

Analysis of Swearing in the Novel 《活着 Huózhe》 By 余华 Yu Hua

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ABSTRACT

Swearing represents a significant yet underexplored aspect of Chinese literary discourse, particularly in contemporary novels that reflect social realities and cultural transformations. This linguistic phenomenon becomes especially prominent in literature depicting periods of social upheaval, where characters express intense emotions through various forms of profane language. This study examines the types, forms, and functions of cursing contained in the novel entitled 《活着 Huózhe》 by Yu Hua (1992). The purpose of this study was to analyze cursing based on the types and forms of cursing according to the theory of Wijana (2004). Then, in classifying curse words based on the function of cursing, the researcher refers to the theory of Andersson and Trudgill (1990) and the theory of Shi Wei and Luo Xiao Nan (2009). This study uses a qualitative descriptive analysis method with a structural textual approach and documentation techniques. The results showed: first, the types of swearing in this novel consist of five categories, namely circumstances, animals, objects, body parts, kinship, and professions; second, there are three kinds of swear words: words, phrases, and clauses; third, there are six kinds of swearing functions, namely expletive/emotional, abusive/warning, humor, auxiliary, attitude, and social. This study contributes to both Chinese linguistics and literary criticism by providing empirical evidence for the systematic use of profane language in contemporary Chinese fiction, offering insights for language educators, translators, and scholars of Chinese literature and culture.

KEYWORDS Novel, chinese cursing function, types of Chinese cursing, Chinese cursing forms



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INTRODUCTION

Chinese literary works have a history spanning over 3,000 years and have undergone significant development since the 20th century. Novels are popular literary forms, enjoyed by many and wielding wide influence. They explore various aspects of human life, including communication with others, the environment, oneself, and even God. Al Ma'ruf & Nugrahani (2017) add that novels arise from the author's conversations, thoughts, and reactions to life and environment. Chinese novels existed during the era of classical Chinese literature and evolved through various dynasties, beginning in the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD). This continued through the Song dynasty (960–1279), known for fairy tale manuscripts crafted by its storytellers; then the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 AD), and subsequently the Qing dynasty (1644–1912 AD). Classical Chinese literature then transitioned in 1949 into a new era, marking the contemporary world of Chinese literature. The development of Chinese literature in this contemporary era followed the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1977) (Listiana, 2017). During this period, Chinese writers produced various genres that enriched Chinese literature. The richness of Chinese literature eventually reached the Indonesian archipelago, with many

Chinese literary works translated into Indonesian (Sun, 2023; Xu, 2022; Zhang, 2023; Zhao, 2023).

Contemporary Chinese literary works (from 1996 to the present) are more detailed and closely connected to everyday life, avoiding rigidity (Husnah, 2014). One prominent Chinese novelist, Mo Yan, received the Nobel Prize in Literature on October 11, 2012. A notable example of Chinese literature portraying daily life is the novel 《活着 *Huózhe*》 by Yu Hua. Yu Hua's novel is significant and has been translated into many languages. The period of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, roughly from 1940 to 1970, was characterized by Mao Zedong's policies, during which famine and oppression were prevalent. Consequently, swearing was often found in Chinese society at that time (Wibowo, 2015).

This novel narrates the life of a man named 《福贵》 *Fu Gui*. Fu Gui was the son of a wealthy, arrogant landlord who was addicted to gambling and hired many prostitutes to satisfy his lust. His ignorance in managing his parents' wealth led to his downfall into poverty, instantly transforming his life. His mother died waiting for her son, who never returned home amid the war between nationalists and communists. Further hardship is seen in the illness of his daughter Fengxia, whose untreated fever resulted in her becoming mute. Besides Fu Gui, other characters include Jiazhen (his wife), Fu Gui's father and mother, Fengxia (his daughter), Youqing (his son), Long Er, Wan Erxi, Squad Leader, Chungsheng, Company Commander, and others (Chen, 2017; Li, 2019; Liu, 2021; Wang, 2020; Wibowo, 2015).

Yu Hua's novel *Living Huózhe* contains abundant swearing as a form of social communication. In line with this, Nurdyanto (2018) argues that swear words serve as effective affective expressions at the onset of communication. In other words, swearing arises as a reaction to a person or event that prompts a strong emotional response, expressed through swearing (Husnah, 2014; Nurdyanto, 2018; Zhang, 2016). Additionally, because swearing is more related to interpersonal relationships than to mere impropriety, the language tends to involve terms considered inappropriate. In Chinese culture, 《刘宏岩》 *Liu Hong Yan* and 《申屠菁》 *Shen Tu Jing* (in Ningsih, 2019) note that swear words are not only outlets for anger but can also increase intimacy in relationships. Swearing in literary works strengthens meaning and expresses characters' emotions (Ningsih, 2019). This makes the analysis of swearing in the novel 《*Living Huózhe*》 by Yu Hua compelling, especially when examining types, forms, and functions of swearing, given the distinct linguistic characteristics of Mandarin and Indonesian. Moreover, swearing is generally tied to the cultural context of the speaker, as observed by Wijana & Rohmadi (2013).

The analysis of swearing in Chinese literature represents a critical yet understudied field in contemporary linguistic and literary scholarship. While profane language serves as a significant communicative tool reflecting social realities, cultural tensions, and character psychology, systematic studies of the linguistic structures and functions of swearing in contemporary Chinese fiction remain scarce. This research gap is particularly pressing when considering the cultural and historical significance of novels like Yu Hua's 《活着 *Huózhe*》, which portrays the traumatic experiences of Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution (1940–1970). The prevalence of swear speech during this turbulent era (Wibowo, 2015) necessitates academic inquiry into its literary functions.

Existing scholarship on Chinese swearing has predominantly focused on contemporary spoken language or general linguistic phenomena, with limited attention to literary applications. While Nurdyanto (2018) established swearing as an effective affective communication tool, and Liu Hong Yan and Shen Tu Jing (in Ningsih, 2019) demonstrated that Chinese swearing can enhance interpersonal intimacy beyond mere emotional release, comprehensive analyses of swearing in specific literary works remain underdeveloped. Additionally, cross-linguistic studies comparing Chinese and Indonesian swearing patterns, especially in literary contexts, have received inadequate attention, despite fundamental linguistic differences between Mandarin and Indonesian (Wijana & Rohmadi, 2013).

This study offers the first systematic linguistic analysis of swearing in Yu Hua's 《活着 *Huózhe*》, employing a comprehensive theoretical framework integrating multiple analytical approaches. Its novelty lies in applying established linguistic theories (Wijana, 2004; Andersson & Trudgill, 1990; Shi Wei & Luo Xiao Nan, 2009) to examine Chinese literary swearing from typological, morphological, and functional perspectives. Unlike previous studies treating swearing as peripheral, this research positions swear words as central literary devices revealing character development, social dynamics, and cultural values within the narrative.

The primary objectives include: (1) identifying and classifying types of swearing in Yu Hua's novel based on referential categories; (2) analyzing morphological structures of curse expressions, ranging from single words to complex clauses; (3) examining functional applications of swearing in various communicative contexts; and (4) contributing to a broader understanding of how profane language operates as a literary device in contemporary Chinese fiction. The research benefits multiple stakeholder groups: language educators gain insights into informal Chinese linguistic patterns, literary scholars obtain empirical data on stylistic devices in contemporary Chinese fiction, translators acquire systematic analyses for cross-cultural adaptation, and students of Chinese language and culture develop deeper understanding of contextual language use in authentic literary settings.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed qualitative research with a textual structural approach (Ali, 2018) to identify the types, forms, and functions of swearing. This approach was chosen because, according to Ali (2018), literary works follow their own language structure rules, so analysis must begin with their structural study. Swear speech in the research text and the process of translation reflect changes in language structure.

The primary data source was the Chinese-language novel 《活着 *Huózhe*》 by Yu Hua. Data collection involved documentation techniques with the following steps: (1) reading and understanding the entire novel repeatedly, (2) marking suspected swear words based on the theoretical framework, and (3) identifying and classifying swear words as research data.

After data collection, classification of swear speech types and forms followed Wijana's (2004) theory. For classifying the functions of swearing, the study referred to Andersson and Trudgill (1990) and Shi Wei 《石神》 and Luo Xiao Nan 《罗晓南》 (2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the answers to the research problem are explained: the type, form, and function of swearing contained in the novel 《活着》 by Yu Hua. The results of the study are described in the following presentation.

Types of Curses

Wijana (2004) classifies the types of swearing seen from its references into seven types. However, there are only six types of swear words in the novel according to Wijana, namely state, animals, objects, kinship, profession, and body parts.

State

Data 1

BSu: "我要刚了你" *Wǒ yào guǎ le nǐ* (p.23, par.3, kal.2).

Meaning: "Here I **cut** you!"

Context: this sentence is a sentence spoken by Fu Gui's father who is insulting his son (Fu Gui), because he has to pay all his son's gambling debts to Long Er, which makes his family fall into poverty. The word 刚 *guǎ* which means 'to cut' is classified as a type of situation related to an unpleasant event because in this context Fu Gui's father wanted to cut off parts of Fu Gui's body. Thus, if someone experiences an event like this, it will certainly be an unpleasant event for him.

Data 2

BSu: "...阉割了你." ... *Yān le nǐ* (p.23, par.3, p.2).

Meaning: "...**slaughter** you!"

Context: recounting the same event at number one. There is a swear word 阉 *yān* which means 'slaughter'. As is well known, the word 'slaughter' in Indonesian is used for animals, not for humans. So this word swear is classified as a type of situation related to unpleasant events experienced by humans. This curse was spoken in a very angry state.

Animal

BSu: "我爸爸在打嗝，声音听起来就像青蛙的叫声". *Wǒ diē dǎzhe bǎogé, nà shēngxiǎng hé qīngwā jiàohuàn chàbùduō* (p.7, par.1, kal.8).

Meaning: "My father always burped, his voice was no different from **a toad**."

Context: this sentence is a sentence that Fu Gui said indirectly to describe his father's voice while burping. There is a swear word using the name of the animal as a reference, namely 青

蛙 *qīngwā* which means 'frog'. The use of the word to mock his father's voice while burping is the same as the sound of a toad.

Objects

BSu: "我爸爸年纪大了, 而且他也在变老". *Wǒ diē niánjì dàle, shǐ yě gēnzhe lǎo le* (p.7, par.2, kal.2).

Meaning: "My father is old, **his feces** are also old."

Context: this sentence is a sentence spoken by Fu Gui to his father indirectly. This sentence tells how difficult it is for Father Fu Gui to defecate because of his very old age. The swear word 屎 *shǐ* which means 'human excrement' is something disgusting and smelly.

Kinship

BSu: "我是他的儿子". *Wǒ shì tā de niè zǐ* (p.7, par.5, kal.1).

Meaning: "I'm the **unlucky child**."

Context: this sentence is a sentence that Fu Gui spoke to himself, because he was the cause of the Xu family's fall into poverty. The word 孽子 *niè zǐ* which means 'unlucky child' or 'sinful child' is used to refer to Fu Gui, and is classified as a type of kinship curse because there is the word 子 *zǐ* which is the origin of the word anak *háizi* which means child. In this type of swearing, the word 'child' is classified as a kinship term.

Profession

BSu: "妓女嘟囔着, 把我带到了城市里". *Nà jìnyǚ dū dūnong hot bèi zhe wǒ wǎng chéngmen* (p.11, par.5, kal.1)

Meaning: "**The prostitute** was grumbling and not wanting to be silent."

Context: this sentence is the sentence that Father Fu Gui spoke to Fu Gui directly. In this context, it tells Fu Gui's father's anger towards Fu Gui because Fu Gui has made his family's wealth disappear, just to pay off gambling debts. The word swear 王八蛋 *wángbā dàn* which means 'bastard' is classified as a type of swearing profession as in the theory of Wijana (2004).

Body Parts

BSu: 我说: "你的屁股又痒了吗?" *Wǒ shuō, "nǐ pìgu yòu yǎng la* (p.73, par.3, kal.5).

Meaning: "**Your buttocks are itching again?**"

Context: this sentence is the sentence spoken by Fu Gui to his son (Youqing). In this context, Youqing said that she didn't want to go to school because her brother (Fengxia) went to work and left home. Seeing Youqing like that made Fu Gui angry at him. The word 屁股 *pìgu* which means 'buttocks'.

Curse Form

Wijana (2004) divides three forms of swearing in Indonesian, including swearing in the form of words, swearing in the form of phrases and swearing in the form of clauses.

Swear Words

Data 1

青蛙 *qīngwā* is a noun category word.

The word translates to 'frog' which is also a noun category.

Data 2

宰 *zǎi* is a verb category.

The word translates to 'kill' which is also a verb category.

Data 3

死 *sǐ* is an ajektiva word.

The word translates to 'dead' which is also categorized as an ajectic.

Swearing in the form of a phrase

Data 1

风骚的女人 *fēngsāo de nǚrén* is a nominative category phrase.

The word translates to 'binal woman' which is also a noun category.

Data 2

馋嘴的猫 *chánzuǐ de māo* is a noun category phrase.

The word translates to 'hungry cat' which is also categorized as Nomina

Data 3

胖胖的妓女 *pàng pàng jì nǚ* is a noun category phrase.

The word translates to 'fat whore' which is also categorized as nominal.

Swearing in the form of a clause

Data 1

你他娘的 *nǐ tā niáng de*.

Consists of 你 *nǐ* 'kamu' as the subject, and 他娘的 *tā niáng de* 'mothernya' as the object.

Data 2

I'll cut off your feet 我将砍断你的双脚 *wǒ jiù bǎ nǐ de jiǎo kǎn diào*.

Consists of 我 *wǒ* 'saya' as the subject, 把 *bǎ* as 'particle 把' and 您的脚砍掉 *de jiǎo kǎn diào* 'cut your legs' as a predicate

Curse Function

The functions of swearing based on the theory of Andersson and Trudgill (1990) and the theory of Shi Wei 《石翀》 and Luo Xiao Nan 《罗晓南》 (2009) found in this study are 1) *expletive/emotional* function, 2) *abusive/warning*, 3) *humor*, 4) *auxiliary*, 5) *attitude*, and 6) *social*.

Expletive/emotion

This function is aimed at expressing a person's expression or emotion.

BSu: 我是我们徐家的失败者. *Wǒ shì wǒmen xú jiā de bàijiāzi* (p.7, par.5, kal.1).

Meaning: I am the son of the destroyer of the Xu family.

Context: tell Fu Gui's regret for himself for making his family fall into poverty. The function of the swear words spoken by Fu Gui in this sentence is to vent his expression or emotion in the form of deep regret so much that he dubbed himself as 'the son of the family destroyer'.

Abusive/warning

This function is aimed at others and is used to insult others.

BSu: 当我走路时, 我把它夹在裆部, 就像一个蒸馒头. *Zǒulù shí kùdāng lǐ xiàng shì jiāle gè mántou shì de yī piē yī piē* (p.9, par.1, kal.5).

Meaning: If he walks he is like pinning a bun in his pants

Context: this sentence is a sentence that Fu Gui said indirectly towards Jiazhen. This sentence tells the time when Jiazhen was pregnant with Youqing. The word *makian* 馒头 *mántou* which means 'mantau' is a type of bread similar to a bun. The word is used to describe the condition of Jiazhen's body when walking as if he is clamping the monitor. From this context, it can be seen that Fu Gui mocked the way his pregnant wife walked.

Humour

This function is intended to make a swear speech sound funnier, not intended to insult someone.

BSu: 我爸爸在打嗝, 声音听起来就像青蛙的叫声. *Wǒ diē dǎzhe bǎogé, nà shēngxiǎng hé qīngwā jiàohuàn chàbùduō* (p.7, par.1, kal.8).

Meaning: My father was always burping, his voice was no different from a toad

Context: this sentence is a sentence that Fu Gui said indirectly to describe his father's voice while burping. Using the word 'toad' to compare his father's voice of burping enters the humor function because the sound of a toad sounds funny.

Auxiliary

This function is used to insult and refer to other people or certain situations indirectly.

BSu: "男人都是死板的家伙". *Nánrén dōu shì chánzuǐ de mǎo* (p.13, par.3, kal.4).

Meaning: "All the men are just hungry cats."

Context: this sentence is a sentence spoken by Fu Gui's mother to Jiazhen. In this sentence, it is told when Fu Gui's mother is advising Jiazhen to be more patient with Fu Gui's behavior who likes to play with other women. The word 馋嘴的猫 *chánzuǐ de mǎo* which means 'cat's eyes' is pronounced indirectly to refer to a man.

Attitude

This function is to express the feelings of individuals who are influenced by surrounding circumstances such as surprise, astonishment, disappointment, and so on.

BSu: 这就是了, 我迷茫而愚蠢地走出了这座城市. *Wǒ jiù zhèyàng mí mí húhú de zǒu dào le chéng wài* (p.21, par.4, kal.1).

Meaning: This is it, confused and stupid I walked out of the city.

Context: this is a sentence that Fu Gui says to himself, and describes his situation when he has to leave the city for the countryside in search of a new home to live in. There is a swear word 迷迷糊糊 *mí mí húhú* which means 'confused' or 'dazed'. The feeling of confusion and stupidity is classified as an attitude swear function because this word is used to express the feelings experienced by the individual.

Social

This function is used as a benchmark for the relationship between individuals and each other, the closer the individual is, the more often they use swear words in their communication.

BSu: "你的孩子是什么时候回来的?" *Nǐ xiǎozi shénme shíhòu bèi zhuā huilai de* (p.52, par.1, kal.2).

Meaning: "You **little bastard**, when will you be arrested again?"

Context: this sentence is a sentence spoken by Mr. Quan to his comrades while on the battlefield as a fellow soldier. Then, they were reunited during the revolutionary war. The word swear 小子 *xiǎozi* is a social function, because this word does not refer to something derogatory, but as a sign of their familiarity in communicating.

CONCLUSION

Language is essential for human communication, allowing individuals to express their thoughts and emotions; however, disputes sometimes arise that trigger the use of swear words, which convey the speaker's feelings through impolite attitudes. This study found swear speech in categories such as conditions, animals, objects, kinship, professions, and body parts, expressed not only as single words but also as phrases and clauses within the novel. Recognizing swearing as a language variation, the research suggests incorporating it into Chinese language teaching to familiarize learners with informal Mandarin. The study

significantly advances understanding of Chinese literary language by showing swearing as a nuanced communicative tool rather than simple emotional outbursts, emphasizing the complexity of informal language use in contemporary literature. It also offers valuable perspectives for translators and language educators to better address cultural and emotional nuances. However, the research acknowledges areas for further study, such as assessing the levels of rudeness in swearing; future research could explore comparative analyses across different Chinese literary works, historical shifts in swearing patterns, gender differences in curse word usage, and the development of pedagogical strategies for teaching informal language in academic contexts.

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