

Original Paper

On the Space Construction and the Exploration of Sun

Shengxi's Identity of *Son of the Darkness*

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Abstract

Son of the Darkness is the debut full-length novel of the post-90s writer Lu Xu from Zhaoqing, which bears a strong allegorical hue. *Son of the Darkness* refers not only to Sun Shengxi of unknown identity but also serves as a metaphor for human destiny. The metamorphoses from human to animal and the shape shifts among objects that occur in the work both imply the marginalized situations of the characters and constitute an allegory of human fate. In the novel, Lu Xu constructs the family space, the space of biopolitics, and the utopian space as the domains for Sun Shengxi's identity exploration. Sun Shengxi's vulnerable situation in the family space and the city theater as the workspace is similar to that of the homo sacer in the space of biopolitics. The transformation in the utopian space embodies the subject's exploration and pursuit of art and freedom, as well as the resistance to the supreme power.

Keywords

Son of the Darkness, space, identity, transformation

1. Introduction

Son of the Darkness is the maiden full-length novel of the young writer Lu Xu, who resides in Zhaoqing, Guangdong Province, China. The winner of the Lu Xun Literature Prize, Yi Zhou, contends that Lu Xu's novels "signify a new literary spirit that we have not yet fully apprehended", featuring "an ageless beauty belonging to literature" (Lu, 2022). *Son of the Darkness* is a postmodernist novel with a distinct creative style, fusing Eastern and Western myths and literary classic characters, and boasting strong intertextuality and significant symbolic implications.

The novel encompasses four chapters, with the exploration of the protagonist Sun Shengxi's self-identity and paternal identity pervading the entire story. The first three chapters commence the novel with Sun Shengxi's memoirs recounted in a theater, presenting his identity search in various

spaces such as the City Theater, Gaosi District, the ruins of the Night Wanderers, the Imperial Hotel, and Shamen Temple. The final chapter of the novel takes an unanticipated turn by indicating that the story of Sun in the first three chapters actually stems from the fictional memoirs of actor K.T. Consequently, the identities of Sun and K.T. overlap in the fictional memoirs, and the multiple boundaries set in the novel are shattered.

Son of the Darkness is also a space novel. “Space is pervaded with social relationships; it is not only supported by social relationships but also generates social relationships” (Bao, 2003, p. 48). Lu Xu constructs family spaces, spaces of biopolitics, and the space of utopias in the novel. In the work, space not only serves as the backdrop for the exploration of characters’ identities but also the environmental characteristics therein constitute a metaphor for the characters’ relationships. Through transformative experiences, the characters in the novels express their resistance to power and dominators in the space of biopolitics and express their pursuit of freedom and art in the utopian space. Through the identity search journey of Sun, *Son of the Darkness* alludes to the human condition and fate with allegorical words.

2. The Mystery of Sun Shengxi’s Identity and the Construction of Family Space

“Who am I” and “Who is my biological father” are the issues that the protagonist of the novel, Sun has been exploring from the beginning to the end. “Who is my biological father” influenced Sun’s exploration of the question “Who am I”. “Identity is a relationship”, and “identity does not lie within the individual but in the relationship between the individual and others”, and it also exists in “the narrative”. Sun initially attempted to conduct self-narration during the process of “integrating with other characters” (Curry, 2003, p. 21): firstly, by relying on the mother-son relationship to explore the mystery of his self-identity; secondly, by completing his self-identity report in the theater and exploring the essence of himself through narrative. Sun’s identity issue was also a concern for his mother’s family. He entered the City Theater for work. But the City Theater was a deformed family space. The leaders of the theater were his grandfather and uncle, and they also cared about Sun’s identity, indicating that his identity must be clarified before he can be assigned any work.

Sun’s exploration of self-identity is concurrently an inquiry into the family’s secrets. “The family is not merely a chain of biological and social ties but also the model on which all broader relationships are predicated” (Malinowski, 2003, p. 229). Sun needed the family space to explore his self-identity, however the family space was in disorder. His mother suffered from a hereditary heart disease and was “irritable, hyperactive, enfeebled, and hostile towards matters” (Lu, 2022, p. 25). Their house filled with books sent by the grandfather, was situated in the Gaosi District. Family members looked down upon them. In rebellion, the mother tore out the valuable pages from the grandfather’s books and used them as wallpaper to cover the walls, and even brushed them over with light blue paint. She fabricated two stories of conception: In one dream, she fell into a cesspool, sank to the depth of filth, and conceived Sun. In the second dream, the mother gave birth to Sun in the cesspool. A Mandrill appeared

in both dreams, witnessing the mother's pregnancy and childbirth process from a tree. Hence, his mother believed that he was the child of the mandrill. This is an illogical explanation. Sun was unable to solve the mystery of his self-identity through the family and thus entered the workspace, the City Theater. Given the ambiguity of Sun's identity, the theater demanded that Sun must complete a report of his own recollections before assigning him a role.

The space of the City Theater is a transformed family space, a space of power, a supernatural space, and it also constitutes a metaphor for the virtual space of the internet. Firstly, the most prominent spatial attribute of the City Theater is its familial nature. The former dean and the new assistant of the theater happened to be Sun's grandfather and uncle. Later, Sun learned that his mother had also been an actress in the theater but left due to memory problems. Thus, the theater was a transformed family space, where his grandfather and uncle were not only his superiors but also his surrogate fathers. Secondly, the theater was a space of power, where the leaders in the theater had the power to dominate and enslaved the members. "The theater formulates a daily schedule for each actor" (Lu, 2022, p. 9), "and in order to clear the actors' memories, each of them is given a special potion before they go to sleep" (Lu, 2022, p. 10). Therefore, the memories of all the actors were cleared by the next day. Sun was not yet a formal actor and thus became the only one in the theater who was not required to drink the potion. The special treatment of him by the theater also implied the hidden connection between the upper leadership of the theater and the elders of Sun's family.

So the family space and the workspace have converged. Thus, Sun's identity issue and the issue of his biological father had become the key problems for him to solve in these two spaces. The family punished Sun in the form of a stage play in the theater. The reporting method adopted by the theater was in the form of a court trial, where the managers were like judges and the jury members "listen to the memoir report as if listening to a prisoner's self-defense" (Lu, 2022, p. 12). By the arrangement of the theater, "the stage is in the middle of the theater, the bench is at the front, and the jury box is like the audience seats of the Roman Colosseum, higher than the ground and surrounding all around". Sun stood in the center of the stage, confined in a specially prepared cage to give the memoir report. He also believed that "my grandfather and uncle pretend to be outsiders who have no knowledge of the matter, but secretly chew on our pain, all for the supreme performing art" (Lu, 2022, p. 330).

Thirdly, the theater is also a supernatural realm that transcends the laws governing life and death. Excluding Sun, all the actors who emerged in the theater were individuals who had passed away in reality. They lost their memories outside the theater and entered the theater to become actors until their lives came to an end once more. The actors in the theater had also initiated numerous attempts to escape from the theater. "It is a game of escape and pursuit involving all the theater personnel" (Lu, 2022, p. 107), yet few actors managed to succeed. Special escape activities metaphorically suggested the impassability of the boundary between life and death.

Finally, the theater also constitutes a metaphor for the virtual space of the internet. Although there are no computers, smart phones, and other contemporary technological products in *Son of the Darkness*, the ghostly image of the uncle resembles a virtual character on the internet. After the grandfather's demise, the uncle became the new assistant in the theater. At this time, the uncle had not completely passed away. Thus, the one who appeared in the theater was the uncle as a "pathetic phantom of the deceased: his body flickered with a layer of electronic snowflakes" (Lu, 2022, p. 132). The split personality of the uncle in the theater resembled the virtual identity generated by the subject after using the internet. The virtual identity and virtual activities in the network can disclose the hidden true intentions of the subject in reality. The harm that the grandfather, the uncle, and others desired to inflict upon Sun and his mother encountered impediments of familial ethics in reality. However, in the "virtual network world", the darkness and cruelty of human nature lost their constraints.

By virtue of the plot in which Sun undergoes interrogation both in the family space and the theater, the author presents, in an allegorical form, the helpless predicament of the individual when encountering authority and delineates the alienation that the individual encounters during the process of interacting with the group. The "interrogation" Sun underwent in the theater was the punishment imposed on him by his maternal family via the theater. Nevertheless, he showed no slightest sign of resistance to the arrangement of the theater but rather accepted it readily. Li Baorong contends that Lu Xu's works "focus on the emotions of the characters", and the characters "are led by a mysterious emotion or confusion to the very depths of existence" (Li, 2023, p. 66). The yearning for recognition by the theater and the family, along with the sense of shame resulting from an unclear self-identity, compelled Sun to surrender his own freedom and security. The sense of shame was also the crucial emotion that the maternal family of Sun endeavored to veil when they resorted to the theater trial to judge the descendants of unknown origin. "A considerable number of groups will resort to measures such as shame threats and the definition of shame in order to facilitate the establishment of identity". And shame is a kind of "self-awareness" emotion that can "constitute or potentially constitute an important aspect of an individual's emotional life, depending on group standards" (Stearns, 2024, p. 1). His mother's lost of chastity and his identity problem brought ignominy to the family. They fabricated the rumor that the mother "married a monster, ran away from home, and hid in the mountains to fish and hunt" (Lu, 2022, p. 315) to cover up her secret. The grandfather's family did not get along well among themselves. The aunt-in-law was heartless and deceived the grandfather out of the house with a ceremony before his death and abandoned the old man. Several aunts were extremely indifferent after getting married. The grandmother had memory problems and would use sparrows that were killed but not cleaned up to make soup for everyone. Sun's cousin Su Wu also agreed that "the family will not tolerate the slightest bit of rebellion that undermines orthodox dignity", and that the "City theater has strict requirements for actors to adhere to the nature of their roles" (Lu, 2022, p. 314).

In *Son of the Darkness*, Lu Xu constructs Sun's identity through the narratives of multiple characters, endeavors to supplement the completeness of the mother's experience while remaining reticent about the mystery of Sun's identity. This enriches the reading experience of the readers and endows them with diverse possibilities to conjecture about Sun's identity. Beyond his mother, the dying K.T., the lodger at the uncle's house, the cousin Su Wu, and the abbot of the Shamen Temple successively told him the story about his identity. According to the lodger, his mother was flirtatious. The cousin's story intimated that the mother might have been violated by a rapist. K.T.'s story indicated a love triangle among the mother, K.T., and the abbot. And the abbot affirmed that Sun was the descendant of K.T., but when K.T. met Sun on his deathbed, he denied being Sun's biological father. Consequently, Sun's identity became an unresolved enigma in the novel.

Meanwhile, the recollections and reports proffered by Sun himself are not credible. Booth maintains that the reliability of the "same facts" narrated by an authorial spokesperson and by a "dubious character" in the story differs. Hence, readers are required to ascertain whether the narrated content is indeed an objective fact or has been distorted by the subjectivity of the characters. Sun is an unreliable narrator, and there exists a discrepancy between his narrated content and the actual truth. For instance, he once recounted the past incident of his classmate Fu Zidan watching pornographic films and mysteriously disappearing the next day. It was not until the second report within the theater that Sun was identified by Fu Zidan as the traitor who had reported Fu Zidan to the teacher for watching pornographic films, leading to Fu's being compelled to suspend from school. Therefore, the narrative discourse of Sun and other characters in the novel were not necessarily reliable.

3. Biopolitics Space and the Homo Sacer

Sun Shengxi was both an unidentified child within the family and a homo sacer in the framework of biopolitics. The homo sacer embodies a "double exclusion", being both sacred and solemn while concurrently functioning as a victim. "They were not only excluded from mundane law (permitting their killing), but also excluded from divine law (prohibiting their sacrifice)" (Agamben, 2016, p. 28). The sons of the darkness are "those who have never recollected the memory of the womb" (Lu, 2022, p. 112), individuals ignorant of their origins, and in the novel, this refers to Sun Shengxi and K.T. The situation of the son of the darkness in the theater converged with those of the homo sacer. The lack of protection from his father also meant that Sun was not safe in reality. During the birthday of the Bodhisattva Veda, his aunt asked by mother, conducted a ritual, affixing a jade earring and pendant on Sun, hoping that he would "be as pure as moonlight" (Lu, 2022, p. 34) and not be encroached upon by evil entities. The mother's actions signified the special identity of Sun and the potentiality of being harmed or killed within the group. Sun entered the theater to obtain a distinct identity. Nevertheless, due to his exceptional status as the son of the darkness, he became "the first person to enter the theater without a self-defined role" (Lu, 2022, p. 16). So Sun became the first intern at the theater, yet "the theater has never had such a position for an intern" (Lu, 2022, p. 8). Consequently, Sun was affiliated

with the theater but never accepted by it. Nonetheless, the theater persistently exerted pressure on him and assigned tasks.

The image and circumstances of Sun constituted a metaphor for the marginalized and minority groups in the actuality. No group was inclined to embrace him; conversely, he was perpetually situated in a position of being infringed upon, banished, and judged within those groups. The sacred person is “excluded from religious communities and all forms of political life” (Agamben, 2016, p. 245) and confront violence, which “cannot be categorized as sacrifice, nor as murder, nor as the execution of a death sentence, nor as an act of sacrilege” (Agamben, 2016, p. 117). In the theater, Sun was confined within a cage on the stage to present a report, “appearing as a prisoner” (Lu, 2022, p. 12). During the celebration of the birthday of the Weituo Bodhisattva, he entered the parade and was nearly taken away as a “sacrificial offering”: “Suddenly, a pair of hands lifted me and placed me at the feet of the Weituo Bodhisattva, as if treating me as the Guanyin Boy. I endeavored to find a foothold and firmly grasped the bottom of the vajra” (Lu, 2022, p. 30). It was not until the advent of Uncle Yi De, a retired soldier holding a gun and “moving sinuously through the smoke” (Lu, 2022, p. 29), that Sun was rescued. On Deer Island, when he and his mother were assisting in moving a mirror, he discovered that “there was no reflection of myself in the mirror; the light passed directly through my body”. The conversation between Uncle Yi De and Teacher Zhang regarding images can account for the issue of him. “On the battlefield, you are a gun, a grenade, a shadow without a physical entity” (Lu, 2022, p. 55). As the homo sacer and the son of the darkness, Sun was excluded from the groups, his life was discarded, and became an object of capture.

The cruelty and violence manifested by the space of biopolitics are mirrored in the Mirror Village. In the Mirror Village of Deer Island, there existed a story about the conflict between people of Mirror Village and the monkey. Villagers have been using mirrors as walls since ancient time, because they were “concerned that they might degenerate into monkeys one day, lacking confidence in whether they were human beings or not, and had to constantly use mirrors to confirm that their appearance was that of a human being” (Lu, 2022, p. 68). Subsequently, a monkey that firmly believed it was a human came to the Mirror Village. After looking in the mirror and discovering that it looked different from the villagers it saw, it demanded the villagers to dismantle the mirrors. From then on, villagers and monkeys became adversaries, and the number of mirror walls multiplied exponentially. The village provided the answer of whether Sun is human or monkey. Through the image in the mirror, he confirmed that he was a human being.

The Mirror Village disclosed the potential for identity transformation between ordinary members and homo sacer within the biopolitical space. “What unites the community is the supreme prohibition that can transform everyone into a ‘homo sacer’ at any moment” (Agamben, 2016, p. 37). The Mirror Village ostensibly constituted a space that accommodate all individuals and bestows equal status upon all its members. Nevertheless, Mirror Village also possessed the authority to convert individuals with distinctive traits into undifferentiated members, depriving them of their freedom and extinguishing

their individuality. Members sharing memories in the Mirror Village took pride in their communal life: “Here, there is no crime, no suffering, and no diverse personalities. To safeguard the honor of the community, everyone behaves with caution. If there are dreams or memories not shared, they need to be reported and registered for elimination as contraband” (Lu, 2022, p. 81). When someone mistook Sun for a resident of Mirror Village, he was overjoyed. The cost of becoming a Mirror Village’s resident was soon revealed. After achieving memory sharing, the appearances of Mirror Villagers became increasingly alike. There was no privacy or individuality within Mirror Village. Only in the reading club could the members return to their independent individual identities. But the host of the reading club happened to be Sun’s grandfather. Therefore, if Sun become a villager, he would still rely on his grandfather to attain independence and freedom. So the space of Mirror Village, the theater and the space of family will converge. At last, Sun leaved the Mirror Village.

Lu Xu utilizes the art of transformation to depict the identity perplexity of the son of the Darkness and the survival predicament of homo sacer, expressing the individual’s intention of resistance in the face of potent forces. Classmate Fu Zidan and the proprietor of the Imperial Hotel, K.T., bore the same equivocal identity as Sun Shengxi, “being incorporated in the mode of being excluded”. They presented to Sun Shengxi an outlet for the sacred person: metamorphosis. Agamben contends that the space of biopolitics “operates through exclusion; it differentiates those who are not yet human from humanity itself, namely, the animalization of human beings, distinguishing the non-human from humans: anthropoids” (Agamben, 2019, p. 45). Transformation constitutes a common artistic form in Lu Xu’s novels, typically manifested as the transition from human to non-human entities. The plot setting of transformation also establishes a connection between Lu Xu’s works and Kafka’s novels. Gregor in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* is regarded as “an image of a ‘minority’ radical life”. “Nevertheless, this image also implies that a ‘minority’ life wandering in openness has lost its pre-determined human form” (Agamben, 2019, p. 26). The characters undergoing transformation in Lu Xu’s *Son of the Darkness* and other works bear similarities to Gregor, all demonstrating the alienation of marginalized and insignificant individuals.

Transformation constitutes a desperate measure and survival tactic adopted by the weak when confronted with potent forces. The transformation of humans into animals “represents vulnerable groups, or those suppressed, prohibited, and rebellious” (Deleuze, Guattari, 2010, p. 348). In *Son of the Darkness*, Fu Zidan was the individual ostracized by other students. Sun regarded Fu as “aloof, with unconventional tastes, being the type of person who is the least sociable and at the lowest rung of society” (Lu, 2022, p. 64). Fu was assigned the nickname “Fu Toad” by his classmates. In the novel, toads with hideous appearances and lotus-shaped skin were all designated as “Fu Toad”, and they served as the subjects of experiments conducted by the school and the theater, being slain. In the City Theater, Sun witnessed that Fu had transformed into a toad. And Fu declared: “After being expelled from school, on my way home, I transformed into a toad. This was everyone’s wish, and it was also my parents’ wish. I originally thought that by complying with them, I could continue to live, but you did

not consider sparing me”. “You trampled me flat. After my death, I came to this theater, spending all day performing as a frog in the prop bushes beside the stage, croaking until my throat was parched” (Lu, 2022, p. 134). Eventually, Fu Zidan, who had transformed into a toad, believed that Sun was the one who exposed his viewing of pornographic films, resulting in his expulsion from school. The toad was unable to suppress the rage in its heart. Its belly swelled increasingly until it burst with a bang. The transformation into a toad rendered Fu’s life increasingly fragile, becoming an object to be slaughtered by others. After emerging from the theater, actor Ma Mo subsequently developed mental disorders, shouting, “all those unnamed shall be put to death” (Lu, 2022, p. 231), and capturing animals to practice killing. Animals were associated with the transformed sacred individuals. The transformation of Fu and the insanity of Ma Mo both pointed to the supreme power represented by the theater, “The state can be declared in a state of emergency (state of exception) by the sovereign at any time, and in this state, ‘human rights’ are suspended” (Agamben, 2019, p. 37).

In *Son of the Darkness*, the transformation plot symbolizes the ambiguity of the boundary between humans and non-humans under the governance of supreme power and the potentiality for mutual transformation between humans and non-humans in the biopolitical domain, indicating the issue of the deprivation of the life power of the sacred human subjects. Agamben pointed out in his analysis of the tragic conditions of Jews during World War II that “Jews were killed, neither constituting a capital offense nor regarded as a sacrificial offering, but merely as the realization of a pure ‘ability to be killed’ inherent in Jews” (Agamben, 2019, p. 159). The owner of the Empire Hotel, K.T., who was also a son of the darkness, underwent transformation as well. When Sun met him for the first time, he had transformed into a salamander. The nymph attending to K.T. explained that “To alleviate human suffering, he would transform into other animals to have a serene night” (Lu, 2022, p. 207). K.T. was capable of transforming into multiple forms, “disintegrating into a series of diverse elements, such as mandrills, insects, sculptures, and hotels, floating in the surrounding air” (Lu, 2022, p. 253). He was born in the darkness of the City Theater. The staff gave him the name “anzi” (the son of the darkness) and discovered that “he would never feel hungry, nor cry, nor fall ill” (Lu, 2022, p. 260). Foucault noted that “biopower is exerted through intervention in people’s life forms to strive for ‘how to make you live’. This power not only possesses oppressive and negative forces, such as destruction, deprivation, limitation, and obstruction, but also has productive and affirmative forces, exercising the ‘life management’ functions of standardization and regulation” (Agamben, 2016, p. 15). The City Theater, in the name of art, interrupted the treatment of K.T.’s eyes. Eventually, K.T. was blind and suffered from severe solar dermatitis, “Once exposed to sunlight, even if it is reflected by a mirror, the skin would rapidly fester” (Lu, 2022, p. 260). Later, K.T. and other actors rebelled and escaped from the theater, establishing the Empire Hotel, a space of utopia, to provide a refuge for artists.

4. Utopia and Reconstruction of Subject Identity

The Utopian space constitutes a liberated realm replete with the unknown and alterations. The transformations transpiring within it manifest the author's affirmation and pursuit of freedom and art. Lu Xu asserted that "Sun Shengxi was born in the dark void and was confined to the theater throughout his life. There is no place for him in this world. He envies the inherent freedom of all outsiders". "The sole means to extricate himself from this jealousy and malice that consumes the soul is to create another artistic world for himself, providing a refuge for his soul and body" (Lu, 2023, p. 82). Sun must liberate himself from the control exerted by the biopolitical space upon him and seek a suitable living space for himself. Utopia is in opposition to the realm of biopolitics, within which the metamorphoses that occur constitute the resistant manifestations of the weak and the marginalized against the supreme power.

In the Empire Hotel, the subject engaged in the exploration of art and life in the form of transformation and rebelled against the violence of the City Theater. The City Theater stipulated the immutability of the roles and identities of its members: "An actor must maintain the same role and setting throughout his life" (Lu, 2022, p. 177). For K.T. and Sun Shengxi, whose identity sources were ambiguous and whose roles in the theater could not be clearly delineated, the theater adopted a cruel means of suppression and abuse. The Empire Hotel was the new habitat founded by the former City Theater actor K.T. "It is a gathering place for artists, featuring galleries, memorial halls, cafes, hotels, etc., replete with cultural ambience" (Lu, 2022, p. 165). The Empire Hotel was a oppression-free space where the people residing there do not need food, and even the air can satisfy hunger. Sun and his mother were provided with a complimentary room in the Empire Hotel, where the bed was extremely comfortable, the lighting was soft, and the walls were decorated with paintings of various styles. The stay was free, but anyone who desired to stay here, even for just one night, must left their works at the hotel. How long a person stayed at the hotel depended solely on their personal moral conscience, as no staff member would evict them.

Transformation is the playful resistance of habitat members against the atrocities in the space of biopolitics. "Play is a purely aimless means" (Agamben, 2016, p. 68). Nevertheless, "play is not merely a specific defiling operation on the sacred domain; rather, it is also a defiling of the contemporary legal, political, and economic domains: play completely invalidates the sacred remnants inherent in the current human community" (Agamben, 2016, p. 69). In the Empire Hotel, the occupants of the habitat savoured the freedom derived from metamorphosis. "You will never encounter the same person twice", because "his thoughts and life status change every second", and "within a certain period, a person maintains one identity and only switches to another when the opportune moment arrives". Someone in the habitat was a male bartender in a diner yesterday, became an actress today, and might be a painter tomorrow. The form of human beings undergoes alterations, and their thoughts can also change at any time. The subject relishes autonomy and the freedom of life during the process of change. When Sun Shengxi first met Yu, Yu was thinking of committing suicide. By the time they met again, Yu had no

intention of taking his own life.

The buildings and diverse objects within the habitat were also capable of modifying their forms at will, which instantiates the freedom of will relished by the subjects within the space. There existed a house in the habitat that was a diner yesterday, a toilet today, and a reading room tomorrow. The two-story-tall iron statue of the mandrill named “The Thinker” on the site was transmuted into a heap of randomly assembled steel bars the next day. Furthermore, the bread in the bakery underwent transformation, thereby various items that had no connection with bread emerge in the store, such as chairs, books, knives, leaves, and toads. They were all transmuted from bread. Once, a murderer purchased a knife in the bakery, but when committing the crime, the knife reverted to bread. The owner of the bakery expounded the transformation of the bread: “Bread is neutral. It did not transform back because of the victim's life. It is a matter of transformation probability” (Lu, 2022, p. 182). Nevertheless, the significance of bread was conferred by humans, and humans could also consume the objects transformed from bread. Whether the body accept it or not was an internal matter. Therefore, in the utopian space, the subject indulged in both the freedom of transformation and the freedom of thought.

The Utopian space had a pronounced positive influence on Sun's process of self-exploration. “Although Utopia does not express desires, it impels people to strive to understand what is necessary for human self-actualization” (Levitas, 2018, p. 181). In Utopia, the subject's perception of self-identity and belonging became more multifaceted. Transformation aided the subject in liberating from the unidimensional constraints, shattering the dichotomous identity setting of the municipal theater, enriching the subject's cognitive modalities, and facilitating the subject to construct more diverse and three-dimensional relationships. The art of transformation enabled the subject to regain the freedom of imagination and assisted the subject in objectively contemplating the relationship between the self and the political space of life. “Imagination is far from leading to a totalitarian society; conversely, it poses a threat to totalitarian society” (Jacoby, 2007, p. 31). After entering the Utopian Empire Hotel, Sun became cognizant that “a person does not have to wait until meeting the national leaders to know who he is, what his status is in this society, and what he should do, because society has its own operational mechanism, and people also have an automatic process of self-recognition” (Lu, 2022, p. 180). Thus, neither the identity of his biological father nor whether he was the son of a mandrill constituted a prerequisite for determining how he should survive in the world and his future destiny. He could create a new personal life for himself and resisted the discipline imposed by the theater and the family. After enjoying free accommodation at the Empire Hotel, Sun developed the intention of working and vowed to become a “person of moral conscience” and “dedicate the corresponding labor to the hotel” (Lu, 2022, p. 180). His mother also accepted the job of cleaning whale bones arranged by the hotel owner. They embarked on a new life through labor and redefined themselves and their relationships with others.

The novel also affirms the value and significance of emotions and desires for the subject in the process of self-construction through the protagonist's unrestricted exploration in the utopian space. "The essence of utopia seemingly resides in desire—the aspiration for a distinctive and superior mode of existence" (Levitas, 2018, p. 265). The City Theater mandated that its members possess fixed identities and roles, thereby constraining the possibility for members to relish emotional freedom. Sun Shengxi's mother, who was an actress portraying the Queen in Oedipus Rex before leaving the theater, developed romantic involvements with K.T., who played Oedipus, and the actor playing the king due to the role requirements. This gave rise to a subsequent tragedy: "Although they had no substantive blood relationship, strictly adhering to the discipline of the role had already instilled the shame of violating human ethics into her soul", and she "utterly deteriorated in the inferno of torment and desire" (Lu, 2022, p. 265). Trapped in a quandary, the mother opted to consume a large quantity of medicine to lose her memory. The novel validates the significance of desire for self-construction, and the protagonist acquires self-awareness through the experience of desire. "Desire is the essence of human beings" (Wang, 2022, p. 8), and human beings are "an ever-varying emotional existence" (Wang, 2022, p. 9). Sun had his first sexual experience in the Imperial Hotel. "The 'selflessness' that has long dominated my spiritual world has for the first time given way to the quietly emerging desire", "I sensed my own existence. Even if it was like an illusion, it emerged more directly from my body than an illusion" (Lu, 2022, p. 193). As a human being, his subjectivity is increasingly complete and distinct, thereby facilitating his self-awareness and enabling him to make appropriate choices.

Utopia and dystopia are not in an entirely antithetical relationship. *Son of the Darkness* also demonstrates the potential transformation of the Utopian Empire Hotel into a dystopia, reflecting Lu Xu's profound cogitation on the human living environment. "Dystopia is more perceived as a developed form of Utopia rather than a deteriorated one. It is generally asserted that dystopia is not the antithesis of Utopia but rather the logical and consummate realization of Utopia" (Jacoby, 2007, p. 10). Sun subsequently detected that the people in the Empire Hotel were encompassed by another kind of pain: "They are perpetually in a state of intense reflection. Seeking pleasure or indulging in dissipation day and night does not alleviate this state in the slightest" (Lu, 2022, p. 178). The nightmare experience engendered by the bird eggs found in the hotel room metaphorically intimated the perils of excessive freedom and unrestrained indulgence in passions. He and his mother cooked and consumed the unidentified bird eggs. At night, he abruptly realized, "artists could transmute into birds. What we ate were either the descendants of art or the products of debauchery". In a state of panic, he smashed the bird eggs and discovered that "those eggs, after several hours of incubation, had hatched into chicks. They had human-like faces and crawled with ugly, hairless limbs" (Lu, 2022, p. 209). The strange encounter incited Sun's aversion towards the habitat and initiated his objective contemplation of the possible negative consequences for the individual resulting from excessive indulgence in passions and disregard for social order.

Sun Shengxi's ultimate choice and destination mirror the author's endeavor to forge a neutral and balanced stance between utopia and dystopia. "On the one hand, art utopia enjoins people to criticize the imperfections of reality and proffers novel conceptions for the future of human society"; yet, on the other hand, "the pursuit of ideals in art utopia sometimes deviates from the right path, and this pursuit of a perfect world often sacrifices the human scale, judging, rebelling against, and fleeing from reality with a 'non-human' perfectionist criterion" (Fan, 2022, p. 71). The proprietor of the Imperial Hotel, the covert agent K.T., desired that Sun Shengxi "inherit the legacy of darkness and freedom" (Lu, 2022, p. 273) before his decease. K.T. opined that "humans have lost hope. This is an era that demands a deity to balance human degeneracy" (Lu, 2022, p. 274). He aspired to erect a statue of Vairocana Bodhisattva on Mount Xumi. The City Theater also asked Sun to be a spy for them to monitor the hotel. Sun conducted himself in accordance with his own volition during his actions and became a double agent for both the City Theater and the Imperial Hotel. He originally intended to construct and dismantle the statue of Vairocana Bodhisattva in order to alleviate the pressure of his paternal identity and self-identity, eliminating the "supreme, god-like colossal shadow that has long occupied the upper part of the mind" (Lu, 2022, p. 315). However, upon beholding the statue of the Bodhisattva, he felt love and compassion and apprehended that the statue "manifested fragile beauty in every aspect" (Lu, 2022, p. 347). Consequently, in the end, Sun gave up removing statues and stopped seeking the approval of theatres and hotels, and came to the railway side and awaited a train to convey him away from Gauss District to the "place of exile", the "gathering place of those who have self-abandoned" (Lu, 2022, p. 11)—the ruins of the Night Wanderers. Sun Shengxi's choice was not an indication of self-abandonment. His choice was replete with self-determination and successfully extricated himself from the reliance on domains such as the City Theater and the Imperial Hotel to define his existence and value, attaining the integrity of his self-subject in nihilism.

5. Conclusion

Lu Xu explores Sun Shengxi's identities in the family space, the space of biopolitics, and the utopia to contemplate the survival stress and anxiety that individuals encounter in the community in the real world. He critiques the harm imposed on individuals by the supreme power and also reflects upon the utopia representing freedom and unrestraint. The son of the darkness and the son of the mandrill not only function as the identities of characters in the novel but also constitute a metaphor for humans in reality. Sun Shengxi's identity exploration in the *Son of the Darkness* also symbolizes human beings' reflection on their own identities, relationships with others, and social connections. The imagery in the *Son of the Darkness* is peculiar and odd, but the connection between the novel and the real world has been acknowledged by the author himself. Among them, the statue of Vairocana Bodhisattva that Sun Shengxi erected on Mount Xumi originated from a Guan Gong statue that was demolished in Zhaoqing City in reality. Thus, *Son of the Darkness* is also a work that focuses on the real ecological situation in the South China. The imagery of islands, toads, the birth of Bodhisattva, and other elements rich in

southern characteristics jointly construct a literary space belonging to the New Southern.

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