



Attitudes towards Corruption and Women in Children's Literature and Detective Fiction: A Parallel between Zheng Yuanjie and Zijin Chen

Sikap-Sikap terhadap Korupsi dan Perempuan dalam Sastra Anak dan Fiksi Detektif: Kesejajaran antara Zheng Yuanjie dan Zijin Chen

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Abstract

In this article, I explore male writers' attitudes towards corruption and women in fairy tales and detective novels, by means of hermeneutically scrutinising works of Zheng Yuanjie, the illustrious 'King of Fairy Tales', as well as Zijin Chen, the 'Chinese Keigo Higashino'. Anti-corruption is a prevalent and preponderant theme in both writers' creation, yet their depictions of barbarous extrajudicial punishment for government officials' misdeeds allude to karmic retribution and are prone to expatiation in graphic detail. Therefore, I propound that some of their fiction appertaining to anti-corruption can be regarded as 'feel-good writing' in essence. Furthermore, the writing of Zheng and Chen is sometimes featured by lack of feminist consciousness, in that a proportion of their works manifest gender stereotypes, exemplified by writers' preconceptions about traits women are supposed to possess. Such a tendency can also be attested in other male writers' fairy tales and detective novels, and hence deserves more attention from both writers and readers.

Keywords: *Children's literature, detective fiction, Zheng Yuanjie, Zijin Chen, anti-corruption, gender stereotypes*

Abstrak

Dalam artikel ini, saya mengeksplorasi sikap penulis laki-laki terhadap korupsi dan perempuan dalam dongeng dan novel detektif, dengan cara meneliti secara hermeneutis karya Zheng Yuanjie, *King of Fairy Tales* yang termasyhur, serta Zijin Chen, *Chinese Keigo Higashino*. Anti-korupsi adalah tema yang lazim dan dominan dalam karya kedua penulis, namun penggambaran mereka tentang hukuman di luar hukum yang biadab untuk kesalahan pejabat pemerintah menyinggung pembalasan karma dan rentan terhadap ekspati dalam detail grafis. Oleh karena itu, saya berpendapat bahwa beberapa fiksi mereka yang bertema antikorupsi dapat dianggap sebagai 'tulisan yang menyenangkan' pada intinya. Selain itu, tulisan Zheng dan Chen terkadang ditampilkan oleh kurangnya kesadaran feminis, di mana sebagian dari karya mereka memanasifestasikan stereotip gender, dicontohkan oleh prasangka penulis tentang sifat-

sifat yang seharusnya dimiliki wanita. Kecenderungan seperti itu juga dapat dibuktikan dalam dongeng dan novel detektif laki-laki lain, dan karenanya patut mendapat perhatian lebih baik dari penulis maupun pembaca.

Kata kunci: *Sastra anak-anak, fiksi detektif, Zheng Yuanjie, Zijin Chen, anti-korupsi, stereotip gender*

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, two illustrious writers, 郑渊洁 Zheng Yuanjie (1955-) and 紫金陈 Zijin Chen (1986-), have gone viral on Weibo, China's leading social media platform with approximately 550 million monthly active users in 2020 (Lai 2020). Zheng Yuanjie has attained legions of devoted fans since 1990s, epitomised by the ten flats he purchased in Beijing in order to store readers' correspondence (Peng 2021), whereas his recent popularity in the cyberspace is under his witty, meticulous and avuncular interaction with his 7.32 million Weibo followers (Cong 2020, Xiong and Sun 2021). In terms of Zijin Chen, his recent prodigious commercial attainment is owing to phenomenal screen adaptation of his fiction (The Paper 2020, Zhou and Du 2020, Zong 2020).

Zheng Yuanjie (henceforward Zheng), is a prolific writer extolled as the 'King of Fairy Tales' owing to his identity as the sole contributor to a namesake monthly magazine 童话大王 *Tonghua Dawang* 'King of Fairy Tales' since 1985 (Ding 2014, Xiong and Sun 2021). Since embarked upon his composition career in 1978, Zheng has created works of over 20 million characters in total and sold more than 300 million copies (Lu 2007, Cong 2020), which enables him to attain enormous commercial success to fund his philanthropy (Jiang 2010, Chen 2012, Peng and Sun 2019). Zheng's writing is exalted for a veritable cornucopia of themes and imagination as well as richness of imagery-evoking and exaggeration-enriched representation (Zhang 2009, Chen 2015, Zheng 2020). For instance, his chef-d'oeuvre is entitled 舒克和贝塔历险记 *Shuke He Beita Lixianji* 'Adventure of Shuke and Beita' (Trans. Mine), which is a series featuring two valiant and thoughtful mice and has been adapted into animation (Wang and Zhang 2011, Han 2020). Apart from fairy tales, Zheng's literary aptitude is also encapsulated by compilation of textbooks encompassing a fecundity of disciplines (Wu 2004, Huang and Liu 2007, Jiang 2007, Tang 2007, Wang 2017).

Zijin Chen (henceforward Chen) is the pseudonym of 陈徐 Chen Xu, whose detective fiction is palpably impinged upon by the celebrated Japanese mystery writer Keigo Higashino, and he is hence acclaimed as the 'Chinese Keigo Higashino' (中国版东野圭吾 *zhongguoban Dongye Guiwu*) owing to their analogous style labelled as the Shakai School (社会派 *Shehui Pai*) addressing societal issues (Pan 2017, The Paper 2020). In stark contrast to his identity as a novelist, Chen graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Water and Marine Engineering from Zhejiang University (Qiu 2018) among the C9 League, viz. China's Ivy League (Allen 2017), which accords with his succinct, plain language and inspires punctilious plots (Pan 2017, The Paper 2020). Notwithstanding his current focus on detective fiction, Chen's writing entails a wide range of themes, reflected by his early novels appertaining to investment and stock exchange and his recent humorous writing (Hu 2007, Zhang 2020). The chefs-d'oeuvre of Chen entail a series of four revenge-themed narratives entitled 高智商犯罪 *Gaozhishang Fanzui* 'High-IQ Crime' (Trans. Mine), yet its screen adaptation into 谋局 *Mou Ju* 'Manoeuvre' (Trans. Mine) (Wu 2020) fails to attain deserved critical attention. The successful adaptation of Chen's fiction can be indicated by three popular

online series, viz. 无证之罪 *Wuzheng Zhizu* ‘Burning Ice’ (2017) based on the namesake novel (Kong 2017, Pan 2017, Strait Metropolitan Post 2017), 隐秘的角落 *Yinmide Jiaoluo* ‘The Bad Kids’ (2020) adapted from a novel entitled 坏小孩 *Huai Xiaohai* ‘The Gone Child’ (Shangguan 2020, Xu 2020, Zhou and Du 2020), and 沉默的真相 *Chenmode Zhenxiang* ‘The Long Night’ (2020) adapted from a 2017 novel 长夜难明 *Changye Nanming* ‘The Long Night’ (China Youth Daily 2020, Zhang 2020).

METHODS

In this article, I investigate construals of corruption and women in fairy tales and detective novels, as embodied in the works composed by Zheng and Chen respectively. By means of hermeneutically scrutinising works of Zheng and Chen, I illustrate that the two writers are both disposed to depict well-deserved nemeses triggered by repugnant corruption. In their writing, government officials void of integrity are prone to extrajudicial executions, whereas a society replete with such punishments is adulated as an exemplary utopia. Furthermore, the writing of Zheng and Chen is also featured by lack of feminist consciousness, as reflected by gender stereotypes attested in their fairy tales and detective novels.

RESULTS

Anti-corruption serves as a prevalent theme in Zheng’s fiction. For instance, a narrative entitled 杀人蚁 *Sharen Yi* ‘Killer Ants’ (Trans. Mine) concerns a mutated species of ants that only prey on human beings who have committed corruption, and their massacre is implied to be meritorious and is deployed by governments (Example (1)). Moreover, in the narrative, barbarous motifs appertaining to retribution for corruption are expatiated explicitly, exemplified by Example (2), in which grotesque excrescences and paranormal scenes are portrayed in graphic detail.

(1) 当人们知道了杀人蚁专门袭击人体生物电磁波属于第二波长的人后，有人欢喜有人愁。自己人体电磁波属于哪个波长不需要仪器测定，每中人心心里都门儿清。那些原先受人们同情的死者的亲人现在成了罪犯的家属而无地自容。从此每被杀人蚁杀一个，地球上就多一个无地自容的家庭。传说有几个国家的反贪局开始饲养杀人蚁。还有的国家解散了检察院。第一波长的人从此高枕无忧安居乐业。第二波长的人惶惶不可终日...以人类的智慧，消灭杀人蚁不是做不到的事。问题在于有相当数量的人类成员不同意消灭杀人蚁，他们甚至说杀人蚁是上帝派来的...人类的数量在继续减少，这是自恐龙灭绝以来地球上第二次大规模的生命优胜劣汰。在人类失去了近两亿同胞后杀人蚁日渐衰落。由清一色的第一波长组成的人类掩埋好亲人和同胞的尸体，开始一个新的纪元。

Upon hearing that killer ants only attacked human beings with a long second wave of biological electromagnetic radiation, some people were enraptured while some were dolorous. Which one of their two waves was longer, everybody was crystal clear. Victims’ families previously received sympathy, but now disdain, because the deceased turned out to be criminals. From now on, every time a human was killed, there was one more ashamed family on the planet. It was said that some national anti-corruption departments around the world began to raise anti-killers, and some countries even disbanded procuratorates. People with a long first wave had been enjoying their carefree and peaceful life, yet those with a long second wave had been traumatised by death threats...With human wisdom, it was surely practicable to annihilate killer ants, but the problem was that a considerable proportion of human beings disagreed to harm killer ants, and they claimed that this species was sent down by God...The human population was decreasing persistently, which was the second largest survival of the fittest since dinosaurs’ extinction. After the death of almost 200 million people, the number of killer ants gradually declined. Now all surviving humans had a long first wave—they buried the corpses of families and friends and witnessed the inauguration of a new era.

(*Killer Ants*. Chapter 15. Trans. Mine)

(2) “听说杀人蚁不会游泳。”妻子化悲痛为力量急中生智。“是吗?”丈夫绝路逢生。“你泡在浴缸里,就不怕杀人蚁了。”妻子说。“一天24小时都泡着?”丈夫不寒而栗。“那也比死了强。”妻子说。丈夫点头。妻子为丈夫烧热水...3天下来,丈夫的皮肤快泡烂了。丈夫想出来。“你看!”妻子让丈夫看浴缸四周的地面。浴缸四周的地面上是数万只杀人蚁,踩不尽杀不绝。丈夫揪自己的头发,连皮带肉。浴缸里的水变红了。他恨自己不该受贿。他成为地球上第一个活活在水里泡死的人类成员。
 ‘I heard that killer ants couldn’t swim.’ The sorrowful wife had a quick wit. ‘Really?’ The husband grasped at straws. ‘Stay in the bath to keep yourself away from killer ants.’ The wife suggested. ‘For 24/7?’ The idea terrified the husband. ‘It’s better than being killed.’ She convinced her husband and filled the bath with warm water... Three days later, his skin was virtually putrefied and he was desperate to get out of the bath. ‘Look!’ She pointed at the tens of thousands of killer ants around the bath. Although she kept trampling them, they kept swooping in even faster. He pulled his hairs off along with his scalp and flesh, dying the water red with his blood. He despised himself for accepting bribes. He then became the first human who died of soaking in water.

(*Ibid.* Trans. Mine)

Analogously, Chen regards devious government officials with disdain and censures corruption as anomie deserving extrajudicial executions, which can be indicated by the title of his novel series, namely, ‘High-IQ Crime’ that was originally named 谋杀官员 *Mousha Guanyuan* ‘To Murder Government Officials’ (Trans. Mine) when first released on the Internet in 2012. For instance, the first narrative of the series, entitled 逻辑王子的演绎 *Luoji Wangzide Yanyi* ‘Deduction of the Logic Prince’ (Trans. Mine), features an intelligent murderer with a Bachelor’s degree in Mathematics and a PhD in Psychology, who exacts vengeance on a list of government officials for his mother’s death and escapes unscathed, as in Example (3). As can be seen from Example (4), the barbarous serial killing and fabrication are acclaimed as meritorious ‘perfect crimes’, in that they defer government officials and their families from conducting misdeeds. Additionally, there is no denying the fact that the son of a framed official is described to be abhorrent, whereas the vindictive revenge from the victims’ families on him is depicted to be well-deserved, which illuminates Chen’s mentality towards legitimacy/illegitimacy and morality/amorality dichotomies.

(3) 毕业于浙大数学系的徐策在本科期间就有“逻辑王子”的美誉,他关于数理逻辑的论文多次上过世界级刊物。其后拿到全额奖学金,赴美国加州大学获心理学博士,此后一直担任美国某投行的区域高管。徐策的单亲老妈在家乡的拆迁中被落石砸中,当场死亡。几名施工队员被判缓刑,现场指挥官员无一受惩。在其母一周年的忌日前,徐策突然离职回国。老家公安局副局长凌晨被人击杀街头,旁边留下一行大字“杀够局长一十五,局长不够科长补”,这个公然向公检法挑衅的大案顿时引发轩然大波,市局刑侦处长高栋带队侦办。高栋是徐策的高中同学兼大学校友,全省顶尖的犯罪心理学专家,他能阻止这场疯狂的盛宴吗?

When Xu Ce was studying at Zhejiang University for a BSc degree in Mathematics, he was granted an accolade of ‘Logic Prince’ and published several papers on mathematical logic in internationally recognised journals. Afterwards, he obtained a full scholarship for a PhD in Psychology to University of California and had been working as a senior manager at an investment bank in the US since graduation. During a housing demolition in his hometown, his widowed mother was hit by a falling stone and killed outright. A few manual workers were put on probation, but none of the government officials in charge was accused. Prior to the first anniversary of his mother’s death, Xu Ce returned to China abruptly. In his hometown, a deputy director of the public security bureau was shot on the street early in the morning, with a jingle besides his corpse: *To murder 15 bureau directors in a list, with section chiefs on the waiting list.* This ferocious anti-government terrorist caused an uproar, so Gao Dong, the head of the Municipal Department of Criminal Investigation, was appointed

to solve this case. Gao Dong went to the same school and same university with Xu Ce, and he was a top criminal psychologist within the whole province. Could Gao Dong stop this crazy feast?

(*Deduction of the Logic Prince*. Preface. Trans. Mine)

(4) 难怪徐策杀了三个副局长后, 直接出国了, 没有杀这位旧改办的主任。因为他对王修邦的仇恨更大, 他不愿直接让王修邦轻而易举就死了。他导演出这场戏, 目的是让王修邦被判死刑, 而且判死刑前, 还被人说成是老变态, 用工具强奸男人的阳痿老变态。王修邦的儿子, 这位官二代的少爷, 再也不能在学校横行了。他爸遭受了灭顶之罪, 而且把全县主要单位, 大小领导, 包括市里, 省里的领导全部得罪了。王修邦判死刑, 他们没办法, 受害者家属, 岂不会找他那个爱画画, 爱打架的儿子麻烦? 这龟儿子的一辈子, 也就此毁了...他这回知道了什么叫真正的完美犯罪。真正的完美犯罪, 不是让警察抓不到凶手, 而是警察明明知道了谁是凶手, 却偏偏不能抓他。他又转念一想: 如果每个县城都出现上百个徐策, 这个国度, 恐怕无官敢作恶了吧。他脸上再次浮现了微笑。

No wonder Xu Ce turned to the US upon murdering three deputy bureau directors, without killing the head of the City Planning Office: his hatred of Wang Xiubang was so passionate that he would not simply kill him. He plotted to frame Wang Xiubang, so that the latter became a death row prisoner, and worse still, an old pervert with ED who raped men with tools. Wang Xiubang's son, a snob born with a silver spoon in his mouth, could never stay as a big bully at school any more. His father faced a death penalty and had infuriated virtually all senior and junior government officials at various levels. For the victims' families, although they could not revenge on Wang Xiubang, they could easily do so on his troublemaker son. This little bastard's entire life would be ruined...Now Gao Dong understood what was a perfect crime. A perfect crime was not to hide the murderer, but to expose the murderer with apparent impunity. On second thoughts, if there were hundreds of Xu Ces in every city, there would not be any bad official in this country. Having this idea in mind, Gao Dong had a smile on his face.

(*Deduction of the Logic Prince*. Chapter 61. Trans. Mine)

In Zheng's writing, characters are marked by conspicuous sexual stereotypes, exemplified by the prominent protagonist in myriads of his fairy tales, who is a rebellious and valorous boy called 皮皮鲁 Pi Pilu, as well as a deuteragonist, i.e. Pi's twin sister, who is an acquiescent and timorous girl. For instance, Example (5) extracted from 皮皮鲁坐上了二踢脚 *Pi Pilu Zuoshangle Ertijiao* 'Pi Pilu Riding on a Firecracker' exhibits gender stereotyping, in that it is stated that the courageousness-uncourageousness dyad is inextricably intertwined with gender, and boys and girls are expected to demonstrate distinct collective attributes respectively. Moreover, it is implied in Example (5) that girls' timidity begets boys' mockery.

(5) 皮皮鲁今年十二岁。他刚生下来时, 就把医生吓了一跳! 医生用X光给小皮皮鲁透视, 发现他的胆特别大, 像个大馒头似的。后来医生仔细一看, 皮皮鲁是个男孩子, 他才不那么大惊小怪了。男孩子嘛, 胆总要比女孩子的大一些, 要不, 怎么叫男孩子呢! 皮皮鲁还有一个双胞胎的妹妹, 叫鲁西西, 她的胆子挺小, 小得都看不见。医生同皮皮鲁的爸爸和妈妈商量了一下, 把皮皮鲁的胆给了鲁西西一点。皮皮鲁和鲁西西一点都不知道, 要不然, 皮皮鲁更该笑话妹妹了。

Pi Pilu was twelve this year. When he was born, he scared the doctor, so the doctor X-rayed him and found out his guts were as big as giant bread. Then the doctor saw the newborn was a boy, so he became relaxed: of course, boys always had bigger guts than girls, and that was why they were boys! Pi Pilu had a twin sister called Lu Xixi, and her guts were too tiny to be seen. The doctor discussed with the parents and gave some of Pi Pilu's guts to Lu Xixi. Neither of them was aware of it, otherwise Pi Pilu would laugh at his sister even more.

(*Pi Pilu Riding on a Firecracker*. Trans. Mine)

Furthermore, there are biased stances on women in Zheng's fairy tales. For instance, in Example (6) extracted from *Adventure of Shuke and Beita*, the author casts aspersions on women by substantially expatiating upon women's covetousness towards foreign countries' affluence and avarice about moneyed life, and women are anathematised for harnessing outstanding appearance in exchange for an opulent lifestyle, driven by cupidity for opulence; additionally, in Example (6), women are portrayed as trophies men compete for, whose value is based on physical attraction. The animadversion towards women is conveyed through two mice characters in the narrative, whose species is adulated for being morally superior due to female members' absence of avarice. It is also notable that Pi Pilu's kiss with a British woman is described as 'winning glory for Chinese men', which entails pejorative connotations.

(6) 这是皮皮鲁有生以来第一次和异性接吻, 而且起点挺高, 初吻即是跨国性的... “皮皮鲁也给中国男人争了口气。” 贝塔目不转睛地盯着屏幕说。“这话怎么讲?” 舒克不明白。“这世界上各个地方的男女比例都是上帝给搭配好了的, 比如在一个国家里, 有多少男人, 就有多少女人, 差不到哪去。可是有的国家先富了, 那些富了的国家的男人不光占着自己国家的女人, 还覬觐上了穷国的女人。于是, 穷国的男人就惨了, 本来属于自己的女人被富国的男人抢走了。” 贝塔发表高见。“这些穷国的女人也是, 就为了那几个臭钱就卖身投靠。” 舒克历来瞧不上这种女性...“不管怎么说, 那些富国男人从穷国男人那里抢走了不少本来属于穷国男人的穷国女人。穷国男人也真够可怜的, 本来就穷得只剩下女人了, 还被人家盯上了。你看看, 那些富国驻穷国大使馆门前排队等着签证的穷国女子一个比一个漂亮。剩下的模样可就不敢恭维了, 还没有咱们老鼠家族中漂亮的女性多呢。” 贝塔特为穷国男人打抱不平...“其实人类中的男性不如咱们老鼠中的男性享福, 钱能左右人的一切, 咱们老鼠却不受钱的摆布, 世间万种动物, 男性和男性之间无时无刻不在竞争女性, 人类的男性之间的这种竞争很大程度上取决于钱。而咱们动物的男性之间都是公平竞争。咱们的女性绝不会因为哪个男性有钱而跟他走。” 贝塔头一次为自己的种族感到自豪。

This was the first time Pi Pilu kissed a woman, while his first kiss was an impressive, transnational one... 'Pi Pilu has won glory for Chinese men.' Beita said, staring at them on the CCTV screen. 'How come?' Shuke was confused. 'In every corner of the world, the proportion women to men has been determined by God, so in each country, the numbers of men and women are pretty much the same. But some countries become rich, so men in the rich countries not only take women in their own countries, but also those in poor countries. So the poor men in poor countries become poorer, because their women have been grasped by men in rich countries.' Beita expressed his insightful opinions. 'Those women from poor countries sell their bodies for money.' Shuke had always despised those types of women... 'Anyway, men from rich countries have stolen many women from poor countries, who should have been owned by men in poor countries. Poor men! All they have are just women, but now even their women have been taken. Look at those beautiful women queuing outside the rich embassies in poor countries. But those left in poor countries are so ugly that even our species has more beauties.' Beita took up the cudgels for men in poor countries... 'Actually, male mice are luckier than men, because money can totally control all humans, but not mice. For all species, males are fighting for females constantly. For the human race, this competition largely depends on money, but it's absolutely fair between animals. Female mice will never go for rich males.' For the first time, Beita felt proud of his species.

(*Adventure of Shuke and Beita*. Chapter 185. Trans. Mine)

It is worth mentioning that in the field of children's literature, Zheng is not the only writer who demonstrates sexist imputations. For instance, 曹文轩Cao Wenxuan (1954-), the first Chinese laureate of the Hans Christian Andersen award for children's literature, viz. 'the Little Nobel Prize for Literature' (BBC News 2016, Chen 2016), is censured for depicting conspicuously enfeebled, innocent and complaisant female characters who comply with traditional credos and altruistic precepts, which annihilates

women's gender awareness while consolidates patriarchal dominion (Huang 2017); Cao's refutation, however, is that applying the feminist theoretical framework to children's literature in an over-simplistic manner is not only unjustifiable, but also unnecessary (Wang 2020).

Analogously, Chen's detective fiction manifests his preconception about traits women are supposed to possess. For instance, the previously mentioned *The Long Night* abounds with sexual stereotypes, exemplified by women's irrationality. In Example (7), a male character is described to be feminine under his cryptic mindset and seemingly arbitrary comportment. In Example (8), through depicting an individual female character, the author ascribes an observation to the entire social group of women, and summarises that women are competent at deploying tears to either give vent to feelings or conceal their mistakes and dominate their male partners via psychological and emotional coercion. The quasi-advice comment targeting male readers in Example (8) is not only irrelevant to the plot, but also void of veneration for women.

(7) “找严良? 可我不知道他会不会管。”赵铁民有些吃惊, 严良过去是省厅的刑侦专家, 后来因一次严重违纪事件离开了警察队伍, 到了浙大当数学系教授, 基本不过问警方的事。这几年下来, 赵铁民找过他几次帮忙研究案子, 有些案子他参与了, 有些案子他拒绝了, 似乎全凭他心情, 跟个女人一样, 赵铁民拿捏不准他会参与破案的标准是什么。

‘Asking Yan Liang for help? But I’m not sure whether he’ll help.’ Zhao Tiemin was surprised to hear the advice. Yan Liang used to be an expert at criminal investigation at the provincial department of public security, but due to a serious disciplinary incident, he left the police and had been focusing on his professorship in mathematics at Zhejiang University. In the past a few years, Zhao Tiemin occasionally asked him to help investigating criminal cases, but he did not always agree to participate. He was as idiosyncratic and emotional as a woman, so Zhao Tiemin was puzzled about his screening criteria.

(*The Long Night*. Chapter 6. Trans. Mine)

(8) 丁春妹无言以对, 过了一会儿, 她双手捂起脸, 用出女人最原始但最经典的一招, 大哭起来。女性天生擅长哭, 尤其在与异性吵架的过程中。哭大体有两种, 一种是情绪性发泄, 真受了委屈, 表达内心痛苦, 老娘命比纸薄, 怎么遇到你这样的臭男人; 一种是技术性防御, 比如男女朋友吵架, 女方明明理亏, 但只要开始哭, 最后都会发展成男方理亏, 主动道歉而告终。许多男性朋友对此总是束手无策, 其实办法很简单, 你可以心里骂娘, 但只要表面上道个歉, 最后开一堆空头支票, 对方准能破涕为笑。

Ding Chunmei was speechless. After a while, she covered her face with both hands and started to use women's most primitive yet most classic tool—crying. Women were natural cry-babies, especially during quarrels with men. There were roughly two types of tears. One was tears of emotions, shed when women were really in agony: ‘Why the hell am I reduced to a complete shit like you!’ The other was a technical defense. For example, when a woman was quarrelling with her boyfriend, even if she was wrong, as soon as she began to cry, the man would become the wrong one and had to apologise in the end. A lot of men did not know how to deal with it, but actually the solution was dead easy: feel free to curse in your mind, but as long as you just apologise and promise her the moon, you can always shut her up.

(*The Long Night*. Chapter 30. Trans. Mine)

It is noteworthy that female characters are not depicted to be multi-faceted in other male-authored detective novels, represented by 死亡通知单 *Siwang Tongzhidan* ‘Death Notification’ by 周浩晖 Zhou Haohui, as in Example (9).

(9) “很庆幸，你是这个硬币的正面。”慕剑云看着罗飞，“如果你选择去当罪犯，那将是多么可怕的事情。”“可怕吗？”罗飞忽然摇了摇头，“至少有一件事情是更加可怕的。”慕剑云好奇地挑起眉头：“什么？”“学心理学的女人。”罗飞模仿曾日华的语气说道，笑容在他的嘴角两侧勒出一对深沟。慕剑云一怔，羞恼地皱起眉头：“怎么你也会耍贫嘴，男人真是没一个好东西。”

‘We’re lucky that you’re the heads of the coin.’ Mu Jianyu looked at Luo Fei, ‘If you decided to be a criminal, how scary that would be!’ ‘Is it?’ Luo Fei shook his head, ‘There’s at least one thing that is scarier.’ Mu Jianyun went curious: ‘What’s that?’ ‘Women studying psychology.’ Luo Fei said in Zeng Rihua’s tone, with a broad smile on his face. Mu Jianyun was stunned for a second and pouted petulantly: ‘How come you’re so glib too? All men are trash.’

(*Death Notification*. Chapter 4. Trans. Mine)

DISCUSSION

Notwithstanding a plaudit as the ‘King of Fairy Tales’, Zheng’s works are not only comprised of short stories targeting a juvenile readership, but also a veritable cornucopia of avant-garde novels dubbed as ‘fairy tales for adults’ (成人童话 *chengren tonghua*) (Wang 2007, 2009, Zhang 2013, Li and Li 2015). On the threshold of the 21st century, Zheng composed twenty full-length novels marked by reality-oriented themes and detail-enriched embroidery, thereby accommodating his loyal fanbase who had reached maturation (Liu 2003, Wang 2007, 2009). Nonetheless, since 2003, his ‘fairy tales for adults’ have been excoriated by a popular science writer 方舟子 Fang Zhouzi for being ‘very obscene and very violent’ (Cai 2010, Chen 2010, Feng 2010, Zhou 2010, Wang and Zhang 2011) as well as ‘anti-scientific and anti-educational’ (Beijing Youth Daily 2010, Jiangnan Times 2010, Legal Evening News 2010). Although Zheng has reiterated that the rationale behind his perpetual creation is to foster readers’ curiosity and imagination (Huang and Liu 2007, Zhai 2010, Zhang 2014, Shi 2018), as anathematised by Fang, Zheng’s motives lie in sales volume and emotional venting (Zhou 2010, Wang and Zhang 2011).

I propound that the writing of Zheng and Chen can be regarded as a subgenre of Internet literature, namely 爽文 *shuangwen* ‘feel-good writing’ that equips readers with reverie established on their prowess to enhance the status quo as well as a temporary escapist mindset from stringent social norms (Zhang 2017, Liu et al 2018). To be more specific, feel-good writing entails a clichéd device dubbed as 金手指 *jin shouzhǐ* ‘golden finger’ (Feng 2013: 39): this literary conception originated in the field of online gaming, and is deployed to denote an irrational authorial design that enables protagonists to possess extraordinary demeanor, supreme intelligence, unremitting auspiciousness, invincible artistry, etc (Zhou 2019). For instance, in a male-authored and male-oriented subgenre of online literature dubbed as 种马文 *zhongma wen* ‘stud fiction’, the ‘golden finger’ generates clichéd plots such as male protagonists’ stud-like virility and attainment of legions of enchantresses (Feng 2013: 10, 38). As a consequence of its surrealistic attribute, fiction entailing the ‘golden finger’ is derogatorily referred to by a neologism YY 小说 *YY xiaoshuo* ‘YY fiction’, in which YY indicates 意淫 *yiyin* ‘lust of the mind’, viz. explicit exploration of mental libidinous ecstasy (Chao 2012: 225, Hockx 2015: 112).

Although the writing of Zheng and Chen does not exhibit lascivious imputation, their depictions of excruciating extrajudicial retribution for corruption are intent on reading pleasure and thus fall into the category of ‘feel-good writing’ in essence. Albeit not necessarily being in a supernatural or paranormal fashion, their writing alludes to

karmic clairvoyance that abhorrent misdeeds regarding corruption beget aberrant, egregious punishments prescribed by retributive justice.

The above paradigms indicate that anti-corruption serves as the theme of some works composed by Zheng and Chen, and these works are deployed as means for the writers to give vent to their grievance against corruption in contemporary China and potentially to accommodate some of their readerships. As can be seen from Examples (1) and (4), Zheng and Chen manifest the similar mindset towards law, justice and retribution, which might have rendered their works ‘feel-good writing’ to some extent. Moreover, barbarous punishment for corruption is depicted explicitly in Example (2), which appears to be irrelevant and unnecessary for the fairy tale.

As for extracts pertaining to female characters, the writers are not necessarily sexist, yet the descriptions are indeed void of unbiased stances on women. The reason may lie in male writers’ lack of understanding of the opposite gender, rather than discrimination.

CONCLUSION

In Zheng’s avant-garde fiction dubbed as ‘fairy tales for adults’, there is conspicuous castigation of corruption, encapsulated by well-deserved nemeses prescribed by karmic justice. Nevertheless, in some narratives, supernatural or paranormal extrajudicial retribution imposed on governmental officials is elaborated in a repugnant manner and in graphic detail, which is not indispensable to storylines. Analogously, Chen’s series entitled ‘To Murder Government Officials’ demonstrates his mindset regarding legitimacy/illegitimacy and morality/amorality dichotomies. In this sense, some works of Zheng and Chen can be regarded as ‘feel-good writing’ that entails the clichéd ‘golden finger’ and strives to enhance reading pleasure. There is no denying the fact that accommodating readers and expressing themselves are preponderant for writers, yet they are also expected to be punctilious in terms of creating details and conveying values.

In terms of attitudes towards women, both Zheng and Chen are disposed to express sexual stereotypes. To be more specific, in some of Zheng’s narratives, girls are expected to possess timidity, while women are chastised for cupidity. In some of Chen’s detective novels, women are surmised to be irrational in decision-making and emotion control and to harness tears as a weapon, yet the animadversion does not contribute to plot lines. Such lack of feminist consciousness can also be attested in other male-authored fairy tales and detective stories. Nevertheless, sexual stereotypes in male-authored works are not necessarily ascribed to discrimination, and a more profound understanding of women may inspire male writers to create more multi-faceted, complex female characters.

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