

A Metaphorical Exploration of the "Fish" and "Cat" Imagery in Jin Yucheng's *Blossoms*

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Abstract. This paper investigates the metaphorical significance of the "fish" and "cat" imagery in Jin Yucheng's acclaimed novel *Blossoms*, with attention to their layered cultural resonances across both Eastern and Western traditions. Through a method of close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how these two motifs function not merely as symbolic figures but as dynamic narrative agents, contributing to both plot progression and character development. As an imagery system marked by contradiction and symbiosis, "fish" and "cat" underpin a concealed narrative framework and serve as metaphors for the existential predicaments faced by individuals amid the turbulence of social change. The interplay of these images articulates the tension between resistance and adaptation within grand historical narratives, and affirms the enduring human impulse toward survival. Jin's work conveys a philosophical depth that reconfigures the dialogue between tradition and modernity, individual and history, through a lens shaped by existential awareness and a cyclical conception of life. In doing so, *Blossoms* offers a compelling interpretive pathway for rethinking the philosophy of life in contemporary Chinese literature.

Keywords: *Blossoms*, imagery of fish and cat, Zhuangzi, existentialism, nonlinear narrative.

1. Introduction

In Jin Yucheng's *Blossoms*, the images of "fish" and "cat" appear as unique and symbolically rich motifs that run consistently through the narrative. Beyond their apparent opposition—embodying life and death respectively—these images carry layered metaphorical meanings that traverse the boundaries of Eastern and Western cultural traditions. Their presence not only enriches the aesthetic complexity of the novel but also enhances its formal innovation in nonlinear narrative structure.

In the tradition of classical Chinese poetry and prose, the image of the fish undergoes a significant transformation—from the fecund symbolism of “you zhan you wei” (“there are bream and sturgeon”) in the *Book of Songs* to the philosophical contemplation of life in Zhuangzi's “Debate on the Joy of Fish.” This trajectory reflects a shift from reproductive worship to a metaphysical view of life. Over time, the fish evolved from a life-affirming symbol to a Daoist metaphor of “mutual generation and transformation,” imbued with ideals of authenticity and freedom. Similarly, the cat—as seen in vernacular novels such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase*—functions both as a projection of human desire and a subtle narrative device that guides the plot beneath the surface. In Western cultural contexts, fish are often laden with religious symbolism, while cats frequently evoke associations with death, fear, and the supernatural, especially within Gothic traditions.

By interweaving classical Chinese imagery with elements of Western Gothic narrative, Jin constructs a modern urban allegory infused with elements of magical realism. The images of "fish" and "cat" transcend singular symbolic interpretation and instead form a dialectical pair that metaphorically expresses the cyclical nature of life and death. Their interdependent opposition reflects a distinct philosophical perspective on existence and temporality, while also tracing the evolution of individual identity amid the spiritual tensions embedded in the city of Shanghai.

This paper adopts a close reading approach to analyze the appearances and narrative functions of the "fish" and "cat" motifs in *Blossoms*, revealing their role in shaping the novel's thematic depth. Although prior scholarship has explored metaphorical imagery in *Blossoms*, few studies have examined the binary structure of "fish and cat" as a dual-symbolic system. This constitutes the central

point of departure for the present study. The dialectical nature of these images endows the characters with hidden existential trajectories, weaving their fates together in subtle and complex ways. More than a regional narrative about Shanghai, *Blossoms* emerges as a philosophical meditation on life's value—one that exceeds its intricate dual-plot structure and gestures toward a universal human concern for meaning and continuity.

2. Fish and Cat: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Literary Imagery

In both Chinese and Western literary traditions, the images of "fish" and "cat" have developed into distinct symbolic systems, each deeply embedded in its respective cultural context. As special literary motifs, they carry rich metaphorical connotations and often evoke surprising resonances across traditions.

In ancient Chinese culture, the fish commonly symbolizes auspiciousness, abundance, and fertility, and was endowed with directional symbolism from its earliest appearances [1]. During the primitive era, the fish was often deified, serving as an object of original worship associated with reproduction and love. Fish-scale motifs are frequently found on ancient pottery, tribal totems, and ritual bronze vessels—symbols not only of ancestral reverence for primordial vitality but also of an early human consciousness of life and an emergent identity of the self.

In the *Book of Songs*, lines such as "In the south are fine fishes; they gather in shoals" (*Nan you jia yu, zheng ran zhao zhi*) depict a scene of aquatic abundance and prosperity. Other lines, such as "The red-tailed bream is in the royal court," elevate the fish from a natural entity to a metaphor for cultural flourishing. Zhuangzi, in his famed "Debate on the Joy of Fish" (*Haoliang zhi bian*), further reinterprets the fish as a philosophical metaphor, reflecting on the universal freedom of life [2]. With romantic flourishes, Zhuangzi portrays fish as emblematic of a Daoist pursuit of authenticity and spontaneity—the ideal of "dwelling with the flow of transformation." When coupled with the ancient mythic notion of immortality, the image of the fish is transfigured into a symbol of metaphysical liberation and ontological truth [3].

The image of the cat in classical Chinese literature is equally multifaceted. In early texts such as the *Book of Rites*, the cat—particularly the wildcat—is depicted as a benevolent creature, appreciated for hunting field mice and serving agrarian society. One passage states: "The noble men of old would welcome cats, for they rid the fields of vermin," highlighting its practical and even moral utility. However, in later vernacular fiction, the cat becomes a more complex symbolic and narrative device, often functioning as a subtle thread that weaves through the storyline [4]. For example, the "tortoiseshell cat" in *The Golden Lotus* (*Jin Ping Mei*) and the wildcat in *The Three Heroes and Five Gallants* hint at themes of conspiracy and carnal desire. Thus, in Chinese fiction, the cat is not only a familiar element of everyday life but also deeply entwined with narrative causality and cultural subtext.

In Western cultural traditions, the fish also carries profound symbolic meaning. In Christianity, the fish represents salvation and divine grace. During periods of persecution, early Christians used the ichthys symbol—a simple fish outline—as a secret sign of faith and hope [5]. By contrast, the cat in Western culture is frequently linked with mysticism and occultism. In ancient Egypt, the cat was revered as a divine guardian; in Roman mythology, it was associated with death and transition [6]. By the Middle Ages, the cat had become a potent symbol of otherworldly forces, often feared as a conduit of dark magic. Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic short story "The Black Cat" epitomizes this transformation: the eponymous cat becomes a harbinger of doom and a vessel for fate and psychological torment, its movements subtly forecasting the plot's descent into madness and moral collapse [7].

As anthropologist Ernst Cassirer once observed, "Man is an animal symbolicum... culture is a symbolic system. [8]" The symbolic divergence between these two cultures stems from fundamentally different epistemological frameworks: the Chinese agrarian civilization emphasizes harmony between humans and nature (*tian ren he yi*), while the Western seafaring worldview often

envision a separation between the divine and the human (*theos-anthropos*). In this light, the fish in Chinese literature celebrates vitality and the quest for existential freedom, whereas in the West, it underscores religious redemption and spiritual endurance. The cat in Chinese fiction often advances the narrative as a suggestive, coded presence; in Western contexts, it becomes a spectral force, charged with the uncanny and the inevitable.

In sum, whether in Chinese or Western literature, both “fish” and “cat” serve as powerful regionalized cultural symbols—each reflecting the fundamental beliefs, fears, and aspirations of the civilizations that birthed them.

3. Symbolic Analysis of “Fish” and “Cat” in Blossoms

3.1. Fish: The Vitality of Life and the Pursuit of Freedom

If the fish in the *Book of Songs* represents fertility and prosperity, and the fish in *Zhuangzi* symbolizes carefree transcendence, then the fish in Jin Yucheng's *Blossoms* inherits both the vitality of classical imagery and extends its metaphorical significance within a modern context. Set against the backdrop of Shanghai from the 1960s to the 1990s, the novel employs a dual-structured narrative: odd-numbered chapters focus on the protagonists' childhoods—A Bao, Betty, and A Po—while even-numbered chapters portray urban life during the economic transformation of the 1980s and 1990s.

The image of the fish appears consistently in the odd-numbered chapters, always linked with Betty and A Po. Its first appearance occurs in Chapter 3, where A Po dreams of her grandmother in Shaoxing—whose body, once remembered in a crystal coffin, is now described as “a fish, stripped to a bare skeleton.” The metaphor emerges from a moment of dreamlike strangeness, combining familial memory and loss with a haunting symbol of mortality. For A Po, the fish evokes unease, while for the children like Betty and A Bao, it becomes an early impression of death and an abstract longing for home.

In Chapter 7, the fish reappears in A Po's dream, this time in a desolate vision of her ancestral grave site in the “Golden Tombs” of her hometown. As the narrative perspective shifts to follow A Po, Betty, and A Bao in their journey across the Jiangsu-Zhejiang-Shanghai region, the storyline begins to resemble a spiritual quest doomed to failure from the outset. This Kafkaesque transformation of identity and memory recasts the fish as a symbol not of generative life but of collective historical trauma and the dislocation of self—an emblem of rootlessness. Narrated through a restrained, third-person “storyteller” voice, the scenes convey profound emotional desolation under the guise of objectivity. As the rootless A Po wanders with young Betty—whose parents are themselves detained and interrogated—they carry with them not only physical displacement, but also a resilient vitality. This tenacity reflects the traditional Chinese cultural ethos of “joy in sorrow,” a form of aesthetic optimism passed down through generations. When Betty calls herself the “Goldfish Princess” and A Po watches a carp leap into a pond, they are both metaphorically affirming life in the face of absence. In this way, the fish becomes a symbol of resistance: a tribute to the enduring spirit of countless “Bettys” caught in the tide of history.

Simultaneously, the fish functions as a kind of private fable. For the innocent Betty, her young life revolves around two recurring images: the goldfish and the piano. If the goldfish represents her intuitive understanding of life—acquired through her grandmother's stories and her own curiosity—then the piano stands for both her aristocratic heritage and her personal belief in beauty and vitality. She once tells A Bao, “Whenever I reach the tenth measure of Clementi's *Sonatina*, the fish appears, and I mark the page.” The first movement of this Classical-era sonatina is known for its lively and childlike spirit, especially in the opening ten bars. From the eleventh bar onward, the music shifts into more lyrical territory [9]. That Betty is continually interrupted by the fish before reaching the eleventh measure suggests that she may never enter this “new world” of maturity and reflection. She remains suspended in a child's world—a symbol of pure memory living only in others' recollections.

The interweaving of the goldfish and the piano casts a translucent veil over the odd-numbered childhood chapters, imbuing them with an ethereal tone. Betty's recurring encounter with the fish

during piano practice becomes, in effect, a personal ritual of memory preservation. In the face of historical trauma and societal repression, this “Betty-like resonance” becomes her way of asserting vitality and preserving familial identity in a world shaped by displacement and forgetting.

If the first moment of spiritual disorientation for A Po and Betty was the loss of their ancestral grave, then the second—and perhaps most devastating—was when their last sacred object, the piano, was confiscated and smashed after their entire family came under political investigation. This act becomes, in a sense, the final straw that crushes their remaining sense of identity. With the abrupt silencing of the piano under the weight of state and ideological violence, every character in the novel is exposed to the fragility of their subjectivity, laid bare through the gaze of the Other in a specific historical moment [10]. *When the piano plays, the fish lives; when the piano falls silent, the fish vanishes.* Though the novel does not explicitly reveal the final fates of A Po and Betty, it repeatedly suggests their transformation into fish—symbols of both transcendence and erasure. Their disappearance is thus not quiet, but rather a symbolic upheaval that disturbs the glamorous surface of the Huangpu River with the resonance of silenced lives in an age where “no one speaks.”

Beyond Betty and A Po, other characters also enrich the symbolic dialectics of the fish. In the novel's expansive narrative, the fish often marks pivotal moments in individual destinies. Another character hidden in the odd-numbered chapters is Shu Hua, a poised young woman who, in Chapter 11, sits beside a dried-up goldfish pond and laments, “Good intentions often lead straight to hell... All I want now is to lock myself in the attic and dream.” Shu Hua's sensibility and melancholia set her apart from her time. If Betty is an innocent sprite untouched by human corruption, Shu Hua is a prophetess cloaked in deathly hues. Her inability to perceive the presence of fish early in the story already signals her detachment from the “roots of life.” Even after Betty's disappearance, Shu Hua, in dreams, refuses to follow the fish, choosing instead to shut herself inside memory. In the end, she is spiritually reunited with “Carp-Grandma” and “Goldfish-Betty” by locking herself into her inner world.

Thus, if Betty's vitality stems from her intrinsic curiosity and affection for life, Shu Hua represents the inverse—a psychic withdrawal in the face of historical muteness. Her inward confinement echoes Jacques Lacan's notion of the “Real”—the inassimilable trauma that resists symbolic integration. Unable to establish coherent selfhood in the context of modern historical violence, Shu Hua embodies the fractured intellectual subjected to the pressures of ideological negation. Yet the novel's portrayal of this secular, rational figure is interwoven with a Daoist myth: the story of “the five-faced fish scales” appears in connection with Shu Hua's narrative. While this may seem abrupt or cryptic at first glance, it gains clarity by the end—when Shu Hua's fate becomes evident. In Chinese mythology, the fish often symbolizes auspiciousness and protection. This recurring motif thus functions as a mythical guardian of fate, suggesting that where there is fish, there is life.

Unlike Betty, Shu Hua does not physically vanish, but her mental collapse draws her into a shared spiritual realm. In her madness, she joins Betty and A Po not in life, but in memory and meaning. This convergence symbolizes a form of poetic resistance: the individual's metaphysical rebellion against historical erasure. Through mythic imagery, Jin binds Shu Hua's story to the larger symbolic thread of the fish, using intertextuality to elevate her descent into madness into a space of potential redemption. In this way, the fish becomes a mythopoetic carrier of collective trauma—a creature that swims between memory and myth, loss and hope.

3.2. Cat: The Gaze of Death and the Symbol of Recurrence

If the cat in both Chinese and Western cultural traditions is a dual-faced symbol—embodying both protection and peril—then the image of the cat in *Blossoms* fuses these traditions into a unique emblem of life and fate. Within the novel, the cat is not merely an animal figure but a signifier of death's imminence and the unfolding of personal tragedies. It becomes a symbolic threshold between life and oblivion.

The cat appears five times in pivotal moments throughout the narrative. Each of these instances—entangled with the image of the fish—marks a major turning point in plot or character fate.

Particularly significant are the first and second appearances, both closely tied to Betty, the “white moonlight” figure in the characters’ memories.

The cat first appears after A Po’s failed journey to her ancestral home. At the edge of a pond, glimmering fish scales lie scattered, and a stray cat flashes into view—a moment of layered metaphor. While the adults and the prematurely aged A Bao prepare for A Po’s passing, Betty, with childlike innocence, declares, “The stray cat is a prince,” and claims that it has placed the carp into the port waters of Sunray Harbour near the Huangpu River. Her whimsical assertion reads like a fairytale prophecy—infused with cruelty and wonder—and adds a surreal, even gothic tone to the scene. Through the dual perspectives of Betty and A Bao, Jin juxtaposes the numb pragmatism of adults with the haunting clarity of children caught between eras. Just as Betty’s piano playing always halts at the tenth measure, her fragmented statements subtly foreshadow the arrested destiny of those unable to adapt to the new social order. Yet the brief appearance of the cat also foreshadows a reversal: its emergence signals both the suppression of vitality and the possibility of its return. Although A Po is spiritually broken by her failed homecoming, Betty’s vivacity still symbolizes a flicker of life amidst historical detritus. Her journey is a silent protest—a resistance marked not by shouting, but by endurance. The presence of the cat in this scene does not negate the fish’s vitality; rather, it frames it within the tragic dignity of survival.

The second significant appearance of the cat takes place in Chapter 13, within Shu Hua’s dream. At this point, the fish has already vanished from her subconscious, and the cat reemerges—this time as a harbinger of death. Through Betty’s voice, the dream reveals: “There are three stray cats. One came for Betty, one for Grandma... the third stands still.” This ominous triad forms a narrative thread that runs quietly but persistently through the novel. Until the final chapters, the “third cat” never appears again, symbolizing an unresolved fate, a life awaiting its inevitable conclusion. If the first cat signified a glimmer of hope or resistance against destiny, the second marks a philosophical shift—toward *being-toward-death*. The cat, as a messenger of mortality, inscribes silence across lives slowly erased by history’s decay.

The symbolic weight of the cat extends to other characters as well. Within the novel’s dual narrative structure—alternating between childhood and adulthood, past and present—“fish” and “cat” form a hidden dialectic, a coded system of fate. In Chapter 18, after A Bao and Li Li share one last intimate moment, a stray cat slips through the trees. In Chapter 24, just as Tao Tao abandons his family to pursue an affair with Xiao Qin, they are startled by “two stray cats shrieking wildly”; shortly afterward, Xiao Qin dies in a sudden fall, and Tao Tao is left with nothing. In the novel’s final chapter, Xiao Mao, facing death, dreams of encountering both Betty and his first love, Shu Hua. Outside his hospital room, stray cats prowl constantly, as if waiting to claim his departing soul.

These interwoven cat appearances serve not merely as gothic ornamentation, but as coded metaphysical markers of transition and consequence. The cat, with its quiet, nocturnal movements and eerie gaze, becomes a vessel for fate, grief, and return. As in traditional folklore and modern psychoanalysis, it is both observer and agent—death’s shadow in a world where history muffles every scream.

From the outset of *Blossoms* through Chapter 15, readers still witness the recurring appearance of the “fish” image in various characters’ memories—a symbol tinged with warmth and nostalgia drawn from their childhoods. However, beginning with Chapter 15, as the novel’s dual narrative lines (odd- and even-numbered chapters) begin to converge, the timeline shifts from the exceptional historical period to the dazzling economic transformation of late-20th-century Shanghai. Along with this temporal transition, the novel’s implicit narrator gradually detaches the reader from the inner perspectives of the characters.

The author adopts a “zero-degree narrative” approach, developing the plot with clinical restraint while deliberately withdrawing the fish imagery from direct focus. The symbol resurfaces only at critical junctures, often as cryptic omens. For instance, just before Tao Tao’s extramarital affair is exposed, a fortune teller named Master Zhong cryptically warns him: “When a fish shows its scales, misfortune is imminent”—a prophecy that foreshadows not only the collapse of his affair but also

Xiao Qin's tragic accidental death. Similarly, during Miss Wang's labor, A Bao observes her distended belly as "layered like scales," evoking a grotesque image of demonic fertility that repulses both character and reader—a nightmarish portrait of "ghost mothers and demon offspring." Near the end, when Xiao Mao lies on his deathbed, he murmurs the lyrics of an old poem: "Since parting, I know not where you are... The water is wide, the fish sunk deep—where shall I seek you now?" These lines function as an elegiac epigraph for every character's fate in the novel.

This symbolic retreat of the fish, and the heightened ambiguity of narrative voice, is orchestrated through a stream-of-consciousness style that fuses modernist technique with the meticulous interior brushwork of classical Chinese fiction. The narrative lens gradually shifts from internal reflection to external observation, allowing the reader—via A Bao and Hu Sheng's perspectives—to gaze once again at "Sunray Harbour on the Huangpu River—two cat tails, two fish tails," a hallucinatory, vanished vision. In the final chapter, a montage-like structure brings the narrative full circle: at Xiao Mao's funeral, "a yellow cat appears just as everyone prepares to leave." At this moment, the long-withheld "third cat" from Shu Hua's dream in Chapter 13 finally materializes, aligning with Hu Sheng's earlier account of the "death-cat" legend in a foreign retirement home. The vanishing cat and Hu Sheng's Gothic narration form a final counterpoint of eerie stillness and narrative closure, completing the arc of symbolic recurrence.

In this way, the dual symbolic system of "fish" and "cat" serves as both a metaphorical axis of fate and a structural cipher. These opposing yet interdependent motifs mirror the dialectic of vitality and void, resistance and submission, survival and loss. From Betty's truncated piano melody to A Po's broken root-seeking journey, from Shu Hua's descent into madness to Xiao Mao's death-wish, from Miss Wang's pathological will to live to the ever-watching cats—each character's fate is braided into the twin narrative strands, composing a complex variation on life and death amid the transformation of Shanghai as a cultural space.

The fish swims, and its tail circles back to its head. Beneath half a century of clamor and prosperity, the question of spiritual belonging emerges as an eternal concern. Through carefully orchestrated structure and poetic imagery, Jin Yucheng uses individual destinies as vessels to interrogate the inner cost of material progress, letting life circulate endlessly in recurrence—emitting, in silence, a profound lament and lingering resonance.

4. The Symphony of Life: The Aesthetic and Existential Significance of Fish and Cat Metaphors

4.1. The Philosophy of Life Embedded in the Imagery of "Fish" and "Cat"

The two central motifs of "fish" and "cat" together form a dual lens through which the cyclical nature of life is articulated in *Blossoms*. These recurring images function not only as metaphors for the spiritual wasteland of the urban modern condition, but also as dialectical vehicles that explore the existential predicament of individual life within a fragmented modernity. Crucially, the pervasive silence that accompanies these symbols throughout the novel is not an expression of nihilism or agnosticism; rather, it signifies a form of muted resistance—a philosophical, even poetic, acceptance of life's impermanence amid alienation.

As Zhuangzi wrote in *Autumn Floods*: "The dace swims freely—such is the joy of fish." The fish's graceful trajectory in water may seem liberated, yet it remains confined within the limits of the aquatic realm. Human beings, similarly, struggle within the historical currents of their age, resisting and enduring the boundaries imposed upon them. From a semiotic perspective, the fish's dynamic movement and the cat's quiet stillness form a binary of opposing signifiers that nonetheless point toward a shared referent: the transience of life itself [11]. The blossoms fall, and all grows silent. As history sweeps forward with indifferent force, individual voices are drowned in its flood—but precisely within that silence, the weight and dignity of existence emerge through subtle, defiant gestures.

At its core, *Blossoms* may be seen as an experimental novel infused with the aesthetic of the absurd. Jin Yucheng's deployment of magical realism—through the interplay of leaping fish and lurking cats—creates a liminal space where life and death collapse into each other. The obsession with survival often appears futile, while death is portrayed with eerie serenity. For example, in the novel's final chapter, the juxtaposition of Miss Wang's childbirth and Xiao Mao's death crystallizes this fatal contrast: Wang gives birth to a malformed, two-headed infant after agonizing labor, while Xiao Mao, surrounded by friends and former lovers, dies in quiet faith. The “fish-cat” motif haunts these scenes, transforming the narrative's ending into a symbolic “field of life and death,” where those meant to live have no path forward, and those who survive do so in a kind of spiritual death. This pairing of binary imagery and grotesque plot elements magnifies the absurd postures of urban subjects grappling with existential crisis.

Moreover, the metaphoric dialectic of “fish and cat” reflects an Eastern philosophical sensibility, particularly Daoist dialectics. Unlike the iconic yellow butterflies in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which symbolize fated repetition and eroticism in the fictional town of Macondo, the fish and cat of *Blossoms*—swimming and crouching through the alleyways of Shanghai—enact a cyclical fable of eternal recurrence. This reflects Daoism's concept of mutual generation (*xiang sheng xiang cheng*) and the balance of opposites as the rhythm of life [2].

In a postmodern context, the magical logic of these images also bears a deconstructive power. Compared to the dove imagery in Wang Anyi's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, where flocks of pigeons evoke historical disappearance and the erasure of self, the fish-cat dyad in *Blossoms* speaks more directly to the friction between the individual and the historical. While *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* explores nostalgia and personal entropy, *Blossoms* foregrounds conflict—between memory and forgetting, survival and dissolution—rendering it more resonant with the dislocations of contemporary urban life. This embedded modernity grants the novel a distinct philosophical and temporal significance.

Ultimately, the “fish” and “cat” function not merely as aesthetic devices, but as vehicles for a deeper meditation on life's essence and its elusive meaning. Through a dual-narrative structure of temporal disjunction and spatial layering, the novel dissolves the boundaries between life and death. What emerges is not a definitive answer, but a moment of clarity—a quiet, luminous space in which the truth of existence is glimpsed in its most transparent form.

4.2. The Philosophy of "Being-Toward-Death"

“Though death is something experienced by the individual subject, it ultimately becomes a universal event stripped of personal specificity [12].” In this sense, death is not only an endpoint but also a necessary passage through which human beings come to understand the meaning of life. It opens up a multitude of interpretive perspectives and existential possibilities. In *Blossoms*, the arc of every major character is enveloped in a faint air of religious fatalism. The novel's epigraph—“God remains silent, everything is left to me”—functions as a prophecy of fate, in which the subject “I” is deliberately left ambiguous. Yet this fatalistic tone does not lead the narrative into paralysis. On the contrary, it offers each character, in the midst of a hyper-materialized society, a tenuous space for agency and a glimpse of existential autonomy. It is within their acts of resistance—undertaken despite hopeless odds—that the tenacity of life emerges most vividly.

From the spatial perspective, the shifting topography of Shanghai provides a material context for the fish-cat metaphor. Since its opening as a treaty port, the city has undergone a series of profound spatial transformations: from the division between “inner and outer cities,” to the emergence of “old and new towns,” from a linear city to a tripolar one, and finally into a fragmented structure of core and satellite zones [13]. In *Blossoms*, these evolving urban forms not only shape the characters' physical environments but also contour their existential trajectories. Characters like Hu Sheng and A Bao navigate different phases of Shanghai's urban evolution—from ordinary factory workers in the 1970s to a lawyer and a businessman, respectively, in the reform era. Their shifting social roles reflect both personal choices and the disciplinary force of urban spatial logic. Thus, the fish-cat imagery

becomes more than a symbolic cipher of fate; it transforms into a commemorative marker of social change and spatial conditioning.

Taken together, the “fish” and “cat” motifs operate intertextually with the novel’s title, *Blossoms*, constructing a thematic arc of flourishing, decay, and eternal return. In this light, these metaphors are not merely projections of individual destiny, but also reflections of life paths shaped in tandem with the transformations of Shanghai itself. Through the eternal recurrence of the fish and cat, Jin Yucheng transcends the traditional Shanghai school of literature’s aesthetic binary of “flourishing and decadence,” offering a reinvention of its literary paradigm [14]. *Blossoms* fall, yet will bloom again. The ephemeral flowers of human life, fading in the dust of history, gestate new beginnings in the silence of time. It is precisely within this silence—the “unsounding” era—that the novel finds its most enduring expression of eternity.

This quiet commitment to meaning-making within absurdity constitutes the metaphysical insight of *Blossoms*. The fish and cat become not merely symbols of fate or aesthetic tropes, but the bearers of a philosophical attitude—a way of being in the modern world. In their oscillation between life and death, visibility and disappearance, they embody the enduring struggle to affirm meaning in the midst of silence. It is this struggle that grants the novel its deep resonance for all who dwell within the fragmented, modern urban landscape.

5. Conclusion

Jin Yucheng’s *Blossoms* constructs a richly layered metaphorical system centered on the opposing yet interdependent images of “fish” and “cat.” Within the discourse of modernity, these motifs interweave personal fate with the sweeping currents of history, enabling a profound meditation on the meaning of life. By juxtaposing the symbolic functions of “fish” and “cat” across Chinese and Western cultural frameworks, the novel presents the fish as a metaphor for vitality and freedom—a modern reworking of the Daoist ideal of *wandering beyond*. Meanwhile, the cat evokes both Eastern fatalism and Western Gothic mysticism, revealing the entanglement of the individual with history, and tradition with modernity.

The cyclical recurrence and intertextual resonance of these images, embedded in the novel’s dual narrative structure, dissolve the constraints of linear temporality and liberate the portrayal of human nature from conventional realism. In this shared temporal-spatial field, impermanence and eternity converge. From the 1960s to the 1990s, the transformation of Shanghai as an urban space mirrors the spiritual dislocation of its inhabitants, whose destinies reflect the fragmentation and ambivalence of the age.

The novel’s use of magical-realist techniques through the metaphors of “leaping fish and crouching cats” deepens the symbolic layers of these binary images. Within *Blossoms*, the metaphors do not merely contrast life and death—they signify the trauma of rootlessness under historical violence, and gesture toward the possibility of redemption in an accelerated, commodified, and alienated urban existence. Through the seamless fusion of imagery and narrative structure, Jin articulates the existential resilience of “being-toward-death,” simultaneously inheriting and transcending the traditional Shanghai literary paradigm of “splendor and decay.” This narrative strategy confronts the absurdity of modern urban survival while offering a poetic, philosophical path toward reconstructing the meaning of life.

In sum, the imagery of “fish and cat” in *Blossoms* is not only an innovative aesthetic hallmark of Jin Yucheng’s so-called “Blossoms style,” but also a deep philosophical reflection on life, history, and urban transformation. His experimental use of symbolic narrative reconfigures the relationship between the individual and grand historical discourse in a modern context. This novel thus serves as a compelling case study for contemporary urban literary analysis and opens up new perspectives on the lived experience, spatial tension, and subjective reconstruction within the evolving landscape of the modern city.

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