

## A Study of Liao Zhai Zhi Yi from the Perspective of Gender Narration

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### Abstract

**There is a male gender tendency in the narrative perspective of Liao Zhai Zhi Yi, for most of stories are told by male narrators, that is to say, the narrative perspective of stories from Liao Zhai Zhi Yi are deeply influenced by patriarchal and feudal culture. There is no female narrators in Liao Zhai Zhi Yi, for no matter the enchanting fox, ghost and flower demon, or the virtuous wife and loving mother in reality; both abominable virago, jealous wife, and ugly chastity are depicted by male narrators. The gender issue in Liao Zhai Zhi Yi can be seen from its narrative technique, including external narrative perspective, narrative internal perspective and flow narrative perspective.**

### Keywords

**Liao Zhai Zhi Yi; Gender; Narrative perspective; Masculinity.**

### 1. Introduction

*Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* is a collection of 491 classical short stories by Pu Songling, a scholar in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. In this novel, most stories tell love between fox spirit, ghost, flower demon and human being.[1] Currently, there are enormous studies on this novel from the perspectives of literature, religion, literary theory and translation theory, etc. There are several articles from the perspective of narration, namely, *The Study on The Art of Narration of Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* by Wang Shiyuan, *A Study on the Narrative Idea of Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* by Zhao Chaohui, and *An Analysis on the Narrative Perspective of PU Songling's Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* by Mu Shuang.[1-3] The above mentioned master theses analyze this novel from the perspective of narrative theories, and only few studies are from gender narrative perspective, therefore, the research on *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* from the light of gender narration can not only enrich the relevant research, but also make contribution to the further research on this novel.

When reading *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, we can't help but admire its magnificent imaginary world, especially the human-like fox spirit, ghost, flower demon. While at the same time, we find that the narrative perspective in this novel is not the omniscient narrative perspective used in traditional Chinese novel, but omniscient narrative perspective with trace of limited narrative perspective. Narrative perspective is the angle of the event narration adopted in one book. The perspective in literary works usually refers to perception perspective which refers to the author's or the reader's emotional attitude, point of view or standpoint towards a certain event. Narrative perspective can be divided into external narrative perspective, internal narrative perspective and flow narrative perspective.

The external narrative perspective means that the story is narrated by a narrator who works as omniscient bystanders, and the internal perspective refers to a narrator who only knows the story from a limited angle.[4] The flow perspective means that the narrative perspective will change with space and time. In the preface to *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, it is said that "Although I am not as talented as Gan Bao or Su Shi, I also like to collect ghost stories. After knowing ghost stories, I will organize them into a short story. Over time, people from different places with same interests send me ghost stories, and then I get more ghost stories." [5] Thus it can be concluded that 400 classical Chinese novels in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* are not all compiled by the author himself, and some are from others and other books. These stories have been reprocessed by author, that is to say, they are retold from a new narrative perspective. In *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, there is not only internal narrative perspective, but also external

narrative perspective and flow narrative perspective. And no matter what narrative perspective, those stories are restricted by male perspective, or directly narrated by male narrator, consequently, they reflect male-dominated ideology. No matter its author, Pu Songling, or the reader are men representing the male-dominated culture, and then it is doubtless that their artistic vision and tastes are influenced by male-dominated culture.[4]In this thesis, the author will study the gender issue in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* by combining external perspective, internal perspective and flow perspective.

## 2. External Narrative Perspective

External narrative perspective is also known as omniscient narrative perspective. In *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, one is subjective omniscient narrative perspective with personal feeling in the narrative process, and the other is objective omniscient perspective without personal feeling in the narrative process. In *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, some stories end with the author's remark, while others do not. Stories that end with author's remarks often adopt subjective omniscient narrative perspective; others without tend to be told from objective omniscient perspective. For example, *Ma Jiefu* starts with the appearance of Yang Wanshi from Daming county HeBei province, who is henpecked.[6]In this story, the narrator knows everything. Yin, Yang's wife, mistreats husband, father, concubine, brother-in-law, nephew, and even her husband's good friend Ma Jiefu. Her father-in-law could not bear her abuse and run to Henan Province to be a Taoist priest. The pregnant concubine is beaten to abortion by Yin.[6] After the death of her brother-in-law, she forces her sister-in-law to remarry; Yin remarries after the family suffers a fire and goes bankruptcy. After that, the family gather together gradually and get into the way of prosperity. It can be said that Yin is like bane. Wherever she is, there will be a disaster. In this story, Yin is cruel and cold, and the tone of the narrator is disgusted or even hated. But is there such a cruel and tyrannical woman in reality? According to Mr Hu Shi's research, *Ma Jiefu* is written according to the family story of Wang Luzhan. Wang Luzhan, a close friend of Pu Songling, had a shrewish wife, Gao Shi, who evicted her father-in-law from home, leaving him in hotel when he was dying of a serious illness. After being told of his father's death, Wang Luzhan was afraid to go to the funeral because of his cruel wife. However, Yin in *Ma Jiefu* not only mistreats her father, but also her husband, concubine, younger brother's wife and everyone around her. She ends up begging for money and dying in the ruined temple. The author hates Yin so deeply. This story ends with the longest author's remark, a total of 929 words, with a large number of stories or legends depicting the ugliness of jealous woman and henpecked man, meanwhile, put forward the methods of how to deal with envy wife. This text is unlikely to be written by woman, but man suffering the burning pain of a jealous wife. Take another story *concubine against the thief* for example, "There is a wealthy noble family at the west of the capital of Yi County, and its master has a very graceful and beautiful wife".[6] The story is narrated from omniscient external perspective, telling a story that a concubine is often abused by her master's wife while she never complains. One night a group of robbers came to their home, while all of them turned into panic, and did nothing. At that critical moment, the concubine drove all the robbers away easily. It turned out that the concubine had been learning martial arts with her father since she was a child. When someone asked her why she did not fight back when being abused by the master's wife, she said "I deserves to be punished by the master's wife as the concubine.[6] After hearing what she said, others spoke highly of her. [6] She is highly praised by Pu Songling at the end of the story. And the purpose of this story is to regulate all concubines, so it is obviously narrated by male narrators In addition to this stories, *Xiao Xie*, *Jin Shengse*, *Guo An*, *San Niangzi*, *Wu Wuyue* and others all tells the same thoughts.

## 3. Internal Narrative Perspective

In *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, the internal narrative perspective is mostly presented as first-person point of narration. The first-person point of narration is also known as limited narrative perspective, which means that the story is narrated by one character of this book. In this condition, the external narrator only knows a part of the whole story, and the internal narrator is the real narrator of the story. The feature of internal narrative perspective is that "narrator exists in fictional world. The first-person

narrator is also a character in this fictional as other characters whose world is completely unified with their world.”[7]The first-person point of perspective can be divided into two kinds: one is that the narrator is the witness of the event, and the minor character in the novel; another is that the narrator is the protagonist of the story.[8] There is few stories in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* told from internal narrative perspective, like *sharp knife* which is as short as the ghost story in Wei Jin southern and northern dynasties, and seldom get involved in marriage, love element. As we know, the ancient woman is housebound .Only literate man can give a detailed account of the action of decapitation. *Stealing peaches* tells a story that children go to take county examination on Lichun, the day before the Spring Festival. On that day, all businessmen of the city carry the color floor, blowing dozen dozen to the chief secretary to celebrate the Spring Festival which is called spring practice.”[6]Then the author narrates the wonderful performance of peach-stealing with the internal perspective, which make readers observe this scene from the eyes of an innocent teenager, for example, “there are four officials in the same color, sitting, sitting on the east, west, south and north sides respectively. At the time, I was young, and did not know who were them”. [6]Internal narrative perspective makes narrative process full of mysteries, for an innocent child does not know the real meaning of the things happening around him while telling this story, but adults understand them very well. Internal narrative perspective make the Peach-stealing show brilliant. “When I was a child, I went to the county test.” [6] No matter how young or old, women do not have the right to participate in test at that time, and naturally they are deprived of such experience. Therefore, the narrator of this story is undoubtedly man. *Jiang Concubine* is narrated by the first-person point of view, which tells the writer’s dream from garden in reality to magnificent palace in dream, from Jiang Concubine’s proposal to Xin Wen, and all are told from author’s perspective. Because women can not have that kind of life experience, and as a whole, man is talented than women for only men have the right to receive education. In addition to the above mentioned stories, there are *Kou Ji* , *Ge Jin* and *Fox Spirit’s Dream* employing internal narrative perspective .

#### 4. Flow Perspective

It is difficult to know the the intentiona of writing *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*’s, because it is neither a simple collection of anecdotes, nor a mere revelation of the evils of reality and criticism of the ruling class. There are a great deal of fascinating stories of fox spirit, ghost and flower demon in this novel, and readers can feel author's disappointment, anger of the real society and strong desire for the ideal life directly and openly. Those reasons make author change the narrative perspective unconsciously according to the needs of expression, forming a variety of narrative perspectives, thus breaking the single narrative mode in traditional Chinese literature. This constant shifting of multiple narrative perspectives is flow narrative perspective. The flow narrative perspective in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* often changes from external to internal, or from one internal to another one. Flow narrative perspective refers to the process in which the narrative perspective keeps changing dynamically. For example, *Tripterygium Wilfordii* opens with omniscient narrative perspective: “Shui Mang is one kind of poisonous grass.”[6]After a brief introduction of the background, the perspective shifts to Zhu Sheng’s eyes. When an old woman gave him a cup of water with *Tripterygium Wilfordii*, he “smelled something unusual”. [6] This is also from Zhu Sheng's eyes. Then San NianZi turn into, "She is about 14 or 15 years old age, beautiful and graceful, wearing ring on her finger, bracelet on her arm which are crystal clear enough to reflect her shadow)",<sup>[6]180</sup> which is also San Niangzi in Zhu Sheng’s eyes. The subsequent story is still told from Zhu Sheng’s eyes, although it is not directly written from Zhu Sheng’s point of view. *Jiao Na* in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* is also narrated with omniscient narrative perspective: "Uele, Confucian disciple, is the descendant of Confucius)", [6]After briefly introducing the background of the story, the story shifts to the angle of the hero, Xue Li’s perspective. For example, “one day, it snows heavily, Xue Sheng is on the way without companion. When he passes one door, an elegant boy comes out. [6] This is clearly from the eyes of Xue Li, followed by the description of the house: “the house is not very tall, and the yard is not very broad; there are hung brocade tabernacle everywhere, and ancients painting and calligraphy on the wall.”[6] All of those are described from

Xue Li' perspective, his first time to a new environment. Later, Jiao Na becomes Kong Sheng's close friend, but why does the writer make Jiao Na's husband die suddenly? Why a married woman can not have a close male friend? Perhaps because the author does not want his close female friend with a closer male friend! If it is written by woman, then it will have a different ending![6] In another story Hong Yu, when Hong Yu appears for the first time, the story is narrated from the internal perspective of hero Feng Xiangru, such as "Hong Yu looks very beautiful. When Feng Xiangru comes close to her, she smiles at him. Feng Xiangru greets her, she does not come and nor leave." [6] when Feng Xiangru's father knows their love story, he scolds them. When Feng Xiangru suffers the death of father, the lose of wife, he tries to revenge but in vain. Just at that moment, a beard paladin appears, which is narrated from Feng Xiangru's eyes: "suddenly one day, a man with a long beard and broad forehead came into Feng Xiangru's house to offer a memorial to his wife; Feng Xiangru had not seen this man before.[6]Then the story is told by narrative perspective. However, no matter how the perspective changes, it is always limited to male narrative perspective, and there is no female perspective at all. In addition to the above mentioned stories, *Qing Feng*, *Xiao Cui*, *Lian Xiang*, *Bai Qiulian*, *Painting on the Wall*, *Ying Ning* and other works also fall into this category.

## 5. Conclusion

*Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, as the traditional Chinese novel, shows its maturity in narrative technique, including external narrative perspective, external narrative perspective and flow narrative perspective. However, no matter what kind of narrative perspective, it is inseparable from social gender problem at that time, that is to say, all those narrative perspective are used by male narrator. There are a great deal of heroins in this novel, like beautiful amorous fox spirit and flower demon and so on. It is a pity that no matter how gorgeous and moving these heroins are, they are told from male narrator, which makes them more like the perfect female characters in male eyes instead of being themselves.

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