

Green Again on the Evergreen Pine: Spatial Narrative in *The Green Valley*

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Abstract

The long rural novel by Liang Shanding, *The Green Valley*, reflects the regional culture and the resistance of Northeast China, during the War of Resistance against Japan. It stands as an important work, while the existing researches on the novel has largely focused on its thematic implications, characterization, textual and edition-related questions and other aspects. To the Contrast, the spatial narrative of the work has remained inferior attention. Considering this, this paper intends to take it as academic subject by methods of spatial narratology. So, we can fathom the particular space narratives.

Keywords

Liang Shanding; *The Green Valley*; spatial narrative.

1. Introduction

The Green Valle, as one of Liang Shanding's representative long rural novels, is an important work, it reflects the culture of Northeast China and the people's rebellion against Japanese aggression during the War of Resistance. Started in a Wopeng (shack) of Lin family, which located in Northeast China, during the first half of the twentieth century. The novel vividly portrays the historical transformations of northeastern society and the lives of ordinary people, in the struggle against multi external forces. There are distinctive spatial dimensions in it. So, this paper has adopted to take such the whole subject, and tried to discover features of its spatial narrative, by the method of the lens of spatial narratology.

2. The Construction and Metaphor of Topographical Space

Gabriel Zoran, In *Towards a Theory of Narrative Space*, indeed introduces the concept, topographical space. Such jargon actually refers to "the highest level in the reconstruction of space. It independently exists beyond the temporal structure of novel world and the sequential procession of the text." "The Text is just like the map. For it can represent topographical structures by direct description ... Yet in fact, every element of the text, no matter narration, dialogue, or even exposition, all of them can make contribution to the representation of topographical structure." [1] Given that, the direct depiction and narration of different spaces, in the novel, are the usual methods by novelists constructing the topographical space.

And the novel, *The Green Valley*, establishes and depicts two distinct topographical spaces: the world of Langgou (Wolf Valley), modeled on the rural Kaiyuan, the author's native place; and the world of Nanman Station, modeled on Fengtian Railway Station, Shenyang. The narrative structure of the whole novel is grounded on these two spaces. And the tensions and conflicts between them finally provide the driving force of the novel.

First and foremost, the Langgou is actually a classical representation of the traditional rural villages of Northeast China. Spatially, it has been divided into two parts. The upper slope, and the Lin landlord family resides in there. As for and the lower slope, it is inhabited by peasants with bad economic condition. And the two places wholly constitute the main setting where the

story unfolds. Liang, with a delicate and poetic straw, vividly refers the vitality and exuberance of Langgou:

"Autumn, Langgou is flooded throughout the valley with the joy of ripeness. The pears with green yet coarse skin are reddened on one side by the August sun, just like young lassies waiting for rouge. They hide shyly behind the web of leaves. Hazelnuts split open with a dry, crisp crackle in the parched air. And their amber kernels tumbles into the grass, some even buried beneath heaps of fallen leaves. Clusters of grapes hang in the depths of the valley, and their dark-purple skins sheathed in a dusky sheen." [1]

The author, Liang, by a certain spatial logic, arranges and depicts these local features. Besides, he interweaves these things with a range of sensory perceptions, so the Langgou's produce has been deftly transformed into spatial signs, which can be sensed. The distinctive regional character could be vividly represented, and delivering real expression of its landscape, in terms of its vivacity. And there is no descriptions, about its temporal order, duration, and frequency. The subduction of time appears to be deliberated. And it is also clear that the markers of a historical era are blurred. This doing enables Langgou to transcend itself from a historical context and serve as an enduring spiritual homeland for all.

However, the Nanman Station stands quiet a commercial town of capitalism. The filth and clamor of it is starkly contrasted to the pulchritude and serenity of Langgou. When Nanman Station first emerges in the novel. Liang describes it in a disdainful and contemptuous tone:

"The streets of Nanman Station spread out like a spider's web. Langsutong Street was nothing but an insect armed with golden armor. It slants down from the left edge of the web, through Turntable Street and finally to the edge of the commercial. Trailing boiling clouds of dust and a wheezing roar, it raced forward at a startling speed, chasing the years as they flew, almost swallowing up the scattered villages around it, each like a fly." [1]

And almost, immediately, Liang turns his attention to the landlords of Nanman Station, such as Old Tong of Laomabao and Master Lü of Bianmenbao. They take ridiculous pride in the title of "fuba". They vie for power with the holders of capital authority from the "foreign faction" and the "northern faction."

By years, they lounge in mainland commercial houses, smoking. And their real-estate processes just sneakily dissolve into smoke. At the same time, the trains carry millions of tons of agricultural produce and mineral away from the plains, but they bring nothing back but propaganda: "friendship," "cooperation," "co-prosperity," and "joining hands". They are disguising the reality and preserve an appearance of peace. Unlike the almost static rural of Langgou, the spaces of Nanman are intertwined with the tragedies of its inhabitants. The pace of the narrative accelerates markedly, marking the movement and development of narrative time.

Last but not least, the juxtaposition and contrast between Langgou and the Station, in terms of the space, directly drive the development of the novel in spatial level. The two places, thus, are invested with distinct layers of meaning, representing, respectively, the rural area and commercial towns of Northeast China during the War. Through the lens of it, we can see clear the realities of the society and the people's living conditions. As for Liang's portrayal, the former is an idealized world of poetry and vitality, but the latter is a concrete carrier of profit and desire. Obviously, he is trying to reveal his divergent values and emotional attitudes toward these two kinds of space. For example, the construction, the railway extends from Nanman Station to Langgou, is bestowed with a telling symbolic meaning. It can be read as the invasion and disruption of the rural area by Japanese imperialism. The author arranges this episode, making Langgou a arena of confrontation and contestation. Meanwhile, the Langgou peasants curse the locomotive as demonic monster. Thereby, they were forced to abandon, with deep anguish, the

riverine lowlands on which they have long depended for their livelihood. And They choose to take up these ploughs and begin cultivating the black soil on the hillsides.

These seemingly insignificant acts of everyday life are a form of implicit resistance to the aggression. The people in Langgou through language and labor finally make it. Liang hides his critical consciousness within the spatial narrative, and consequently transforms Langgou into a spiritual homeland of resistance.

3. Spatial Displacement and Characterization

When we talk about “Space”, especially in novel analysis, is not only the concrete setting in which a character’s disposition has been shaped, but also a manifestation of a character being defined. This is because “it is in space that human beings most fully reveal the condition and meaning of their existence. So, to observe their life and environment from the perspective of space, actually, is the best way to understand the human condition.”[2]

The protagonist of novel, Lin Xiaobiao, is a identity with dual culture. He is both the third-generation heir to the Lin landlord family and a “new” man influenced by the New Culture Movement of the May Fourth era. The collision between the two different culture is very clear in his character. Moreover, the novel’s basic narrative thread is structured around Lin Xiaobiao’s journeys, back and forth between Langgou and Nanman Station. From them, a clear traced emerges from the trajectory: a gradual growth. The journeys mean nothing geographical, but entail a corresponding transition between different social spaces. And more importantly, such displacement serves as a crucial marker of his awakening to class consciousness and national consciousness.

To begin with, this spatial displacement is just Xiaobiao’s movements themselves. His three returns to Langgou—a series of spatial transitions—provide the background where the narrative could unfold. And to a certain degree, such arrangement enriches the narrative. His first return to Langgou, Xiaobiao maintains a carefree attitude, and never immerses himself in the life of Langgou. Once the life begins to feel constraining, he just leaves without hesitation. But on his second trip to Langgou, he visits with a Japanese girl, Meizi. They indulge themselves in the exquisite natural beauty of his native village. But the confusion is that, he still fails to recognize the bond between himself, Langgou, and its people.

His genuine transformation comes after he escapes Xiaobailong’s control. When he survived and fled away to Nanman Station, the knowledge of books ultimately abstract and insufficient grasps him. And the experience acquired from real life finally could enable one to resolve the concrete problems. On the third return to his native land, he finally realizes that the fate of him is closely to the black earth. So he decides to distribute his family’s land among the local people. And as for himself, he becomes a figure from a strange fairy tale. The spatial movements of Xiaobiao is actually a circular spatial structure: he follows the trajectory of “Langgou—Nanman Station—Langgou.” As his movements carry the story episodes from one space to another, and the roles and relationships changes with each shift in place and setting, lending greater complexity and narrative depth to the novel’s plot.

Second, such displacement can also be read in reciprocal transformation between environmental space and psychological space.[3] This interplay between the two forms of space is realized primarily through Xiaobiao’s speech and memories, the dialogues of other characters, and the narration of the external narrator. On this basis, Lin Xiaobiao’s characterization can be understood principally in the following two respects:

First, a profound attachment to his native land and a conscious identification with his native soil. From the moment of his birth, he almost forms a fateful, flesh-and-blood bond with Langgou. Even he was an infant, his grandfather, on his deathbed, asked the family to let the

boy know he was born in here. This calling means Xiaobiao has already been claimed as a heart and child of Langgou. And fortunately, he is longing and nostalgia for the soil and the people.

As he promises his aunt, Shuzhen: "Langgou is my mother. I grew up in her arms. I know it—I grew up drinking her milk!"[1] So when he leaves the soil, this attachment is intensified to an almost overwhelming degree. Before his leaving, he uses some terms and concepts, which are hard for his people, the peasants, to understand, to articulate his ideas. From his action, we can tell the gap between intellectuals and the rural. Yet deep within Xiaobiao, Langgou remains bound to him: "The land is our life. Whoever leaves the land is, in effect, committing suicide..."[1] In other words, although an obvious gulf, at the level of their intellectual, indeed exists between Xiaobiao and the people in Langgou. But when it comes to the experience and emotional expression, a close bond between them emerges.

Second, the loneliness of an unsettled past and the nihil of the uncertain fate. Despite the continuous stresses on the heart of Langgou for Xiaobiao, the future heir of the Lin family, his the childhood trauma of losing his father at an early age and seeing his mother remarry, both of them shapes his later understanding of himself and his times. He is, by no means, a wastrel. He repeatedly defines himself as a solitary and helpless figure. And he frequently reveals a keen awareness of the capriciousness of fate:

"We are all duckweed, drifting from one place to another. Water is our era: it surges, roars, and leaps, rolling forward like a wild horse. It allows no reserve, no contradiction, not even the smallest inkling of fancy. It sweeps us up into itself, turning us into an inorganic drift. It does not know that we, too, are growing; in truth, it scarcely even notices that we exist..."[1]

This sense of individual loneliness and nihilism is simultaneously externalized as an intergenerational spiritual condition. As Meizi observes: "What a mysterious country this is"—China, that is, as the writer clarifies—"the older generation desperately struggles for fame and profit, while the younger generation is excessively melancholy and sentimental..."[1] The judgement confirms the spiritual predicament shared by the same generation: they see no home between tradition and modernity, between the individual and the nation. There is no firm ground for them to stand, so they have to plunge into bewilderment and melancholy.

Finally, this circular displacement echoes the narrative themes of "return" and "rebirth." Lin Xiaobiao's journey is not a geographical migration. Frankly, it also represents his persistent pursuit of humanity and justice, which is manifested primarily in two respects, on the spiritual level:

First, the conflict between the old and new values of two generations. This conflict is mainly centered on Lin Xiaobiao and his aunt. As the de facto head of the Lin family, Lin Shuzhen can be read as a classic role, the human nature is suppressed and distorted under the traditional order. She is not only a woman of vigorous vitality, but also a tenacious one. She is a victim crushed by the constraints of feudal ethics. On the contrast, for being deeply attached to the notion of bloodline and lineage, she hopes, with strong will, that Xiaobiao could one day restore the family's former glory.

At the same time, she is deeply in love with the, steward, Huo Feng, but she fails to acknowledge the relationship because of "family status" and "social standing", so she suffers a lot, physically and emotionally. And finally, she is murdered without mercy by her own brothers, becoming a tragic victim of the old order.

But Lin Xiaobiao is totally different, for he possesses a sense of individuality and an independent spirit. He is a witness that how people like his aunt Shuzhen are reduced, under the old order, to loveless remnants. His critical consciousness ultimately focuses on the old ancestral residence, sunk in dimness, and the objects preserved within it: the gilded *kang* zithers that have remained untouched for twenty years, the bright ceiling partitions, lacquered trunks,

lacquerware, ancestral altar tables, and latticed Buddhist shrines all seem to speak of the oppressive weight of time.

He eagers to break every one of these old barriers and compose a requiem for the ancient residence that stands as a symbol of the old order. This is not only a vivid expression of his bold pursuit of individual freedom, but also an important reason why he ultimately chooses to return to his soil to bring about change.

Second, a profound call for the restoration of human dignity and the affirmation of human worth. Such complex transformation in space directly represents Lin Xiaobiao's personal aspirations and ideals for life. Grounded on that, Langgou is elevated from a secular space into a "sacred space" filled with his convictions. "The establishment of a sacred space makes a 'fixed point' possible, and hence makes orientation within the homogeneity of chaos possible; it also makes it possible to 'construct this world and truly live in it.'" [4]

For the protagonist, Lin Xiaobiao, Langgou is not merely a birth place, it is the point of his personal world and the source of meaning in his life. Most importantly, the death of his aunt means the land ownership and inheritance falls upon Lin Xiaobiao himself. But when he returns to Langgou and decides to allocate his land among to local people, his justice and humanity awake. The land to those who till it is, in itself, the most powerful affirmation and recognition of human agency: people are no longer subservient to the land, but become its true masters.

Here, the texture of the black earth and the bonds of the community become the most sources of revelation. Xiaobiao comes to perceive the interdependence between individual destiny and the survival of the nation, and the trajectory of his spatial displacement is thereby marked by the spiritual imprint of a dual awakening to class consciousness and national consciousness [5].

4. Conclusion

In *The Green Valley*, Langgou and Nanman Station are two distinct topographical spaces, but they together generate the narrative momentum of the novel through their juxtaposition and conflict. They are metaphorical representation of northeastern society under imperial rule.

Lin Xiaobiao's repeated journeys, between the two spaces, not only symbolize his spiritual passage from confusion and alienation to awakening and return, but also constitute the novel's circular narrative structure. The transformation of topographical space and the evolution of the protagonist's psychological state mirror one another, binding his individual fate ever more closely to the future of the nation.

It is therefore clear that Liang Shanding makes space a central narrative strategy running throughout *The Green Valley*. This strategy not only brings the author's implicit creative intentions fully to the fore, but also gives the novel's examination of wartime Chinese society and lived human experience a distinctive depth and force. Space thus becomes a crucial dimension through which to understand both the historical significance and the literary achievement of the novel.

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