



# Analysis of the Image of Lin Xiangfu in Yu Hua's Novel *Wencheng*

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**Abstract.** *Wencheng*, the latest novel written by Yu Hua, narrates a story that happened in the late Qing Dynasty, a troubled time in Chinese history that the northerner, Lin Xiangfu, brings his daughter going south to find his wife Xiaomei and her hometown Wencheng city. After years of struggle and hardship, he finally died at the hands of bandits. More research is conducted around *Wencheng's* themes and writing techniques, compared to the research on its characters. Therefore, the protagonist of this novel, Lin Xiangfu, especially his image and personality were analyzed in this paper. According to the analysis, with a personality of persistence and tolerance, the behavior of Lin Xiangfu reflects the pure kindness in human nature, which is also consistent with traditional Chinese values. In addition, his thoughts contain certain backwardness due to the time limitation, while he has also progressive thinking. This research aims to make contributions to the comprehension of *Wencheng's* theme and the writing style of Yu Hua.

**Keywords:** Yu Hua · *Wencheng* · Lin Xiangfu · Image analysis

## 1 Introduction

Published in March 2021, *Wencheng* is a novel written by famous contemporary Chinese writer Yu Hua. The main contents are as follows: The story happens in the late Qing dynasty. The northerner Lin Xiangfu works hard to enrich his family after his parents both pass away. One day, he encounters a woman from south China, Xiaomei, and falls in love with her. Eventually, they get married and have a daughter. However, with the second sudden disappearance of Xiaomei, Lin Xiangfu determines to drop his family business and brings his daughter to look for a city named Wencheng, which is told by Xiaomei as her hometown. After a long journey, Lin Xiangfu just finds a city called Xizhen, where the local accent is similar to his wife's. Subsequently, he starts to live in this unfamiliar place. With help of his outstanding carpentry, he lives a very comfortable life and makes some kind friends such as Chen Yongliang and Gu Yimin. However, the peaceful life is short-lived, the people of Xizhen soon suffer from the fire of war waged by warlords and the banditry problem. Eventually, Lin Xiangfu is killed by bandits and never meets his wife, Xiaomei, again, who has already died with deep regret several years before.

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As soon as the novel is published, it attracts wide attention. However, the reactions of readers are different. Some believe that *Wencheng* is a successful work that can catch the achievement of Yu Hua's novel *To Live* after the failure of his work *Brothers and The Seventh Day*, which represents the highest creation level of him. In contrast, some people believe the narration of *Wencheng* is so unreal that it cannot resonate with readers.

Although some scholars have studied this novel, the reference related to it is not very plentiful for the reason that it is a recent and fresh work. The main scholars who have published research results are Ding Fan, Wang Chunlin, and so on. The majority of them concentrate on the analysis of the epic narration, the tragedy of the characters, the writing technique, and the theme of this novel. However, the researches on the specific character image in this novel are rare.

This paper mainly investigates the image and personality of Lin Xiangfu. Hence, the characterization in the novel will be analyzed at first. Then, Lin Xiangfu's image and personality will be explored through the plot of this work.

## 2 Analysis of the Characterization of *Wencheng*

To understand the protagonist, the background of this novel and its characterization will be analyzed first. Then, the choice and behavior of the protagonist Lin Xiangfu can be better interpreted. The characterization can be summarized as romantic and utopian as well as stereotyping.

### 2.1 The Romantic and Utopian

According to Wang (2021), the behaviors of the characters in *Wencheng* present a type of ideal kindness that was lacking at that precarious time, which can be described as romantic and utopian [1].

The background of this novel is set in the period between the late Qing dynasty and the early republic of China, which is one of the crucial and revolutionary turning points in Chinese history. Nevertheless, it is also "the age when the traditional Confucian ideology had been being converted to modernity" [2]. The fall of the feudal dynasty and the rise of new forces failed to bring peaceful living circumstances to people. Instead, non-stop wars lead to people's confusion about the survival of the individual and also the nation. At the same time, people are numb about the befalling misfortune. Living in that specific troubled time, it can be seen that everyone has their way of survival due to the lack of constraint of law and restriction of morality, such as plunder or even shamble, which shows the phenomenons of overriding justice and infringing on other's right of living as one's wish. All of these show the dark side of human nature, which is universal for the majority of people back then.

However, in *Wencheng*, the majority of characters including the upright Tian Brothers, the fearless "one-ear" crops in Xizhen, and even Lin Xiangfu's disappeared wife Xiaomei and prostitute in Xizhen show great integrity. Some of them can sacrifice themselves to protect others, and others struggle in their own tragic life but abide by their belief firmly. These narrations related to the kindness of human nature weaken the sense of tragedy, making the story like a fairy tale.

Although there are still some parts depicting the fighting of warlords and bandits as well as the expression of people's backwardness in the reality, these dark sides of human nature and limitations of the era are mainly used to set off the display of good values and human brilliance. For instance, after accepting a warm welcome in Xizhen, the domineering Beiyang army has to perform more reasonably, "we still need to care about military prestige when prostituting" [3], as the commander says; cruel bandit Zhang Yifu finally cannot escape from being killed. The principle known as "evil does not oppress the righteous" is confirmed on his destiny. In the face of unrest current situation, the weakness in human nature produces escape psychology and egoism, but there always be some people who can gather everyone's faith and uphold justice. No matter those shoulders, bandits, or ordinary people, their behaviors reflect different choices of the public.

## 2.2 The Stereotyping Characters

The creation and development of the Chinese novel cover a very long period, and the shape of the characters has been varying according to time changing. The shape of characteristics in the early novel is very flat and simple. For example, in the novel *Three Kingdoms*, the character Liu Bei is seen as a representative of "benevolence", but Cao Cao is labeled as "treacherous". Nowadays, whether a character image has contradictoriness and induces readers' thoughts about "human nature" has become one of the most significant standards of literature. However, the main character images in *Wencheng* cannot match the mainstream evaluation standard. The author of *Wencheng* returns to use the method of flat and labeling to shape the characters, which means good persons are always good, bad persons are always bad, neglecting the complexity of humanity, also arousing plenty of disputes.

Referring to Lin Xiangfu, Gu Yimin, and Chen Yongliang, they are fully good men, which means that the readers can describe them with all compliments without hesitation. Even though they are squires, rich businessmen, landlords, and rulers of power who can acquire self-insurance or even have the power to oppress the people to gain benefits, they open up some kinds of spirits including wide tolerance, affecting friendship sentiments and humanistic care of "making the whole world virtuous". On the contrary, the people such as cruel Zhang Yifu, the arbitrary Beiyang army, and misbehaving Gu Tongnian are considered complete evildoers. Such opposition related to "good" and "evil" is one of the most wonderful and core conflicts, but it also makes the character images monotonous.

## 3 The Image of Lin Xiangfu

### 3.1 The Core Characteristic of Lin Xiangfu

When trying to summarize the characteristics of Lin Xiangfu, it is difficult to find a negative word to describe him. He shows extraordinary kindness, which can also be considered as his core characteristic. He persists in improving his carpentry to revitalize the family business, which shows his diligence and filial piety; he insists on embarking on a journey to Wencheng city to track down his wife Xiaomei at any cost, which shows his

persistence and fortitude; Besides, he helps local people fix their broken houses and tries to be kind to his friends, which shows his genuineness and benevolence; Moreover, he would rather sacrifice himself to protect the true justice faced with the threat of bandits, which shows his courage and tolerance. Overall, a kind of pure and glittering “kindness” of human nature can be the best induction of the main quality of Lin Xiangfu.

### 3.2 The Chinese Traditional Morality of Lin Xiangfu

The characteristics of Lin Xiangfu indicate the loyal persistence of traditional Chinese ethics and moralities. As the title of the novel shows, Wencheng is given the meaning of maintenance of traditional culture [4]. This kind of expression related to Chinese traditional morality and ethics is also the main part of the theme of Wencheng. Searching for the city Wencheng is not only a crucial clue throughout Lin Xiangfu’s life but also reflects plenty of traditional Chinese values.

The characteristics of Lin Xiangfu indicate sedimental attachment to family ethics. Fei Xiaotong suggests that the relationship between Chinese and society is just the different mode of association, which is around personal family [5]. This type of attention and attachment has been buried in every Chinese heart for thousands of years, imperceptibly influencing people to act and make decisions. Therefore, Hong Zhigang suggests that *Wencheng* expresses the significance of family ethics to Chinese survival, which even becomes the main character Lin Xiangfu’s faith of the living [6]. It can be seen that Lin Xiangfu always shows a craving for the “family”. When first stepping on the trip to find Xiaomei, the place, Wencheng, is a warm home and beautiful hope for Lin Xiangfu. Suffering from the death of his parents, Lin Xiangfu’s broken and lonely heart desires a complete and lively home to comfort him, so that is why he firmly decides to drop everything to look for consolation no matter how far the distance is.

The characteristics of Lin Xiangfu indicate the persistence of justice and tolerance of affliction in his life. After settling down in Xizhen, the place, Wencheng, is not just a distant place name for Lin Xiangfu, which has gradually meant his insistence on various Chinese traditional spirits. The benevolence and virtue are shown in his behaviors such as being kind to the people of Xizhen or sacrificing himself without fear. Famous scholar Ding Fan suggests that *Wencheng* is a poetry-like and mournful epic, which is legendary, romantic, epic, and tragic [7]. The reason why those qualities can leave a deep impression on readers is the huge contrast between Lin Xiangfu’s tragic life and his perfect personality. According to Wang (2021), the writer Yu Hua elevated the description of suffering to the level of destiny in *Wencheng* [8]. In other words, all of the tragic experiences of Lin Xiangfu are inevitable. No matter the running away of his wife Xiaomei, the tough searching for Wencheng, the explosive wars, or the tragic sacrifice, all of them are just unfriendly jokes made by his terrible destiny, making him more stoic and more tolerant. Different from the character Fugui lingering his last breath of life in the novel *To Live* which is also written by Yu Hua, Lin Xiangfu is a kind of idealist who would rather use his life to exchange justice than surrender to unfair reality. This kind of description of a noble personality deepens Lin Xiangfu’s spirit of maintenance of traditional culture [4].

### 3.3 Advance and Backwardness of Lin Xiangfu in that Era

Lin Xiangfu not only performs some advances but also some backwardness in that era.

Most notably, Lin Xiangfu shows a kind of respect for women, which is extremely rare in that patriarchal era. He can treat his wife Xiaomei with respect and give up remarrying. Also, he does not have the lagging thought like “a woman’s incompetence is a virtue” and is willing to send his daughter Lin Baijia to girls’ school. The concept of equality and heed to women are rare in that chaotic and feudal era, which is commendable.

However, some plots also expose Lin Xiangfu’s backwardness. For instance, he is worried about his marriage, because his and his wife’s birthdays are mismatched. According to old Chinese culture, the mismatched birthdays can be a sign of broken marriage or inharmonious relationships. This plot shows Lin’s infatuation but also indicates a type of universal superstition. Moreover, some ignorant feelings between Lin Baijia and Chen Yaowu are eliminated because of the engagement made by Lin Xiangfu, revealing the tragic consequence caused by the value of “arranging a match by parents’ order and on the matchmaker’s word”.

The image of Lin Xiangfu represents a kind of unique people in that era, who possesses ideal and advanced personalities but can eventually not break the shackles of the times. It is a pity that the readers can not feel a very distinctive “sense of the times” from the narration of Yu Hua. According to Wang (2021), the tragedy of destiny makes history back to the site of background in *Wencheng* [9]. Yu Hua pays more attention to the description of human nature but ignores revealing the direct connection between characters and era.

### 3.4 Analysis of Lin Xiangfu’s Character Image Through Indirect Comparison with Other Main Characters

The main characters Lin Xiangfu, Chen Yongliang, and Gu Yimin are of the same type since all of them can be labeled as “kindness”. Their behaviors indicate the life values that combine Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism with folk chivalrous culture and romantic feelings [10]. There are still some slight differences lying in the performance of their characteristics, which can be analyzed to promote the cognition of Lin Xiangfu’s characteristics.

As for Chen Yongliang, the personality benevolence is strongly emphasized. He always discriminates between love and hate, which is an immovable belief in his mind. He would rather remove his house out of Wanmudang to avoid his son affecting the engagement of Lin and Gu; after knowing that Gu Yimin is kidnapped by bandits, he is determined to risk his life to rescue Gu Yimin; especially one of the most attractive parts of the novel, he holds the knife which is used by the bad person to kill Lin Xiangfu to finish the leader of bandit Zhang Yifu. All of these behaviors indicate Chen Yongliang’s chivalrous quality.

Compared with others, the kindness of Gu Yimin is described rather as a kind of leader’s responsibility. In the novel, he is also the one who possesses more sense of reality. He likes to put on official airs since he is the chamber of commerce president, but the education of his offspring is unsuccessful. Confronting the torture of bandits, he has no choice but to yield. Despite this, as a leader, he takes the initiative to negotiate

with the Beiyang army and forms a corps to defend the town, protecting the relative stability of Xizhen. In general, the character image of Gu Yimin seems more like an ordinary person in reality.

Moreover, the persistence and tolerance of Lin Xiangfu are relatively highlighted: Lin Xiangfu is always determined to insist on his faith and to embrace every distress with a broad mind. He is willing to follow his heart to look for an uncertain place Wencheng and never mind dropping all his property. Rarely performs he negative, complaining, or even angry sentiments, because he always endures all the tortures silently. After Gu Yimi is caught and afflicted by bandits, the people of Xizhen suddenly lose their leader. Consequently, when they set their eager eyes on Lin Xiangfu and hope he can be the representative to make deal with those bandits, he does not prevaricate or hesitate even though he knows it will be extremely dangerous. His respectable optimism and persistent courage add some legendary qualities to his tragic ending.

## 4 Conclusion

This paper firstly analyzed the overall characteristics of the characters in the work *Wencheng*. Combined with the specific plot, this paper then summarized the image of Lin Xiangfu into a positive image of perseverance, toughness, tolerance, and benevolence shining with the brilliance of human nature, reflecting the promotion of traditional values. Although due to the limitations of the times, some of Lin Xiangfu's behaviors show certain backwardness, in general, his personality still tends to be pure and kind. In addition, he has an extraordinary tolerance for the suffering of the world and an obsession with what he believes in himself, which is different from the other main characters.

This paper tries to provide references for research on the novel *Wencheng*. In the future, the author hopes to have more in-depth and convincing research results based on the theory of the theme, connotation, and characters of the novel.

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