

# Study on the Narrative Time and Space of Mo Yan's Novellas and Short Stories

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## ABSTRACT

The narrative time and space in Mo Yan's novels can be described as intertwined and jumping, with twists and turns, interpromoting relation between fiction and reality, and unpredictability. This article focuses on Mo Yan's novellas and short stories since his attempt of narrative revolution in 1985, appreciates the quirky and changeable narrative landscape of time-space perversion, time-space loopback, and the interpromoting relation between fiction and reality, and also explores the triple narrative strategy behind them, namely, presenting the cause and effect of reclusion with disorderly time and space, mapping the complex psychology of characters with disordered time and space, and expanding the spatial-temporal pattern to enhance the aesthetic effect.

**Keywords:** Mo Yan's novels, Narrative time and space, Narrative strategy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Time and space are the two basic ways for humans to perceive the world. Time and space in the novel both complement and support each other, and jointly serve the advancement of the story, the shaping of the characters, or the presentation of the theme; the superposition and extension of time and space reflect the writer's narrative strategy to a certain extent. The narrative time and space in Mo Yan's novels can be described as intertwined and jumping, with twists and turns, interpromoting relation between fiction and reality, and unpredictability.

## 2. UNPREDICTABLE NARRATIVE TIME AND SPACE

### 2.1 Time-Space Perversion

In the novel *Dry River* (《枯河》), the boy Xiaohu played with the secretary's daughter Xiaozhen. Xiaohu fell from a tree and crushed Xiaozhen to death. Xiaohu was beaten by the secretary and his

father and brother. By writing that "On the riverbank, he squatted down, and the shadow that enveloped him was much larger than his body" [1], it expressed the death of Xiaohu cryptically. Then it clearly explained Xiaohu's death as "Until tomorrow morning when he huddled up like a frog in the sweet potato vine at the bottom of the river and slept eternally never to wake up, the people in the village gathered around and looked at him..." [1] Later, it continued Xiaohu's "present" feeling with "He squatted on the riverbank, put his hands in the bends of his legs, and put his chin on his sharp knees" [2]; then, by writing that "Perhaps, when he was squatting on the riverbank surrounded by a mass of shadows, there was a sobbing sound coming out of his thirsty throat. Maybe he was reminiscing about what had just happened before. At that time, he was wearing a fat gown and standing barefoot under a white poplar. In front of the white poplar were the only five tile-roofed houses in the village. The child in the tile-roofed house was a very beautiful little girl with dark eyes like two black chess pieces. The girl said to him: 'Xiaohu, can you climb up this white poplar?'" [2], it recalled what happened. In real life, people are under the control of and accustomed to the irreversible definitive property of linear time, however, in the world of fiction, the author reconstructs the logical relationship between

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discourse time and story time to present the author's imagination of time and the reconstruction of order by rebelling against and offending linear time.[3]

## 2.2 *Time-Space Loopback*

The first sentence of the opening of the novel *Red Sorghum* (《红高粱》) writes, "In 1939, on August 9th of the lunar calendar, my father, a bandit species, was a little over fourteen years old. He followed the team of the legendary hero, Commander Yu Zhanao, who would later renown the world over, to ambush the enemy's motor squadron on Jiaoping Highway." [4] The two time scales of "In 1939, on August 9th of the lunar calendar" and "a little over fourteen years old" gave the story plausibility [5] and stipulated the narrative time as the past, then the word "later" pointed the time to the future. In the later text, by writing that "Seven days later, on August 15th, it was the Mid-Autumn Festival... My father smelled a bloody and sweet smell that was countless times stronger than now under the broken moon shadow" [6], it broke the barriers of linear timing with the narrative sequence from the future to the present. Next, through the description "Father often walked this way and it often flashed before his eyes when he was suffering in the Japanese charcoal kilns later" [7], it preset the future and associated the present based on the present — the future — the present time sequence. In the fourth section of the novel, the father and grandpa's ambush scenes interspersed with past events such as the father and uncle Luohan catching crabs, uncle Luohan being arrested and skinned alive and executed, etc. In the ninth section of the novel, it described the scene of the battle between grandpa's troop and the Japanese troops, which was sprinkled with scenes like later the grandpa and father burying grandma hastily, later on grandpa returning after living in a cave in the wasteland of Japan, then grandpa's death, and then Leng Detachment grabbing grandpa's trophy after the war, taking the present — the future — the future of the future — the future of the future of the future — the future — the present as the narrative time chain, connecting the future with the present, associating multiple futures with the future, and then returning to the present.

## 2.3 *Juxtaposition of Fiction and Reality*

In the novel *Revolutionary Romanticism* (《革命浪漫主义》), "I" entered a nursing home because half of my butt cheeks was blown off by a landmine. During this period, I fell in love with the little nurse

and fantasized about marrying her and having children: "When is she going to give me a son with long incisors and a wrinkled nose? This is of course an illusion..." [8]

Soon, it made a sudden turn to the war, using "Katyusha" as a metaphor for the rising artillery fire, which caused many injuries and deaths of comrades-in-arms. Suddenly, it turned to the evaluation of the battle fatigues by an old Red Army man who was also recuperating in the nursing home, inserting the evaluation of the battle fatigues by the late captain in the war during his lifetime: "As the pear flower blooms all over the world, the river is floating with soft veil Katyusha! Katyusha flies to the bare red clay hills like rows of bright silver snakes... At that time, the nerves on my butt cheeks are very tense. I unload the weapons and ammunition from my body, and when I'm about to take a leap, our captain is already flying into the sky and another comrade-in-arms is beaten in two parts by the waist. Shrapnel whiz past my head and hit a bird that is fleeing in panic..." [9]

Then it talked about "me being set up with someone by my sister" after recuperation: "My sister set me up with someone who asked me to dance with her. I said that I can't even walk well, much less dancing... In the smoke, our captain flies to the sun, his feathers gleaming with gold. My girlfriend is trembling all over, peeling 'Chinese tumion seed' with her fingers violently, and the expression on her crazily wiggly butt cheeks is rich... I get up and walk out of the ballroom and onto the street..." [9]

The narrative time of the novel is the period of convalescence when "I" am in the nursing home, and the story time in the quotation completely breaks this boundary and barrier, not only going back to the past time and space, reviewing the battle scenes on the battlefield, but also crossing into the future dimension, to show "me" being set up with someone by my sister after the recuperation, the intercourse between "I" and the one I date with, and the depression in "my" heart. It is difficult to confirm from the work whether the future events occur in reality or out of illusions. In this way, reality and dream as well as past and present, are deliberately confused and reversed by the author; the narrative time is separated from the simple copy of the story time, intentionally disobeys and deviates from the time sequence, and uses the inverse time sequence and the chronological time sequence in combination to intricately interweave the past, present, and future,

in order to show the anomie of order brought about by war and the physical and mental devastation caused to those who witnessed it. Once narrative time no longer faithfully maps linear time, then narrative time in the novel itself has become an organic part of creative activities.

### **3. EXPLORING THE NARRATIVE STRATEGY**

#### ***3.1 Unordered Time and Space, Reclusive Cause and Effect***

As in the novel *Dry River* quoted above, when an innocent child becomes a victim of the established order, then the perversion of time and space is bound to become inevitable. In this way, the perversion of time and space is not only due to the author's aesthetic purport and narrative need, but also means people's anxious call for logical order and rules.

In the novel *Man and Beast* (《人与兽》), near a corn field on a mountain ridge in Japan, the grandpa who has lived in the mountains for a long time sees a Japanese woman Xiaojie, "Grandpa knows from her two bulging breasts that she is a woman who breast-feeds. Douguan hangs on his grandma's breasts clowning around as she slaps his bare butt cheeks. The thin and sturdy Douguan stands on the back of the mare, and runs across Tian'anmen loosely on the reins, with the horse's hoofs clattering, and there are horseshoes ringing on the rocky road. He and his companions shout slogans loudly, resounding throughout the world." [10] The narrative changes in time and space here include both a vertical historical review and a horizontal observation of the present, which can be described as criss-cross and variegated, and the span of space is adjusted by the loops of time, not only cleverly marking the time scale of Grandpa's encounter with the Japanese woman, but also vaguely conveying Grandpa's vengeance psychology of trying to assault the Japanese woman indecently. In this regard, the causal logic is implied under the appearance of time-to-space conversion.

The novel *Our Uncle Seven* (《我们的七叔》) inserts in the fantasy dream of missing Uncle Seven that Uncle Seven ignored the grandparents' upbringings to him whose parents were both dead and slandered the grandparents, causing the old couple to suffer strong physical and spiritual injury and blow. In grief and indignation, Uncle Seven's

grandparents cursed him to die. Now the death of Uncle Seven in a car accident seems to have fulfilled the curse of the grandparents. Uncle Seven was innocent, childlike, and energetic with strong mind, but his slander against his grandparents during the Cultural Revolution was tantamount to loot a burning house and add insult to an injury, making the situation of the two who had been persecuted for no reason worsened, which really hurt his grandparents who worked hard tirelessly to raise him. In the following text, "I", who came back from the condolence of Uncle Seven, met the Uncle Seven who had passed away. Uncle Seven said that he knew "I" came back, and came to welcome "I" specially. "Uncle Seven said: This is fated. Sooner or later, I can't escape the catastrophe. Do you remember? During the 'Cultural Revolution', I kicked your grandpa and grandma in the butt cheeks, which was condemned as evil. This is the way God punishes me." [11] In the above plot of the novel, the "present" is used to associate the "past" of the past, and the dual past is linked to the "past"; in the seemingly chaotic time sequence, there is a causal logic hidden: the result of Uncle Seven's death in a car accident at "present" is because he requited kindness with enmity in the past before the past, and his repentance when "I" encountered Uncle Seven in the "past" further confirmed the aforementioned causal logic. It can be seen that as far as reading experience is concerned, the messy time sequence is only the appearance and belongs to the category of form, while the inner causal logic is the essence, the quintessence. As for the narrative strategy, the novel uses the faint foreshadowing method to hide the causal logic into the interlaced time sequence, expressing the order of the cause and effect through the disorder of time.

#### ***3.2 Mapping the Complex Psychology of Characters with Disordered Time and Space***

In the third section of the novel *Ball Lightning* (《球状闪电》), it went from the memories of the grasshopper stepping on the hedgehog in the reeds to the present day hedgehog witnessing ball lightning hit the grasshopper in the grasshopper's yard, and back to memories of the grasshopper's conversation with the cocoon in the reeds. The novel dissolves the pre-existence of a single linear narrative logic with a cross-over pattern of chronological and inverse time sequences of the past — the present — the past — the present — the

past. Its obscuration and deformation of the conventional temporal relations not only enrich the space-time dimension of the narrative, but also reflect the irrational view of the narrative subject to the phenomenal world.

In the novel *Blond Baby* (《金发婴儿》), Tianqiu "wanted to visit home more, but then something else happened, which delayed his trip. These things will come to his mind when he sits on the tidal flats with michelalbine by the small river in his hometown." [12] The author uses the time sequence of the present — the future — the further future — the past to express the Tianqiu's regrets for not being able to visit the home in the future, and his pain and annoyance for his wife's affair, which had become a fact. Here, the messy narrative time comes not only from the innovation in form, but also from the need of content. Conversely, the author's disrupting and reshaping of narrative time and space and collage of disorder are not only a creative development of narrative time, but also a deliberate effort to reveal the characters' upset and regret.

The fourth section of the novel *Strange Death* (《奇死》) tells the tragic scene of the Second Mistress and the Younger Aunt being tortured and killed by Japanese soldiers. It used the day when the second mistress and the younger aunt were tortured and killed by Japanese soldiers as the continuous tense. Early in the morning, the second mistress got up quickly when she heard the gunshots. When she recalled the news that the Japanese were about to ransack the village, she was in panic all day long, with a black premonition of the imminent catastrophe in her heart, and begged my grandpa to return to my grandma's house together. Grandpa categorically refused her for fear that the two women would get along with each other frequently to stir up countless troubles. But "Soon, grandpa regrets this incident greatly. When he is standing in this yard with the footsteps of wild beasts tomorrow morning with the warm sunshine at the end of October, he sees the terrible tragedy caused by his mistakes." [13] Here, the narrative time is presented as a sequence of the present — the past — the present — the future, with brief explanations of past events to flash back to subtle plots that have not been explained; by pre-narrating the regret of the grandpa seeing this tragic situation tomorrow, the ending of the incident is reminded in a flash-forwards way. The present, the past, and the future remind each other and complement each other to facilitate the complete presentation of the whole

process of the event. The novel breaks the time difference, spans the process of occurrence, and closely connects the ending of the present and future events, reflecting the ease of extension and retraction as well as the loose and tight management in the narrative of the novel, together with the perfect tense and sense of history of the event.

### ***3.3 Expanding the Spatial-Temporal Pattern to Enhance the Aesthetic Effect***

The present and the past, the present and the future, the future and the present, and the reality and the illusion in the *Red Sorghum* and *Revolutionary Romanticism* mentioned above are dynamic, varied, and interlaced with mutual promotion, forming a majestic narrative pattern, enhancing the aesthetic effect of the novel.

In the second section of the novel *Exploding* (《爆炸》), "I" returned home to visit relatives from the troop and saw my daughter in the wheat thresh field, remembering the scene of "I" returning home to visit relatives three days after my daughter was born. And then, the scene returned to the present with my family working hard in the wheat thresh field. The narrative clue goes from the present to the past and then back to the present. Through memories, it cleverly supplements that life in the past was also poor and hard: on the one hand, "I" lamented that my wife lived a poor and tired life since she married me with my poor family, and didn't spend any nice days; on the other hand, "I" wondered why kind people like us, whose family members beared hardships and stood hard work, and made an honest living of farming, lived such a hard life. The narrative of inverse time sequence here is a supplementary narrative and explanation of the omissions brought about by the narrative of chronological time sequence.

The first to eighth sections of the novel *Roadbuilding* (《筑路》) use the past road construction site as the continuous tense, interspersed with the past and criminal history of the road construction worker; the ninth section is extended to the current road construction site. So far, the "present" at the beginning of the novel is restored to the past. Therefore, the past, the past before the past, and the present tense form a three-dimensional space, interlacing and unfolding current events and recalled scenes, and linking and contrasting the past with the present with similar scenes. Despite the

passing of time, the hot road construction scenes, the tortuous romantic relationships between men and women, and the condolences from the propaganda team are all so similar. Just as the Buddhist classic *Flower Adornment Sutra* (《华严经》) explains the harmony, integration, loopback and mutual absorption of time, in the integration and mutual absorption of time, the confrontation between the past, the present and the future in the usual time context is dispelled, and the three-time-period communication, loopback and interlacement are realized: "All the troubles in the past are handled in the future and the present. The troubles in the future and the present are implied in the past life". The mystery therein is deeply comprehended by Chinese Zen. The monk asked: "How to become a Zen master?" The Zen master replied: "This year is like last year". Therefore, the present has been restored to the past, and thus, the one-way passage of time has become a loopback and mutual absorption. [14] The novel eliminates the continuity of time by the similarity of events, and degrades the deduction of time with the illusion experience that the present is like yesterday and the past is like the present.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Mo Yan entered the literary world in the early 1980s and was recognized by the literary world for his simple, unadorned and warm style and fresh and beautiful language. Around 1985, Mo Yan made bold attempts at narrative innovation and language experiments with high creative enthusiasm. Each of his works has realized creative writing and personalized expression, striving to be different from others' creations and not to be similar to his own works, which not only shows originality, but also breaks a new path. The turbulent and ever-changing narrative time and space in his novels summon hidden causal logic and reflect the complex emotions of the characters. The change and succession of time in his novels breaks the normality of linear narrative and replaces it with a time arrangement of intertwining, spanning, interlacing, and leaping, expanding the narrative time and space, strengthening the logic of succession, and forming a narrative pattern of ups and downs as well as a complicated and confusing aesthetic effect.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Yingjie Nie wrote the manuscript, contributed to revising and editing, and analysed data. Kaihua Wang is responsible for experimental design.

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