

Spatial Narrative in *A Touch of Green*

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Abstract: Drawing on the theoretical framework of Spatial Narrative, this paper analyses the profound connection between geographical shifts and psychological transformations in Bai Xianying's novel *A Touch of Green*. The study focuses on the contrasting narratives of the two polarised spaces of Nanjing and Taipei: Nanjing, represented by 'Ren'ai East Village', is constructed as a wartime utopia brimming with warmth yet inherently fragile, whose inevitable collapse sets the tone of trauma; Taipei, by contrast, is presented as a place of exile devoid of meaning, where the alienating and stagnant spatial texture externalises the characters' rootlessness and sense of entrapment. The thesis further draws upon Long Diyong's theory of 'circular narrative space' () to elucidate how the novel, through the perspective of Mrs Qin's recollections, weaves Nanjing and Taipei into a self-contained, inescapable narrative loop. Ultimately, this paper reveals how the spatial narrative of *A Touch of Green* elevates the experiences of specific historical individuals into universal human existential dilemmas concerning the trauma of war, the stagnation of time and eternal homesickness.

Keywords: *A Touch of Green*, Spatial Narrative, Bai Xianying.

1. Introduction

A Touch of Green is a short story by the writer Bai Xianying, published in the August 1966 issue of *Modern Literature* and included in the collection *People of Taipei*. Set against the backdrop of the 1940s and 1950s, the story centres on the life experiences of the protagonist, Zhu Qing, spanning the two cities of Nanjing and Taipei, and drawing a contrast between them—Nanjing representing the 'beautiful past' and Taipei the 'tragic present'. Nanjing was the setting for Zhu Qing's long academic career, her heart-stirring romantic experiences and her married life. It was here that she met and fell in love with her partner, Guo Zhen, and together they built a home. After Guo Zhen was killed in the war, Zhu Qing fled to Taiwan. Living in Taiwan, Zhu Qing underwent a profound change in character, becoming a stark contrast to the Zhu Qing of Nanjing. Here, Taiwan exists as the 'other', standing in contrast to Nanjing; the spatial narrative in *A Touch of Green* begins with this externally imposed geographical shift.

Discussions regarding the temporal and spatial dimensions in literary works have long been a perennial topic. In the realm of literary creation, the modernist writers who emerged as a new force raised the banner of anti-traditionalism; they broke away from traditional linear narrative, employing techniques such as the interweaving and inversion of time and space in an attempt to shatter the conventions and forms of traditional fiction and explore a spatialised writing paradigm for the novel. On the theoretical front, from the latter half of the twentieth century onwards, the relationship between narrative and space in literary works became a topic of widespread academic interest. In 1945, Joseph Frank, a renowned American critic and Professor of Comparative Literature at Princeton University, published the essay 'Spatial Forms in Modern Literature', in which he first systematically proposed a theory of spatial forms in the novel. In his essay "Spatial Narratology: A New Field in Narratological Studies," The subsequent development of spatial narratology reflects a broader shift from an almost exclusive emphasis on temporal sequence towards increasing attention to the spatial organization of narrative. Wang An's study of the development of spatial narratology provides an important

account of this theoretical transition.[1] Long Diyong argues that narrative should be examined not only through its temporal dimension but also through its spatial dimension, since space itself can perform important narrative functions.[2] Existing scholarship has also examined the importance of space in Bai Xianying's fiction. Zhou Yao approaches Bai's short stories through spatial imagery, spatial form and the relationship between the writer's life experience and spatial writing.[3] Zhang Yinan further investigates spatial narrative across Bai Xianying's fiction, highlighting its significance for narrative innovation and aesthetic expression.[4] Building on these studies, this paper will explore the spatial narrative in Bai Xianying's novel *A Touch of Green* from the perspective of existing Spatial Narrative theories, delving deeply into the transformations of physical space within the work and the resulting collapse and reconstruction of the female protagonist Zhu Qing's psychological space. Layer by layer, it will reveal the complete genealogy of war trauma in the novel: beginning with a forced rupture in geographical space, manifesting as disorder and disintegration within the ethical space of daily life, and ultimately crystallising into irreparable psychological ruins within the individual's inner world.

2. The Fractured Homeland: The Duality of Nanjing's Narrative Space

As the ancient capital of the Six Dynasties and the seat of the Nationalist Government during the Republic of China era, Nanjing is portrayed with unique distinctiveness in Bai Xianying's writing. It is both the setting for a bygone era of splendour and the homeland to which the protagonist can never return—a place laden with infinite memories and nostalgia. 'Suddenly returning to that imperial capital of the Six Dynasties, with its ancient monuments and splendour everywhere, an air of imperial grandeur that dazzled our eyes.' [5] The Nanjing depicted in the novel is embodied in 'Ren'ai East Village', the air force dependants' community where the protagonists live, and is first and foremost meticulously constructed as a spiritual haven offering refuge from the chaos of the outside world. This construction is

achieved entirely through the limited and value-laden perspective of the narrator, Mrs Qin. Bai Xianyong's core narrative technique is one of selective refinement and emotional focus. In Mrs Qin's recollections, the space of 'Nanjing'-represented by Ren'ai East Village-is filtered to exclude the widespread chaos, hunger and panic experienced by the common people during the war, presenting instead a sense of tranquillity and harmony that seems to exist in a world of its own. Through the author's pen, readers witness the pilots-Guo Zhen being a prime example-'clad head to toe in American-style Vautrin air force uniforms, with a fur-trimmed leather jacket over their shoulders, their waists cinched tightly, yet a Ray-Ban sunglasses case dangling from their belts.' Their dashing and heroic bearing, coupled with the refined and ethereal elegance of the female protagonist, Zhu Qing-who, upon her arrival, is described as wearing "a semi-new, straight-cut blue cotton tunic with a white silk handkerchief tucked into the lapel"-infuses this stable world with a sense of freshness and hope. Meanwhile, the disaster, chaos, death and suffering lurking behind the scenes are merely touched upon in passing through the backstories of various marginal characters during casual conversations. Together, these images weave a micro-community that is warm, orderly and imbued with human warmth and ethical values. In this sense, Nanjing serves as a symbol of a 'home' created by the narrative-a fleeting 'peaceful time' suspended above the dark clouds of war. The unique narrative significance of these fond memories lies in their extreme fragility and their function as a frame of reference. The more the narrator emphasises the perfection of the past, the more they intensify the pain caused by its destruction. It is not an objective historical scene, but rather an emotional space laid out in advance to prepare for the immense rupture that is to follow. What resonates with readers is not so much nostalgia for a real city as it is for a space embodying a cultural ideal-one that has been idealized-of 'home' and 'youth'.

However, Bai Xianyong's insight lies in the fact that he does not portray this utopia as a flawless illusion. As the setting for the characters' painful memories, Nanjing's significance extends far beyond the emotional trauma of individual displacement. In Bai Xianyong's portrayal, the city's painful essence stems from an irreconcilable fissure within its very fabric-a structural contradiction between a vision of beauty and a cruel reality.

The spatial stability of this 'homeland' is built upon the most unstable of foundations-death. In the novel, the daily order of Nanjing is perpetually overshadowed by a sense of impending doom. Every time the pilots take off, it could be their 'last farewell'; it is precisely to cushion the anxiety and pain of separation that Mrs Qin takes Zhu Qing to cook, knit jumpers and 'play a few rounds of mahjong', as a way of warding off the terrible news that could arrive at any moment. The swift, passionate and resolute love between Zhu Qing and Guo Zhen is itself the ultimate product of this pressure of a countdown-they live each day as if it were their last, thereby avoiding any regrets in their love. Consequently, the beauty of the Nanjing setting is always symbiotic with a pre-existing, structural sense of loss. Its status as a 'home' is but a step away from death. Guo Zhen's death in battle was not merely a random blow from an external catastrophe, but the inevitable fulfilment of the space's inherent logic of danger. The news of his death was like a precise key that unlocked the gate of 'loss' that had hung over everyone's heads from the very beginning.

Towards the end of the war, the collapse of the Nanjing space was total and silent. Bai Xianyong handles this vast dispersion with an extremely restrained pen: 'Zhu Qing had only been gone a few days when we, too, began our flight, leaving Nanjing.' The understated nature of the narrative serves to highlight the harrowing reality. The order, warmth and ethics of days gone by were instantly rendered meaningless under the crushing weight of the torrent of history. What the characters were forced to undergo was not merely a geographical migration, but a forced stripping away of their very sense of existence. They were violently severed from the soil that had given them their identity, relationships and memories. From that moment on, Nanjing collapsed from a 'living space' brimming with warmth and happiness into a traumatic symbol that could only be repeatedly ruminated upon in memory, yet could never again be fully articulated. It solidified into a complex crystallisation encompassing all love, fear, glory and shame, carried by the survivors to the other shore.

Consequently, the transition to Taipei is by no means a mere change of location. Taipei will become a pale screen upon which all of Nanjing's unresolved contradictions, unfinished grief and forcibly interrupted lives will cast distorted and lingering shadows. The characters' existence in Taipei-whether it be Mrs Qin living as a monument to memory, or Zhu Qing resolutely throwing herself into another form of chaos-constitutes an ongoing response to the structural trauma of Nanjing. The agony of Nanjing lies in the fact that, for the military dependants of that era, it once represented a tangible hope; yet the inevitability of its destruction transformed that very hope into the cruelest form of torment.

3. A Hopeless Reality-The Narrative Space of Taipei and the Stagnant Time of Diaspora

When the exiles' ship arrived in Taiwan, a decisive shift occurred in the narrative space. Yet the Taipei depicted by Bai Xianyong is by no means a geographical starting point brimming with new hope, but rather a 'present-tense' vessel, suspended in the crevice of history and devoid of meaning. With an almost cruel detachment, it reveals the directionless, stagnant state into which life is plunged when the 'past' is forcibly severed and the 'future' becomes unimaginable. The core function of Taipei's narrative space lies in reflecting and amplifying the inner emptiness and despair of the military dependants.

In Taipei, the air force dependants once again settle in a 'jun village' known as 'Ren'ai East Village'. On the surface, this appears to be a relocation of Nanjing's 'Ren'ai East Village', an attempt to maintain continuity in both physical form and community relations. However, through meticulous comparison, Bai Xianyong profoundly reveals the essential difference between the two-similar in form but dissimilar in spirit; the more deliberate the connection, the more jarring the rupture.

The connection survives only in form and in a struggle to maintain it; although both are called Ren'ai East Village, 'it has absolutely nothing to do with the one I lived in in Nanjing.' The distinction, however, is deeply rooted in the very nature of the space and its spiritual core. Nanjing's Ren'ai East Village, though fragile, was an organic, warm-hearted community; its solidarity stemmed from a shared sense of

destiny (as Air Force dependants) and genuine emotional bonds. The military dependants' village in Taipei, on the other hand, was first and foremost a political and temporary resettlement site, symbolising the collective identity of exiles—the 'people from other provinces'. The space became cramped, chaotic and at odds with the surrounding local society, losing the self-contained, relatively unhurried demeanour of days gone by. More importantly, the spiritual 'backbone' had vanished. In Nanjing, everyone's husband was 'in the sky', and they shared the anxiety and glory of 'waiting'; in Taipei, husbands had either perished or sunk into the mundane trivialities and disillusionment of everyday life. With the myths of 'flight' and 'heroism' shattered, the military dependants' villages have lost the tense, spiritual core upon which they once coalesced, becoming mere residential areas trapped in the past. Consequently, Taipei's military dependants' villages are no longer 'homes', but rather refugee camps, stranded on the shores of time and steeped in nostalgia.

Bai Xianyong's depiction of Taipei's urban landscape stands in stark contrast to his 'emotional focus' on Nanjing, presenting an overall sense of restrained detachment, incompleteness and sensory isolation. This unique narrative technique serves precisely to externalise the characters' existential state of 'being here, yet their hearts elsewhere'.

Firstly, there are the limitations of the narrative perspective and the isolation of perception. The novel strictly adheres to Mrs Qin's first-person limited perspective. Consequently, the city of Taipei is never depicted in a panoramic or objective manner. It appears only in a fragmented and functional way within the gaps of the narrative; for Mrs Qin, Taipei's local society, culture and daily life are 'invisible' or 'ununderstood'. This narrative 'blind spot' precisely corresponds to the profound spiritual disconnect between the exiled community and the land beneath their feet. They live in a self-enclosed 'bubble', in which the true face of Taipei is obscured, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Secondly, there is the 'unfinished' and 'temporary' nature of the space. The characters in the novel never seem to have truly 'made a home' in Taipei. Qin Qianyi's residence serves merely as a place from which she reminisces about Nanjing, lacking any character of its own. An even more typical example is Zhu Qing, whose place of residence changes frequently and whose furnishings remain vague, much like her ever-shifting masks of identity. This spatial fluidity and rootlessness are a direct externalisation of the characters' inner disarray and their refusal to put down roots. Taipei's architecture and streets lack detail and warmth in the narrative; they are consistently presented as a backdrop, devoid of depth, forming a stark contrast to the concrete and minute sensory details of Nanjing's spaces. It is as though Taipei itself refuses to be experienced deeply, or rather, the narrator refuses to imbue it with meaning.

Furthermore, there is a sense of temporal stagnation. In Taipei, linear, forward-moving time seems to have come to a standstill. The characters' psychological time remains forever frozen in 'the year we left Nanjing'. Through Mrs Qin's repetitive narrative tone and Zhu Qing's 'frozen-in-time' appearance as she smokes and chats by the mahjong table, Bai Xianyong creates a suffocating sense that time no longer flows. Day and night in Taipei, as well as the changing of the seasons, lose their meaning within the narrative; the space thus degenerates into a pale, flat plane devoid of historical depth or future dimension.

Consequently, in Bai Xianyong's portrayal, the narrative

space of Taipei is defined not primarily by its physical appearance, but by the characters' 'alienated reactions' to it and their 'sense of absence'. It is a city of absence 'in the present'. Its streets, buildings and climate all seem veiled by a transparent membrane; the characters move through it, yet never truly touch it. The 'hopelessness' of this city lies precisely in its inability to become a meaningful 'place'; it can only be a 'space' in which one is forced to take refuge. It provides a stage for the long, silent and seemingly endless reverberations of the Nanjing tragedy, where the bereaved enact their ceaseless dialogue with the ghosts of the past. This naturally leads to the ultimate inner landscape: when the external world offers no longer any refuge, in what form will trauma take permanent residence amidst the spiritual ruins of the individual?

4. 'Hometown and Homecoming': A Circular Narrative Space

Long Diyong provides a theoretical account of the circular spatial form in his doctoral dissertation on spatial narratology.[6] He identifies the circular structure as an important form of spatial narrative, with García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* serving as a representative example. Similarly, in Bai Xianyong's novel *A Touch of Green*, Nanjing and Taipei are set in contrast; the narrator, Mrs Qin, recalls her past in Nanjing whilst in Taipei, after all the events have already taken place. Overall, the novel deals with the past; the narrator stands at a somewhat ambiguous 'present' in the past (in *A Touch of Green*, this is the moment when the narrator, Mrs Qin, returns to Nanjing immediately after the victory over the Japanese invaders), recounting a future that lies 'many years later' (when the narrator fled to Taipei), and then, from this 'future' (i.e. Taipei), looks back on that now somewhat distant 'past' (i.e. Nanjing). Broadly speaking, the novel begins its narrative from a certain 'future' within this past; consequently, no matter how far it delves into the 'past' of that past, it must ultimately return to the 'future'—the novel's opening. Thus, the novel's structure forms a temporal circle.

Spatially speaking, the past often signifies one's hometown; gazing back at one's hometown from the present implies a deeply meaningful return home. In the short story collection *People of Taipei*, there are always two times and spaces: one is the past, the other the present; one is the hometown, the other a foreign land. The protagonist, situated in the 'present' in a 'foreign land', recalls events that took place in the 'past' in their 'hometown'. Yet recollections must inevitably come to an end; when the flashback concludes, the story returns to reality, converging with the opening, as the narrative completes a full circle and returns to its original starting point. Whilst it appears to have reached its conclusion, it has in fact returned to the beginning. These two distinct geographical spaces—the hometown and the foreign land—are linked together through a special connection to the same character's life experiences and emotional journey. Within this spatial framework, a specific form of narrative space emerges—'hometown and homecoming'. This narrative model facilitates the construction of spatial storytelling, its most distinctive feature being spatial mobility; a spatial shift inevitably occurs between the two. Whether travelling from the hometown to a foreign land, or returning from a foreign land to the hometown, it represents a change in position—that is, a shift in the narrative space. Leaving one's hometown

gives rise to feelings of attachment and homesickness; returning evokes comparisons between the past and the present, and a sense that whilst the places remain the same, the people have changed. Spatial shifts are particularly conducive to accommodating stories and rich emotions: on the one hand, they involve a contrast between the space of the hometown and the external world; on the other, a contrast between the hometown as remembered and the hometown as it is in reality. Such contrasts, and the emotions they generate, serve as one of the key avenues through which characters express their sentiments.

In *A Touch of Green*, the narrator, Mrs Qin, flees from Nanjing to Taipei. The two villages where she lives share the same name: 'Ren'ai East Village'. This coincidence creates a natural contrast within the text: are the two villages with the same name the same in other places? The answer is clearly no. The residents of Ren'ai East Village in Taipei have migrated from all corners of the country, whilst those in Nanjing's Ren'ai East Village are all air force pilots and their families; life in Taipei's Ren'ai East Village is peaceful and bustling, with its residents finding solace from their hardships in a life of pleasure and indulgence; whereas Nanjing's Ren'ai East Village, though seemingly harmonious, is repeatedly struck by tragic news, ultimately falling apart. Most significantly, there are the two Zhu Qings—one from Nanjing and one from Taipei—represented by the female protagonist Zhu Qing: the Zhu Qing of Nanjing is delicate, shy and utterly devoted to love; the Zhu Qing of Taipei is feisty, composed and has long since given up on love. As one reader remarked, the true Zhu Qing died alongside Guo Zhen in the 37th year of the Republic of China. The novel unfolds entirely from the perspective of Mrs Qin, moving from memories of the past to the present, and from the present back to the past. Through this circular narrative structure, it takes the reader back to Nanjing and Taipei, bearing witness to the protagonist's turbulent and nomadic journey between the two cities. This reflects the history and war rolling past like a mighty wheel, as well as the people crushed by history and war who struggle to survive.

5. Conclusion

In summary, *A Touch of Green* uses an ingenious circular

narrative structure to elevate a historical tragedy into a universal human predicament. Bai Xianyong's work resonates across disciplines with Long Diyong's theory: the form of a narrative is the most profound expression of its content. Within this narrative circle formed by Nanjing and Taipei, 'hometown' is eternally poeticised as an 'absolute past' to which one can never return—a source of all beauty and suffering; whilst 'returning home' is revealed as a form of mental anguish and inner turmoil present in every moment of the 'now'—a continuous act of gazing, superimposition, comparison and loss. The lives of characters like Zhu Qing are imprisoned within this cycle with no way out. Their lives in Taipei are both a memorial to the spirits of the past and an exhibition of themselves as historical relics.

Ultimately, *A Touch of Green* tells us that the most profound form of homesickness is not geographical distance, but the collapse of time. The novel's circular structure serves as the perfect metaphor for this existential condition: the story may end, but the cycle of emotion never ceases; the characters may appear to age with the passage of time, yet in reality they are forever trudging along the impossible journey from 'foreign lands' back to their 'hometown'. This is not only the fate of the 'Taipei people' in Bai Xianyong's writings, but also the bleak panorama of life shared by all those who have been torn from their roots by the tides of history.

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