

Gender Dilemma and *Fu Ji* in *Ji Shen* in light of Power Theory

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Abstract: *Ji Shen*, the masterpiece of Sun Pin, is an important part of contemporary Chinese literature. The novel shows the modern popularity of "planchette writing" culture and explores people's alienation in the influence of the culture. The core idea in *Ji Shen* coincides with the French sociologist Foucault's theory of social power systems, both mutually evident. This perspective reveals that although the protagonists, Chang Yong and Yang Deqing, keep trying to reclaim their gender, their journey of resistance is always manipulated by "power", culminating in the unsolvable gender dilemma described in *Ji Shen*. Similarly, Foucault believed that power could only be overcome through sadism and masochism, but that sadism and masochism could also result in severe self-harm and ultimately death. Moreover, *Fu Ji* has a long history in China and became popular again in the 1980s and 1990s. This novel is a refraction of this history and has significant cultural value.

Keywords: Sun Pin, *Fu Ji*, Foucault, power, gender.

1. WRITING FEATURES OF *Ji Shen*

Ji Shen is one of Sun Pin's masterpieces. Among the post-80s writers in China, Sun is the one who must be mentioned. Far removed from the aesthetic style of the "post-80s writers' group," her style maintains a legacy with contemporary female writers' styles such as Lu Yin's, Xiao Hong's, Eileen's, and Wang Anyi's (Chen 2013). "Sun Pin's novels, mainly middle-grade, are inimitable and distinct, which, with the themes of body and lust, express loneliness and despair to seek breakthrough and redemption (Han 2019, 31–37)." Unlike emerging writers keen on "modern China," Sun still takes "vernacular China" as the writing core, showing a simple return to humanity under modernization and Chinese "fringe culture".

Sun Frequency's novels, especially *Ji Shen*, are characterised by two main features: firstly, they focus on the deviation of human beings from the trend of the times; and secondly, they observe the experience of survival and alienation of human beings in modern society through sex so as to explore the dilemmas of the "other" people's lives. Due to her distinctive creative style and profound connotations, her works are hotly debated whenever they are released, and it seems that the author herself intends to stir up such controversies. The author does not seem to want her work to be treated only as a fictional text. In fact, her works are more like a report on the development of contemporary Chinese society, with broad cultural and sociological connotations, such as *Ji Shen*, a research novel describing the psychology of society and the culture of *Fu Ji*.

The story told in *Ji Shen* is not complicated: it takes place in the mountainous region of Lvliang, Shanxi Province, where the heroine, Chang Ying, was blind and was raised by her grandfather. In order to avoid being bullied and humiliated after his death, he renamed her Chang Yong, disguised her as a man, and trained her to tell fortunes with copper coins. But after her grandfather's death, Chang Yong's disguise was soon discovered and she was raped and then impregnated. The hero, Yang Deqing, a small-time gangster whom everyone hated, also discovered Chang Yong's gender, but he suffered from erectile dysfunction due to a previous experience and didn't do anything to Chang Yong. When he discovered that Chang Yong is pregnant, he began to take care of her, and the two of them became dependent on each other. In order to make others no longer dare to belittle them, Yang Deqing and Chang Yong worked together as the Ma Pi of the religious festival that pray to the gods. After that, Yang Deqing had continued to work as a Ma Pi until he died of self-inflicted injuries, while Chang Yong turned into a *Ji Shen* and finally burned herself to death. This is where the name "*Ji Shen*" comes from, as it has long been customary in China to perform performances in order to bring down the gods, known as "*Fu Ji*". In this novel, such performances take the form of self-mutilation and procession. For example, Chang Yong used her own body as the venue for the performance, thus earning her the name "*Ji Shen*". In hence, the novel is inextricably linked to the culture of *Fu Ji*.

In *Ji Shen*, Sun Pin uses the isolated mountainous area to create a time-space dislocation, and through exaggerated writing, she writes about the redemption and destruction of Chang Yong and Yang Deqing, two marginalised

people, "using the small impermanence of the individual to reflect the common spiritual condition of our time". What Sun wants to express is the culture of "Fu Ji" that was active in the 1980s and 1990s and its alienation of human beings. This is a kind of outdated "bad habit", which brings people endless torment in the novel, spreading from the body to the spirit, and ultimately leading to the destruction of human beings. Ji Shen demonstrates Sun's "high degree of concern for reality in his creations, her persistent search for the inner spirit of his characters, and her diligent pursuit of the truth of existence". However, in the novel, the questioning of the truth of existence does not find a perfect answer. The main characters, Chang Yong and Yang Deqing, are unable to change their fate no matter how much they fight against it, and eventually end up dead, creating an unsolvable dilemma of Ji Shen. Why are Chang Yong and Yang Deqing unable to break through their existential dilemma to gain a new life? This seemingly unreasonable ending can be explained by French sociologist Foucault's theory of power system. With the help of Foucault's theory, and based on Sun Pin's portrayal of the confusion and conflict between the two sexes, we can find a brand new perspective for interpreting the story, and comprehensively dissect all kinds of "oppression" in that period, especially the oppression of Ji Shen as a marginal culture. By placing the novel under sociological theories and connecting fiction with reality, the novel can also break through the limitations of a virtual story, and be endowed with a deeper meaning and revelation of life. In conclusion, this paper tries to explore the destiny of two people affected by the culture of "Fu Ji" under the background of chaotic times through Sun's novel, and the main method of analysing is Foucault's theory of power. In addition, by looking beyond the text and placing the story in the context of China at that time, we can also explore the deeper reasons for the popularity of "Fu Ji" culture.

2. GENDER AND OPERATION OF SYSTEMS OF POWER IN JI SHEN

The story of *Ji Shen* is not complicated: it took place in the mountainous region of Lvliang, Shanxi province, where the heroine, Chang Ying, was a blind girl her grandfather raised. To avoid Chang Ying's inability to survive independently and prevent her from being bullied after his death, her grandfather renamed her Chang Yong, disguised her as a man, and trained her to tell fortunes with copper coins. However, after her grandfather's death, Chang Yong's disguise was soon discovered, and she was raped and then became pregnant. The hero, Yang Deqing, a small-time gangster everyone disliked, also recognised Chang Yong's gender. However, he did nothing to Chang Yong because his suffering from erectile dysfunction arose from a previous experience. When he found out that Chang Yong was pregnant, he began to take care of her, and the two became dependent on each other. Yang Deqing worked with Chang Yong as *Ma Pi*¹ for the Ying Shen Sai Society to ensure no one would dare to belittle them again. Afterwards, Yang Deqing continued to work as *Ma Pi* until he died of self-mutilation, while Chang Yong became a medium and eventually burned herself to death.

There are two most important goals in the lives of Chang Yong and Yang Deqing. The first is to regain their gender: Chang Yong is forced to disguise herself as a man, while Yang Deqing is forcibly castrated. The second one is to find themselves: they have been belittled, bullied and lived like insects and animals. The story revolves around these two goals, in the pursuit of which the two protagonists die. Little do they know that their quest is doomed to failure because a hidden mechanism controls and regulates their behaviours: social power. This theory was established by Foucault, who used it to dissect modern society. He argued that man is under the control of a system of power from which they can never escape but can only be unwittingly manipulated by it, which is invisible and cannot be directly defined. However, everywhere in our society, the role and discipline of power are manifested, forming a tight hierarchy so infallible that man can never find his true self under its control.

The most famous of Foucault's theories of power is the 'circular prison' theory, which reflects the state of Chang Yong's life. In the story, the county's inhabitants are always attracted to her and secretly look at the eccentric Chang Yong: she is dressed as a man but has a "fat ass" and a thin, feminine voice. With this contrast, the county's residents became interested in Chang Yong's gender, which also filled Chang Yong's surroundings with the gaze of others. Chang Yong is well aware of these gazes, even though she cannot see them. This one-sided voyeurism resembles what Foucault calls "the architecture of panoramic openness": a modern disciplinary mechanism has produced a circular prison with a tower at its centre, with shutters; thus, the watcher inside the tower can monitor any criminal at any time, without the criminal knowing when he will be watched; so he can only assume that he is being watched at all times, and has to perform every action in this state (Michel 2019). Chang Yong lives in this kind of ring prison, where the surveillance is focused on "gender," where she does not know when she is being watched and where she has to assume that she is being watched all the time and regulate her behaviour in this way

¹ *Ma Pi* refers to people who used to beg for rain by extreme means in the old countryside.

to hide her femininity. Moreover, she is in an upgraded version of the panopticon: a prison in which she is the only prisoner and the whole county is her monitor. This surveillance is so oppressive that even at night, when she pees in her home, she has to pee into a canister standing up like a man. In addition to the oppression, the panopticon also brought with it an intense fear that her gender disguise would be detected. She said, "If everyone knew I was a woman, I would not be able to live. All I have is to die (Sun 2016, 110)." In the panopticon, Chang Yong is consciously disciplining herself, and she is helpless to do so because the "power system" has captured her weakness: her gender. In reality, modern people tend to face the same "circular prison" as Chang Yong because "gender" is the most hidden place for people and where the power system is most easily enforced and deterrent.

Gender is a physical difference in the social relations constructed in *Ji Shen* and a hierarchy of power in which women are always vulnerable. Weakness means the possibility of bullying, which is the "default" of the county residents. From Grandpa and Yang Deqing to everyone in Jiaocheng County, even Chang Yong himself, it was accepted that a blind woman would be raped, stolen or even killed. The men around her "spied" on her day in and day out, not simply to identify her gender but to find a breakthrough in the bullying. The grandfather believes that the breakthrough to change this fate lies in gender and that social power is much less oppressive to men, so he has Chang Yong "castrated" as a male. This change, in turn, reinforced the default: a blind woman could not live. This view is so deeply ingrained that, under subtle discipline, women become "a disease, a shame, a distant and vague phantom (Sun 2016, 78)" for Chang Yong.

Women and everyone in society are defined and regulated by power through the panopticon and hierarchy. Even Yang Deqing, on the fringes of society, is not immune. Having lost his parents as a teenager, Yang Deqing had no one to turn to. He only desired to support himself without skills, so he often stole to survive. It would seem that Yang Deqing, far removed from this system of power, should have been virtually immune to its discipline, but it turned out to be just the opposite. The discipline he received was more direct and brutal: a severe beating when he was caught stealing. Once he came into contact with society, he was quickly disciplined. The beating made Yang Deqing realise that his behaviour was not allowed. In a superficial sense, this is an exhortation to be a good person, but in a more profound sense, the beating subjugates Yang Deqing to mainstream values and draws him back into the value system of social power:

"After he was nearly killed, Yang Deqing seldom stole and started to earn his living. He was invited to the funeral of any family, carrying a coffin, or holding boys, girls or a paper cow." (Sun 2016, 94–95)

This mechanism, which constantly draws people from the margins to the centre, is driven by the "knowledge" of reason, science, morality, etc. Foucault says: "Knowledge normalises discipline, produces oppression, forms a set of standards of power and value judgements. To be incompatible with knowledge is to be incompatible with power."

Nor does the punishment of "knowledge" stop at the physical level. Once, when Yang Deqing was helping out at a funeral, the master asked him to carry pork into the kitchen, and Yang, who had never been with a woman before, felt a burning desire for pork:

"Yang Deqing took his trousers down to his heels with bare buttocks and poked hard at a valve of pork. just poked a few times, he was caught, the person who came like Zhong Kui catching a ghost grabbed him and pulled him out of the valve his face still had an expression of an impending orgasm, nervousness, spasms, ecstasy, and the most pious and sacred anticipation of that instant." (Sun 2016, 95–96)

This incident dealt a severe blow to Yang Deqing, and when he spied on Chang Yong shortly afterwards:

"He hurriedly touched himself down there, just masturbating through the glass. However, no, it was always soft there. He suddenly remembered when he had been pulled raw from that pork valve, which was about when he could not. He was castrated." (Sun 2016, 100–101)

The punishment is severe, as it disqualifies Yang Deqing from being a man, that is, the loss of a 'male' gender identity. Looking at Chang Yong and Yang Deqing, we can see that the discipline of power is focused on gender and, in turn, is achieved through gender; in other words, power uses gender to rule. However, gender is often only a façade, and those disciplined and oppressed by it will not always be willing to submit to it. In the closed loop of power-knowledge-regulation, they seem to have found a breakthrough in the more profound, more natural

expression of gender: sex. Sexual impulse is a primitive human instinct that seems to have no legal discipline, and later, Chang Yong and Yang Deqing used it as a breakthrough in life.

3. FROM GENDER TO SEXUALITY: TOTAL MANIPULATION OF PEOPLE BY POWER

Both Chang Yong herself and her grandfather understood that she was in a panopticon, but they approached it in a completely different way. Grandpa's approach was to emphasise Chang Yong's "male identity constantly ":

Whenever people were suspicious of Chang Yong's gender, he would take her out into the street and say, "That is my grandson; let us go for a walk at the west end." (Sun 2016, 78)

Moreover, to eliminate Chang Yong's femininity:

"He asked her to pee standing up as a child and told her this was how men peed. After she had her period at the age of 13 or 14, he told her that she must not dry her menstrual belt in the yard and that it must not be seen, only hidden in the darkest corners. He would not let her wear a bra and used a cloth belt to wrap her breasts all year round, flattening and compacting them, wishing to ram them into the flesh like a foundation." (Sun 2016, 77-78)

Grandpa thought that by turning Chang Yong into a man, he could end the surveillance of the panopticon because men were at the top of the hierarchy of power, and he wanted Chang Yong to be a part of it. But Chang Yong's solution was the opposite: she wanted to prove that she was a woman, and "although she was afraid that people would recognise her as a woman and bully her, never wanted to admit it, she was more afraid that no one would know she was a woman." (Sun 2016, 102)

In Chang Yong's view, she is being watched because the uncertainty of her gender is a source of great controversy. If she were to identify herself as a woman, the panopticon would lose its foundation. In addition to this, she is also self-confirming because she does not want to live out her life as a man. Why does she want to prove her femininity? Because beneath the representation of gender lies a sexual impulse. Gender can be disguised, but sexuality cannot be eliminated. Chang Yong's sexuality has been repressed until Yang Deqing's pry, which brings her sexual impulses back with greater ferocity.

After her grandfather's death, not many people came to ask Chang Yong to tell his fortune. To survive, she had to go through the rubbish and find food that had not yet spoiled at night. She thought no one would find her during that period, but she was watched by Yang Deqing and a few other gangsters, who became so interested in her gender that they sent Yang Deqing to sneak into Chang Yong's house to spy on her. Chang Yong is blind but has keen senses and immediately notices this surveillance. At this moment, she was not only alarmed but also shocked:

"She was delighted that a prying man was standing outside her door. How could this happen? Wasn't this what Grandpa had feared most? However, why shouldn't she be happy if a man stood outside the door watching her? He was her soulmate. She had dreamed of crawling out of this infinite armour of men she was carrying, and now, suddenly, she felt a crack. In the darkness, she began to move to undress..... leaving her whole body hanging out in plain view" (Sun 2016, 103)

Why must Chang Yong let the man outside the window see her body? According to Lacan's Mirror Stage theory (Zhu 2001), Chang Yong's ego has been split into pieces by years of disguise, and like a baby, she cannot recognise or identify herself. To establish a unified self, she needs to objectify herself to identify herself through the 'mirror' of Yang Deqing. Through the object of Yang Deqing, she can see her femininity, which is closely linked to her physical desires, so that sexuality becomes a form of expression and proof of gender. After taking off her clothes "She found that the more she folded her breasts, the larger they became, like berries growing in the wind, ripening so fast that they were almost ready to ooze juice at the touch. She was too careful to touch them again. Then she felt herself parting her legs again, and she parted herself like a clam shell. She began to get damp there and even could smell that strange dampness seeping from the depths of her body." (Sun 2016, 104)

Yang Deqing's voyeurism seems to have opened Pandora's Box: with self-evidence of gender Chang Yong inevitably and naturally falls into the realm of sexuality. When she takes off her clothes for self-evidence of her gender, the primitive sexual impulses in her body cannot be restrained from surging outwards, so unconsciously, gender proof is replaced by sexual proof, and the desire for gender identity becomes sexual desire. So, five days

have passed since the voyeurism, and when another man creeps into her room, she does not panic but cooperates and allows herself to be 'raped':

"..... She suddenly found her two hands on the man's waist, and she held him as if she was afraid that he would run away, and later she clamped her legs around him The man was busy finding a place there and trying to penetrate, while Chang Yong was busy being scared and happy at the same time. Of course, she was scared because she was about to be raped, but she was so happy that it bordered on lustful. Over the years, all those things that had been suppressed and imprisoned had returned, not only returned but also intensified, coming over to ask her for more to push her down and trample her underfoot. Only by being raped by a man can she prove that she is a woman after all." (Sun 2016, 105–106)

"The only way to prove that she is a woman after all is to be raped by a man," indicating that the way to prove gender is through the act of sex, and Chang Yong seems to have found a way to break out of the trap. However, sex, the deepest of human primal desires, seems outside the regulation system. Chang Yong sensed this, so she was eager to be "raped." It is not that her sexuality overwhelms her or that she prefers alternative forms of sex, but that this form is a loophole in the system of power that allows her to construct and unify herself while rejecting the discipline of power.

Is sex not within the regulation of power? A famous Western saying is, "Everything in life is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power."² Systems of power still manipulate sex. In the *History of Sexual Experience*, Foucault states, "What is peculiar for modern society is not so much that sex is confined to the shadows, but that people talk about it endlessly while keeping it a hidden secret (She 2000, 27)." By examining European Christian societies, Foucault found that sexual liberation was accompanied by an explosion of sexual discourse, which "proliferated within the operations of power: the institutions of power incited people to talk about sex and to talk more and more about it (She 2000, 13)" and finally, through human self-narratives, sex was incorporated into the scope and discourse of scientific observation. Sex is not the breaking point that overthrows the system of power. Still, that power encourages people to talk about sex because sex is central to social management. In talking about sex, we enter into a discourse shaped by power, where even the production and mobilisation of desire are under its control. The sex people fantasise about to counter power and gain freedom is a creation of power. Chang Yong thinks she has achieved liberation in sex, but what follows is an even more significant blow. Foucault argues that sex is at the intersection of control of the body and control of the population, that it produces not only pleasure but also population, and that this is an essential basis for power to ensure its manipulative power.

Three months later, when Yang Deqing came to Chang Yong's house again, he was shocked to discover: Chang Yong was pregnant. At this point, a great contradiction lay before Chang Yong: she had been trying to prove her womanhood, but she could not give birth to a child as a woman. Otherwise, her secret would become public, and the county's residents would know she was a blind woman who could be raped. With pity on her, Yang Deqing took her to a small clinic in the county next door for a check-up, bought the medicine and sent her back. The discipline of power was harsh: Chang Yong aborted her pregnancy through medication, nearly killing her.

Both Chang Yong and Yang Deqing's gender representation dilemmas ultimately return to the kernel of 'sexuality'. The system of power disciplines Chang Yong by making her experience sexuality and dissuades Yang Deqing by making him lose it. The gender of Chang Yong and Yang Deqing is ambiguous and uncertain. While Chang Yong gains some of his masculinity through disguise, Yang Deqing loses his masculinity after being stimulated, which is revealed through gender but acts on sex. Yang Deqing's loss of sexuality is a deprivation of gender from the inside out. Furthermore, this discipline had a lasting effect, as when Chang Yong took the initiative to touch Yang Deqing shortly afterwards, Yang was unable to respond, although he was on fire inside:

"All his nerves began to tense and twitch, and a fire began to burn inside him. What if, he thought, what if it would be okay? However, the organ was still soft in Chang Yong's hand, and for a moment, it was a little dumb, but then it quickly shrank back down and went soft again. But he couldn't; his penis still did not get an erection; he was in tears; he broke away from her hands and arms and yelled loudly and roughly, "What do you want? Quickly let go, sleep." (Sun 2016, 114–115)

² The quote is widely attributed to Wilde, but there is still no reliable basis for identifying the author.

Here, Chang Yong begins to mirror the search for the self again, but this time the sexual mechanism does not work because the object of sex has lost its sexual function. Interestingly, they think that through sex, they can break through to power and that sexual liberation is the disintegration of the power system; here, however, the power system forces Yang Deqing to repress his sexuality, making them acutely aware that sex is merely a grip of the power system. What is more interesting is that in this process of sexual repression, power does not intervene, as if it is Yang Deqing's 'self-selection'.

Discipline alone is not enough to achieve control over all people. Power, while controlling people, also empowers them so that society can form a perfect 'hierarchy'. For Yang Deqing, the system of power gives him a particular hierarchy, the feeling of being needed:

"Only for Chang Yong, he is still a person because she is weaker and more alone than he is, and she needs him. And he needs her for that need." (Sun 2016, 114)

Behind this need is the transmission of the discourse of power and the creation of a hierarchy, which in this way, completes the process of drawing a marginalised person back to the centre. In this way, both Yang Deqing and Chang Yong are unwittingly subordinated to the system of power discourse. This also argues for Foucault's view that power is not an external manipulation but an internal one.

4. "FU JI" AND SELF-ABUSE: ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO BREAKING FREE FROM POWER SYSTEM

With such a perfect system of power at their disposal, does it mean that Yang Deqing and Chang Yong no longer have the opportunity to rebel against the system of social power? Not really. Foucault offers a possibility to escape from the control of power: to abuse and to be abused. Foucault says: "One's goal should not be set on the liberation of genital desire, but on some general system of pleasure that is not based on sexual norms, making one's flesh a site of extremely varied pleasure while freeing it from dependence on the genital organs." In short, the quest for the desexualisation of pleasure, he argues that if a man wants to resist the discipline of power and find the so-called "reality," they must return to the flesh itself, not through thought, nor experimentation. Power can transform the mind, language, culture, and social structures, but the physical sensation is always natural. For the masses, physical pleasure is always obtained through sex. Still, Foucault found that 'sex' had been regulated as a social product, so he advocated the use of other parts of the body to experience pleasure, which must be an extreme feeling which belongs to a category beyond the reach of the social system of power: sadism and masochism.

It has become common knowledge that one can obtain pleasure by abusing and being abused. In the story of *Ji Shen*, the purpose of abusing and being abused is not for pleasure but for true liberation. In the real world, the abuser and the abused are often taken up by different people according to their preferences, but in the book, the two are often united in the same object, and this act of subject and object is self-abuse.

In the novel, self-abusive behaviors develop under the influence of the "Fu Ji" culture, which is highly touted due to the common belief that the ritual can be used to obtain instructions from the gods. In ancient China, the ritual was so simple that no one was harmed, but as the ritual deepened, only extreme self-mutilation of the human body could satisfy people's curiosity and imagination. As a result, the act became so dangerous that almost no one dared to try it.

The origin of self-abuse in the story is the proposal of Yang Deqing:

"Chang Yong, do you want to keep living like this? This year, there will be a festival to haunt the Ying Shen Sai Society in East Street, and I heard there would be a big fuss. I heard today that they need two people as *Ma Pi*. Do you dare to go with me to do this job?" (Sun 2016, 117)

"If we perform successfully at this year's Gods Festival, people will think that the spirits possess us, then we will survive, you know?" (Sun 2016, 120)

Ma Pi is responsible for the performance of the spirit possession in Ying Shen Sai Society, so they often have to use some self-inflicted injuries to move the gods and prove that they have gained special divine powers. On the festival day, Yang Deqing strung their mouths with a steel brazier, immediately shocking the audience and making the performance successful.

Chang Yong became seriously ill after this. When she recovered from her illness, she became "*Ji Shen*." She behaved strangely, and her face had an "air of gravity and emptiness (Sun 2016, 126)," which was the aftermath of "Fu Ji" ceremony. Sun tries to explain:

"Chang Yong was only suffering from a schizophrenic-like hysteria after experiencing the extreme fear of the steel brazing through his cheeks and the extreme excitement of being in the limelight." (Sun 2016, 126)

In other words, Chang Yong has become a psychopath; she is no longer normal. Nevertheless, the question is, again, who defines normal and abnormal? Foucault reveals in *Madness and Civilization* that the modern medical system is, in a sense, a power mechanism that defines who is normal and who is abnormal. This mechanism, backed by reason and science, seems justified and righteous. Insanity is still part of the power system and is manipulated through "knowledge." Insanity is not the correct term for Chang Yong's state of being; a more appropriate term would be passion. Foucault argues that a significant source of madness is passion, which is the basis of madness, and that passion is the point of convergence between the body and the soul.

The system of power defines the normal and the abnormal, but it misses the point of removing the abnormal from society. It also means that the 'abnormal' is free from its control. Soon, Chang Yong finds and indulges in freedom:

"Chang Yong then sat cross-legged on the bed, her white eyes rolling vigorously, and her head suddenly drooped as if she had fallen asleep. When she slowly raised her head again, her expression and voice suddenly changed: she sometimes made a woman's charming face and crossed her fingers; her voice became shrill and thin. It was as if she had lost all control of herself, and a woman's spirit was attaching itself to her body and directing her to go on and on. Sometimes she suddenly turned into an older man again, coughing and yawning, unable to straighten her back. She looked instantly aged by dozens of years. Her voice was also so old that she could not bite the words. Walking away from the wind and leaking air seemed to be coming out of a black hole of a mouth without teeth, making people horrified to hear it. When the spirit had finished, Chang Yong slowly began to wake up, her drooping head slowly lifting, her face full of weariness as if she had just fought a battle. She looked around with white eyes and said, 'Where am I now? Why am I so tired?'" (Sun 2016, 127)

Performing demonic possession is immensely physically damaging, but Chang Yong becomes increasingly obsessed instead of rejecting it. She continues to abuse herself through the performance of *Ji Shen* because this is a place where the discourse of power is untouchable. The combination of physical destruction and spiritual passion stimulates Chang Yong and leads her to find her true self.

Yang Deqing also discovers this in a much simpler and more brutal way, repeating and even intensifying his self-abusive behaviour in the ceremony since his first battle of fame:

"He would do all sorts of horrific tricks such as piercing the staff, hanging the guillotine, spitting fire, etc. Sometimes he would stick a steel blade in his face instead of a steel brazier, which would go in through this cheek and out through that cheek. At other times, several steel knives were stabbed through the cheeks one by one, making the whole cheeks look like a hornet's nest. Sometimes the knife is also used to cut into the forehead. The harder the cut, the more realistic it is." (Sun 2016, 132)

If at first the self-mutilation as *Ma Pi* is an act of necessity, a concession to the discourse of power and a desire to gain the awe of others through a lurid performance, then after the first time their self-mutilation is an act of making one's flesh a site of highly varied pleasure that does not depend on "sex" but comes entirely from self-mutilation. This pleasure does not depend on 'sex' but comes entirely from self-mutilation. In this pleasure, Yang Deqing discovers his true self, and he no longer needs the awe of the other, for awe is part of the system of power. Now he has broken away from this system of power and has turned to the ultimate physical sensations. Nevertheless, the feeling has a time limit because he needs to keep doing the horse benefit and getting that feeling. Similarly, Chang Yong has to keep busy with mediumship performances all day, and they both turn their bodies into places to obtain extreme pleasure. These acts, although dangerous and extremely self-mutilating, make them insatiable.

Self-abuse had severely damaged Yang Deqing's body, and he was soon on the verge of death:

"His face looked unusually grim, and several deep wounds on the upper (face) were inflaming and dripping pus. The wounds were turned out like lips, revealing a scarlet lining. At the very bottom of the scarlet sunk a few points

of snowy white, which were bones. His whole face had become swollen and blackish-purple." (Sun 2016, 135–136)

"Whoever plays with fire will get burnt." When Chang Yong discovered Yang Deqing's condition, he suddenly went crazy and wanted to have intercourse, but Yang had long since lost his sexual function. To satisfy Chang Yong, their sex developed to the point of sexual abuse:

"Chang Yong laughed through tears. Yes, yes, I want to be a woman. I was already a woman. I just want to be fucked by a man, buddy. You are about to fuck me. You will get me to death tonight, okay Chang Yong screamed wildly despite everything. She screamed I want more, more, buddy, deeper and deeper. You stick me in again, stick it in again, ah. Yang Deqing's hand was deeper to reach. He put the whole arm to reach in. Now, she is a woman. He is a man "(Sun 2016, 138–139)

Lacan has suggested a self-punishing delusion of victimisation, which also applies to Chang Yong: there are always two selves within Chang Yong. One is Chang Yong, and the other is Chang Ying. Chang Ying is a state that Chang Yong can never have, so Chang Yong has a conflicting emotions of love and hate for Chang Ying. Because she could never become Chang Ying, Chang Yong would constantly attack Chang Ying, while the best way to attack Chang Ying happened to be self-abuse. Lacan's statement that "he is the object of punishment itself" is ideally confirmed in Chang Yong's case, which is another explanation for his desire to be raped. In this intercourse between Chang Yong and Yang Deqing, the primitive pleasure of sex has long since lost its effect; it remains essentially an act of self-abuse. The perverted way of behaving allows Chang Yong to achieve extreme physical pleasure once again, a kind of other-mutilation that is much more violent than self-abuse and in which her true self is constantly being constructed in the act of perversion. For Yang Deqing, this is also the first time he appears as a subject of abuse. In contrast, before this, he had been the one being 'abused', from stealing the neighbour's grain to the pork incident, Yang Deqing was repeatedly disciplined as the object of abuse and eventually deprived of sex; at this moment, the abuser Yang Deqing grows a phallus in another way: he sexualised his entire arm. Since then, he has finally regained his gender and his self-identity. Three days later, he died in Chang Yong's house.

Chang Yong, who became *Ji Shen*, drenched herself in petrol during the demolition of the old street shortly afterwards, publicly displayed her physical features for the first time in the "Panopticon" of Jiaocheng County, and informed the whole city of her identity as a woman. She then lit a lighter and set herself on fire in front of a bulldozer to complete her final act of self-abuse. This self-mutilation brought about her death, but this self-mutilation finally allowed Chang Yong to shed her disguise and become Chang Ying.

Self-abuse is a double-edged sword. Although it can be used to escape the manipulation of the power system, it comes at the cost of life. This is the central question of the medium's dilemma: the solution to the dilemma turns out to be death, and if life ends, can the resistance of Chang Yong and Yang Deqing be considered successful? This is a difficult question to answer. Regarding the outcome, they break free from their discipline through self-abuse, which supports Foucault's view. Beyond the world of fiction, although *Ji Shen* is a fictional story, its connotations and meanings are relevant to the real world. From Asia and the Pacific to Europe and the United States, topics of gender and power have always been of broad interest to literary scholars. The recounting and imagining of these events have a significance that goes far beyond the fictionalisation of a story. Still, more importantly, the writer has identified, fleshed out and amplified the problems in the workings of society. From this perspective, the world of *Ji Shen* is the observational notebook of Sun as a social observer, and the dilemmas of life that it constructs will, quite 'coincidentally', continue to play out in the broader world. Sun Pin did not know Foucault and his theories when she wrote, or instead, she must not have tried to apply Foucault's theory of power when she wrote deliberately, but the resulting work "coincides" with Foucault. This shows the universal adaptability of Foucault's theories but also the commonality of the human predicament. This is the relevance and the profound question that the work brings to humanity: how can real people escape their predicament? One might think that *Ji Shen* is concerned with the deviant in society, far removed from normal human beings, and that the "Fu Ji" ritual has long since disappeared. Nevertheless, in today's society, where the alienation of human beings is taking place at a rapid pace, we will one day have to face up to this problem, and perhaps we should start thinking about the appropriate solutions now.

5. FROM FICTION TO REALITY: HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND CONTEMPORARY POPULARITY OF "FU JI" CULTURE

Ji Shen is essentially a cultural novel. "Fu Ji" is a very old feudal superstition in China, but it has not received much attention from researchers so far. Traditional "Fu Ji" is very simple, with a "T" shaped wooden frame inserted into

a sand tray, combined with certain actions and rituals, in order to achieve the purpose of "inviting the gods to come down to earth". As the ceremony continues to evolve, the rituals become more and more brutal, with the wooden frame turned into a steel drill and the sand tray into a human body. During the performance, the selected person would run the steel through his cheeks in order to bring the gods down into his body. This activity has been widely documented in various literary works and books related to folk culture, notably in Chen Zhongshi's *Two Families in Fifty Years (Bai Lu Yuan)*, in which the people pray for rain in this way and are successful.

The common perception is that this ritual should have disappeared with the advancement of science and the development of the times, but this has not been the case. Since the introduction of modern scientific culture into China, official efforts have been made to disseminate scientific knowledge among the population in order to eliminate this superstitious activity. However, it is still widespread in modern China, as shown in such papers as "Healing, Jiang Ji, and Local Society: Gaochun in 1900" and "From Fu Ji to Spirituality: Knowledge and Reason in Modern Science and Genetics". It is particularly interesting to note that many of the highly educated elites and senior government officials also believed in mediumship, such as Wu Tingfang, the Minister of Justice of the Republic of China, who has repeatedly expressed his approval and admiration for this kind of superstitious activity. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, all feudal superstitions were completely eradicated, and "Fu Ji" was naturally no exception. However, after the reform and opening up of China (after the 1980s), this spectre miraculously resurrected itself and became popular in various parts of China, which was due to the complicated background of the times in China at that time.

At that time, China abandoned its old model of development and began to seek integration with the world, creating a completely new economic system, an act that brought about as much volatility as the founding of the new China decades earlier. The old order was completely disrupted, people were at a loss in this change and everything became chaotic. Under these circumstances, people, especially those living in remote areas, economically underdeveloped and uneducated, not knowing what the future held for them, desperately needed some kind of spiritual support and source of strength to help them cope with the drastic changes in their lives. As a result, the power of "spirits" is once again valued, and "mediumship" has returned. The social roots of the popularity of "mediumship" are the uncertainty about the future and the sense of powerlessness in life. The era of the novel "Mediumship" is the chaotic and confusing 1980s and 1990s, when Sun Frequency borrowed from a small county in Northwest China. Sun borrows from a small county in Northwest China to reflect the broader picture of China at that time. It is as if this kind of activity is engraved into the DNA of the Chinese people, as if it is an innate Chinese skill that can be resurrected indefinitely. In the novel, when Yang Deqing and Chang Yong's county decides to restart this superstitious activity, people are surprised to find that there are no survivors who can perform the rituals, some 40 years after the founding of the new China, which is obviously due to the Chinese government's strong control of superstitious activities. But even without being taught, Yang Deqing quickly learnt how to perform, and became increasingly skilled. Sun also hints at the popularity of this kind of Fu Ji in other parts of the world, which can indicate both the great popularity of mediumship in China at that time and the many "Yang Deqing" who mastered the essence of this ritual through self-study. The love and admiration of the people is the secret of the rebirth of Fu Ji, and even though the ritual is sometimes extremely dangerous, people continue to follow it. For the spectators, the ritual provides temporary peace of mind as they receive instructions from the gods. For the performers, it is through such alternative and exciting behaviors that they can find their "selves" and confirm their "selves" in the eyes of others. Therefore, this kind of grotesque and dangerous role becomes the goal of the main character "Yang Deqing". It is like a drug that destroys people's bodies, but at the same time it gives people spiritual comfort, which is exactly what Chinese people need most in the confused times.

This kind of feudal culture is essentially a product of its time; it was born and died because of its time, and never died because of the development of scientific knowledge. After a period of confusion in the 1980s and 1990s, China re-established a new order and ushered in a period of rapid development. Against this backdrop, "Fu Ji" ceremony ceased to be popular, and went underground with specific groups of people. Although it is difficult to find this culture in today's civilised China, it is only 20 to 30 years since it was first practised, a short period of time that cannot completely erase the traces and wounds it has left in Chinese society, and many of its "victims" are still alive. This is a marginal culture that should not be forgotten. With her words and two fictional protagonists, Sun uses her words to bring people back to the historical scene again, and visually experience the anomalies of the times. The culture of "Fu Ji" in the novel will never appear in official records, but it is worth digging deeper and analysing. From this perspective, Ji Shen is not only a fictional text, but also a cultural carrier. It records the erosion of the times and the predicament of human existence, which is the real reason why the dilemma of "Ji Shen" is unresolved, because the individual can never resist the flood of the times, and only when the times have changed will this dilemma be resolved. Therefore, when China gradually stepped into the track of healthy development, the

culture of "Fu Ji" naturally disappeared, but we can still imagine that when the social order is in chaos, people cannot get enough security. However, we can still imagine that when the social order becomes chaotic, and people are unable to obtain a sufficient sense of security, "Fu Ji" or other similar cultures will make a comeback.

Furthermore, the self-mutilating superstitious activities in the story are not unique to China. For example, in some parts of the world, people tie themselves to crosses, drive steel nails through the palms of their hands, and parade through crowds of people in order to experience the crucifixion of Jesus and gain a mutual sensation with God. This model is very similar to mediumship, except that one is nailed through the palms of the hands and the other through the cheeks. While the latter has almost disappeared in contemporary China and no visual record of it remains, the former is still performed every year and recorded by many people on camera. Those who have tried it describe it as not too painful if they get the technique right, much like the account in Sun's novel. The fact that the rituals of the gods are very similar in different regions suggests that people from different cultures in different places tend to deal with difficult situations in the same way, reflecting the cultural commonality of humankind, which is worthy of in-depth study.

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GLOSSARY

Terms and proper nouns	Chinese characters
Ji Shen	乩身
Fu Ji	扶乩
Ma Pi	马禩
Jiang Ji	降乩