

# The Symbolic Feelings of Opposites: An Analysis of the Characters in Bai Xianyong's *Taipei People*

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**Abstract.** Critical analysis of the stylistic features in the works of Bai Xianyong has already been richly explored by previous scholars. The theories on temporal and spatial themes have gradually made the analysis of artistic techniques a tool for supporting arguments. However, as the fundamental means of style formation, analysing artistic techniques alone remains an effective way to understand the article and the author's writing style and purpose. This article analyses the character-shaping techniques in Bai Xianyong's *Taipei People*, especially the use of metaphor and symbolism in presenting oppositions. Through in-depth analysis of *The Eternal Snow Beauty* and *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream*, it reveals how Bai Xianyong uses techniques such as symbolism and metaphor to reflect the oppositional relationships between historical changes, social realities, and individual destinies. These artistic techniques not only shape the complex characters but also express the author's deep thoughts on history and reality and his emotional attitude toward the social group that migrated to Taipei. Therefore, while Bai Xianyong integrates unique writing techniques from both Chinese and Western literature, he uses symbolism to soften oppositions, resulting in a unified texture in his works where conflicts are apparent but not contradictory.

## 1 Introduction

The implicit inheritance of traditional Chinese culture, combined with the integration of Western theories and narrative techniques, has shaped Bai Xianyong's unique and harmonious writing style. Although similar influences can be seen in the works of a group of writers who studied abroad, Bai Xianyong stands out due to his solid writing skills, delicate techniques, and thick emotions. Analysis of Bai Xianyong's works and related literary research has been ongoing since the introduction of his works in 1979. Scholarly analysis of his artistic techniques has been ubiquitous. Early on, the "temporal theme theory" proposed by Ouyang Zi and the analysis of symbolic art and Sino-Western hybrid writing style by Fan Xiaodan almost became the mainstream methods for deconstructing Bai Xianyong's novels [1, 2].

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Fan Xiaodan, in her previous paper *The Symbolic Art of Bai Xianyong's Novels*, detailed the importance of symbolic art in Bai Xianyong's works. She pointed out that Bai Xianyong not only inherited the symbolic techniques of classical Chinese literature but also incorporated Western modernist symbolic techniques, making his novels reflect the characteristics of the East-West cultural hybrid. Additionally, Fan Xiaodan emphasizes that Bai Xianyong's symbolic thinking runs throughout his works. Through the creation of characters and the selection and depiction of imagery, he successfully expresses his views on history and life.

In the paper *The 'Sacred Space' in Bai Xianyong's 'Taipei People'*, Zheng Shaonan proposed the construction of a "sacred space," pointing out that Bai Xianyong uses "sacred space" to reflect characters' spiritual pursuits and crises of faith. Zheng believes that Bai Xianyong, through meticulous spatial descriptions and symbolic techniques, places characters in an environment full of symbolic meaning, allowing readers to understand the characters' inner worlds and spiritual states more profoundly. This is also an important viewpoint of the "spatial theme theory" in Bai Xianyong's novels [2].

With the new propositions of "spatial theme theory" and "time-space theme theory", symbolic and other art techniques have gradually become tools for supporting these theories. In fact, regardless of those themes proposed, artistic techniques are foundational rather than mere tools. The analysis of artistic techniques is a crucial method for understanding an author's writing style. Moreover, the completion of an article as a whole cannot be separated from the artistic techniques used to shape characters. Novels are the art of people, with eternal themes and protagonists set in the linear river of time and various contrasting spaces. In Bai Xianyong's *Taipei People*, the rhetorical use of metaphor and symbolism, the two most commonly used writing techniques by Bai Xianyong, plays a key role in shaping character images. At the same time, this shaping also contributes to the presentation of oppositions in the article. This paper aims to analyze and explain the character-shaping techniques in *The Eternal Snow Beauty* and *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream in Taipei People*, exploring the artistic methods of presenting oppositions and further investigating the use of symbolism, metaphor, and suggestion in Bai Xianyong's works.

## **2 The use of artistic techniques in *Taipei People***

### **2.1 The use of metaphors in *Taipei People*'**

In the literary space of *Taipei People*, the rhetorical use of metaphor and symbolism plays a crucial role in shaping character images. The entire book not only highlights characters' personality traits and even destinies through metaphors, symbolism, and suggestions but also uses these techniques to suggest the author's contradictory emotional attitude toward the social group that migrated to Taipei and even to demystify this social group.

#### **2.1.1 *The Eternal Snow Beauty***

In the work *The Eternal Snow Beauty*, the implicit contrast between white and red carries a strong symbolic meaning. On the surface, the two colors represent the cities of Shanghai and Taipei, respectively. In the work, the snow beauty is synonymous with Shanghai, always dressed in a simple white outfit. In Bai Xianyong's writing, this white color is pure, beautiful, and even sacred, emotionally recognized significantly higher than the red represented by "rotten flesh around the eyes" and "blood-red hairpins." At the end of paragraph 3: "The snow beauty stood aside, puffing on a gold-tipped cigarette, blowing smoke rings, and looking at her group of proud, frustrated, old, and middle-aged guests with compassionate

eyes. These guests, who once stirred up the wind and rain and were once stunning, were frantically fighting and slaughtering each other." This passage uses the snow beauty's eyes, which are metaphorically referred to as the eyes of God, to highlight the current situation of Taipei people who are no longer as tragic as they once were. In the opening chapter of *Taipei People*, it completes the demystification of this social group. Through several intense Mahjong games, it metaphorically highlights the complex and ugly social environment of Taipei at that time, where people's hearts are unpredictable [3].

In the second half of the article, when the snow beauty attends Xu Zhuangtu's funeral, the author still emphasizes her pure white outfit. Moreover, the snow beauty's entrance further highlights her separation from the surrounding characters: "The snow beauty somehow flashed in like a gust of wind. She was still dressed in pure white, with no makeup on her face, and walked lightly to the desk, picked up a brush, signed her name on the guest book, and then gracefully walked to the center of the hall. The guests parted to make way for her, allowing the snow beauty to walk to the spirit table, where she solemnly bowed three times before Xu Zhuangtu's portrait." Her white element becomes a visual symbol, indicating her difference from the worldly joys and sorrows and material pursuits, creating a strong contrast and separation from other community members. This imagery helps the author better highlight the character's eternal traits. The white not only is her constant color in life but also symbolizes her unchanging transcendent attitude towards time and fate, a typical example of Bai Xianyong's use of symbolism to highlight character destiny.

### 2.1.2 *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream*

The use of metaphor in *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream* almost runs throughout the text. The article uses the half-dream, half-awake consciousness of Lan Tianyu after being drunk to flashback to the turbulent events from Nanjing to Taiwan over the past twenty years. It indirectly portrays Lan Tianyu's current state of decay and aging, showing a strong sense of powerlessness and helplessness in the face of time, while also faintly revealing the intense image and vitality of Madam Qian's past life. This character shaping, along with the almost rambling paragraphs, scatters the author's confused yet unwilling emotional attitude towards the migration to Taiwan into the text [4].

*Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream* uses the two operas "Wandering" and "Waking" as metaphors for the two stages of Lan Tianyu's life. "Wandering" seems to be a symbol of the past in Nanjing for Lan Tianyu and all the guests at the banquet. The past prosperity and beauty are recreated through "Wandering." "Waking" corresponds to the current life that people in Taiwan need to face, even their survival status. It is as if the dream created by "Wandering" for Lan Tianyu is broken at this moment, leaving only a hoarse voice that can no longer sing and herself. At the same time, this also metaphorically reveals Lan Tianyu's current life status. Ultimately, whether it is the opera or the banquet, it just provides Taipei people with a chance to revisit the illusory past through old friends and acquaintances [5].

## 2.2 The presentation of opposition in *Taipei People*

Opposition is an important topic found throughout *Taipei People*. The novel depicts the emotional opposition between the migrating group and the native group, the division within the migrating group causing opposition, and the use of metaphor, symbolism, and suggestion to create spatial and temporal dimensions of opposition. From the author's perspective, Bai Xianyong's unerasable romantic "traditional" color and his proficient modern novel techniques form the opposition, which is the reason for the frequent use of artistic techniques such as symbolism and metaphor in the novel.

### 2.2.1 *The Eternal Snow Beauty*

The snow beauty represents the prosperity and elegance of old Shanghai, while many around her are immersed in material desires after moving to Taipei. The eternal white on The snow beauty suggests her nostalgia and persistence for the prosperous past. In contrast, others are confused and stagnant, showing a clear opposition in values. The snow beauty's residence, Yin Mansion, is also shaped by the author as a place entirely different from the broader social environment of Taipei at that time, with even the food being replicas from Shanghai: "The snow beauty herself supervised two clean-faced Suzhou maids serving alongside. The afternoon snack was Ningbo rice cakes or Huzhou zongzi. The dinner was Shanghai delicacies from Yin Mansion's famous Shanghai chef: gold and silver legs, concubine chicken, spiced shrimp, and drunken crabs. The snow beauty personally designed a rotating menu, offering exquisite banquets every day." This sacred space attracts other characters in the author's writing. This space, created through decor and food, symbolizes the past Shanghai and represents the temporal dimension's difference and opposition [6].

In the author's writing, white symbolizes snow beauty, and the snow beauty symbolizes eternity. Eternity means that the past will not fade away. Red symbolizes the Taipei people, representing material desires and even bloodshed. This imagery ultimately points to the complete opposite of the snow beauty and the past days, to decay, stagnation, and living for the moment. The snow beauty is a timeless legend in the novel, while other characters face misfortunes, immersed in material pursuits and interpersonal struggles, often ending in tragedy. The snow beauty, with her unchanging appearance and transcendent attitude, becomes a symbol beyond time and fate. Her existence is not only an opposition to other characters but also a satire of Taipei people's lifestyle by Bai Xianyong [7].

### 2.2.2 *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream*

In *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream*, the opposition between Lan Tianyu and other characters like Madam Dou is evident, caused by the division within the migrating community after moving to Taipei. Lan Tianyu, depicted by Bai Xianyong, carries an old air but remains elegant: "Madam Qian moved closer to the mirror, wearing a dark green Hangzhou silk qipao, thinking the color seemed a bit off. She remembered that under the light, this silk should look like emeralds, but in this dim hall, it appeared dull. Could it be that the material was old?" In contrast, Madam Dou's attire is more luxurious and worldly: "Madam Dou wore a silver-gray thin silk qipao sprinkled with vermilion. She also matched it with silver-gray shiny high heels, a lotus seed-sized diamond ring on her right hand's ring finger, and a white gold bracelet set with small diamonds on her left wrist. She wore a coral crescent hairpin in her hair, and a pair of inches-long purple jade earrings hung down, making her plump face look even more elegant and dignified." One is plain, and the other is luxurious, presenting a strong oppositional image to the reader, and highlighting the clear opposition between the two. The beginning of the article uses extensive descriptions to depict this opposition in appearance, even the incompatibility between Lan Tianyu and the mansion, all to downplay the deeper contrast between the past and present.

Lan Tianyu's image, apart from her slightly outdated clothes, has another important characteristic: living in Tainan. Unlike the migrating group living in Taipei like Madam Dou, Lan Tianyu's choice is an externalization of an otherworldly attitude. This regional contrast also metaphorically hints at the difference between the mainland and Taiwan: the mainland is like Tainan, comfortable and leisurely, while Taiwan is like Taipei, with nightlife but people being confused and stagnant. This treatment successfully downplays the theme Bai Xianyong wants to express in the entire *Taipei People*: the "all beings" living in Taipei, reminiscing about the mainland [8].

This downplay is not necessarily intentional, nor can it be said to be unintentional. First, using regional differences like Tainan and Taipei can metaphorically hint at the psychological gap and alienation between Lan Tianyu and Madam Dou, and the mansion group. Lan Tianyu is the protagonist, and such arrangement first uses metaphorical techniques to downplay opposition, then uses the protagonist's choices to express the author's emotional attitude, making the article less biased, and presenting a balanced sense. This also helps to subtly express the author's emotional inclination.

However, such techniques and the habit of dissolving opposition are not deliberately done by the author but rather a near-instinctive softening by Bai Xianyong when writing. The sections and clothing descriptions in the first half of *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream* carry a clear Chinese style, with highly similar expressive techniques to the classic *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The opera part in the latter half uses stream-of-consciousness writing techniques, successfully downplaying the tragic feelings before and after events, making the opposition between the past and the present less apparent. The ability to use large sections of stream-of-consciousness writing to assist narration and help readers sync with the protagonist Lan Tianyu is because the author is familiar with and proficient in Western modern writing techniques. At the same time, this use of techniques also aligns with the implicit and restrained expression style of traditional Chinese writing, an embodiment of Bai Xianyong's fusion of Chinese and Western writing techniques.

### **3 The inseparability of metaphor and opposition**

Bai Xianyong's use of metaphor and symbolism in *Taipei People* is mainly applied to the shaping of character images. The differences between these character images are crucial and the only carriers for Bai Xianyong to express his emotional attitude and various oppositions. Novels are the art of people, and the shaping of character images is vital. Metaphorical and symbolic techniques not only highlight the characteristics and personalities of characters but also imply the author's personal emotional attitude through the metaphorical structure. In *Taipei People*, Bai Xianyong's emotional attitude towards the characters he shapes is often processed through techniques to be downplayed or hidden but can generally be divided into positive and negative. The characters, through their emotional attitudes, present oppositional features. It is precisely the successful creation of these oppositions that reflects back on the author's overly implicit emotional expressions, making the emotions in the article clear but not exaggerated, and the expression implicit but not obscure [9,10].

Bai Xianyong was born in Guilin, Guangxi. His father, Bai Chongxi, was a famous general. With the end of the Chinese Civil War, Bai Xianyong moved to Taiwan with his family. This displacement caused Bai Xianyong to grow up in an environment filled with historical scars and identity crises. In the 1970s, Taiwan underwent dramatic political and cultural changes, profoundly affecting Bai Xianyong's thoughts and writing motivations. In writing, he was deeply influenced not only by traditional Chinese literature but also by Western modernist literature. During his studies in the United States, he was exposed to a large number of Western literary works, whose symbolic techniques and oppositional thinking had a profound impact on his creations. This dual influence of Eastern and Western literature on Bai Xianyong's symbolic techniques and metaphorical skills is evident in his works. He blended the implicit beauty of traditional Chinese literature with the metaphorical techniques of Western modernist literature. This cultural integration made his works exhibit both Eastern charm and modernist tension and depth. He also borrowed common metaphors and symbolic techniques from Western literature, using meticulous descriptions and overlapping imagery to endow his works with multiple layers of meaning, making the presentation of opposition more profound and tense.

Bai Xianyong's sense of opposition is also reflected in the dual backgrounds created through metaphors and symbolism in his works. In *Taipei People*, there are always two layers of social background: one is the environment where the story takes place, Taipei; the other is the indelible sacred space in the characters' hearts, mainland China. This arrangement also enhances the character images' layers. Symbolic and metaphorical techniques become crucial means to enrich character images and increase their complexity. In *Taipei People*, Bai Xianyong uses specific imagery and metaphors to make characters more than just flat figures but rather deeply connotative symbols. For example, in the descriptions of old Shanghai, the prosperity of that era is not just a backdrop but a reflection of the character's inner sacred space. The luxury and splendor of old Shanghai symbolize the characters' past glory, while their current desolation metaphorically expresses their nostalgia and helplessness towards reality. This use of symbolism makes the characters more three-dimensional and richer, also vividly presenting a sense of opposition and even fatalism [11].

## 4 Conclusion

*Taipei People* is a concentrated manifestation of Bai Xianyong's artistic techniques and a crystallization of his deep thoughts on contemporary issues. Through metaphors, symbolism, and other techniques, the novel skillfully presents multi-layered oppositions. These oppositions not only enrich the complexity of character images but also allow readers to perceive the author's profound reflections on the relationships between historical changes, social realities, and individual destinies. In *The Eternal Snow Beauty*, the contrast between red and white symbolizes the snow beauty's transcendent attitude towards the world and her separation from secular life. Through the juxtaposition of Lan Tianyu's dreams and reality in *Wandering in the Garden*, *Waking from a Dream*, the tumultuous events of the past twenty years are unfolded, highlighting the protagonist's powerlessness and the contrasting celebration and even latent lust of characters like Madam Dou, emphasizing the division and opposition within the community that migrated to Taipei. These techniques underscore the significance of symbolism and metaphor in expressing historical and contemporary realities. Bai Xianyong successfully portrays the complexity and depth of characters through the multi-layered oppositions in *Taipei People*. This method of using symbolism, metaphor, and other techniques to depict oppositions not only infuses the work with artistic tension but also imparts significant ideological depth. His creation uniquely blends Chinese and Western literary techniques, softening oppositional elements through symbolic methods, resulting in apparent yet non-contradictory conflicts, presenting a unified texture. The application of these artistic techniques not only shapes complex and profound character images but also expresses the author's deep reflections on history and reality and his emotional attitude towards the social group that migrated to Taipei. Artistic techniques, as the foundation of text writing and the fundamental means of shaping style, remain essential for understanding Bai Xianyong's works and writing style. Readers today, when revisiting *Taipei People*, can still resonate with the lives of Taipei residents of the past through Bai Xianyong's delicate touches and profound symbolism, as if personally experiencing those times when prosperity faded. This nostalgia for the past and hope for the future is also deeply reflected through the metaphors and symbolism in *Taipei People*.

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