An Exploration of the Culture of Nicknames in Zhao Shuli's Novels: A Case Study of Nicknames in the Characters of Li Youcai's Board-Talk

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Abstract. In Zhao Shuli's fiction, nicknames act as clear literary markers, rich with rural culture and social meaning. While scholars have often looked at the language and folk style in Zhao's writing, studies focused just on nicknames are still rare. As a key work of the 'Yam Egg School', *Li Youcai's Board Talk* offers especially interesting nicknames for close study. This paper takes Zhao Shuli's well-known novel The *Li Youcai's Board Talk* as its focus. By looking closely at the meanings and cultural weight behind the characters' nicknames, it shows how these names build the characters in three ways — spirit, personality, and way of living. It also explains how the nicknames bring in elements of rural culture and add depth to the storytelling, showing their role in shaping characters, moving the story forward, and reflecting society. Looking at the novels, this study finds that these nicknames don't just capture a character's inner state, morals, and habits — they also work as channels for everyday speech, making the story feel more real and emotionally true. This paper hopes to take a fresh look at Zhao Shuli's idea of 'writing for ordinary people' by exploring this special literary feature. It aims to offer ideas for today's rural literature to stay close to common readers and use folk material, while giving solid theory and practical steps for current rural writing.

Keywords: *Li Youcai's Board Talk*; nicknames for characters; the worth of the writing; modern-day observations.

1. Introduction

Nicknames are informal names that people often use, and they can capture someone's personality much better than their real name. In Chinese storytelling, giving characters nicknames is an old and clever way to bring them to life. In *Water Margin*, names like 'Timely Rain' for Song Jiang, 'Star of Wisdom' for Wu Yong, 'Leopard Head' for Lin Chong, and 'Flower Monk' for Lu Zhishen really show what these characters are all about — their spirit and key traits jump right off the page. Over in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, nicknames such as 'Reclining Dragon' for Zhuge Liang and 'Phoenix Cub' for Pang Tong compare them to rare, almost mythical animals, pointing out their amazing gifts and legendary feel. And in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, tags like 'Chaos-Stirring Demon King' for Jia Baoyu and 'Phoenix-Spice' for Wang Xifeng paint a clear picture of their nature, making them feel real and full of flavor. These aren't just simple labels. They come from everyday talk, carry special cultural meanings, and let the writers share their own take on each character.

In modern and contemporary Chinese literature, Zhao Shuli stands out with his unique "Yam Egg School" approach. He turned his attention to rural China, painting a clear picture of village life and the flow of time. What really stands out are the colorful nicknames he gives his characters — they act like a key to his storytelling world. *Li* Youcai's *Board Talk* is one of Zhao Shuli's most famous works, bringing to life a whole cast of peasants and local officials. In the book, from the main character 'Li Youcai' to the landlord 'Yan Hengyuan' and all the village leaders, almost everyone has a nickname. These names carry strong feelings of like and dislike, along with clear judgments, making the characters feel more real and rounded.

While scholars have looked a good deal at the language and folk touches in Zhao Shuli's fiction, the particular business of 'nicknames' in his writing hasn't gotten much focus. This paper zeros in on the special case of "nicknames" found in Zhao Shuli's 'Yam Egg School' pieces, taking a close look at *Li Youcai's Board Talk*. Digging into this area matters for adding depth to how we see Zhao Shuli's

novels and to get a better handle on the folk talk in country-life literature. Work moves ahead on three main fronts: the deeper meanings behind the nicknames, what they do culturally and for the story, and their place in literature along with what they say to us today. By going through existing books and articles, this method helps pull together what's already been studied and picks out the key points from the texts, which moves the search along. So, this study puts the speech in *Li Youcai's Board Talk* at the center. It tries to see how the nicknames given to characters hold deeper meanings and how they tie into shaping those characters and the world around them. This line of inquiry gives us a sharper view of Zhao Shuli's way with folk language, showing how his approach of 'living deep among the people and putting down roots' still speaks to making literature now. By taking a good, hard look at the nickname culture in *Li Youcai's Board Talk*, you can not only come to a richer understanding of what Zhao Shuli gave to literature but also find solid ideas and useful directions for today's writers. This helps in painting a true picture of village life, hearing the voices of ordinary folk, and putting those voices into words the right way.

2. The Profound Implications of Nicknames in Li Youcai's Board-Talk Characters

The nicknames of characters in *Li Youcai's Board-Talk* are not mere labels, but vessels imbued with rich socio-cultural significance. These monikers accurately reflect the characters' mental dispositions, moral character, and conduct, crystallising folk wisdom while simultaneously embodying the author's emotional stance and value judgements.

2.1. Mental State and Nicknames

Nicknames get right to the core of who someone is, showing what they're really like inside.

The old locust tree is both the place where things happen and the main spot where the story plays out. Meng Xiangwu points out in his study that this picture holds deep meaning. For one, it shows how Li Youcai, much like the ancient locust tree at the edge of the village, has stayed firmly planted in his home ground, becoming a natural piece of Yanjia Mountain's community life. He also stands for country ways and local know-how; with his long life and sharp eye, Li Youcai has turned into the village's own wise man in people's minds. What's more, it stands for a tough, unyielding spirit, letting him keep his head and push back hard against the landlords' harsh treatment. So the "Old Locust Tree" neatly brings together the characters' roots, their culture, and their inner strength into one whole [1].

Li Youcai's other name, "Unflappable," fits his steady heart and strong will when things got hard. This is nothing like the thinking of the landlord class. It's more than just a picture of the man himself — it shows the tough life force and the brave spirit of working people everywhere under the boot.

The villagers called the landlord Yan Hengyuan "Lord of the Underworld," a name that laid bare their deep hatred for him. It wasn't just a label; it showed how completely he controlled life in Yanjia Village. People felt their lives were in his grip, and the name pointed to the cold cruelty in his heart. To keep what was his, he would crush anyone beneath him without a second thought, showing no mercy at all. This "Lord of the Underworld" stands far apart from Li Youcai's "unflappable spirit." One is the dark face of feudal power — all about squeezing people dry — while the other stands for the working folks, who have a tough will and won't be broken. Jiang Hui also points out that Li Youcai's way of "loitering" brings to mind the "flâneur" known in French writing. By watching from a distance, without jumping straight into political fights, he carves out his own space as a peasant thinker. This lets him see society clearly and gather everyday wisdom through a less tangled view [2].

Young farmers like Xiao Fu and Xiao Shun — their nicknames just put "Xiao" before their real names. This little word holds three meanings: first, "small" can hint at youth and energy, quietly showing the fresh spirit and push of new farmers, fitting their lively nature;second, in village life, "small" often means "lower rank" or "not yet fully grown," which matches their shaky place in society;third, "small" points to something "not yet fixed," setting them apart from the older farmers'

way of thinking and leaving space for their own awakening and inner change. This way of naming captures their bright but uncertain spot as a new generation on the land. Slowly waking up through the revolution, their spirit both fits with and carries on the work of the farmers who came before.

2.2. Personality, Conduct, and Nicknames

Nicknames are the "labels" of a character's personality and conduct, which make clear value judgments about the character's character and conduct through highly condensed visual language.

Although Xiaoyuan did not have a specific nickname in the early stages, his behavior was ridiculed by the board as "changing clothes, changing clothes, sitting on the temple and not getting down" [3]. This reflects his gradual expansion and corruption after gaining power, and his detachment from the character of the people. Yang Yuelin further pointed out that the essence of Xiaoyuan's transformation was the instability of his "struggle". His initial resistance stemmed from his concern for his own interests, rather than a firm revolutionary belief. After coming to power, he was lured by the old landlord forces and transformed from a rebel to a defender of vested interests. This transformation deeply exposed the complex character of some rural youth in class struggle [4].

In contrast, Liu Guangju's nickname "Fake Big Head" is a precise portrait of the hypocritical behavior of those who rely on power. This nickname deeply reveals the contradictory nature of the character's personality: he is determined to become a big shot in the eyes of others, eager to gain social status and power beyond his own abilities, but lacks matching real talent, practical work, and moral cultivation. Therefore, he could only seek and maintain his status and power by fawning on the landlord Yanhengyuan. The word "fake" pierced the illusion of "big head" hidden under his hypocritical appearance. The idiom "follow the trend" can best describe him.

Different from the hypocrisy of Liuguangju, Zhang Degui's nickname "pancake eating cadre" starts from a scene with a breath of life and mercilessly criticizes the corruption of grass-roots power. This nickname comes from his specific behavior of using the authority of the chairman of the farmers' Association to seek personal gains and plunder the wealth of the people. Although the villagers did not use the word "corruption", they chose the daily word "eating pancakes" to describe it, which was even more selfish and greedy. This way is vivid and vivid. It turns the abstract power of corruption into a picture of life that everyone can understand. The critical effect is stronger. Here is the uniqueness of Zhao Shuli.

Yan Jiaxiang is called "ghost blink". This nickname not only describes his appearance characteristics of blinking but also implies his cunning and crafty character. He is both Yan Hengyuan's son and his accomplice. From time to time, he gives advice for him. The author uses the nickname "ghost blink" to vividly show his sinister character.Lao Qin's character is described as "only afraid of the persimmon leaves falling down and breaking his head" [2]. Although this is not a formal nickname, it vividly depicts Lao Qin's cowardly character. This is also a true portrayal of some farmers in old China.

2.3. Ways of Doing Things and Nicknames

The nickname of a character is not only a label of character, but also a mirror, which vividly reflects the way the character does things and the survival strategy of the character in a specific social environment.

In addition to the nickname of "breathless" and the image description of "old locust tree", Liyoucai also has an incisive summary of his identity and core skills - "Allegro expert". This nickname is not only because he is good at composing Allegretto and singing Allegretto but also reflects his wisdom in dealing with the world with folk literature and art as a weapon. Wangyuyu mentioned in his research that this way of doing things not only conforms to his identity as an ordinary people but also avoids direct conflict with the landlord class. Reading the catchy Allegretto, it skillfully spreads the information, thus revealing the truth of the matter and condensing the power of the vast number of working people [5].

In sharp contrast to Li Youcai's popularity, the village bully Yanxifu is the most popular. He has a frightening nickname - "a tiger". This nickname accurately describes his nature: he is as ferocious and brutal as a tiger, and he runs rampant in the countryside with the help of his hegemonic power. He is unreasonable and relies on threats of violence. He often punches and kicks the common people. He not only forms gangs, but also colludes with evil forces, making the village restless. The common people are so miserable that they dare not speak out in anger.

In addition, the newly appointed cadres of the farmers' Association, such as Xiao Shun and Xiao Fu, are still inexperienced although their way of doing things seems particularly enthusiastic. They dare to fight against evil forces, but sometimes they just act recklessly and never consider the consequences. Their nickname ("small" generation) also implies that they have to continue to hone their way of doing things.

In general, the nicknames in *Li* Youcai's *Board Talk* constitute a subtle folk narrative strategy. These nicknames comprehensively and profoundly shape the character image from the three aspects of spirit, character and behavior, and also carry the profound social and cultural connotation and folk value judgment. This creative technique has greatly enhanced the artistic expression of the novel, and let us see Zhao Shuli's profound understanding and skilled use of folk discourse.

3. The Cultural Function and Narrative Value of Li Youcai's Board Talk

The nicknames in *Li Youcai's Board Talk* are far from just simple labels — they hold deep cultural meaning and a clever touch of storytelling skill. They not only bring local culture to life but also add much to the novel's way of telling a story. These names show how Zhao Shuli truly wrote for everyday people.

3.1. Local Cultural Spirit Bearing and Social Reality Mapping

A nickname, coming from the talk of ordinary people, shows the local culture of a place, along with what folks there believe in and how they feel about life.

The nicknames in *Li Youcai's Board Talk* give us a way to see how Yanjiashan village works — who has power and how people relate. Mengxiangwu's study shows that "Lord of hell" Yan Hengyuan and "immortal" Liyoucai stand in clear opposition. One stands for the old dark forces — feudal, oppressive, and exploitative. The other stands for the working people, full of life and unwilling to give up [1]. This clash really shows the deeper social conflicts at play.

"The Lord of hell" title really shows how scared and powerless the villagers felt after years of being pushed down. It points to Yan Hengyuan's strong grip on the village, and hints at the deep shadows cast by old feudal powers in the Chinese countryside. In contrast, Li Youcai, who is "not dead in anger", represents the survival wisdom and toughness of the people at the bottom. This nickname reflects the villagers' admiration and recognition for him. It symbolizes the indomitable vitality and indomitable fighting spirit of the working people under extremely harsh conditions. However, the nicknames of "small generation" young farmers, such as Xiaoshun and Xiaofu, have formed effective complementarities and inheritance with the older generation of farmers, reflecting that they still need to work hard. These nicknames together constitute a complete spiritual map of rural society.

The nickname has become a mirror here, reflecting the class contradictions, power structure and the plight and mentality of the people in rural society before the land reform in the liberated areas. Huang Hui found that the expression of this contradiction and mentality achieved in-depth dissemination with the help of Banhua, a folk form. For example, the Banhua criticizing Yan HengYuan, "village head Yan HengYuan, cover the sky with one hand", stabbed the darkness of power with rhymed short sentences, which not only conformed to farmers' oral habits, but also formed a strong critical tension, and became an important carrier for farmers to compete for the right to speak [6]. Zhaoziyun further pointed out from the perspective of the public sphere that the space of "the bottom of the old locust tree" in *Li Youcai's Board Talk* is the core field for the spread of nicknames

and Banhua. The discussion and singing of nicknames such as "Lord of hell" and "Qi Bu die" are essentially the practice of farmers' group's criticism of patriarchal power in public space. These nicknames and Banhua jointly build a local public opinion field and promote the transformation of villagers from "silent bystanders" to "participants in public affairs" [7].

3.2. Narrative Expression Enrichment and Story Appeal Enhancement

From the perspective of narration, the use of nicknames has greatly enhanced the artistic expression, authenticity and appeal of the novel, which is a very important part of Zhao Shuli's narrative art.

First of all, these nicknames enable readers to instantly grasp the core characteristics of the characters and leave a deep impression. As Zhang Xiaoqin's research points out, the nicknames of characters in Zhao Shuli's novels have a unique rhetoric art, which can make a clear value judgment on the characters' character and conduct through highly concentrated visualized language [8]. For example, nicknames such as "fake big head" Liuguangju and "ghost blink" Yanjiaxiang enable the characters to show a distinctive image when they appear, which saves the author a lot of narrative ink and leaves a deep impression on the readers.

Secondly, the nickname endows the narrative with strong emotional color and folk wisdom. The nickname of "pancake eating cadre" Zhangdegui, through refining a scene with a strong flavor of life, embodied the corruption of grass-roots power into a picture of life that everyone can understand. The author's description has a stronger critical effect. This is the uniqueness of Zhao Shuli.

Finally, the nickname is inseparable from Zhao Shuli's unique language style and narrative form. Wang Yuyu and Miao Shushan's research focused on Zhao Shuli's integration of folk literary forms such as Banhua into narration and his pursuit of popularization and popularization of language [6, 9].Ling Chen also pointed out in his research that the 13 Allegretto in *Li Youcai's Board Talk* are concise and catchy, which not only expose the landlord's evil deeds, but also encourage the peasants' struggle, showing his skillful use of folk art forms [10]. The nickname itself has the humor, vividness and image of the folk language, which complements the overall language style of the novel, and jointly creates a strong local flavor and a sense of reality close to life. Jiang Hui also mentioned that the "Banhua" form of *Li Youcai's Board Talk* is not simply a reproduction of folk art, but a fusion of modern narrative characteristics. For example, the dual functions of "storytelling" and "comment" are realized through Li Youcai's allegro. This innovation not only continues the comment tradition of traditional Chinese poetry but also endows folk literature and art with modern critical consciousness, which makes the whole story more cordial and vivid [2].

4. The Literary Significance and Contemporary Enlightenment of Zhao Shuli's "Nickname" Writing

4.1. Expression Innovation of Local Literature and Deep Cultivation of Folk Culture Core

Zhao Shuli's skillful use of nicknames is his landmark artistic achievement, which not only enriches the expression techniques of modern local literature, but also deepens the folk culture of his works, which is of great significance in the history of literature.

First of all, in terms of characterization, "nickname" realized the breakthrough and innovation of traditional local characters. Prior to this, the images of farmers in literature tended to be conceptualized. Zhao Shuli refined "nicknames" from folk life as the "label" of character and spiritual traits. As Meng Xiangwu said, these nicknames "are the most refined and vivid summary of character" [1]. For example, Li Youcai, the "immortal" and Yan HengYuan, the "Lord of hell", not only form a sharp contrast, but also intuitively highlight the character's spiritual character and class attribute, enhancing the character's recognition and three-dimensional sense.

Secondly, on the level of cultural connotation, "nickname" carries the essence of folk culture and originates from real life in northern rural areas and people's daily conversation. It was pointed out in

the morning that Zhao Shuli highlighted the character through the precise use of dialects (such as "die Shou" and "Ge Liu Zui"), and the rich local flavor made the character image more vivid [10]. These nicknames contain specific regional customs, people's values and judgment standards, and are essentially the reference and creative transformation of folk narrative wisdom. Chen Xu stressed that Zhao Shuli created from the standpoint of farmers. His nickname not only fits the rural oral habits and cognitive logic but also integrates folk art elements such as rap and Allegro, so as to implement the concept of "writing for the people", highlight the popularity of local literature [11], and endow his works with profound cultural heritage and distinctive national style.

4.2. Enlightenment of Contemporary Literary Creation Path

Zhao Shuli practiced the concept of "writing for the common people" through "nickname" writing, which provided important theoretical and practical enlightenment for contemporary local literature.

First, it enlightens contemporary writers to "go deep into life, take root in the people" and draw creative nutrition from folk experience. Zhao Shuli's "nickname" is vivid because of his profound understanding of farmers' lives and skilled use of folk discourse. His creative purpose of "writing for the common people and reading for the common people" confirms that the vitality of literature lies in the connection between truth and people's livelihood. In contrast, some of the current works are divorced from reality and difficult to resonate. Contemporary writers should be close to public life, adhere to the attitude of creating for the people, dig materials from daily life and discourse, and create works with both authenticity and appeal.

Second, it provides an example for contemporary literature to balance "profound thought" with "easy to understand" and achieve "common appreciation of both refined and popular tastes". Zhaoshuli carried social criticism in the form of folk narration, and wangchangjun commented that *Li Youcai's Board Talk* "achieved the perfect integration of political discourse and folk discourse" [12]."Nickname" is not only a tool to shape people, but also a medium for ideological transmission and social criticism. Based on Jameson's "National Fable" theory, Eric Hodges pointed out that his character nickname contains both the symbol of toughness at the bottom and the metaphor of national vision, providing a historical reference for balancing "Folk Narrative" and "grand theme" [13].This enlightens contemporary writers that when dealing with serious issues, they can learn from folk wisdom and life narrative, adopt grounded expression strategies, avoid expression divorced from reality, and let the works play the social function of enlightening people's wisdom and consensus while having both ideological depth and wide acceptance.

5. Conclusion

Zhao Shuli made clever use of nicknames in *Li Youcai's Board Talk*. This isn't just a clever writing move — it's packed with deep cultural meaning and sharp social commentary. These nicknames hit right at the heart of each character's personality, their state of mind, and how they handle things, making them feel real and alive. They also carry a strong local flavor, turning into sharp tools for showing social truth and making powerful critiques. Zhao Shuli's approach gives local literature something to learn from. It reminds writers today to get close to everyday life, to pull ideas and material from folk culture, and to write stories that have both depth and reach. This study re-examines Zhao Shuli's concept of "writing for the common people", and more clearly realizes that only when literature is close to public life and reflects public opinion, can it really enter the hearts of readers, so that everyone is willing to read, understand, and be inspired and inspired. This is why his works are still moving and have strong vitality.

The research result of this study is a systematic analysis of the nicknames in *Li Youcai's Board Talk*, which shape the characters from the three dimensions of spirit, character and way of doing things, and also have the functions of local culture bearing and narrative strengthening. Therefore, it is further concluded that Zhao Shuli's "nickname" writing is an important carrier for practicing the concept of "writing for the people", which highlights the literary value and social critical significance

of folk discourse. This study provides a valuable reference for the study of Zhao Shuli's novels and the folk discourse of local literature in the future. It mainly affects the attention paid to the micro literary phenomenon such as "nickname" in this field and promotes the academia to pay more attention to the interpretation of the deep connotation of local literature from the perspective of folk elements. Future research should focus more on the comparative study of the "nickname" culture in Zhao Shuli's other works and the analysis of the differences in the writing of "nickname" in local literature in different regions.

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