

# The self-referentiality of two kinds of people --Character Types and Their Psychological Analysis in Pai Hsien-yung's *Taipei People*

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**Abstract.** Two distinct types of people are featured in Pai Hsien-yung's novel "*Taipei People*": the 'Root Breakers,' who have severed their ties to the past, and the 'Root Seekers,' who are deeply rooted in their memories. This essay delves deeply into the inner lives of the characters from the author's perspective while also providing a detailed analysis of these two categories of characters and examining the interactions and collisions between various characters in *Taipei People*.

**Keywords:** *Taipei People*; Pai Hsien-yung; genre analysis; cultural psychology.

## 1. Introduction

What exactly is the undesired? They are also referred to as 'superfluous people' and first appeared in Russian writings. It mostly refers to the intellectuals who had fallen from the aristocracy at that time. This character type was expanded to cover a group of impoverished people following the May Fourth Movement. this character type was expanded to include a group of poor intellectuals who were at a loss in their hearts. In Pai Hsien-yung's *Taipei People*, there are also such unwanted people. They lack recognition of their cultural roots, they are not mainlanders, and they lack historical memories in common with Taiwan's local residents or their own fathers, so they become "unwanted" in their hearts and minds.

## 2. Types of Characters in the Text of *Taipei People*

### 2.1. The 'unwanted' with 'no past'

As a minority, there are characters in *Taipei People* who are not affected by the past, but Pai holds an attitude of reservation and even contempt for them. They are either from the previous generation who also migrated from the mainland but have completely severed their ties with their homeland and are ready to adopt a new life; or they are young people who grew up after their parents had already taken root in Taiwan, but who do not have a deep sense of their "hometown" and do not even understand their parents' mentality of living in the past.

#### 2.1.1. 'People with broken roots' who have cut ties with the past

Pai Hsien-yung displays a distinctly negative attitude towards this kind of people. In the face of the unchangeable reality, they do not want to be trapped in the spiritual quagmire like the "root seekers", and would rather abandon the past, open their eyes to the reality they are now living in, and complete their inner self-compatibility. Such characters, such as Shao Ziqi in 'Winter Night', Wan Lu Ruzhu in 'Autumn Reveries', and Wang Jiaji in 'The Dirge of Liang Fu', are unforgiving of the past, and live a life that is a hundred times more comfortable than that of the Roots Seekers in terms of materialism and spirituality.

This kind of mentality of avoiding harm is rationally worthy of affirmation, but this kind of behavior of completely cutting off the past is psychologically too cruel and lack of humane feelings. Therefore, although Pai Hsien-yung approves of their choice of 'moving forward', he still turns around and embraces the 'root seekers' who are incapable of self-referentiality. Therefore, although Pai

recognized their choice to "move forward", he still had to turn around and embrace the "root seekers" who could not relate to themselves.

### **2.1.2. 'Rootless people' who have not experienced the past.**

These people lack cultural identity; they are neither nationals from the mainland nor "Taiwanese" who share historical memories with Taiwan's aborigines. Although they lack cultural belonging, they do not have to endure the pain of constant confrontation and coexistence with the past. Pai Hsien-yung has a sympathetic attitude towards these people. Junyan in "Winter Night", Yeoju and Yu Xin in "New Year's Eve" are such characters. They are naturally unfamiliar with the glorious years spoken of by their fathers and cannot empathize with them.

It is easier for them to accomplish spiritual self-connection than for those who have broken their roots. Because there is no root, there is no "pain of breaking the root" and no "pain of searching for the root". In their eyes, all the complexes of their fathers that cannot be smoothed out are just fascinating stories that they cannot understand and do not want to understand. They are not in touch with the spirit of the "root seekers", and they hold the contempt of the "in touch" for the "suffering", if any.

Whether they are "people without roots" or "people with broken roots," they are all people trying their best to integrate into post-war Taiwanese society. They have an ambiguous attitude toward their own or their fathers' past, and they do not deny this kind of cultural memory that belongs only to the mainlanders who came to Taiwan, but they do not intend to use this unique cultural mark as a passport to identity with others, and they hide their cultural mark in order to have a better chance of integrating into the new Taiwanese society.

## **2.2. 'Returnees' nostalgic for the past**

As mentioned above, in *Taipei People*, there are young Taiwanese born after the turbulent times, and naturally, there are "returnees" who came to Taiwan from the mainland and who are always nostalgic for their glorious years in the mainland and for their own cultural roots. The term "homecoming" here refers to the feeling of yearning to return home after realizing that one has no home to return to. According to the manifestation of this feeling, these characters are categorized into the following two types:

### **2.2.1. 'Dreamers' who are immersed in the beauty of the past**

"The Dirge of Liang Fu" and "State Funeral" in *Taipei People* are typical novels focusing on the senior generals of the Kuomintang. These groups were powerful before the collapse of the civil war, but were unable to do so after they had become isolated, so they immersed themselves in the past and were unable to wake up. In these two novels, which are told mainly from a male point of view, we can see characters such as Park Kung and Chin Yi-Fang who live entirely in the past. Their proudest honor and youth have become worthless with the years, and the once powerful generals are now fighting with their own descendants, losing the respect of their own descendants, and a reflection of the loss of their majesty and power.

The lower class can be equally intoxicated with dreams, such as Mr. Lu, who has been pining for his past fiancée in "Glory's by Blossom Bridge"; and Wang Xiong, who pines for his little sister's son at home in "A Sea of Blood-red Azaleas". They seem to have settled into a new life, but in essence they rely on the dreams of the past to maintain their mental decency. These characters appear to be detached from their past, but in fact they are rooted in it. They are clearly aware of their homelessness, yet they continue to reminisce about the beautiful moments of the past. When these beautiful moments are proved to have been disillusioned, their hearts collapse and they go to their souls or physical deaths.

### 2.2.2. The 'Awakened Dreamer' who is obsessed with searching for her roots.

The female characters, mostly prostitutes from the lower class and those who have lost their husbands, take up more of this typical role. Without the material conditions to survive in the dream, they can only walk on thin ice in real life and cannot indulge in the beautiful old dream. For the dependents, their glory and status come from their husbands, so when their husbands lose power or die, their inner insecurity is fully exposed. In contrast to the male characters, the female characters' lamentation of the comparison between the present and the past, their nostalgia for the golden years, and their regret for their lost love are intertwined, constituting their colorful inner world. For example, Mrs. Qian in "Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream", her highly respected with the death of her husband became a vain, and the status quo comparison with the other sisters make her feel out of place, the touch of their own past lost love makes Mrs. Qian's heart as immersed in a number of shuttles in the dream, the husband's death, the cruelty of the past of the lover's change of heart, and the newlyweds, the beauty of the dream of cooking oil, so that the reader together with her shuttling in the dream within a dream; a handful of green a dream; a handful of the golden years of nostalgia, regret for the lost love and other emotions intertwined with each other to constitute their rich and colorful inner world. "A Touch of Green" in which Zhu Qing, who came to Taiwan and completely lost his youthfulness and affection, "loves to eat chicken", and Wu Guozhu in "Winter Nights", who has completely lost the passion of his youth when he participated in the May Fourth Movement and has to bow down to the reality[1].

Whether they are in the dream or not, they have actively or passively agreed with the "unwanted": the old dream is over, and whether they want to or not, they must admit that the Taipei society no longer needs this obsolete historical memory. They are willing to be social outsiders rather than give up their memories, and this obsession with finding their roots is no longer just an obsession, it is the root that sustains their lives and livelihoods, and they have consciously made this choice. Compared to the "unwanted", they decided to hold on to the cultural markers of their continental origins to define their own communities, in which they licked each other's wounds.

## 3. The Encounter between the Unwanted and the Returnees

In Taipei People, both the 'unwanted' and the 'returnees' coexist in a single narrative space, so the clashes between these two groups, either distinct or hidden, can be seen everywhere in the text.

### 3.1. 'A Good Dream is Hard to Come True' or 'Awakening from a Great Dream'?

Among these types of roles, the "awakened dreamer" and the "root-breaker" seem to be only one step away from each other: the "root-breaker" only takes one more step forward, leaving the dream world that is destined to be impossible to return to, and no longer indulges in the present and the past. The "root-breaker" only takes one more step forward, leaving a dream that is doomed to never return, and no longer indulges in the pain of the comparison between the present and the past. Becoming a "root-breaker" is the only way for these new *Taipei people* to obtain happiness as the wheel of history moves forward. In order to be happy in the future, they bravely cut off the happiness of the past, betray the past, and embrace happiness, which undoubtedly requires great courage.

But do the "awakened dreamers" really not know the new happiness that the "root-breakers" have gained by cutting the rope of the past? The answer is no. *Autumn Reveries* in the face of Mrs. Hua beauty therapist Ms. Lin, trying to find out through the mouth of others than the evidence that she is younger than Wan Lv Ruzhu, although indignant at her flaunting and flirting with their own can not help but by the present of her scenery look back on their own from the past; "Winter Night" in the Yu embedded Lei, although Shao Ziqi as an official "will not talk about the false set", but he also desperately want to go to the "winter night", but he also wants to go to the "winter night". In "Winter Night", although Yu Nai Lei "won't talk nonsense" to Shao Ziqi, who is an official, he also desperately wants to go to the United States to get away from the unpleasant reality. They have contempt for the "people with broken roots", but also have a vague envy. But in the cold reality of life, they choose to

dream a beautiful dream like "the little girl who sells matches", and even if they die in the snow and wind, they still have a smile on the corner of their mouths, which is their life choice.

The "unwanted" and the "returnees" share the same historical memories and the same changes in their lives, but they are heading for very different future paths, and their confrontation is a battle of contradictions between the past and the future in coexistence. In this battle, no one is destined to win. Whether it is guarding memories or cutting them off, both require intense psychological struggles. Therefore, even though they don't approve of each other's choices, the "unwanted" and the "returnees" still establish a subtle coexistence in the gradual establishment of a new society, becoming two sides of the same coin! They have become two sides of the same coin[2].

### **3.2. Pai Hsien-yung's Choice: Still in a Dream**

Pai Hsien-yung writes in the title page of this book: *In Memory of My Parents and Their Troubled Times*. As the next generation of mainlanders, Pai Hsien-yung has not taken the path of "rootlessness" chosen by many young people, but has chosen to embrace the unhealed knots of the previous generation.

In his opinion, "sense of belonging" is the true homeland that human beings seek throughout their lives. Pai Hsien-yung inwardly recognizes the correctness of "people with broken roots" in making the choice of moving towards a new life, but he is unable to appreciate them from the bottom of his heart. In his opinion, even the agonizing "sense of belonging" has its own necessity and value, and it is only when one knows where one has come from that one can understand where one is going. Pai Hsien-yung does not think that the lack of self-compatibility of the "returnees" is a foolish act of drawing a blank, on the contrary, this kind of entanglement and pain on the meaning of existence makes their life more thick.

So, is the choice of the "unwanted" to abandon their own sense of belonging? Pai Hsien-yung obviously does not agree with this either. The choice of the "unwanted" is not to strip the sense of belonging out of their lives, but to dilute the inescapable pain from the depths of their souls. But their "dulling of pain" is more of a passive escape into another community than an active confrontation with the common pain of the existing community. Therefore, Pai Hsien-yung does not consider them as outright betrayers and denies them completely, but recognizes their courage to bring back from the beginning, and does not appreciate their passive choice to escape[3].

## **4. Conclusion**

Both the "returnees" and the "unwanted" have found a self-referential exit from their own painful struggles, but this self-referentiality is incomplete. The "unwanted" are able to live forever in the comfort zone of their own beautiful past, but are unable to let the wounded community move into the future; the "zero-remnant" have gotten out of their obsession with the past, but because of their innate cultural markers, they are unable to truly integrate into any of the communities, and have become a true member of one of the communities. The "Zero Remnant" have broken away from their obsession with the past, but because of their inherent cultural markers, they cannot truly integrate into any ethnic group, and have become the real "redundant". In their search for identity and inner harmony, they are able to give their souls a respite, but they are never able to lead themselves to a new future. In the face of the cruelty of realpolitik, they show the resilience of life, but at the same time fully expose their own powerlessness. This individual life in the coolness of death may also be the heart of Pai Hsien-yung bared. As a descendant of a military officer, he felt the heavy significance of history and reality carried by the "Taipei People", and understood the insignificance of individuals in real life. The resilience of the lives of the *Taipei People* belongs not only to Pai Hsien-yung and his father, but also to every Chinese.

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