



## **Attitudes Towards Homosexuality and Women in Male- Authored Detective Fiction in Chinese: An analysis of Zijin Chen's *Murder Series***

### **Sikap-Sikap terhadap Homoseksualitas dan Perempuan dalam Karya Fiksi Detektif yang Dikarang Laki-Laki dalam Bahasa Mandarin: Analisis Serial Pembunuhan Zijin Chen**

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#### **Abstract**

Zijin Chen, 'the Chinese Keigo Higashino', is celebrated for reality-oriented detective fiction addressing social issues. As a prolific writer, Chen has composed a list of best-selling, thought-provoking novels, three of which have been adapted into phenomenal online serials. Notwithstanding successful screen adaptation, his chef-d'oeuvre *The Long Night*, along with a series entitled *To Murder Government Officials*, manifest the author's conspicuous stances pertaining to homosexuality and women. To be more specific, fictional characters in his narratives are prone to regard gay men and homosexual relationships with disdain, and exhibit the male gaze and gender stereotypes towards women. In this research, I scrutinise the four novels in the series entitled *To Murder Government Officials*, drawing on analyses of the work *The Long Night*. I propound that although the author's mentality is not necessarily triggered by homophobia or misogyny, his writing might have been impinged upon by outdated policies and social stigma and hence is featured by lack of feminist awareness.

**Keywords:** *fiction, attitude, discourse analysis*

#### **Abstrak**

Zijin Chen, 'the Chinese Keigo Higashino', dirayakan untuk fiksi detektif berorientasi realitas yang menangani masalah sosial. Sebagai seorang penulis yang produktif, Chen telah menyusun daftar novel terlaris dan menggugah pikiran, tiga di antaranya telah diadaptasi menjadi serial online yang fenomenal. Terlepas dari adaptasi layar yang sukses, chef-d'oeuvre *The Long Night* miliknya, bersama dengan serial berjudul *To Murder Government Officials*, mewujudkan sikap mencolok penulis yang berkaitan dengan homoseksualitas dan wanita. Untuk lebih spesifik, karakter fiksi dalam narasinya cenderung menganggap pria gay dan hubungan homoseksual dengan jijik, dan menunjukkan pandangan pria dan stereotip gender terhadap wanita. Dalam penelitian ini, saya mencermati keempat novel dalam seri yang berjudul *To Murder*

Government Officials, mengambil analisis dari karya *The Long Night*. Saya mengemukakan bahwa meskipun mentalitas penulis tidak selalu dipicu oleh homofobia atau misogini, tulisannya mungkin dipengaruhi oleh kebijakan yang sudah ketinggalan zaman dan stigma sosial dan karenanya ditampilkan oleh kurangnya kesadaran feminis.

**Kata kunci:** *fiksi, sikap, wacana kritis*

## INTRODUCTION

Detective fiction, as one of the most fully fledged literary genres in contemporary Japan (Nakanishi 2014), entails three preponderant subcategories: 1) the reality-oriented Shakai Ha ‘Social School’ (社会派 *Shehui Pai*) that profoundly expounds characters’ psychological motives and elaborates societal issues (Seaman 2004a); 2) the classic Honkaku Ha ‘Orthodox School’ (本格派 *Benge Pai*) highlighting spine-tingling puzzles and plot twists; and 3) the Shin Honkaku Ha ‘New Orthodox School’ (新本格派 *Xin Benge Pai*) evolved from the ‘Orthodox School’ (Seaman 2004b: 9, Saito 2007). A celebrated figure of Japanese crime and mystery writing is Keigo Higashino, whose chefs-d’oeuvre are represented by *The Devotion of Suspect X*, *Under the Midnight Sun*, *Malice*, *A Midsummer’s Equation*, etc (Stasio 2011, Kidd 2015, Forshaw 2016, Schreiber 2016). Keigo Higashino also deploys humour and parody in his crime writing, exemplified by a 1996 compilation entitled *The Rules of Master Detection* (Silver and Herbert 2005).

In contemporary China, there is an illustrious detective writer who is extolled as ‘the Chinese Keigo Higashino’ (中国版东野圭吾 *zhongguoban Dongye Guiwu*), viz. 紫金陈 Zijin Chen, the pseudonym of 陈徐 Chen Xu (1986- ). Palpably impinged upon and inspired by Keigo Higashino, Chen’s writing bears similitude to the former’s creation in terms of style, and it is characterised by traits of both the Orthodox School and the Social School (Pan 2017, The Paper 2020). The meticulously-designed plots and logic-enriched deduction of Chen’s fiction are ascribed to his educational background in science from a top university ranked among China’s C9 League (Allen 2017, Qiu 2018). Such educational background is also presumed to nurture his plain, succinct language in writing (Pan 2017, The Paper 2020). Since embarking upon his composition career in mid-2000s, Chen has attempted at an array of themes, exemplified by his early narratives appertaining to stock exchange and investment, i.e. 少年股神 *Shaonian Gushen* ‘Prodigy in the Stock Market’ (Hu 2007) and 资本对决 *Ziben Duijue* ‘Capital War’, as well as a 2020 humorous book entitled 低智商犯罪 *Dizhishang Fanzui* ‘Low-IQ Crime’ (Trans. Mine) (Zhang 2020).

As a prolific writer, Chen has published a list of best-selling novels, and three of his chefs-d’oeuvre have been adapted into phenomenal online serials. 无证之罪 *Wuzheng Zhizu* ‘Burning Ice’ (2017), which is based on a critically acclaimed novel released in 2013, is adulated as one of the most commendable online serials in China and an ‘epochal masterpiece’ concerning karmic destiny and human nature (Kong 2017, Pan 2017, Strait Metropolitan Post 2017). The award-winning 隐秘的角落 *Yinmide Jiaoluo* ‘The Bad Kids’ (2020) is adapted from a novel entitled 坏小孩 *Huai Xiaohai* ‘The Gone Child’, which is overwhelmingly surmised to allude to the author’s dolorous childhood rife with self-abasement (Shangguan 2020, Xu 2020, Zhou and Du 2020). As for the thought-provoking and melancholic 沉默的真相 *Chenmode Zhenxiang* ‘The Long Night’ (2020), it is based on a 2017 novel 长夜难明 *Changye*

*Nanming* ‘The Long Night’ that captures quotidian people’s adamant will to expose paedophilic crime (China Youth Daily 2020, Zhang 2020).

Apart from these chefs-d’oeuvre marked by attributes of the Social School, between 2013 and 2017, Chen has also published a series of revenge-themed thrillers entitled 高智商犯罪 *Gaozhishang Fanzui* ‘High-IQ Crime’, which are labelled as works of the Orthodox School. This series was originally named 谋杀官员 *Mousha Guanyuan* ‘To Murder Government Officials’ (henceforward *Murder*) when first released in the cyberspace in 2012. The *Murder* series is constituted of four novels: 1) 逻辑王子的演绎 *Luoji Wangzide Yanyi* ‘Deduction of the Logic Prince’; 2) 化工女王的逆袭 *Huagong Niwangde Nixi* ‘Counterattack of the Chemistry Queen’; 3) 物理教师的时空诡计 *Wuli Jiaoshide Shikong Guiji* ‘Temporal-Spatial Tricks of a Physics Teacher’; and 4) 代上帝之手 *Dai Shangdi Zhihou* ‘Hand on Behalf of God’ (Trans. Mine).

In stark contrast to the three novels with successful screen adaption and thus enormous visibility, the four narratives of the *Murder* series (henceforward *Murder* I-IV) have not attained deserved critical attention. Therefore, in this article, I investigate *Murder* I-IV, placing an emphasis on the author’s construals regarding homosexuality and women. Additionally, I draw on examples from the work *The Long Night* (henceforward *Night*), in that this novel also entails plots and descriptions illuminating the author’s stances.

## RESEARCH METHOD

In this research, I explore male-authored detective fiction in contemporary China, scrutinising Chen’s *Murder* series that comprises of four works. I also draw on Chen’s chef-d’oeuvre *Night* for qualitative data.

When conducting textual analysis, I deploy the method of hermeneutic content analysis, by means of explicating and interpreting depictions extracted from *Murder* I-IV and *Night*, so as to unravel the author’s rationale and mindset. In order to attain a fully comprehensive understanding of the texts, I observe hermeneutic rules, including punctilious reading, sentence-by-sentence interpretation, holistic study, general reflections, repeated analyses, consultation with secondary literature, etc (Byrne 2001, Bergman 2010, Vieira and de Queiroz 2017).

Twelve representative examples are extracted from the texts for qualitative analysis. Apart from original expressions in Chinese, I have included English rendering translated by myself.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Murder* I, II and IV manifest a negative mentality towards homosexuality, in that homosexual orientation is correlated with besmirched reputation in the narratives (Examples (1-3)).

As indicated by Example (1) extracted from *Murder* I, a serial killer, who is adulated as an intelligent ‘logic prince’, commits multiple murders and escapes unscathed. Nonetheless, as implied in Example (1), the most deleterious vengeance this serial killer exacts is to fabricate homosexual evidence against a heterosexual man, rather than three victims’ decease.

(1) 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。

No wonder Xu Ce went abroad straight away upon killing three deputy directors, but left the Head of the City Planning Office alive. His hatred of Wang Xiubang was so intense that he did not want to let him die so easily. The reason why he framed Wang Xiubang as a serial killer was to make him a death criminal, and worse still, an old pervert notorious for raping men with tools because of his ED.

(*Murder I*. Chapter 61. Trans. Mine)

Analogously, Example (2) extracted from *Murder II* demonstrates that fabricating evidence regarding homosexual anal intercourse against oneself is attributed to deliberate defamation. As can be inferred from this example, the murderer self-claims to be gay, which is depicted as ‘abnormal’ and ‘ruining his own reputation’ in an astonishing manner. In stark contrast to this act, the murderer’s heterosexual devotion to a woman is implied to be meritorious (Example (2)).

(2) 通过随后的尸检, 警方会发现陈进的肛门括约肌松弛, 这也是他在前几个星期弄出来的。所以看守所的人会告诉徐增, 前段时间陈进上厕所时在呻吟, 以为是癌症发病, 事实上根本不是, 而是他用很痛苦的方式, 让自己的肛门扩张, 从而再次制造出自己是同性恋的铁证...徐增很清楚, 陈进从来都不是同性恋, 他十多年来一如既往深爱着甘佳宁, 怎么可能是同性恋。也正因他爱着甘佳宁, 所以这么多年来一直没有谈恋爱。他竟不惜毁坏了自己的声誉, 给自己贴上了异样的标签, 来营造出另一个同伙, 完成甘佳宁的心愿!

In a following autopsy, the police would discover that Chen Jin’s anal sphincter was damaged, which was caused by himself in the previous weeks. The warders would report to Xu Zeng that they indeed heard Chen Jin moaning in the toilet, but they thought it was due to his cancer pain. Actually, he had been using an agonising method for anal dilation, in order to trump up evidence of his homosexual identity...Xu Zeng was fully aware of Chen Jin’s heterosexual orientation: he had been adoring Gan Jianing for over ten years, so how could he possibly be gay? And because of the deep affection for Gan Jianing, he had never been in any relationship. It was astonishing that in order to realise Gan Jianing’s wish and create a fictional accomplice, he would ruin his own reputation and claim to be abnormal!

(*Murder II*. Chapter 90. Trans. Mine)

As for Example (3) extracted from *Murder IV*, it manifests that even for a victim, exposed homosexual identification is in line with ‘damaged reputation’. Moreover, this example alludes to a construal that homosexual identity begets public denigration.

(3) 原来的真相多好, 对所有人都好。对被害人来说, 王红民的声誉保住了, 永远不会有人知道他是同性恋, 更不会知道, 汪海全是他杀害的。

The previous truth was much better and it was good for everybody. As a victim, Wang Hongmin’s reputation would not be damaged: no one would ever know he was gay, or the fact that he killed Wang Haiquan.

(*Murder IV*. Chapter 72. Trans. Mine)

I propound that Chen’s mentality regarding homosexuality is impinged upon by previous official policies. In pre-modern China, there was comprehensive

embracement of male-male same-sex emotional and erotic relationships during the vast majority of historical periods (Lau and Ng 1989, Hinsch 1990, van Gulik 2002, Song 2004). Nonetheless, there has been sexual conservatism since the Qing (1644-1912) era, especially the reign of the Chinese Communist Party, according to which homosexuality is construed to be interconnected to interpersonal and moral issues—this construct is by virtue of homosexuality’s defiance against Confucian patriarchal creeds and (post)socialist ideology (Sang 2003: 46, Wang 2019). In the Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China in 1979, homosexuality was tagged with ‘crime of hooliganism’ (Gao 1995). As a consequence, gay men used to be chastised and imprisoned (Chou 2001, Li 2006, Jones 2007, Kong 2016), and they were repressed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and even the Reform and Opening-up (1978-1985) period (Worth et al 2017, 2019). Therefore, I postulate that born in the 1980s, Chen was ineluctably brainwashed by the discriminatory policies at puberty. In the 1980s and 1990s, especially during nationwide ‘Strike Hard’ anti-crime campaigns, homosexuality was a taboo subject in mainland China (Sigley and Jeffreys 1999), and non-heterosexual people were sullied as hooligans and/or mental patients (Kong 2016) and fell prey to a negative connotation of HIV infection (Ning and Guo 2022). In China, the modern gay emancipation movement started to emerge from the 1990s (Cao and Lu 2014), whereas Chen’s mentality has already been formed in an intolerant society replete with heteronormative values.

Moreover, Chen’s occupation as a writer determines that he needs to stay punctilious in his publications. In the contemporary Chinese society, homosexuality-themed discourse and media representation are under nation-wide surveillance imposed on by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Zhao et al 2017). For instance, in 2016, a phenomenal gay-themed online serial *上瘾* *Shangyin* ‘Addicted’ was removed from all streaming websites by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, by virtue of its ‘vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content’ that exhibits ‘abnormal sexual relationships and behaviours’ (Campbell 2016, Ellis-Petersen 2016, Yang and Tang 2018). In the literary field, a genre dubbed *耽美* *danmei* ‘indulgence in beauty’ concerning male-male same-sex romance and homoeroticism is subjected to strict expurgation, legal regulation, moral scrutiny and state censorship (see Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Zhao et al 2017, Wang 2019, Tian 2020, among many others). That is to say, as a writer himself, Chen might have intended to circumvent homosexual discourse, but his attempts appear to be beyond a reasonable limit.

Furthermore, in the *Murder* series, homosexual bonds are depicted to be anathema to the public. In Example (4), none of the protagonists or supporting characters in the entire courtroom comprehends homosexual love or sacrifice, and all characters overwhelmingly regard it with repugnance and disdain.

(4) 所有人都忍不住产生一种呕吐感, 同性间义无反顾的爱, 为了这份畸形的爱而选择杀人, 这种思想、这种情感该有多么变态!... 又是一阵恶心的反胃, 异性间的爱为对方牺牲, 世人都能理解。可现在是同性间畸形的爱, 为了这种爱而去牺牲自己, 成全另一人, 这实在难以接受。

Everybody could not help feeling sick about the selfless and reckless same-sex love. To commit murder because of this queer love—how perverted the thought and the emotion were!... There was another burst of repugnance. Love between opposite genders and sacrifice for each other were appreciated by every single person in the

world. But it was abnormal queer love between men, which led to sacrifice of oneself for the sake of his same-sex partner. This was utterly unacceptable.

(*Murder II*. Chapter 89. Trans. Mine)

I postulate that Chen's attitude towards male-male homosexuality is consistent with that of some quotidian people impinged upon by social policies. The *Murder* series was composed and released in the 2010s. There is no denying the fact that in those years, non-heterosexual people were still not treated with equity and inclusiveness. In the contemporary Chinese society, ordinary people are prone to perceive homosexuality as deviation from social norms (Kang 2012): according to statistics collected by the 2013 Chinese General Social Surveys, approximately 78.53% of the respondents deem same-sex sexual intercourse wrong (Xie and Peng 2018). Heterosexual men in China expand heteromale conduct and reiterate heteromale identities, so as to circumvent apprehension about surging visibility and public awareness of homosexuality (Wei 2017). Even in the late 2010s, there was still open hostility towards homosexuality. For instance, in 2017, a cohort of Chinese parents censured sex education books for 'preaching that homosexuality is normal, and that people should respect different sexual orientations' (Whitelocks 2017). Therefore, the conception conveyed in Chen's writing might accord with the prejudice of part of his readership, so he has not received (a sufficient amount of) feedback on his misconception.

Moreover, characters in the *Murder* series are portrayed to lack understanding of homosexuality. According to a male character's surmise in Example (5), one's homosexual orientation can be triggered by an extrinsic force of erectile dysfunction. There is no denying the fact that in a previous episode, the character suffering from erectile dysfunction has been portrayed to be an abhorrent government official. Nevertheless, the pejorative overtones conveyed in Example (5) fail to manifest an unbiased attitude towards LGBTQ communities.

(5) 不久, 又一人跑出, 报告高栋: “老大, 这里有王修邦的病例, 他去上海看过病, 确实是阳痿, 上面写着早年受过机械性损害, 年纪大后, 影响更甚, 性功能很难恢复。难怪他对男人有意思呢。哈哈, 这里还有一大堆药, 都是壮阳的。”

Soon afterwards, another policeman ran out and reported to Gao Dong: 'Boss, here's Wang Xiubang's medical record. It says he's been to Shanghai to treat ED. He was injured years ago, and it's going worse as he grows old. It's hard to get his sexual function back again. No wonder he's interested in men. Ha ha! Look at these medicines! They're all for his ED.'

(*Murder I*. Chapter 61. Trans. Mine)

Similarly, as can be seen from the statement of a male heterosexual character in Example (6), apart from animus towards a male-male same-sex relationship, there is a stereotypical conjecture pertaining to gay men's sex roles and aesthetic preference. As indicated in Example (6), a short man would assume a submissive, passive role in same-sex sexual intercourse, and he would be liked by a top for his handsome appearance. The heterosexual character in Example (6) also teasingly compares a man to a military comfort woman, because he surmises that the man receives penetration in sexual encounters, analogous to women. This line in the narrative implies lack of veneration for both gay men and female victims of Japanese Imperial Army troops during World War II.

(6) 李卫平把这口烟抽完, 又要了一根, 高栋帮他点上, 他继续道: “至于林小峰呢, 我不清楚他到底是不是同性恋, 反正他个子小, 长相英俊, 大概正符合王红民这家伙的审美眼光吧, 在我看来, 林小峰不就是个慰安妇嘛, 哈哈。”他哈哈大笑起来, 目光中带着胜利者的得意和对王红民的鄙夷。

Li Weiping finished a cigarette and asked for another. Gao Dong lighted the cigarette for him, and he continued: ‘As for Lin Xiaofeng, I’m not sure whether he was gay or not. Anyway, he was short and good-looking, so he must be Wang Hongmin’s cup of tea. To me, Lin Xiaofeng was just a comfort woman. Ha ha.’ He burst into laughter, showing victorious pride and disdain towards Wang Hongmin on his face.

(*Murder IV*. Chapter 71. Trans. Mine)

I posit that plots concerning homosexuality and same-sex bonds are not necessarily attributed to the author’s homophobia, but his lack of comprehension. Despite an enhanced stance on homosexuality and a greater extent of representation, there are still prevalent misconceptions in the contemporary society (Wee 2020, Williams 2020). For instance, a diagnosis of homosexuality per se was officially expurgated from Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders in 2011, whereas a diagnosis resembling ego-dystonic homosexuality was still retained (Wu 2003, Xiong 2010, Kang 2012); in 2016, the Ministry of Education was sued by a lesbian woman for releasing textbooks that defined homosexuality as ‘a psychological disorder’ (Independent 2016, Iyengar 2016). Therefore, fictional characters’ utterances pertaining to homosexuality in the *Murder* series may be ascribed to the author’s distorted impression.

Notwithstanding misconstruals regarding homosexuality, I profound that an allusion to ‘marriage fraud’ in Example (7) indeed reflects the status quo in China. The contemporary Chinese society is featured by flourishing LGBT rights movements (Micollier 2005, Schroeder 2015, Zheng 2015), which is embodied by a surge in advocacy of same-sex marriage (Jiang 2013). Nevertheless, LGBT groups still consistently experience severe self-perceived discrimination from family and social services (Wang et al 2020). As a consequence, only up to 15% of LGBT people in China unravel their sexual orientation to families (Williams 2020). To demonstrate silent resistance (Kam 2012: 99-103) and/or to circumvent the intensive societal and familial pressure, a proportion of closeted gay men establish pretended heterosexual matrimonial relationships (Bennett 2014), either with lesbian women in a form of contract/cooperative marriages (Engebretsen 2014: 104-106, Ren et al 2019), or worse still, with unknowing straight women via ‘marriage fraud’ (Zhu 2018). Example (7) epitomises an immoral case of ‘marriage fraud’ that a gay man marries an unwitting straight woman, in order to conceal his homosexual orientation from the public. This plot encapsulates ‘marriage fraud’, yet the author fails to present it as a social problem, or mention its cause, viz. sexual orientation discrimination.

(7) “王红民是个实实在在的同性恋, 他条件那么优秀, 别人家介绍给他的女朋友数不胜数, 他从没和任何一个发展关系, 多年未婚。大概是为了打消旁人的猜忌, 他在三十七岁的时候, 经人介绍认识骆慧慧, 很快跟她结了婚, 但婚后几乎没有性生活。”高栋顿时明白了, 原来徐策判断完全是正确的, 骆慧慧岂止性生活不和谐, 简直没有性生活, 所以她的中指指甲剪短, 是用来自慰。

‘Wang Hongmin was a pure gay. He was so outstanding that many women were interested in him, but he never had any girlfriend. I guess it was to get rid of rumours,

at the age of thirty-seven, he married Luo Huihui soon after meeting her. But they almost never had sex.’ Gao Dong was enlightened immediately, and it turned out Xu Ce’s previous judgement was absolutely right. Luo Huihui’s sexual life was not just unsatisfactory, but virtually absent. That was why she only cut the nail of her middle finger short—it was for masturbation.

(*Murder IV*. Chapter 71. Trans. Mine)

Nonetheless, in addition to castigation of ‘marriage fraud’, Example (7) also manifests a sexist implication. In Examples (7-8) extracted from *Murder IV*, two men’s deduction is that a woman’s short middle fingernail is correlated with masturbation and thus potential murder of her husband.

(8) 不过此时他回想起徐策说的一点，当一个女人其他手指都蓄了指甲并且爱护妥当，唯独中指指甲剪短了，结论是夫妻性生活不和谐。当时他只当是玩笑，如今，或许这是事实。骆慧慧和王红民的关系，并不像周围人看上去的那般美好。要不然，她也绝对不会想着杀死自己的丈夫。

He recalled Xu Ce’s deduction that if a woman’s all other nails were long and well protected except for the middle finger, her sexual life could not be enjoyable. He thought it was a joke, but now it seemed to be true. The relationship between Luo Huihui and Wang Hongmin was not as good as it appeared, otherwise she would not plan to kill her husband.

(*Murder IV*. Chapter 69. Trans. Mine)

Apart from heroines, female supporting characters in Chen’s fiction are sometimes portrayed with an element of sexual innuendo, yet such depictions do not necessarily contribute to storylines. For instance, in Example (9) extracted from *Night*, a male police officer talks about a suspect’s wife in a sexist manner and the protagonist also casts the male gaze at that female character. Such descriptions, however, are not indispensable to the narrative: as a minor character, this woman’s demeanour is not correlated with plot development in the following context.

(9) “我需要找她谈一谈。”赵铁民揶揄坏笑：“没问题，我已经约了她明天来单位，到时，这位丈夫入狱、独守空闺的美少妇的时间，就全部交给严老师了。”李静缓缓推开门，挪动优雅的身躯，走入办公室。她看到严良，微笑着点头打了声招呼，款款落座。严良简单地自我介绍完毕，不敢与她对视过久，他觉得大多数男人与她相处，都会忍不住被她那种熟得恰到好处的魅力所吸引。

‘I need to talk to her.’ Zhao Tiemin giggled teasingly: ‘Of course you can. I’ve asked her to come to the police station tomorrow. This lonely, beautiful young woman whose husband’s in jail—her time will be all yours.’ Li Jing opened the door and walked elegantly into the room. She smiled and nodded her head in greeting to Yan Liang and took a seat in a charming way. Yan Liang made a brief self-introduction, carefully avoiding looking into her eyes for too long. He felt most men would be under her spell, because of her allure enriched by a touch of matureness.

(*Night*. Chapter 46. Trans. Mine)

Analogous to Example (9), Example (10) also involves the male gaze from two male characters, and the description of the female character’s attractive appearance does not contribute to plot development. Apart from sexual innuendos, Example (10)



is also comprised of the author's comment on heterosexual relationships. In this example, women are objectified and compared to stocks, and their value is believed to be inextricably intertwined with age and appearance. Additionally, it is implied that women need to possess youth and beauty, so as to attain attention and adoration from the opposite gender, and women's harmonious matrimonial relationships are determined by their ability to retain physical attractiveness.

(10) 通常女人三十是个坎, 过后利好出尽大盘见顶, 终生熊市。这女人显然算是非周期性行业的成长股, 皮肤、身材依然保持得很好, 透着一股恰当好处的成熟。他们俩都不禁多看了几眼。难怪各方面调查都显示张超很爱他太太, 平日里对他太太极好, 他太太比他小好多岁, 老夫少妻, 又是美女, 恩爱的概率自然会高很多。女人挪动着优雅的身躯, 开始自我介绍: “我是张超太太, 刚才警察打电话给我, 说要带人再来复查, 让我有时间的话最好过来, 免得贵重物品丢失等麻烦。”

Normally, thirty-year-old women were on the threshold of a new era: beyond this point, their stock prices reached a peak and they would be trapped into a bear market forever. This woman was obviously a growth stock in a non-cyclical industry, because her skin and body had been taken good care of, showing her attraction as a properly mature woman. Both of them could not help staring at her. No wonder police investigation showed that Zhang Chao loved his wife very much and was very good to her. His wife was beautiful and much younger than him, so of course he cherished her. The woman walked towards them elegantly and started a self-introduction: 'I'm Zhang Chao's wife. A police officer called me just now and said people were coming to investigate again. He asked me to come if I had time, just to keep an eye on the valuables here.'

(*Night*. Chapter 9. Trans. Mine)

Furthermore, there are gender stereotypes in *Night*. For instance, in the narrative, a promiscuous young widow is bribed to lodge a false accusation against an innocent man for rape, yet under cross-examination, she resorts to tears so as to conceal her misdeed (Example (11)). By means of depicting an individual female character, the author gives a summary of the entire gender group, and states that women are competent at deploying tears to give vent to negative emotions or to dominate their male partners through psychological and moral coercion. In Example (11), following the authorial comment on women, there is an advice which seems to address a male readership: men are suggested to give seeming apologies and empty promises, just to stop women from crying. Either the comment or advice in Example (11) is directly relevant to the plot line—they simply convey male chauvinism and indicate that women are vulnerable, emotional, irrational and devious.

(11) 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 did not know how to defend herself, so soon afterwards, she covered her face and started using the most primitive yet most powerful weapon women had: crying. Women are born cry-babies, especially during quarrels with the opposite sex.

There are two kinds of crying in general. One is to give vent to feelings. When women are in a bad mood, they shed tears to express criticism—*Why the hell am I reduced to such a horrible man like you?!* The other type is a technical defense. For example, when quarrelling with her boyfriend, even if the woman is the wrong side, as soon as she starts crying, the man will have to apologise in order to patch up. Lots of guys do not know how to deal with it, but actually the tip is dead easy. You're free to curse in your mind, but you must say you're sorry. As long as you say it and promise her the moon, she'll just stop crying.

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

As for Example (12), although it does not decry women, it characterises women with an over-generalised view regarding their comportment. In Example (12), young women are depicted as being addicted to beautified selfies even under life-threatening circumstances, and young women's tone on social media is featured by 撒娇 *sajiao* which is a composite concept denoting 'playing cute', 'performing winsome/coquettish', 'to show pettishness', 'adorably petulant', etc (Farris 1994: 12-13, 161, Qiu 2013, Dale 2016, Shen 2020). Again, such superficial descriptions of women are not indispensable to the bloodcurdling scene in Example (12).

(12) 一听到“杀伤性武器”，所有人本能地停下脚步，心中顿时一紧。警察赶忙示意旅客往后退。地铁站里的旅客吃惊地看着这一幕，按照社交惯例，有危险是吧，先别管那么多了，人们纷纷拿起手机，对这个奇怪的中年男子拍了一通照，发到网上。当然，少不了年轻女性趁机转过身，调到前置摄像头，自拍美颜一番，配上文字“我就在地铁站，出了大事，好危险啊，怕怕的”。

Hearing the expression 'legal weapon', all people subconsciously stopped and terrified. The police showed underground passengers to step back, but people all took pictures of the strange middle-aged man with their smart phones and posted the photographs on social media platforms. Of course, many young women took selfies, had them retouched and posted them off with texts: 'I'm right in the underground station. There's something huge going on here. Ooh, spooky.'

(*Night*. Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

I postulate that the author's attitude towards women is not necessarily misogynistic. As a country marked by a profoundly entrenched patriarchal system, China has witnessed an array of post-Mao reforms that have massively enhanced women's status (Hershatter 2004). Nevertheless, women were still perceived to be dependent in terms of sexuality even in reform-era representations of femininity (Evans 2000, Honig 2003), and they were underrepresented in managerial positions and formal politics in the reform period (Edwards 2000, Wang 2004). Women's studies in China was inspired by economic reforms, instead of feminist movements (Li and Zhang 1994, Wang 1997), so it did not attain substantial development until the 1980s. During this period, legal rights of women were protected via a well-publicised legislative campaign (Li and Zhang 1994, Wu 2005, Angeloff and Lieber 2012), and organisations were established to conduct women's research and address issues in liberation movement in a communist context (Zhong 2007, Wang 2013). In terms of feminists in China, they used to adopt a 'non-confrontational and co-existence' approach and regard feminism as 'female or feminine-ism' (Wang 2018). It was not until very recently, feminism became 'women's rights or power-ism' promulgated by activists (self-)labelled as 'feminists for women's rights/power' (Ko and Wang 2006, Yang 2020, Tan 2021).

Therefore, Chen's stigma to women might be interconnected to the underrepresentation of women's rhetoric in the past decades.

## CONCLUSION

In the *Murder* series, homosexual identity is correlated with besmirched reputation, and same-sex bonds are depicted to be anathema to the public. I posit that Chen's mindset concerning gay men and homosexual relationships might have been impinged upon by prevailing heteronormative values and legislative policies that used to criminalise homosexual conduct. Additionally, his misconstrual of same-sex intimacy is parallel to that held by the majority of quotidian people in the contemporary society. In terms of his works such as *Night*, they manifest sexist implications, exemplified by depictions involving sexual innuendos via the male gaze, which are not indispensable to plots. In the novels, there are also authorial comments marked by gender stereotypes and male chauvinism. I propound that Chen's stance is not necessarily misogynistic, yet he is indeed void of feminist awareness, which might be correlated with the fact that feminism has not undergone substantial development in contemporary China until very recently.

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