

IJASC 24-1-13

Portrayal of people with disabilities in Chinese novels: Focusing on Shi Tiesheng's novels “Ming Ruo Qin Xuan”, “Yuan Zui”, “Wo zhi Wu”, and “Shan Ding Shang de Chuan Shuo”

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Abstract

Deleuze and Guattari introduced the concept of minority groups resisting the majority. Minority groups consist of individuals who are excluded and marginalized by the majority. They advocate for a society in which these individuals, through mutual solidarity, can escape prejudice and fixed ideologies and lead a dignified human life. In this context, through his novels featuring protagonists with disabilities, Stéphane aimed to create an ideal societal atmosphere. The characters with disabilities in the novels incessantly strive toward life goals, emphasizing the importance of the process of effort and progress, even if the ultimate goals are not achieved. The dedicated pursuit of goals and the journey toward them hold significance beyond the attainment of objectives. Such an attitude and approach toward life by minority individuals is deemed sufficient to challenge the power structures established by the majority. This narrative challenges the societal norm and power structures, which highlights the value and meaning found in the process of striving and progressing, and ultimately contributes to breaking down societal barriers and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

Keywords: Shi Tiesheng, Awareness of the Disabled, Disability, Minority, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari.

1. Introduction

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari asserted that the “literature of minority groups refers not to that of minority languages but that sustained by such groups within the linguistic dominance of the majority group” [1]. The term “minority group” typically denotes individuals excluded by the majority, which creates considerable distance from dominant powers, ruling forces, the production of political discourse, and societal participation. In political and social contexts, minorities can be viewed as those in a subjugated position, including sexual minorities, people with disabilities, migrant workers, and seniors, who are often targets of social prejudice and politically marginalized.

Minority groups aim to narrow the gap with the majority through various forms of resistance, and ultimately

Manuscript Received: February. 14, 2024 / Revised: February. 26, 2024 / Accepted: February. 28, 2024

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aspire to construct a utopian society in which ideal values are realized. They raise objections against irrational power structures in reality and various injustices across different domains, which sparks a form of invisible revolution.

Using literature as a means of representation is one form of resistance for such groups. Among them, Shi Tiesheng stands out as a writer who elevated the standards of Chinese disability literature. Notably, during the Cultural Revolution in 1969, Shi Tiesheng was sent to a rural area, and had to engage in strenuous physical labor. As a result, symptoms of spinal pain and leg paralysis emerged, which eventually led to lower limb paralysis at the age of 18. Through his novels, Shi Tiesheng conveys the process of overcoming social prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination faced as a person with a disability. Therefore, this study aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's advocacy for minority literature and explores the portrayal of individuals with disabilities in Shi Tiesheng's novels. This study seeks to dismantle existing fixed and negative notions about people with disabilities and, further, contributes to raising awareness for the respectful inclusion of individuals with disabilities as valued members of society, ensuring a humane life.

2. Solidarity Among Disabled Individuals in “Ming Ruo Qin Xuan”

In the novel “Ming Ruo Qin Xuan” published in the 1985 issue of the magazine *Modern Man* “Xian Dai Ren”, the protagonists are an old and a young blind musician. The survival strategies these two blind individuals exhibit diverge from the transient cooperation depicted in traditional disability literature. The old blind musician and his disciple, the young blind musician, demonstrate a determination to positively navigate their lives despite their physical disabilities. This reflects their pursuit of human dignity on a personal level. Traveling through various villages and playing the sanxian (a three-stringed plucked instrument), they find fulfillment and meaning in life.

A The survival approach and self-expression of individuals with disabilities as a minority group is a crucial aspect. Despite societal prejudices, these two blind musicians, with resilient mental strength, reject unnecessary sympathy and live with a clear sense of purpose. They defy social biases and resiliently pursue their life goals, thereby emphasizing the importance of self-determination in the face of adversity.

“The old blind musician cradled the strung sanxian tightly against his chest, feeling each string with care. He then gently shook the resonating box of the sanxian and confirmed the presence of a prescription note inside. This simple act was the only thing that could alleviate his worries. It also represented a lifelong aspiration for the old blind musician” [2].

The blind musicians held the belief was that the prescription note within the sanxian contained a secret that could cure their ailments. Specifically, it was believed to hold the formula to restore their sight. To retrieve this prescription, they had to diligently play and break a thousand strings of the sanxian. They depended on each other for a common goal and devoted themselves to their respective duties. According to Deleuze, desire as a drive for self-preservation can dismantle existing dominant ideologies and create new orders. In other words, desire is not a state of lacking something; instead, it can be viewed as a driving force capable of creating something. In this sense, the desire of the two blind musicians to overcome their blindness transforms into a passion for life. Despite societal prejudices, they reject unnecessary sympathy with resilient mental strength and set their own life goals.

The prescription they sought, which was the goal of the musicians, is an intriguing aspect in that it turned out to be nothing more than a blank sheet. In the story, the old musician finally breaks a thousand strings, retrieves the prescription, and asks someone who can read to verify its contents, only to find out that it contains

"nothing."

"The old blind musician had returned to this village primarily because of his young disciple. When he first heard that the prescription note he had treasured for 70 years was nothing more than a blank sheet, he found it incredibly difficult to believe. Honest individuals who could read stepped in to verify the truth on his behalf" [3].

Furthermore, the old musician tells his young disciple that the prescription note will only take effect if he breaks 2000 strings and retrieves it, a well-intentioned falsehood meant to encourage him.

"Remember this. You must break 2000 strings."

"2000 strings?"

"Bring the sanxian here. I'll place this prescription note in the resonating box for you."

"Only then could the old blind musician comprehend the words his mentor had spoken. It was a metaphorical reflection that our lives are akin to this sanxian. Although the purpose of life may be fictional, it is crucial for our existence. Without it, how can we tighten the strings? If we cannot tighten the strings, we cannot play the sanxian properly."

"Why do I have to break 2000 strings?"

"It's 2000 strings. I must have been mistaken, thinking it was a thousand" [4].

The act of "tightening the strings" (preparing to play) is the beginning of faithfully continuing one's profession and living diligently. The old blind musician realized the meaning of life through the process of tuning his sanxian. Therefore, he lied to the young musician, stating that breaking 2000 strings and retrieving the prescription note would have an effect. This lie stemmed from the understanding that considering the number of his performances and age, the young musician would not be able to break 2000 strings until he passed away. In essence, the old musician hoped that the young musician would continue to give his best in his work until his death.

Experiencing the attitude of his mentor firsthand, the young musician strengthens his determination to shoulder the role of a commendable member of society. This process serves as a catalyst to challenge existing biases in society's perception of people with disabilities. The ongoing efforts of such individuals to realize their self-worth become an opportunity to change the structures of dominance and power created by the majority.

3. Attitude Toward Life of Individuals with Disabilities in "Yuan Zui"

"Yuan Zui·Su Yuan" was published in 1988 in the magazine *Shou Huo*, and within it, the portrayal of characters with disabilities is prominently featured. In "Yuan Zui," we encounter "Uncle Shi," a man whose entire lower body, from the neck down to the feet, is paralyzed.

In this work, we witness an individual with disabilities, Uncle Shi, engaging with children and interacting with other humans. The process of him communicating with children reflects his continuous efforts to reclaim his sense of identity for the restoration of his self-esteem.

"Uncle Shi spent his days lying in a small room behind the tofu shop. This was because his entire body, from the neck down to the feet – encompassing the chest, waist, and legs – was paralyzed, which rendered him

unable to move at all. He couldn't even move his head. In other words, apart from being able to open and close his eyes and mouth, and breathe in and out, he could not move his body. Nevertheless, Uncle Shi was alive. He lay in bed with a blanket covering him up to his neck" [5].

Uncle Shi regularly narrates fascinating mythological stories to three children - "I," "A Dong," and "A Xia." Lying down, Uncle Shi vividly describes the "world" outside the window that he has imagined and observed with a mirror. The three children frequently visit Uncle Shi to hear his stories. Narrating mythological tales to the children is his way of communicating with the "world." Although the mythological stories he tells lack scientific evidence, through them, the children imagine the fair and beautiful world that Uncle Shi envisions.

Uncle Shi sets out to find the mysterious white building mentioned in the myths he shares with the children but fails to locate it. The "white building" is nothing more than a creation of his imagination, representing a world confined to the realms of fantasy.

"However, the strange thing was that we seemed to be continuously navigating through winding alleyways. Although we could see the white building, we couldn't find any path leading to it. We couldn't get closer. A Dong suggested going back home, which caused a disagreement among us. A Xia scolded A Dong for being a coward. We pushed Uncle Shi's cart, heading west and then turning north. The building seemed to move like us. Strangely, the closer we got, the farther away the white building seemed to be. A Dong tightly A Xia's clothes tightly and refused to let go. As the dim evening glow, slowly descended beneath the roof of a house like fading charcoal embers, the white building transformed into a deep, reddish hue" [6].

In reality, the white building is not something one can find. The crucial point is that Uncle Shi's tales of legends and myths are not about the existence or reproduction of real-world events. Instead, they reflect his belief that, even in the realm of imagination, his ideals can be realized. As previously mentioned, Deleuze asserted that desire creates new order. In this sense, by freely communicating with his neighbors and living a sincere life, Uncle Shi channels his modest desires into the concrete act of "narrating mythological stories."

Uncle Shi expresses his aspirations through this simple desire, believing that his ideals can come to fruition even in the realm of imagination. Indeed, despite being a person with a disability, Uncle Shi maintains a positive outlook on life. His attitude emphasizes the importance of a process-oriented approach to life rather than a result-oriented one. This life attitude not only challenges but also overcomes existing value systems and ideologies; it works to break down prejudices against people with disabilities.

4. The Will to Overcome Disability in "Wo zhi Wu"

"Wo zhi Wu" was published in the magazine "Dang Dai" in 1986. The story revolves around an 18-year-old man who, despite being unable to use his legs, remains unemployed owing to his disability. He lives a pessimistic life, finding solace in conversations with other individuals with disabilities, and considers it his only source of comfort. In what follows, we explore the degrees of disability mentioned for each character in the work.

"In the summer of the year when I turned 18, my legs were still paralyzed" [7].

"Uncle Shi (Shi Qi) uses a wheelchair due to paralyzed legs, similar to me. Uncle Meng (Meng) also has paralyzed legs, and since he is visually impaired, someone has to push his wheelchair. Uncle Lu (Lu) takes on this responsibility. Uncle Lu and Uncle Meng both work in the same factory, attaching paper bags. Every day during their commute, Uncle Lu helps by pushing Uncle Meng's wheelchair" [8].

"When Uncle Lu was born, the doctor diagnosed him as having an intellectual disability. Uncle Lu's congenital characteristics included narrow-set eyes and thick lips, typical traits of such disability" [9].

In this work, the characters, each with varying degrees of disability, interact and engage in conversations as members of a shared community. Through these dialogues, the protagonist reflects on the philosophical aspects of life, including the joys and sorrows, the dichotomy of life and death, and other existential questions related to identity and existence. Furthermore, the narrative subtly conveys the message that despite the challenges of reality, one must persevere and live with determination.

After entering an old gray shrine and hearing the story of the deceased "old couple" from the grassy park, the protagonist begins contemplating profound philosophical ideas such as joy and sorrow, life and death, subjectivity and objectivity, existence and non-existence, and the realms of the living and the afterlife. This work utilizes dreamlike and fantastical scenes to emphasize the uncertainties of life and highlights the protagonist's determination to face these with hope and expectation. The death of the old couple triggers a series of events that prompt serious contemplation of human desires and societal transformations.

Drawing on the perspectives of Deleuze and Guattari, the work suggests that individuals stigmatized as socially weak, such as those with disabilities, can find their desires, dismantle societal structures, and reclaim human dignity in the process. In this sense, the narrative serves as a psychological stimulus for those living with disabilities, portraying a journey toward self-realization despite societal prejudice. In the concluding part of the work, the protagonist reaffirms their commitment to live their life autonomously.

"Please don't call me 'Shi Ba' anymore. When the sun rises, I am now nineteen years old. My mother told me that I was born when the sun was rising" [10].

In general, "the sun" symbolizes life and energy, and a "rising sun" often signifies hope. Witnessing the revival of the souls of the deceased old couple, the protagonist breaks free from the fear of death. This experience instills a determination in them to faithfully live their current life. The author explores the struggle of adopting an attitude toward life that transcends the pains of reality, aspiring to live a better life.

5. Overcoming Prejudice against Individuals with Disabilities in "Shan Ding Shang de Chuan Shuo"

"Shan Ding Shang de Chuan Shuo" was published in 1984 in the magazine "Shi Yue." The narrative introduces an aspiring writer with a limp. Despite having a romantic partner, they face the obstacle of not being able to marry owing to societal prejudice against people with disabilities.

"However, despite being in love, the young man with a limp and the woman always harbored fears of separation, burdened by the constant worry. She couldn't return home late. In the eyes of her parents, the young man seemed like a person afflicted with a contagious disease, akin to a pestilence. Their love seemed as if it was under constant scrutiny, resembling stolen affection" [11].

In the work, the individual with a disability faces unequal treatment under the prejudice of being a "pestilence." According to Deleuze, breaking away from hierarchical order and achieving an egalitarian relationship requires the formation of the identity of minorities. The protagonist tirelessly strives to overcome this inequality. On the one hand, persistently writing and submitting works as an author, and on the other, embarking on a journey to find the dove "Dian zi," left behind by his girlfriend who departed.

“He lay down, groaning quietly. ‘Ah! Truly exhausting.’ His entire body ached. The grass had already turned green. Facing the sky, he thought the countless stars above were probably revolving around the Earth, much like the rock that Sisyphus struggled to push back up the mountain. In his mind, Sisyphus was considered a great myth, and he likened the unending task of pushing the falling boulder up the mountain to the relentless work of human life” [12].

The process of climbing the mountain in search of the departed dove can be likened to the journey of finding one’s identity. The journey of the limping aspiring writer to ascend the mountain top was not an easy one. This resembled the punishment Sisyphus received in Greek mythology. Pushing the boulder, only for it to roll back down, was the worst form of punishment. Similarly, the aspiring writer with a limp faced a challenging path in searching for the dove. Climbing treacherous mountain trails without any guarantee of finding it, they embarked on this journey while pursuing the pure pursuit of love and discovering his true identity. The author hints at the possibility of realizing the writer’s ideals in the final part of the work.

“Another interpretation is that the person living on the mountain top is not a limping old man but rather a young lady. She came from the south and is still described as young and beautiful. She cultivates dozens of doves to bring peace to the human world. As dawn breaks, she releases the doves, and among them is said to be ‘Dianzi,’ the dove with a black tail and black crest mentioned earlier...” [13].

The liberation and freedom expressed in the story of the dove “Dianzi,” once trapped in the city, now flying freely, symbolize a form of emancipation. Furthermore, the fact that the protagonist’s girlfriend continues to care for the doves they once raised together, without being swayed by societal judgments, signifies a pursuit of genuine love and a resilient determination that can serve as a driving force to change the underlying irrationalities of societal structures.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the concepts of minority groups proposed by Deleuze and Guattari via an analysis of novels by the Chinese author Shi Tiesheng. The former have long introduced the concept of minority groups as a counterforce to majority groups in society, which have strived to reestablish an existing unequal social order. Among these efforts, Shi Tiesheng aimed to create an ideal social atmosphere through novels depicting characters with disabilities. Shi Tiesheng himself living with lower body paralysis and using a wheelchair, expressed his own experiences through his disability-themed novels.

In “Ming Ruo Qin Xuan,” the narrative paradoxically suggests that overcoming life’s challenges lies in the process of two blind musicians playing the Sanhyungum. Rather than living life as a person with a disability with pessimism, the story emphasizes that one’s true worth is manifested when adhering to responsibilities and staying true to reality. In this sense, the ultimate goal is not just the contents of the prescription letter in the Sanhyungum.

In “Yuan Zui,” the character Uncle Shi whose limbs are paralyzed, tells myths to children. The myths he narrates cannot be found in the real world, yet he lives with the belief that by realizing his desires and dreams in the realm of imagination, they can become a reality. Communicating one’s ideal world to others is more crucial. Through such communication, the meaning of life can be rediscovered.

“Wo zhi Wu” portrays the protagonist as finding their identity through communication with other individuals with disabilities. Scenes such as dialogues with the soul serve to dispel the fear of death, expressing the will to lead one’s life actively.

In "Shan Ding Shang de Chuan Shuo," the protagonist faces breaking up with his girlfriend owing to biases against individuals with disabilities. However, with unwavering determination, he climbs to the mountain peak to find the dove they raised together. Symbolizing the difficulty of ascending the mountain as a person with a disability, the narrative metaphorically illustrates the challenge of changing the pre-existing societal structure centered on the majority. Nevertheless, the continuous effort to climb to the summit represents a journey of finding one's true self and pursuing pure love.

In conclusion, protagonists with disabilities in Shi Tiesheng's novels strive tirelessly for life's goals. Even if they fail to reach their set objectives, they prioritize the process of achieving those goals. These efforts and challenges by characters with disabilities serve as a catalyst for transforming the power dynamics, dominating structures, and irrational systems entrenched in society, which are predominantly oriented toward the majority.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea(NRF-2022S1A5A8056908)

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