Narrative Modes in Lu Xun's Short Stories

Tan, Junqiang

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Conclusions

We investigated Lu Xun's short stories from the perspective of narrative modes, against the background of traditional Chinese fiction and the course of its modernization around the turn of this century. This investigation suggests certain conclusions concerning the transformation of the narrative modes and the significance of Lu Xun's short stories in this transformation, as well as Lu Xun's successful use of all important narrative modes.

The transformation of narrative modes from narratives with zero focalization to narratives with internal and external focalizations is one of the most important signs in the transition from traditional to modern Chinese fiction. This transformation, which began in the work of the late Qing novelists, reached a higher stage and was successfully completed in Lu Xun's fiction. It was a long process, marked by the phases of translation, a story in classical Chinese, "Remembering Past Times," and Lu Xun's short stories in modern Chinese. These works show a clear development in this regard. In his early translations of Jules Verne's fiction, Lu Xun used all the techniques of traditional Chinese fiction with zero focalization; then he successfully used the internal focalization in first-person in his first short story, still written in classical Chinese, and, finally, following his first story in the modern vernacular, "A Madman's Diary," he skillfully employed different narrative modes in his later stories.

Lu Xun's transformation of narrative modes was a creative effort, profiting from influences from both the foreign fiction and the traditional Chinese fiction. In other words, Lu Xun did not cut his connection with traditional Chinese fiction when he absorbed many foreign techniques, including new narrative modes. Lu Xun's fiction is separated by a profound rift from traditional fiction; yet it still had some traces of it. He wrote his short stories in new forms by transforming as well as transcending traditional Chinese influences, all the while consciously borrowing from Western literary models.

Lu Xun's short stories are generally acknowledged to be classics of modern Chinese fiction, and he was the first writer in the history of modern Chinese fiction to use successfully all the important narrative modes. He creatively developed the art of narration, especially the complex art of fictional narrator.

Lu Xun wrote outstanding stories in all three kinds of narrative modes, but from a narrative perspective his fiction with internal and external focalization were of greatest importance to modern Chinese fiction. In these narratives, Lu Xun skillfully introduced new narrators who differed from the traditional omniscient narrator, and he introduced new ideas even in the case of the latter. Among his narrators, the first-person narrators merit special attention, because in traditional Chinese fiction one rarely finds narrators who participate in the events of the story and because of their unique role and function in the story. Although there are some stories which include the author's individual experiences, they are all fictional rather than autobiographical. Actually, Lu Xun avoided revealing himself in his stories. He developed the device of unreliable narrator, and distanced himself from the characters. Lu Xun's first person narrators are narrator-characters who participate to varying degrees in the events: they may be observers, witnesses, minor participants, relatively important participants, and protagonists. As narrator-characters, they all have their meaning in the story. At the same time, they have a special function. Having special physical, mental, or moral attributes, these narrators not only tell the story to the reader, they can also treat and observe characters from a special and limited view, or describe a number of characters through their perspective, which permits the author to concentrate his description on the special characters and events familiar to him. Thus the scholars, intellectuals and farmers become two kinds of unforgettable characters in the stories: in the first-person narrations, the focalizer and the first-person narrator coincide as a narrator-character, in
the third person narrations the focalizer coincides with a character and become a character-focalizer, but does not coincide with the narrator. In the latter case, seeing and saying are separate.

Passages with external focalization may be found in some traditional Chinese fiction, for example, when the narrator quotes characters’ speeches. But these never carry through a whole story. Lu Xun’s two stories with external focalization made skillful use of this technique and they became outstanding examples for using this narrative mode.

Each of Lu Xun’s short stories has a dominant focalization and a certain narrative mode. However, the different narrative modes are not isolated from each other in the story, and the author does not always follow through with the principle he adopted at the outset. In some stories the focalization changes, and there are some alterations appeared.

Every narrative mode has its own strength and weaknesses. One cannot judge a story or novel just by the narrative mode it employs. However, in the development from traditional to modern fiction, the change of the narrative modes is a notable phenomenon. This change first occurred in Western fiction, and in Chinese fiction, which ran a different trajectory, it happened later.