

# On the Dialectical Relationship between "Small Space" and "Big City" in Lao She's Works

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**Abstract.** Lao She's works are based on the life of the citizens, and his focus is on the characters at the bottom of the hierarchy, with emphasis on the portrayal of their living space and spiritual outlook. The "small space" in Lao She's works, as a public space for information exchange and recreation, is able to encompass and display the human conditions of the "big city"; and the overall changes of the "big city" will also affect the survival choices of the people in the "small space" and the disintegration of the spatial order. The overall change of the "big city" will also affect the people's choice of survival and the disintegration and reconstruction of the spatial order in the "small space". The pivot of the connection between "small space" and "big city" is the human nature of city life. The "small space" and the "big city" under Lao She's writing jointly interpret Lao She's distinctive nationalised narrative features, and show the unique Beijing flavour and charm in his works.

**Keywords:** Lao She's works; "small space"; "big city"; dialectical relationship.

## 1. Introduction

In Lao She's works, the concept of "small space" and its intricate relationship with the "big city" serve as a rich source of nationalized writing. These two concepts are not just physical entities but carry profound spatial connotations that transcend their mere physical dimensions. To comprehensively explore this organic connection between "small space" and "big city," this paper will delve into Lao She's relevant works, providing a nuanced understanding of these concepts while analyzing the broader social and cultural implications they hold, extending far beyond their spatial definitions. Lao She's literary oeuvre masterfully weaves together the microcosm of "small space" with the macrocosm of the "big city." By delving into his works, we can unearth the layers of meaning embedded within these concepts. "Small space" often represents the intimate, tightly-knit communities, neighborhoods, or individual households where his characters reside. These spaces become crucibles where individual destinies, emotions, and moral dilemmas are intensely examined. In contrast, the "big city" symbolizes the bustling, dynamic urban environment where these smaller spaces are nestled, reflecting the broader societal forces, values, and changes at play. Beyond their physical attributes, "small space" and "big city" in Lao She's works take on profound social and cultural functions. "Small space" becomes a microcosm of the larger society, a stage where human nature, relationships, and conflicts are laid bare. Within these confined spaces, Lao She's characters grapple with timeless themes such as survival, betrayal, trust, and dignity. Their choices in the face of adversity reveal the diverse facets of human nature and the varied definitions of survival. Conversely, the "big city" exerts a pervasive influence on the "small space," shaping the hidden political power dynamics and cultural norms within. It serves as a backdrop against which the characters' struggles and choices are contextualized. The rapid changes and challenges of urban life infiltrate even the most remote corners of "small space," creating a dynamic tension that drives the narrative forward. This paper aims to employ logical analysis and critical thinking to elucidate the dialectical relationship between "small space" and "big city" in Lao She's works. By doing so, it seeks to broaden the depth and breadth of their connotations, revealing how these concepts are intertwined and integral to the overarching themes of his literature. Through this exploration, we will emphasize the magnificent artistic tension that Lao She achieves in his writings, offering readers a richer understanding of his masterful storytelling and its broader societal and cultural significance [1].

## 2. Conceptualisation of "small spaces" and "big cities"

The "small space" in Lao She's works is a public space that is compatible with people from all social strata, rich in social information, transcends the initial social function of space, and serves as a more diversified social role and spiritual support. Take Lao She's famous play "Teahouse" as an example, the Yutai Teahouse in old Beijing is a typical "small space". The book gives the relevant features of a big teahouse in the opening of the first act: there are common people with different identities: "discussing things", "matchmaking", "fighting", and they can hear the most absurd news, strange opinions, and see exotic treasures, it is a place for cultural exchange. The teahouse retains its proper material function - the shopkeeper sells tea and the customers drink it. However, teahouses bring together consumer groups of different status and position. They travelled around the city and became a vehicle for collecting and disseminating information. They gather in teahouses, often in the time of a cup of tea or a bowl of noodles, to complete the exchange of information, and then spread the information to build the city's information network. Such a process is staged every day in the teahouse, making the teahouse the hub of information exchange, the medium of urban memory, and the geographical coordinates of history and culture [2].

The "big city" in Lao She's works is a big background which is made up of a wide social space, has a real historical background, and is able to fully interpret the outline and process of social history. The city of Beijing in Lao She's literature is made up of multiple time and space, and it is in a period of transition where traditional and modern civilisations collide with each other, where social contradictions are acute and social conflicts are constantly intensifying. The changes in Beijing reflect the life-and-death historical situation of modern Chinese society. Lao She's writing about the nationalisation of Beijing essentially reflects the democratisation of modern Chinese literature under the call of reality. In *The Teahouse*, Lao She chose three points in time: the period just after the failure of the Restoration Movement, the period of the civil war between the warlords of China at the behest of the imperialists, and the period when the Kuomintang secret agents and the American soldiers were rampant in Beijing after the victory of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression; in *Camelot Xiangzi*, the author located the time and space in the 1920s in the period of the warlordism in Beijing, and depicted the tragedy of the life of the underclass physical sellers of the city; in *The Four Shires of the Same House*, the novel reflected the democratic demands of Chinese modern literature under the call of reality. In *The Four Together*, the novel focuses on the difficult survival choices of many ordinary people in the fallen area of Beijing during the war. Based on the macroscopic historical background, Lao She's Beijing is steeped in history and culture, and its characters are inevitably marked by the city's unique history. The closed and compromised old citizens struggled hard in the turbulent times, and their behaviours, survival choices and destinies were closely related to the huge span of time and space.

Lao She's "small" is a complete individual with rich artistry, which can cause deep reflection and resonance, and has magnificent artistic tension. The "big" in Lao She's writing is a broad background that can reflect the suffering of the people at the bottom and the rise and fall of the society.

## 3. "Small space" encompasses the "big city"

### 3.1. public space

The "small space" in Lao She's writing is open and secular, and information from the "big city" is gathered, exchanged and disseminated in the "small space". Take the teahouse in Lao She's writing as an example, the teahouse culture in old Beijing has a long history. It has retained the social functions of traditional teahouses, such as drinking tea and relaxing, and also possessed the qualities of a public space similar to a hotel. The diversified social functions not only enriched the business model of the teahouse, but also adapted to the needs of different tea drinkers. The common people could learn about current news and exchange anecdotes. They used easy-to-understand language and exchanged vivid and vivid insights. Single isolated news in the process of exchange according to the

different needs of social groups to achieve collision and redistribution[3], thus spreading to a wider social space, the rapid transmission of information and wide dissemination.

The "small space" in Lao She's writing is popular and social, bringing together characters with different identities and distinctive characters. They take "small space" as the centre to establish a certain social network and have fixed social relations, thus turning "small space" into a platform for communication and interaction. In *The Teahouse*, due to the different identities of the teahouse guests and the variety of topics of conversation, the atmosphere of the teahouse is free and relaxed, with strong social inclusion and compatibility. In the teahouse, there are the upper class of the old society, such as Qin Zhongyi and Eunuch Pang, the middle class who can drink tea and tease the birds, such as Chang Siwei and Song Erwei, the poor lower class, such as Kang Liu, and there are also Tang Tiezui, who is a fortune-teller, and Liu Mazi, who is in the business of making pimps. .... The "little people" of all shapes and sizes are all trying to survive. All of these "little people" run around for the trivial matters of survival, and have their own social circle and track of action. When they meet in the teahouse, people of different classes and identities are able to break down social barriers and establish new social relationships. The interpersonal relationships born in the "small space" continue to intertwine and extend, gradually expanding to the "big city" and constituting the social network and urban ecology of the "big city".

### 3.2. Sociocultural

The living conditions of small people in "small spaces" are a visual reflection of the changes in national society. Therefore, small characters can reflect the reality of the big time. The "little people" in Lao She's works change their living condition according to the change of the background of the times, and float together with the waves of the times. In *Longshougou*, with the liberation of Beijing, the ditch repair project of Longshougou was gradually launched, and the identities of the four families in the small courtyard along the ditch were also changed. Old Man Zhao becomes a member of the Security Committee, Crazy Cheng makes up a new piece called "National Peace" and performs it successfully, and Erchun works actively and is enthusiastic about the Party's new policies. Among the many characters, Auntie Wang's thinking gradually changes from old-fashioned superstition to support for the CPC as the ditch-repairing project progresses. At first, when faced with the people's government's construction of Longshu ditch, she thought that "officials love to do things", and that they were always trying to get something out of it. But she was not stubborn, "seeing is believing", from the bottom of her heart, she exclaimed "the Communist Party is really good". When she talked about how she felt about the ditch repair, she said, "After the ditch is repaired, I can take my grandma and grandpa home". This is the most simple wish of Auntie Wang, and also the words that best fit her identity and character. Lao She's works focus on the quality of life of the grassroots through the eyes of the people, which makes the theme of glorifying the people's government more natural and real, and also shows the changes in the people's living conditions after the founding of New China.

The movement of people in the "small space" and the change of space arrangement present the social and historical changes of the "big city". In Lao She's *The Teahouse*, the number of teahouse customers and the layout of the teahouse reflect the prosperity and decline of the business of the teahouse, thus showing the changing times of the public space. In the first act, the teahouse has a large house with many seats, and the teahouse guests can not only drink tea and rest their feet, but also talk about the sky and tease the birds[4]. At this time, the teahouse belongs to the public, the atmosphere is free, and the functions are diverse. In the second act, the warlords cut off the war, the teahouse in the shelling in preparation for the opening. "The only remaining teahouse" is a direct statement of the dismal business operation, before and after the teahouse function of the distinction between the indirect expansion of the source of income, the style and number of teahouse retreat is to cut back on expenses, but also implies a reduction in the consumption of tea customers, the increase in the number of begging refugees, the survival of the teahouse in a more difficult situation. In the third act, the teahouse is no longer decent and is becoming more and more bleak. The new note "Tea Money Paid in Advance" indicates that the teahouse is difficult to maintain its daily operation, and

that the teahouse, which originally belonged to the people, has been occupied by the minions of the power class, such as Xiao Liu Ma-zi and Xiao Tie-zui. Wang Lifa's hanging also symbolises the end of the teahouse as a public space for the people and a carrier of their interests. The change of the "small space" epitomises the rise and fall of the "big city", and makes the historical conflicts more focused, conveying the author's reflection on the change of people's public life in the course of Chinese history.

#### 4. "Big cities" affecting "small spaces"

The pivot of the link between "small space" and "big city" is the people living in the city. Lao She's works reflect the universal human psychology from the unique individual life, and write the eternal national spirit in the limited length of life. This way of writing makes the conflicts in his works more concentrated and intense, thus elevating the theme of his works from trivial matters to the righteousness of the country, and making the literary expression more exciting and expressive.

In the face of changes in the "big city", different characters in the "small space" make different life choices, which eventually lead to different life outcomes[5]. In the peaceful times, most of the people at the bottom of the society are busy with their daily lives, with stable activities and relatively fixed contact groups, and their human nature has not yet been fully revealed. But in the turbulent years, when the family and the country fall, the people's habitual order of life no longer exists, and the people's regular material needs are difficult to maintain, life and death have become an imminent problem. The ultimate propositions of small family and big country, survival and death, trust and betrayal, which directly hit the soul of human beings, are unexpectedly revealed to the lower class people. When their lives are threatened, they are forced to make life choices: there is the fear of doing nothing, there is the awe of dying rather than giving in, there is the degradation of insensitivity, and there is the sinking of betraying dignity.

All these choices are the manifestation of the undertones of human nature, which illustrate the different definitions of the way of life in different people's hearts. Take "The Fourth Generation" as an example, under the high pressure of life, all the people in the "small sheep circle" hutong gave very different answers. Ruiquan, the Qian family, Mr and Mrs Xiaowen hold fast to their beliefs and actively fight; Mr and Mrs Guan Xiaoho and Mr and Mrs Ruifeng sell their dignity and willingly fall; and ordinary civilians in the Little Sheep Circle, such as Master Qi and Master Li, go along with the flow and keep to their own ways[6]. At the moment of life and death, all the people in the "small space" get a glimpse of their own hearts and the hearts of others, and the distinctions between their personalities gradually become clearer, and their interpersonal relationships are transformed. Qian Mo-yin, an old-fashioned scholar, awakens to anti-Japanese resistance after his family is betrayed by Guan Xiaohuo. The originally weak literati gently but firmly stood up to the punishment and torture. Even after the disaster in his life, he still repays Guan Xiaoho's family for their kindness, provides guidance to those who have lost their way, and gives his grandchildren the name of "Goodness". The traditional Chinese literati ethos of "poverty cannot be shifted, might cannot be subjugated" gives a man a strong vitality and resilience at a time of national tragedy, while his intellectual cultivation allows him to overcome hatred and maintain kindness. Each character in the "small space" may be a reflection of a kind of person in the "big city". In the face of death, the self-preservation and evasion, wandering and wavering social groups endure and experience the mutation of human nature; in the face of morality and righteousness, the betrayers, who actively or passively sink because of their desires, abandon their integrity, sell their conscience, and bear moral condemnation; in the face of reality, there are still fighters who persist in the struggle and awaken to the pain, who shoulder the responsibility, bravely undertake the mission, and interpret the glory of human nature. From the shaping of individual image to the construction of group consciousness, Lao She's works are full of contradictions in the human nature of the writing burst out of the desire for integrity and the national survival of the cry. The visual presentation of human nature is also the key to the historical span and

spatial connection in Lao She's works, which also provides important support for the historical narrative of the grand theme of human nature[7].

The "small space" in Lao She's works, as a public space and a kaleidoscope of social and cultural changes, encompasses the human conditions of the "big city", while the "big city" in Lao She's works also the "big city" in Lao She's works also influences the invisible political power and spatial and cultural order in the "small space" in a subtle way. There is a dialectical relationship between the two, and the concept of space far exceeds the simple connotation of objective physics and geography, and is more integrated into social and historical understanding and interpretation, carrying social memories and historical symbols far beyond the social function of the space itself. The "small space" and "big city" constructed by Lao She conveys Lao She's multi-faceted excavation of social history and cultural connotations, reflects his unique interpretation of the depth of human nature, and interprets the sense of national responsibility and national anxiety in the dimension of time and space.

## 5. Conclusion

With small space and big city as the background, Lao She's works reflect the complexity of human nature and the diversity of existence through his unique writing style. He reflects the universal human psychology through the individual life in the small space, and presents the conflicts in a concentrated and intense way, thus sublimating the theme of his works from trivialities to the righteousness of the family and the country, and giving the literary expression a more profound tension. In the turbulent times, people in the small space are faced with the choice of life and death, and the different choices highlight the undertones of human nature and the different definitions of ways of living.

The characters in these works may be the epitome of all kinds of people in big cities, and their different reactions in the face of death, morality and reality demonstrate the diversity of human nature. Through the portrayal of individual figures and the construction of group consciousness, Lao She presents the desire for sound personality and the call for national survival. His works not only show the diversity of human nature and human feelings, but also reflect the multi-dimensional excavation of social history and cultural connotations, manifesting a profound awareness of national responsibility and national anxieties. Through the interweaving of small spaces and big cities, Lao She provides readers with a profound interpretation of social history, emphasising the importance of cultural memory and historical symbols in the dimension of time and space.

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