

WRITING AS RITUALS AT THE POSTMODERN JUNCTURE:
TRANSLOCAL IMAGINING IN ZHU TIANWEN'S
A SORCERESS' DISCOURSE

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This article explores the postmodern pastiche represented in *A Sorceress' Discourse* 巫言 [Wuyan] (2007) by Taiwanese writer Zhu Tianwen 朱天文 (Chu T'ien-wen). By putting this novel into dialogue with Chinese legacies, Taiwanese customs, and western influences, this paper illuminates what is left unexplained in Zhu's experimental writing. Performing the magic of words in her literary universe, Zhu reclaims what is culturally tabooed in local community and engages with global flows of cultural commodities. Zhu's fiction writing can be understood as magical rituals that negotiate the past and present, thus projecting fragmented, hybrid memories in response to shifting cultural landscapes. This paper is divided into three sections. The first part examines the cross-cultural implications of wizardry and the development of Zhu's witch-identity from her short story "Fin de Siècle Splendor" 世紀末的華麗 (1990) onwards. The second part takes into account the witch-narrator's roles as a sorceress of words, an unaccompanied traveler, a flâneur, and a political critic. The sorceress' multiple identities make explicit the author's ambivalent agendas towards translocal cultures and postmodern spectacles. Third, Zhu goes beyond the realm of local politics and brings into focus a phantasmagoric vision of commodity fetishism and enigmatic traces of cultural hybridity at the turn of the century. Straddling between local consciousness and western orientation, *A Sorceress' Discourse* sheds new lights on the identity crisis of the individual and the translocality of Taiwanese literature in the twenty-first century.

In Zhu Tianwen's novel *A Sorceress' Discourse*, readers are usually impressed by its Chinese title Wuyan, which literally means the words of a wizard, witch, or shaman. Wizardry has been of great significance around the world for thousands of years. Even though the term 'wizardry' can be easily considered as negative and primitive from a modern perspective, such magical practices are widely adopted and appreciated in ancient civilizations like Mesopotamia and India. China and its related communities are of no exception. According to Richard E. Strassberg,

The term "wu-shaman" is used [...] for want of a more accurate designation of an unorganized class of spirit-mediums that long existed in almost every traditional Chinese community and whose practices reflected considerable local variations. These shamans generally gained their status either through

inheritance or by demonstrating personal charisma, and scattered exponents of these techniques can still be found today.¹

Strassberg's definition of a magical practitioner in the Chinese context is entwined with one's unique functions in response to the demands of a society. A wu-shaman may claim to have the power to ask for rain, heal the sick, and prefigure the future. The most common act of a wu-shaman is to make animal sacrifices and perform religious rituals so as to communicate with such supernatural beings as deities and specters from the other world. Interestingly, Zhu's novel does not introduce a fantastic world of magic and miracles as expected. So, what does Zhu's mysterious witchcraft imply? How do we approach it? Taiwanese critic Tang Nuo resorts to Claude Levi-Strauss and defines Zhu's "witchcraft of fiction"² [xiaoshuo zhi wu] as something employed to "understand the world," "[our] surroundings," "[various] phenomena," "conditions of the individual," and "the essence of knowledge".³ It is true that this novel serves a greater purpose behind linear storyline and coherent narrative by incorporating different dimensions of human life into the literary text. More importantly, we can see in Zhu's witch-identity a medium bridging fiction and non-fiction and negotiating local politics and postmodern waves. Therefore, what is really enchanting is the author's complicated linguistic and cross-cultural construct.

To better understand Zhu's witchcraft of writing, it is worth discussing "*Fin de Siècle Splendor*"—the beginning of Zhu's witchcraft. It is obvious that Zhu's postmodern writing can be associated with gender dynamic in relation to minority discourse. Because of her groundbreaking fiction writing and prominent artistic values, Zhu is regarded as one of the most influential writers in contemporary Chinese communities. "*Fin de Siècle Splendor*" represents multicolored urban space and lifestyle. Mia, the female protagonist and the alter-ego of the author, is cast as a witch-character that lives on her sensual experiences:

As for Mia, she's probably a witch. Her flat is filled with dried flowers and herbs, like a pharmacy. Duan often has the illusion that he is with a medieval monk. Her bathroom is planted with Chinese orchids, African violets, potted pineapples, Peacock coconuts, and all sorts of nameless ferns. [...] the room is like a magician's distillery.⁴

Whereas the plot is diluted to the extreme, what pervade the whole story are the sensual memories of Mia and the rapid transformation of cityscape. Mia with her "medieval" quality is not unlike a character from the past. More interestingly, we need to keep in mind that she is also from the future: Mia lives in 1993, while Zhu completed the

1 *A Chinese Bestiary*, 232.

2 In this article, all Chinese-English translations are mine unless it is otherwise noted.

3 "About A Sorceress' Discourse" [Guanyu Wuyan], 348.

4 Zhu, "*Fin De Siècle Splendor*," 398.

story in 1990. Furthermore, Zhu's feminine consciousness is made visible through the representation of witches. In one scene, the narrator rivets readers' attention on a series of MTV shots, piecing together "Madonna lookalikes," "Wu Shuzhen,"⁵ and "Corazon Auino".⁶ This montage of empowered modern witches challenges the traditional stereotypes of patriarchy. In the final paragraph of the story, Mia envisions the grand destruction or deconstruction of the world system in the future, "[T]he world men have built with theories and systems will collapse, and [Mia] with her memory of smells and colors will survive and rebuild the world from here."⁷ This mythical ending points to a witch's postmodern vision, if not illusion, against the patriarchal and symbolic system.

Following the success of "*Fin de Siècle Splendor*," Zhu rose to the peak of her career with the publication of *Notes of a Desolate Man* 荒人手記 [Huangren Shouji] in 1994. In this award-winning⁸ novel, Zhu delineates a utopian world of yuppie gay men and lays bare the "decadent aesthetic"⁹ of homosexuality. The desolate gay man here may not stand as a wu-shaman like Mia, but his in-between position of sexuality and supernatural insight into the ancient past call into question the urban reality. As the I-narrator reflects at the outset of the novel, "This is an age of decadence. This is an age of prophecy. I am securely bonded with it, sinking to the bottom, the very bottom."¹⁰ The entire novel is laced with such retrospective and prophetic images as the transience of youth and the decay of body. At this point, AIDS turns out to be a symbolic catalyst that accelerates the process of life and death. Further, Zhu tries to justify homosexuality in contrast to the overarching framework of heterosexuality. In this novel, the homosexual relationship is mediated by the repetition of body contact and sexual encounter. Body decays, and memory fades as always. While the protagonist highlights the crucial feature of writing in creating a space free from the bondage of time and social norms, the author elaborates on her magic of language to the extreme.

To Zhu, the road from *Notes of a Desolate Man* to *A Sorceress' Discourse* had not been smooth. Despite her short literary pieces and screen scripts for worldly-renowned film director Hou Hsiao-hsien, Zhu did not publish any long-length novel until the end of 2007. It actually took her about a decade to conceive, write, and re-write *A Sorceress' Discourse*. The return to fiction writing is necessary for Zhu because she takes it as a long-term commitment. Unlike "*Fin de Siècle Splendor*" and *Notes of a Desolate Man*, this novel escapes any direct link to gender politics. However, all of these three works are laden with fiction writing as a register that produces deconstructive texts to challenge ideological hegemony. *A Sorceress' Discourse* centers on the witch-narrator's

5 Wu Shuzhen is the wife of Chen Shui-bian, former President of Taiwan (2000-2008).

6 "Fin De Siecle Splendor," 395.

7 *Ibid.*, 402.

8 Zhu Tianwen's *Notes of a Desolate Man* won the prestigious China Time Novel Prize in 1994.

9 Liou, "At the Intersection of the Global and the Local: Representations of Male Homosexuality in fictions by Pai Hsien-yung, Li Ang, Chu Tien-wen and Chi Ta-wei," 202.

10 Chu, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, 1.

cross-cultural journey through varied geographical locales, historical sites, and political agendas. Beyond a clear storyline, the witch-discourse contains the narrator's random thoughts, observations, and commentaries with respect to translocal imagining. Besides, the witch-narrator reminds us readers of Mia from "*Fin de Siècle Splendor*" We can also find noticeable correlations between the witch-narrator and Zhu Tianwen herself. In this sense, the witch-narrator is identified as the alter-ego of the author.

If a witch acts as a medium between spiritual and secular worlds, Zhu Tianwen as a witch-writer illustrates the transcendence of East-West tensions and the entanglement between Chinese traditions and postmodernity. In the words of Kim-chew Ng, Zhu in this novel "rejects readers' expectation of fictional narrative."¹¹ Zhu's focus on daily chores and personal observations indeed delivers such a message in her writing. While a novel reads like a collection of prosaic fragments, what is left with the term 'fiction'? At this point, 'fiction' represents the ultimate freedom for the author. Under the umbrella of 'fiction', she would be able to go beyond the normal structure of language and to grapple with cross-cultural complexities. Each fragment resembles a spell cast by the witch, and each spell has its own cultural function.

It is worth noting that Zhu Tianwen assigns the I-narrator to such identities as a magician of words, a traveler, a flâneur, and even a political commentator. To tackle translocal cultures throughout the journey of witchcraft, the author divides *A Sorceress' Discourse* into five chapters: "A Witch's Watching" [wukan], "A Witch's Time" [wushi], "A Witch's Issue" [wushi], "A Witch's Path" [wutu], and "A Witch's World" [wujie]. On the whole, Zhu makes a point to mention what is lost and should be recalled in a postmodern context with the help of a witch-writer's enigmatic language in relation to individual and collective memories. In Ng's view, "[L]anguage is situated at the core of the structure of collective memory, or a so-called structural memory."¹² On account of its linguistic and cultural legacies, a witch's magical language is used to mediate between the living and the dead. However, Zhu experiments on an even more profound level of writing while the insights of the individual are placed above the "structure of collective memory". As Zhu argues in the novel,

Words make a language. In the ancient times, language can open up the channel to ghosts and gods and tell one's fortune. It is a noble symbol. Of course, it has been secularized and devalued till now. Its ancient burns [...] have become an original sin. I [...] carry the original sin and lives in the Virtual V-Generation of hyperlinks and hypertexts.¹³

Highlighting the magical power of words, Zhu not only makes clear the correlation between language and divinity, but also suggests a new strategy of writing by putting together messages from various sources and spaces as "hyperlinks and hypertexts" do.

11 "Sorceress's Discourse and Messy Language: Comments and Notes on Two Novels," 248.

12 *Textuality, Soul, and Body: On Chinese Modernity*, 31.

13 *A Sorceress' Discourse [Wuyan]*, 19.

These repetitious acts of outsourcing and re-organization present an assemblage of interrelated and conflicting elements. The starting line of the novel can be a good case in point: “Do you know why Bodhisattva lowers her eyebrows? So the thing is, I met an unaccompanied traveler.”¹⁴ Zhu leaves her readers in complete bewilderment until next section where she finally provides the answer: “Afraid of eye contacts with people, Bodhisattva lowers her eyebrows.”¹⁵ To Buddhists’ common knowledge, Bodhisattva forgoes nirvana in order to save people in the world of endless suffering. That said, Bodhisattva lowers her eyebrows so as to gently welcome and engage secular beings. In Zhu’s new reading, Bodhisattva surprisingly turns to rejection rather than acceptance, thus re-shaping this supernatural being with a postmodern twist.

The above example is merely one of the many playful issues brought up by Zhu Tianwen. Additionally, Zhu’s detail-oriented writing is complicated by her interdisciplinary interests. Zhu’s wide knowledge of translocal cultures is based on her extensive reading and traveling experiences. As the screen writer for auteur Hou Hsiao-hsien, Zhu made quite a few overseas trips to international film festivals. In *A Sorceress’ Discourse*, the narrator first appears as an unaccompanied traveler. Traveling alone seems to be a personal choice, but this act is also shared by the other characters in the novel. “Take unaccompanied travelers for example,” Zhu writes, “[They] temporarily fade out from interpersonal network. They don’t socialize. They don’t communicate. They don’t shoulder responsibilities.”¹⁶ Zhu deliberately targets physical detachment and emotional alienation. While Zhu criticizes those unaccompanied travelers, it sounds like a self-criticism of her own identity as a lone witch-writer. Traveling from one city to another, the narrator can further be regarded as a flâneur by way of the parallel between strolling and observing. The western concept of ‘flâneur’, as noted by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, has become an essential element in handling the prospect of urbanity and modernity. According to Hanna Arendt, “[T]he flâneur had his home in the nineteenth century, an age of security in which children of upper-middle-class families were assured of an income without having to work, so that they had no reason to hurry.”¹⁷ In this regard, the term ‘flâneur’ demonstrates male-centered power as well as “upper-middle-class” taste.

Of course, Zhu Tianwen has no interest in endorsing patriarchal hegemony, but she does possess the discerning eye of a connoisseur. The witch-narrator’s identity as a flâneur appropriates cultural privilege and addresses gender dynamic. Nevertheless, the I-narrator does not have the same economic status to support it. Paradoxical as it may sound, the narrator is a middle-class subject laughed at by young hedonists, social snobs, and even herself. In the meantime, she also functions as a trenchant critic by commenting on both private and public issues. Like a flâneur, the narrator walks within cityscapes and

14 *Ibid.*, 6.

15 *Ibid.*, 25.

16 *Ibid.*, 47.

17 “Introduction,” 22.

(re-)interprets cultural and political implications. Under this circumstance, the narrator's perspective fills the lack of feminine agency in a male discourse of flâneur. In other words, she is no longer an object of male gaze. She is thus re-defined as an active female observer. Although Zhu decides not to touch upon the controversial topic of sexuality after *Notes of a Desolate Man*, gender dynamic still surfaces in this novel.

In addition to the image of flâneur, the witch-narrator can also be adapted into the sub-category of local politics. Zhu Tianwen's mainland background raises readers' interest while trying to decipher her criticism of the politicians of the Kuomintang (KMT), aka the Chinese Nationalist Party. In this case, the modern KMT icons Lien Chan and Ma Ying-jeou become laughable figures. On the one hand, Lien Chan is called "A-She" in the novel. In Taiwanese dialect, A-She originally is an honorable title to wealthy men. At present it carries a negative tone indicating one rich man's extravagance and waste of money. For years, Lien's political enemies from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has been using such a nickname to tarnish his reputation and further raise a sense of class divide within the public. On the other, Mayor Ma's¹⁸ "greatest contribution" to the capital of Formosa, an alternative name of Taiwan, lies in his "attractive appearance".¹⁹ Linking local politics with show business, the narrator seemingly suggests that Lien and Ma are good-for-nothing other than monetary value and personal charisma.

Considering her criticism of Lien and Ma, it is interesting to note that Zhu Tianwen, whose father is a Chinese immigrant and mother a local Taiwanese, is a typical second-generation Chinese mainlander in Taiwan. For the new generations of mainlanders, mother China can only be imagined and idealized. In this account, most Chinese mainlanders can be easily labeled as faithful followers of the KMT, which represents a political tendency towards Chinese legacies. In her earliest writing, Zhu time and again expresses emotional attachment to mainland China. Led by her father Zhu Xining (Chu Hsi-ning) and mentor Hu Lancheng, Zhu acted as a major member in the famous San San Literary Group so as to promote traditional Chinese cultures in the late 1970s. However, Zhu's predilection for Chinese cultures has been shaped and re-shaped with time. Still, it seems unlikely for her to delve into a complete pro-Taiwan system, as DPP proposes, in terms of language and culture. Like her younger sister Zhu Tianxin (Chu T'ien-hsin), who is also a well-known writer, Zhu's political stance has been wavering in face of the fall of Chinese myth and the rise of postcolonial wave in Taiwan.

While connecting variety shows with local politics, Zhu also brings in DPP and ventures into the notorious February 28 Incident, the bloody massacre of local Taiwanese in 1947:

2-28? No, 2-29.

2-28, the day of suffering has become Joshua's ATM, and all the money in the account is almost gone. The annoyed victims of the massacre rise out of

18 Ma Ying-jeou has served as the president of Taiwan since 2008.

19 Zhu, *A Sorceress' Discourse* [Wuyan], 31.

the ground and say, “Stop kidnapping us. Let us rest in peace.” Stop taking suffering as hostage. Please let the dead rest in peace. Please set the living free. Of course, it’s not 2-28.²⁰

Here Zhu criticizes the DPP’s persistent strategy of associating the tragic incident with the earlier KMT atrocity, thereby widening the gap between local Taiwanese and Chinese immigrants. To Zhu, it is nothing but DPP’s political trick to consume the victims of the incident. As a witch-writer, Zhu conjures up the dead to speak for her. Then, Zhu continues to digress from the subject and to present a diluted picture about the intensified trauma of 2-28 by providing a full account of 2-29. 2-29 here does not correspond to the aftermath of 2-28, but refers to an abrupt departure from this traumatic event. Her digression starts with the origin and calculation of February 29th from a western perspective. What follows is the author’s imagination of the return of the dead company president on the day of 2-29. Based on the close relationship between the narrator and the company president, the returning dead figure serves as a replacement character for the author’s father, novelist Zhu Xining, who died of cancer in 1998. The returning president/father re-lives a normal day and remains aloof to political chaos embedded in mass media. Unable to change the disordered reality of local politics, the witch-narrator can at least transform the historical trauma and political turmoil into a digressive narrative in her literary realm. Whereas the ideology of the romanticized China and that of the localized Taiwan make reference to two opposite political poles, Zhu chooses to stay in-between and shows ambivalent attitude towards her Chinese roots. The struggle of local politics can thus be mediated and diluted through fragmentation and replacement in a translocal sense.

Beyond the topic of local politics, Zhu Tianwen also revolves around different issues related to translocal consciousness in *A Sorceress’ Discourse*. On the one hand, numerous critics have tried to re-locate Zhu Tianwen by examining her writing in response to earlier Chinese writers like Zhang Ailing and Hu Lancheng. On the other, it has long been argued that Zhu’s writing represents an extensive reference to western theorists like Claude Levi-Strauss and Michel Foucault. In *Notes of a Desolate Man*, Zhu already demonstrates “a pastiche of encyclopedic knowledge of elitist and popular discourses”.²¹ Likewise, *A Sorceress’ Discourse* displays similar spectacles of postmodern pastiche. The suggested “encyclopedic” writing here showcases a parallel between the past and present and further looks into the accumulated human knowledge entry by entry. As Zhu’s writing is disordered and perplexing due to repetitive digression, the concept of phantasmagoria may help us better grasp the conscious and unconscious flows embedded in Zhu’s translocal narrative.

Phantasmagoria originally refers to a magical show regarding projection and illusion of fantastic images with the aid of light, shadow, smoke, and sound effects in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. This magic-lantern performance

20 *Ibid.*, 254.

21 Peng, “Representation Crisis,” 397.

is claimed to conjure up the dead and have a dialogue with them, and in this regard mirrors the innermost desire and fear of the individual and the collective. It is valid to argue that *A Sorceress' Discourse* is profoundly loaded with a phantasmagoric vision of the past and present. However, in a different account of Marxism, phantasmagoria in the novel can also be allied with a domain of commodities. Within Walter Benjamin's framework, "commodity's status as a phantasmagoria" emerges as "a delusional expression of collective utopian fantasies and longings"²² The projected "fantasies and longings" in Zhu Tianwen's fiction are based on personal experiences and intertextual references beyond domestic politics of Taiwan.

More importantly, the translocal imagining in Zhu's writing consorts with an ambivalent attitude towards commodity fetishism. We need to keep in mind that the narrator is cast as a *flâneur* as discussed earlier in this article. From a *flâneur's* angle, human body, material products, and pop cultures can all be deemed as commodities. At this point, it reminds us of Zhu's "*Fin de Siècle Splendor*". Despite the dazzling abundance of colors and smells, "*Fin de Siècle Splendor*" is imbued with senses of sadness and emptiness. From the perspective of Mia, everything is valued by its commodity value. You are what you wear. Clothing and accessories make visible one's sexual orientation and social status. It seems that Zhu plays the game of signified and signifier. Her characters are dehumanized and encoded, therefore deconstructing humanity and ways of communication in the context of consumption. The ensuing hollowness swallows the past, the present, and even the future. A phantasmagoric delusion of commodities is thus created.

It is intriguing to note that Zhu Tianwen transcends geographical boundaries and chooses Hong Kong to be the target in her discussion of commodity culture with respect to translocalism. In *A Sorceress' Discourse*, Hong Kong is fashioned as a perfect place where human characters can also be objectified. Due to its earlier colonial rule by the Great Britain, Hong Kong has always given tourists the impression of an advanced westernized city and of a paradise for quality shopping. For example, shopaholic figures like Miss Hat and Cat Woman are described as lost in the consumer culture of Hong Kong. Though sharing the same hotel room during a trip, the narrator and Miss Hat decide to reduce any conversation and eye contact with each other to the minimum. The interaction between them is basically mechanic and unnatural. As the narrator reveals,

"Thanks." "[You've] come back." "I will take a shower first." "Okay. You first." "You take the key." "No problem." [The above] are our limited words [to each other]. They are not human words but spells. These spells wrap us up and turn us into two separate objects.²³

The lack of communication in the modern period is problematic to the narrator since she constantly revisits the issues about the objectification of human beings.

22 Pensky, "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images," 184.

23 *A Sorceress' Discourse* [Wuyan], 14.

Commodity fetishism here leads to a degraded form of human contacts. The shopping craze shared by Miss Hat and Cat Woman merely reflects the pursuit of fashion myth in social network without any direct link to interpersonal relations. According to Margaret Cohen, “[T]he spectacle of the phantasmagoria [...] offered Benjamin a thoroughly archaeological way to depict the persistence of the irrational in modern life.”²⁴ Clearly, the narrator sees in these dehumanized figures “the persistence of the irrational,” thus projecting the phantasmagoria of the commodity world.

Furthermore, Zhu Tianwen’s writing of phantasmagoric phenomena must be re-examined in a postmodern era. Zhu might not be interested in fashions and designers’ products, but she is surely attached to such cultural commodities as artistic works and literary canons. While criticizing Miss Hat and Cat Woman’s desire for the aura of fashion products, the narrator is obsessed with intangible cultural capitals from the western world, such as Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *The Phantom of the Opera* and Italo Calvino’s novel *Mr. Palomar*. The above two works clearly represent the author’s translocal tastes and approaches to cultural commodities. Despite their opposite interests, the narrator, Miss Hat and Cat Woman can be placed in the same category of phantasmagoria. In this case, the narrator questions her own desire to watch *The Phantom of the Opera*. After all, it is why she plans the trip to Hong Kong and ends up exchanging the same message with Miss Hat: “I am here to relax like an idiot and a beast. Please treat me as a chair, a lamp, a drawer, or whatever. In any case, [I am] not a human.”²⁵ By revealing alienated subjects vis-à-vis cultural commodities, the narrator investigates the inscrutable commodity fetishism of oneself and others on a profound level. As Jan Mieszkowski stresses,

In this respect, the “universe of a phantasmagoria” is not simply a collection of visions or images – true or false, natural or artificial – but an entire system of relationships poised uneasily on the borders between public and private space, past and future, dream and waking.²⁶

When it comes to the concept of phantasmagoria, Mieszkowski’s focus on “relationships poised uneasily on the borders” coincides with Zhu’s calling into question the recurrent symptom of human alienation. The phantasmagoria created by the witch-writer thus discloses the juxtaposition of a retrospective pastiche and a prophetic fantasy of postmodern Taiwan in response to cross-cultural experiences around the world. Thereupon the author’s phantasmagoric vision has gone beyond the domain of local consciousness and reaches the edge of translocal imagining in the postmodern era.

Engaging translocality in *A Sorceress’ Discourse*, Zhu Tianwen situates herself between private and public, China and Taiwan, and finally, East and West. Despite her passion for rendering western theories and classics, Zhu has learned to keep a distance

24 “Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria: The Arcades Project,” 208.

25 *A Sorceress’ Discourse [Wuyan]*, 6.

26 “Art Forms,” 48–49.

from Chinese and western standards of fiction writing. In the novel, Zhu carefully employs the third voice produced by the narrator's friend to comment on novelist Ha Jin. As a Chinese, Ha Jin chooses to write English novels with Chinese settings, but he refuses to translate his works into Chinese by himself. The narrator and her secret friend continue to claim that Ha Jin's breakthrough only lies in his linguistic border-crossing. They also stress that Ha Jin's novels are definitely no better than a number of modern Chinese works with similar Chinese backdrops. As for herself, Zhu is searching for a singular route of writing away from Ha Jin's path to success in line with western criticism. In contrast to Ha Jin's fiction, what *A Sorceress' Discourse* delivers is a complicated structure of cultural hybridity.

In terms of hybridity in Zhu's translocal writing, *Peng Hsiao-yen uses the phrase "representation crisis" to describe the cultural complexity found in Taiwanese writers from "soldiers' villages" [juancun]:*

The overarching idea of my argument is what I call "representation crisis," the deep feeling that both language and narrative have lost their referent in the post-martial law cultural state in Taiwan. These writers' mistrust of official histories leads to an inward turn toward personal experiences, whereas the inability to grab a unifying "self" results in the questioning of language as a useful means to convey meaning; language or narrative as a signifier of an external referent is put into question.²⁷

Peng's argument indeed provides us a way to look into Zhu's cultural hybridity. Internalizing the collective experience of Chinese diaspora, Zhu divulges senses of loss and rootlessness in "*Fin de Siècle Splendor*" and *Notes of a Desolate Man*. In *A Sorceress' Discourse*, the "representation crisis" of the author is further embodied through "the questioning of language".

The witch-narrator uses a magical language inaccessible to general readers, but it is her discursive narrative that confuses them the most. Take, for instance, the ecological concerns of the narrator. As Zhu Tianwen identifies the alchemists in the Middle Ages as "the mixture of liars and magicians"²⁸ [pianzi he moshushi de zongheti], the author herself acts as a postmodern alchemist with environmental consciousness. In the novel, she argues that there are four different worlds: "the world of immortality" [yongsheng jie], "the world of rebirth" [congsheng jie], "the world of reincarnation" [toutai jie], and "the world of recycling" [zaisheng jie].²⁹ In addition to religious functions of witchcraft, the narrator performs alchemical acts and turns the unwanted and the undesired into a recycling process. Whenever the narrator travels, she always brings back home the trash produced by herself and others from thousands of miles away. According to Wang Yanfang, *A Sorceress' Discourse* criticizes "modern technology" and puts into practice

27 "Representation Crisis," 377–378.

28 *A Sorceress' Discourse* [Wuyan], 73.

29 *Ibid.*, 16.

the “ethics of environmentalism” by living an environmentally friendly life.³⁰ The gist here seems to lie in the author’s attempt to recycle ordinary materials and turn them into various uses.

Wang Yanfang’s statement is surely valid but requires further discussion. As a matter of fact, the narrator’s recycling mission can also be related to a research project of anthropology: “[Boss the anthropologist] said that anthropologists are junk collectors in the studies of history [because they] find treasure in trash bins.”³¹ Zhu Tianwen in the novel follows the above agenda and goes through a magical ritual of linguistic and cultural hybridity. In short, a ritual performed by the witch-narrator is not unlike a process of calling the lost and the forgotten in face of rapid transformation in the postmodern era. Actually, Zhu has mentioned several times in public how she was inspired by Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of Paul Klee’s painting named “Angelus Novus”. Reading the original text may help us better understand Zhu’s multilayered narrative jumping from ecological consciousness to nostalgic sentiments:

[The angel’s] eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has [...]

got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.³²

In this light, Benjamin expresses a vacillating attitude towards the change of life style encompassed by industrial revolution and capitalism. While the new age is dominant in all aspects, the past is still lingering in gray spaces and seeking remembrance. If we go back to examine *A Sorceress’ Discourse*, a similar thread can be found. Although the novel has a different historical setting, its nostalgic imagining, ambiguous positioning, and border-crossing references in the author’s translocal narrative are connected with the new angel’s act of looking back.

Like the new angel, Zhu Tianwen provides a unique way to look into the fading past. Moreover, the targeted past is bound up with the profound level of the present and future. Intriguingly, the author confirms that the witch belongs to the “asocial” category

30 “Discussing the Ecocritical Ethics in Zhu Tianwen’s Fiction [Lun Zhu Tianwen Xiaoshuo De Shengtai Lunli Guanhu],” 57.

31 *A Sorceress’ Discourse* [Wuyan], 183.

32 Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 257–258.

close to “non-human zone”.³³ Whereas a socializing process should be connected with physical and ideological contacts with the public, Zhu’s writing, in contrast, serves its own purposes without any easy access for common readers to get to. Nevertheless, the narrator’s critique of local politics and calling for the dead/past discussed earlier are both socialized actions. Unlike the indifferent Bodhisattva and the meditative new angel, the witch-writer decides to engage with emergent issues within a multi-referent framework of translocality.

To conclude, Zhu Tianwen’s witchcraft of writing indeed puts up an invisible wall between the author and general readers through her complex translocal imagining. The fragmentary narrative of *A Sorceress’ Discourse* points to a loose structure with respect to paradoxical and interrelated subjects. In other words, the entire segment reads like the representation of an individual discourse in bits and pieces. As its storyline is replaced by postmodern spectacles, readers may wonder if they are reading a fiction or a collection of proses, diaries, and editorials. As a matter of fact, Zhu never targets on common readers. As she admits, “I write for connoisseurship, or an insight.”³⁴ This statement is originally from novelist Ah Cheng (Zhong Acheng), but it is Zhu that makes the most of it and brings it to the extreme. Reading this novel is not unlike going through a literary journey planned by the author. Herein Zhu functions as a tour guide—leading readers to re-visit historical sites and reconsider translocal phenomena in a postmodern context. Some people may feel uneasy while reading this novel due to the lack of cross-cultural backgrounds and encyclopedic knowledge. Some may be shocked or amazed by the effects of *déjà vu* if they are already equipped with elite tastes of aesthetics. The witch-narrator performs the magical rituals through writing, thus profoundly embodying her recurrent longings for the fading past and deep anxiety for the disconnected present and future.

Zhu Tianwen ends the novel with the following: “Only the books that remain after being burnt down and saved from fire can make people acquire some sort of necessity. Is it the necessity that might never be lost and replaced? A holy script.”³⁵ The “holy script” refers to Mishnah, the major script of Judaism. It is worth noting that Zhu’s witch-discourse points to the “necessity” in human civilization comparable to the above holy script. Breaking with the mould of traditional fiction writing, Zhu cleverly demonstrates a (con-)text of translocal imagining in response to postmodernity, and thereby provides an illuminating insight into the cross-cultural positioning of Taiwan. That said, we see in the author one of the finest creative minds in Taiwanese literature.

33 *A Sorceress’ Discourse* [Wuyan], 197.

34 Zhu, “Solitude, Persistence, Insistence: Zhu Tianwen Talking About Her Practices of Words [Guji, Pianzhi, Jianchi: Zhu Tianwen Tan Tade Wenzhi Xiuxing],” 44.

35 *A Sorceress’ Discourse* [Wuyan], 322.

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