

Flowing Tin City: Mobility Narrative and Localization Paradox in *Liu Su Di*

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Abstract

In *Liu Su Di* ("Land of Floating Customs"), Li Zishu focuses on the daily life of Malaysian Chinese and describes the life genre painting of Malaysian Chinese. The novel uses a lot of mobility narratives of walking, riding and experience changing for depicting the people and things of Tin City. In addition to becoming a "built-in frame", mobility also reflects the stratum and power mobility outside the memory of Malaysian Chinese. In this memory space, the author needs to face the paradox of social mobility and localization of Malaysian Chinese, only by constructing identity belonging in mobility can the anxiety and difficulties of Malaysian Chinese creation and life be broken.

Keywords

Malaysian Chinese literature; Li Zishu; *Liu Su Di*; mobility narrative.

1. Introduction

Li Zishu talked about the meaning of the title of *Liu Su Di*: "I think the combination of the three words 'Liu Su Di' is very interesting. Liu means liquid and water; Di means soil; and Su means people carrying grain. Between water and soil, between mobility and immobility, food is the first necessity of the people, which fits well with the idea of the novel." [1] In fact, the novel is presented in the same way. The mobility and localization of Tin City, the customs of people, things and objects constitute the local chronicle novel written by Li Zishu. Unlike the previous works, which were heavily focused on experimental, violent and dark elements, this time the author turns her attention to the daily life of Malaysian Chinese under individual experience, and writes about the life samples and story lines of Chinese people among all races in Malaysia. Li Zishu "Avoids grand historical narratives and uses a approach of achieving more with less to focus on the writing of time and memory" [2], as memories flow and angles change, the genre painting are slowly described as the author envisions. As depicted in the novel, not only do the people of Tin City live in a mobile state, but the migration of collective memory over decades is also narrated in a dynamic form, and mobility becomes an indispensable basis for narrative. From this perspective, the memory map pursued by the author is entangled with the local experience of the Malaysian Chinese, carrying identity recognition and mixed features that are difficult to quantify. When exploring this memory section, many questions are waiting to be answered - focusing on "Liu", "Su" and "Di", how does Li Zishu present the feature of the "flowing" of the Malaysian Chinese life? What is the dynamic relationship between mobility and localization present? What kind of focus and spiritual map are reflected behind these?

2. Body Flow and the Generation of Custom Maps

Although *Liu Su Di* reflects the presentation of local customs, customs are not only the author's focus. The people in the customs have also become an important fulcrum in the author's memory. Rather than using the people living there to depict genre paintings, author simply uses mobile people and mobile local customs add radiance and beauty to each other, and show the different features of the Malaysian Chinese land. In the novel, whether it is the appearance of

characters or the progress of the story, walking and riding are tools to achieve personnel changes. In terms of this clue, *Liu Su Di* starts with the main story line of the life changes of neighbors living in Jinda flats for decades, and the blind girl Yinxia as a protagonist and look at these changes. Furthermore, the author also gives each character a focus on the internal perspective, and grows branches of warmth and humanity of the Malaysian Chinese from them. In fact, if we slightly review *Liu Su Di* from the perspective of body mobility, we can easily find the story signs that the author has placed along the way. The characters' walking alone makes up a large part of the text, such as the route where Xihui goes home from school. In addition, although Yinxia is a blind person with limited mobility, she also has many mobile walks in the text, for example, Yinxia recall her past walking routes - "She also secretly crossed the border and the busy Xiuluo Street to eat tofu pudding and chicken rice noodles on the other side of the old street, and even traveled to the new street to buy the Portuguese egg tarts she had always wanted to eat." [3] It is noteworthy that these walks often carry the signs of geographical location and the inclusion of local scenery, and includes the display of local landscapes except flowing. The pork intestine noodle and Indian pancakes that Xihui ate on his way home from school juxtapose the scenery of different cultures, in addition to reflecting the mixed features of race, Xihui's walking also becomes a mobile practice that crosses cultural barriers. Here at Yinxia, the senses except vision are erased still builds a cognitive map for her, the geographical name of "Xiuluo Street" implies the Chinese culture and colonial legacy after the transliteration transformation, the appearance of rice noodles and Portuguese egg tarts also add a layer of color that should be for the flow. It is thus clear that walking has become an important carrying way to describe the cultural map and present land of floating customs.

Another kind of activity is traveling by vehicle. "Travel spaces such as train, car, subway, airplane, station and airport are all liminal spaces and flowing space, or what de Certeau calls daily practice space, they are not only physical spaces where people with different classes, genders, races and ages meet, but also symbolic spaces that are constantly give meaning and produce meaning." [4] Many scenes in the text take place on moving vehicles, for instance, the text mentions that Huilan "Squeezed in the company's van used to transport employees", between the restaurant and her home, the confined space of the bus and the changes in the external landscape are all integrated into the mixture of identities. "Indonesian girls who wash dishes, clean pots and toilets" and "Bangladeshi waiters who speak some English with an Indian accent" [3] and Malaysian Chinese appear in the viewpoint that moved along with the vehicle, the mixture and mobility of identities seem to accommodate more freedom, but in fact, moving Huilan, like the foreign workers, is still in a solidified stratum.

The flowing angle of riding limits the mobility of identities and stratum solidification in a paradox; however, the mobility of characters' stratum and fates is often implicitly hidden in the novel through the flowing mode. Every time a character is introduced in the novel, their past experiences are explained one by one. This explanation always appears in "location + identity or experience" way, for example, when introducing Aunt Lianzhu at the beginning of the novel, the emphasis is on location "at the age of seventeen, she took a bus from Gulou River mouth to the city to seek refuge with her brother" [3], when going on writing her experiences, the sense of mobility of location and experience is also gradually unfolded - " She has weighed salted fish and shrimp at a seafood shop, took tea and washed cups in the tea room, and sold foreign goods; when Enzai died, she worked at the Chuo Yue Photography Studio on Xiuluo Street, and finally settled down." [3] Specifically, this sense of mobility pervades the whole text, the storylines and the customs map of the novel gradually unfold to the readers in the explicit body flow.

3. Mobility Narrative and the Dialogue with Power Space

In Li Zishu's other novel, *The Age of Goodbyes*, mobility doesn't seem so obvious. The novel does not stick to the landscape changes when characters move to reflect the existence of mobility, it mostly mentions these movements in passing, the names of landmarks are not as important, instead, it carries another heavy thing. This raises the question, what are the reasons for the occurrence of bodily movement in *Liu Su Di*.

Homi Bhabha once used the stairwell suggest liminal space: the stairwell connects the upper and lower floors, straight up and down, and prevent the identity of either end from being fixed at the original two poles. Different cultures have blurred boundaries at the threshold, which can easily lead to "conflicts of meaning and values" [5]. In this area, people do not find a fixed identity, and can only reshape their mixed cross-cultural mixed identities while pursuing identity recognition, this is also the mixed experience faced by the Malaysian Chinese community. Li Zishu enters into the daily life of the Malaysian Chinese by writing local chronicles, she has to confront the issue of mixed identities. Therefore, focusing on "mobility" is not only the author's narrative arrangement but also a restoration to the original writing. The diversity of races and nationalities not only exist in the Malaysian Chinese society, but also the differences in culture, religion, and spiritual beliefs. Such custom features are difficult to present with a fixed perspective, which is also an important factor for the development of mobility.

More specifically, the physical movement of characters in the novel always forms a hidden dialogue with power space. Taking Yinxia's blind identity as an example, her walking route naturally has a subversive nature of counter-gaze: when the healthy person relies on vision to establish spatial order, Yinxia reconstructs a non-visual spatial cognitive system through hearing - the dispatching sounds of the taxi radio, touch - the nylon rope woven grid, and memory - the map of the Tin City in her mind. This bodily experience deconstructs the hegemonic logic of colonial cities which divide centers/edges based on visibility, transforming geographical symbols such as Wubing Road and Xianyu Street into cultural memory carriers of the Chinese community. As the author mentioned in an interview, "I want to have a person who is not deceived by appearances or colors to describe this place where all quarters in and there are many prejudices among different races", "using a blind person as the protagonist in the novel, which can have more profound expressions and better handle the mixed relationships among various races in Malaysia. Yinxia captures space and culture by contacting the outside world through non-visual means in body flow, it also means viewing racial and cultural differences with marginalized identity and common heart, without distinguishing between superiority and inferiority. Similarly, the mobility of transportation also symbolizes the power shift in the story. Old taxi wanders at night, which is not only a low-level symbol abandoned by the progress of the times, but also a flowing window for exploring urban desires. And Lianzhu's rise from a seafood store worker to the mistress of a councilor is externalized through the image of a car: her initial embarrassment of taking the bus when she first gets into politics, which forms a mirror image with the ease of later shuttle services, suggesting the price and limitations of upward mobility for Chinese women in Malaysia.

These body flows occur in *Liu Su Di*, in fact, naturally superimpose time and space, a few strokes of movement can depict the characters and their experiences. What is superimposed is not only the time and space of people but also the changes in the local time and space depicted by Li Zishu in the form of ethnic groups. As cultural geographer Michael Crang pointed out, "The region provides a connection pile for people, tying together the shared experiences of the people and the time continuum in this region, this living connection binds people to the region, it makes people to define themselves and share experiences with others to form various communities." [6] These identity sections that flow across different times and spaces are

juxtaposed in the same geographical space - floor upon floor, it makes flats become multiple memory field that carries cultural symbols, survival wisdom of lower classes, and folk beliefs, and folk beliefs, this is also what Li Zishu intends to express.

4. Paradox of Localization and Mobility

In *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman mentions that in this liquid modern world, "The pursuit of identity is a continuous struggle to inhibit and slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, and to give tangible things to intangible things." [7] In the memory and body flow, the novel solidifies Li Zishu's individual localization experience into collective memory, becoming the image of the Malaysian Chinese community and the memories of society and era. However, the novel goes further, as a "local chronicle," Li Zishu must present the local color of the Malaysian Chinese through the complex mobility, as well as the more complex identity of the Malaysian Chinese. The Malaysian Chinese are in the Malaysian society, facing a wandering history, moreover, they do not give up nostalgia for Chinese culture. Thereupon, the work takes "place" as a coordinate, condensing the urban ecology, dialect and slang, and multi-ethnic cultures of the Tin City into the spiritual homeland of the Chinese in Southeastern Asia. Li Zishu studiously abandons the usual national fable in Malaysian Chinese literature, and turns to delving into the daily fabric of 'floating customs': the Guandi shrines in Chinese shops coexist with the Ganesha statues in Indian barber shops, Hokkienese and Malay interweave in the streets, and these fragmented localization symbols become the material carriers of identity. However, the dynamic force of "flow" constantly erodes the solid "place" - time washes away memories like the rivers in the Tin City, the separated Chinese descendants wander in the middle between local dialects and Mandarin, as the times progress, the on-call taxi industry is gradually replaced, the original sense of cultural dependence gradually flows away among the younger generation, there is no absolute explanation for the identity recognition of Malaysian Chinese, which is the anxiety hidden behind the author.

More importantly, the separated trauma and localization resilience of the Chinese immigrants together form an indelible fold in the historical geological layers exposed by the demolition. The paradox in the fold lies in that mobility easily dispels localization, as the world progresses, memories rich in Malaysian Chinese culture are gradually forgotten, the flow of people makes the spiritual core tend to be uniform, and localization is easily dispelled. However, localization still needs mobility to maintain its vitality, and mobility must rely on localization as its foundation, the separated people still need to maintain their identity with the memory of their homeland. The two seem to be opposed but each of which is the precondition. Thereupon, behind the rootlessness, the verification of rationality needs to be completed in the flow, just like the details hidden in Li Zishu's novel - ghosts only appear before Chinese in flats, men in fishing villages are always charmed by mainland girls, the Chinese education is popular, the roots that Malaysian Chinese cannot give up still face Chinese culture. This paradox indicates that the persistence of localization can only gain meaning through the flowing breaking experience.

On the other hand, writing about localization through mobility also implies the author's creative anxiety. "From the perspective of Taiwanese localists, we are outsiders; and from the perspective of Malaysian localists, aren't we? The logic is simple, no matter where the localists are from, they construct their binary oppositions based on the absolute presupposition of localization - local/foreign, or departure." [8] Malaysian Chinese writers need to fight for living space in the mainstream Malaysian culture while establishing their uniqueness in the Chinese literary world, this anxiety drives them to reconstruct history and deconstruct identity through literature, and write about their localization experiences in a unique way. To some extent, it means that Li Zishu is constantly seeking contents that are unique to the Malaysian Chinese

community, and records the forming identity and unity through the writing of localization. These are the mobility where the passing of people, memories, and history together constitute their shared sense of belonging.

5. Conclusion

It is in this kind of flowing localization experience where the cultural identity constructed by Malaysian Chinese is continuously composed- "They are anything but eternally fixed in some essential past, but yield to the constant play of history, culture and power. Identity is by no means rooted in a pure restoration of the past; the past still awaits discovery, and when discovered, it will permanently fix our sense of self." [9] Clearly, behind the paradox of localization and mobility lies Li Zishu's thinking on the environment and people of Malaysia Chinese. Li Zishu constantly "Handles her stories and history from the perspective of a female Malaysian Chinese author" [10], The narrative of the dimension presents both the dilemma of mobility and the exploration of living resilience in writing, opens up a new realistic dimension for Malaysian Chinese literature - not a nostalgia for stability, but the possibility of reconstructing a separated community in mobility. Resisting solid homogenization with flowing localization and reconstructing separated sense of belonging with mixed root system, Li Zishu describes a spiritual map of "rootless roots" for the Malaysian Chinese community - there are no pure roots or fixed boundaries, only a sense of belonging that is constantly reconstructed in flow.

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