

A Comparison of the Theme of “Redemption” in Beicun’s “Divine Writing”: Taking I Have a Covenant with God and The Book of Consolation as Examples

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Abstract:

This paper takes two novels of the writer Beicun during his transitional period as the research objects. Through close reading of the texts and comparative analysis, it explores the evolution track of the theme of redemption in his “divine writing”. In *I Have a Covenant with God* in 2005, redemption is mainly achieved through the religious conversion of the characters, reflecting a clear Christian redemption model. However, in *The Book of Consolation* in 2016, redemption turns to real-life dilemmas, and the characters seek a way out through self-reflection and reconciliation with others, with religious elements being diluted. This transformation is closely related to the social transformation in contemporary China - from the lack of faith under the impact of the market economy in the early stage to the complex social contradictions in the process of urbanization. Beicun’s redemption narrative has developed from directly conveying religious doctrines to providing spiritual care that is closer to reality. In terms of the path of redemption, it has shifted from emphasizing “external divine intervention” to “internal awakening”. In terms of the correlation with the times, it has changed from reflecting the “individual faith vacuum” in the early stage of the market economy to echoing the “collective spiritual trauma” in the process of urbanization. In addition, it reveals that Beicun’s strategy for dealing with the faith crisis has shifted from “conveying religious doctrines” to “reconstructing secular ethics”.

Keywords: Divine Writing, Redemption, Religion, Dilemma

I. The Generative Context of Beicun's "Divine Writing"

1.1 The Literary Coordinates of Divine Writing

The concept of Beicun's "divine writing" was first proposed by the critic Xie Youshun in 2003, specifically referring to the creative paradigm of "taking ultimate concern as the core and exploring the redemption of the soul through the consciousness of sin" formed after his conversion to Christianity (Xie Youshun, *The Constant Path of Literature*, 2009). Beicun's divine writing has two characteristics: First, the generalization of the writing of sinfulness. For example, in *The Book of Consolation*, everyone has sins of different sizes, and the profound reasons lie in the increasingly prominent problems such as demolition conflicts and social class solidification. Second, the ritualization of the path of redemption. In *I Have a Covenant with God*, the debate between Su Yunqi and Chen Sanmu in the studio is a stylized scene of preaching.

It is worth noting that this writing mode is not a simple branch of religious literature. In fact, Beicun's divine writing integrates the Christian concept of original sin and the existential dilemma. For example, before his crime was exposed, Chen Busen in *I Have a Covenant with God* was always switching between the identities of a kind person who took care of Leng Wei's family and the murderer who killed Leng Wei's husband. This existential self-splitting makes it different from the one-dimensional redemption narrative of traditional religious literature.

1.2 The Psychological Rift in the Social Transformation Period

In *I Have a Covenant with God*, the direct motivation for Chen Busen's involvement in the murder case is economic hardship. He was forced to join the criminal gang of Da Madeng, and his childhood traumatic experience is also related to the reality of his parents' layoffs. Through this plot, Beicun exposes the causal relationship between the lack of social security and the increase in the crime rate. When Chen Busen recalled on the train that "there are more hateful people" and "bigger thieves and robbers", it implies the structural problems of society. Chen Busen's contact with Su Yunqi and the selfless dedication of the volunteers in Su Yunqi's counseling station essentially reflect the desperate pursuit of spiritual support by the lower-class groups.

By the time of writing *The Book of Consolation*, the urbanization rate has increased, but problems such as demolition conflicts and social class solidification have become

increasingly prominent. For example, in the work, Liu Zhongtian seemingly resists the demolition but actually colludes secretly with Chen Xianhan, and Li Yi's self-sacrifice is a literary footnote to the social contradictions during the rapid social development. In this stage, Beicun shows a shift from individual redemption to social pathology diagnosis. The narrative strategy of shifting the blame from the individual to structural violence marks the deep integration of divine writing and social criticism.

2. The Narrative Evolution of the Redemption Subject

2.1 Have a Covenant with God: The Stylized Redemption by the Divine Intermediary

The character network of this novel presents a "center-radiation" structure - Su Yunqi as the core, connecting Chen Busen through Zhou Ling, connecting the volunteers through the counseling station, and connecting the public through the news media, constructing three layers of redemption channels. This structure confirms the characteristics of the "vertical redemption" model: the redemption energy flows unidirectionally from the divine center (the pastor) to the marginal individuals (sinners), forming a strict hierarchical order of "the rescuer - the rescued".

2.1.1 Chen Busen: The Psychological Collapse of Individuals When Faced with Survival Difficulties

The work first reveals the transformation of violence under the survival dilemma. The direct motivation for Chen Busen to join the Da Madeng gang is economic hardship. The text shows that Chen Busen was forced to join the Da Madeng criminal gang after "when the twenty catties of white rice were all eaten, he really had nothing left". By presenting the secular nature of his criminal motive, Beicun dissolves the moral criticism in traditional crime novels.

In terms of the redemption process, Chen Busen's awakening is presented in three stages: The first stage is the period of the rationalization of violence, with the creed of "the timid starve to death, and the bold are stuffed to the brim", using the logic of the gangsters to dissolve the moral guilt. The second stage is the period of ethical suspension. During the process of pretending to be Leng Wei's husband, he experiences the superposition of the identities of "the perpetrator - the rescuer". For example, the psychological description after singing for Leng Wei shows the fierce collision between the awakening of conscience under religious salvation and the ethical conflict of

the identity of a murderer. The third stage is the period of complete redemption. Chen Busen achieves self-redemption through confessing in court and writing. However, Leng Wei collapses because she cannot forgive him. After suffering from both physical illness and mental torture, she finally achieves perfection in the realization that “what I really need to forgive is not Chen Busen, but myself”, which also shows the influence of Chen Busen’s redemption on others and expands the significance of redemption. In general, Chen Busen has gone through three identities: the perpetrator (the murderer who killed Li Ji), the substitute (the emotional projection object mistakenly regarded as Leng Wei’s husband by Leng Wei), and the penitent (who achieves self-redemption by taking care of Leng Wei). It is precisely under the intense collision between divine redemption and secular ethics that the author expresses the necessity of external religious intervention when individuals lose their faith and fall into a survival dilemma.

2.1.2 Su Yunqi: The Instrumentalized Divine Symbol

This character has obvious functional limitations. All his dialogues revolve around religious doctrines, and he lacks personalized emotional expression. Even his confession of the idea of “self-righteousness” serves to highlight the theme. This “dehumanized” feature makes the act of redemption mechanical and rigid.

2.2 The Book of Consolation: Online Narrative of Mutual Assistance in Trauma Recovery

The characters in the novel form a “closed-loop trauma network”: Liu Zhihui connects Chen Tong, Liu Zhongtian, and Li Jiang at the same time, forming a mutually restrictive redemption chain. This structure requires that redemption must be achieved through the interaction between the nodes. For example, after Liu Zhihui has a relationship with Li Jiang, she begins to reflect on what she has done to Chen Tong, thus promoting Chen Tong’s transformation.

2.2.1 Liu Zhihui: The Carrier of Intergenerational Trauma

Liu Zhihui’s image is a literary translation of the collective spiritual trauma in the process of urbanization. The death scene of her father being run over by a bulldozer at the forced demolition site constitutes the original image of the traumatic memory. This incident is not only a personal tragedy but also the strangulation of rural civilization by institutional violence. Huotong Township symbolizes traditional agricultural civilization, the bulldozer represents the violence of urbanization, and the land certificate be-

comes the physical evidence of the conflict between law and ethics.

Beicun deepens the dimension of her trauma through spatial narrative. In terms of physical space, her strange illness symptoms can be regarded as the physical reflection of the physical and mental trauma of two generations caused by the demolition incident. In terms of social space, Liu Zhihui sublimates her private trauma into a carrier of public memory by doing volunteer work, making the image of Liu Zhihui go beyond the category of an individual avenger and become a collective memory device of the cost of urbanization.

In terms of the path of redemption, Liu Zhihui’s redemption practice presents a contradictory state, and her revenge is finally self-dissolved: After the carefully designed revenge plan is implemented, she does not get the expected pleasure but begins to reflect and finally moves towards self-redemption. For example, her sexual intercourse with Li Jiang, the son of her enemy, can be regarded as the ritual removal of the traumatic memory, and it also exposes the unsustainability of the cycle of violence. However, this redemption is in an unfinished state. The ending of Liu Zhihui implies that her redemption is not perfect, confirming Beicun’s cautious attitude towards the reconstruction of secular ethics.

2.2.2 Li Jiang: A Split Individual with a Dual Personality

As the son of the executor of the forced demolition, Li Jiang’s image reveals the oppression of power and capital in urbanization. His father is an executioner who obeys the violence of urbanization, and he himself is a professional who perverts the law in the name of revenge. This constitutes a satire on the so-called justice of revenge.

Li Jiang’s split is manifested in the split between his words and actions: He first said “I will act in accordance with the law”, and even seemed very “magnanimous” during the court trial. But Li Jiang confided the real purpose of handling the case to Sun Xiaomei, and only after his father Li Yi died did he admit that “my ideal of the rule of law was lost just after I graduated from university” and “I have succeeded in my revenge”. This split state makes him a concrete manifestation of institutional violence. He is both the perpetrator of alienation and a secondary bearer of trauma. His transformation lies in his reflection on the meaninglessness after the disappearance of the object of revenge. This tense path of redemption not only reflects Beicun’s exploration of the possibility of secular ethics but also exposes his helplessness in the face of institutional dilemmas.

3. The Transformation of the Theme of “Redemption” in I Have a Covenant with God and The Book of Consolation

3.1 From Divine Revelation to Human Relations: The Displacement of the Redemption Mechanism

3.1.1 The Structural Transformation of the Redemption Motivation

In *I Have a Date with God*, the core motivation of redemption comes from the Christian doctrine of “justification by faith”, that is, being saved by faith in God rather than by deeds. Su Yunqi’s rescue of Chen Busen always unfolds around Chen Busen’s inner repentance, and its narrative logic strictly follows the three-stage structure of “crime - confession - absolution”. In *The Book of Consolation*, however, the motivation for redemption is internalized into the self-dissolution of traumatic memory, and the characters carry out existential self-redemption when they are in a meaningless dilemma.

3.1.2 The Transformation Mechanism of the Discourse System

In *I Have a Covenant with God*, Beicun uses the character of Su Yunqi to output religious concepts to the readers in the way of a pastor’s preaching. Moreover, when the characters fall into a crisis, the narrative suddenly turns to religion, which is too rigid. In *The Book of Consolation*, religious concepts are more reflected through the characters’ behavioral motives. Beicun does not directly give the answer about redemption, leaving room for the readers to think.

3.2 The Dialectical Investigation of the Validity of Redemption

3.2.1 The Verification of the Limitations of Religious Redemption

In *I Have a Covenant with God*, Beicun focuses on depicting the inner changes of the protagonist Chen Busen, with the emphasis on Chen Busen’s process of confession and inner liberation. After awakening, he obtains complete redemption. This kind of “quick-fix redemption” is difficult to deal with complex real-life dilemmas. In *The Book of Consolation*, Beicun’s narrative rhythm accelerates, and he focuses more on describing the intricate real-life situations and interpersonal relationships. In the development of the plot, the inner transformation of the characters is naturally promoted, reflecting Beicun’s reflection on the way of redemption and the exploration of the depth of hu-

man nature.

3.2.2 The Incompleteness of Secular Ethics

Compared with *I Have a Covenant with God*, the redemption model in *The Book of Consolation* is more diverse, but its open ending implies dilemmas: First, the institutional violence has not been eradicated: Chen Xianhan only repents personally and does not touch on the disadvantages of the real estate development system. Second, the fragility of ethical reconstruction: Liu Zhihui’s transformation is based on Chen Tong’s death, lacking universal value.

4. The Value of Redemption Writing and Its Contemporary Enlightenment

4.1 The Evolution of the Creative Motif

By comparing Beicun’s three works, *The River of Baptism* in 1992, *I Have a Covenant with God* in 2006, and *The Book of Consolation* in 2016, we can clearly observe the three-stage transformation of divine writing: from the mystical revelation in *The River of Baptism* to the institutionalized religious redemption in *I Have a Covenant with God*, and then to the reconstruction of secular ethics in *The Book of Consolation*. This evolutionary track breaks through the single religious narrative and innovates a new path for the localization of Christian literature.

4.2 The Deepening of Critical Realism

In *I Have a Covenant with God*, Beicun’s exploration of reality mainly focuses on the struggles and confusions of individuals in the pursuit of faith. He analyzes the individual spiritual world from the perspective of faith, and the criticism of reality in the narrative is relatively implicit. *The Book of Consolation* not only includes the discussion of faith but also digs deeper into the multi-faceted nature of human nature in a complex social environment, widely involving various fields of society, such as the gap between the rich and the poor, the decline of morality, and judicial injustice. The critical tentacles extend to a deeper level of the social structure and the essence of human nature, showing the distortion and oppression of human nature by social reality. The criticism is more incisive and direct, making the connotation of critical realism more abundant and profound.

4.3 The Contemporary Enlightenment of Beicun’s Creation

As a representative writer of Chinese avant-garde literature, Beicun’s works always question the essence of hu-

man nature with profound spiritual exploration and sharp consciousness of sin. Although the two full-length novels *I Have a Covenant with God* (2006) and *The Book of Consolation* (2016) are ten years apart, they jointly construct a spiritual spectrum from the redemption of individual souls to the collective trauma of society, which has a diagnostic significance for the spiritual crisis of contemporary society. In a modern society dominated by instrumental rationality, Beicun's works constitute a powerful counterattack against value nihilism. Through the transformation of Chen Busen from a "violent machine" to a "penitent" in *I Have a Covenant with God*, it reveals the reshaping power of faith on subjectivity. *The Book of Consolation* shows the ethical break caused by the lack of faith through the transmission and transformation of intergenerational trauma, establishing a state of "unfinished redemption" and declaring the invalidity of simple reconciliation. Beicun's two masterpieces not only reveal the activating effect of

faith on the reconstruction of the subject but also explore the possibility of integrating textual form experiments and the depth of thought. These enlightenments not only provide an important perspective for understanding the contemporary spiritual history of China but also provide a new direction for Chinese literary creation.

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