

Transcending Death by Telling Stories: On the Dead Narration in Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day*

Xiangyi Luo *

Chinese Language and Literature, Fuzhou University Zhicheng College, Fuzhou, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 1059531701@qq.com

Abstract. In the history of literature, the traditional narration of the dead is mainly characterized by the connection of “yin”(dead) and “yang”(alive) when the dead people return to the living world, there is no lack of the enlightenment of punishing evil and promoting good, and supporting justice. However the narration of the dead in Yu Hua's novel *The Seventh Day* is different from the tradition, which is emphasize the incoherence of yin and yang, reflecting the heavy realistic meaning. Starting from the tradition of literary history, this paper combs the development of the narration of the dead, studies the characteristics of the narration of the dead in Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day*, and compares it with the traditional narration of the dead, and then deeply explores the profound values behind Yu Hua's transformation of the narration of the dead.

Keywords: Yu Hua, *The Seventh Day*, Dead Narration.

1. The Literary History Tradition of the Dead Narration: From the Separation of Yin and Yang to the Connection of Yin and Yang

According to the *Book of Rites - Sacrifice Law*, everything that grows between heaven and earth is called “life”, and the death of all things is called “break”. And human death is called “ghost”. This has not changed since five generations [1]. It can be seen that the concept of dead people as ghosts existed as early as the Five Dynasties in China. Before the Tang Dynasty, people advocated the concept of “different paths between yin and yang, separated by dark and bright paths”. The dead and the living could not intersect because of the separation of yin and yang. This is also consistent with the objective reality. In the Tang Dynasty, under the influence of Taoism, Buddhism and witchcraft, people were both curious and scared about the ghostly world. As a result, “Ming Bao novel” (ghosts come to revege) appeared in the Tang Dynasty.

Lu Xun once said in *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*: “I thought there were different paths, but people and ghosts were all real, so his narration of different things was different from recording common things in the world.” [2] What he is talking about is the “Ming Bao novel” of the Tang Dynasty. People rely on the hands of ghosts to resort to the mouth of ghosts the contradictions that cannot be solved and the truth that cannot be told in reality, which is the traditional narration of the dead in literary history.

In ancient Chinese literature, the narration of the dead is not only used in ghost novels, but also in Tang legends, drama books and Yuan dramas. In the Yuan Dynasty drama “*Snow in Midsummer*”, Zhang Lver tried to seize Dou E by blaming Dou E for the death of the old man Zhang. Dou E tried hard to justify her efforts and pinned her hope on the government. Unexpectedly, the government was not in the side of justtice. The guards were indiscriminate, abused and resorted to torture the poor woman. The dutiful Dou E had to confess wrongfully in order to protect the mother of the deceased husband, Grandma Cai, from being beaten. After Dou E's death, the grievance repeatedly “played the lamp” and “turned the paper” in front of her father's book case, which attracted her father's attention, and finally the grievance was redressed.

And in the legend “*The Story of Red Plum*” written by Zhou Chaojun in the Ming Dynasty, Jia Sidao killed Hui Niang and imprisoned childe Pei because he was angry with Hui Niang for express praise for him. Hui Niang said, “After her death, this feeling will not die out.” With the help of the judge, the ghost returned to the living world, rescued childe Pei and his wife and concubines who were wronged in the inner Mongolia of Jia's house, angrily scolded Jia Sidao and washed away her

grievances. Also in the Qing Dynasty, Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, is a novel showed that he shaped his "ideal country" into a "ghost country" full of ghosts and monsters. The ghosts' hideous appearance in *Strange stories from a Chinese Studio* has been changed, through the dead spirit narrative techniques, Pu Songling makes the poor man and the died of the beautiful female ghost love each other, to complete a kind of spiritual self comfort. Later, *Fantastic Tales* By Ji Xiaolan also used the technique of ghost narration to connect the living people in one world with the ghosts in another world. However, Ji Yun did not take this opportunity to affirm the very meaning of life itself, but to truly reflect the darkness of society in the Ming and Qing dynasties through his cool style.

In the ancient feudal society, the hierarchy was strict and people believed in the feudal ethics of the monarch such as loyalty and filial piety. People will be oppressed before they die and cannot tell the truth or revenge. When writing, ancient writers could not get rid of the shackles of feudal ideology, but they wanted to punish the evil and promote the good and justice, so they could only let the dead of the characters say and do, because once a person died, he would no longer be oppressed by the feudal concept in reality. Therefore, after yin and yang are separated, there must be connected later again. The dead return to the world after death, revenge, punish the evil and promote the good, which reflects people's yearning for the good and is a kind way of expressing hope.

2. Yu Hua's *The Seventh Day* Transforms the Narrative Tradition of the Dead: Yin and Yang Separated Forever

Yu Hua changed the traditional narration of the dead in his novel *The Seventh Day*, and returned to the "different paths between yin and yang, and the dark and bright paths separated" advocated in the Tang Dynasty, that is, the separation of yin and yang forever and ever. This is not only a transformation of the traditional narration of the dead, but also a return to the traditional concepts of ancient China.

First of all, the world of the dead created by Yu Hua in *The Seventh Day* is different from traditional novels. In traditional novels, the ghost of a human being is either with the help of the ghost of the underworld, or because of other coincidences, so that it can return to the world and do something that could not be done before, which can be said to be completely free from the shackles of the living world. However, in *The Seventh Day*, people are still bound by the secular world after death. Take Yang Fei's description when he first came to the funeral home as an example:

"On the right side of the hall are rows of plastic chairs held in place by iron shelves, and on the left is the sofa area, which is surrounded by comfortable sofas in several circles, with plastic flowers placed on the coffee table in the middle. On this side of the plastic chairs, there are a lot of people waiting to burn. On the other side of the sofa, there are only five people waiting to burn. They are sitting comfortably and crossing their legs like they are successful." [3]

For example, when Yang Fei arrived at the funeral home one day, he heard the rich people discussing their shrouds and urns together. The shrouds were made of silk and the urns were made of luxury materials such as large leaf red sandalwood, while the poor people blamed his wife for not bargaining because his shrouds were 50 yuan more expensive than others, and the cemetery prices were expensive was confined to a one-square-meter space after his death.

When the rich come to the world of the dead, they can enjoy VIP treatment in the funeral home, and the cemetery they live in is even more luxurious. After the death of the poor, because there is no money to buy a cemetery for themselves in reality, and even no one who can help them settle down, they cannot be cremated in the funeral home in the world of the dead, and can only wander around in the underground world. Death did not liberate those who had suffered before, but instead fell from one kind of despair to another kind of endless despair.

Secondly, Yu Hua's narrative perspective is also different from the traditional narration of the dead. Generally speaking, if a literary work uses the narration of the dead, its narrative perspective is often the living perspective and the perspective of the dead occupy the same space, or even more to tell the story from the perspective of the living. But in *The Seventh Day*, almost all of them use the

perspective of the dead to narrate. The first paragraph of the novel says: "The place I am going to is called a funeral home... My cremation appointment is at 9:30." [4] The beginning of the novel explains the hero Yang Fei is a dead person, is a dead spirit. Then all the people Yang Fei meets are also in the form of dead spirits. For example, the ex-wife Li Qing he meets the next day is also a dead spirit. "The rich woman named Li Qing cut her wrists in the bathtub of her home yesterday." [5] Including the people Yang Fei met in the "dead without burial place", such as Tan Jiabin family, Mouse sister, Wu Chao, Xiao Qing, Zhang police officer, Li Yuezhen and a couple crushed to death in the demolition of Shenghe Road. This makes the narrative emotion seem cold and depressed, and the tone and environment of the characters in the novel are extremely cold. Every character in "The Seventh Day" seems to be telling others' stories as a bystander when telling their own stories. For example, Yang Fei's scene is as follows:

"When the thick fog filled, I walked out of the rental house and walked alone in the empty and chaotic city. The place I was going to was called the funeral home. This is its current name, and its former name was the crematorium. I got a notice that I should arrive at the funeral home before 9:00 in the morning. My cremation time was scheduled at 9:30." [4]

This text is narrated from Yang Fei's first person perspective. It is clearly about the absurd and tragic thing of going to the funeral home to cremate after his death, but his tone of voice seems so calm and indifferent, as if it is only a matter of no concern to himself. Death has always been the most difficult thing for human beings to face, and it is also the origin of all human tragedies. There is no big difference between the world of the dead and the world of the living. The death that is as heavy as a thousand pounds seems to be insignificant for a small person.

However, Yu Hua's narration of the dead has one last feature that is quite noteworthy, which changes the gray color of the first two features and reflects some strange spirit and belief. We can see that in traditional novels, suffering will end with death, but in *The Seventh Day*, suffering changes from the real suffering of survival to the suffering of the dead that is difficult to rest. The grievance has not been vindicated, and the villain has not been punished. When a person dies, he is just dead. This shows that Yu Hua seems to have a rather pessimistic attitude towards practical problems - that is, all kinds of suffering problems in reality cannot be solved by death. However, Yu Hua's artistic treatment in his novels also shows that his narration of the dead is not a purely despairing style. For example, the novel does not let the ghosts wander meaninglessly in the world of the dead, but constructs a "dead without burial place". Although the name is horrible, Yu Hua's description is quite poetic. Among them, the dead are not alone. They can get together with friends who are also dead. After arriving at the "place of death without burial", they talked to each other and comforted each other here.

Although yin and yang are still separated, this profound arrangement shows that Yu Hua's narration of the dead is not pure despair, but with a trace of hope.

3. Transcending Death by Telling Stories: Despair is as Important to Vanity as Hope

In *The Seventh Day*, whether living or dying, people are suffering, suffering can not be solved, and people have always been in despair. People experienced the real suffering of the oppression of powerful people before his death, and still fell into the suffering of the "difficult to rest" after his death. In *Wild Grass*, "Hope", Lu Xun repeated this sentence with powerful tune: "Despair is as important to vanity as hope!" [6]

As a philosophical category, "nihilism", in the eyes of existentialist philosophers, is also a form and way of existence like other substances. As a special and specific existence, this nihilism is the objectified emptiness of human beings, that is, the spiritual existence that human beings choose in the existence of "evil" in the external world after losing the freedom of reality, and is the abstraction of emptiness. In Lu Xun's opinion, this "nihilism" is the nihilism caused by "despair" and "vanity". This includes the connotation of humanistic spirit, which means that "despair" in Lu Xun's spiritual

system is not the final result, but only a cognitive attitude and value judgment that is emotional and rational and points to the final result of vanity. Lu Xun did not turn from despair to nihilism, but at the same time, he also raised profound questions about his despair. In his article "Hometown", Lu Xun said: "Hope is nothing, nothing. This is just like the road on the ground; in fact, there is no road on the ground, with more people walking on it then there will become the road." [7] Despair does not mean that hope is broken, but that hope is reborn. Fighting against despair is a hope.

In *The Seventh Day*, although Yu Hua has plunged the characters into endless despair with indifferent and repressive strokes, Yu Hua has also constructed a "death without burial place" full of warmth and hope in the novel. There, Tan Jiabin's family continued to operate the restaurant they had opened before their death:

"I saw Tan's wife, daughter and son-in-law coming. Their hands were all holding plates and bottles. Tan Jiabin said to the coming of them: 'Tan Jia Cuisine opened today, Yang Fei is coming today.'" [8]

Li Yuezhen and 27 children killed by the hospital have been singing:

"After crossing the border between life and death, Li Yuezhen stepped onto a grassy meadow. The green grass rubbed against the necks of 27 babies crawling behind her. The tickle made them squeak with laughter. At the end of the parkview, there was a shining river. Li Yuezhen stepped into the river. The river rose slowly to her chest and then dropped slowly to her feet. Twenty-seven babies crawled across the water. They choked and coughed all the way to the other bank. They crossed the river into the forest. In the forest, Li Yuezhen began to sing a certain tune unconsciously, followed by twenty-seven babies. When Lee stopped humming, the 27 babies did not stop, and the nightingale-like song has been ringing ever since." [9]

Yang Fei also reunited with his adoptive father:

"We sat down in plastic chairs, my right hand cupping the white glove of my father's left hand. The hole in the glove made me feel the bones of my father's fingers, so weak they seemed to break at the touch. My father looked at me with his blind eyes and made me feel very friendly." [10]

In their own way, the dead are fighting against the eternal despair brought by the difficulty of resting in peace. Death is unavoidable, it is the greatest human suffering and the origin of all human tragedies for thousands of years. Literature is a way that people find to comfort themselves when they have to face this problem, because the writer uses the way of telling stories to make life exist in another form, which is to use stories to transcend death, which is also a hope of people for the unavoidable and unresolved suffering.

References

- [1] Dai Sheng. Complete Book of Rites. Beijing: China Textile Press, 2018, 162.
- [2] Lu Xun. A Brief History of Chinese Fiction. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1998, 24.
- [3] Yu Hua. *The Seventh Day*. Beijing: Xinxing Publishing House, 2018, 8.
- [4] Yu Hua. *The Seventh Day*. Beijing: Xinxing Publishing House, 2018, 3.
- [5] Yu Hua. *The Seventh Day*. Beijing: Xinxing Publishing House, 2018, 25.
- [6] Lu Xun. *Wild Grass*. Beijing: China Literature and History Press, 2020, 18.
- [7] Lu Xun. *Shouting*. Beijing: China Literature and History Press, 2020, 69.
- [8] Yu Hua. *The Seventh Day*. Beijing: Xinxing Publishing House, 2018, 152.
- [9] Yu Hua. *The Seventh Day*. Beijing: Xinxing Publishing House, 2018, 170.
- [10] Yu Hua. *The Seventh Day*. Beijing: Xinxing Publishing House, 2018, 212.