

# The Historical and Current Characteristics of “Plague Writing”—Rereading Chi Zijian’s Novel *White Snow Crow* in the Post Epidemic Era

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Chi Zijian’s novel *White Snow Crow* is about the pestis in Northeast China from the autumn and winter of 1910 to the spring of 1911, focusing on the living conditions of people in Fujiadian, Harbin, under the shadow of the pestis, and thus connects the vicissitudes of Harbin in the development of modern Chinese history. Re-reading this novel in the context of the post-epidemic era not only allows us to immerse ourselves in the specific temporal and spatial fields described in the text with an immersive reading mindset, feel the heavy impact that the disaster has brought to the people of Northeast China, but also provide us with a different perspective to observe the current social reality. In particular, the social problems shown by the novel through the pestis and the description of ordinary people’s life experience under the plague still deserve further discussion.

*Keywords:* Chi Zijian, plague writing, *White Snow Crow*, post pandemic era

“Plague writing” is not uncommon in Chi Zijian’s novels, and this type of writing may be long or short, with different references in different texts. This type of writing, like the religious factors integrated into Chi Zijian’s works, has become an important component of the plot development of the novel. The description of pestis in *White Snow Crow* can be seen as the concentrated embodiment of this writing style. Although this novel describes the pestis in Northeast China more than a century ago, because the content of the novel is similar to the real impact of the COVID-19, a comparison between the new type of pestis that broke out in Northeast China more than a hundred years ago and the epidemic that still ravages the world will show that although the two are far away in time, from the huge impact of the epidemic on social reality and the measures taken by people in response to the epidemic, the two have extremely similar aspects: The same is a new virus, the same is a shortage of masks, the same is lockdown, the same is centralized quarantine, and so on. From a literary perspective, in the face of great disasters, human nature is interconnected. The description of the social reality problems exposed during the outbreak of the plague and the public’s mentality in *White Snow Crow* not only provides us with an aesthetic “mirror” to reflect on the current social reality problems, but is also possible to better understand the choices made by individuals as subjects in the face of disasters, as well as the sublimity and despicability revealed behind these choices, from this historical and current “comparison”. And this aesthetic reflection is precisely the unique way in which literature intervenes in reality.

### **The Historicity of “Plague Writing”**

In this novel, the pestis itself is not the focus of the author’s attention, but the national problems and public mentality reflected by the outbreak of the pestis are the core of the novel. This is obviously a literary narrative method, and

compared to “historical narrative”, there must be a certain spiritual, psychological, and cultural “hidden structure” in this narrative. It is precisely because of this “hidden structure” that the author’s imagination, beliefs, beliefs, and demands make the novel text display the qualities of “surreal” and “super historical”. (Zhang, 2019, p. 63)

The track of Wang Chunshen’s carriage in Futou District and Fujiaden, on the one hand, described the historical features of several major urban areas of Harbin a hundred years ago and the personality characteristics of various characters when facing the pestis; on the other hand, the differences between different urban areas and the historical reasons for such differences were also presented through Wang Chunshen’s observation. Here, the author does not directly describe how Harbin was intervened by foreign forces a hundred years ago, but instead takes all of this as the “scenery” observed by specific characters in the novel, which removes the preaching atmosphere from this description and is embedded in the “plague writing” of the novel, allowing the novel to maintain a relatively objective narrative tone while incorporating rich historical connotations.

The novel extensively depicts the privileges of the Russians in Harbin, especially the construction of the Middle East Railway, which extends the influence of the Russians in Harbin. Even the grass by the Songhua River cannot be easily harvested because it is located in a subsidiary area of the Middle East Railway. The two elm trees in front of Ji Yonghe’s grain depot also caused him great distress because they were Russian property. Moreover, with the full connection of the Middle East Railway and the completion of the South Manchurian Railway, modern enterprises from Russia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Japan gradually replaced local small workshops in Harbin, which made it difficult for Chinese merchants doing business in Fujiadian. These local merchants had to lower their prices again and again in order to survive, to the point where most local small workshops were on the brink of bankruptcy. The Chinese people who originally lived along the river still did their business. However, because this place has become a concession, they have changed from owners to settlers, the Middle East Railway Administration has established a land area office, and Chinese commercial and civilian land for building houses must apply to the land area office. After registration, land rental fees must be paid year by year in order to operate (Chi, 2010, p. 25). The various enterprises operated by the Japanese in Harbin have also brought a huge impact on the local business of Fujiadian. For example, the Japanese businessman Kato Shinfu opened a soy sauce factory in Fujiadian, which

virtually weakened the Xiangyi soy sauce that occupies half of Fujiadian soy sauce market. Gu Weici, the boss of Xiangyi, had to decline again and again to compete with the Japanese soy sauce market. In just one year, the old cost was almost lost. (Chi, 2010, p. 49)

In addition, the brewery, Baijiu factory, flour factory, cigarette factory, sugar factory, soap factory, etc., run by foreigners. It has caused a devastating blow to the local business in Harbin. Moreover, consuls from various countries stationed in Harbin took the opportunity to request intervention from the Daotai Prefecture, which was in charge of Fu Jiadian. In the eyes of Daotai Yu Sixing, “In addition to self-danger, foreigners have a deep purpose to intervene in Fu Jiadian’s epidemic prevention” (Chi, 2010, p. 50). This “deep purpose” undoubtedly took the opportunity to seize actual control of the Fu Jiadian area.

When the Russians and the Japanese used their privileges to block Fujiadian, which led to heavy casualties in the pestis, Fujiadian people's superstition and fighting independently also contributed to the spread of the pestis to a certain extent. If the blockade of Fujiadian by the Russians and Japanese in the port area and the new urban area has a clear color of external aggression, then the speculation and profiteering of Fujiadian local businessmen represented by Ji Yonghe during the spread of the pestis means the disintegration of Fujiadian's internal forces. In his opinion,

In ten and a half days and a month, there will be more deaths, and the railway will have to be shut down. “At that time, the grain cannot be transported in, but people have to eat, and the grain warehouses in Harbin have sold out, and there is no way to make up for it. The grain in my warehouse is gold and silver!” (Chi, 2010, p. 107)

However, the complexity of the novel lies in the fact that on the one hand, Ji Yonghe wants to make money in the face of the plague; on the other hand, he has a simple hostility to foreigners in Harbin, and he does everything to make money because:

“Money can be a man!” When I was a kid, where did I see so many foreigners? I followed my father in the Songhua River fishing, that is called a free, want to where a shack, want to go where to play! What's it like now? You want a shack, you have to apply on someone's acre! You know why? We are poor! If someone is rich, he becomes a father! As the old saying goes, money can make the devil go, when I earn enough money, let foreigners give me as a slave, I turn over as a master! God damn it, I have to build a grain store on the second floor for those with yellow hair and blue eyes to serve my guests and sell grain on the first floor, and a kitchen and bedroom on the second floor, where I sit in the chair of the chief teacher every day and let them serve me tea, wash my feet, warm wine, pick vegetables, pick my ears, make the quilt, pick my teeth and beat my legs! (Chi, 2010, p. 58)

This simple hostility naturally contains national contradictions, but national contradictions are not the premise of his hatred of foreigners, but his personal enjoyment is. Moreover, his important means of acquiring wealth—stockpiling grain and forcing Zhai Fanggui to sell his body—were at the expense of the interests of his compatriots and even his personal dignity, so although he had a hostile side towards foreigners, this hostility was not so much out of national righteousness as to satisfy his own selfish desires. In this sense, through the portrayal of characters like Ji Yonghe, the novel reveals the complexity of the relationship between individuals and others, and between individuals and nation-states under the special historical background of the plague raging and the unprecedented intensification of national crisis.

### **Social Criticism in the “Plague Writing”**

In addition to describing the political crisis Harbin faced before and after the outbreak of the pestis and the spiritual oppression brought by this crisis to the Harbin people, the novel also extensively shows various social chaos under the plague, which greatly enriches the ideological connotation of the work. One detail in the novel is worth noting: Due to ignorance of the plague, when the furrier Bayin died of illness, the onlookers actually “split” his clothes, shoes, and hats and even the melon seeds in his pockets. The selfishness of the people revealed in this detail was an important reason for the rapid spread of the plague in Fujiatian. As if to retaliate against the Fujiadians for their ruthlessness, the plague quickly spread throughout Fujiadians in an unstoppable manner. Although the governors of the three eastern provinces specially sent two doctors with modern medical knowledge to assist Harbin's epidemic prevention work, in Fujiadian's view, those methods mentioned by the two doctors were a bit “far-fetched”. Not only are they not enthusiastic about disinfection, but

"hygiene habits are not good, they like to eat smelly fish and rotten shrimp, and there is no habit of washing hands before and after meals, coupled with the lack of sewage facilities in the streets, greasy pot water, and even urine cans of urine water, are poured on the street." The moment these filth is thrown from the warm room, due to the warm heat, the wind will produce incandescent fog, dispersed in the air, and also a potential source of infection. (Chi, 2010, pp. 139-140)

If Ji Yonghe's hoarding behavior still contains a simple concept of justice, then the behavior of firewood shops, burial clothes shops, coffin shops are also followed by price increases purely looting:

"In the business of firewood, there is a price increase, and the rest of the others also follow suit." Not to be outdone, the shrouds put up their prices. The owner of the coffin shop, when he thought that everyone else was making money, he would be a fool not to make money himself. He also raised the price of the coffin. (Chi, 2010, p. 105)

Even Zhai, a eunuch who had been expelled from the palace, had begun hoarding as the plague spread. The 10 coffins he stored in the "Sanpu Kang Inn" were the same as the practice of Ji Yonghe, the owner of the grain warehouse, to buy large quantities of soybeans. Only Fu Baichuan, the man of Fu Jiatien, "joined with the people of the Chamber of Commerce to resist the tide of price increases, and followed suit, reducing the prices of goods in his own cooking pots, Shanhai grocery stores and satin shops by 20 percent" (Chi, 2010, p. 105).

In addition, the inaction of some officials of the Riverside Hall government is also an important factor leading to the continuous spread of pestis. In the case of pestis, how to identify whether a patient is infected with pestis is a huge challenge for medical workers, especially in the era of poor health care conditions; managers often take a "one-size-fits-all" approach to dealing with related issues. However, this indiscriminate approach is at the expense of the lives of ordinary people, to reflect their responsibilities as managers. In the face of the increasingly severe pestis, in addition to the virtual absence of the "Epidemic Prevention Health Bureau", the governor Chen of the Fujiadian County Government was also ignorant; he "actually said that no matter how toxic the disease, like a child crying, you ignore him, it will pass by itself, there is no need to care about it" (Chi, 2010, p. 74). Wang Chunshen's son Jibao and his wife Jin Lan died in the "epidemic disease hospital" set up by the epidemic Prevention and Health Bureau, and the author accused the "government" of inaction in epidemic prevention: "'Since few people go in and come out alive, then what is the use of spending money on this epidemic hospital?' ... Fu Jiadian died every day, how come no one from the government died?" (Chi, 2010, pp. 134-135).

Generally speaking, although the pestis brought unprecedented disasters to the Fujiadian people, and even some people speculated and made money in the country, most people did not lose confidence in life. They not only spontaneously organized to deliver meals to the isolated patients, and provide free masks and herbs, but more importantly, they still maintained their simple and kind nature, even if they adhered to some traditional customs with feudal thoughts, but also out of devout prayer for the future life. Compared with the county officials and profiteers who plundered during the pestis, those who came from other places to take root in Fujiadian contributed their own strength. Among them, Fu Baichuan, the boss of Fu's cooking pot from Shandong Province, and Zhou Ji's family from Shanxi Province, all of them provide help to the people of Fujiadian within their own power, showing the mutual assistance and warmth among the people at the bottom. It is the adherence to this optimistic spirit and kind nature that prompts the people of Fujiadian to still greet the New Year in accordance with traditional customs and pray for good weather in the New Year. The novel describes Fujiadian people's piety to the gods in detail, revealing a strong flavor of the New Year, and injecting a different kind of humanistic atmosphere into the whole novel. Although the Zhou family was nearly destroyed when Xixi sneaks into a crock-wagon separating suspected cases of plague in an attempt to bring some fodder to the Kitchen Lord's white horse

and caught the virus, the author does not portray the brash child in a mocking or critical tone, but with deep sympathy, which is inseparable from traditional folk customs.

### The Current Nature of “Plague Writing”

According to Chi Zijian, her motivation for writing *The White Snow Crow* came from the SARS epidemic in 2003:

The SARS epidemic in 2003, when the government took a lot of prevention and control measures. The Harbin media reported that this was almost exactly the same as the measures taken by Wu Liande, a medical officer sent by the Qing government to combat the pestis when it broke out a hundred years ago. (Chi & Shu, 2013, p. 99)

In fact, looking back at the measures people took to deal with the pestis in the post-epidemic era mentioned in this novel, it is surprising to find that whether it is the plague in Harbin more than a century ago, the “SARS” in 2003, or the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic today, people have very similar aspects in dealing with the pestis: It is the same new virus, it is the same shortage of masks, it is the same lockdown, it is the same centralized isolation, and so on. This shows that although the current level of science and technology is far from that of a century ago, some of the most basic measures are still the most effective ways to deal with the plague, which cannot but cause us to reflect deeply on the lessons of history. On the other hand, although the performance of ordinary people in different times and their psychological feelings in the plague there are huge differences, such a “big era” often reflects the common human nature. If Chi Zijian’s *White Snow Crow* provides us with a novel to understand how ordinary people faced the plague more than a century ago, then, in the current era of such developed Internet media, when we see the spirit of mutual assistance shown by ordinary people in the COVID-19 epidemic and join hands to fight the epidemic, when there are also disgraceful acts of lawbreakers taking advantage of the situation, it is easy to think of a similar phenomenon in *White Snow Crow*. In this process of reading “history” and “present”, the charm of literature itself is self-evident. Therefore, the writing of the plague in the *Snow Raven* is on the one hand a record of past history, but also a profound insight into the world’s people:

“I began to pay attention to this event, to pay attention to Wu Liande, but I was not only interested in him as a character.” I want to know how ordinary people felt when the plague came, how they felt. (Chi & Shu, 2013, p. 103)

In this sense,

literature, in telling history, is trying to realize its own possibilities, while history, in its proud conviction of the truth and necessity of self-representation, misses the innumerable details and folds of existence that once had a sense of life and temperature. (Zhang, 2019, p. 69)

Such “details and folds” are also what we should pay attention to when reflecting on the survival of ordinary people in this disaster since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus outbreak:

“Focusing on ordinary people who are really suffering in the plague may be the way to make literary reflection towards humanity or the state of human existence.” In this regard, Chi Zijian’s treatment of *White Snow Crow* is of great reference value, both as a panoramic depiction of the pestis from the perspective of contemporary plague views and administrators, and as a name for everyone involved in the plague, whether noble or humble. (Zhao & Jiang, 2021, p. 18)

It is quite interesting that when the epidemic in Fujiadian began to show signs of improvement, the “Catholic Church” located in Fujiadian City had become a “epidemic prevention dead corner” because of its particularity. In addition to the believers, there are also the people who fled here from Fujiadian, who believe that the

“Almighty Lord” will save them, so they refuse the help of the Epidemic Prevention Bureau. The death of the Russian actress Senikova made Wulende realize the seriousness of the problem: “Senikova was infected in the church in the port area, it seems that mass during the plague is dangerous” (Chi, 2010, p. 101). Realizing this, “Wu Liande ordered that all churches and temples in Harbin be inspected and all religious activities suspended” (Chi, 2010, p. 101). However, “since the first people arrived already infected with the plague, and the church did not take any preventive measures, the people mixed together, and the severity of the epidemic was astonishing” (Chi, 2010, p. 225). In addition to the dozens of bodies that had been quietly buried, more than 20 people who had recently died were placed in coffins in the courtyard, and they had become a cemetery in the city! Moreover, of those who were still alive, after examination, about 80 percent were infected with the plague, and they still sat together, singing and chanting, praying that God would spare them and free them from the plague” (Chi, 2010, p. 225). In the recent COVID-19 epidemic, mass infections caused by religious activities have also posed a major problem for countries in the process of epidemic prevention. Rereading this novel, while lamenting the author’s meticulous description of the plague in Northeast China a hundred years ago, it can also make people reflect on similar problems in the current society.

If SARS in 2003 is the 1.0 version of this “coronavirus”, then the novel coronavirus and its variants are undoubtedly its upgraded version. Over the past three years or so, hundreds of millions of people have been infected with COVID-19 worldwide, and more than one million people have died. This has forced us to reflect on the fact that in the 2020s, when technology and medical treatment are so advanced, human beings are still so vulnerable to the virus. In this context, looking back at the pestis in Northeast China more than a century ago, history seems to repeat itself, except that the political issue of invaders from Russia, Japan, and other countries seeking to seize Chinese territory in the northeast where the plague is spreading is transformed into a geopolitical conflict between different countries and regions on a global scale in response to the novel coronavirus epidemic. This interpretation is too far from the topic for the *Snow Crow*, but the historical events described in the novel and the exploration of the mentality of ordinary people in the face of disaster can provide an artistic model for us to reflect on the life experience of ordinary people under the epidemic situation in the post-epidemic era. This is also Chi Zijian’s aesthetic concept in the novel:

“What I want to show is the daily life of people when the plague strikes.” That is to say, I want to push through the white bones, to seek even the phosphorescent glimmer in the depths, and to outline the life that lies beneath the shadow of death. (Chi, 2010, p. 259)

### Unfinished Comments: Death Consciousness in “Plague Writing”

In fact, “plague writing” is an important feature of Chi Zijian’s novel creation. In addition to the novel *White Snow Crow*, which specifically describes the plague, in *The Right Band of the Argun*, “my” uncle Nidu Shaman introduced the reindeer plague to his own clan when he performed a spiritual performance for other Ewenki clan, which caused a large number of reindeer deaths. The description of the “Shijing troops” in *Pseudo Manchukuo* using live people to conduct plague virus experiment in Pingfang District of Harbin constitutes one aspect of the novel’s nation-state narration; *Goodnight Rose* takes the Japanese plague experiment in Harbin as the historical perspective of the story; a special chapter in *Clear Beyond the Clouds* describes “the Plague on the Vang River”; the plague of horses mentioned in *The Peak of Mountains*; the description of the plague caused by the release of rats carrying the plague virus after the defeat of the Japanese bacteriological forces in *Yellow Chicken Baijiu*; the “highly pathogenic avian influenza virus” appearing in “Tile City” in *The Bravery of Migratory Birds*; let’s wait.

These “plague writing”, like the religious factors that Chi Zijian incorporated into her works, became the internal driving force to promote the development of the plot. On the one hand, we can find that Chi Zijian’s “plague writing” is related to the consciousness of national state, which is related to the specific historical attributes of the objects described. On the other hand, while writing about the plague, she also extensively expressed the various associated reactions of the people’s hearts caused by the plague, which makes her “plague writing” not only have a historical sense, but also contain some permanent literary charm. Moreover, these “plague writings” are all closely related to death, which conveys Chi Zijian’s deep thinking about life itself.

A considerable part of these works describe people’s life experience in the face of death, and the experience of death is exactly the real experience that she has repeatedly experienced in the process of writing. In the course of writing *Clear Beyond the Clouds*, her husband died in an accident; *The Bravery OF Migratory Birds* and *All the Nights in the World* can be seen as a deep memory of the late husband; grandma died in the middle of writing *White Snow Raven*. These personal experiences all have a hidden or explicit influence on Chi Zijian’s novel creation, which leads her to unconsciously incorporate deep thinking about death in the process of writing. For example, in the writing process of *Clear Beyond the Clouds*, Chi Zijian experienced the separation and death of her lover. After completing the creation, she suddenly realized that the novel was the deepest memory of her lover: “Now I think of it, this novel seems to be a ‘eulogy’ written for my lover, although the content has no direct connection with him” (Chi, 2014, p. 330). In Pearl, the epilogue to *White Snow Raven*, she also mentions that “halfway through, I still felt the difficulty. This difficulty is not literary, but the kind of pressure that the mind cannot bear after truly entering the plague situation. This has never been done before in my writing” (Chi, 2010, p. 260). The sudden death of her grandmother gave her a deeper understanding of death, so that ““I returned to the long form, no longer afraid to enter the plague situation”. It seems that grief and illness are not bad things. Quietly, they give me strength” (Chi, 2010, p. 262). The portrayal of Xin Kailiang in *The Peak of the Mountains* also includes Chi Zijian’s personal experiences with her lover, which together with other relevant plots constitute the novel’s further meditation on death (Chi, 2020, pp. 325-326). In the epilogue to *The Bravery of Migratory Birds*,

“A Fading Sunset”, she also mentions that the oriental stork written in this novel was a large bird she encountered during a walk with her husband. After the death of my lover, I told my mother about this bird, and she said that she had lived here most of her life and had never seen it, and that I lost my lover after the bird appeared, so it was not an auspicious bird. But in my eyes, its direction, so brilliant, is not unlucky, who is not finally toward the sunset, the length of time. (Chi, 2018, p. 202)

And the experience had a potential impact on her conception of the novel:

The chapter I wrote that moved me most was the ending, in which two birds, living and dying in nature, do not escape the storm of fate, and the two people who bury them, in a moment of chaotic happiness, cannot find their way back. (Chi, 2018, pp. 202-203)

The experience of death is integrated into the conception process of the work, and then the meaning of “life” is reflected in the writing of death, thus reflecting the philosophical thinking of “living to death” contained in this kind of work:

“I like to write about the abundant vitality in the death.” Life is indeed difficult, everyone will experience sudden disasters, fear, death, the only thing that can overcome these is the desire for life. The vitality and warmth in the shadow of death are especially valuable. (Liu, 2010)

Therefore, some researchers believe that “she tries to break through and surpass death, which is difficult to carry human aesthetic ideals but is absolutely unavoidable, so that it becomes a part of her ideal real life” (Liu, 2011, p. 123). In this sense, experiencing death and writing death have become two intertwining important themes in Chi Zijian’s “plague writing”.

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