

# A Flaw in the Jade, Not Yet a Masterpiece — A Critique of the Urban Writing in Shi Yifeng's Novel *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*

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**Abstract:** *In *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*, Shi Yifeng adopts a detached, on-site narrative attitude and a condescending narrative stance towards the survival dilemmas of the urban petty bourgeoisie. Although Shi Yifeng writes with sympathy about the dramatic and tragic lives of the urban poor, the image of the urban poor represented by Chen Jinfang inevitably becomes stereotyped due to a lack of real-life experience and a critical vision that transcends appearance to reach essence. Furthermore, the portrayal of urban citizens in *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang* implies a narrative of the suffering of the urban poor. However, the author only presents fragmented scenes of Chen Jinfang's childhood hardships through humanitarian sympathy in minor details, lacking the power and inclination to present the real-life scenes of the urban poor with true realist literary passion and compassionate literary sentiment. This determines the regrettable situation where *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*, like a flaw in an otherwise fine jade, falls short of being a masterpiece.*

**Keywords:** Urban Writing; Shi Yifeng; *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the urban literature theory conference held in Beidaihe in August 1983, urban literature has developed rapidly in the Chinese literary world like a wildfire. Numerous urban literature authors have created works that focus on the loss and distortion of urban citizens in the material world as the main narrative thread, adopting a critical stance towards cities and the petty bourgeoisie. This has led to the emergence of outstanding works and authors such as Wang Shuo's *The Troubleshooters*, Zhu Wen's *I Love Dollars*, He Dun's *Life Without Sin*, Dong Xi's *Altered Fate*, Shi Yifeng's *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*, Sun Huiwen's *Da Lao Zheng's Women*, Wei Wei's *Makeup*, Chi Li's *Troubled Life*, and Fang Fang's *Scenery*. However, this has been accompanied by questions and discussions in critical circles regarding the creative concepts and writing techniques of urban literature authors. Indeed, a considerable portion of urban literature suffers from an inadequate understanding of the life experiences of the urban poor, an inability to shed the intellectual stance and think from the perspective of the urban poor, and an expression that remains mired in sympathy for their suffering lives and dramatic fates without the ambition and skill to transcend reality. Such problems constrain the development of the portrayal of urban citizens in current urban literature, and Shi Yifeng's representative work *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang* is a typical example.

*The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*, a winner of the 7th Lu Xun Literary Prize, garnered significant attention from the literary world and academia upon its publication. The novel depicts the tragic life of Chen Jinfang, a poor rural girl who voluntarily plunges into the vortex of urban material desire to fulfill her life's wish of making it big in the city, only to be ultimately devoured by the city. Scholars have generally approached the study from the perspective of human nature versus material desire, focusing on the spiritual dilemmas of new urban migrants in the novel. However, few studies have paid attention to the issue of portraying urban citizens in the work. In fact, from the perspective of humanistic criticism, although *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang* relatively completely depicts the dramatic ups and downs in the life of the urban poor Chen Jinfang, Shi Yifeng failed to demonstrate the structural failures of the urban poor with the insight and analytical power expected of a writer, nor did he reveal his resentment towards the distorted urban material structure that supersedes humanity from both urban and human perspectives. He also does not convey indignation at the deformed urban material structure overriding human nature from the dual perspectives of the city and humanity. It can be said that Shi Yifeng's portrayal of urban citizens has not yet reached a state of mastery. The image of the poor urbanite in the novel tends to be stereotypical. Moreover, the condescending narrative stance and the narrative concept limited merely to sympathy throughout the novel impair its pioneering quality and artistry in grounding itself in the people, reflecting social reality, and transcending current issues, thereby hindering its path to becoming a great literary work.

## 2. STEREOTYPED IMAGES OF THE URBAN POOR

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu once said, "People's recognition of beauty is not entirely subjective or free but is embedded in the aesthetic consciousness of the era." This statement applies equally to the shaping of literary characters and the positioning of aesthetic interests. Since the reform and opening up, China's economy has developed rapidly, and urbanization has accelerated noticeably. The aesthetic orientations of urban literature writers, shaped by the era of reform and opening up, differ significantly from those during the periods of Seventeen-Year Literature and Cultural Revolution literature. Writers no longer view and portray characters in urban novels from a political or class perspective. Instead, they examine the images of urban citizens from an economic and market standpoint. This has led urban literature writers of the new era to habitually gauge human nature from a material perspective, using the abundance or lack of wealth and social status as the basis for character development. Writers generally tend to depict the distorted souls and meager material foundations of the urban poor, while also delighting in portraying the extravagant consumption and barren yet arrogant souls of the urban propertied class. They use these two types of urban citizen images as contrasting groups to reflect each other, thereby elucidating their own subtle thoughts on the city or human nature.

It must be said that this writing technique is one manifestation of writers unconsciously changing their writing intentions under the influence of the changing times and societal aesthetic shifts. However, at the same time, when writers reshape the image of the urban poor under the influence of mainstream ideologies, they easily fall into superficiality and stereotypes. Due to their weak material foundation, the urban poor are often vilified and ridiculed by writers across different works. The similarity in portraying characters from the same social stratum by different writers is astonishingly high. For instance, the inner core of Chen Jinfang, the urban poor in Shi Yifeng's *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*, is almost like a sister to Jia Li, the poor female student in Wei Wei's *Makeup*. The deeper reason for this phenomenon lies in the writers' half-understanding, half-listening approach to the urban poor stratum, their failure to criticize and sublimate, and their taken-for-granted deep-seated intellectual arrogance.

In *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*, Chen Jinfang and her entire family represent the urban poor. Chen Jinfang's sister and brother-in-law are rural Hebei natives working in the canteen of a Beijing school to earn money and support the family, gradually settling in Beijing and becoming urbanites. Chen Jinfang transfers from her rural hometown in Hebei to attend school in Beijing, also becoming an urbanite in behavior and psychological identification. Objectively speaking, neither the brother-in-law and sister's work nor Chen Jinfang's school transfer is particularly pitiable or contemptible. However, in the author's depiction, the identity of a new urban migrant conversely becomes one of the major stains on Chen Jinfang's life and a significant reason why she faces ostracism from classmates after transferring to Beijing. Regarding the livelihood issues of new urban migrants, the novel even satirically states:

*There was another joke in the courtyard: because Xu Fulong's family had many mouths to feed and high food expenses, Xu Fulong would steam buns and steamed rolls every day, first stuff two catties into the crotch of his baggy military trousers, and then rush home waddling like a duck. Over time, Xu Fulong's genitals were effectively steamed daily and were ruined, becoming dysfunctional. (院儿里还有个段子，就是许福龙家里人口多，吃饭挑费高，许福龙便每天蒸出包子、花卷，先往肥大的军裤裤裆里塞上两斤，然后像鸭子一样火急火燎地跑回家里。天长日久，许福龙的生殖器相当于每天蒸一次桑拿，便被烫坏了，失灵了。)*

This passage depicts Xu Fulong using his position in the canteen to steal food for his family to solve their food and clothing problem, indirectly reflecting the Chen family's embarrassing situation and humble material life in the city. The author's subjective intention in foreshadowing Chen Jinfang's brother-in-law's job and money-making methods is to lay the groundwork for Chen Jinfang's later tragedy—indulging in material life, risking illegal fundraising for money, and ultimately being arrested. However, this descriptive technique is overly satirical, filled with the arrogance and disdain of the urban leisure class towards the urban poor. In contemporary urban literature novels, this kind of trick of taking advantage of public property is common across various works and authors. For example, Chi Li's *Troubled Life* depicts Yin Jiahe, an ordinary urban employee, saving water for his family by taking advantage of the water company, which is similar to Chen Jinfang's brother-in-law's behavior. While such money-saving behavior is not commendable and indeed abnormal and ignoble, it is not a crucial basis for distinguishing between rural-to-urban migrants and born-and-bred urban citizens. This kind of satirical description resembles the writer subjectively adding a symbolic label to the urban poor, a product of preconceived concepts.

Furthermore, in *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*, the images of the urban poor are deeply associated with derogatory terms such as cunning, lazy, greedy, and slick. The book depicts numerous urban poor, including Chen Jinfang, her brother-in-law, her sister, and Humany, but all without exception are negative images. One cannot see the beauty and goodness of human nature in these urban poor; they are a diminished, imagined, spoken-for, and ridiculed mass of laboring people. Admittedly, the urban poor are almost always a vulnerable group living under the dual pressure of low material standards and impoverished spiritual life. They live at the bottom of the city and, as a matter of course, occupy a weak position in both literary works and real life. Writers also take it for granted that the inner world and behavioral traits of the urban poor living under high economic pressure should be abnormal. Thus, darkness, pettiness, and humbleness become the stereotypical images of the urban poor. Whenever writers write about the laboring masses and new migrants from rural areas to cities, they think of the inevitable mental distortion, alienation, and degeneration of the urban poor under the weight of fate, as if only this technique can express their thoughts on human nature. While this writing technique can reflect some reality, part of reality also represents another part's falsehood—do the urban poor have no shining qualities worth portraying? Must the urban poor sell their bodies as hostesses, engage in petty theft, swindle, and engage in all kinds of scams to gain a foothold and realize their dreams in the city? Of course not. It's just that the writers subconsciously use urban class hierarchy and material wealth abundance as criteria for judging moral integrity, interpersonal harmony, and the ability to realize ideals. This condescending posture of overlooking the urban poor also renders the images of poor urbanites in their works superficial and stereotypical. What should be a serious critique and reconsideration of urban society is also reduced to simplistic and superficial observations due to excessive exposure of the stereotypical behaviors of the urban poor and the accompanying imagined sensory stimulation.

### 3. A CONDESCENDING NARRATIVE STANCE

In an interview with *China Youth Daily*, Shi Yifeng once said, "*The World Has No More Chen Jinfang* is about people's desire since the reform and opening up to change their destiny and live a better life. This is the most simple and universal wish of the Chinese people, embodied in Chen Jinfang." Indeed, Shi Yifeng grasped the urgent psychological need of urban petty bourgeois like Chen Jinfang after the reform and opening up to change their survival situation. He also diligently demonstrated in his work the psychological and physical sacrifices made by such petty bourgeois to change their unfair fate and extreme poverty. Their lofty sentiments of "I am the master of my fate" and "Is the birth of kings and generals predetermined?" are thoroughly permeated in the work. However, it must be said that although *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang* primarily depicts the urban poor Chen Jinfang and objectively pours sympathy and pity into her tragic fate—for instance, on the night Chen Jinfang is taken away by the police, the author uses Chen Jinfang's own words to express the urban poor stratum's longing for a better material life in the city and their lifelong lament of not being accepted by the city: "I just wanted to live like a human being"—the author's sympathy reaches its peak here, so much so that it can almost break through the paper and rush straight at the reader's face. However, such pity is not an equal stance of mourning the same kind but is expressed from a condescending position of the urban middle class.

When the author adopts such a posture to depict Chen Jinfang's life as an urban poor, sympathy is often tinged with a hint of relief: the author, as the hidden narrator, secretly gives thanks for not being one of the suffering people at the bottom of the city, for not having to experience the dramatic life of the character Chen Jinfang and the invisible oppression exerted by the distorted urban values on urban poor like her. In fact, the narrative stance of *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang* is that of an intellectual. The novel is filled with implements and scenes with strong intellectual tendencies, such as violins, pianos, symphony orchestras, concert halls, galleries, and steak. Since intellectuals consider themselves superior to the urban poor stratum, even though Shi Yifeng very clearly displays his moral and emotional position as a writer in the novel, it must also be acknowledged that such a moral narrative stance is condescending. His sympathy for the tragic fate of urban poor like Chen Jinfang far outweighs his understanding, his self-examination far outweighs his empathy, and his imagination of the lives of the poor far outweighs his understanding of their life experiences. Simple pity replaces thinking about the lives of all urban strata and the entire social structure. In other words, while the writer appears to be shouting and appealing for the survival difficulties of urban poor represented by Chen Jinfang, he actually does not transcend the suffering of Chen Jinfang's impoverished childhood and the tragedy of her exhausting all efforts to break through class barriers only to fail. Such sorrowful and bitter lives of the urban poor, written relying solely on experience and imagination, are, in any case, somewhat perfunctory and condescending.

### 4. A NARRATIVE CONCEPT LIMITED TO HUMANITARIAN SYMPATHY

The limitations in Shi Yifeng's portrayal of urban citizens are not merely a problem of insufficient life experience

or artistic skill but also a problem of his narrative concept. Although Shi Yifeng himself harbors sympathy for urban poor characters like Chen Jinfang, this kind of humanitarian sympathy is limited. Shi Yifeng fails to firmly root himself in the difficult position of the urban lower class soil to depict rounded urban characters. The novel's descriptive focus is never on how the urban lower class people achieve class breakthrough and satisfy their higher-level survival needs for respect and understanding. Instead, it is on the display of suffering as Chen Jinfang endures numerous hardships and even uses sex to exchange for resources.

In most current urban literature novels, the composition of urban citizen images is often relatively monotonous. Generally, these images mainly cover two types: one is impoverished urban lower class citizens, and the other is citizens of the propertied class who control wealth, status, fame, and other resources. As presented in Shi Yifeng's *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*, many urban literature writers hold the view that the urban poor stratum is naturally a breeding ground for suffering. Therefore, in their urban novels, especially those with female protagonists, they are filled with depictions of suffering. These images of impoverished urban women encounter tragic circumstances in the texts that are hard to imagine in real life. Writers also believe that this demonstrates the real problem of the city as a money-burning pit distorting human nature and expresses genuine concern for the survival of the urban poor. Actually, this is not the case. In these works, the suffering of impoverished urban women is rootless duckweed, unable to reflect the hardships of urban lower class livelihoods. Instead, it exposes numerous problems, such as the writers' insufficient rational understanding, single aesthetic orientation, distance from the laboring masses, and lack of the intellectual's concern for the world.

Both urban and rural areas have dark corners. Both the poor and the rich may have dark thoughts. As a writer, one should, based on experiencing the daily lives of the characters and delving into their spiritual worlds, use suffering as a surface and exposure as the core, writing about the structural problems encountered by the urban poor with the literati sentiment of "grieving over their misfortune and anger at their unruliness," instead of simply exacerbating the suffering of the lower classes until only suffering remains. In *The World Has No More Chen Jinfang*, whether it is the representative of the urban poor, Chen Jinfang, her sister and brother-in-law, or Humany, although the writer does not excessively exaggerate their suffering lives, he also does not depict their spirit of striving for self-improvement and eagerness to advance. In fact, Chen Jinfang, living at the urban lower class, even though she adopted the wrong methods and thus could never achieve her commendable goal, the courage, resourcefulness, and even gambling spirit she displayed to escape the urban poor stratum are indeed admirable. However, the writer's depiction of Chen Jinfang is limited to humanitarian sympathy, neglecting the exuberant vitality within her.

Gramsci mentioned in his *Prison Notebooks*: "Intellectuals are the 'deputies' of the ruling group, exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political governance, but manifesting them in specific, often highly complex ways. In maintaining the ideological unity of the entire social group, intellectuals have the obligation to participate in the practical life of their class and become its organizers." Indeed, as one of the leading figures of social trends, intellectuals should shoulder the responsibility of voicing for the obscured urban lower class characters in the urbanization process. Therefore, intellectuals, especially writers, when writing about the city, cannot merely stop at overlooking the lower class. They cannot confine themselves to pitying the urban lower class people merely to satisfy their own humanitarian needs. They cannot merely present the chaotic, disorderly, and ugly side of the lower class people, let alone deny their series of efforts to improve their own survival situation. Only then can contemporary urban literary works possess the realistic power to transcend fantasy and reach the essence of literature.

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