



Narrative Characteristics and Artistic Features of Chen Zhongshi's Novel *White Deer Plain*: A New Exploration

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Abstract: *White Deer Plain* is a classic Chinese novel from the 1990s. Since its publication, scholars have conducted extensive research on the novel from various perspectives, yielding fruitful results. However, the narrative line from the perspective of “Mr. Zhu” in *White Deer Plain* has rarely been explored. This paper takes it as the research focus, delving into the narrative characteristics and underlying causes of this feature in the novel. By analyzing this artistic trait, we can better understand the significance of “Mr. Zhu” in the overall structure of the novel, as well as gain deeper insight into Chen Zhongshi’s creative philosophy and the profound depth of his work.

Keywords: Chen Zhongshi’s novel; *White Deer Plain*; Mr. Zhu; artistic features

1. Introduction

White Deer Plain is one of the classic Chinese novels of the 1990s, and its artistic features have consistently been a focus of academic research. A review of existing studies reveals that over the past eight years, scholars have provided diverse interpretations of the novel’s artistic characteristics. These analyses range from character studies to historical perspectives, as well as examinations from the angles of regional culture, traditional culture, and national spirit. The ability to withstand exploration from various perspectives underscores the novel’s status as a classic. However, as a masterpiece, it still holds ample room for further exploration. For example, the narrative line from the perspective of “Mr. Zhu” has rarely been studied. Therefore, this paper will focus on analyzing the narrative characteristics and their causes within this story arc, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the artistic connotations embedded in the work.

2. Narrative Features and Cultural Connotations from Mr. Zhu’s Perspective

In *White Deer Plain*, we find a character who seems to possess divine foresight and an “omniscient perspective”—Mr. Zhu. Among the many characters in the novel, Mr. Zhu is one of the figures into whom Chen Zhongshi poured significant thought and effort. Some have argued that the author portrayed Mr. Zhu as excessively perfect, overly virtuous, and almost godlike in wisdom. However, the truth is that the novel’s heavy, chaotic, and oppressive narrative required a clear-headed, wise, and open-minded observer, and that role is fulfilled by Mr. Zhu. His storyline, marked by extraordinary foresight and prophetic insight, creates a remarkable artistic feature: a clear narrative logic that is both coherent and compelling.

2.1 Metaphorical Weather Predictions: The Establishment of Sacred Status

In the eyes of the farmers on *White Deer Plain*, Mr. Zhu was regarded as a “divine” figure, primarily due to his two instances of “metaphorical weather predictions.” The first instance was wearing wooden clogs on a sunny day. After the wheat harvest, every household spread their fresh wheat on the threshing grounds to dry under the blazing sun. Yet, Mr. Zhu walked through the village alleys in wooden clogs, clattering noisily. The farmers mocked him, calling him crazy, and children followed behind him, laughing and joking. Mr. Zhu returned home without explanation, lay down, and took a nap. Unexpectedly, a fierce wind arose in the afternoon, followed by torrential rain, turning the threshing grounds into a vast expanse of water. Many households lost their wheat to the floodwaters. It was only afterward that the villagers realized Mr. Zhu’s thoughtful foresight.

The second instance was his stargazing. One night, while reading late into the night, Mr. Zhu stepped out of his cave dwelling, looked up at the starry sky, and blurted out, “This year will be a bean year.” He then returned to his studies. His sister, who was visiting from her parents’ home, overheard this and told her husband the next day. The couple immediately planted their entire land with a variety of beans. That year, a prolonged drought destroyed crops such as millet and sorghum, but the beans thrived and yielded a bumper harvest. These two instances of “metaphorical weather predictions” became widely circulated among the people of *White Deer Plain*, solidifying Mr. Zhu’s sacred status in their hearts.

2.2 Foretelling Current Affairs: The Consolidation of Sacred Status

Mr. Zhu often predicted future societal trends. For instance, his forecast of the land reform movement—"Houses are mere signs, land is a burden, and saved silver is a death curse"[1]—implicitly referred to the situation during the land reform period. The landlord class suffered calamities and even death due to their land and wealth. Bai Jiaxuan heeded Mr. Zhu's advice and refrained from hiring long-term laborers three years before the liberation, thereby avoiding being classified as a landlord.

Moreover, in Heiwa's memory, Mr. Zhu's cryptic and ambiguous words when performing divinations never provided direct answers. However, before his death, he resolutely told Heiwa, "The world is destined to belong to Zhu and Mao." Mr. Zhu explained that the Kuomintang's "Blue Sky with a White Sun" could only remain in the sky, while the Communist Party's flag was "red across the land," implying that a political party rooted in the people would naturally win their hearts. He firmly believed that correct and exceptional culture could endure and develop in any era, which led him to make such a prediction.

2.3 Foreshadowing Fate: The Deepening of Sacred Status

Mr. Zhu's divine nature is further highlighted through his foresight into the destinies of others. He predicted the fate of landlords like Lu Zilin and meticulously arranged his own affairs before his death. Before passing, he foresaw the arrival of a new era, refusing coffins and tomb chambers, demonstrating his profound wisdom. As one evaluation noted, "He always maintained an exceptional clarity in a world filled with clamor and chaos." [2] These elements reflect Mr. Zhu's profound contemplation of traditional culture and the novel's focus on national spirit.

Overall, Mr. Zhu embodies both virtue and wisdom, standing as a guardian of Chinese traditional culture. In times of calamity, he persuades others with reason and helps the needy; in times of peace, he revises county records and establishes community norms, exemplifying a perfect fusion of engagement with and detachment from the world. As both a carrier of national spirit and a practitioner of Confucian thought, he enriches the cultural connotations of White Deer Plain with profound humanistic care.

3. The Deeper Reasons Behind the Characterization of Mr. Zhu

It can be said that the depiction of Mr. Zhu as a semi-divine spiritual leader in White Deer Plain ultimately stems from the following two reasons:

3.1 Objective Reason: The Conflict Between Social Reality and Confucian "Benevolence and Righteousness"

The novel *White Deer Plain* critically examines Confucian culture, portraying the process of struggle, transformation, and decline of Confucian ideology, which once held a dominant position, during the turbulent and disastrous first half of the 20th century. *White Deer Plain*, located in the Guanzhong Weihe Plain, the ancient land of Zhou and Qin, serves as a living specimen of village and family culture in China. This family culture is a fundamental feature of traditional Chinese society. The evolution and decline of family culture in *White Deer Plain* symbolically reflect the mysteries of modern Chinese national history.

Mr. Zhu's semi-divine identity can be seen as an appropriate metaphor for cultural dilemmas: at times, Confucian culture aligns with realism, imprinted in countless everyday details; at other times, it degenerates into a distant legend, becoming a fictional construct detached from reality and marked by an irreparable sense of tragedy. As a striking cultural symbol, Mr. Zhu permeates the narrative with an unavoidable tragic essence.

3.2 Subjective Reason: Expression of the Author's Personal Sentiments

Chen Zhongshi's historical perspective is expressed through the character of Mr. Zhu, a Confucian scholar from Guanzhong. "Firstly, contemporary Mr. Zhu's historical vision emphasizes four aspects: historical facts, public sentiment, societal trends, and personal experience. Secondly, it uses the national interest as the measure, surpassing class perspectives with a broader vision, greater generosity, and grander demeanor. Thirdly, it reflects the historian's mindset of writing truthfully and objectively." [3] Mr. Zhu and others who represent the "spiritual essence" of the nation embody the author's effort to legitimize the position of Confucian culture and explore its potential for "revival" in modern times. As Chen Zhongshi once said, "In writing Mr. Zhu and Bai Jiaxuan, I sought to portray the finest qualities passed down through our national spiritual world up to the early 20th century." Unlike previous works, Chen Zhongshi does not address themes solely from the perspective of political ideologies or class relations. Instead, he situates them within the historical context of enduring national culture, thereby imparting the novel with a dual significance: a reflection on traditional culture and an examination of contemporary

history.

In summary, Mr. Zhu in *White Deer Plain* actively upholds and advocates Confucian thought and the concept of “benevolence and righteousness.” He rigorously adheres to and pursues the faith of “benevolence,” embodying the love of a benevolent person. This image possesses profound temporal and historical generalization, as well as a deep artistic interpretation of life. It has the power to transform outdated concepts, beliefs, and ways of thinking of the era, offering a new perspective for understanding history and life and showcasing the profound integration of traditional culture and real-life experiences.

4. The Realistic and Magical Characteristics of Mr. Zhu’s Narrative Perspective

In the author’s view, the storylines developed from the narrative perspective of “Mr. Zhu” possess the following two characteristics:

4.1 Realism

The prototype of Mr. Zhu in *White Deer Plain* is Niu Zhaolian, a renowned Confucian scholar from Guanzhong. The Chinese character “朱” (Zhu) can be deconstructed to signify “牛人” (Niu Ren, meaning “man of Niu”). Chen Zhongshi wrote Mr. Zhu’s character based on historical facts, and the stories related to him were orally passed down among the people. Through his depiction of the conflicts and relationships between the two families, Chen Zhongshi reveals the suffering of the people and reflects the realities of an entire historical era, making the narrative profoundly representative of its time.

4.2 Magical Realism

It can be said that Chen Zhongshi endowed Mr. Zhu with extraordinary foresight, such as his interpretation of the White Deer imagery and his prediction of Bai Ling’s death. Throughout *White Deer Plain*, the use of magical realism is skillfully executed, carrying profound symbolic connotations. The novel is a timeless masterpiece resulting from Chen Zhongshi’s long and arduous creative journey, his deep research and contemplation of national history and culture, and his analysis and synthesis of previous achievements. The integration of authentic historical sentiment, rich cultural connotations, and bold, ethereal imagination creates a grand, tragic, and sublime style.

5. Conclusion

In summary, despite Chen Zhongshi’s frequent homage to the past glory of Confucian culture in *White Deer Plain* and his sincere praise for it, he remains clear-sighted. While expressing a strong affinity for Confucian culture, he inevitably confronts its dilemmas and frustrations in the face of a modern historical process that diverges from tradition. As Nan Fan aptly remarks, “Indeed, it is an unyielding fact: the rise of modern society also signifies the gradual distancing of Confucian culture. Concepts like the Three Bonds and Five Constants or self-discipline and returning to propriety have gradually become subjects of nostalgic discourse, increasingly absent from contemporary historical narratives.”^[4] From this perspective, *White Deer Plain* resonates as a dual elegy for the spiritual and practical dimensions of Confucian culture.

References

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