



## Self-awareness in *Sangetsuki*

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### Abstract

The story of *Li Zheng*, in which he transforms into a tiger, has many adaptations in both Chinese and Japanese literature. Similarities are common in those adaptations, but in Japanese writer Nakajima Atsushi's version, there lies distinctiveness. He adds "self-awareness" into his adaptation *Sangetsuki*, and achieves his own literary accomplishments. This paper will give an analysis of this "self-awareness" in *Sangetsuki*.

**Keywords:** Nakajima Atsushi, Japanese and Chinese literature, Self-awareness

Adapted from *Li Zheng* written in the T'ang dynasty, *Sangetsuki*, Japanese writer Nakajima Atsushi's first work, was published on *Literature World*, in February of 1942. Most analyses towards this adaptation focus on contextual differences between the two versions. However, actually, the most significant alternation Nakajima Atsushi makes in his version is in the thematic expression rather than simple contextual refreshing, and the instillation of self-awareness into the new version plays a critic role in the adaptation. This paper will analyze this self-awareness through the perspective of comparative literature.

### 1. *Sangetsuki's* Prototype and Other Adaptations

The story of *Li Zheng*, actually, has also experienced a series of adaptation in Chinese literature history. *Li Zheng*, originally from a novel selection *Xuan Shi Zhi* made by Zhang Du in the Tang dynasty, later was included into *Records of the Taiping Era*. In following periods, many writers had made their own adaptations and revisions of this novel, which could be found in selections as Lu Ji's *Gu Jin Shuo Hai* in the Ming dynasty, *Tang Ren Shuo Hui* in Qian Long's period of the Qing dynasty and *Jiu Xiao Shuo*, edited by Wu Zengqi in the Republic periods, etc. It is generally acknowledged that based on its plots' inference, as the original version *Li Zheng*, *Sangetsuki* also bears a reference of *Ren Hu Zhuan* in *Tang Ren Shuo Hui* of the Qing dynasty (Sun, 2000, p.281). Compared with the original version, following plots are added in *Sangetsuki*: firstly, before *Li Zheng's* transformation, there is some voice calling on him outside the room; secondly, there are descriptions about his embarrassment and anger, and his hunting after the transformation; thirdly, the tiger recites a poem in one scene; fourthly, the explanation that the reason for the transformation is his burning down the widow's house after their adultery; fifthly, in the conversation between *Li Zheng* and *Yuan Shen* there are contents about the mutton-presenting and showing his tiger body to *Yuan Shen*. Through a careful comparison of these two adaptations, it can be found that Nakajima Atsushi, excepts several small deletions, has nearly made no revision towards the original version's plots, but there is a dramatic change in the story's connotation.

Features of Chinese classic novel are obvious in the whole series of adaptations of *Li Zheng*, and there are three main points of them. Firstly, the story itself is a typical mystery story, i.e. recording mysterious events and anecdotes to amuse readers. Secondly, with the adding of moralization in the development of the story, those adaptations use the comeuppance as a main clue in plots' construction. Thirdly, in concrete contexts, those stories "focus on the narration of plots and simplify psychological and scenery description, especially avoid lengthy descriptions that are irrelevant to main plots" (Yuan, 2006, p.356). In general, they emphasized on story-telling rather than the expression of thematic meaning, and appear to be short of the characterization of individual subjective thinking, in particular.

Faced with those distinct features in previous adaptations, Nakajima Atsushi takes a lot of efforts to change them and help to contribute the creation of self-awareness. In the first level, he uses many psychological descriptions in his version, which constructs the expression of subjective feeling, and achieves natural advantages in humanity's presentation. In order to enhance its mysteriousness, the original story contains lots of miraculous imaginations, such as in *Records of the Taiping Era* the description about the feeling after his transformation into a tiger that "I have a feeling

that the more ruthless I become, the more powerful I am. Then I notice that short hairs grow on my arms and legs. All those people passing by, horses with burden, flying birds and beasts with short hair, appear in my vision, provoke my desire for eating". However, *Sangetsuki* just presents a brief depiction of these imaginations, instead of which, a long paragraph with philosophical and subtle self-thinking is added:

"At first, I can't believe my eyes. In my opinion, it must be a dream, because I've once dreamed about a dreaming situation that I was aware of. I get lost in dismay when I have to admit the fact that it isn't a dream. Then, fear comes with it. I know nothing, but just passively accept what fate imposes on me, and keep my meaningless life. This is the destiny of all livings" (Nakajima, 1993, p.30).

This paragraph enfeebles the process of the transformation, which only takes one sentence, but shows, with subtlety, the protagonist's psychological changing from surprise to sorrow and then to fear, after the transformation. The more profound part is that the author treats the transformation as the fate of the "self", controlled by unknown others, in which process an awareness of "self", contrasting "others", is produced. Many other psychological descriptions in the story can be analyzed similarly: because of the existence of "self", there are paradoxes about self-existence and self-value, as well as self-mourning. To sum up, Nakajima Atsushi's adaptation, with amble, subtle inner description, contrasts sharply with the original version, and establishes the basic preparation for the tragedy of the protagonist Li Zheng.

For the second part, Li Zheng's character is obviously changed in Nakajima's adaptation. In Chinese adaptations, Li Cheng is a typical literati and being a high rank official is his final ideal, which can be seen from his conversation with Yuan Shen. And his inner lamentation can also be categorized as the traditional literati's "unrecognizing depression". Possessing the common arrogance of literati, Li Zheng, is not created as an individual figure, but as a representative of the whole group of Chinese literati.

Differently in *Sangetsuki*, the author pays much attention on accentuating Li Zheng's ideal of "writing to live", a strong desire to perpetuate his works and obtain wide acknowledgement. For instance, Li Zheng's reclusion from the society is driven by his devotion into poem-writing, rather than the unwillingness in affiliating with the vulgar. After the transformation, keeping thinking of his unfulfilled dream, Li Zheng primarily entrusts Yuan Shen to spread his works rather than originally asking him to take care of his wife and children. It's worthy of being noticed that, this idea is against the moral principles of that time. This over-obsession with writing results in his exclusive character, which even could be a sick paradox, a struggle between the cowardly pride and haughty diffidence. This kind of figure, as Li Zheng in *Sangetsuki*, has never appeared before. Assimilating many personal experiences of the author Nakajima himself, it demonstrates strong individuality and distinctiveness, greatly different from any figure in other Chinese adaptations.

Lastly, Nakajima Atsushi deletes many contents about moralization in his version. As mentioned above, moralization is considered a significant part in other Chinese adaptations, especially in chronically later ones. In the version from *Tang Ren Shuo Hui*, features of comeuppance and asking for benevolence are apparent, such as Li Zheng's adultery and murder cause his transformation, and Yuan Shen's helping Li Zheng's family results in his promotion. However, those parts are not reserved in Nakajima Atsushi's version. The author's deletion of moralization at one side, accentuates the tragedy of Li Zheng, because the transformation is arisen from the protagonist's self inner struggle, which promotes the "self" to the surface, rather than the moral comeuppance; on the other side, based on the proposition of the imaginary readers' changing from the common people to the literati, this deletion moves the theme to "self-expression" from the simple demonstration of "mystery" and "moralization". Mysterious experiences and lamentation can no longer be found in the tiger's confession, which becomes Li Zheng's analysis of his inner thinking. To this extent, all those changes clearly reveal the author's creativity, leading by his strong intention in self-expression.

## 2. "Self-awareness"

In this part, further consideration about *Sangetsuki*'s theme will be presented, through three distinct contrasts of the story.

### 2.1 The contrast between the inner mind and the outside world

After Li Zheng's transformation, a monologue is depicted in the story, as mentioned above, that "At first, I can't believe my eyes. In my opinion, it must be a dream, because I once dreamed about a dreaming situation that I was aware of. I get lost in upset when I have to admit the fact that it isn't a dream. Then, fear comes with it. I know nothing, but just passively accept what fate imposes on me, and keep my meaningless life. This is the destiny of all livings" (Nakajima, 1993, p.30).

The contrast between Li Zheng's inner mind and his "fate", or "subjectivity" and "objectivity", could be the ultimate cause for his transformation into a tiger. Being a talented writer at a young age, it is natural for Li Zheng to chase the ideal of "living for writing". However, his being unknown to the public is quite doubtful. According to Japanese scholar Sagi Tadao, the possession of talent could be necessary to create a tragedy (Sagi, 1990, p.289). If Li Zheng is only a third-rate writer, all those confession and lament would loss much power, and may result into a story of a clown. After

all, readers are not likely get moved by a complete loser. Compared with the uncontrollable fate, Li Zheng's achievements of standing out in the imperial examination, getting highly praised by Yuan Shen, and even his poem-recital after the transformation, are powerless and insignificant. The mere action he can take is "passively accept what fate imposes on me". This is his awareness that he has to make compromise with fate, but still, a strong desire of resistance is hidden behind.

### 2.2 *The contrast between cowardly pride and haughty diffidence*

The tiger illustrates his thinking about the transformation to Yuan Shen, after handing over his family to Yuan.

"I have said that, I'm not sure why my life could become like this. But after a careful consideration, I think, it may be reasonable... All those changes originate from my cowardly pride and haughty diffidence. I take efforts in learning, practicing because I'm afraid of my lack of talent; while still, I'm confident in my ability, to some extent, and then reluctant in dealing with the vulgar. Gradually, I drive myself away from the society. But for my resentment towards those injustices and misfortune on me, the sick confidence grows in my mind. So, I'm what I am now. Just appearing like my inner mind" (Nakajima, 1993, p.34).

This long monologue leads the story to its climax, in which the author's ideas are best illustrated. The protagonist's self-contradiction, represented by the "cowardly pride" and "haughty diffidence" is explicitly demonstrated here. In addition, the author even provides explanations towards these two terms. "Cowardly pride" implies Li Zheng's exclusiveness, caused by his proud talents, or, to be more accurate, his ineffable inferiority complex. "Haughty diffidence" means his reluctance in communicating with teachers and friends, which should be done to achieve improvements, caused by his cowardice or self-abasement. Being opposite to each other, these two sides, in fact, share the same prerequisite, that they are both based on the contrast between "self" and "others". This contradiction is produced in his incompatible communication with others. Without the cowardice for the possible being hurt, he won't suffer the fear and hesitation in social affairs with friends and teachers; without the strong inferiority complex, it is not necessary for him to reduce the sociality with the excuse of "arrogance". Li Zheng has sharp eyes on his "arrogance" in others' thinking, and his own "inferiority complex". Therefore, this struggle originates from the over-emphasis on "others", their comments and thinking towards Li Zheng. In the author's mind, this kind of "haughty diffidence" can be visualized by a tiger's appearance, that a diffident mind is hidden under the scary surface. Consequently, with the growth of Li Zheng's "self", a ferocious tiger, the uncontrollable "self", takes the place of Li Zheng's humanity.

### 2.3 *Contrast between humanity and bestiality*

To demonstrate the self-thinking of his character, the tiger makes the following speech:

"It's hard to speak out what I have done since my transformation. But I may turn back to humane for a few hours each day, during which I can speak, thinking and even recite poems, just like before. With this human mind, when reviewing my wrongdoings as a tiger, as well as my destiny, I always feel ashamed, fear, and resentful. However, even those a few human hours are shortening. I used to think the reason for my transformation, but recently, I found that I'm thinking about why I was a man in the past. It's horrible! Perhaps, sometime later, my humanity will be wholly covered by bestiality" (Nakajima, 1993, p.33).

Apparently, Li Zheng, in the continuous transformation between tiger and man, "stays in a fragmentary situation, suffering the metal inner fission" (Guo, 2004, p.104). In the story, Nakajima Atsushi, through the tiger's mouth, states his own thinking that human mind contains both humanity and bestiality, and everyone should make a good control of them through profound self-understanding. "Cowardly pride" and "haughty diffidence" in Li Zheng's mind can be a concrete characteristic presentation of this contrast between humanity and bestiality. If bestiality is well controlled, human form can be kept, otherwise beast form will take the place. Failed in keeping the balance, Li Zheng, after his transformation, still has human features. The author's calling for introspection becomes obvious in the protagonist's self-examination of his double-mentality. On one hand, Li Zheng feels the pain brought by those wrongdoings as a tiger, and fears the shortening time of his being human. On the other hand, he also expects to relieve himself from this unbearable suffering, through the complete transformation into a tiger. With the development of the story, this contrast becomes more universal to readers, that how people could maintain their bestiality, if everyone contains it; further, whether it is possible for everyone to be changed into a beast, under the pressure of the outside world.

## 3. The origin of Self-awareness

Compared with other adaptations, *Sangetsuki* contains more aspects of self-awareness. The following part will, through the consideration of both the author's background and social environment, analyze the origin and source of the usage of self-awareness in this story.

### 3.1 *Nakajima Atsushi's personal background*

Works written by Nakajima Atsushi usually have close relation with his own actual and mental experiences. For example, in *Sangetsuki*, Nakajima instills his thinking and beliefs in the identity of literati and artistic creation into the

protagonist Li Zheng, who is created as a tragic figure, who fails to achieve literary acknowledgements that he earnestly longs for. Nakajima Atsushi was born in a family with a tradition in learning Chinese studies (Li, Ono, 2002, p.84). Nakajima is a knower of both eastern and western cultures.

He tried to live as "a man of culture," attending musical and dramatic performances, reading widely in Eastern and Western literature, philosophy, and history, studying foreign languages such as French, German, Latin, and Greek, in addition to English and Chinese, translating from English into Japanese works by D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, and Franz Kafka, and writing short stories, an unfinished novel, other narratives, and poetry in Japanese and Chinese (Nobuko, 1987, p.38).

Although he was regarded as a whiz kid since very young, Nakajima didn't achieve widely acknowledgement from his graduation from college to the end of his life. It could be his destiny, just as Li Zheng's situation in *Sangetsuki*. Japanese scholar Yoshida Seiiti in commenting him says that "Nakajima inherited the weakness of traditional family, and was greatly influenced by his family and society, under which he formed his own characters within a dark youthhood. Probably because of this kind of personality, many of his works show literati's loneliness, desperateness and inner resistance, which construct the basic tone of those works" (Yoshida, 1994, p.728).

For another part, the contrast between "cowardly pride" and "haughty diffidence", to some extent, suggests Li Zheng's representative position of the author himself. With the association of Nakajima Atsushi's other works, *Sangetsuki* can be the most direct one in showing the author's self-confession. What readers can feel are not the mere protagonist's self-awareness and introspection, but more importantly, is the author's expression of his inner thinking. In *Sangetsuki*, Li Zheng takes efforts to avoid connection with others, and to write and create alone. For the over-emphasis on readers' commenting on his poems, Li Zheng is too cowardly to show his works to others. To this extent, Nakajima Atsushi, the author, shares the similarity with Li Zheng. Although he had been writing since high school, partly because he did not join any literary coterie and partly because he had high literary standards and therefore did not feel confident enough to submit his works to literary magazines, he was unable to get his works published (Nobuko 37-58). This experience seems to be correspondent to the tiger's saying that he at one side fears to communicate literature with friends or teachers, and on the other side, he also disdains to deal with the common people. Nakajima's wife once mentioned that "he never talks about his writings, but one day, he came to me in the kitchen, and said, 'I wrote a story of a man's transformation into a tiger.' At that time, I felt he looked sad, which I can't forget until now. Later I read *Sangetsuki*, and felt bad, because I seemed can hear his voice in the novel" (Hamakawa, 1976, p.117). The "cowardly pride" and "haughty diffidence" can be found not only in Li Zheng, but also in Nakajima, which explains his never talking to his wife or friends about his writings.

### 3.2 Social Background

The world in the novel should not be disconnected with the real world.

"Modernism novel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has stepped into an obscure and elusive path. Therefore, reading and explaining those novels are imposed with the same difficulty. But, perhaps, this fact may indicate our life and living environment in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are even more complicated and difficult to be explained and mastered. Novel's complicity is correspondent to the intricacy of the reality" (Wu, 2002, p.5).

Goes with people's increasingly diversified thinking, the perception in viewing human goodness and vice becomes obscure. From Nakajima's view towards "humanity" and "bestiality" in *Sangetsuki*, it can be indicated that the dark side is ingrained in people's mind, and becomes a part of one's personality (Sun, 2000, p.288). With the emphasis on that self-encouragement and self-cultivation are helpful in the restraint of "bestiality", the author's revealing and criticism towards human mind's dark side appear more apparent.

In addition, *Sangetsuki* was published in the middle of the Second World War, a period of militarism in Japan, in which humanism and individualism were greatly suppressed. The almighty power of the unknown "others" vaguely appears in *Sangetsuki*, could be associated with the temporal social environment. During the wartime, Nakajima, for a period, had to be an official in a small island in the south Pacific, in order to sustain his family (Nobuko, 1987, p.38). This experience was never mentioned in his works, but still readers can found that Nakajima's being an official can be another correspondence to Li Zheng, who set foot in the officialdom for the same reason. The inner minds of both Nakajima and Li Zheng are contradictory with sadness and compliant to the "outside world", which is the resource of the "self-struggle" in the novel. Takeda Taijon says, "Nakajima Atsushi demonstrates the 'fear of the world's malevolence' in a modern way", and based on this, he predicts a new literary trend, especially a trend of post-war literature" (Takeda, 2001, p.26).

It can be said that, due to the instillation of the "self-awareness", *Sangetsuki* proves its uniqueness and distinctness among so many adaptations, from both China and Japan. As to its author, Nakajima Atsushi through the figure of Li Zheng, achieves his own purpose in self-expression.

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