

A Study of the Disaster Narrative in Chi Zijian's "Snow and Raven"

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Abstract: *This paper takes Chi Zijian's novel Snow and Raven as the research object to explore its unique disaster narrative model. Distinct from the grand narratives of panic, destruction, and heroism in traditional disaster literature, Chi Zijian adopts a de-spectacularized narrative strategy: she depicts the mundane urban life in Fujia Dian of Harbin in detail, and by portraying the living conditions, emotional entanglements, and human choices of ordinary people amid the plague, constructs a disaster narrative with "everydayness" and "humanity" at its core. From four dimensions—narrative perspective, spatial construction, character portrayal, and thematic connotation—this paper analyzes how Snow and Raven transforms a horrific public health crisis into a profound reflection on the dignity of life, human resilience, and civilized order. Ultimately, it reveals the profound humanistic concern and historical warmth underlying the work.*

Keywords: *Snow and Raven*; Disaster narrative; Chi Zijian; Everydayness; Humanity; Humanistic care.

1. INTRODUCTION

Disaster, as an inevitable extreme scenario in the course of human civilization, has always been a significant motif in literary creation. From the great plague described by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides to Camus' *The Plague*, and from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* to contemporary apocalyptic sci-fi literary works, disaster literature has developed a relatively solid narrative paradigm: it often focuses on the suddenness, destructiveness, and spectacularity of disasters. By depicting the collapse of society, the breakdown of order, the struggle of individuals, and the rise of heroes, it creates intense dramatic conflicts and evokes readers' fear and awe. Within such a grand narrative, disaster itself is frequently portrayed as a grim-looking "Other," while human stories are reduced to a binary opposition of confronting, conquering, or submitting to this "Other" [1].

However, contemporary author Chi Zijian presents a strikingly different disaster narrative in her novel *Snow and Ravens*, set against the historical backdrop of the pneumonic plague outbreak in Northeast China in the winter of 1910, this catastrophe—which claimed over 60,000 lives—undoubtedly has all the makings of a thrilling disaster epic [2]. Yet Chi Zijian deliberately avoids macro-scale depictions of the epidemic. Instead of focusing her pen on the horrific sight of corpses strewn everywhere or the hysterical panic, she directs her gaze downward to the specific geographical space of Fujia Dian with the patience of an archaeologist and the compassion of an anthropologist, centering her attention on a group of ordinary people whose faces have faded into the dust of history: peddlers, sex workers, rickshaw pullers, officials, doctors, and foreign residents. In her writing, the terrifying plague is not an abrupt intruder; rather, like the cold of a harsh winter, it seeps silently into every crevice of daily life, becoming the backdrop to people's impoverished lives.

Therefore, through an inward-turning disaster narrative, *Snow and Ravens* successfully deconstructs the traditional model of grand narrative. Chi Zijian employs a narrative strategy of de-spectacularization, replacing the grand historical narrative of disaster with microscopic narratives of individual life histories. With her calm, restrained, yet poetic prose, she explores the dignity of individual life, the complex spectrum of human nature, and the remarkable resilience of daily life under extreme circumstances—thereby achieving a profound transcendence of conventional disaster writing [3]. This paper will conduct an in-depth analysis of the uniqueness of *Snow and Ravens* from four dimensions: narrative strategy, spatial construction, character portrayal, and thematic connotation. It aims to reveal how the novel transforms a crisis of death into a meditation on and eulogy to the value of life, and ultimately demonstrates the profound humanistic care and historical warmth embedded within it.

2. DE-SPECTACULARIZED NARRATIVE STRATEGY—FROM GRAND HISTORY TO MICROSCOPIC DAILY LIFE

The appeal of traditional disaster narratives stems largely from their construction of the "Spectacle." Highly visually striking scenes—such as explosions, tsunamis, and zombie sieges—serve as key devices to engage readers.

Snow and Raven, however, rejects this temptation from the very beginning. Chi Zijian's narrative strategy can be summarized as an effort of de-spectacularization: she directs readers' attention away from the external manifestations of disaster toward its internal textures of human nature and daily life.

2.1 Calm and Restrained Narrative Tone

The core narrative feature of *Snow and Raven* lies in the narrative of everydayness that runs through the entire novel. Even when the plot depicts scenes of Fujia Dian being under lockdown and the daily death toll rising, the novel's narrative focus remains centered on those "non-disaster-related" trivial matters of daily life. Since people need to eat, the business of grain shops becomes a daily concern for them; as the weather turns cold and people need heating, fluctuations in the price of charcoal stir their concern; and as people crave emotional comfort, Wang Chunshen's complex feelings for Zhai Fanggui and Xisui's innocent yearning for love continue to quietly take root.

For instance, depictions of death in the novel often stop at a hint, avoiding detailed accounts of corpse decomposition or the tragic conditions of the sick. When a character dies, the narrator acts more like a quiet recorder than an emotional orator. After Zhou Yushi's husband passes away, she "looks at his sallow face and thinks he is like a piece of wood drained of all moisture." This metaphor contains no gore, yet it accurately conveys the transience of life and the coldness of death. When addressing scenes of large-scale death—such as corpse transportation and cremation. Chi Zijian's prose remains equally calm. She describes the entire process: how bodies are wrapped, how they are carried, how they are thrown into the fire pit as if documenting a tedious procedure. This "cold" treatment is not indifference, but a more sophisticated narrative technique. It forces readers to detach themselves from the sensory reaction of physical discomfort and instead reflect on what death itself means to the living, as well as the state of life before it fades away. Susan Sontag, in her work *Illness as Metaphor*, criticized the social "demonization" of diseases. [4] Chi Zijian's calm narrative tone is precisely a conscious resistance to such "demonizing" narratives: she restores the pneumonic plague to its essence as a disease and death to its nature as a life phenomenon, thereby endowing the narrative with dignity.

2.2 The "Presence" and "Continuity" of Daily Life

The core narrative feature of *Snow and Raven* lies in the narrative of everydayness that runs through the entire novel. Even when the plot describes scenes of Fujia Dian being placed under lockdown and the daily death toll climbing, the novel's narrative focus remains centered on those "non-disaster-related" trivial matters of daily life. Since people need to eat, the business of grain shops becomes a daily concern for them; as the weather turns cold and heating is needed, fluctuations in the price of charcoal stir their concern; and as people crave emotional comfort, Wang Chunshen's complex feelings for Zhai Fanggui and Xisui's innocent yearning for love continue to quietly take root.

In the novel, considerable space is devoted to depicting the urban everyday life of Harbin: for instance, the peddling cries of small vendors and manual laborers on the streets, the exotic charm inherent in Harbin as a city, the religious rituals held by foreign expats, and the daily lives of neighbors. While such plot elements seem irrelevant to the disaster, they are in fact the result of Chi Zijian's unique design and deliberate craftsmanship during her writing process. This portrayal of everyday life constructs an everyday world distinct from the world of disaster—though the city was ravaged by the plague, the operational logic and order of the city had not completely collapsed.

This "present" everyday life carries dual significance. Firstly, it greatly enhances the authenticity of the narrative. A disaster is not an extreme event that severs the daily connections between characters and the external world; instead, it unfolds concretely in the basic necessities of every individual. When readers witness Xisui still rejoicing over a piece of candy, and Zhou Yushi still carefully calculating her household expenses to make ends meet, the plague that occurred a century ago no longer remains a distant historical term, but becomes vivid and lifelike.

Second, the continuity of daily life is in itself a form of silent resistance. It proclaims the tenacity of the power of life. As stated in the novel: "No matter how you live your days, they always go on." Under the shadow of death, the perseverance in "living one's life" embodies humanity's most primitive and resilient life instinct. This narrative strategy dispels the absolute authority of disaster. The pneumonic plague can claim lives, but it cannot completely destroy life itself. This eulogy to everydayness fills the disaster narrative of *Snow and Raven* with an inner sense of power—it does not wail in despair, but affirms the existence of life amid the ruins.

2.3 Polyphonic Civilian Perspective

Often accompanying grand narratives is a single narrative perspective that centers on heroic or central figures. Snow and Raven, however, completely breaks this pattern by adopting a "polyphonic" civilian perspective. There is no absolute protagonist in the novel: Dr. Wu Liande is a key figure driving the historical narrative, yet his perspective is neither the only one nor even the primary one. The narrative lens shifts frequently across every corner of Fujia Dian: from Zhou Yushi, who runs a grain shop, to Zhai Fanggui, a sex worker; from Wang Chunshen, a carriage driver, to Sergei, a patrol officer; and to Xisui, an innocent teenager. These characters, with their diverse identities and social strata, collectively form a "perspective matrix" for observing the disaster.

Through the eyes of these novelistic characters, readers perceive a "heteroglossic" Fujia Dian. [5] Here, there are livelihood-sustaining businesses, as well as human warmth and coldness under the shadow of the plague and the fear of death. This polyphonic narration transforms history from the cold numbers and conclusions in official archives into an objective entity formed by the convergence of countless vivid individual perceptions and subjective experiences.

It avoids the monopoly of any single voice in narrating the "truth" and presents the inherent complexity and objectivity of disasters. Everyone is both the protagonist of their own story and a bystander in others' stories. This heteroglossic narrative effect authentically simulates the social ecology that emerges when a disaster strikes—chaotic, diverse, and fraught with uncertainty.

3. SPATIAL POLITICS: FUJIA DIAN AS A VESSEL OF DISASTER AND LIFE

Space is never merely a passive backdrop in disaster narratives, but an active participant with agency. Fujia Dian—the core space in Snow and Raven—serves as a complex vessel rich in political, cultural, and life connotations. Through the careful construction of this space, Chi Zijian profoundly reveals the dialectical relationships between order and chaos, isolation and connection, and death and life amid disaster.

3.1 The "Siege-like" Space of Confinement and Isolation

First and foremost, Fujia Dian functions as a physical "siege-like" space in the novel. As the plague spread, the Qing government, following Dr. Wu Liande's advice, imposed a strict military blockade on Fujia Dian. Recurring images in the novel—such as barbed wire fences, sentry posts, and roadblocks—clearly delineate the boundary between life and death. Fujia Dian became an isolated island abandoned by the outside world: those inside could not get out, and those outside could not get in.

This physical confinement directly gave rise to immense psychological pressure. Despair, suspicion, and panic spread and festered within the confined space like viruses. The imagery of the "siege" has long carried rich cultural connotations—it serves as both protection and imprisonment. In Snow and Raven, Fujia Dian's siege-like state highly condenses and intensifies the experience of disaster [6]. It becomes a secluded "social laboratory" where all social contradictions, human weaknesses, and ethical dilemmas that are usually concealed in ordinary times are sharply amplified within this closed world.

Relationships between people grow extraordinarily strained: neighbors may be wary of each other out of fear, and family members may even be abandoned if infected. The confined space of Fujia Dian thus evolves into an extreme scenario that tests human nature, forcing every individual within it to make a choice: to uphold their humanity, or to succumb to their animalistic instincts.

3.2 The Interweaving of Order and Chaos

Within the "siege-like" space of Fujia Dian, the space is not monolithic; instead, it presents a complex landscape where order and chaos intertwine intensely. On the one hand, the forces of modern medicine, represented by Dr. Wu Liande, sought to establish a new, rational "sanitary space" here. He implemented a strict quarantine system, required disinfection in every household, set up anti-epidemic hospitals, and even pushed for cremation despite immense pressure. Using the ruler of science and the scalpel of rationality, these measures carved out scattered enclaves of order within the chaotic Fujia Dian. Spaces such as hospitals, disinfection stations, and office areas stood for the power of reason, civilization, and progress—serving as frontline positions resisting the invasion of death [7].

On the other hand, the citizens here adamantly clung to their traditional way of life in the face of the disaster. They distrusted modern science and instead resorted to superstitious beliefs to speculate about the cause of the plague, attributing it to the mischief of the "drought demon" (a mythical entity in traditional Chinese culture believed to trigger droughts and plagues) or the wrath of the gods—whom they thought had sent calamities to punish humanity. These rumors enveloped the entire city and exacerbated social panic. Moreover, some lawless individuals took advantage of the chaos to hoard goods for profiteering, inflate prices, and even resort to robbery [8].

This chaos manifested itself not only at the social level but also within families. For instance, in the novel, after Wang Chunshen's wife contracted the plague, he was torn between fear of the disease and his inability to sever the family bond with his wife. This psychological struggle is a direct reflection of the conflict between the concept of traditional ethical order and the instinct for survival.

The clash between Wu Liande's efforts to promote scientific anti-plague measures in the plague-stricken area and the inherent beliefs of Fujia Dian constitutes the primary plot conflict of the novel. This is not merely a contest between science and ignorance, but more importantly a head-on confrontation between two paradigms of civilization in the face of disaster. Instead of simply praising one side and criticizing the other, Chi Zijian objectively presents the hardships and costs involved in the process of breaking free from the old order.

3.3 The Imagery of Life Beneath the Snow Cover

"Snow" and "Ravens" are core motifs that run through the entire novel. They not only form part of the novel's title but also jointly define its emotional tone and temporal-spatial boundaries. Snow is a common imagery of Northeast China's winters: in winter, heavy snow falls in flurries, shrouding the heavens and earth in a vast expanse of whiteness. snow can cover everything on the surface of this plague-ravaged city—streets, rooftops, and even the corpses of citizens who died from the plague. The pure snow and the filthy reality of death form an eerie harmony, as if nature were mourning this human tragedy and gathering its remains in its own way. The coldness of the snow and the deathly chill brought by the plague are mutually reinforcing and intrinsically linked, together constructing the novel's oppressive and grim tone.

Yet the imagery of snow is not merely associated with unbearable cold; it also symbolizes purity and purification. The heavy snow covers all filth—whether it is garbage on the streets, or the evils and sufferings of humanity—and everything seems to achieve temporary purification beneath this blanket of whiteness [9]. When spring arrives, the ice and snow melt, and all that was buried will see the light of day again. This further implies the renewal and cycle of life.

As for "ravens," in traditional culture, they are usually an omen of death and misfortune. In the novel, ravens often foreshadow death: they peck at corpses and linger like a shadow alongside the fear of death. Yet in the novel, they are also living beings on this land, striving to find food and survive in the harsh winter. Their pursuit of death stems not from malice, but solely from the instinct for survival. snow and ravens—one static, the other dynamic; one white, the other black; one pure, the other filthy—jointly construct a natural space full of tension. In this space, death and life are not diametrically opposed, but interdependent; together, they form an organic part of the life cycle on this vast northern land.

4. THE PRISM OF HUMAN NATURE: PORTRAITS OF BEINGS UNDER EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES

If narrative strategy and spatial construction form the framework of *Snow and Raven*, then the rich and complex character portrayal is its flesh and blood. Chi Zijian does not create flawless heroes or irredeemable villains; instead, she turns Fujia Dian (Harbin) into a prism of human nature, refracting the vibrant spectrum of human qualities that emerges under extreme circumstances.

4.1 Heroism Under Extreme Circumstances

Dr. Wu Liande is the only real historical figure in the novel and also a key character driving the plot development. Yet Chi Zijian does not portray him as an omniscient savior who rescues people from suffering [10]. Instead, the Wu Liande depicted in the book is a realistic modern individual with genuine human traits. As an anti-epidemic expert equipped with advanced scientific knowledge, he still experiences stress, fear, and even confusion when confronted with an unprecedented plague and uncooperative people. He has to navigate interactions with

government officials, combat the ignorance and distrust of the public, and even confront skepticism from his peers.

His heroism does not lie in extraordinary abilities or superhuman wisdom, but in his adherence to professional ethics and the scientific spirit in the face of immense pressure. He personally dissects corpses, ventures deep into plague-stricken areas at the risk of infection, and makes the decision to cremate the deceased despite widespread opposition—behind these actions lies the sense of responsibility and commitment of a modern intellectual. He represents the force of rationality, civilization, and progress.

Beyond Wu Liande, other medical staff in the novel—such as Dr. Yao—and some dedicated grassroots officials collectively embody the brilliance of human nature amid disaster. They are all ordinary people caught in the tide of their era, yet it is the perseverance of these ordinary individuals in their respective posts that forms the backbone of disaster resistance. By shaping this group of characters, Chi Zijian expresses respect for the modern scientific spirit; behind this respect lies Chi Zijian's humanistic perspective [11].

4.2 Complex Human Nature Amid Conflicts Between Desire and Morality

The most touching part of *Snow and Raven* lies in its portrayal of the ordinary citizens of Fujia Dian. With her consistent "warm realism," Chi Zijian delves into the hidden recesses of human nature, revealing the complex faces of ordinary people amid disaster.

Zhou Yushi, who runs a grain shop, is shrewd, calculating, and even somewhat selfish. When grain prices soared, her first thought was for her own business and survival. Yet at the same time, she embodies the kindness and resilience of those at the bottom of society: she helps her neighbors in need and feels sympathy for figures like Wang Chunshen. Her behavioral logic is entirely based on the practical considerations of survival, making her impossible to define with the simplistic labels of "good" or "evil."

Zhai Fanggui, a prostitute, is a character of remarkable artistic value in the novel. As someone at the bottom of society, she fits the classic literary archetype of "the insulted and injured"—a tragic female figure subjected to humiliation and harm. Nevertheless, deep in her heart, she retains a longing for dignity and genuine affection. There is no romantic love between her and Wang Chunshen; instead, their bond is defined by interdependent warmth—a mutual reliance for survival. Amid the disaster, she demonstrates unusual clarity of mind and courage: she faces death calmly and with dignity, and this calmness serves as a powerful protest against the corrupt world around her.

Wang Chunshen, a cart driver, is cowardly and ignorant. When his wife dies, his first thought is to protect himself. Yet deep down, he harbors a simple sense of conscience and cares for Zhai Fanggui.

All these characters embody the "gray areas" of human nature. They are neither heroes nor villains, but ordinary people struggling to survive in the disaster. Chi Zijian spares no effort in depicting their selfishness, greed, and fear, just as she does in showing their occasional moments of kindness, sympathy, and love. This profound insight into and compassionate understanding of the complexity of human nature are precisely the core embodiment of the novel's humanistic care.

4.3 Emotional Connections Between People Under the Threat of Death

Enshrouded in the shadow of death, sincere human emotions among people serve as the spiritual pillar sustaining their will to live. There are several emotional threads in *Snow and Raven* that infuse the cold narrative with warmth. Between cart driver Wang Chunshen and prostitute Zhai Fanggui exists a complex emotional bond that transcends romantic love and desire: they seek solace in each other and jointly form a temporary and fragile "home" [12].

The innocent crush that the teenage Xisui has on the Russian girl Natasha encourages the two teenagers to face the threat of death together with courage. These depictions of sincere human emotions in *Snow and Raven*, together with the grand anti-epidemic narrative, constitute the novel's two core narrative threads. Chi Zijian intends to convey that no matter how harsh the circumstances, the human longing for emotion is inalienable. In *Snow and Raven*, sincere human emotions among people are not a romanticized slogan, but a concrete, everyday practice. It is precisely these trivial emotional practices that form the strongest defense against nihilism and despair, allowing life to still radiate the brilliance of human nature even under the shadow of death.

5. THEMATIC IMPLICATIONS: FROM REFLECTION ON DISASTER TO EULOGY OF LIFE

Through its unique narrative strategy, spatial construction, and character portrayal, *Snow and Raven* ultimately attains profound thematic implications. It is not merely a literary reconstruction of a historical period, but also a philosophical meditation on life, civilization, and human nature.

5.1 The Tender Reconstruction of Historical Memory

The 1910 pneumonic plague in Northeast China was a major public health event in modern Chinese history, yet it remains relatively obscure in public memory. Official historical records tend to focus on epidemic statistics, anti-epidemic measures, and Dr. Wu Liande's achievements—while the fear, suffering, and struggles of the unnamed victims who perished in the disaster have been overshadowed by the grand narrative of history [13].

To a large extent, the writing of *Snow and Raven* represents an effort to deconstruct the grand narrative embedded in historical discourse. Chi Zijian returns to the historical scene through literary means, but her goal is not to retell history, but to "experience" it through an emotional lens. By creating fictional characters such as Zhou Yushi, Zhai Fanggui, and Wang Chunshen, she infuses the cold fabric of history with human warmth and emotion. She makes us believe that history is not merely shaped by heroes and major events, but also by the daily lives and lived experiences of countless ordinary people.

This tender reconstruction of historical memory elevates *Snow and Raven* beyond a typical historical novel. It does not merely explain history from the framework of grand narrative, but calls for a genuine reckoning with history—evoking empathy and remembrance for the lives lost. This constitutes a historical perspective rooted in humanistic spirit: it refuses to forget, and above all, refuses to forget the silent majority who were erased from historical records.

5.2 A Profound Eulogy to the Resilience of Life

Though *Snow and Raven* is filled with depictions of Harbin under the shadow of death, the spiritual undertone of the entire novel is not fear and despair. Instead, it is an affectionate tribute to the courage for life. This courage manifests itself on multiple levels.

Firstly, it lies in people's tenacious instinct for survival. Even though deaths occur every day, those who survive still do everything they can to keep living and meet their most basic physiological needs; the will to survive constitutes the most primitive driving force of life.

Secondly, it is reflected on the spiritual level. Faced with the threat of death, people do not collapse completely. They still exchange jokes, engage in gossip, and develop romantic feelings. This attachment to life and pursuit of beauty amid despair reveals the indelible brilliance of human nature.

Finally, it is embodied on the cultural level. Although the urban folk culture and local customs of Fujia Dian are impacted by the disaster, their core remains intact. People still abide by certain traditional life orders, and this cultural resilience provides individuals with a spiritual sense of belonging and security.

From the biological to the spiritual, and then to the cultural level, Chi Zijian depicts the resilient form of life in a progressive manner, ultimately accomplishing the highest praise for life itself [14].

5.3 A Calm Examination of Civilization and Progress

The modern epidemic prevention system led by Dr. Wu Liande ultimately overcame the plague, which seems to fit the classic narrative of modernity—"science triumphs over ignorance" and "progress defeats backwardness." However, Chi Zijian's profundity lies in her refusal to simply eulogize this outcome; instead, she maintains a calm stance of examination. While presenting the power of modernity, she also reveals its "violent" side.

For the sake of epidemic prevention, the entire Fujia Dian was placed under mandatory lockdown, and individual freedom was completely deprived. To prevent the spread of the virus, infected people were forcibly taken away, and families were torn apart. The decision to implement cremation was an even greater shock to the traditional

Chinese ethic of "being laid to rest in the earth." In the novel, there exists intense tension between Dr. Wu Liande's scientific rationality and the emotions and customs of the people. Chi Zijian does not judge who is right or wrong; she merely presents this conflict objectively.

This reflects her recognition that "progress" is not a linear, cost-free process. Every leap forward in civilization may be accompanied by the subversion of certain traditional values and the harm to individual emotions. Such a complex attitude toward modernity elevates the ideological depth of *Snow and Raven* beyond simple praise or criticism. It guides us to reflect: On the path of pursuing civilization and progress, how should we balance efficiency with humanity, and science with ethics? This remains a proposition of practical significance to this day.

6. CONCLUSION

With its unique disaster narrative, Chi Zijian's *Snow and Raven* provides an outstanding model for contemporary Chinese literature and even world disaster literature. Through the de-spectacularization of the traditional grand narrative, it transforms a horrific plague into a careful exploration of microscopic daily life and the depths of human nature. With a calm and restrained tone, adherence to daily life, and a polyphonic civilian perspective, the novel constructs a real and complex disaster space—Fujia Dian. Within this space, order and chaos intertwine, and life and death dance together.

By shaping a series of characters such as Dr. Wu Liande, Zhou Yushi, and Zhai Fanggui, Chi Zijian places human nature under the prism of extreme circumstances, refracting its complex and true spectrum. She not only praises the brilliance of human nature represented by professional ethics but also compassionately understands the moral dilemmas of ordinary people under the pressure of survival, and vividly depicts the powerful role of love and desire as spiritual pillars. Ultimately, the novel's theme transcends mere historical reproduction, elevating into an eulogy to the resilience of life, a tender reconstruction of historical memory, and a calm examination of the progress of civilization.

In today's era, where global public health incidents occur frequently and uncertainty is increasing, the disaster narrative of *Snow and Raven* is particularly precious. It tells us that in the face of disaster, what we need most is perhaps not spectacle that incites panic or illusory heroism, but respect for every ordinary life, adherence to daily life, and a profound understanding of the complexity of human nature [15]. For, as the novel reveals, even in the harshest winter, beneath the snow and ominous ravens, the faint light of life never fades. This is perhaps the warmest and most solid strength that literature can offer us in the face of disaster.

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