A Sip of Desire: Wine, Power and Masculinity in the Republic of Wine

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Abstract: Wine has been an important imagery in Chinese literary works. Mo Yan, a well-known Chinese writer, uses wine as a more dynamic metaphor in his work the Republic of Wine to show the powerful functions of wine and unveil problems in China's society. This article mainly focuses on power and masculinity while incorporating with wine to depict China's drinking culture and analyze how alcohol shapes a man but meanwhile causes troubles to a man through close reading of this fiction. It argues that wine is not only a symbol of the author's satire but also a metaphor that conflates several complicated concepts. More specifically, when people are too crazy about masculinity and power to control themselves, they would be trapped in pain.

1. Introduction

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (2000), German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche associates the imagery of wine with irrationality and wildness. He appropriates Dionysus, the God of wine in ancient Greek religion, as the symbol of ecstasy. According to Nietzsche, Dionysian spirit is ecstasy in the midst of pain, causing struggles and obsessions. Interestingly, wine in the Chinese culture shares this Nietzschean connotation such as hedonism and indulgence, while also having a significant connection with masculinity and power.

Since ancient times in China, wine has been widely used as a metaphor in literature to demonstrate the author's emotions and concepts like failure of gaining power or expression of men's masculinity. Li Bai, one of the most famous poets from the Tang Dynasty, considered wine as important as his life. He adopted the imagery of wine in more than 170 poems, most of which show the frustration about his failure in official career. Apart from this, wine is the placebo for people who could not access officialdom; especially under the influence of the educational system at that time, people were eager to be a part of the official group. But the vacancies are much less than the demands, so those who could not achieve their dream career drink for comforting themselves. Similarly, in today's China, one typical example Mo Yan's *the Republic of Wine* has inherited this literary tradition, while using

¹ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, one of the descriptions of Dionysian spirit is "...only the peculiar mixture and duality of the emotions on the part of the Dionysian enthusiasts recalls it—as cures recall lethal poisons—the phenomenon that pain arouses pleasure, that exultation tears cries of agony from the breast.", 27

wine as a more dynamic metaphor that symbolizes not only individual emotions, but also social problems in China. In this novel, drinking is the symbol of masculinity and one's power; and the image of wine has been combined with the metaphor in Chinese literature and the theory by Nietzsche. In most cases, drinking makes everything possible though things sometimes go against the law and ethic.

This novel was written during 1989~1993, when China's Reform and Opening-up was progressing and market economy establishing. On one hand, since the highly centralized system of the government could not adapt to the trend of the new period in China, the power shifted from the government to people and the society. However, in this process, corruption and formalization became increasingly widespread.² Alcohol becomes the currency in the field of officialdom. Officials advocated "drinking culture", charging the government for drinking and abandoning themselves into fun rather than their work. Some overdrank to show their masculinity and tell others they are men of abilities; others tried to get close to the officials through drinking with the power owners, in order to reach their filthy motives. Thus, in the field of power, wine was the ticket, making things possible. Officials took advantage of their power for extravagance at the dining table to show off their power and social status, damaging the image of government and nation.³

In Mo Yan's the Republic of Wine, the imagery of wine is not only a symbol of the author's satire but also a metaphor that conflates several complicated concepts. When people are too crazy about masculinity and power to control themselves, they would be trapped in pain, which, according to Nietzsche's understanding of pain, is nihility—one losing himself and forgetting his missions. This essay mainly focuses on power and masculinity while incorporating with wine. Face and masculinity encourage the alcohol abuses in Chinese wine manner, for external bravery of drinking and sometimes, the satisfaction of forcing others to drink. Wine, as an indispensable entertainment in Chinese officialdom, is a tool for some officials to show off their power, also a way for illegally satisfying motives, embodying corruption.

The two main characters in this work—Ding Gou'er and Diamond Jin—are both destroyed by wine. Being unable to resist the drinking urging from others and to maintain his masculinity, Ding Gou'er outdrinks himself even though he could not hold his liquor, leading himself to death; while Diamond Jin, a crazy power-chaser, always takes advantage of wine to and try to conquer everything including law. But gradually, he becomes a slave of power.

2. Wine and Masculinity

Although the story is set in a place called "the Republic of Wine", actually the setting is just a small city where the culture and economy are dominated by wine. In Liquorland, wine is the necessity in people's daily life—they drink when having meals, driving cars, and whoever comes for business should drink. According to what Diamond Jin says about his childhood, at that time he substituted industrial alcohol for sorghum liquor in order to toughen his internal organs, under the circumstance that there was no liquor. (36) With the establishment of a Brewer's college and tens of thousands of distilleries, wine has become the economic backbone of the city, with alcohol specialties including Black Pearl, Overlapping Green Ants and Red-Maned Stallion invented by Li Yidou, a Ph.D. candidate in liquor studies at the Brewer's College.

Masculinity as a concept is infused with the imagery of alcohol, in terms of how people name the alcohol products, how they drink, and the discourse that revolves around drinking and wine. Names of wine bear connotations of masculinity. "Black Pearl", for example, is a famous Liquorland drink

² Liu Feng, "Zhongguo Shehui," 85.

³ Dai Guozhao, "Jiuzhuo Wenhua", 1

that relieves indigestion. In ancient China, black pearl was a symbol of courage and power. Similarly, "Overlapping Green Ants" also connotes masculine power and sexual ability. "The basic ingredients are sorghum and mung beans, fermented in an old cellar." (97) Although there is no insect in the liquor, "ant" is incorporated in its' name. Besides, a widely accepted saying in China refers that the wine of ant is a great aphrodisiac, which is called "Zhuangyang" in Chinese. As such, the name "Overlapping Green Ants" contains the implication of sexual capacity, which is an important component of masculinity. Moreover, in Chinese, the word for ant, yi (from ma'yi), sounds like the word for billion, yi, referring to wealth, which is a symbol of man's social status and power. According to Li Yidou's words, Overlapping Green Ants is a high-quality liquor, and only those who own high social status and wealth could enjoy the liquor.

Wine in this context is gendered and linked with the production of manhood and womanhood.

In the drinking scenes, the male drinking group creates a unity distanced from other people and specifically from women.⁴ Wine is the priority of men while women's position is peripherial, and sometimes women are compared with wine, which is to be consumed by men. "Using beautiful women as a metaphor for liquor is the best, most vivid means of characterizing its qualities."(97) Men and women are not on the same position, as women are passive, objectified by the active male drinkers. Since alcohol consumption is seen to be a masculine behavior, men who are insecure in their masculine identities may use alcohol consumption to demonstrate masculine competence.⁵ Wine and the consumption of wine contribute to the construction of "men's club", a homosocial unity essential to the acknowledgement of one's masculinity. "Homosociality promotes clear distinctions between hegemonic masculinities and nonhegemonic masculinities by the segregation of social groups."⁶ In Mo's the Republic of Wine, there is only description of men drinking in a group while women are excluded, at best they are acting as servants of bringing the wine for the men. This homosocial interaction enhances the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity by the division of the gendered roles, referring to women as the sexually consumed and men as consumers.

While wine, as an important currency of communication in social settings, builds up this homosocial unity of men; it also becomes a framework of what man should look like. In other words, men are also disciplined to follow rules of drinking, so as to be confirmed of their male identity. Just as the old saying in China, "If a man does not drink, he lives in vain.", the incapability to hold large amounts of alcohol would be considered weak and feminine. Diamond Jin challenges Ding Gou'er: "Some people would rather be known as the son of a whore than drink a little liquor." (179) "Son of a whore" is a harsh insult for a man in the Chinese context, but it is even more belittling to be man who drinks only "a little liquor". This suggests how hierarchy is constructed through wine in the patriarchal homosocial system. Someone who could not hold his liquor would have to outdrink himself in order not to be looked down upon. Therefore, men, though seemingly playing a dominant role in the patriarchal society, are actually captivated by the masculine construction. At the same time they are given more power, their rights to express their weakness are also deprived. Drinking is one of the appearances of masculinity—to drink is to be masculine, and to drink heavily is to be even more masculine⁷—it has become a solid concept in "male talk".

The major discourse of masculinity features physical and emotional toughness or risk taking. In this context, men who can drink are considered more sexually attractive by women. Masculinity is the important factor of influencing the health-related behavior such as drinking, and men try to

⁴ Hunt, "Alcohol and Masculinity", 228

⁵ Richard and Jonathan, "Alcohol consumption and masculine identity", 600

⁶ Bird, "Welcome to the Men's Club", 121

⁷ Hunt, "Alcohol and Masculinity", 227

override women through alcohol, formed by attracting the female and making women serve them. "'Hegemonic masculinity' is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women." Diamond Jin, a heavy drinker coming to his power in Liquorland through drinking, always attracts females at the dining table. His drinking behavior brings about the visual attractiveness. As Li Yidou describes in Alcohol:

They want their future sons to be like Diamond Jin, the women want their future husbands to be like Diamond Jin. A banquet is not a banquet without liquor; Liquorland would not be Liquorland without Diamond Jin. He drank down a large glass of liquor, then dried his moist, silky lips with a silk handkerchief that reeked of gentility. Wan Guohua, the flower of the Distilling Department, dressed in the most beautiful dress the world has ever seen, refilled our visiting professor's glass with liquor, her every motion a study in grace. She blushed under his affectionate gaze; we might even say that red clouds of joy settled on her cheeks. (33)

Diamond Jin sets up his masculine character by drinking, satisfying women's illusions of their mates, attracting them to come and serve him. In this process, the different roles are created—the female is within male's control. The description of Wan Guohua's appearance (her dressing and her facial expression) implicates that the female has become the object under male gaze, including Diamond Jin's gaze and the author Mo Yan's gaze, while Wan Guohua herself does not realize she is being gazed, rather, enjoying in pleasing men. The masculinity built by liquor is powerful enough, for it could easily help males grab the initiative position.

3. Wine, Food and Power

In this work, Mo criticizes social problems including corruption, hedonism and moral decay in Chinese officialdom epitomized by Liquorland. The wine-dominated city is in chaos—rules are ignored, laws violated, and people corrupted. Diamond Jin and Ding Gou'er are the two typical figures that are destroyed by masculinity and the twisted desire for power which are symbolized by wine. While power combined with wine, classifies males into grades. "Homosocial interaction, among heterosexual men, contributes to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity norms by supporting meanings associated with identities that fit hegemonic ideals while suppressing meanings associated with nonhegemonic masculinity identities." Though male plays a role as dominate player in society, there is hierarchy among them. That means those who own more power are on the higher level, encouraging them to chase more power for masculinity. The desire for power would finally lead to corruption if it goes to extremes.

The abnormal social norm regards wine as a guideline—wine means power. In Liquorland, wine is the symbol of one's ability, and a qualified man is not in determined by his qualities but the capacity of drinking. Diamond Jin, the major power owner in this work, comes to his power as the minister of propaganda department in the city with his large hold of wine. During the time when Diamond Jin is in charge, he has becoming a man who is extremely greedy to power. In his mind, drinking results in power which could make everything possible; and this thought encourages him to gain more power to protect himself including veiling his guilt. Liquorland has its own protective mechanism for the power desires through assimilating the new comers or excluding them. Wine expands people's desires, making them manage to find ways to veil their astonishing illegal activities and maintain their power, finally leading to collective degradation. Ding Gou'er, as a special investigator of the Higher

⁸ Connell, "Gender and Power", 183

⁹ Bird, "Welcome to the Men's Club", 121

Procuratorate, should have investigated reports that infants are being braised and eaten. However, Diamond Jin took advantage of his high tolerance of wine to persuade Ding Gou'er to drink as much liquor as possible, so as to barricade Ding's investigation. Diamond Jin manipulates Ding Gou'er by forcing him to drink. Wine is used as a weapon to challenge the authority of justice, breaking the rightful regularities and rewriting the social rule. Besides, it is a favorable way for him to trick Ding Gou'er and stop the law-enforcement.

As the supplement of wine, food is also an important metaphor of power. People in Liquorland are not only crazy about wine but also gourmet. "Things available elsewhere are available here; things unavailable elsewhere are also available here."(145) As the traditional Chinese alimentary motifs such as Jiu Chi Rou Lin ([drink] pond of liquor and [eat] forest of meat), moral decadence, social degeneration and dynastic collapse all revolve around extravagant feasting and over indulgence. The refined taste of gourmandism generates execrable filth.¹⁰ Similar to drinking, eating creates an oral and social space where power is exercised and abused. In the novel, the most special dish in the donkey banquet named "Dragon and Phoenix Lucky Together" is made of donkey's sex organ which is regarded as filth. The author sarcastically describes people's craving for it, revealing that the pursuit of power is associated with abnormal consumption. People show off their power by eating strange food because those who are not up to par could not access it. Thus, in the officialdom, sometimes people chase such strange food for distinguishing themselves from those who do not own the power. In addition, male's sex organ is usually the symbol of power. Men feel satisfied just by eating them up, implying a kind of sexual violence. "By sexually violating women's and men's bodies, predominantly male perpetrators demonstrate their power over men." They usually keep ambitious to compete with their peers by continuously gaining power through practices and actions that are considered masculine, including marginalizing female or other subordinate groups. For men, attaining power in officialdom is hard, but eating animal's sex organs is easier to satisfy their own desires of power. That means power and masculinity are not so solid that they need to show these by the outward ways. To some extent, it is a kind of criticism of formalism. Looking back, a lot of officials are not devoted into their works; in most cases, they work simply for inspections or appearance. They take advantage of their power to benefit themselves such as drinking and eating with public money.

Except for this, people all over the city continuously break through the limit of food, and eating infants is the typical one. "A kind of universal unconscious, rooted in desire and power, unites cannibalism." The excessive and twisted food consumption forms a sharp contrast with China in the 1960s, when people managed to survive in the face of the famine by eating inedible food such as skin of trees and cottonseeds. At that time a lot of villagers dies of starvation, and there was not enough place to bury the bodies. As Mo Yan recalled in his article Wang Bu Liao Chi (Cannot Forget to Eat), "It was the best time of dogs, and they were used to eating dead people that they became crazy, attacking living people for meat." Eating human is the carnival for dogs in the period of starvation while in this work, it is the carnival in officialdom. Mo uses the satirical style to unveil that there is no difference between dogs and some officials who equalize power with eating and drinking. Among the nine works of Li Yidou, the industrial chain of infant-eating is clearly shown, including the high-quality infant production, the legalized marketing channel and the specialized cooking school. "Stork Delivering a Son" is a famous infant specialty in the Liquorland; it is served only to visiting dignitaries. "It is a dish they won't forget for as long as they live, one that has drawn nothing but praise." (81) It can be learned that the main diners are the officials in the city. The infants are

10 Yue, "The Mouth that Begs Hungry", 263

¹¹ Anjuli & Mollie, "Masculinity and Sexual Violence", 679

¹² King, "Cannibalism in Contemporary Cultural Critique", 115

divided into classes, and only boys with the first two grades could fetch a higher price. Ironically, as the dominant role in society, male is also the first to bear the brunt just as boys are being eaten, and males are classified into different levels—the higher level they are on, the more they gain. That is why men are eager to gain the power to climb to the higher level. Situations are same in the infant selling market: people rush to give birth to children and show special care for them before selling—the bath water could not be too hot or they would gain the lower grade if their skin were hurt; they could not be made cry due to the possible degradation, etc.. These high-quality infants are used to serve the top officials. Despite the inhumanity, the alluring reward leads to the willingness of citizens to reproduce the required children for money.

Why do they like children? It is because our meat is more tender than beef, fresher than lamb, more fragrant than pork, fattier than dog, softer than mule, harder than rabbit, silkier than chicken, more dynamic than duck, more straightforward than pigeon, livelier than donkey, more pampered than camel, springier than horse, finer than hedgehog, more dignified than sparrow, fairer than swallow, more mature than hedge-goose, not as chaffy as common goose, more sedate than cat, more nutritious than, less demonic than weasel, and more common than lynx. Our meat tops the charts. (106)

"Behind the enchanting façade, the drinking star Diamond Jin is the embodiment of corruption and power." As one of the senior officials, Diamond Jin makes use of his power to expand the infant dining group, for that making more people as accomplices could form a larger union, legalizing the infant eating. In this way, his distorted behavior could be covered. Wine is also a weapon for him to go against investigation of police. On the dining table, he employs lots of excuse to persuade Ding Gou'er to outdrink. Under the effect of alcohol, Ding Gou'er forgets his mission that he has been asked to solve the infant case and believes Diamond Jin's words that the dish "Stork Delivering a Son" is actually not made of a real infant but simply looks like it, finally becoming a person who also enjoys the infant-made delicacy. Additionally, the desire for power encourages Diamond Jin to seduce the investigator with his wife, making the action of Ding Gou'er a total failure. Therefore, the excessive desire for power leads Diamond Jin to do everything that benefits him and become a slave of power.

Wine makes Ding Gou'er a tragic figure, turning a righteous hero into a powerless man. He could not hold his liquor well, and being forced to drink again and again made him lose the initiative on the dining table at the beginning. "Quan Jiu" (forcing others to drink) is the typical activity in this work, and it is also a reflection of China's drinking culture. In this work, ways of forcing others to drink vary. The Mine Director said to Ding Gou'er: "As patriots we boycott foreign liquor." He tried to persuade Ding that drinking the homebred wine is an act of patriotism, and it is also easy to arise the sense of masculinity. During the period when China is suffering from foreign aggression, Chinese men were insulted for they could do nothing at that time. Therefore, rejecting foreign liquor stands for rejecting aggression, an act of protecting their motherland and their properties. Also the words "Wine is one of the important tax base of a country. Drinking means contributing" made it hard for Ding to refuse the invitation. As an official of the country, he had to drink it up because it is more like a political agenda. Furthermore, Ding was told "we cannot show the intimate relationship between official ranks if you won't drink with us" and "it is a local custom". As a new comer in Liquorland, it is important to establish the rapport with the people there, which will clear the barriers for his investigation. Thus, drinking or not is not his personal choice but about his work. Generally especially in officialdom, businesses usually combine with banquets, where liquor is the necessity.

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¹³ Olsen, "Drinkers and Drinking Culture", 165

When Ding Gou'er asked the servant to bring him to the Mine Director, he was told that he should drink up the liquor at first, saying that it is the mine policy. In fact, the drinking culture in China owns a long history with a saying "Drinking eases the restrictions." Because traditionally it is believed that wine relaxes one's mind and show what he really is; thus "guanxi" (relations) could be generated which more probably leads things to success. From the ways of urging others to drink, to the manners of drinking, those contain the implication of power, not merely for the etiquette. For one thing, in order to assure the loyalty of his subordinates, the power owner would persuade them to drink to see whether they are willing to follow his words or not even someone could not hold his liquor well. The leader would urge others to drink with the words like "You can refuse to drink if you belittle me." Sometimes the embarrassing look on other's face make him feel satisfied for that his power works. For another, people drink for credit enhancement, showing that trust is more important than one's dignity and face. "I drink at first, then it is your turn." is what leader like to say to his subordinates. It is also the irresistible invitation, for that the senior has shown his good faith and trust, then the subordinate could not refuse or he would be accused of insulting his leader. But liquor is also easy to make people lose consciousness and judgement. In Mo's work, by the words "A toast to our honored guest!", Ding was again forced to drink, for they has shown their welcome and sincerity to himself so he should do the same way in return. Ding Gou'er has made asses of himself many time on the dining table. "His caution began to crumble, as warm feelings toward Diamond Jin surfaced slowly, like water grasses budding atop a stream during a spring."(59) Under that effects of alcohol, he loses his judgement on whether his enemy's words are right or not and even forgets his task is to investigate Diamond Jin for the infant eating case. "When the Mine Director or Party Secretary passed half of the other arm to him, he threw down his chopsticks, snatched it up in both hands, grease and all, and attacked it with his teeth."(90) This symbolizes the transformation of Ding Gou'er—he has become an accomplice of Diamond Jin rather than a justice power. When facing the female trucker, Ding Gou'er fails to control his sexual desire and falls in love with her, never finding that it is just a "honey trap" set by Diamond Jin. That is the reason why he could not help to shooting the female trucker when discovering that she is the ninth mistress of Yu Yichi, proprietor and manager of Yichi Tavern also an ugly dwarf, making himself a killer under sentence to death. His final drunk at the gate of the Martyrs' Cemetery hallucinates him, seeing the female trucker waving to him, and he dashes toward her, only to stumble into an open-air privy filled with a soupy. "Within seconds, the sacred panoply of ideals, justice, respect, honor and love accompanied a long-suffering special investigator to the very bottom of the privy." (333) Wine results in the tragic fate of Ding Gou'er—the ever best senior investigator has disappeared, replaced by a wimp.

4. Conclusion

Mo Yan automatically opens his mouth, being gulped down the large bowl of liquor by the charming vice mayor. He feels warm and could not help tearing, saying, "It feels like being in relationship with a beauty." (366)

By describing people drinking liquor and urging others to drink, the work expends the stories to present power and masculinity generated by wine, moreover, the social problems in China's society. Characters in the story could not resist the temptation of wine for the desire of attaining power or maintaining their masculinity. However, as wine helps keep their so-called dignity and reach their purposes, wine also destroys them.

The work ends with Mo Yan to be drunk at the dining table. As the only character who keeps a clear head in this work, Mo Yan still could not get rid of the influence of wine. He shares the similar experience with Ding Gou'er, being forced to drink a lot even though he could not hold his liquor

well. In Liquorland, wine is powerful enough that it could paralyze one's judgement and value, then assimilate him to rationalize the immorality. Ding Gou'er, as a positive figure, easily becomes a part of such a society featuring wine and cannibal. That indicates danger is not always tangible and visible, and participants are usually ignorant of what they are doing. Wine culture derives hidden rules in locus of power—everything could come true through wine. Traditionally in China, wine is the best choice to build up the relationship, for that it is a tool for power owner to take advantage of his power and benefit himself; while subordinate could make use of wine to get close to the power owner and attain his objects. Thus, the image of this work could be a reflection of dark side of China's officialdom including embezzlement and bribes.

Besides, forcing others to drink gets extensive coverage in this work. On one hand, as a manly symbol, men who could hold large liquor is considered to be masculine. Despite the harm to health, alcohol consumption would be a universal and important source in the social construction of a masculine identity. Thus alcohol panders usually take advantage of the reason about masculinity, while those who could not drink a lot also try to realize their external masculinity through liquor. On the other hand, urging others to drink is also the embodiment of power, for that subordinates generally do not dare to reject the requirements of the power owners. The successful urging would make power owners satisfied and enjoy the benefits brought by power.

By illustrating Chinese wine manner, Mo Yan further explains the semiotic significance of wine, combining with masculinity and power. The Republic of Wine has provided a new perspective for presenting masculinity in Chinese literary works, including how the masculinity has been shaped while on the other hand, how the concept of masculinity causes troubles to the males.

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