Narrative Modes in Lu Xun's Short Stories

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Introduction

Scholars in China normally consider the literature from 1917 to 1949 as “modern Chinese literature,” and the one from 1949 to present as “contemporary.” Modern Chinese literature, a vernacular literature with a predominantly realistic social content and new forms and styles, was heralded by the publication in 1917 of Hu Shi’s “A Modest Proposal for Literary Reform” in New Youth. According to Liu Wu-chi, one may distinguish within the modern era an early phase (1917-37), when “writers experimented to create a new vernacular literature in opposition to traditional classical literature.” Lu Xun was “the leading writer of the first period and, in fact, the greatest name in twentieth century Chinese literature [...] whose short stories and essays have exerted a tremendous influence on the younger generation” (224). As Irene Eber writes: “That Lu Xun has achieved a worldwide reception as a writer is obvious. His works have been translated into over fifty languages, including twenty-five European languages and twenty-one spoken by nationalities of the USSR. Aside from the translations, scholars and critics have produced many books and articles about the man and his literary craft” (242).

Research on Lu Xun’s works has gone on for more than eighty years now in China. In 1913, Yun Tieqiao, chief editor of The Short Story Magazine, made remarks on Lu Xun’s short story in classical Chinese, “Remembering Past Times.” The first important research article on Lu Xun, “Cannibalism and Feudal Ethics,” was published by Wu Yu in New Youth, 1919. Since then, innumerable books and research papers about Lu Xun’s life and work have been published. According to the statistics of Books and Articles on Oriental Subject Published in Japan, edited by the Oriental Association of Japan, over the past 60 years about 3,000 books and articles have been published on Lu Xun in Japan alone. The first doctoral dissertation on Lu Xun in a Western language was written in 1937 by Wang Cheng-ju (Wang Zhengru) at the University of Bonn, since then many others were completed.

Lu Xun wrote mostly essays and translations, the number of his short stories is relatively small. He wrote thirty-four stories in total, including fourteen collected in Call to Arms, eleven collected in Wandering, eight as historical fiction collected in Newly Edited Old Stories. “Remembering Past Times” which we have mentioned, is not included in these collections. Though small in number, these stories have played a very important role in the history of modern Chinese fiction. By absorbing and introducing the artistic methods of Western novelists, Lu Xun made comprehensive artistic innovations in traditional Chinese fiction.

Chinese research on Lu Xun has been focused over the past decades on his life, his style of writing, and his portrayal of the realities of life. Scholars in China have studied him mainly from a socio-historical standpoint. A leading critic in China, Zhou Yang, says that Lu Xun’s short stories fully embody the tradition of the literary revolution in the May Fourth Movement. His short stories represent the reality of the Chinese democratic revolution, and they are greatly successful in reflecting the democratic revolution’s object, task and motive force (3). In 1954, another important critic, Chen Yong, wrote in connection with the farmers and the intellectuals, two types that frequently appear in Lu Xun’s short stories: “Lu Xun’s realism made it clear that bourgeoisie is incapable of leading the Chinese revolution toward victory, and that the farmers must take a revolutionary road because of their oppressed position, but they have their own weakness. What about the intellectuals? Many of them are intelligent, honest and they are usually the first people to awaken in every revolutionary period, but when they have no clear understanding of reality and are
themselves isolated, they are weak and incompetent” (31; my translation. Hereafter unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine).

By the 1980s Chinese research on Lu Xun took a new direction. Lin Zhihao remarked: “The research tradition that was started by Zhou Yang and fulfilled splendidly by Chen Yong has dominated the research on Lu Xun’s short stories for thirty years. A different view on this research tradition emerged in 1985 when Wang Furen’s ‘On Call to Arms and Wandering’ was published” (Lu Xun Study 2: 46).

Wang Furen’s article was an extract of his 1984 dissertation A Mirror of the Anti-feudal Ideological Revolution in China: On “Call to Arms” and “Wandering” at Beijing Normal University, the first doctoral dissertation on Lu Xun in China. Its basic view is that Lu Xun’s short stories are “the mirror of the anti-feudal ideological revolution in China.” Wang Furen thinks that many commentaries on Lu Xun’s short stories were made in terms of the political revolution, and therefore are not exact: “The realities that Call to Arms and Wandering reflect and present are not from the angle of the political revolution of Chinese society, but from the perspective of the anti-feudal ideological revolution in China.” Accordingly: “It is necessary to adjust our research perspective on Call to Arms and Wandering, and to create a perspective that will replace the existing one. This research perspective should not be based on Mao Zedong’s theoretical conclusion about the specific law of the Chinese political revolution, but based on what Lu Xun was actually seeking in his thought and for art” (On Call to Arms and Wandering, 1985: 3-5-6). Many people think that Wang Furen’s study was a breakthrough; nevertheless, it also took a socio-historical point of view.

In the middle of the 1980s, some Western literary theories were introduced to China. The late Vice-President of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), Professor Yang Zhouhang, urged Chinese scholars to use Western literary theories to analyze Chinese literature. He thought this should be an important aspect of comparative literature in China. Western narrative theory now received some attention in China, and a small number of articles using narrative theory appeared also on Lu Xun’s short stories.

My following study of these short stories is a systematic and comprehensive examination, based on the use of narrative mode, one of the key dimensions of narrative theory. It is “a set of devices and verbal means which create an image of a story’s mediator, the so-called narrator in the narrative” (Dolezelová, Chinese Novel 57). In Percy Lubbock’s view, “the whole intricate question of method in the craft of fiction,” is governed by “the relation in which the narrator stands to the story” (251). If the same story were to be narrated by means of a different narrative mode, it could have completely different effects, produce different aesthetic experiences, and the reader would get entirely different information.

In recent decades, studies on the narrator’s position have achieved noticeable success, in spite of the appearance of some problems relating to the use of divergent terminologies. “Point of view” is most commonly used, and several typological descriptions of narrative based on it have been proposed. For example, Brooks and Warren use the term “focus of narration,” Grimes uses “viewpoint,” Stanzel uses the “narrative situation.” “Narrative perspective,” “narrative manner” and “narrative point of view” are also often used. Genette uses the slightly more abstract term “focalization” (Discourse 189) in order to distinguish between “who sees” and “who speaks,” and to avoid the too specifically visual connotations of the terms “vision,” “field,” and “point of view.” He distinguishes between 1) nonfocalized narrative, or narrative with zero focalization; 2) narrative with internal focalization, which includes three kinds: fixed, variable and multiple; and 3) narrative with external focalization. Genette’s categories will be used as my starting point of my study, but I shall also take into account work of other scholars, especially that of Mieke Bal and
Narrative texts, even short stories, usually employ more than one narrative mode, but they usually contain a dominant one. In different periods or movements of literary history, different narrative modes have leading positions, and new narrative modes resulted sometime from the stylistic experiments by writers. When examining the narrative mode of an author, we must therefore look also at the historical changes, at the culture of his age, and at the literary movements of that time.

In the history of Chinese fiction, zero focalization was the dominant mode in traditional Chinese fiction for a long time, although other narrative modes, such as internal focalization also appeared occasionally. It was only in the late Qing dynasty, when external and internal factors led to the introduction of changes, that Chinese novelists and critics consciously departed from the tradition of the narrative with zero focalization. This process, which was started in the late Qing dynasty, was completed by the writers of the May Fourth Era, foremost among them Lu Xun. He was not only the first Chinese writer to use all three narrative modes, he also used them in an exemplary way, opening new ways for the development of Chinese fiction.

I will study Lu Xun’s use of the traditional narrative with zero focalization, as well as his use of narratives with internal focalization and narrative with external focalization. He started with the traditional narrative mode in his translations of Jules Verne’s *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1903) and *A Journey to the Moon* (1906). He used internal focalization in the first person in his mentioned first short story, “Remembering Past Times” (1911), and in his first short story in modern vernacular, “A Madman’s Diary” (1918). In his following short stories he skillfully employed different narrative modes, including internal focalization and external focalization. I will analyze Lu Xun’s use of all three narrative modes, and I will show their significance in the evolution of narrative modes in Chinese fiction. Finally, I select five short stories as case studies.

My study examines thus the form of Lu Xun’s fiction. This kind of systematic narrative research is seldom practiced in China, because Chinese scholars usually study the content of literary works. The study of form has been neglected, and “formalism” has been a derogatory term in literary criticism for a long time. Xu Jie’s *Lectures on Lu Xun’s Fiction* (1951), was the first book that specifically studied Lu Xun’s fiction. In “The Author’s Preface,” Xu Jie says that he would like to “take the form [of fiction] as the point of departure to analyze and appreciate it, and come into contact with its inside through the form.” Using this method, *Lectures on Lu Xun’s Fiction* made some important contributions to the study of Lu Xun’s fiction. However, Xu Jie’s book was repeatedly criticized. Critics have declared almost unanimously that his book “lays undue stress on the technique of expression form” (Yuan Liangjun, *Contemporary Era* 25-27). Yet, studying a writer, a literary work, or literature of a certain period, it will be difficult to grasp their essence if we do not delve into technical matters. This is especially true for an author like Lu Xun, who lived through a traumatic transitional period of Chinese literature, and whose works have epoch-making significance.

Using the mirror and the jigsaw as metaphors, Yang Zhouhang tries to show a major difference between Chinese and Western critical attitudes. He thinks that Chinese critics mainly concentrate their attention on the real life reflected in literary works, while Western critics focus on the literary work itself and on literary forms (22-23). I believe that what is shared by Western and Chinese literary theories outweighs what separates them. Although some people oppose analyzing Chinese literature in terms of Western literary theories, this kind of research has been and will be going on. The goal of my study is not simply to apply some literary theories, but, more importantly, to open new ways of research on Lu Xun’s fiction. Building on
studies of Lu Xun's short stories in the 1990s, I hope to stimulate further interest in Lu Xun.