THE NARRATIVE SUBJECT CONSTRUCTION AND NARRATIVE EFFECTS IN "THE LIANG ZHUANG TRILOGY"

Lu Liu *

Abstract: Focusing on the formal poetics analysis of "The Liang Zhuang Trilogy", this study explores how the author expresses her understanding of the world through specific literary forms. In this process, relatively eternal forms are preserved as crystallizations of consciousness. Within the trilogy, the narrative subject undergoes a threefold differentiation: the "narrating self", the "experiencing self", and the "researching self". The "narrating self" integrates diverse genres, styles, and narrative rhetoric to forge a distinctive nonfiction form, bringing the self to the forefront of the narrative and revealing its incisive judgment and critical edge. The "experiencing self" intervenes from an "inner" perspective, not only revealing personal emotional landscapes but also delving into family dynamics and bearing witness to the village's evolution. The "researching self" engages in book-review-style scrutiny of academic works, reflecting on its own scholarly trajectory, while simultaneously demonstrating a clear problem consciousness and profound understanding of rhetorical ethics.

Liang Hong left Liang Zhuang (Liang Village) for university at the age of twenty. When she returned to her hometown in 2008, she was thirty-five. Fifteen years of profound change—from youth to maturity—brought multiple transformations in her identity. She shifted from a girl born and raised there to a middle-aged returnee, from a familiar local to a "stranger" who was both unfamiliar and familiar. Born in Liang Zhuang, Liang Hong was nurtured by its soil; her every expression and action bore its imprint. Yet she left Liang Zhuang to pursue higher education, evolving into a modern intellectual who reexamined her homeland through the lens of civilization and critical reflection. This dual stance endowed the "I" with remarkably rich layers of observation, raising questions about narrative stratification. Within the Liang Zhuang Trilogy, is the first-person "I" solely a narrator? Does "I" also fulfill other structural functions? Beyond narration, does 'I' also function as a character with subjectivity? Beyond the character "I", is the narrative subject further differentiated?

I. The Narrating Self and Narrative Rhetoric

The "narrating self" manifests as the self-image the narrator constructs through recounting experiences, stories, and daily life. It involves the selection, organization, and interpretation of memories, as well as how individuals connect these narratives to their sociocultural context. The "narrating self" typically emerges from the need to revisit memories and narrate the present. The writing of China in Liang Zhuang and Leaving Liang Zhuang stems from the narrator's profound curiosity about her hometown, a curiosity that drives her to reconnect with every brick and blade of grass in her native place. The first two works embody the construction of self-awareness, reflecting the narrator's desire to engage with Liang Zhuang's reality and rebuild her connection to her hometown. In this process, the narrator not only constructs connections with Liang Zhuang through words but also seeks a renewed bond with her homeland deep within her soul. By the third work, Ten Years in Liang Zhuang, the "narrating self" no longer feels the urgent imperative to write about Liang Zhuang.

* LU LIU, Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Fudan University.

The desire to write about it has been fully released, transforming into a normalized practice, with the writing scope significantly reduced compared to the previous two works. Though the "narrating self" retains its focus on social issues, the narrative motivation shifts toward preserving memory and resisting forgetting. The "narrating self" aspires to create a "record like a long river", documenting "the constant loss of life and the constant arrival of new life. It documents some growing old and others growing up (Meng & Liang, 2022). In the blink of an eye, a decade has passed. From instinctive life documentation, Liang Hong gradually developed a conscious pursuit of "history." The Liang Zhuang Trilogy chronicles a decade of transformations in Liang Zhuang, yet Liang Hong is not content with this. She envisions a broader narrative blueprint: Ten years, twenty years, thirty years—until my own passing. Over these decades, it will coalesce into a relatively complete 'village chronicle,' documenting the myriad transformations within an era." (Liang, 2021, 233)

The "narrating self" also presents different facets of the same subject through varied perspectives. In The Chronicles of Liang Zhuang, the portrayal of the "tricycle" issue involves two narratives: migrant workers' and the media's. Migrant workers recount their arduous history of labor marked by humiliation and exploitation. The media, however, frames "unlicensed tricycles" as "a major headache for urban traffic management", even labeling them "a social problem seriously threatening public stability" (Liang, 2016, p. 53). Tricycle drivers thus exist as targets for "cleansing" and expulsion by the metropolis. Nonfiction writing has always emphasized the narrator's role in reconstructing events. The narrator holds the power to decide how and what to narrate—specifically, what content to select and from what perspective to present it—all of which implicitly reveal the narrator's "I think."

With urban governance as its core theme, the report text unfolds within the broader discursive space shaped by diverse debates. It explores the contradictions arising between the survival needs of marginalized groups and the fundamental requirements of urban social management, as well as conflicts between city administrators and tricycle owners. This subsequently sparks debates over survival versus governance, dignity versus red lines, and related topics. In other words, during the process of urbanization and modernization, the living space of marginalized laborers has been squeezed, their survival needs ignored, all to fit into a certain economic narrative framework driven by the reckless pursuit of GDP growth. Within this economic narrative, the living conditions of marginalized laborers, whether their dignity is respected, and their individual feelings and emotions are often overlooked. Within this economic narrative, migrant workers persist as an abstract noun, a voiceless underclass. "Narrating Self" juxtaposes migrant workers' oral accounts with news reports, objectively revealing the harshest, most brutal facets of contemporary society through this dual presentation of genres. The author's inclination lies hidden within the narrative rhetoric. "Narrating self" refrains from overtly sharp social criticism and adheres to simple public values. It avoids direct expressions of dissatisfaction with urban management, sympathy for tricycle drivers, or confusion over news reports that "stigmatize" them.

II. The Functions and Limitations of the "Experiencing Self"

The "experiencing self" reflects an individual's direct feelings and life experiences, revealing their immediate reactions to the surrounding world. Through this self, Liang Hong engages with the mundane life of Liang Zhuang, constructing a social and ethical

identity rooted in kinship and locality. She forms diverse social and ethical relationships with the characters in the work. Initially, the villagers of Liang Zhuang regard this both unfamiliar and familiar "returnee" with suspicion and curiosity. Under her father's guidance and assistance, the villagers gradually shed their wariness and guardedness toward Liang Hong. Centering on "herself", Liang Hong progressively establishes connections with Liang Zhuang, constructing multiple social identities. Within the family, Liang Hong became the fourth daughter of Liang Guangzheng and the youngest sister in the extended household. Beyond the family, she constructed roles such as Xiao Qing—the daughter of Liang Zhuang, a neighbor, a junior, and a mentor. Though the villagers were initially skeptical, with her father's help, they gradually lowered their guard, allowing the "experiencing self" to establish connections smoothly.

After completing China in Liang Zhuang, Liang Hong realized that the excessive involvement of the "I" might compromise the work's artistic integrity. In Leaving Liang Zhuang, she attempted to make the "narrating self" invisible, abandoning the "experiencing self", avoiding value judgments, and "returning to a distant, unrelated life, seemingly an objective existence for millennia" (Liang, 2016, p. 319). The narrative atmosphere grows austere, shifting the second volume's focus from the subject's spiritual world to economic life and urban encounters. Upon entering Chapter Two, she soon grew dissatisfied with the "fixed, closed 'landscape'" and reverted to the "experiencing self." Guided by her father, she delved into the urban village through an 'inner' perspective. Leveraging the trust that "we're all family—you can ask anything", she encouraged migrant workers to open up about their urban experiences: the bittersweet reality of the eldest brother supporting his entire family, the struggles and humiliations of tricycle drivers, and the distress of having nowhere to lay Xiansheng's coffin after his untimely death. The presence of the experiencing self provided migrant workers with an effective channel for emotional release.

In Liang Zhuang folklore, Xiansheng was hailed as a legendary figure who rose from the ranks of the village. Yet the "experiencing self" exposed the carefully woven myth of his success through Aunt Xiulan's oral account: after moving to the city, Xiansheng never shed his peasant kinship ties, yearning instead to replicate a hierarchical, mutually supportive family model within the urban landscape. Xiansheng earned money to support his sisters, yearning to maintain the rural kinship model to achieve an urban-rural identity transition, only to end up in the predicament of having nowhere to bury his coffin after death. This perspective also reveals familial conflicts: Xian Sheng's sacrifices went unappreciated by his brother, Xian Ren, while his sisters gradually strayed from rural ethics, demanding compensation and even the division of property. His sister-in-law still regarded him as a "poor relative", prompting Liang Hong to reflect on urban-rural interaction patterns and familial dynamics. The "experiencing self's" choice to emerge from invisibility and return to Liang Zhuang revitalizes the nonfiction text's emotional resonance.

In Ten Years in Liang Zhuang, the "experiencing self" transforms from an intervening stance to one of "dissolving into Liang Zhuang, standing alongside its people in the river of time, watching the torrent of history surge forward, and collectively feeling the waves crash against us" (Liang, 2021, p. 235). Over a decade of observation, the "experiencing self" witnesses migrant workers returning home and elders passing away, using funerals to bid farewell to the "past self" and distilling the philosophical maxim that "all death is rebirth" (Ibid., p. 175). while also following the growth of the young Yangyang toward the "future self", highlighting the developmental and enduring nature of the Liang Zhuang series.

The "inner" perspective of the experiencing self has limitations, most notably in the case of the vanishing village school. In China, in Liang Zhuang, Liang Wanming recounts the transformation of village schools and numerous educational issues, yet

the narrator focuses on "the disappearance of the village's cultural atmosphere, the loss of an upward-striving spirit", equating the decay of village schools with the decay of the countryside. Objectively, the "inner" perspective excludes macro-level considerations, is confined to the rural community, and is inherently closed. Liang Hong's nostalgia for village schools devolves into a longing for traditional rural life, overlooking that the decline of rural schools is an inevitable consequence of urbanization. The consolidation of educational resources through school closures aligns with national reform trends. Subjectively, her perspective cannot represent all villagers; having left the countryside, her memories of rural education diverge from reality, and the current loss of quality resources remains underappreciated. The "inner perspective" exposes the disconnect between intellectual writing and peasant discourse, as well as the misalignment between ideal pathways and rural educational realities. If one persistently approaches grand structural challenges solely through fragmented oral materials and an "inner perspective", it diminishes the ethical demand for authenticity in the work. Therefore, recognizing the limitations of the "experiencing self" and thereby employing the rhetorical strategy of the "researching self" becomes particularly crucial.

III. The "researching self" and Rhetorical Ethics

The "researching self" implies a transcendent observer beyond the narrative, scrutinizing both the text's storytelling and its characters. It exists both inside and outside the text; it relates to the implied author while also connecting to the researcher Liang Hong. Distinct from the "authentic self" and differentiated from the "narrating self" and "experiencing self", the "researching self" constructs a sociologically meaningful and idealized rural synthesis through a rigorous, idealized state of reflection. This process, to some extent, obscures the real countryside through narrative and imagination.

The "researching self" possesses an academic commentary function. In the first work, it analyzes Yan Yunxiang's The Transformation of Private Life, emphasizing the book's pioneering "turn inward" in rural sociology. acknowledging its influence on the subjects and methodologies of "The Liang Zhuang Trilogy." Both works emphasize anthropological thick description of rural life, transcending traditional anthropological boundaries to explore private emotional realms while integrating literary techniques to highlight individual values and affective orientations. Using social science works as a mirror, "researching self" identifies distinct academic approaches: First, it notes differences in research focuses—Yan's work examines "holistic transformations and structural elements", emphasizing systematic induction and macro-level conclusions, while the trilogy highlights individual variations, stripping away emotional and economic-political discourse to explore micro-level descriptions. Second, Yan's work integrates literary expression with anthropological methods such as fieldwork and quantitative analysis, achieving a fusion of "nuanced imagery and independent thought." While drawing on fieldwork, the trilogy centers on literary expression and expands the scope of rural narrative. Third, the ambiguous and fluid nature of emotion conflicts with anthropology's demand for objectivity, yet aligns with literature's nuanced sensibilities. Liang Hong employs a literary lens to portray the individuality of peasants, achieving a high degree of alignment between the research methodology and the subject matter. "Researching Self" enables her to understand the lived world

of peasants with a writer's sensitivity and sincerity, offering an authentic expression of contemporary Chinese peasantry.

The "researching self" carries explicit awareness of problems and rhetorical ethical considerations. Nonfiction writing functions not merely as an artistic form but also shoulders the mission of conveying meaning. Unlike fiction, nonfiction bears greater moral responsibility; great nonfiction works can yield ethical benefits. Liang Hong states: "Facing Liang Zhuang, facing a contemporary village, one naturally develops profound and intense problem awareness." From its inception, China in Liang Zhuang carried a potent problem-consciousness, rooted in broader societal reflections (Meng & Liang, 2022). China in Liang Zhuang organizes its narrative around seven major rural themes. Through the deliberate editing and integration of "researching self", the interview content serves to validate these questions. However, this editing may simplify the issues, obscure diverse influencing factors, and limit the full presentation and deep understanding of individual experiences. The Journey Out of Liang Zhuang shifts the focus to urban-rural relations, encompassing sub-themes such as migrant workers' interactions with city residents, rural migrants' survival strategies in cities, and their quality of life. Organized by work locations, it employs multiple narrators to minimize subjective intervention, using documentary-style objectivity to chronicle homecoming observations—closer to the ideal form of nonfiction. Though its problem consciousness is more subtle than its predecessors, it still focuses on issues such as the comparative relationships between people inside and outside Liang Zhuang, the imprint of Liang Zhuang on migrant workers, and the motivations for returning home. Liang Zhuang: A Decade continues the writing mode of its predecessor, presenting the original state of the village through the path of returning home, with its problem consciousness focused on individual life journeys and the functioning of the rural organism.

Overall, the trilogy's themes lack consistency, reflecting the evolving relationship between the author, Liang Hong, and her subject, Liang Zhuang. This journey mirrors the literary concept from "seeing mountains as mountains" to "as not mountains", and back again (Liang, 2021, p. 235), reflecting a journey from intuitive perception to deep understanding and ultimately to re-examination.

Conclusion

The core issue in constructing the "Liang Hong Trilogy" concerns how literary scholars engage with reality and how effectively they do so. Since the 1950s, Western literary circles have extensively debated the "objectivity" of novelistic writing, with authors generally pursuing objectify their subjects, adhering to a purely objectifying writing paradigm. Numerous critics also advocate that nonfiction writing should "show" rather than "tell", enabling readers to form their own judgments.

Liang Hong consciously establishes three dimensions—" experiencing self", "narrating self", and "researching self"—at the textual structural level to achieve subject construction. These dimensions frequently intersect and overlap, forming dialectical relationships between the interior and the exterior, memory and the present, existence and transcendence, ought and is—reflecting Liang Hong's grand narrative ambition. Through literary narrative strategies and expressive techniques, her nonfiction works research the emotional worlds and existential landscapes of peasants with a writer's sensitivity and sincerity. Drawing on the strengths of sociology and anthropology, and borrowing from field research methods, he conducts long-term, sustained tracking of specific villages, achieving a masterful fusion of literary expression and scientific analysis. This creative approach endows his work with profound insights into the countryside and its people while also endowing it with empirical validity and objectivity.

The "internal" perspective not only depicts the birth, aging, sickness, and death of individuals within villages but also probes into family and generational relationships through personal life histories. This approach directly addresses the historical context of peasants and migrant workers, revealing the operational logic of Chinese society, examining the profound impact of urbanization on rural areas, and sketching the complex dynamics of bidirectional urban-rural migration. However, constrained by the boundaries of the inner perspective and the author's personal experience, Liang Hong's rural writing also has limitations, struggling to connect micro-level realities with macro-level structural issues effectively. This limitation is not a personal creative flaw of the author, but an inevitable result of the inner perspective and the finite distance of cognition.

References

1. Meng, Chang, and Liang Hong. 2022. "Liang Hong: Recording My Hometown Like a Long River Has Fundamentally Changed My Life." *Untimely*, Xiao Yu Zhou app, June 5. https://www.xiaoyuzhoufm.com/episode/629cb4fbb32f552f54730c86.
2. Liang, Hong. 2016. *Leaving Liang Zhuang*. Beijing: Taihai Publishing House.
3. _____. 2016. *China in Liang Zhuang*. Beijing: Taihai Publishing House.
4. _____. 2021. *Ten Years in Liang Zhuang*. Beijing: Taihai Publishing House.