



A Study of the Town Narrative of the Southern Goods Shop Under the Urban-Rural Counterpoint

Xinyi Jin^(✉)

College of Arts, Suzhou University of Science and Technology, Suzhou, China
shrintonlee@163.com

Abstract. Set in the particular spatial subject of the ‘town’, The Southern Goods Store transforms the county town into an important link between the countryside and the city. This paper discusses three aspects of the unique town narrative of The Southern Goods Store: the novel’s perspective of the multitude, its depiction of the emptiness of the world and the sadness of life, and its use of the southern dialect. The novel presents an undifferentiated view of the world, portraying the emptiness of the world and the sadness of life. It uses the southern dialect to build up a descriptive tone of white descriptions and to develop a picture of life in the southern county under the counterpoint of the city and the countryside, making the town a complex literary space and a dense and complex field of discourse.

Keywords: town narrative · The Southern Goods Shop · narrative perspective · southern dialect · Zhang Ji

1 Introduction

In 2020, when Zhang Ji’s *The Southern Goods Store* was published, the novel did not attract much attention or discussion in academic circles, although it was preceded by *The Prosperous Flower* and followed by *The Little Flower Girl*. It is worth noting, however, that unlike “Shanghai literature”, which focuses on urban life with a strong flavour of the Shanghai school, *Nanhua shop* focuses on life in the county town of Ningbo in eastern Zhejiang province and narrates the struggles of people in the turbulent period from the late 1970s to the 1990s. The main character, Qiu Lin, is a shopkeeper in a southern goods store, and the stories of the various characters are linked to create a picture of life in a southern town.

The concept of ‘counterpoint’, originally derived from the technique of musical composition, has since been extended to ‘counterpoint reading’. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said suggests that empire gives writers a global perspective, allowing them to structure their narratives around their home countries while extending their perspectives abroad, thus creating a tension between here and there, between home and abroad, which constitutes the core concept of “counterpoint reading”. The concept of ‘urban-rural counterpoint’ in this essay is an extension and re-creation of this foundation. In

contemporary China, the existence and opposition between the modern city and the isolated countryside are obvious and distinct. The city, with its heterodoxy and modernity, is infiltrating the countryside, while the countryside, with its super-stability and resilience, is confronting the encroachment of the city. At the same time, there is a space between the two that cannot be ignored, namely the 'town'.

The Southern Goods Store portrays a picture of the south in the context of the urban-rural divide, where the town lies between the city and the countryside, an expansion of the countryside and a reduction of the city, and is related to and distinct from the city and the countryside. Amid the gradual disintegration and deterioration of the monolithic agricultural system, the town, located at the 'head of the village and the tail of the city', is given a new connotation.

Based on this quality, since the birth of new literature, the town has always existed as an independent image, which not only prepares a spatial background for literature but, more importantly, is an image subject in itself, with life, character, consciousness and value of its own. The unique narrative character of the town in *The Southern Goods Store*, which lies between the city and the countryside, makes the county town an essential link between the countryside and the city and thus becomes a complex literary space, a dense and complex field of discourse. In the spatial body of the town, the author links the city and the countryside through the narrative perspective of the story, the transformation of the plot and the specialisation of language, with the city and the countryside interacting within the same space, forming a certain contradiction. Between the two poles of the city and the countryside, there exists a third genealogy of literary traditions, namely town narratives and town writing.

2 The Undifferentiated World in the Perspective of All Beings

One of the most characteristic features of the town narrative in the novel *The Southern Shop* is the specificity of its narrative perspective. Perspective in narratology refers to the particular vision and perspective from which work or text views the outside world and is the basic paradigm through which the author translates his or her own world of experience into the world of verbal narrative. In narrative literature, the relationship between the narrator and the story is essential. In fiction, the narrator sees and narrates events from a different perspective, which produces different narrative effects. *The Southern Goods Store* is a novel without a particular point of view, or rather, the author intentionally eliminates a particular point of view from the writing of the text. *The Southern Goods Store* is located in a town called Changting in the Ningbo countryside, but the main characters who come and go are not local people; Lu Qiu Lin, Master Ma, Master Qi, and later Ai Chun, Xu Ben Chang and Qi Haisheng are all outsiders. The novel abandons the specific perspective of the village people or a particular protagonist, opting instead for the 'perspective of the many'.

The perspective of the many lives is almost identical to the so-called 'omniscient perspective', in which the narrator has all the characters, plots and details that he introduces to the reader. The difference, however, is that the perspective of the many lives is based on the mundane space shared by all the characters in the novel and constitutes a kind of microcosm of life. The perspective of the many lives leads the reader to be present with

the characters in the lives of the many lives, without pity or fear, without cold eyes or value judgement. The perspective of the multitude of beings treats people, things and objects from a dispassionate, but not unfeeling, perspective, and in this perspective, the southern goods shop is a unique space with a very different emotional experience. By looking at it from the 'perspective' of the living, even in the face of unexpected events such as failures, runaways and deaths, the shop remains unmoved, not indifferent, but with compassion and warmth without value judgement.

The long-standing conflict between Master Qi and his son Qi Haisheng is a part of the novel that cannot be ignored. When Qi's wife is unable to have children, he finds a relative in the countryside to "borrow his belly" and gives birth to Haisheng, who grows up with doubts about his origins. One day he loses all his money gambling on crickets and asks his father for it, but he refuses to give it to him and still tries to persuade him to study. During the Cultural Revolution, he brought along his "revolutionary juniors" to expose Master Qi for hiding money owed to him by others, criticised him for being a "change of tent", and rebuked Master Qi to his face at a mass criticism meeting, telling him of his "hard life" since childhood. In a meeting of 10,000 people to criticise him, he scolded Master Qi to his face and told him about the "hard times" he had grown up with. The novel describes the state of Master Qi when facing the criticism of his son in this way.

"Master Qi could never forget the events of this day; the stage was black with people, like a sea, almost beyond his reach. But as Master Qi stood on the stage, he could not see these people at all, nor could he hear their voices. All he could see was Qi Haisheng alone, holding up his fist and shouting his name through gritted teeth.

At that moment, Master Qi was so sad in his heart that he really did not know what he had done in his last life to deserve such suffering in this one" [1].

In such a harrowing episode, there is only one sentence about what is going through Master Qi's mind. The author does not use God's point of view to portray Master Qi's mental activity at this moment in time in detail, nor does he overplay his state of mind. In contrast, the author maintains his identity as a witness and maintains a more unobtrusive attitude, making an 'omniscient' but not 'omnipotent' narrative, in which the author's personal world of direct and indirect experience is naturally transformed into a narrative field of vision. In this vision, one can see the organic integration of urban and rural life in the town and the enclave of the town, the southern goods shop, and the ups and downs and wanderings of the individual fates of Master Qi and Qi Haisheng, which are also a kind of eternal display of the drifting fates of a community of beings.

In this way, the novel is a profound observation of the ordinary and concrete lives of ordinary people from the perspective of all living beings, a desire to present them with interest, a kind of narrative self-consciousness of civil society, and a concern for the turbulent flow of life like "floating weeds" of all living beings, but a calm and calm expression of external life, constructing a unique perspective belonging to The Southern Goods Store. The perspective of all lives. In this way, the southern town is transformed into a public space for everyday life, and the "southern shop" is an enclave that embodies the social landscape of the south in an undifferentiated world. This discourse is omniscient without being omnipotent, freeing the narrative from the pragmatic control and entanglement of ideology and gaining genuine folklore.

3 Life's Grief in the Emptiness of the World

The second half of the novel is more controversial, with some scholars and critics arguing that it undermines the novel's original warmth and falls into cliché. The second half of the novel is, in fact, the focus of the novel, where the market economy and moral self-discipline meet and where the characters' changing and unchanging personalities directly affect the sinking and rising of their fate. The narrative of the town is expressed in the novel's focus on the emptiness of the world and the sadness of life, as the town is a geographical unit between the city and the countryside, a unique geographical location that makes it the meeting place of two civilisations and lives. The uniqueness of town culture and town narratives lies in their 'in-betweenness', as they are situated between the urban and rural counterparts, so that 'the collision and exchange between the countryside and the city, and the fusion of rural culture and urban culture, all occur indirectly in a sense through the small town, and are more concentrated. The town is a small town [2]. The town bridges the gap between traditional and modern civilisations in the transformation of Chinese society, showing the transformation of the town and its people in the modernisation of Chinese society.

The opening pages of the novel present a world of objects in extremely detailed white descriptions; ordering goods, drinking, eating noodles, washing, life is trivial but decadent, time is slow, even as if it were still, with a deep and lustrous lustre. However, after many of the characters have left the southern goods shop, the novel begins to flow like a storm. What begins as the fullness of things is replaced by the hollowness of human destiny. Outside of Lu Qiu Lin's steady high rise, Master Qi retires for his son Qi Haisheng and collects his son's body; Master Wu falls in love with Mi Grain and takes early retirement; Weiguo falls in love with Yunzhi, but Yunzhi falls in love with Mao Yifu and later marries a man who works in the court and gives his body to Weiguo in the mountains; Mao Yifu meets a Taizhou poetess and goes to Taizhou; Yu Chujun marries Ge Meicheng and then Gong Zhiqiu Each person's life winds down to a trivial life, a world of emptiness. As the characters leave the southern goods shop, the literary space of the town becomes more complex from purely materialistic fullness, as individual fates flow and usher in empty destiny endings. In such a situation, the novel resolves the loneliness and emptiness felt by the individual, which is produced by the transformation of social and personal circumstances brought about by urbanisation.

At the end of the novel, Lu Qiu Lin writes a eulogy for Master Qi, and when he puts down his pen at the end, he asks, "Is this what he wrote about Master Qi's life? Is this all there is to a man's life?" Such a lament is not only for Master Qi's personal fate but also for the fate of all beings. The world is empty, and therefore the human world also seems empty. Xu Min, for example, who married Du Shan after the death of her husband Duer, soon died, went to Buddhism, was guided by her Taizhou guest to convert to Christianity, and finally disappeared, evacuating forever from this society of beings, leaving nothing behind and nothing to keep her. Then there is Du Mei, who had excellent craftsmanship as a woman, then divorced, opened a tailoring shop in the county, and eventually hanged herself: "When I pushed open the door, I saw only empty space, and Du Mei had suspended herself from a beam with a rope. Her body hung in a pile of clothes, swaying slightly when the wind blew" [1]. The novel's narrative of Xu Min's

and Du Mei's lives fully reflects this characteristic of emptiness, and both inevitably end up in an ending that makes the reader sigh.

Likewise, apart from these supporting characters, so does the protagonist, and a sense of emptiness stays with Lu Qiu Lin. He has a crush on Chunhua but cannot get her and does not make any effort to pursue her. And after marrying a soldier, Chunhua expects to have a beautiful and happy life, but she suffers domestic violence and later is cheated by a small factory manager who is married and loses tens of thousands of dollars of her private money, making her life unsustainable. Lu Qiu Lin takes money to Chunhua, and after some catching up, the two men leave. This is how the novel reads, "Qiu Lin saw Chun Hua standing there, looking at himself alone, the modest room looking so empty at the moment" [1]. In chapter 22 of the novel, Lu Qiu Lin has a lament, which is the best portrayal of the sorrow of life in the open world: "Qiu Lin suddenly understood a truth, in this life, it is only one person to know one person, and one person to leave. Being a human being is really empty and meaningless" [1].

"Literature is concerned with the ways in which this cultural space determines people's destinies, their characters, and the character of the lives they experience" [3] The same is true of town narratives, where the town as a geographical unit, which is attributed to the nature of a community, becomes in literature "the context, the field, the space in which literature takes place, the 'material form' that has a soul" [4].

It is in the space of urban-rural alignment that the author keenly captures the subtle fissures of individual lives in the midst of historical changes, making the Nanhua shop a mirror of its time, from which everyone can see the undertones of life. Before the reform and opening up, there were clear rules for people's lives and survival; after the reform and opening up, the systems and rules that people relied on for survival began to blur and disappear, so that not everyone could cope with them, and many people were at a loss. The novel writes a picture of life, and the life in its town narrative is trivial but not tedious, empty but not dull. The relationship between people and the city, between people and the world, has been broken and mended several times under the flood of the times and has become a unique expression of the town narrative.

4 White Intonation and Southern Dialect

The use of southern dialects is also a feature of the novel's urban narrative expressions. The differences in pronunciation and semantics between the southern dialects and Mandarin make the same phonetic expressions have entirely different meanings, and these meanings are carefully chosen by the author and eventually superimposed to form a unique and meaningful expression of the town.

For example, the word 'life' is mentioned several times in the novel. The dialect word 'life' actually means things, affairs and work, which is very different from the Mandarin semantics, but there are also subtle connections. The first time the word appears is when Lu Qiu Lin first reported for work at the Nanhua Store: "In that year, Qiu Lin was nineteen years old, with small hands and feet and little strength. But on the first day he reported to the Nanhua Store, he fought for this life on the doorstep" [1].

The so-called "life" in Mandarin actually means things, affairs and work in the novel, and Qiu Lin's "fight" for this work is not a struggle for interests, nor is it a spiritual conflict

or competition, but rather a person who wants to enter the ordinary life constructed by acquaintances. It is a “life” that one must first fight for in order to enter the ordinary life constructed by one’s acquaintances. This word is used by the author, expressed in the southern dialect, and is integrated into the context of the novel’s town life, blending with the novel’s narrative expression and containing the novel’s understanding of the world and life, constituting the novel’s unique understanding of the characters in the world of life. The so-called ‘life’ in Mandarin is ‘reduced’ in the novel to things, affairs and work, which are the everyday existence of ordinary people and where they make their living.

Another important dialect word in the novel is the word ‘multitude’. In the Wu dialect, it does not mean “all beings” but is used to refer to animals, humble people or even lowly people, mainly in a derogatory sense, but occasionally with a sense of compassion due to the character of the speaker. For example, “Master Wu lowered his voice and said, “As you can see, the two outside are all faces of the living. Why don’t you go back first and let me talk to them again? I’ll pick you up when we’re done.” I don’t care about the poor food; Director Xu said, “It’s not like I didn’t have a hard time back then. The most painful thing in my heart is Tong Xiaojun the beings” [1].

The so-called “beings” in the novel are people bound by the laws of life - even bound to a small piece of land. The geographical space in the novel is not open, and the town has a narrow middle quality under the urban-rural counterpoint.

The novel’s vernacular tone is at the service of the living. The tone of the novel does not come from Western modernist literature but rather from classical Chinese vernacular novels, such as “Three Words, Two Beats”. The novel presents the existential situation of all beings in a simple but slightly cruel manner, without discussion, lyricism or judgement, allowing “life” to come. The fact that all beings are scattered in their individual fates constitutes a kind of de-subjective realism, not directly concerned with the emotions, feelings, spiritual quest and growth of the subject, even in the event of failure or death, but presenting the fate of all beings nested in the logic of life, without fully identifying with it. Through its use of the southern dialect, *The Southern Goods Shop* constructs a white tone that is not self-indulgent, lyrical, playful or deconstructive, a familiar low tone in the space of the novel.

5 Conclusion

The *Southern Goods Shop* gives all beings, i.e. the many ordinary people, a bracket of existence. One becomes oneself for no apparent reason, or one fights to the death and cannot become oneself. The tighter one is bound by life, the less one’s individuality has angles, and the more one is able to move towards mundane success, like Lu Qiu Lin. Conversely, if the relationship between one’s personality and the logic of life is loose, one is prone to failure. Master Qi is the most typical example of this. When Qi Qingfeng (Master Qi) and his wife Xiujuan have no children, he submits to her design to have Qi Haisheng with Mei Gu. As a result, the conflict between father and son intensifies, eventually giving Master Qi a tragic life and eventually, the white-haired man has to collect his son’s body.

The town has its own political, economic and cultural connotations and is a social area where all kinds of ideological stirrings and confrontations arising from “modernity”

are played out. In a sense, it is also a buffer zone where the confrontation between the city and the countryside is buffered. The city's prosperity, weirdness and openness, and the countryside's stagnation, constancy and conformity all leave their traces in this space. In the agitation and buffering, the spatial subject forms its own independent image, "each of which has the size and the character of a completely separate town, village, or city," [5] the town not only exists as a geographical and social concept but also has its profound meaning in literary concept.

In a time of slight material scarcity, and under the wash of civilisation in the city and the countryside, the southern goods shop, as a mobile space, bears witness to the lives of countless ordinary people in the novel. The business of the teacher, the human warmth of the old bean curd seller, the absurd love affairs between men and women, the indifferent relationship between fathers and sons towns witness life and death and the sinking of fate. A town is a place of life, death and fate, a place of everyday life in the midst of the turmoil of the times, where the world rises and falls and the light and darkness of human nature. The narrative expression of the town in *The Southern Goods Store* finds an appropriate linguistic form, narrative paradigm and even a spiritual face to express historical reality in the counterpoint between the city and the countryside, revealing the spiritual ups and downs of the county, i.e. the town, in the wash and clash of urban and rural culture and civilisation.

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