between the text and historical reality become inevitable. Nevertheless, Zhao Shuli's writing always remained faithful to the inherent logic of real life. He therefore supplemented the narrative with elements popular among ordinary readers to reconcile these discrepancies. As a result, a series of intriguing tensions emerged among the historical prototype, the author's creative intentions, and the final textual form of the novel.

To examine this in detail, we must begin with the novel's creative context. Amid the relentless artillery fire of the resistance base against Japanese aggression, literary and art workers inevitably strove to serve the War of Resistance, creating works that the masses would enjoy and readily understand. For Zhao Shuli at this juncture, serving politics and popularizing literature and art naturally became the key terms defining his revolutionary mission and the artistic direction he forged in the process. A survey of his major experiences illuminates this clearly:

On May 4, 1941, at the Resistance Base of southeastern Shanxi, there held a commemoration of the May Fourth Movement, Peng Dehuai expressed his hope that literary and art workers would create superior works characterized by greater popularity, accessibility, and national style. Deeply inspired, Zhao Shuli strengthened his commitment to literary popularization. Shortly thereafter, in August, he co-founded the Society for Popularization with Wang Chun, Lin Huo, and other colleagues.

In October of the same year, followers of the Ligua Dao (a folk secret sect in Republican-era North China) in Licheng County launched an armed uprising, which exerted an extremely negative political impact. In response, in January 1942, Political Department of the 129th Division, Eighth Route Army of the National Revolutionary Army and the Taihang District Party Committee of the Communist Party of China jointly convened a Forum of literary and art workers. The discussions focused intensely on the issues of "popularization" and "educating the masses". Working in the Propaganda Department of the Taihang District Party Committee, Zhao Shuli attended the forum and delivered a passionate speech. Following the conference, under the guidance of the Propaganda Department, he wrote *Wanxiang Tower*, a drama opposing secret religious sects. In January 1943, all cadres of the Investigation and Research Office of the Northern Bureau were killed in battle. Zhao Shuli was subsequently transferred to this office. Later, he participated in a New Year's Forum jointly held by the Taihang District

Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the Association of Literary Circles. The forum continued discussions on launching an artistic offensive against the enemy under the principle of literary popularization(Dong,1993,pp.179-223).

During this period, in addition to publishing short works in local journals such as *The Chinese People*, Zhao Shuli completed the important drama *Wanxiang Tower* (May 1942), as well as the now-lost play *Qing Zhai*. Also known as *Immortal Family* and *World of Immortals*, *Qing Zhai* is regarded as the embryonic prototype of *The Marriage of Young Blacky*. It features two recognizable characters, Third Fairy and Second Zhuge, and narrates a story centered on “settling the exploitative debts of a landlord.”(Dong,2018,p.410)

A comparative reading of these two works offers insight into Zhao Shuli’s attitude toward feudal-minded rural peasants at this stage. Leaving aside the fact that the writer framed the core theme of *Qing Zhai* as the settling of landlord exploitation—seemingly prioritizing class attributes over the cultural dimension of superstition—a close reading of *Wanxiang Power* alone reveals Zhao’s profound understanding and sympathy for traditional rural folk. In the turbulent and precarious old society, the superstitions of the elderly peasant Li Jishan were not entirely groundless. As he laments: “When you were seven or eight years old, you nearly died. Without the protection of the Buddha, how could you be alive today(Dong,2018,pp.70-71)?”

Superstition itself was undoubtedly problematic, yet the true source of evil lay with the invading enemies and local hooligans who manipulated popular belief, rather than ordinary peasants who were honest and easily deceived(Dong,2018,p.587).It is evident that when addressing the theme of opposing feudal superstition, Zhao Shuli did not merely condemn superstition in the abstract. Instead, he primarily criticized the harmful consequences arising from the manipulation of superstition. Similarly, the fundamental obstacles in *The Marriage of Young Blacky* stemmed from Jin Wang and Xing Wang, rather than the fortune-telling of Second Zhuge or the spiritual mediumship of Third Fairy in themselves. This narrative approach remained consistent throughout his writing and embodies Zhao Shuli’s fundamentally humane outlook on the peasantry.

These constitute Zhao Shuli’s major experiences in the two years prior to the creation of *The Marriage of Young Blacky*. At this time, his work centered firmly on the popularization of literature and art, a task closely intertwined with the wartime situation of the resistance. Accordingly, to launch an effective political offensive toward enemy-occupied areas through literary creation, he had to clearly identify the real enemy while uniting the broad masses. On the one hand, he needed to write works that rural readers found engaging, intelligible, and emotionally resonant so as to consolidate popular support. On the other hand, he made deliberate compromises on sensitive issues concerning grassroots cadres in certain ambiguous

spheres to maintain unity within the revolutionary ranks—much like his tactful criticism of local work in Zuoquan County in 1942(Dong,2018,p.174).

Furthermore, the difficult publication process of *The Marriage of Young Blacky* reveals some hidden predicaments. The first draft was initially sent to Yang Xianzhen, who suggested revisions to certain details. Yang then recommended the work to Pu Anxiu, Secretary of the Women's Movement Committee of the North China Bureau who was compiling materials to promote marriage autonomy at the time. Pu, in turn, passed it to Peng Dehuai, who highly praised it and approved its publication. However, Xinhua North China Bookstore repeatedly delayed the release, claiming that the novel's depiction of villains in the village cadres would damage the Party's image. Yang Xianzhen met Peng Dehuai again, then Peng wrote a note stating, "Such popular stories rooted in mass fieldwork and research are still rare", and instructed Li Dazhang, Director of the Propaganda Department of the North China Bureau, to arrange publication. Only then was the novel finally released(Dong,1993,pp.226-228).

During this prolonged and difficult process, it remains unknown what specific "detailed revisions" Zhao Shuli made, nor how much criticism he received from intellectuals who judged the work as "damaging the Party's image." By comparing the historical prototype with the final fictional text, one certain observation emerges: within the wartime context of the resistance, whether willingly or reluctantly, Zhao Shuli could not truthfully lay bare problems among those village cadres, as this might have been interpreted as casting doubt on Party leadership—a politically sensitive stance. Nor could he disregard rural people's real living conditions and cultural psychology through overly sharp writing, lest he alienate the primary readership of popularized literature and art.

Consequently, he had to weigh competing considerations and revise the novel's characters under the dual constraints of political demands and literary mission. Although cadre corruption was a serious issue, assigning such wrongdoing to Jin Wang and Xing Wang, who were implicitly linked to enemy forces, better served the practical goals of uniting the revolutionary ranks and undermining enemy morale. Though the villagers' indifference and cruelty were undeniable, they belonged to "contradictions among the people" and thus could not be exaggerated. While the feudal superstitions embodied by Third Fairy and Second Zhuge certainly must be criticized, the relative rationality of rural ethics prevented the writer from completely dismissing them in an oversimplified manner, which would have alienated rural readers. For this reason, Zhao supplemented the portrayals of Third Fairy and Second Zhuge with their opposition to the marriage.

3. The Rewriting of Characters Based on the Happy-Ending Narrative Model

How, then, is such rewriting concretely realized within the novel?May Fourth intellectuals

such as Hu Shi criticized the traditional Chinese literary convention of the happy ending for glossing over social realities and numbing people's will to resist. Their criticism are a stance rooted in their Enlightenment ideals. As representative problem novels, Zhao Shuli's works also consistently adopt happy-ending resolutions. Yet as a branch of revolutionary literature, they simultaneously assumed a new enlightening function to serve political purposes.

Unlike conventional ancient comedies following the formula of "the noble youth falls into misfortune, the young lady keeps secret company, and once the top scholar is conferred, all troubles vanish", the happy endings in Zhao Shuli's fiction aim to revise reality and inspire fighting spirit. They emphasize granting a fulfilling and ideal resolution to the righteous majority—the peasant masses who have gained emancipation and become masters of their own.

Therefore, in the specific context of *The Marriage of Young Blacky*, with the exception of the evil forces represented by Jin Wang and Xing Wang, all other villagers can be regarded as part of this "righteous majority". To reconstruct the tragic real-life Yue case into a renewed narrative within the novel, Zhao Shuli took the villager group as the core step of his rewriting, thereby promoting the remolding of other characters.

Villagers in the novel differ greatly from those in reality. In real life, local villagers not only gossiped about the romantic relationship between Yue Dongzhi and Zhi Yingxiang, but also believed, after the fatal incident, that although Yue Dongzhi did not deserve death, he ought to have been punished. Though feudal conventions also made these villagers victims of history, their role as indifferent and cruel onlookers in the Yue case undoubtedly rendered them complicit in the tragedy. In the novel, however, Zhao Shuli subtly frames the issue of the child bride to endow the villagers with a benign, kind, and positive image.

In the original historical prototype, the Yue family adopted a child bride first, and Yue Dongzhi's romantic relationship with Zhi Yingxiang developed afterward. Consequently, Yue Dongzhi was generally regarded as a man "already having a spouse", and his subsequent romance was naturally deemed a violation of rural ethical norms. The novel reverses this timeline instead. In *The Marriage of Young Blacky*, Young Blacky and Xiao Qin are already in love, and "some villagers from the neighbouring village even offer to act as matchmakers for the two" (Dong, 2018, p. 153). It is only at this point that Old Li, a refugee from Henan, entrusts his daughter to Second Zhuge. As a result, the child bride does not become a decisive obstacle to the protagonists' romance in the novel. This young girl, who has no control over her own fate, remains marginal throughout the narrative and can even be disposed of arbitrarily by the plot.

The district head said: "... If that young girl you are taking care of truly has no natal family, you may formally adopt her as your daughter." Second Zhuge replied: "That would be

fine...(Dong,2018,pp.158-159)''The disappearance of the child -daughter-in-law is pivotal. Young Blacky once labeled a bachelor, thus frees himself from the moral pressures imposed by rural ethics. Meanwhile, the villagers also escape from the ensuing moral ordeal.

Subsequently, the novel further endows the villagers with an ideally constructed historical identity. Though feudal and cowardly by nature, they are inherently kind-hearted. Once enlightened by official policies, they grow into an important driving force for social reform:

The village chief remarked, "Everyone in the village knows Youg Blacky refuses to recognize his child bride..."

... Neighbors took the opportunity to mediate, and the two fortune-tellers consented their marriage.

After the wedding, the young couple lived in great contentment, and the villagers all praised them as the finest couple in the village.(Dong, 2018,pp.154-162)

Evidently, Zhao Shuli's intention to enlighten the masses is not realized through criticizing ignorance or depicting spiritual awakening. From the very beginning of the novel, the villagers are already in a state of semi-emancipated ideology regarding autonomous marriage. What accounts for this "semi-emancipation"? The crux lies not with the villagers as a collective, but with the obstacles to their full emancipation posed by conservative figures represented by Third Fairy and Second Zhuge, as well as the evil forces represented by Jin Wang and Xing Wang.

Consequently, the abstract collective of villagers gains the opportunity—and inevitability—to acquire the legitimate status conferred by revolutionary history. The narrative conflict is thus destined to focus solely on concrete individuals who are relatively easy to "remold": Second Zhuge, bound by feudal superstition, obstructs his son's free love in the name of paternal affection; Third Fairy intends to marry off her daughter out of personal selfish desire; Jin Wang and Xing Wang abuse political power for private gain and reckless retaliation. As long as Second Zhuge's superstition collapses, Third Fairy abandons her selfish desires, and the evil forces are quickly overthrown, the story naturally culminates in a satisfactory ending amid the masses' support and acclamation.

Sure enough, the novel first dismantles Second Zhuge's superstition through comic characterization. In the original prototype of the story, Yue Dongzhi's father is merely an honest farmer. Like most villagers, he holds superstitious beliefs at most but possesses no practice or talent for fortune-telling. Nevertheless, in creating the figure of "Second Zhuge", Zhao Shuli deliberately shapes him into a soothsayer. He drew on images of several rebel cult leaders in the late Qing dynasty and also incorporated traits from his own father. This raises a critical question: why must the Yue Dongzhi's father be transformed into a "soothsayer"?

The creation of the character "Second Zhuge" is, on the one hand, closely linked to the

anti-feudal theme; on the other hand, it stems from the novel's elimination of narrating the "child bride", and to render villagers' sense of justice logically plausible within reality. Alongside the vanishing of the child bride setup, the plot motivation for obstructing Young Blacky's marriage also disappears. Consequently, the writer had to provide Second Zhuge with another more reasonable justification for opposing the marriage. Thus this affectionate father relies on his fortune-telling to stubbornly defend what he regards as his son's "lifelong destiny":

Second Zhuge pleaded anxiously, "I beg the District Chief to show mercy. Their fates do not match; this is a matter for a lifetime!" He then turned to Young Blacky and urged, "Young Blacky, Do not be foolish! This will determine your whole life!(Dong, 2018,p.159)"

Furthermore, attributing the obstacles to Young Blacky's marriage solely to Second Zhuge's superstition also serves to facilitate the novel's conventional happy ending. The authority of yin-yang divination lies precisely in its supposed accuracy of prediction. Yet the novel opens with the counterexample of the "unfavourable day for planting", which turns out to be completely wrong. This detail subtly foreshadows that Second Zhuge's obstructive influence will gradually decline as the plot unfolds. Indeed, after Young Blacky is taken away by authorities, none of his divined omens—"riding a donkey for a daughter-in-law", "opera performing in the temple", and "crows alighting on the east chamber"—come true. Instead, the outcome is that his son is permitted to marry. As a result, the novel's comedic tone grows increasingly prominent. Readers witness Second Zhuge engaging in futile and ridiculous struggles against an inevitable ending.

The image of Second Zhuge is not complex; he is merely an elderly feudal peasant deeply imbued with patriarchal traits. His comedic nature derives precisely from this identity: confined by a fixed social role, he is doomed to failure from his first appearance, much like a clown on a theatrical stage. Notably, however, this clownish figure is not detestable but merely comical. Similar to Li Jishan in *Wanxiang Tower*, Zhao Shuli does not harshly condemn Second Zhuge but instead shows considerable understanding and sympathy toward him. The first section of the novel subtly implies a certain rationality behind Second Zhuge's superstition. Having once been a businessman, he habitually refers to yin-yang and the Eight Trigrams in all matters, a practice that logically serves his desire to avoid risks and safeguard his family's livelihood, even if it only offers psychological comfort. Moreover, the "unfavourable day for planting" results largely from natural disasters. In reality, timely and orderly agricultural production does not rely heavily on divinatory instructions. If farming truly followed such superstitions rigidly, Second Zhuge would never have felt assured enough to "do nothing on Dragon Boat Festival year after year".

Immediately afterward, the narrative arranges for Third Fairy to abandon her personal

desires. The novel depicts three logically connected episodes centering on Third Fairy. First, constrained by unfulfilled repressed desires, she engages with young men in the village relying on her beauty and alleged spiritual powers. Second, resenting that Xiao Qin draws the young men away from her, Third Fairy resolves to marry Xiao Qin off. Third, after meeting the district chief and receiving enlightenment under the new social order, she abandons her old ways. The writer adopts subtly different attitudes in portraying these three episodes. In depicting her conflict with Xiao Qin, Third Fairy appears entirely a selfish mother. Driven by carnal desires and petty jealousy, she possesses a distorted and dreadful personality, toward whom the novel adopts a distinctly satirical tone. Even so, Third Fairy is by no means a public enemy of the people. She cannot be allowed to remain an obstacle to the union of the male and female protagonists, which would prevent the narrative from achieving a happy ending. Accordingly, the first and third episodes implicitly lay out a narrative line that invites understanding and sympathy for her, providing a reasonable path for her spiritual reform.

The writer sincerely depicts the life background of Third Fairy. Her husband is dull and reticent, leaving her alone at home in profound loneliness. When young villagers come to keep her company voluntarily, they are harshly driven away by her father-in-law. Trapped in such predicaments, she has no means of resistance apart from conventional dramatic outbursts of weeping, quarreling, and threatening suicide.

When a neighbor brings a sorceress to her home, the second act of Third Fairy's tragic fate officially begins. She is confined within the signifier of a "fairy", reduced to an empty shell placed upon a lofty altar. So long as her supposed spiritual power appears to resolve practical troubles for the villagers, she is revered with kowtows and incense offerings—even the village tyrant, Jin Wang's father kneels before her. Yet once her mysterious rituals fail to work, she is mercilessly ridiculed with the sarcastic remark "The rice has gone rotten".

Third Fairy never possesses basic personal rights as an individual. Neither her family nor society offers her any way out. When she finally manages to pry open a subtle crack to break free from her compromised identity as a witch, she inevitably falls into disillusionment again amid the onlookers' alternating favour and abandonment. Consequently, she ultimately resorts to exercising the only authority she holds—maternal power—to oppress the weaker member of society, her own daughter, so that she may indulge more deeply in illusory comfort.

Nevertheless, the abrupt arrival of the new society shatters this illusory contentment once again. Possessing a touch of Ah Q's mentality, Third Fairy goes to meet the district chief in the expectation that another onlooker will admire her, only to find everything utterly changed.

The district chief took another look at her and said, "Are you Xiao Qin's mother? Stand up! Stop feigning divinity and playing tricks! I know everything. Get up!" ... He went on, "Look

at yourself.—dressed up like that, do you even look like a proper person?”

Then the messenger arrived with Xiao Qin and remarked deliberately, “What are you staring at? She is just an ordinary person. Haven’t you ever seen one before? Make way!” A group of women burst into loud laughter. (Dong,2018,p.160)

Third Fairy suffers a steady defeat. The blunt remark “Stop feigning divinity and playing tricks” instantly strips her of her sacred aura, and the subsequent question “Do you even look like a proper person?” further undermines her identity as an ordinary person. Reduced to a clown standing center stage, she is subjected to judgment not only by the authoritative new official but also by the mocking female onlookers outside. While she once managed to gain a foothold in the patriarchal rural community by virtue of her alleged spiritual powers in the old era, she is abruptly cast to the lowest stratum of the new society in this moment. She has no choice but to accept ideological remodeling and reshape her mindset passively.

Third Fairy’s fate, from beginning to end, is inextricably bound up with the villagers’ gaze. She was able to establish herself as a spiritual medium and live a dissolute life for decades largely because the collective onlookers sustained and stabilized the reciprocal relationship between seeing and being seen. Nevertheless, aiming to shape the villagers as righteous figures, the novel refrains from delivering fierce Lu Xun-style criticism toward this crowd of spectators. Instead, Zhao Shuli depicts them in a mild and gentle tone filled with sympathy and understanding. Hence, the villagers are portrayed less as accomplices than as ignorant masses and even victims of feudal society. They have no intention of committing the metaphorical act of “cannibalism”, and instead possess the potential to embrace transformation along with the old social order.

In this narrative setting, Third Fairy’s inner change also unfolds under the villagers’ watch. To dissociate them from the image of cruel spectators, the villagers in this context represent newly awakened common people, standing as symbols of a promising future and the new society.

Lastly, to steer the story toward a happy ending, the novel simplifies depictions of problems concerning village cadres.

On one hand, this simplification is embodied in the portrayal of Jin Wang and Xing Wang. First, the process of investigating and punishing the two villains is condensed and hastily concluded in the final chapter. Meanwhile, the writer exposes their crimes comprehensively, albeit generally, in both the opening and closing chapters, imposing harsher punishment on them compared with the real-life prototype. Such writing evades the intricate facts of the actual case as well as the ambiguous zones within revolutionary judicature, yet its verdict achieves a satisfying artistic effect that remedies social realities. Second, though the revolutionary regime

presides over their trial, the wronged and righteous villagers play a pivotal role in investigation and accusation, with Young Blacky standing out as the most prominent civilian hero. In contrast to the historical prototype, the novel endows the masses with the authority and capacity to judge wrongdoers, making up for the absence of popular power in reality and bringing about a more ideal and thorough settlement of the case. While punishing Jin Wang and Xing Wang merely rectifies individual misdeeds and resolves the trivial matter of blocking Young Blacky's marriage, enabling villagers to stand up and gain the power to be their own masters in the campaign against evil signifies that the remolded public can effectively prevent similar tragedies from recurring. This constitutes the ultimate happy ending of the narrative.

On the other hand, it is reflected in the characterization of the village chief. Zhao Shuli intended to rewrite the tragic ending of the original story and point out a clear direction of struggle for young people. In the early revolutionary period, there were few effective solutions apart from top-down official support. Against this backdrop, Shi Xianying, the village chief who was involved in the case and sought to mitigate his guilt, is reshaped into a spokesperson for the revolution in the novel. Nevertheless, if this village chief fully conformed to revolutionary ideals, he would never have allowed the obstruction of Young Blacky's marriage. To resolve this logical contradiction, the novel defines him as an outsider settler, attributing his dereliction of duty mainly to his estrangement from the masses.

The village chief was an outsider who knew little about local affairs. Taking advantage of this loophole, Jin Wang and Xing Wang grew increasingly arrogant. As long as they kept things hidden from the chief, they could order all villagers around at will. Over the years, several other village cadres had been replaced, yet the two villains remained firmly entrenched in power (Dong, 2018, p. 152).

Dispatched from elsewhere, the village chief remained unfamiliar with village affairs even after years in office. Alienated from the local people, he was virtually an outsider easily manipulated by others. He settled disputes merely through mediation, adhering to rural customary ethics rather than modern legal principles. He showed little concern over whether the romance between Young Blacky and Xiao Qin deserved genuine legal protection, nor did he care whether Xing Wang's arbitrary detention of villagers and Jin Wang's wife's unreasonable behaviors should be duly punished. The novel portrays the village chief in a concise manner without clarifying his final fate. Readers remain unaware whether he adjusted his working methods or was dismissed in village elections. What can be confirmed is that, if the village chief failed to unite with the public and integrate into the collective, such pedantic and incompetent official would inevitably be excluded or replaced by villagers who are brave enough to speak out. Such village chiefs are recurring figures in Zhao Shuli's works, forming

a gallery of typical characters. Though these portrayals imply the writer's concerns about revolutionary cadres, these conflicts are essentially contradictions among the people. These cadres are merely flawed in their working styles rather than reactionary evil elements by nature.

4. Conclusion

By revisiting the context of *The Marriage of Young Blacky* from the Yue Dongzhi case to its literary adaptation, this paper reveals how Zhao Shuli adopted sophisticated narrative strategies to transform a brutal social tragedy into an uplifting revolutionary fable. Centered on the preset happy ending, he takes the justification of villagers as the core, and thereby accomplishes the narrative concealment and idealization of a full range of characters including Second Zhuge, Third Fairy, Jin Wang, Xing Wang and the outsider village chief.

The significance of this finding goes far beyond clarifying the details of a literary controversy. It further delves into an inherent structural dilemma that Chinese literature in the 20th century had to confront in its transition from enlightenment for life to mobilization for revolution: how to inspire public morale through reconstructing reality while retaining literary authenticity and thematic complexity. The rewriting strategies adopted in *The Marriage of Young Blacky* offer a thought-provoking solution. Zhao Shuli ultimately diverts critical focus away from the indifferent masses and disorderly grassroots power, and instead centers his critique on personal selfish desires and feudal superstitions embodied by individual backward figures. Such a shift of contradictory focus enables the novel to uphold the peasant standpoint and human warmth, yet inevitably comes at the cost of overlooking the darker and heavier truths hidden behind the Yue Dongzhi case.

Hence, *The Marriage of Young Blacky* stands as a contradictory archive concerning how narratives intervene in reality. It demonstrates that the happy-ending narrative mode of revolutionary literature inherently contains dual mechanisms of suppression and reconstruction, concealment and healing from its very beginning. These mechanisms have shaped the images and voices of "the people" in Chinese literature for decades to come. In this sense, rereading Zhao Shuli equals revisiting a pivotal and tension-filled origin point of modern Chinese literature.

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