

Secularity and Human Relations

— Study on the Utopian Imagery in The Love Story of a Young Monk

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Abstract:

Having suffered from the spiritual trauma caused by the Cultural Revolution, Wang Zengqi reshaped the ideal society and national character through novels such as *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, which helped to solve the problem of spiritual distress for the folks. Continuing the romantic narrative tradition of Chinese classical literature, *The Love Story of a Young Monk* shows human emotions and materials in ordinary life. The common people who live in Anzhao Village hold simple moral values, shaping stable and harmonious human relations, which forms a negation and criticism of the real world. Rather than holding the abstract worldview in form, Wang Zengqi's utopian impulse pursues a way of survival that conforms to human nature and roots in secular life. This article attempts to study the romantic imagery in Wang Zengqi's *The Love Story of a Young Monk* and finds that Wang Zengqi describes his utopian imagery from both secular and ethical perspectives, hoping to use this imagery to solve people's current state of disappointment.

Keywords: Utopia; Wang Zengqi; *The Love Story of a Young Monk*; secular

1. Introduction

Wang Zengqi, whose aesthetic and literary style cannot be classified, plays a special part in literary history. However, as the last scholar-bureaucrat in China, most of his works convey the pursuit and exploration of human beauty. His representative work, *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, shows his understanding of the beauty of human nature.

As a novel that goes against the trend after the Cultural Revolution, *The Love Story of a Young Monk* is regarded as a special existence in the literary world of the 1980s. Since its publication, much attention has been paid to it by the academic community. *The Love Story of a Young Monk* influences the direction of literary writing. Standing out in the literary world that is filled with scar literature and reflective literature, the purpose of *The Love Story of a Young Monk* is not to criticize history, completely negate the past, or enable people to engage in spiritual emptiness but to focus on describing an „old dream“ and reshaping the spiritual character of the nation. The reason why Wang Zengqi and his works are popular with people is mainly because of the beauty of human nature, secular beauty, and harmonious beauty displayed in his novels. These ideals of hope and love are buried in everyone's heart. Wang Zengqi used his writing to inspire the reader to pursue the value of beauty. The construction of the beauty of human nature, secular beauty, and harmonious beauty not only

refers to Wang Zengqi's expectation of national character but also the writer's fantasy of utopia.

The academic research on Wang Zengqi's *The Love Story of a Young Monk* focuses on the language style and lyricism. Moreover, his writing style plays a special role, and the harmonious beauty shown in his articles impacts later writing. Wang Dan and Li Haiyan both explored Wang Zengqi's writing style from the blank spaces in the description of *The Love Story of a Young Monk* and the harmonious aesthetic categories reflected in the book [1,2]. Since Wang Zengqi studied under Shen Congwen, his early works are classified as Beijing style. Therefore, Zhang Shaojiao explored Wang Zengqi's inheritance of Beijing-style aesthetics in the 1980s from the perspective of the creative background and content of *The Love Story of a Young Monk* [3]. In addition, as *The Love Story of a Young Monk* was published right after the end of the Cultural Revolution and people were in a state of psychological trauma, some writers such as Zhang Dahai analyzed the creative background of *The Love Story of a Young Monk* from the perspective of new historicism [4]. However, personally, in addition to analyzing the language style and lyricism of *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, the description of Anzhao Village in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* shows the romantic imagery, which is of great help to the study of the society at that time. By adopting the method of text reading, this paper will ana-

lyze the romantic imagery in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* and find out Wang Zengqi's narrative purpose and method used for reshaping the classical utopia.

2. Chinese „Utopia“

„Utopia“ was originally defined as „a place that doesn't exist“ or „a good place,“ but later, it was extended to refer to the wishes or ideals that humans will never achieve. Later, it generally refers to „a utopian country.“ This term originates from the book of the same name written by Thomas More, an Englishman, in 1516 (*De optimo Reipublicae Statu, deque nova insula Utopia*), which describes a society without exploitation or oppression, where all wealth belongs to the members of the society, everyone is born equal without hierarchy, the daily necessities are distributed according to the demands, and the workers are dressed in uniform. People dine in public restaurants like canteens, and the officials, elected by the public, work for the people [5].

Compared to Western utopia, which focuses on social construction, Chinese utopia takes ethical relations as its core. China already had the concept of „utopia“ as early as the Spring and Autumn period, which can be traced back to the realm of inaction in „A Happy Excursion“ by Zhuang Zi. This is the primitive utopia and the ethical utopia mentioned in „The Book of Rites“ by the Confucians, as well as the utopia of „The Peach Colony“ mentioned in the Peach Colony by Tao Yuanming in the Xiangxi Jin Dynasty, as well as the rural utopia in „The Border Town“ by Shen Congwen during the Republic of China period. The Peach Colony, described by Tao Yuanming, marks the establishment of utopia in China.

Liang Qichao believes The Peach Colony is a typical Eastern Utopia [6]. In The Peach Colony, Tao Yuanming describes a fisherman who happens to enter the Peach Colony. After the fisherman entered the Peach Colony, Tao Yuanming describes the happy life of everyone, the reasonable layout, and everything in order in The Peach Colony in a few sentences. After seeing the fisherman in The Peach Colony, the locals invited him to their homes, which shows their enthusiasm, hospitality, and kindness. It also further portrays human emotions and customs in Chinese utopia.

In China or Western countries, aesthetic utopian ideas inevitably exist in their respective historical cultures and almost become a cross-cultural collective unconscious [7]. The most significant difference between China and the West in describing utopia lies in religion and secularity. Compared with Western countries, China has never encountered a situation where divine power surpasses monarchy. Secondly, Chinese religions such as local Tao-

ism and Buddhism combined with Chinese local culture have also been influenced by Confucianism for better dissemination in China, with more utilitarianism. Influenced by such values and aesthetic culture, Chinese utopia highlights „benevolence“ and living in harmony with each other. Attaching little importance to the existence of the law highlights the favor and ethics, resulting in a difference in the focus of utopia between the East and the West: Chinese utopia focuses more on secularity and human relations, while Western utopia focuses more on the construction of institutions. The Western utopia tends to be narrow and is related to social organizations. The imagery of Chinese utopia tends to have a broad definition of utopia, which refers to people's inner thoughts and spirits.

Additionally, the difference between the utopia of China and the West lies in whether the concept of utopia in the West is influenced by theology. Among these, in the Bible, Jesus believes that a beautiful world lies in the future after his passing away. American theologian Paul Tillich once divided „utopia“ into two types: „looking forward (future)“ and „looking backward (past),“ which is divided according to the time. The abovementioned shows that the West categorizes utopian practices and impulses as human ideals and the future. Moreover, in Chinese utopia, especially Tao Yuanming's The Peach Colony, when the fisherman asks the villagers about the time, they „do not know if there is Han, Wei, or Jin Dynasty“ [8]. This shows the dilution and ambiguity of time.

The Anzhao Village described in Wang Zengqi's *The Love Story of a Young Monk* is a Chinese utopian imaginary, reflected in the secularity and human relations and religious secularization of Anzhao Village. Then, the paper will analyze the romantic imagery of Anzhao Village based on the content of *The Love Story of a Young Monk*.

3. The Utopian Imagery in The Love Story of a Young Monk

In „Returning to Realism, Returning to National Tradition,“ Wang Zengqi pointed out that, „My request for myself is to return to realism and national tradition“ [9]. Wang Zengqi grew up in Gaoyou and was deeply influenced by Confucian culture, which enabled his utopia to embody human emotions and the beauty of human nature. In his work *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, readers will find numerous descriptions of harmonious human relationships.

Wang Zengqi's novel *The Love Story of a Young Monk* portrays the natural and simple, carefree, and pleasing life in The Peach Colony. The scenery of Anzhao Village is depicted as natural and beautiful, while temple and rural life are portrayed as casual and warm, creating a poetic

world. Particularly notable is the natural portrayal of sexuality and desire in the novel, along with the breaking of religious precepts in secular life, illustrating the powerful temptation and rebellious force of that era.

The romantic imagery in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* is primarily depicted in two aspects: the ethical and worldly sentiments of Anzhao Village and the freedom of human nature reflected in the secularization of Buddhism. The secular and human relations in Anzhao Village demonstrate the harmonious and beautiful social relationships among its inhabitants. The folk customs of Anzhao Village portrayed in the novel are harmonious and natural, with everyone being a member of this ecosystem, living freely and equally, working in the mountains, and dwelling by the waters. For instance, Uncle Zhao's family exemplifies a harmonious family relationship, reflecting a harmonious and enjoyable living state. Interactions among neighbors, such as Minghai helping Xiao Yingzi with housework and painting flowers for Da Yingzi and Aunt Zhao adopting Hai as her godson, showcase the harmony and beauty of human relationships. Confucianism greatly emphasizes self-improvement and promotes harmony, from family to neighborhood and even society. The absence of conflicts or disputes among neighbors in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* creates a beautiful environment where everyone willingly aids each other and lives happily, embodying Confucius' concept of a harmonious society. Such social harmony is maintained through personal ethics rather than legal enforcement. The love between individuals in the novel—father and daughter, mother and daughter, sisters, neighbors, or teacher and students—is depicted as genuine and unaffected by rank, seniority, or status, emphasizing people's commitment to maintaining human relations.

In addition to family and neighborhood relationships, *The Love Story of a Young Monk* also portrays the pure and touching love between Xiao Yingzi and Minghai, representing the beauty and harmony of human nature that the author seeks to express and secularize religion. Wang Zengqi skillfully downplays the sense of detachment between the religious identity of a 'monk' and reality in the novel. Minghai's perspective is adopted, suggesting that monks are no different from other professionals. As he states, 'There are monks in his hometown. Just like some places have pigs, mats, hoops, cotton, painters, and prostitutes, there are monks in his hometown.' Xiao Yingzi further emphasizes this by stating, 'To put it simply, taking precepts is akin to obtaining a diploma for the qualified monk!' This serves to secularize what is commonly regarded as a sacred profession.

The monks in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* live secularized lives. Wang Zengqi showed no interest in religion

but focused on people. When Wang Zengqi constructed the utopian world centered on people, the lifestyle that conforms to human nature is the core of the ideology. 'There are no rules or regulations in this temple, and no one even mentions these two words' [10]. When describing the people in the temple, the monks in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* eat meat, get married, and have a mistress. They are busy fighting instead of meditating. These astonishing images completely contradict the image of monks in people's minds. Wang Zengqi applied sexual and vulgar desires to break the conventional strict rules, adding a sense of secularism and closeness to the whole book. Apart from breaking down the barriers and narrowing the differences, the writer also downplays religion from the perspective of the novel characters. The abnormal phenomena of these unconstrained monks in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* are recognized and even regarded as 'reasonable,' 'understandable,' and even 'well-known' in *The Love Story of a Young Monk*. The monk Renhai lives a real life as an ordinary person with demands, desires, and emotions that will not disappear due to their identity or decrease due to their social roles. These monks became monks only for the sake of livelihood. Their true identity is that of the workers at the bottom of society, and they never forget that it is human nature. They 'eat meat without deceiving others' and live a free, happy, and truthful life in the 'so-called unregulated' shabby hut. Although they are common and ordinary people, they lead a life with their characteristics.

This disregard for the rules, the breaking of mysticism, and the sanctification of Buddhism reflect that the writer encouraged people to pursue freedom and happiness. The original meaning of *The Love Story of a Young Monk* was that Buddhist believers had to accept the precepts under certain rituals before becoming monks or nuns. The five precepts of Buddhism are no killing, no stealing, no debauchery, no false words, and no drinking. However, the novel's concept of *The Love Story of a Young Monk* is nothing but a facade, breaking the precepts without any consideration or contemplation. Perhaps the novel attempts to integrate the secularization and humanization of Buddhism, showing that 'Buddha' in life conforms to both human and human nature, as well as 'divine nature.' It manifests Zhuang Zi's inaction, where any dull and rigid constraints are meaningless, and people can pursue their dreams and desires. This shows the writer's critical thinking on traditional culture. Although Wang Zengqi was influenced by Confucian culture from a young age, he also accepted the dissemination of new ideas during the May Fourth period. He knew that humans had evolved from animals and had their desires. At that time, the Confucian concept of self-restraint and restoration of propriety

was no longer applicable to people's pursuit of happiness then, so he hoped to overthrow the constraints established by Confucianism on human desires by adopting the Taoist perspective of carefree inaction. This is a kind of neutrality that Wang Zengqi inevitably made when applying modern thinking to describe traditional society, that is, finding a balance between the utopia described by Confucianism and Taoism.

In addition, when describing Anzhao Village, the writer blurs out time and space. It can be easy to find that no specific time was mentioned in the book, and inference can only be made according to some details. From the inference, it shows that people's lives are similar to the living background of the Republic of China period. However, during the war years, it was impossible to have a quiet and peaceful paradise. Moreover, the description is similar to the portrayal of the Peach Colony in „The Peach Colony.“ The writer blurred the time and fictionalized Anzhao Village. It tries to imply to readers that such a utopia does not exist by blurring the time. While blurring time, the writer also tried to stop Anzhao Village from communicating with the outside world and preventing external invasion and influence because he knew that utopia should be closed so that it could maintain self-sufficiency and a peaceful state. The adoption of the deliberate method of blurring time and enclosing space results from the writer's reflection after going through the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, when seeing people experience a spiritual crisis, he fabricated a utopia to rebuild people's spiritual civilization.

4. The Writing Value of Utopia

As Wang Zengqi mentioned, *The Love Story of a Young Monk* is an „old dream“ from the 1940s. This is going against the trend of the times, recalling and memorializing the happiness of the past. The description of utopia in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* is exactly the writer's pursuit and fantasy of the happiness of secularity and human relations. Such kind of description, whether for the past or present, can temporarily keep people from the restless world and return to the primitive, harmonious, and peaceful world. Li Tuo had an insight into this, pointing out that „Wang Zengqi had already published a short story called *The Love Story of a Young Monk* in October 1980. No one had imagined that such a simple novel would bring any revolution at the time. On the contrary, the reason why people liked it is that it was ‚harmless.‘ It was like a fresh breeze in the air filled with gunpowder.“ The criticism community probably recognized Wang Zengqi in a polite manner, which reflects a tolerant spirit unique to the „new era literature.“ It was like a leisurely and wild grass, but

he could be left to fend for himself“ [11]. To some extent, Wang Zengqi's writing is in line with the trend of ideological liberation in the 1980s, and he practiced diverse literary views through writing. The harmonious, peaceful, warm, and simple scenes in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* are not only a personal way for the writer to eliminate the darkness of reality and pain but also a collective unconscious cohesion of the nation. Wang Zengqi's integration of Confucian and Taoist ideas inherits and interprets the utopian dream deeply rooted in the national psyche. Therefore, *The Love Story of a Young Monk* is full of artistic personality and a state of selflessness where heaven and man are united.

The writer experienced movements such as the May Fourth Movement and the Cultural Revolution, which downplayed traditional culture. Still, the difficulties of reality have forced the writer to return to traditional culture and seek original harmony and civilization. When encountering such reality, the writer discovered that reflection and pain are not enough, and it is also necessary to trace the source to find the beauty of tradition. The rise of romantic imagery in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* allows people to experience a moment of harmony and quietness in reading. Wang Zengqi's teacher, Shen Congwen, believed that his writing was like buying a barrel to return a pearl. The readers failed to observe the endless sadness and melancholy in his writing but focused on mocking the writer's innocence and impracticality, as did Wang Zengqi's writing. Wang Zengqi had been studying serious national issues through writing, exploring what constitutes healthy human nature through writing, and continuing Lu Xun's idea of „cultivating people.“ Since Lu Xun explored the issue of national character, countless Chinese writers have continued this topic. Compared to Lu Xun exposing the common spiritual ailments of the Chinese people to bring hope for healing, Wang Zengqi and his teacher Shen Congwen adopted a different approach, not a path of criticism and negation but an affirmation of what good human nature and life should be like. Shen Congwen found strong vitality in the healthy and primitive human nature preserved by the Miao people in the western frontier to improve the cowardly mentality of Chinese people when encountering Western culture at that time. Based on traditional culture and combined with modern civilization, Wang Zengqi helped to get rid of the pain in people's hearts. Wang Zengqi searched for the factors that activated the ideal human nature of Chinese people from the familiar Confucian and Taoist culture when he was young. Wang Zengqi's pursuit of building a healthy national character was hidden in the book *The Love Story of a Young Monk*. He knew the difference between reality and ideals. When encountering obstacles in reality, history,

and society, Wang Zengqi first attempted to break through the spiritual barriers in values, allowing Chinese people in historical pains to find spiritual strength from traditional culture. Wang Zengqi established a world of „should be“ and „possible“ through writing. Standing in the cultural position of the 1980s, Wang Zengqi examined traditional culture with a history of thousands of years. Moreover, he found that every breakthrough in our nation’s civilization was accompanied by a utopian impulse hidden in the unconscious of the national collective. During the decline of the Zhou royal family and the struggle for power among feudal lords, Confucius traveled to different feudal lords to promote the benevolent ideology of „restraining oneself and restoring propriety“ and was mocked as a „homeless dog“; Zhuang Zi pursued the realm of personal freedom and inaction, attempting to relieve the suffering of practical constraints on the world through the natural way, but he was regarded as a crazy man living on the edge of society. Wang Zengqi also continued this utopian spiritual impulse, instructing people to put forward the tradition of Confucius and Zhuang and the small tradition of May Fourth opened up by Lu Xun through writing. Currently, many people have an affection for Wang Zengqi, and the influence of *The Love Story of a Young Monk* seems to have never died away. The utopia described in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* impacts today. In the current materialistic society, readers shall re-understand the poetic beauty of human beings discovered in Wang Zengqi’s novels and affirm the value of human nature. This is a dream expectation and a thought that is needed today. The romantic imagery in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* lets people calm down, look back on the past, and seek tranquility and beauty.

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5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the romantic imagery in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* mainly by carefully reading the book. Finally, it can be concluded that Wang Zengqi showed harmonious interpersonal relationships and tolerance for people’s pursuit of desires in Anzhao Village through his human relations and religious secularization. It is the writer’s approach to dealing with the scarred situation that arose after the Cultural Revolution and their outlook for the future. Wang Zengqi hoped to improve people’s inner struggles and pain by seeking the greatness of national culture.

This paper is different from others that study the writing skills of Wang Zengqi’s *The Love Story of a Young Monk*. It mainly focuses on analyzing utopian imagery, hoping to provide new ideas for others. However, since there is not enough data and material support, it is impossible to further analyze the impact and significance of *The Love Story of a Young Monk* in the present. This paper is an introduction to the romantic imagery of *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, which needs further investigation by other excellent scholars.

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