

# ***The Identity Dilemma of Qiu Hu in ‘The Wilderness’: Unveiling the Hidden Oppression Behind the ‘See’***

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**Abstract:** ‘Seeing’ and ‘being seen’ is a classic motif in contemporary Chinese literature. The action of ‘see’ represents not only the instinctive behavior of people but also a relationship between people, which has a complex socio-cultural meaning behind it, causing the subject of seeing and the object of being seen to suffer mental scrutiny and even oppression. In ‘The Wilderness’ by Cao Yu, the relationship between Qiu Hu and the characters in ‘The Wilderness’ is one of ‘seeing’ and ‘being seen’, and they are always under the pressure of ‘seeing’. Therefore, this paper will adopt the method of textual reading to classify and analyze Qiu Hu’s multiple identities from the relationship of ‘seeing’ and ‘being seen’ among the dramatic characters and classify Qiu Hu’s identities into three aspects: social ethics, social laws, and social, interpersonal relationships Qiu Hu’s identity is divided into victim and victimizer, judged and judge, and the outlier who cannot fit in, and the character of Qiu Hu is reinterpreted and reconstructed. Under the perspective of ‘see’, Qiu Hu’s multiple identities arise from the conflict between humans and society, and his identity dilemma symbolizes the dilemma of the relationship between the individual and the collective and even the individual and the society.

**Keywords:** ‘see’, Yuanye, Qiu Hu, identity, Cao Yu

## **1. Introduction**

‘The Wilderness’ is the last part of Cao Yu’s early trilogy, written in April 1937. In this play, Qiu Hu seeks revenge and returns to ‘The Wilderness’, where the Jiaos live, although his revenge ultimately leads to emotional turmoil. Qiu Hu decides to enact revenge by killing Jiao Da Xing and Xiao Heizi, then escapes with Hua Jinzi. However, he becomes lost in the Dark Forest and ultimately takes his own life through suicide.

The publication of ‘The Wilderness’ was met with a lengthy and underwhelming reception, but it began to receive more recognition during the literary emancipation period after the establishment of New China [1]. Early analyses often focused on class struggle due to the writer’s own evaluation of the work; however, since Cao Yu’s evaluation of the play varied over time, it is no longer appropriate to use class analysis based on the author’s intention for interpretation. Since 1977, research on ‘The Wilderness’ has shifted to multiple perspectives, such as literary theory, religious theology, and Western theatrical parody. These viewpoints have expanded the scope of interpretation, revealing a

range of findings such as the conflicts between man and survival and fate, religion and sin, and primitive and civilization [2,3].

This paper employs a documentary research approach to examine the characters' perceptions through a close analysis of the text and to explore the various identity dilemmas experienced by Qiu Hu during his quest for revenge. The concept of 'seeing', in this context, pertains to the act of visual gaze between people or objects; it encompasses not only the physiological activity but the cognitive process that enables individuals to be conscious of their act of seeing. In other words, the 'seeing' action is not merely a natural reflex but a complex social behavior that involves cognition, examination, judgment, and other mental activities shaped by personal choices and emotional inclinations. By scrutinizing the relationship between 'seeing' and 'being seen,' it is possible to unravel the intricate web of identities that belong to Qiu Hu.

According to the way of realizing the activity of 'seeing', the activities of 'seeing' related to Qiu Hu in the 1996 edition of *The Complete Works of Cao Yu* can be divided into three aspects: visual cognition, mental examination, and hidden perspective.

Additionally, the act of 'seeing' involves the use of human cognitive ability [4]. Regarding visual cognition, two characters--Bai Shazi and Jiao Daxing--cognize and judge Qiu Hu through their vision, and their 'seeing' activity relies on human physiological organs. In terms of spiritual examination, the characters' perception transcends superficiality, utilizing spiritual cognition to delve into Qiu Hu's trial through imagined illusions. While Qiu Hu engages in self-reflection, Jiao Mu (Jiao Daxing's mother), Jiao Yanwang, and the deceased family members induce in him a cognitive perception of being 'observed,' thereby positioning Qiu Hu as both the subject initiating the act of observation and the object being judged. Despite its significance, the hidden perspective in 'The Wilderness' is often overlooked. The character Changwu serves as the eyes of both Jiao Mu and the entire village, potentially acting as a watchdog to monitor and deter Qiu Hu. Meanwhile, the posse represents Qiu Hu's act of revenge as a breach of social order, causing him to face the threat of being observed at all times. Additionally, the Heavenly Deity embodies the highest authority level and serves as Qiu Hu's judge. Throughout the book, the author evaluates Qiu Hu's appearance as varying between ugly, beautiful, and wild. This evaluation serves to symbolize the different mental states Qiu Hu experiences and encourages readers to examine his behavior. In conclusion, the term 'seeing' not only refers to visual perception but also encompasses selectivity influenced by social structures, cultural background, and personal emotional bias.

The exploration of the theme of 'The Wilderness' and Qiu Hu engages multiple levels of literary criticism and academic research, yielding a comprehensive and systematic body of scholarship. This theme constitutes a crucial subject within the domain of Chinese modern and contemporary literature. This study aims to contribute to this scholarly discourse by offering novel interpretations from distinct perspectives, with an emphasis on both 'seeing' and 'being seen.' Furthermore, by investigating literary classics, we aim to further our understanding of the history of Chinese modern-and-contemporary literature, inspire the classicization of contemporary literature, and extend the longevity of these works.

## **2. Dual Identity of Victims and Victimizers**

### **2.1. Victims**

In 'The Wilderness', Qiu Hu is the initial victim. Jiao Yanwang seizes his family's land, sets fire to their home, kills Qiu Hu's father, and forces his sister into prostitution while arranging for his childhood friend Jinzi to marry Jiao Daxing. Qiu Hu's life is marred by relentless persecution from Jiao Yanwang; revenge became his instinctive reaction and self-choice in the face of persecution from Jiao Yanwang. In order to avoid the pain that causes his own demise, Qiu Hu's revenge is dedicated

to destroying the source of the pain - Jiao Yanwang. However, the premature death of Jiao Yanwang discontinues the original act of revenge, so driven by the traditional moral concept of 'a dutiful son obliged to pay his father's debts', Qiu Hu shifts the object of revenge to Jiao Da Xing.

Although Jiao Daxing replaced Jiao Yanwang as the target of revenge, he was not involved in the previous acts of persecution. In fact, he was uninformed and showed goodwill towards Qiu Hu. Both Hua Jinzi and Jiao Mu evaluated Jiao Daxing as 'blind' and 'ignorant' due to his lack of understanding regarding Qiu Hu's vendetta. He was unable to subjectively evaluate the situation, which made him harmless but weak. His cowardice always put him in a position of being watched and judged by others, and he adhered to traditional filial piety without questioning it. Even when drunk, Jiao Daxing would display his savagery and desires. Nevertheless, his remarks implied that he continued to perceive surveillance from Qiu Hu and Hua Jinzi. For instance, phrases such as 'Look who I am' and 'this time I want Jinzi to see' indicate his continued positioning in the passive role of being observed by Qiu Hu and Hua Jinzi [5]; he said, 'I'm going to (swiftly taking out his dagger; deeply) kill him!' that shows an outburst of aggressiveness, but he quickly suppressed by Hua Jinzi's words and chose to abandon the opportunity to kill Qiu Hu, who is Hua Jinzi's lover [5]. Despite sensing Jiao Daxing's innocence and harmlessness, Qiu Hu considered him an enemy's son and pursued revenge according to the cultural instruction of 'the father pays the son' becoming a complete victimizer [1].

## 2.2. Victimizer

Qiu Hu remains oppressed by Jiao Mu's scrutiny, unable to escape the victim's identity. Despite being blind, Jiao Mu's character's power of observation is not affected by her physical disability. Her ability to scrutinize Qiu Hu comes from both external and internal sources of knowledge. The external 'eyes' refer to the people around Jiao Mu who inform her about the events occurring in the Jiao family and the village. In the play, the author uses Changwu's mouth to point out that Jiao Daxing is Jiao Mu's 'eyes' at home and that he is monitoring Hua Jinzi and Qiu Hu instead of Jiao Mu, while in the absence of her trusted son, Changwu and Bai Fuzi, the neighbors of the village, become the hidden 'eyes' monitoring Qiu Hu. The inner 'eyes' refer to Jiao Mu's keen perception. Despite her blindness, she uses other senses and sophisticated thinking to perceive everything happening around her. In the numerous encounters and struggles, Qiu Hu's actions remain undisguised from Jiao Mu, whose ability to see reality instead of using physical vision provides her with invaluable insights. Although the script mentions Jiao Yanwang's evil deeds several times, it neglects Jiao Mu's role in them. Jiao Mu's character emerges as a 'family guardian' from her words and actions upon Qiu Hu's return. While Jiho Mu is conscious that she cannot let her children and grandchildren be resented by the next generation of the family, shifting the target of revenge to their offspring is contrary to her mission of safeguarding her lineage. Consequently, she coerces or lures Qiu Hu to his death. By contrast, Jiao Mu's protection of her family has a natural moral advantage, and Qiu Hu feels extremely guilty for victimizing Jiao Da Xing and Xiao Heizi, who have no ill will toward him, so the human conscience makes Qiu Hu feel extremely guilty. In the face of the illusion of the Dark Forest, Qiu Hu cries out to justify himself, attempting to defend himself against Jiao Mu's moral oppression. However, Jiao Mu has the corpse of Xiao Heizi and indicates that she wants to pass before Qiu Hu's eyes. These grisly visual images are seared into Qiu Hu's mind and become an inescapable illusion. As a consequence, he suffers from mental persecution.

Jiao Yanwang's photograph replaces the real person and mentally oppresses Qiu Hu in his hallucinations. Qiu Hu feels persecuted by Jiao Yanwang's gaze when he and Hua Jinzi plot revenge many times, and he also uses the photo as a double of Jiao Yanwang to talk to him. Whether angry, resigned, or contemptuous, Jiao Yanwang always looks down on Qiu Hu in his imagination, exercising a powerful deterrent over him. Furthermore, the feudal, patriarchal authority of Jiao Mu has been inherited from Jiao Yanwang, which means that Qiu Hu can never escape fear whenever he

encounters anything connected to Jiao Yanwang. The omnipresent ‘eyes’ keep Qiu Hu in a perpetual state of anxiety, wondering if he is being watched and creating a tense and apprehensive atmosphere. Finally, his fear explodes in the dark forest, where Qiu Hu sees visions of his family members turning into ghosts and being humiliated by Jiao Yanwang. Although Qiu Hu believes he completed his revenge on Jiao Yanwang by harming Jiao Daxing and Xiao Heizi, the opposite hallucination reveals that Qiu Hu’s revenge did not have the impact he anticipated: Jiao Yanwang continues to flaunt his power, and his family members still bear the brunt of his tyrannical behavior. Consequently, Qiu Hu realizes that he has not achieved true revenge, which he expected to provide satisfaction and pleasure. Instead, he finds himself continually playing the role of the victim whenever he confronts Jiao Yanwang.

### **3. Confrontation and Integration of the Judged and the Judge**

#### **3.1. The Judged**

Despite the fact that the posse does not make a direct appearance before the characters, its authority to conduct trials is constantly present throughout the drama. The pursuit of Qiu Hu by the posse represents the punishment inflicted by the state on its citizens. This symbolizes the trial of Qiu Hu by the state, with his shooting representing his condemnation and elimination by society.

The posse is responsible for implementing the organization under social security organs. In the drama, they have the power and responsibility to offer a reward for Qiu Hu’s arrest or even shoot him, which represents the maintenance of social order by the state machinery. They have the power to manage and judge the citizens of the land they govern. Qiu Hu’s actions, which include killing Jiao Daxing and indirectly killing Xiao Heizi through Jiao Mu, seriously violated social order and morality. Therefore, the posse pursues Qiu Hu, judging him by the rules of social order. The threat and imminence of the posse have been a great deterrent to Qiu Hu from the beginning to the end. Even in the period before the posse came to ‘The Wilderness’, Qiu Hu was still scrupulous in avoiding being ‘seen’ by the posse. Although the posse does not appear directly in the drama, their presence and power are shown to Qiu Hu through the words of others, his own vigilance, and bullets and guns. This creates anxiety and panic for Qiu Hu as he is always under the threat of being discovered by the posse. In the Dark Forest, the arrival of bullets foreshadows the approach of the posse. Despite his efforts, Qiu Hu cannot avoid being exposed to the posse and facing social judgment.

#### **3.2. The Judge**

After his own awakening and receiving advice from Hua Jinzi, Qiu Hu’s identity undergoes another transformation. While being judged by the social order, he also judges ‘heaven’ and the self.

In Chinese culture, the term ‘heaven’ often carries multiple connotations. On the one hand, it denotes an abstract, divine entity that embodies supreme morality; on the other, it refers to specific beings, such as ancestors or sons of heaven [6]. In the drama, Qiu Hu identifies ‘heaven’ as the ‘Heavenly Deity’, while Hua Jinzi mentions ‘eyes’ in his portrayal of ‘heaven’. The names and imagery employed by Qiu and Hua indicate that their concept of ‘heaven’ is humanistic in nature, referring to the judge with the highest authority in the drama. Pursued by the posse and fleeing through the dark forest, Qiu Hu is confronted with moral and societal judgment. Through support from Hua Jinzi, he eventually grasps that ‘Heaven is partial to those in power, not to people like us’ and ‘Then, is Heaven blind?’ [5] As a result, Qiu Hu becomes both the subject and object of evaluation, lambasting weak rulers who subject the people to injustice and subordinate themselves to the powerful, as well as a corrupt social order upheld by these rulers that fails to dispense justice and condemns good people to ruin. At this point, Qiu Hu reaches the height of his rationality, realizing

his plight is not solely the result of a slight error in thought, but is also the outcome of an immoral and decadent society.

Thus Qiu Hu's trial of self carries the double meaning of rebelling against an unjust society and pursuing spiritual freedom and liberation. When Qiu Hu is in the judge's identity, he chooses to run away to the Dark Forest in a mess. When Qiu Hu is in the judge's identity, he recognizes the social reality and realizes that seeking revenge against Xiao Heizi and Jiao Daxing as a substitute for Jiao Yanwang goes against his self-consciousness, stripping away notions of justice and morality. He needs to pay the price for his sin [7]. However, the power organs of the secular world are no longer trusted by Qiu Hu, who has judged their dereliction of duty and degradation, and he does not want to be bound again by the 'iron shackles' of the order he despises. Therefore, facing the golden future of freedom and the dark confining reality, Qiu Hu's act of breaking the iron shackles and raising the gun to commit suicide is both an extreme expression of self-condemnation and self-repentance, as well as the end of fierce resistance to being judged by the social power organs. Either he loses his conscience and escapes, or the detective team catches him; Qiu Hu breaks the shackles of these two options with the bloody tragedy of self-murder and comes out of a bloody path of his own when wildness and rationality are intertwined in character, and the violent act shows a primitive and complex beauty.

#### **4. Failure of Conversion from Outliers to Collective Member**

##### **4.1. Outliers**

In the prologue, Qiu Hu escapes from prison and arrives alone in 'The Wilderness'. The author portrays him as a twisted monster with an ugly face, strange limbs, and a torso that display a sense of incongruity between toughness and disability. His dirty and torn clothing and his fierce and cynical attitude lend an evil aggressiveness and surging vitality to his character. The tile-size buckle echoes Qiu Hu's strong muscles and bones, adding a tough color to the character with a metallic shine. The character's overall appearance reflects instability, incorporating violent and rugged elements to the extreme. This sets up the initial image of a returned avenger who has suffered inhuman torture but refuses to submit.

During a conversation between Qiu Hu, a twisted monster, and Bai Shazi, Bai Shazi responded to Qiu Hu's query on his appearance by remarking that Qiu Hu did not look like a human being. Here, Bai Shazi's 'see' connotes perception and judgment. Qiu Hu's family has been broken and imprisoned for many years, and he has been out of the normal social system for a long time and is an outlier. Although people cannot exist separately from the social group, Qiu Hu only returns to the village for revenge and does not belong to the social group. Therefore, as the first person to appear to live in a social group, Qiu Hu takes Bai Shazi temporarily as the group's representative and hopes to obtain his social identity from his answers. On the one hand, Qiu Hu becomes the object of observation, and his questioning aims to have Bai Shazi evaluate his social image on behalf of the secular society. On the other hand, Qiu Hu also becomes the subject of analysis, using Bai Shazi's answers to examine his socially recognized image. During the subsequent questions and answers, Qiu Hu questioned Bai Shazi about where he did not look like a human being and proclaimed, 'Who said I am not ugly.' These actions exemplify their real trial of social appearance by denying superficial physical form. Qiu Hu's frustration suggests that he both desires to integrate into the social group and engages in self-denial and self-deprecation due to social exclusion.

##### **4.2. Collective Member**

Qiu Hu does not want to remain an outcast or be excluded from the social group; he desires to escape his current painful situation and become socially accepted. To entice Hua Jinzi, who suffers from the destruction of Jiao Mu and is not sheltered by her husband, Qiu Hu describes a faraway place covered

with gold as a means of escape from the status quo and the start of a new life rooted in symbolism and beauty. Even though Qiu Hu later denies the existence of this fabled location, Hua Jinzi still yearns for it. Consequently, Qiu Hu empathizes with Hua Jinzi's vision of the future because it reflects his own aspirations. The 'return - revenge - to the place where the gold is covered' plan actually represents the process of Qiu Hu getting rid of his inhuman image as an ugly monster and becoming a human being again. It is the process of his transition from social detachment to assimilation into a superior social group.

In conforming, Hua Jinzi and Qiu Hu are one and the same. Hua Jinzi is not a Jiao clan member, lacking the psychological identity typical of family groups [8]. She views Jiao Daxing as an immature child and lacks genuine affection for him. She is spoiled and aggressive because she uses her husband as a last resort in the family to fight against Jiao Mu. Hua Jinzi bears a longstanding grudge against Jiao Mu, who is constantly guarding against her wildness and attempting to bring her under parental authority as they have done with Jiao Daxing. However, Hua Jinzi truly identifies herself as a family member of Qiu Hu. She perceives herself as Qiu Hu's partner, actively supporting him in his acts of violence, urging him forward when he hesitates or feels weak, and reinforcing his belief in the killing. Together, they flee into 'The Wilderness', aspiring to escape to a distant and prosperous land. Their spiritual connection is physically embodied through their sexual relationship, which leads to creating a temporary social unit - a family. However, revenge and deception in 'The Wilderness' defy societal moral principles, leaving this small group vulnerable to exposure from Changwu and other villagers, Jiao Mu and Jiao Daxing. The risk of being discovered makes it impossible for the small group to be accepted by the larger village community, rendering it highly unstable. Thus, the group must flee 'The Wilderness' to the outside world, where they can escape ongoing surveillance pressures.

The Dark Forest is an external expression of Qiu Hu's inner turmoil and conflict. Here, Qiu Hu confronts his identity as a victimizer and is judged by his conscience in the Dark Forest. The performance of seeing and being seen establishes a two-way interaction that is the foundation upon which a complex system of interpersonal dynamics is built [9]. Hence, it was Qiu Hu who could not escape the clutches of the Dark Forest, not Hua Jinzi [10]. When the posse eventually discovers them, only Hua Jinzi manages to evade capture and find an opportunity to start anew. However, Qiu Hu is forced to remain in 'The Wilderness', causing the small family group of Qiu Hu, Hua Jinzi, and their unborn child to disintegrate. Eventually, Qiu Hu is compelled to break away from his family and becomes an outlier.

## 5. Conclusions

Qiu Hu's process of revenge is deeply intertwined with the multiple identities he carries, presenting a complex socio-ethical predicament. His role as both victim and victimizer reflects the conflicting nature of his position within the socio-legal structure. Moreover, the tension between outliers and collective member highlights Qiu Hu's detachment from social relationships. Throughout his interactions with different characters, the weight of these identities becomes apparent through the dynamics of 'seeing' and 'being seen' influencing his choices and actions during his revenge.

The interplay of Qiu Hu's identities is not straightforward or independent. The contradictions arising from his dual roles as victim and victimizer and his position as the judged and judge hinder his integration into the conformist framework. Seeking revenge further alienates him from his village while victimizing Jiao Daxing, and Xiao Heizi fractures his spirit and exposes him as a fugitive, preventing him from escaping to the 'Wilderness' with Hua Jinzi to build a family. Consequently, Qiu Hu remains adrift, unable to establish meaningful connections within any social group—be it familial, communal, or societal. Ultimately, he leads a solitary life as an outlier.

Qiu Hu's identity dilemma serves as a symbol of the challenges encountered by individuals in their relationships with collectives, including society. His character represents an extreme situation in

which some people feel alienated from society. 'Seeing' is an instinctive human activity that creates interpersonal connections among individuals within social groups. By examining the characters' use of this visual relationship throughout the story, it can be found that Qiu Hu's struggle for revenge does not only stay at the level of personal conscience and freedom of life but also extends to the powerful connection between man and the society he depends on. Though no one can exist entirely independently of collective structures, Qiu Hu ultimately loses his chance to integrate into any social group after Hua Jinzi's departure, and he ultimately becomes socially dead. By raising his gun and taking his own life at the play's conclusion, Qiu Hu both achieves spiritual liberation and signifies his social demise.

It is important to note that although this paper provides preliminary classification and analysis of the 'see' perspective, these findings are largely general and cannot be directly applied to the discussion of multiple identities presented later.

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