Narrative Modes in Lu Xun's Short Stories

Tan, Junqiang

Citation for published version (APA):
Tan, J. (2001). Narrative Modes in Lu Xun's Short Stories.

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
CHAPTER THREE
The Third-Person Focalization and Changes in Focalization

3.1 External Focalization

In the third book of Plato’s *The Republic*, Socrates points out a distinction between two ways of rendering speech: *diegesis* and *mimesis*. The characteristic feature of *diegesis* is that “the poet himself is the speaker and does not even attempt to suggest to us that anyone but himself is speaking” (638). In *mimesis*, on the other hand, the poet tries to create the illusion that it is not he who speaks. In Anglo-American criticism this contrast of *diegesis* and *mimesis* is often reproduced as “telling and showing” or “summary and scene” (Rimmon-Kenan 106-07).

Percy Lubbock regards “showing” as a superior technique to “telling”: “The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself” (62). Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* criticizes this opinion. He argues that the line between showing and telling is always to some degree an arbitrary one: “though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear” (20). Booth adds: “Whether an impersonal novelist hides behind a single narrator or observer, the multiple points of view of *Ulysses* or *As I Lay Dying*, or the objective surfaces of *The Awkward Age* or Compton-Burnett’s *Parents and Children*, the author’s voice is never really silenced” (60). *The Rhetoric of Fiction* is, to a great extent, a defense of “telling.” Today, most critics have no preference: “each has its advantages and disadvantages, and their relative success or failure depends on their functionality in the given work” (Rimmon-Kenan 107-08).

Although one cannot generally decide whether showing or telling is ultimately better, many post-Flaubert authors have illustrated a partiality towards showing. In China too, one can see signs of this literary trend in the development of the nation’s literature. “Telling” is more linked to traditional narratives, those with zero focalization, while “showing” is more associated with external focalization. Narrators with external focalization differ from narrators with zero focalization, who frequently engage in commentary. In zero focalization, a narrator says less than what characters know. Like outsiders unwilling to show their face, such narrators only describe speeches and activities, never entering the consciousness of the characters and making no subjective judgments or psychological analyses. In traditional narratives of zero focalization, the external agent can still see and know everything in every character’s heart. In such narratives, the narrator-focalizer has no limitation. In narratives with external focalization, however, the narrator-focalizer’s field of vision is limited, for he focalizes and narrates only what appears to the characters. Such narratives can give the reader more opportunity to participate in creating the text. Since the textual space of external focalization leaves more of the story unspecified, readers get a greater role in filling the text in. They can endow the narrative with their own individual meanings, in accordance with their differing experiences and expectations. As John Neubauer says:

It is appropriate and legitimate to shift our attention away from those data of the text which were important to the author to those which we now discover to be of interest. [...] There are, in fact, good reasons for advocating as many perspectives and interpretations on a text as possible (440).

Lu Xun wrote only two pieces that are externally focalized, but these outstanding examples show a unique artistic style. “A Public Example” has a simple, even incomplete plot. It describes merely a few moments of a scene: on a hot summer day in
a street in the west city of the model region, many onlookers gather to look at “a public
dexample.” More than ten characters appear on the scene in an extremely brief space.
These characters are both opposite and complementary to each other, and can be divided
into two distinct groups. The first consists of “a man in a blue cotton gown and white
sleeveless jerkin,” who is to be the public example and “a scrawny policeman with a
sallow face in a yellow uniform.” (LXQJ 2: 68-69; Wandering 63-64). They are linked
by a rope that is held by the policeman and tied around the arm of the man at the other
end. The other group is composed of onlookers in a semi-circle, who gather as soon as
the policeman and the man appear on the scene. This is the focalized object of an
external narrator-focalizer, who only shows the scene that happens in front of him,
providing no explanation or contextualization. Many things remain unclear. What has
the man done wrong? Nobody knows. There are some Chinese characters written on the
man’s jerkin, and his crime should be evident from this. However, when Baldy,
standing almost directly opposite the man, stoops to study the characters and finally
reads out: “Weng, du, ben, ba, er...,” the words are meaningless. A rough fellow, who
looks like a workman, asks Baldy in a low, diffident voice: “Hey, what has he done
wrong?...” (LXQJ 2: 69; Wandering 65), Baldy gives no answer, simply glares at him
till he lowers his eyes. So, flustered as if he himself had committed some crime, he
slowly backs out and leaves. Why do the men, women, and children gather suddenly
under the blazing sun? Nobody knows. The readers are informed only that “a semi-
circle of onlookers gathered. After they were joined by an old bald-head, the little space
left was promptly occupied by a bare-chested fat fellow with a red nose” (LXQJ 2: 69;
Wandering 64). When the rough fellow leaves, his place is taken by a tall fellow with an
umbrella. When a man with a stiff straw hat who seems to be a student withdraws, his
place is taken by the oval face of a sweaty head caked with dust. What do the robed man
and the policeman think? Nobody knows. We are told only that the prisoner’s “new
straw hat, its brim turned down, covered his eyes.” (LXQJ 2: 69; Wandering 64).
Apparently he does not like to be looked upon. When Fat Boy looks up he meets the
prisoner’s eyes. They seem to be fixed on his head. He hastily lowers his eyes to look at
the white jerkin. The policeman’s face is also expressionless.

We do not even know the names of the characters, only nicknames or
descriptions drawn from their physical features, dress, or actions. The prisoner, for
example, is called “White Jerkin.” Among the onlookers, there is “Baldy,” “Fat Boy,”
a “bare-chested fat fellow with a red nose,” “one lean fellow even gaping like a dead
perch,” “an even rounder fat face, like that of a Maitreya Buddha,” “a tall fellow with an
umbrella,” an “Amah holding a child,” “a feline face,” “Oval Face” and “Longfellow.”
The onlookers want to linger on. To look at the prisoner becomes their only interest,
making them forget everything else. Both the prisoner and the onlookers have blank
expressions. The former shows neither panic nor fear, nor shame; the latter seem to feel
neither sympathy and pity, nor anger and hatred. All the characters, without exception,
are stupefied. Only when another interesting matter happens do they break up in a
hubbub. A rickshaw man falls, and the onlookers higgledy-piggledy all make their way
over, looking at the new matter until the rickshaw man rises to his feet, rubbing his
knees. At this point “Five or six people had gathered round, grinning, to watch” (LXQJ
2: 72; Wandering 67). The reader is given no clues. Although the activities of all
characters are clear, the absence of narrative directive forces readers to guess at the
characters’ inner thoughts and feelings. What they really are we do not know. The text
implicitly makes an appeal to the readers’ experience to fill in the spaces left often.

The entire story, in fact, heightens the social atmosphere through the portrayal of
the onlookers. The author does not lay stress here on the depiction of a single character.
Rather, one realizes the thing that truly makes them a collective; there are all eager
onlookers and careless spectators. This feature does not shed light on their inner world,
but readers can glimpse at their thoughts and feelings through the actions and surroundings.

Relating Lu Xun’s experiences to his work, we find that the idea of apathetic spectators was deep, perhaps even foundational, in his thoughts as a writer. When Lu Xun was studying in Japan, he often discussed with his friend Xu Shouchang what the greatest deficiencies in the Chinese character were. Their answer was, “lack of love and honesty” (The Lu Xun I Knew 59). In Lu Xun’s view, this often showed in the apathy of the masses, in the tendency to look on the misfortunes of people and become a mere cold passive spectator. When Lu Xun studied at the Sendai Medical College in Japan, a slide shown in a lecture radically changed his outlook. It was “a news-reel slide of a number of Chinese, one of them bound and the rest standing around him. They were all sturdy fellows who appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, the bound man was a spy working for the Russians, to be beheaded by the Japanese military as a warning, while the others had come to enjoy the spectacle” (LXQJ 1: 416; Works 1: 35, slightly modified). This slide convinced Lu Xun that literature was more desperately needed by his people than medicine:

The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they might be, could only serve to be made examples of or as witnesses of such futile spectacles; and it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit; and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I decided to promote a literary movement (LXQJ 1: 417; Works 1: 35).

Scenes of spectatorship appear frequently in Lu Xun’s stories. About one year before writing “A Public Example,” he said in his speech: “What Happens After Nora Leaves Home”:

The masses, especially in China, are always spectators at a drama. If the victim on the stage acts heroically, they are watching a tragedy; if he shivers and shakes they are watching a comedy. Before the mutton shops in Beijing a few people often gather to gape, with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep. And this is all they get out of it if a man lays down his life. Moreover, after walking a few steps away from the scene they forget even this modicum of enjoyment (LXQJ 1: 163; Works 2: 91).

Thus Lu Xun seriously criticized this passive spectatorship. The spectator, who adopts an indifferent attitude towards anything and everything, is not only negative, but also of ill will. The stupid and attentive gaping, “with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep” is indicative of this.

Although Lu Xun is angry about spectatorship, “A Public Example” is quite calm and objectively detached. The author’s voice is hidden quite well behind the external focalization, and his reliable narrator/spokesman does not make any direct comments or criticisms. It is exactly the author’s silence and refraining from intervention through the narrator, leaving his characters “to work out their own fates upon the stages” (Booth, Rhetoric 7), that allows the story to achieve its aesthetic luminosity. In high summer, the dogs’ tongues are lolling out, even the crows on the trees are panting for breath, but the onlookers do not mind at all to look at the public example. Their bodies exude perspiration, but their hearts are deadly still, their concentrated expressions are just like the men who “gather to gape, with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep.” Seeing this scene, the reader cannot but be jolted. This effect is like the one we find in Hemingway’s fiction, which skillfully uses
the technique of external focalization: “The success of many so-called hard-boiled detective and adventure stories written under the influence of Hemingway depends largely on the fear we feel as soon as we see danger as if through our own eyes” (Booth, Rhetoric 277). The calm exposition of the story, the ingenious camouflage of the authorial voice, and the keynote of strict narrative sobriety, add up to give Lu Xun’s story its special power.

Genette thinks that the strictly textual mimetic factors come down to two sets of data: the quantity of narrative information (how developed or detailed a narrative is) and the absence (or minimal presence) of the narrator:

“Showing” can be only a way of telling, and this way consists of both saying about it as much as one can, and saying this “much” as little as possible [en dire le plus possible, et ce plus, le dire le moins possible]: speaking, Plato says, “as if the poet were someone else” -- in other words, making one forget that it is the narrator telling. Whence these two cardinal precepts of showing: the Jamesian dominance of scene (detailed narrative) and the (pseudo-)Flaubertian transparency of the narrator [...] mimesis being defined by a maximum of information and a minimum of the informer, diegesis by the opposite relationship (Discourse 166).

Although the reader cannot see the inner world of the characters, their appearance, action, and surrounding are shown in detail; the reader gets enough information to make independent inferences. Naturally, the quantity of information is in inverse ratio to the speed of narrative: the slower the narrative speed is, the more information the reader must digest. The narrative speed in “A Public Example” is quite slow. The time between the prisoner’s and the policeman’s appearance and the crowd’s dispersal is probably less than thirty minutes.

If “A Public Example” embodies more of scene, then “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight” leans towards an embodiment of “the (pseudo-)Flaubertian transparency of the narrator.” In this kinds of narrative, the narrator is nearly invisible, giving rise to a sort of “absolute imitation” (Genette, Discourse 169). Hemingway’s “The Killers” and “Hills Like White Elephants” are canonic forms of this type.

The external focalization that emphasizes the words of the character and seldom allows the narrator to intervene was influenced by behavioral psychology. In order to portray his characters, Lu Xun stresses character speech. He noticed that “Gorky marvels at Balzac’s skill in handling dialogue, for without any description of his characters’ appearance he conjures them up before the reader by their conversation.” He thought that “novelists of this caliber have not yet appeared in China, though there are passages in Outlaws of the Marsh and A Dream of Red Mansions which enable readers to visualize the characters from their talk” (LXQJ 5: 530; Works 4: 80). When a writer builds up a character through dialogues, he has a mental picture of the man, which he passes onto his readers till they form a similar picture in their minds: “If you cut all extraneous matter and simply select what is distinctive in each one’s conversation, I am sure others could guess their character from their talk” (LXQJ 5: 530; Works 4: 80). What kinds of words are then suitable in an externally focalized narrative of words? McHale suggests a progressive scale, ranging from the “purely” diegetic to the “purely” mimetic: 1) Diegetic summary; 2) Less “purely” diegetic summary; 3) Indirect content-paraphrase (or indirect discourse); 4) Indirect discourse, mimetic to some degree; 5) Free indirect discourse; 6) Direct discourse; and 7) Free direct discourse (249-87).

The conspicuous feature of “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight” is that the author paid special attention to the words of the characters. Although he uses several forms, direct discourse, which is a “quotation” of a monologue or a dialogue, is most conspicuous. It creates the illusion of “pure” mimesis, although it is always in some
The heart of "The Lamp That Was Kept Alight" is, as the title suggests, a lamp that the "old folk" claim "was lit by Emperor Wu of Liang, and it's been burning ever since" (LXQJ 2: 56; Wandering 54). Not even the Long Hairs put it out. This is a lamp that brings benefit to Lucky Light Village. People believe that if it is put out, the end of the village will loom: the village will become a sea and all the people in the village will turn into eels. The "madman" of the village decides, however, to put it out and touches off public indignation. The people of the village do everything to keep it lit.

The lamp has a symbolic flavor. It is a metaphor of tradition. It is by no means easy to do away with traditions that have survived intact for millennia. Therefore, it is not surprising that people who challenge these traditions are regarded as dangerous "madmen" by tradition's adherents. Lu Xun was a strong opponent to most old traditions. Only three weeks before he wrote "The Lamp That Was Kept Alight," he said in "More Thought on the Collapse of Leifeng Pagoda": "True, without destruction nothing new can be built;" he praised men like Rousseau, Stirner, Nietzsche, Tolstoy and Ibsen, who are, in Brandes' words, "destroyers of old tracks." Lu Xun stated: "Actually they not only destroy but blaze a trail and lead a charge, sweeping aside all the old tracks, whether whole rails or fragments" (LXQJ 1: 192; Works 2: 114). At the same time, he keenly felt that there are "very few men like this in China, and even when they appear they are likely to be spat at by everyone" (LXQJ 1: 192; Works 2: 115).

The idea of this article is displayed artistically in the story. The "madman," who opposes tradition appears infrequently. The bulk of the story portrays the people of the village and their deliberations how to control or get rid of the madman. The narrator-focalizer does not intervene or peek into the characters' hearts, but shows their cruelty through their words and actions:

"Still no change?" asked Triangle Face, picking up his bowl of tea.
"Still no change, they say," replied Square Head. "He keeps repeating, 'Put it out! put it out!' His eyes are flashing worse than ever. The devil! Don't think it's a joke-the fellow's a menace to our village. Fact is, we ought to find some way to get rid of him!"

"Get rid of him, by all means. He's nothing but a dirty bastard. When the temple was built his ancestors paid their share, yet now he wants to blow out the temple light! Is that unfilial or isn't it? Let's send him to the county court as an unfilial son!" Kuoting ended with a flourish, smashing his fist on the table (LXQJ 2: 56; Wandering 53).

The narration consists here almost entirely of character remarks, with just a few introductions and additions by the narrator. It is very similar to some of Hemingway's short stories with external focalization, for instance "The Killers" (collected in Men Without Women), which was published in 1927, just two years after the "The Lamp That Was Kept Alight." In "The Killer," the narrator puts in very few appearances and the events are almost entirely depicted through the characters' conversations, allowing the narrative, as Lubbock said, "to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself." Yet it includes some things not mentioned in the conversations. What has Andson done, for example? Why do the two fellows kill him? The dialogues won't tell. We can ask similar questions about Lu Xun's story. What kind of person is the "madman"? Why does he really want to put the lamp out? We can only guess.

In "The Killer," the conversational quotes account for eighty to ninety per cent of the text. In the absence of physical description or emotional insight, the reader can only guess. In "The Lamp That Was Kept Alight," conversation takes up more than half of the text. As for tone, the narrator of "The Killer" is more deeply buried and
embedded in the text, more calm and collected. We can see this not only from the percentage of conversation in the totality of the text, but also through the descriptive words used. When introducing conversations, the narrator of “The Killer” does not endow the characters with emotional coloring, while the narrator of “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight” says things like “Kuoting ended with a flourish, smashing his fist on the table; “Square Head spoke scornfully,” “asked Zhuang in surprise,” “her glare turned into a smile.” “Fourth Master sounded both stern and grieved, and his voice was trembling” (LXQJ2: 56-64; Wandering 53-60, italics added). These illustrative words yield more information, also about the informer.

“A character’s speech, whether in conversation or as a silent activity of the mind, can be indicative of a trait or traits both through its content and through its form” (Rimmon-Kenan 63). Aiming at keeping the flame lit, people of various social circles gather and become a collective unit, forming a mass. As a collective, the people have common traits, but they also retain individual characteristics. For example, Kuoting, who frequently says extreme things like “Get rid of him,” and “he’d be better dead” is truculent; Square Head is pretentious; Triangle Face is dull-witted and stingy; Old Guo, who is too old to speak, is thickheaded. The most noticeable one among them is the squire Fourth Master, whose words have a special style. In the village, Fourth Master holds power over the madman’s life and property. His words are spoken slowly, sometimes sounding both stern and grieved. He has a murderous look but shows some solicitude for the man: “Every day I’ve been hoping for his recovery” (LXQJ2: 64; Wandering 61). However, he is ultimately no different from the undisguised advocates of the madman’s execution; he merely has more refined manners and puts prettier clothes on his meanness. He undoubtedly wants to lock up the madman, but he pretends not to think about it. Allegedly merely repeating the words of another, he says: “There’s nothing for it but to lock him up as this gentleman suggests, to keep him out of mischief, lest he disgrace his father. This may be just as well, we owe it to his father.” (LXQJ2: 64; Wandering 61) The squire exposes himself with his own words.

Although the madman seldom appears in the story, his words clearly show his determination to blow out the lamp. He vaguely longs for a better world, but his words are distinctly crazy: “That lamp has got to be blown out. You see, they should all be put out: Blue Face with his three heads and six arms, Three Eyes, Long Hat, Half Head, Ox Head and Swine Tusk....Out with the lot of them! When they’re out we shall have no more locusts, no more plague” (LXQJ2: 60; Wandering 56-57). He is not afraid of the threats and cannot be cheated by the others. When Kuoting says that they will blow out the lamp for him, he can come-back in a few days and see for himself, he answers: “Not you! I don’t need any of you. I’ll do it myself. I’m going to blow it out now!” He is undeceived by the others’ attempts. When Square Head says to him that he has always shown himself an intelligent man, and urges him not to engage in folly, he replies that he will just be doing the best he can, and he is going to blow the lamp out. When somebody says to him that he cannot blow out the lamp and should go home, he answers “I’m not going home. I’m going to blow it out.” They tell him that he cannot push the door open, that he has no way of opening it, his answer is: “I’ll think of some other way then”; he will set the place on fire (LXQJ2: 61; Wandering 57-58). At last the people deal with him collectively and lock him up in the west room. He still repeats that he’ll set the place on fire. Like the symbolism of the lamp, the symbolism of the madman is uncomplicated. Since the story uses external focalization, we know nothing about the characters’ hearts, including the madman’s very different inner world, but we get a chance to see through his words. Both the madman and the rest of the village show their individual traits in conversations.

3.2 Narrative with Zero Focalization
The narrative with zero focalization, or nonfocalized narrative, represented by classical Chinese narrative and by Western traditional narrative, refers to “a type of focalization or point of view whereby the narrated is presented in terms of a nonlocatable, indeterminate perceptual or conceptual position” (Prince 103). It is different from internal focalization, in which the focalizer coincides with a character, and also from external focalization, in which the focalizer is unable to provide information about the inner world of the characters. In narrative with zero focalization, the focalization can be changed at will according to the needs and development of the story. The narrator can enter the minds of all the characters and provide information and is able to tell more than what any individual character knows. These kinds of narrators are usually called omniscient. Their absence from the story and their higher narratorial authority in relation to it makes them omniscient. Although “omniscience” is perhaps an exaggerated term, the characteristics connoted by it are still relevant: familiarity, in principle, with the characters’ innermost thoughts and feelings; knowledge of past, present and future; presence in locations where characters are supposed to be unaccompanied (e.g. on a lonely stroll or during a love-scene in a locked room); and knowledge of what happens in several places at the same time (Rimmon-Kenan 95).

“Storm in a Teacup” is a story about a passing panic caused by the rumor that the emperor has been restored and every man must now have a pigtail. Sevenpounder does not have a pigtail, and Seventh Master Zhao, who is the proprietor of a wineshop and was cursed as a “bastard” by Sevenpounder two years ago in a fit of drunkenness, comes to Sevenpounder’s home. He asks about Sevenpounder’s queue and stresses that this is an important matter. He reminds him that back in the time of the Long Hairs [Taiping rebels] the slogan was “keep your hair and lose your head; keep your head and lose your hair.” Sevenpounder and his wife are thoroughly frightened. A fortnight or so later, Mrs. Sevenpounder finds Seventh Master Zhao sitting in his wineshop, reading with his queue coiled on top of his head again. When she passes, she knows that the rumor about the restoration of the emperor was false. Thus, everything is calm again.

“Storm in a Teacup” is told by an omniscient narrator. As the story opens, the narrator describes the scene on the mud flat by the river and the activities of people; forsaking the plot, he only tells the reader the time and setting, thus intensifying the atmosphere of the scene. Solely for the information of his reader, he describes a scene, which at this point is, strictly speaking, invisible to his characters. The narrator not only describes the setting of the story, but also hears the literati on a boat lyrically exclaim: “Such carefree tranquillity!” “How idyllic!” (LXQJ 1: 467; Works 1: 79). Readers probably find names like “Ninepounder” and “Sixpounder” odd, hence the narrator explains: “It was the somewhat unusual custom in this village for mothers to weigh their children at birth and to call them the number of pounds they happened to weigh” (LXQJ 1: 468; Works 1: 80). When new characters come on stage, the narrator introduces them:

Although a villager, Sevenpounder had always wanted to better himself. For three generations—grandfather, father and son—not a man in his family had handled a hoe. Like his father before him he worked on a boat which left Luzhen every morning for the town, returning to Luzhen in the evening. As a result he knew pretty well all that was going on: where, for instance, the thunder god had blasted a centipede spirit, or where a virgin had given birth to a demon. In the village he was quite a personage (LXQJ 1: 468; Works 1: 81).

Later on, when Seventh Master Zhao comes on the stage, he is introduced more extensively. When Sevenpounder is frightened and at his wits’ end, the narrator focuses on his incoherent thought:
It struck him that matters had reached a most dangerous pass, and he tried to think of a way out, some plan of action. But his thoughts were in too much of a whirl for him to straighten them out. "Queues, eh, queues? An eighteen-foot lance. Each generation is worse than the last! An emperor is on the Dragon Throne. The broken bow will have to be taken to town to be riveted. Who's a match for him? It's written in a book. Mother's!" (LXQJ 1: 473-74; Works 1: 87-88).

Finally, when the passing panic is gone, the narrator tells the reader that at the end of the story Sevenpounder is once more respected and treated well by his wife and villagers. When summer comes, the villagers still have their meals on the mud flat at their door, as they always have. In short, everything is back to normal.

At the opening of another story, "Tomorrow," people in Luzhen have bolted their front door and gone to bed as usual. However, the narrator tells us, at two places people would still be awake by midnight: "Prosperity Tavern where a few gluttons guzzled merrily round the bar" (LXQJ 1: 450; Works 1: 68), and the house next door, where Fourth Shan's widowed Wife lived, who had nothing but the cotton-yarn she spun to support herself and her three-year-old boy; this is why she also slept late. The narrator has at his fingertips the events that happen in two places at the same time. And the story goes on with the protagonist, Fourth Shan's Wife. The only hope of her life, her boy, is dying of a serious illness. Fourth Shan's Wife has hardly slept the night; in the early morning, she brings her son to see a traditional doctor and gets a prescription to buy medicine. When she is in a state of utter exhaustion and about to go home she meets Blue-skinned Awu, who has had his own designs on her for a long time. He offers her to take the boy:

Though Fourth Shan's Wife had been longing for an angel to come to her rescue, she had not wanted her champion to be Awu. But there was something of the gallant about Awu, for he absolutely insisted on helping her; and at last, after several refusals, she gave way. As he stretched his arm between her breast and the child, then thrust it down to take over Bao'er, she felt a wave of heat along her breast. She flushed right up to her ears (LXQJ 1: 452; Works 1: 71).

What Fourth Shan's Wife "wanted," and what she "felt" are presented from an omniscient point of view by the narrator. Her son dies but she cannot accept it. Seeing the dead Bao'er lying on the bed, she feels it is impossible. The narrator reveals her inner world in a trance: "This is only a dream," she thought. "It's all a dream. I shall wake up tomorrow lying snug in bed, with Bao'er sleeping snugly beside me. Then he'll wake and call, 'Ma!' and jump down like a young tiger to play" (LXQJ 1: 454; Works 1: 73). When the coffin is carried to the potter's field and covered with a mound, Fourth Shan's Wife goes back to home, looks around, and feels unable either to sit or stand. Not only is the room too quiet, but it is also too large and the things in it are too empty. The large room hems her in from all four sides, and the emptiness crowds in on her until she can hardly draw her breath. Now she remembers the past, her son's childish words.

After that, the narrator focalizes on the Prosperity Tavern, which does not have any direct connection with her. Red-nosed Gong there has no sympathy for Fourth Shan's Wife, and even sings an obscene folk song directed against her: "I pity you—my darling—all alone...." (LXQJ 1: 456; Works 1: 75). He laughing tipsily reels away with Blue-skinned Awu. The technique reveals the heartlessness of society around Fourth Shan's Wife, and it accentuates her grief. When all these events are over, the omniscient narrator looks down at Luzhen from a greater distance and tells the final result in an authoritative tone: "Fourth Shan's Wife was asleep, Old Gong and the others had gone,
the door of Prosperity Tavern was closed. Luzhen was sunk in utter silence. Only the night, eager to change into the morrow, was journeying on in the silence; and, hidden in the darkness, a few dogs were barking" (LXQJ 1: 456; Works 1: 75).

Lu Xun’s “The White Light” is a story about a single character, Chen Shicheng, who repeatedly fails the civil service examination. After failing the sixteenth time, he begins to dig a hidden treasure said to have been buried on his family property. Finally he goes crazy, and drowns in a river. In “The White Light,” unlike “Tomorrow,” the narrator-focalizer does not focus on different places or describe events happening at the same time in different places, but uses the character’s experience as the only thread. He describes not only Chen Shicheng’s strange actions that appear abnormal to ordinary people, but also his thoughts. After his sixteenth county examination Chen Shicheng expects very much to find his name in the results of the examinations, but he cannot: “His pale face grew even paler; his tired eyes, puffy and red, glittering strangely. In fact, he had long stopped seeing the results on the wall, for countless black circles were swimming past his eyes” (LXQJ 1: 542; Call to Arms 123). This new attack makes him lose consciousness, and fills his mind with dreams about civil service examinations, winning promotions, and getting rich:

He had won his first degree in the county examination and taken his second in the provincial capital, success following success....The local gentry were trying by every means to allay with him by marriage; people were treating him like a god, cursing themselves for their former contempt and blindness....The other families renting his tumble-down house had been driven away—no need for that, they would move of their own accord—and the whole place was completely renovated with flagpoles and a placard at the gate....If he wanted to keep his hands clean he could be an official in the capital, otherwise some post in the provinces would prove more lucrative... (LXQJ 1: 542; Call to Arms 123).

However, when facing the facts, he immediately recognizes that everything is over. The sharp contrast between his dream and the facts upsets him and makes him go crazy. The omniscient narrator repeatedly says “Failed again!” thus stressing the cause of his craziness, and he generously describes his appearance, speech, action, and thought. Following the narrator, readers can see Chen’s sad fate as a victim of the imperial examination system.

Chen Shicheng’s thoughts and heart are in keeping with his appearance and actions. Those of Zhang Peiju in “Brothers” are hidden much deeper, for his speech and public deportment do not always accord with what goes on in his soul. More is revealed of his heart than of Chen Shicheng in “White Light.” The narrator penetrates into his conscious and subconscious life, even in his “dream fragments.”

When his colleague in the Public Welfare Bureau, Qin Yitang, tells him that his sons fight for money, Peijuin is unable to understand. With eyes flashing compassionately he says: “I really can’t understand why brothers squabble like this over trifles. What difference do these things make anyway?” (LXQJ 2: 132; Wandering 122) He is proud of his harmonious and selfless relations with his younger brother: “We don’t squabble, but share and share alike. Money and property aren’t things we worry about” (LXQJ 2: 132; Wandering 122). Hearing about an epidemic of scarlet fever, he worries very much, because the face of his younger brother, Jingfu, was hectic red when he came to the office after lunch. He tells the orderly to ring up a German doctor and ask him to see his brother at once.

At first glance, Peijuin really shows the utmost solicitude for his brother. However, when the omniscient narrator describes his solicitude for his brother and penetrates his heart, the reader sees the other side of him. Coming back to his home, as he keeps watch...
at his brother’s bedside during the night, the boredom of waiting for the doctor gradually slackens his attention, and fragmented images, related by the omniscient narrator, cross his mind. For a moment, Peijun thinks that Jingfu has incurable scarlet fever. What would he do about the family finances? Although their town is small, prices are going up. Through these fragmented images, the narrator makes the reader see that Peijun’s exemplary devotion to his younger brother hides a selfishness. His younger brother has eighteen hours of classes a week and has to correct ninety-three compositions on top of that. His support of the family is needed, for Peijun cannot cope with it alone. There is another matter to worry about: if Jingfu should die, how about Jingfu’s two children? It would be impossible to send them, as well as his own, to school. Suppose he could only afford to send one or two of them to school. His own son is the brightest of the lot, but if he sends him, everyone would criticize him for treating his brother’s children shabbily. Peijun is so disturbed by these thoughts that they still float through his mind when he learns from the doctor that Jingfu only has measles. The next morning, the fragments of his dream keep flashing before him:

--Jingfu was lying like this, but he was a corpse. He hastily laid him out and carried the coffin on his back all the way from outside the gate to the main hall. The place seemed to be their old home. He fancied he saw many acquaintances standing on either side praising him....

--He ordered Kang’er and his younger brother and sister [Peijun’s children] to go to school; but two other sobbing children clamoured to go with them. Their sobbing got on his nerves, but at the same time he felt that he had absolute power and great strength. He saw the palm of his hand, three or four times bigger than normal and hard as iron, slap Hesheng [Jingfu’s son] on the face.... (LXQJ 2: 140; Wandering 129-30).

After experiencing this vision, which exposes the secret of his heart, Peijun seems to know himself more clearly. The omniscient narrator describes the situation when Peijun works at his office. The office and the colleagues are all the same, but Peijun feels that they have changed and seem strange. Of course, its only because he feels himself different from the previous day on account of the frightening dream. The narrator makes it clear to the reader that the moral rectitude of Peijun’s relationship to his brother can no longer be taken for granted. Penetrating beneath the surface of externality, the omniscient narrator portrays a character who has affection for his brother on the surface, but is secretly selfish.

The protagonist of “Soap,” Siming, is nominally a moral man of great rectitude, but full of lascivious desires in his mind. The words, which are said on the street impertinently by a low type to a beggar girl who looked eighteen or nineteen, get engraved on his mind: “Afa! Don’t be put off by the dirt on this piece of good. If you buy two cakes of soap and give her a good scrubbing, the result won’t be bad at all!” (LXQJ 2: 49; Works 1: 217) The words give rise to lascivious desires in his mind. Although the omniscient narrator does not show Siming’s hidden desire, his actions and speech reveal it. He describes how Siming unconsciously bought a cake of scented toilet soap for his wife, and twice uses the words said by the low type. Siming vents the anger and resentment raised by his lascivious desire on his son Xuecheng, whom he has no reason to blame. His wife, who knows him well, exposes that desire in the scolding:

“How could he understand what’s in your mind?” She looked angrier than ever. “If he had any sense, he’d long since have lit a lantern or a torch and gone out to fetch that filial daughter. Luckily, you’ve already bought her one cake of soap; all you have to do is buy another.” (LXQJ 2: 49; Works 1: 219, slightly modified).
Siming tries by every means to deny this, but when Ho Daotong and Bu Weiyuan come
to his home he cannot help repeating the low type’s words to them, which indicates the
intensity of his lascivious desires. The omniscient narrator indicates Siming’s apparent
moral rectitude by quoting him that loyalty and filial piety are important virtues, and
“it’s already in very poor taste the way women wander up and down the streets, and
now they want to cut their hair as well” (LXQJ 2: 47; Works 1: 214). He thinks those
girls turn everything upside-down, and ought to be very severely dealt with indeed.
Although the omniscient narrator does not directly depict Siming’s psychological state,
his actions and speech, as well as his wife’s exposing, reveal the innermost recesses of
his heart. The hypocrite is exposed. As C.T. Hsia says, Siming “stands revealed as a
universal hypocrite” (42).

3.3 Changes in Focalization

Every narrative mode has advantages and disadvantages, and we cannot say
which one is better. As the history of Chinese and world literature show, every mode
can be successfully used, outstanding narratives can be created by using all of them.
Furthermore, the different narrative modes are not isolated from each other.

Narrative texts, even if short, may use several modes next to a dominant one:
focalization can shift. In Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, for instance, one finds variable
focalization, omniscience as well as partial restrictions. According to Genette: “This is a
perfectly defensible narrative course, and the norm of coherence raised to a point of
honor by post-Jamesian criticism is obviously arbitrary” (Discourse 194-95). To
Lubbock, who demands that the novelist must be “consistent on some plan, to follow
the principle he had adopted” (72), Genette responds by asking why novelists shouldn’t
take the course of “absolute freedom and inconsistency?” (Discourse 195). Lu Xun
successfully used all three narrative modes, but he did not restrict himself and we may
find shifting focalization in some of his short stories.

Genette thinks that certain variations in narrative “point of view” can be
analyzed as momentary infractions:

A change in focalization, especially if it is isolated within a coherent context,
can also be analyzed as a momentary infraction of the code which governs that
context without thereby calling into question the existence of the code—the same
way that in a classical musical composition a momentary change in tonality, or
even a recurrent dissonance, may be defined as a modulation or alteration
without contesting the tonality of the whole (Discourse 195).

To such isolated infractions that do not endanger the coherence of the whole and the
domination of a mode/mood, Genette gives the general name alteration. He conceives
of two types, which give either less or more information than is necessary in the code of
focalization governing the whole. He calls the first type paralipsis, and the second
paralepsis. In the latter we are dealing with taking up and giving information that
should be left aside (Discourse 195). Alteration, an isolated change in focalization,
sometimes occurs in summaries, when discourse time is shorter than story time.
Summary can cover a range of speeds between scene and ellipsis (Prince 94). The very
brevity of the summary makes it quantitatively inferior to descriptive and dramatic
chapters; summaries probably occupy a limited place in the corpus of narratives.
However, as a suitable instrument for presenting background information, or for
connecting various scenes, the importance of summary cannot be underestimated. It is
the most frequent transition between two scenes, and thus the connective tissue par excellence of novelistic narratives (Bal, *Narratology* 73; Genette, *Discourse* 96-97).

Both kinds of alterations exist in Lu Xun's stories. Let us first see how paralepsis allows an inroad into the consciousness of a character in the course of a narrative generally conducted in external focalization (Genette, *Discourse* 197). In external focalization the narrator generally does not enter the consciousness of characters. But in "The Lamp That Was Kept Alight" the narrator once does read the mind of the villagers:

After Square Head and Kuoting had shuttled to and fro between some of the larger houses, the whole of Lucky Light Village was plunged in confusion. Many ears and hearts were filled with that fearful word "Fire!" This was not true, of course, of quite a few more conservative ears and hearts. Still there was an air of tension throughout the village, and all conscious of this tension felt as acutely uneasy as if at any moment they were liable to change into eels and the whole world was to perish. Although they were vaguely aware that only Lucky Light Village was to perish, to them Lucky Light Village was the world (*LXQJ* 2: 62; *Wandering* 58, slightly modified).

This narrative summary follows two scenes: in the first, Kuoting, Square Head and other people talk about the "madman," in the second, they go to the temple and unsuccessfully try to persuade the "madman" not to put the lamp out. Two additional scenes follow this summary: in the first, which takes place in Fourth Master's reception room, Fourth Master, Old Guo, Kuoting and Square Head conspire against the madman; in the second, the madman is locked up in the temple and continues to insist to put the lamp out.

Events take a turn for the worse after the quoted summary. Thus, it is not only a suitable instrument for connecting various scenes, but also an important turning point in the development of events. Related to the previous scenes, the summary describes the air of tension throughout the village aroused by the madman. In order to intensify the air of this tension, the external focalization gradually shifts to an internal one. Phrases like "although they were vaguely aware that only Lucky Light Village was to perish, to them Lucky Light Village was the world" expose the thoughts of the people in the village and their panic about the approaching end. This presentation of the background information by way of internal focalization has an important role in the story's development: fearing their end, the old liners must prevent the madman from putting the lamp out. All events in the following scenes, gradually leading to the story's climax, will be closely related to the content of the summary. Although this information should formally be left aside, it is necessary for the course of events.

In internal focalization, the focal characters cannot know the thoughts and feelings or other characters, neither can they provide information about a scene that they are unable to witness. Paralepsis occurs when in the course of internal focalization such information is incidentally provided. In "A Madman's Diary," the focalizing first-person narrator, the madman, describes all sorts of characters and events, and he gives his personal explanations. Facing the characters normally, he just describes their looks, expressions and his conversations with them. However, there is an exception: when the madman goes to his elder brother and asks him not join the people who want to eat him [the madman]: "If they eat me, they can eat you as well; members of the same group can still eat each other" (*LXQJ* 1: 430; *Works* 1: 49). In talking with his brother, the madman sees that outside the gate a crowd had gathered, and all are craning their necks to peer in. He "could not see all their faces, some of them seemed to be masked; others
were the old lot, long-toothed with livid faces, concealing their laughter" (*LXQJ* 1: 430; *Works* 1: 49). Although he cannot see their faces, he knows their thoughts:

I knew they were one gang, all eaters of human flesh. But I also knew that they did not all think alike by any means. Some of them thought that since it had always been so, men should be eaten. Others knew they shouldn’t eat men but still wanted to, and were afraid people might discover their secret; so although what I said made them angry they still smiled their cynical, tight-lipped smiles (*LXQJ* 1: 430; *Works* 1: 49).

The madman cannot see all the faces, yet he can speak about the thoughts behind them with certainty. He does not guess their thoughts from their expression, but knows why some people “smiled their cynical, tight-lipped smiles.” We should note, however, that the statements come from a “madman,” an abnormal person. When he says he knows what goes on in people’s mind, this may just be an idea fixe in his own mind. His claiming of having insight only seemingly violates the focalization code governing the story as a whole. Actually, it does not contradict it.

Paralipsis is opposite to paralepsis. The classical type of paralipsis in the code of internal focalization is the omission of some important action or thought of the focal character, which neither the character nor the narrator can be ignorant of but which the narrator chooses to conceal from the reader (Genette, *Discourse* 195-96). The narrator in “A Small Incident” is certain that the woman who fell had not been hurt, and he asks the rickshaw man to keep going. But, the latter pays no attention to the remark, gently raises the old woman and heads for the main gate of the police station. At this point, the rickshaw man starts to grow in the focalizer’s mind and he himself is shrinking. Without thinking, he takes a handful of coppers out of his pocket and hands them to the policeman to give it to the rickshaw man. When the narrator later reflects on his motivation for this, he conceals something from the reader:

The wind had dropped completely, but the road was still quiet. As I walked along thinking, I hardly dared to think about myself. Quite apart from what had happened earlier, what had I meant by that handful of coppers? Was it a reward? Who was I to judge the rickshaw man? I could give myself no answer (*LXQJ* 1: 459; *Works* 1: 77-78).

The narrator had felt small in comparison to the rickshaw man; after this, he recognizes that this small incident is “teaching me shame, spurring me on to reform, and imbuing me with fresh courage and fresh hope” (*LXQJ* 1: 460; *Works* 1: 78). However, he says ambiguously about the reason that his giving a handful of coppers to the rickshaw man. He uses “I hardly dared to think about myself” as an excuse. But, why did he hardly dare to think about himself? The reader knows, the narrator does, too. As for the action itself, giving the rickshaw man a handful coppers, the narrator raises three questions in succession, none of which he can answer. He does not provide any further information about his motivation. Can he really not answer the questions? Viewing the whole story, the answer is no. The narrator refuses to answer and intentionally conceals something in his thought from the reader. Logically, the amount of information provided is less than needed, but the narrator’s concealment leaves the reader more space for reflection. Readers can themselves answer the questions raised by the focalizer and hence participate in constructing the story. According to Jean Pouillon, the main disadvantage of “vision with,” which actually is the internal focalization we are discussing here, is that the character is too well known in advance and holds no surprise in store (Genette, *Discourse* 196). But the narrator’s defensive concealment in “A Small Incident,” which
Pouillon would deem a clumsy deliberate omission, is actually an ingenious artistic device.

Omniscient narrators have more space than internal and external focalizations would allow. When they introduce focalized objects they may make choices, and they can change the omniscient view to a limited one, for example, to that of a character. In “The True Story of Ah Q” zero focalization is dominant: the omniscient narrator describes Ah Q’s whole tragic life, he even goes into his mind just before his execution. However, the code of narrative focalization in the introduction differs from the one governing the rest, because the omniscient narrator converts here to a first-person one:

For several years now I have been meaning to write the true story of Ah Q. But while wanting to write I was in some trepidation too, which goes to show that I am not one of those who achieve glory by writing; for an immortal pen has always been required to record the deeds of an immortal man, the man becoming known to posterity through the writing and the writing known to posterity through the man—until finally it is not clear who is making whom known. But in the end, as though possessed by some fiend, I always came back to the idea of writing the story of Ah Q (LXQJ 1:487; Works 1:102).

The first-person narrator talks here about himself and his comments on writing the story resemble those of Lu Xun. This frequently happens in narratives with zero focalization. But the introduction to “The True Story of Ah Q” goes further, for here the narrator enters in communication with his characters. Relating his uncertainty as to writing Ah Q’s name, he says: “I once put this question to Mr. Zhao’s son, the successful county candidate, but even such a learned man as he was baffled by it” (LXQJ 1:489; Works 1:105). Now both Mr. Zhao and his son will enter the story as characters later; the narrator communicates with them before their coming. Thus he becomes a first-person narrator participating in his fictional world. But unlike internally focalizing narrators, he deals only with a problem of writing and not with the characters and events of the story. “This is the one accounting for the part the narrator as such takes in the story he tells, the relationship he maintains with it” (Genette, Discourse 256). This narrator intentionally limits his view when he introduces his protagonist, he pretends he doesn’t know what Ah Q’s surname is and how to spell it and he is uncertain about his birthplace (LXQJ 1:488-89; Works 1:103-04, 106). All of these contrasts sharply with the remaining story, in which the narrator omnisciently relates Ah Q’s thoughts and actions. In principle, the narrator-focalizer knows everything about the represented world, and when he restricts his knowledge, he does so out of rhetorical considerations, for instance to create surprise or shock (Rimmon-Kenan 79). Here, the narrator’s restriction of his knowledge also has a special reason. In my opinion, the narrator wants to stress the character’s insignificance.

In narratives with zero focalization, the omniscient narrator often keeps a certain distance from the characters of the story in order to retain authority and objectivity. In “Tomorrow,” the code of focalization governing the whole changes partly, and the distance between the narrator and his character suddenly shortens. The omniscient narrator in “Tomorrow” repeatedly comments that “Fourth Shan’s Wife was a simple woman.” When she returns to the loneliness and emptiness of her room after Bao’er’s burial, she is bereft of all hope:

She knew now her Bao’er was really dead; and, not wanting to see this room, she blew out the light and lay down to cry and think. She remembered how Bao’er had sat by her side when she spun, eating peas flavoured with aniseed. He had watched her hard with his small black eyes and thought. “Ma!” he suddenly said. “Dad sold
hun dun. When I’m big I’ll sell hun dun too, and make lots of money—and I’ll give it all to you.”

At such times even every inch of yarn she spun seemed worthwhile and alive. But what now? Fourth Shan’s Wife had not considered the present at all—as I have said, she was only a simple woman. What solution could she think of? All she knew was that this room was too silent, too large, too empty (LXQJ 1: 455-56; Works 1: 74-75).

There is a shift of focalization in this quotation: the omniscient narrator enters his text as an “I,” his dispassionate voice is replaced by an emotional one. Lyell thinks that Lu Xun’s subjectivity leads him here to a rare breach of artistic and tonal consistency when he needlessly intrudes in the first person (Reality 301). But the intrusion is not “needless,” because it induces in reader’s greater solicitude for the tragic lot of Fourth Shan’s Wife.

“Medicine” and “The Divorce” have more complicated focalization. In the former, related to the parallel threads, different narrative angles are chosen, internal and zero focalization are combined. Focalization in “The Divorce” is similar to “Medicine.” Several shifts in focalizations are to be found in both. When a special focalization is used, some isolated infractions may appear. The third installment of “Medicine” at a tea-house is focalized from the visions of the omniscient narrator and Uncle Kang respectively. First the omniscient narrator relates how people in the tea-house get together talking and drinking, but once Uncle Kang is introduced the narrator pretends to be an onlooker who does not know the situation:

“It’s just that Old Shuan’s busy,” said the hunchback. “If his son....” But before he could finish, a heavy-jowled man burst in. He had over his shoulders a dark brown shirt, unbuttoned and fastened carelessly by a broad dark brown girdle at his waist. As soon as he entered, he shouted to Old Shuan:

“Has he taken it? Any better? Luck’s with you, Old Shuan. What luck! If not for my hearing of things so quickly....” [...]

“This is a guaranteed cure! Not like other things!” declared the heavy-jowled man.

“Just think, brought back warm, and eaten warm!”

“Yes indeed, we couldn’t have managed it without Uncle Kang’s help.” The old woman thanked him very warmly (LXQJ 1: 444; Works 1: 62-63).

The omniscient narrator introduces a new character in an unexpected way. In order to create a special atmosphere and effect, he feigns ignorance of newcomer that bursts into the tea-house. When reporting what the newcomer says, the narrator identifies him as “the heavy-jowled man,” the phrase he used introducing him. The reader learns his identity only once the old woman calls him Uncle Kang. The method increases the reader’s curiosity and produces a dramatic effect.

We see that in Lu Xun’s fiction the breaches of normal focalization, isolated infractions, are not random but motivated. The effect of an infraction cannot be ignored, the change of convention can reveals special rhetorical methods.

3.4 Narrator’s Intervention

Narrators can intervene into the story in zero as well as internal and external focalization, though they do so more frequent in narratives with zero focalization. Narrative intervention is less frequent in modern than in traditional fiction, but it still exists. The question is not whether the narratorial intervention is allowed, but whether it suits the story.
Narratorial interventions normally appear as comments on characters, events, and even the text itself, and they go beyond the identification, description, or recounting of events. In the commentary, the narrator explains the meaning or significance of a narrative element, makes value judgments, refers to worlds transcending the characters’ world, or comments on their own narration (Prince 14). In a chapter in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* on narrators’ commentary, Booth includes: providing of facts, picture, or summary; molding beliefs; relating particulars to the established norms; heightening the significance of events; generalizing the significance of the whole work; manipulating mood; and commenting directly on the work itself (*Rhetoric* 169-210). Chatman distinguishes two kinds of intervention: commentary on story and commentary on discourse respectively. Of the former he distinguishes three aspects, interpretation, judgment, and generalization:

“In interpretation” can be seen as the broadest category of overt commentary. In one sense, it includes the others: if an interpretation proper is any explanation, a judgment is an explanation whose basis is moral evaluation, while a generalization is one that compares an event or existent in the story with real ones in the nonfictional universe (*Story* 237).

In “The True Story of Ah Q” we find commentary both on the story and on the discourse. The commentary on discourse belongs to what Genette calls the narrator’s “directing function”: they are to some extent metalinguistic, marking the articulations, connections, interrelationships of the discourse, in short, its internal organization (*Discourse* 255). Such a commentary was very common in traditional Chinese fiction, much it became conventional. In the Introduction to “The True Story of Ah Q,” the narrator says that he has been meaning to write the true story of Ah Q for several years, but with some trepidation:

And yet no sooner had I taken up my pen than I became conscious of tremendous difficulties in writing this far-from-immortal work. The first was the question of what to call it. Confucius said, “If the name is not correct, the words will not ring true”; and this axiom should be most scrupulously observed. There are many types of biography: official biographies, autobiographies, unauthorized biographies, legends, supplementary biographies, family histories, sketches... but unfortunately none of these suited my purpose. (*LXQJ* 1: 487; *Works* 1: 102).

The narrator then explains why all these do not suit his purpose. Finally, he decides to use for his title the last two words of a stock narrative phrase: “Enough of this digression, and back to the *true story.*” Here, through the choice of his story’s title, the narrator deals with his writing of it. At this moment, the protagonist, Ah Q, has not yet come to the stage, while the highly “self-conscious” narrator tells the reader about his tremendous difficulties in writing. This “self-conscious” narration undercuts the fabric of the fiction (Chatman, *Story* 248) and foregrounds the discursive comments. The narrator stresses in this special way that he is writing a story. This increases the distance between the narrator and the protagonist. Like a puppeteer, the narrator can freely pull the strings of his figure.

Comments on discourse and story are not isolated from each other. Some comments on discourse are simple, straightforward and relatively harmonious with the story (Chatman, *Story* 248). In the quoted comments on discourse, Ah Q is not a legendary figure, has no achievements and the narrator is not Ah Q. At the beginning of the story, the narrator says that “an immortal pen has always been required to record the deeds of an immortal man” (*LXQJ* 1: 487; *Works* 1: 102), but then he admits that he is
writing a “far-from-immortal work.” From the contrast between “immortal” and “far-from-immortal,” readers can easily infer what kind of character they will face. The narrator’s tone toward his character is disdainful and mocking, which undoubtedly will influence the reader’s reception of the character. The narrator then combines his comments on discourse and story. Talking about biographies of this type, the narrator says they should start something like this: “So-and-so, whose other name was so-and-so, was a native of such-and-such a place” (LXQJ 1: 488; Works 1: 103). But he does not know what Ah Q’s surname is. He then says: “Once, he seemed to be named Zhao, but the next day there was some confusion about the matter again” (LXQJ 1: 488; Works 1: 103), because Mr. Zhao does not allow such a wretch to have the surname Zhao. The discourse comments effect the story and directly touch its content.

Discourse comments can use different devices. Some of them, especially in self-conscious narration, are different from the convention of the narrative text. They are seemingly bent on destroying, not merely playing with, the narrative text. One such discourse commentary is to add footnotes to the text — a technique that Lu Xun uses in two stories. There are two footnotes in “The Lamp that Was Kept Alight,” and two in “The Divorce.” The most remarkable one appears in the following situation:

The boat was very quiet, with no sound but the splash of water against the bow. Zhuang Musan reached for his pipe and filled it. A fat man sitting opposite, next to Basan, rummaged in his girdle for a flint and struck a light, which he held to Zhuang Musan’s pipe.

“Dui, dui,” said Zhuang Musan, nodding to him (LXQJ 2: 145; Works 1: 273, slightly modified).

“Dui, dui,” the author explains in a note, is a clipped form of duibüqi, duibüqi [Sorry to bother you—lit., I can’t face you] or a contraction of dezui,dezui [I’ve troubled you—lit., I’m the one to blame]: Unknown” (LXQJ 2: 145). In the first three notes the author explains some words, whose meaning seems unclear or ambiguous. However, this one does not give the exact meaning for the Musan’s words; on the contrary, it says that their meaning is “unknown.” Musan’s response is ambiguous, even on a very simple matter, namely that the fat man shows his respect and kindness for him. It shows that he is absent-minded at the moment. Before this, Basan had very tactfully persuaded Musan and Aigu, by saying “there’s really no point in Aigu going back there” (LXQJ 2: 145; Works 1: 273). Aigu strongly objected to this. Basan is convinced and keeps his mouth shut. Hearing their talking, Musan is probably lost in thought, and his response to the fat man is ambiguous “dui, dui.” The note of “dui, dui,” the narrator’s intrusion into the discourse, is relevant to the story, its rhetorical function cannot be ignored.

Lu Xun’s stories also contain commentaries that lie between discourse and story, form and content. These, often placed in brackets, are commentaries on discourse that are closely related to the story. They are the narrator’s commentary on interpretations of the story. Their function, according to Booth, is “to tell the reader about facts that he could not easily learn otherwise” (Rhetoric 169). Let us see the following two paragraphs in “My Old Home”:

Our family had only one “busy-monther” servant. (In our district we divide servants into three categories: those who work all the year for one family are called “year-long”; those who are hired by the day are called “short-timers”; and those who farm their own land and only work for one family at New Year, during festivals or when rents are being collected are called “busy-monther”) (LXQJ 1: 477-78; Works 1: 92, slightly modified).
After making this discovery, Mrs. Yang is very pleased with herself, and flies off taking the dog-crazer with her. (The dog-crazer is used by poultry keepers in our part. It is a wooden cage inside which food is put, so that hens can stretch their necks in to eat but dogs can only stand around “crazed” with frustration.) (LXQJ 1: 484; Works 1: 100, slightly modified).

The narrator makes the commentaries of interpretation on the “busy-monther” and the “dog-crazer” respectively. Chinese readers would have no problem in guessing the meaning of “busy-monther.” Yet the narrator not only explains the exact meaning of the word, but also gives some supplementary information. This is both interesting and useful, because readers can infer from it that the narrator’s family could not afford a “year-long” servant. As for the “dog-crazer,” even most Chinese readers will not understand its meaning without explanation. This commentary shows that Mrs. Yang is greedy and ridiculous: she takes a worthless thing with her.

The narrator’s intervention in traditional narratives often has no close relation to the contents of story. But in Lu Xun’s stories the comments fuse with the context and seem apt. In “Storm in a Teacup,” the narrator comments when Old Mrs. Ninepounder and her granddaughter Sixpounder come to the stage and Old Mrs. Ninepounder says for the first time her pet phrase “Each generation is worse than the last”:

It was the somewhat unusual custom in this village for mothers to weigh their children at birth and to call them the number of pounds they happened to weigh. Since Old Mrs. Ninepounder’s celebration of her fiftieth birthday she had gradually become a fault-finder, for ever complaining that in her young days the summer had not been so hot nor the beans so tough as now. In a word, there was something wrong with the present-day world. Why else had Sixpounder weighed three pounds less than her great-grandfather and one pound less than her father, Sevenpounder? Surely this was irrefutable evidence. So she reiterated emphatically, “Yes, indeed. Each generation is worse than the last” (LXQJ 1: 468; Works 1: 80).

The narrator’s comments on the odd names of Ninepounder and Sixpounder make readers understand the background of their names. This not only satisfies the reader’s curiosity, but provides the opportunity for Old Mrs. Ninepounder to use her pet phrase about gradual decline. Relating that Sixpounder weighed three pounds less than her great-grandfather and one pound less than her father, the narrator ironically remarks: “Surely this was irrefutable evidence.” The commentary is ironic, because a single example is never “irrefutable.” When Mrs. Sevenpounder refutes Old Mrs. Ninepounder later on, we know that the “evidence” is definitely not “irrefutable” but doubtful. Old Mrs. Ninepounder still repeats her pet phrase, raising doubts about her judgment. These comments by the narrator are not only in perfect harmony with the story, they also mock at characters such as Old Mrs. Ninepounder, who obstinately adhere to past practices. In real life, she is definitely not unique. In Chinese, the name “Old Mrs. Ninepounder” has taken a specific meaning, referring to persons who stick to old ways.

Comments of judgment are explanations whose basis is moral evaluation; the narrator judges the values, norms, and beliefs of characters. Comments of judgment may be scattered in the text. Narrators frequently judge the character’s moral norms through adjectives. Examples are not difficult to find in Lu Xun’s stories. For example, “Our boss was a grim-faced man, nor were the customers much pleasanter, which made the atmosphere a gloomy one” (LXQJ 1: 438; Works 1: 53). “This Mr. N is rather irascible. He often loses his temper for no reason and makes tactless remarks” (LXQJ 1: 461; Call to Arms 39). In some stories, the narrator repeats his judgment on the same character several times in order to produce a special effect. In “Tomorrow,” for example,
Fourth Shan’s Wife tries everything for her boy: she had drawn lots at the temple; she had made her vow; and she had given the boy his medicine. If he still does not get better, she will have to take him to Mr. Ho Xiaoxian. “But maybe Bao’er’s only bad at night; when the sun comes out tomorrow his fever may go and he may breathe more easily again. A lot of illnesses are like that” (LXQJ 1: 451; Works 1: 69). To counter her trusting to luck, the narrator comments: “Fourth Shan’s Wife was a simple woman, who did not know what a fearful word ‘but’ is. Thanks to this ‘but,’ many bad things turn out well, many good things turn out badly.” The remark, “Fourth Shan’s Wife was a simple woman,” appears five times in the story. The first time already hints that her simplicity may not be effective. However, the narrator makes clear that Fourth Shan’s Wife is not only “simple.” He remarks, for example, that “she might be a simple woman, but she had a will of her own” (LXQJ 1: 451; Works 1: 69). The repetition of the judgment also increases the distance between the narrator and his character, and keeps the narrator’s authority and objectivity. He can tell a sad story in a calm tone.

In “The True Story of Ah Q,” the reader can find many comments. At the opening of Chapter Four, entitled “The Tragedy of Love,” the comment of judgment is not directly related to the events, but the narrator links it to the protagonist:

There are said to be some victors who take no pleasure in a victory unless their opponents are as fierce as tigers or eagles: in the case of foes as timid as sheep or chickens they find their triumph empty. There are other victors who, having carried all before them, with the enemy slain or surrendered, utterly cowed, realize that now no foe, no rival, no friend is left—none but themselves, supreme, lonely, lost, and forlorn. Then they find their triumph a tragedy. But not so our hero: he was always exultant. This may be a proof of the moral supremacy of China over the rest of the world (LXQJ 1: 498; Works 1: 117).

Unlike those victors who feel empty, lonely, lost, and forlorn even in victory, Ah Q, an unimportant person, as shown by his previous actions, is always exultant. The narrator speaks of “our” Ah Q, which has a special meaning. It makes people aware that Ah Qs are living with “us” and among “us.” When the narrator adds that Ah Q’s permanently “exultant” state may be “a proof of the moral supremacy of China over the rest of the world,” this can only be understood as a generalizing irony.

When discussing commentaries that “manipulate mood,” Booth claims that a different element enters when an author intrudes to address the reader’s moods and emotions directly. Thus, he thinks it is reasonable “for the frequent insistence that indispensable commentary be spoken by a character in the story” (Rhetoric 201). In Lu Xun’s stories, the comments by narrating characters sometimes come from unreliable narrators. In such cases, the comments arouse questions: the narrator-character’s judgment and evaluation may be problematic or they may defend his own actions. When Xianglin’s Wife in “The New Year Sacrifice,” makes detailed inquiries about whether dead people turn into ghosts, whether hell exists, and whether all members of a family will meet again after death, the narrator “I” finally says “I’m not sure” and walks off quickly. After that, he comments on what he said and did:

“I’m not sure” is a most useful phrase. Bold inexperienced youngsters often take it upon themselves to solve problems or choose doctors for other people, and if by any chance things turn out badly they may well be held to blame; but by concluding their advice with this evasive expression they achieve blissful immunity from reproach. The necessity for such a phrase was brought home to me still more forcibly now, since it was indispensable even in speaking with a beggar woman (LXQJ 2: 8; Works 1: 172).
The narrator comforts himself for what he said in a relaxed tone. He calms down, but his scholarly conscience also diminishes. Readers will take a poor view of him since he shirks moral responsibility by extricating himself from an awkward predicament.

Another narrator's comment of judgment is to be found in "Regret for the Past," when Juansheng's life becomes more and more difficult and he is about to forsake his common-law wife Zijun. Reflecting on his life during the last half year he comments:

As I sat there alone thinking over the past, I realized that during the last half year, for love—blind love—I had neglected all the other important things in life. First and foremost, livelihood. A man must make a living before there can be any place for love. There must be a way out for those who struggle, and I hadn't yet forgotten how to flap my wings, although I was much weaker than before.... (LXQJ 2: 121; Works 1: 261)

The narrator's judgment holds true for life: "A man must make a living before there can be any place for love." However, the applicability of narrative judgments "depends upon how they suit the fictional context, not their truth in an absolute sense" (Chatman, Story 244). In this context, Juansheng's comment is unsuitable, because it becomes his pretext. Zijun loves him, but the narrator regards her love as "blind" and he attributes all his problems to this "blind love." This is grossly unfair to Zijun. The narrator's comments raise suspicion about his intention and they make Zijun more attractive.

In commentaries of generalization that compare something in the story with elements in the nonfictional universe, we frequently find "general truths," that is, philosophical observations that reach beyond the world of the fictional work into the real universe" (Chatman, Story 237, 243). Like "general truths," the commentary of generalization says something that everybody knows. In Lu Xun's stories, the narrator sometimes states something which people know very well, or he uses sayings handed down for a long time, in order to explain and summarize the character's action or the event's occurrence. When Ah Q, looking different from before, tosses unto the counter a handful of silver and copper to order wine, the narrator remarks: "The ancients say, 'A scholar who has been away three days must be looked at with new eyes.' So the waiter, tavern-keeper, customers and passers-by all quite naturally expressed a kind of suspicion mingled with respect" (LXQJ 1: 508; Works 1: 129-30). When Ah Q first wins at gambling but finally loses everything, the narrator says by way of introduction: "the truth of the proverb 'Misfortune may prove a blessing in disguise' was shown when Ah Q was unfortunate enough to win and almost suffered in the end" (LXQJ 1: 493; Works 1: 111). The sayings "A scholar who has been away three days must be looked at with new eyes," and "Misfortune may prove a blessing in disguise" are familiar to Chinese readers. They are "general truths" that do not provide new information in this context. With these commonplace sayings, the narrator makes the reader have a strong impression. Of course, the "general truth" may have different meaning in different contexts. Its narrative use may or may not be ironic. The original meaning of "Misfortune may prove a blessing in disguise" is that a loss may turn out to be a gain, but the narrator could use this commentary to say that a gain may turn out to be a loss. Here, the proverb is ironically as in many other contexts that Lu Xun often takes an ironic a critical attitude with respect to "ancient wisdom."

---

1 Liang Dynasty (502-557), one of the dynasties in the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589) in China.
2 Lu Xun says: "Ah Q seems to have figured in my imagination for several years, but I had never felt the slightest urge to write about him. This request [by Sun Fuyuan, editor of the Morning News supplement;
he asked Lu Xun to write for a weekly column on “Humour”) made me remember him, so I wrote the first chapter that evening, ‘Introduction’” (LXQJ 3: 281; Works 2: 315).

2 Lu Xun comments: “To make it fit into ‘Humour,’ I added some unnecessary jokes at random, which actually do not suit the story as a whole” (LXQJ 3: 378; Works 2: 315).

4 All four notes were omitted in Yang’s translation; while William Lyell keeps them all. My translation relies on Lyell’s text (Diary of a Madman and Other Stories 379).

5 Some readers overlook the special function of this note. Lu Xun’s “The Divorce” was included in Reference Material on the History of Modern Chinese Literature (Vol. I) but this note was cut out (p. 26). This is an obvious misunderstanding. In the recent The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun published by the Zhejiang Literary and Art (1992), Shidai Literary and Art (1999) and Henan People’s (1999) publishing houses, the original four notes of the author in “The Divorce” and “The Lamp that Was Kept Alight” were all cut out.