

On the Narrative Art of The Lychee in Chang'an

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Abstract: Set in the 14th year of Tianbao of the Tang Dynasty, Ma Boyong's *The Lychee of Chang'an* tells the story of Li Shande, a petty official of the ninth rank, who finally succeeds in transporting fresh lychee after going through all kinds of difficulties. This paper is a case study of Lychee in Chang'an from the perspective of narratology, analyzing its underlying narrative strategy and narrative art.

Keywords: The Lychee of Chang'an; Narratology; Underlying narrative; Narrative art; Fiction.

1. Introduction

The *Lychee in Chang'an* is a long novel written by contemporary writer Ma Boyong, which focuses on the story of Li Shande, a minor official of the ninth grade, who transports fresh lychees during the fourteenth year of Tianbao of the Tang Dynasty. Ma Boyong narrates the story from the perspective of the grassroots and provides a deep insight into the lives of the grassroots people. The whole book talks about the small lychee and the small lychee official, and reflects the shortcomings of the era of the Tang Dynasty from the small characters in history, reflects the important reasons for the decline of the Tang Dynasty, which plays the effect of "seeing the small things and knowing the big things". This paper takes "*Lychee in Chang'an*" as the object of analysis, and focuses on the narrative art of the novel from the aspects of underlying characters, narrative perspective and narrative voice.

2. Underclass Narrative

The term "subaltern" was first coined by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci to refer to the subordinate social groups in European societies that are excluded from the mainstream. The concept of "subaltern" began to be popularized in sociology in 1987 when the American Social Science Research Council set up a committee specializing in the study of subaltern issues[1]. Nowadays, the term "underclass" refers to the people who are gradually marginalized and stratified in the process of rapid socio-economic and cultural development and change. However, "due to the fact that the sociological concept of 'underclass' is difficult to define, and can only reproduce some disadvantaged survival groups, once, in the face of 'underclass writing,' the vast majority of researchers consciously bypassed the definition of this concept. "[2] The author believes that the object of attention of the "underclass narrative" is mainly the underclass characters and the underclass society, and pays deep attention to the living conditions of the toiling masses at the bottom of the society, and unearths the complex human nature.

"Because most of these works do not have a 'bottom perspective' even though they depict the bottom, they actually do not care about the status quo of the life of the bottom, but only want to extract the drama of the plot from it; the writers are looking down rather than looking up in their postures." [3] What is remarkable is that Ma Boyong does not look down on the underclass, not just revealing the hardships of the

underclass, but also delving deep into the hearts of the underclass to express their spiritual struggles and sufferings in a profound way.

In *Lychee in Chang'an*, Ma Boyong penetrates deep into the lower class of society, and Li Shande's repeated failed attempts become the centre of gravity of the author's writing. Although there is no detailed account of the history of the Tang Dynasty, readers can still see the shortcomings of the era of the Tang Dynasty through what Li Shande goes through in the process of transporting lychees. For example, "Li Shande suddenly found it absurd that he had followed all the rules, but had run into obstacles at every turn; whereas there was such a sign that was not on any official paperwork, but it went through unhindered." [4] It can be seen that the society at that time was really a dark power game. For the sake of the saint's light sentence: "I want your consort to eat fresh lychee on the day of her birth". Li Shande after countless difficulties and day and night running, almost lost his life to transport a fresh lychee. Numerous officials had to think twice, numerous horsemen had to break their legs, and numerous people had to pay half a year's corvée in vain..... This fresh lychee is not only the lychee that the saint used to win the smile of the red face but also the lychee that millions of people piled up with their flesh and blood. The bottom narrative can give the reader a more powerful impact, which is also precisely the bottom narrative perspective to start the artistic charm of the narrative.

3. Underclass Character

Ma Boyong did not choose a high and mighty character but set the main character as a poor grassroots official, Li Shande. Li Shande is just an insignificant official, a small civilian who works hard for a living. At the age of fifty-two, he took out a loan to purchase a remote mansion. While he was still revelling in the joy of acquiring a new house, he was given an impossible task - to make sure that your consort would have fresh Lingnan lychees on her birthday. However, lychee changes colour in one day, fragrance in two days, and taste in three days. With a distance of 5,000 miles and limited time constraints, Yao completes the transportation, which is an impossible task in everyone's eyes. Li Shande was framed by his colleagues and forced to take over the transportation task. During the transportation process, the author shows the survival of the grassroots and the warmth and coldness of human nature to the fullest. The author does not give Li Shande a strong character conflict but presents Li Shande's

predicament to the readers in a very calm and simple narrative method.

Ma Boyong once said in an interview, "Writing history from the perspective of a minor character allows me to quickly immerse myself in the environment, because in fact, our readers, including myself, are minor characters, and it is hard for us to imagine what the lives of real dignitaries, emperors and generals were like, so it is much easier for us to perceive the lives of the minor characters, as well as their joys and sorrows. It is easier for us to perceive the living conditions of the little people and their joys and sorrows. My creative concept is to bring up the stories of these small people in ancient times, who have not received special attention, from the long river of history. On the other hand, as a person who follows the big era, the study of history should also start from a small place, to observe the people in the long river of history, and only when we understand the life of the small people and the era they live in can we push back and understand the real power behind the changes of the big era." [5] Under Ma Boyong's narration, the whole story is sad, but it also contains color of warmth. The author often adds some warm flavouring when he narrates the sufferings of Li Shande so that the reader can be buffered and the narrative will not be overly heavy.

For example, when Li Shande was in trouble, Han Migui and Du Fu listened to him and sincerely analyzed the advantages and disadvantages for him, gave him advice, and pointed out the direction for him in the middle of the predicament; A boy's liveliness and frankness. She is devoted to guarding the lychee tree. Although she does not understand what Li Shande is doing, she sees the difference between Li Shande and the "city people" and chooses to believe him and give him sincere help; in addition, there is also the loyal servant, Lin Yi Nu: "It is my duty to be loyal to my master, and I came here to warn him in order to return the favour to the ambassador." [4] He risked being eaten by a tiger and blew his lungs out to warn Lee Sun-tak. After learning that he would not live long, he was willing to use his own body to lure the tiger and use the tiger to get rid of the enemy that was chasing Lee Sun Tak. This is an extremely moving part of the story. Lin Yi Nu makes the reader feel the warmth of humanity; and lastly, it is Li Shan De's keeping in mind his original intention. "I originally thought that I should be happy when I delivered the lychee safely to the capital, and from then on I would have a great career. But after I ran the whole way down, I realized that the closer I got to success, the fewer friends I had, and the guiltier I felt inside. I had wanted to be like I was before, to tolerate it a little bit, and maybe get used to it soon. But on June 1, when I was leaning against the remnants of the monument at Shanghaofang, watching the lychee being delivered to Chunmingmen, I realized that I was not happy at all, but only full of disgust. At that moment, I suddenly realized that some impulses cannot be met with, and some thoughts cannot be hidden." [4] Therefore, he chose to give up more than twenty years of cowardice and confronted the Duke of Wei, Yang Guozhong. He held fast to his heart, sought peace of conscience, and ceased to be a silent man. Anger at the imperial court's extravagance, indignation at the Dong people's innocence of having their trees chopped down, and compassion at the farmers' unbearable labour force coalesced into a powerful force that erupted in that instant. However, Li Shande was also deported to Lingnan as a result.

4. Narrative Perspective

This paper is a first-person narrative. Although the narrator's point of view and the character's point of view alternate in traditional first-person narratives, the narrator of a first-person narrative work joins the narrative point of view in a special relationship that is unified with the narrated task. [6] However, in *Lychee in Chang'an*, there are fewer cases of alternation between the two, and most of them are intermingled. The narrator appears as a listener, intermingling with the characters in the work in order to achieve a greater understanding of the underlying characters. Ma Boyong's narrative language is shallow and easy to understand; he lets the characters speak for themselves and uses dialogue to drive the entire storyline, which is highly contagious. Ma Boyong becomes a bystander like the reader, replacing the author's voice with that of the minor characters. The characters are infused with the author's flesh and blood, showing Li Shande's resilience and bearing in the face of suffering.

5. Repetition of Narrative

"Repetition is an ancient artistic force, the earliest rhetorical term for rhetoric that relies on the repetition of a word or phrase to achieve a specific effect is *escritoire*. Repetition is an important means of narrative in novels, and the use of 'repetition' in novels can be divided into two categories: narrative repetition and subject repetition." [7]

A large number of repetitive narratives in *Lychee in Chang'an* build up the general framework of the whole novel. "Transporting Lychees" is the biggest narrative repetition in the whole novel, with three trials. The first trial consisted of four routes, all of which failed. The second trial is optimized to two routes, carrying half-ripe green lychees from Meiguan Road and Xijing Road respectively, and the result is still a failure, but the lychee's period of tartness is prolonged by half a day. The third trial was divided into water and land routes, during which unexpected events were encountered. The last transportation of lychee transportation is divided into pre-preparation and mid-term arrangements, and finally encountered all kinds of accidents on the way, but finally completed the task of transporting lychee.

The novel writes that Li Shande keeps exploring transportation routes and improving transportation methods in order to transport lychees. The repeated failures of his experiments make him constantly learn from them. He improves and perfects every aspect, and finally works out the most suitable transportation method. He failed again and again, but again and again, he stood up again. After overcoming geographical obstacles and environmental difficulties, he faced the complexities of the human heart and unexpected situations, and finally solved all the problems to deliver the lychees safely to Chang'an before the birthday of the noble concubine.

Such repetition of the narrative helps to characterize Li Shande. It makes the readers deeply feel that he is a person who is not vain about the surface and pays much attention to practice. When confronted with the problem of lychee transit, any variable along the way could lead to a million different results. Instead of paperwork, he was hands-on, experimenting in the field himself even before he explained the task. Still, a man who defied the odds and had strong convictions. An almost impossible thing was able to achieve success with his persistence. In the midst of countless failures and despair, he stifled any desire to retreat and never chose to

give up. He truly realized what he said, "Even if I fail, I still want to know how far I fall from the finish line." [4]

6. Underlying Narrative Voice

"Narrative voice is the various intentions, values, and elements of power and ideology in the narrative. In the work, we can feel the author's moral, ideological and aesthetic tendencies in the seemingly objective narrative." [8]

6.1. Satirizing the Workplace Ethos

"Many petty officials in ancient times, many grassroots officials, including some ordinary people, faced problems in their life and work that were very similar to our modern day-to-day." [5] A big reason why "Lychee in Chang'an" has the power to hit the heart is because the author combines his familiarity with history with his concern for reality. It seems to be writing about ancient people and events, but every modern person can see themselves in it again.

"When they saw Li Shande, they put aside their chopsticks and bowed their hands enthusiastically to salute. Li Shande was a bit surprised, when did these guys become so polite? He was just confused when he saw the Shanglin Agency Order beckoning and signalling himself to make it to the side. Liu was a big fat man who was usually polite to the upper peak of the detachment and never wore colours to his subordinates. He was so amiable and loving today, making Li Shande a bit flattered." [4] From this passage, one can see the ugly face of Liu Department Order and other colleagues. The disguise and weakness before preparing to frame Li Shande. But Li Shande had no choice but to try his best to find a silver lining in the numbers and desperately race against time to save his family and himself.

But why did they choose to frame Li Shande? Because Li Shande was timid and cowardly and was not well-versed in the ways of officialdom. He was bullied by his peers on weekdays kept silent, and had no lofty ambitions. Therefore, in the face of the imperial court sending down the task, the disaster can only be the weakest one. And, in the process of experimentation, Li Shande also hit a wall everywhere. As the book says, "Processes that kind of thing are rules that only the weak have to follow." [4] Processes are set up for people at the bottom; the higher you climb, the more power you have and the fewer obstacles you have; people who start low have a hard time every step of the way, and most people spend their whole lives just to get to the starting point of others. This is an unjust reality that is hard to change. Li Shande seems to have accomplished his mission through his efforts, but in fact, the so-called good luck and coincidence are all given by the "big man". He is just a small pawn for the "big shots" to fight for fame and fortune. If he is useful, he will be used; if he is not useful, he will be discarded; it is just a game of power.

6.2. Exposure to the ills of the Times

Ma Boyong exposes the dark side of history with his humorous and affectionate yet tragic and shocking words. A

dystopian era is revealed from the perspective of the lowly character Li Shande. A concubine's desire for food is more important than a group of people's lives. The king's casual errand takes up countless amounts of money and manpower to fill. Countless people were thus reduced to having no food, and no clothing, and their families were broken. The emperor stood in the tower above the people's worship and respect, but could not hear a word of the people's livelihood, and could not see a glimpse of the people's feelings. The great Tang Dynasty, which looked like a blossoming world where all countries came to worship, was dark and shocking.

7. Conclusion

The Lychee in Chang'an maps out the social problems of the big time with the encounter of the minor character Li Shande in transporting lychees. Ma Boyong repeats the story of Li Shande's transportation of lychees in a climactic narrative device, and at the same time creates a narrative perspective of the underlying narrative, which makes the work vivid, infectious and impactful. In addition, the author implicitly points out in the text the ills of the era of the Tang Dynasty and satirizes the absurd and unfair workplace culture. Ma Boyong's exploration of the underlying narrative also reflects his humanitarian spirit. It provokes the readers to re-recognize history and reflect deeply on human nature. The novel succeeds in both narrative strategy and narrative content and is an excellent work of underclass narrative, which can play a certain role in the development of underclass narrative. As the author is not well educated, I can only stop here to analyze the narrative art of the book.

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