

“Remembering Past Times”: Lu Xun’s First Attempt at Integrating New Ideas with Classical Language

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[Abstract]

The transformation of narrative modes from narratives with zero focalization to narratives with internal and external focalizations is one of the most important signs in the transition from traditional to modern Chinese fiction. This transformation, which began in the work of the late Qing novelists, reached a higher stage and was successfully completed in Lu Xun’s fiction. “Remembering Past Times” is Lu Xun’s first short story. Although its language system was related to the old one, it was close to the direction of the new literary movement. He successfully used the internal focalization in first-person in his first short story. Seen from the perspective of the use of narrative modes, “Remembering Past Times” is an important turning point. A new page was started; the use of different modes was introduced into modern Chinese fiction.

Keywords : narrative modes, transformation, Lu Xun, “Remembering Past Times”, internal focalization

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In December 1932, Lu Xun wrote in his “Preface to My Selected Works”: “I started writing short stories in 1918, when *New Youth* was calling for a ‘literary revolution’” (*LXQJ* 4: 455). He refers to the short stories written in the modern vernacular, beginning with his “A Madman’s Diary.” For a long time, he rarely mentioned “Remembering Past Times,” which he wrote still earlier, possibly because he himself forgot that this story existed or because he did not consider it to be of the caliber of his later innovative work. It was not included in any of the collections of his short stories.¹

“Remembering Past Times” was actually written in the winter of 1911 and published in *The Short Story Magazine* No.1, Vol. 4, in April 1913 under the pseudonym Zhou Chuo.² This long neglected story is actually extremely helpful in understanding the development of his short-story writing over time, as well as in gaining a better appreciation of his literary projects and general ambitions. As for the transformation of narrative mode, it plays a special role, for it forms a link between the earlier translated fiction and the subsequent original short stories. Although “Remembering Past Times” was written in the classical Chinese literary

¹ In his letter to Yan Jiyun of May 6, 1934, Lu Xun said: “Now people all say that my first short story is ‘A Madman’s Diary.’ In fact, the first one is a short story in classical Chinese, which was published in *A Forest of Fiction*(?), probably before the Revolution of 1911. The name of the story and the pseudonym I have forgotten. The content is about something that happened in an old-style private school” (*LXQJ* 12: 403).

² Lu Xun’s brother Zhou Zuoren says: “His writing of fiction, had not started with ‘A Madman’s Diary.’ While at home in the winter of 1911, he wrote a short story in classical Chinese, using a rich man who was the next-door neighbor as a model. It was written about the situation on the eve of the Revolution of 1911 [...] and had no title. Two or three years later, I added a title and a pen name, and sent it to *The Short Story Magazine*. At the time the magazine was relatively small in size. Its editor Yun Tieqiao, wrote in reply gave it high praise and promised to publish it as the forthcoming issue’s first or inaugural story” (*Memories* 274). “Remembering Past Times” was reprinted for the first time in the seventh volume of his collected works in the *Collection of Items Not Included in Any collection* in 1958. In 1990, as an appendix, it was put at the end of *Complete Selection of Lu Xun’s Short Stories*.

language, it employs much of the new style, coinciding with the direction in which new Chinese literature was developing with respect to subject matter, plot, construction, organization, and, particularly, the use of narrative mode. Průšek, who recognizes the significance of this story and holds it in high regard, writes that reading it “we feel quite clearly that it is a work entirely of the new modern literature and not the literature of the preceding period” (170). Taking the change of literary construction as his point of departure, Průšek chooses the plot as his object of study and concludes:

We can consider Lu Hsún's [Lu Xun] approach to his plot as one of simplification, a reduction of the plot to its simplest components, and an attempt to present his subject without the framework of an explanatory story. The author wants to go right to the heart of his subject without the stepping-stone of a plot. This is what strikes me as the specifically modern feature of the new literature; I would even formulate it as a principle that it is characteristic of the new literature to play down the function of the plot, even to the point of dispensing with it altogether (173).

I agree with Průšek, but I wish to analyze the story from the perspective of the narrative mode, in order to show its significance in the transformation of Chinese fiction.

“Remembering Past Times” uses internal focalization in the first person instead of the traditional narrative mode of zero focalization. The story is related by a nine-year-old boy, a participant in the story. The events are seen through his eyes, and the events described are confined, with a few exceptions that will be discussed later, to what this narrator-agent does, sees, thinks, and hears. This narrative mode is very rare in traditional Chinese fiction. It is not that we cannot find first person

narration, but in these, the narrator only records the story or is only an onlooker of the events rather than an active participant-protagonist.

For a long time, authors in late Qing dynasty also organized their stories by means of first-person narrators who are merely onlookers or recorders. Sometimes, as in the case of Wang Junqing's *Looking on in Cool Detachment* and Xiaoran Yusheng's *Traveling Notes from Utopia*, we may guess from the title that a first-person narrator is used. In fact, most short stories in the initial stage of "New Fiction" in the late Qing dynasty use this method to organize the story and its events. Even Wu Jianren's *Strange Events of the Last Twenty Years* has, as we saw, a kind of onlooker or recorder as the first-person narrator. Using a passive narrator's travels, sights and sounds as a frame for the story, was still quite common in the late stage of "New Fiction."

Lu Xun wrote "Remembering Past Times" shortly after the publication of Wu Jianren's *Strange Events of the Last Twenty Years*. Although the title immediately reveals that recollections from the past are going to be its content, it differs greatly from the above-mentioned novel because it uses internal focalization in the first-person, and takes an important step forward in transforming narrative modes.

The narrator of "Remembering Past Times" tells about his experiences when he was nine-year old. In fact, he allows us a glimpse of several scenes in a day of his school life. At the beginning, he recalls his unhappy school life and an unpleasant teacher, Master Tu (*tu* means bald in Chinese), under whom he suffered as a child. One day, the lesson is interrupted by the local rich man, Jin Yaozong with the frightening news that eight hundred "long-haired rebels" are approaching the town. The rich man and the teacher take counsel about how to gain the rebels' favor. The teacher advises him to proceed obsequiously but cautiously because the government troops may later defeat the rebels. The wisest option, he says, would be to maneuver carefully between the two extremes. Although the rich man does

not completely understand this, he leaves, thanking the teacher many times. The teacher abandons his class and hurriedly leaves school, but he soon reappears in the company of the rich man and announces that this was a false alarm, for the group consisted only of refugees from famine-stricken parts of the county. They all laugh happily. The teacher disappears to console his terrified family, and the usual evening calm returns beneath the tree at the gate. The old servant Wang and Li continue to tell tales.

The story is basically restricted to the nine-year-old boy's field of vision. As a character in the story, an innocent pupil, the focalizer is identified through his contact with the teacher and his comments on the teacher, who seems disagreeable and conservative. He asks the boy to compose parallel couplets, but does not explain to him the principles involved and the need for the tones to correspond to the words. The nine-year-old boy has, naturally, no idea of the differences in tone between the different words. He can do nothing:

Thinking over about it for a long time, I still can't compose. Very slowly stretching my palm, I slap against my thigh, make a loud sound, just like swatting a mosquito. I am hoping the Master Tu would understand my difficulties, but he still seems to pay no attention to me at all (*LXQJ* 7: 215).

The teacher still lets him mull it over; when he explains *The Confucian Analects*, the boy feels weary and tired, since he does not understand it:

Shaking his head, shaking his knee, the teacher explains the book for a long time. He himself seems very interested, but I am very impatient. Although his bald head looks very strange, it makes me weary to look at it for a long time (*LXQJ* 7: 216).

It is so hard and boring to follow Mr. Tu that the boy is hoping, early in the morning, that he would be taken ill and then recover in the afternoon. Then he would have a good half-day's vacation. It is "better to let Mr. Tu to be taken ill,

and best to let him die. If neither illness nor death overtook him, I have to go to school tomorrow and study *The Confucian Analects*" (LXQJ 7: 216). The next day, the rich man comes to tell the news about the "long-haired rebels," and the teacher advises him. Once the rich man is gone, the teacher is very anxious. The boy already heard the news about "long-haired rebels," but thinks nothing of it. On the contrary, he is very happy since he can skip his lesson. When the teacher announces that he can go home and that the class is canceled, the boy narrator continues:

With great happiness, I bound out to the tung tree. Although under the summer sun, I do not care a bit. I think it is my place under the tung tree right now (LXQJ 7: 218).

The boy sees that people are fleeing their homes like ants and "everyone is afraid," but he does not mind: "I am too busy to think about the long-haired rebels: I catch a fly, and lure ants out with the fly, then kill them and pour water into their hole" (LXQJ 7: 219). All of the narrator's responses to the events and all of his actions accord with the status of a nine-year-old boy. He shows his dislike for and disinterest in school life. He does not understand the news about the long-haired rebels that shocks everybody, and he remains happy, contented, and unaffected by the events.

In narratives with fixed internal focalization, the focalizer usually coincides with a character in the story; this character is used to view all the happenings in the story, including the narrator-agent's experiences. Such characters will have a technical advantage over the other characters, for the readers watch the events through their eyes, and they will, in principle, be inclined to accept their vision. But, such a character-bound focalization also brings about bias and limitations. In Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*, the story is told by an external narrator, but he focalizes internally, mostly through Maisie, a little girl who does not understand the

problematic relations among people around her. The reader views the events through the limited vision of the girl, but they can do more with the received information than Maisie does, and they can interpret it differently. When Maisie sees only a strange gesture, readers may notice that it is an erotic one (Bal, 104-05). The May Fourth era author Wang Tongzhao does something similar in "A Child's Talking at the Lakeside" (1922). The narrative focalizer in this story is a child who spends much time loafing around the reed marshes of the lakeside. The child says that his father, a blacksmith, allows him to go home only very late. Readers gradually discover through the child and his narration that his father is unable to feed the entire family and has to let his mother prostitute herself at home (39-46). The child, the character-bound focalizer, cannot understand the events he sees and talks about, but readers understand the truth. The story's particular effect comes from the differences between the child's point of view and the adult reader's interpretation.

In "Remembering Past Times," the boy narrator tells the reader what he sees and experiences, and the reader discovers the deeper significance of what the boy narrator describes but sometimes does not fully comprehend. The reader recognizes the teacher's ridiculous and repulsive behavior through the contact between the narrator and the teacher. Certain details reveal their hidden meaning to the reader through the boy narrator's observations; readers thus deepen their understanding of the teacher's character. For example, there is a set of *Baming shuchao* on the teacher's desk, a model for writing the essay required in civil service examinations. Mr. Tu takes a different attitude to it at different times. After hearing the news about the "long-haired rebels," and seeing Jin Yaozong off, he is, according to the boy, "hurrying away with a big bundle of clothes under his arm. Normally he would only go home on the occasion of a special festival or at the end of the year. At those occasions he always takes several volumes of *Baming shuchao* with him.

This time, however, the whole set remained on the desk (*LXQJ* 7: 218). When it turns out that the news about the “long-haired ones” was a false alarm, people who fled come back one after another. As the boy narrator reports, Mr. Tu is among them: “Mr. Tu paces around for a long time and then says that he is going home in order to reassure his own family. Saying he will be back the next morning, he takes *Baming shuchao* with him and goes home” (*LXQJ* 7: 220).

Rimmon-Kenan says that a trait may be implied both by one-time actions and by habitual ones. One-time actions tend to evoke the dynamic aspect of the character, often playing a part in a turning point in the narrative. By contrast, habitual actions tend to reveal comic or ironic effects, as when a character clings to old habits in a situation which renders them inadequate (61). Mr. Tu habitually brings his *Baming shuchao* with him, showing thus that he clings to old habits. But when he is frightened by the “long-haired rebels,” he leaves the whole set on the desk because he wants to save his life.

In a narrative with fixed internal focalization, character-bound narrators cannot go beyond their focalizer-character. The narrator is unable to go into the heart of the other characters, he or she can only guess what they feel and think. In this respect, “Remembering Past Times” proceeds properly. When the rich man and the teacher come back, they discuss the fact that the long-haired rebels were only a band of refugees. This discussion is followed by the words of the teacher as reported by the boy narrator: “ ‘Aha! Refugees!...Oh...’ Mr. Tu roars with laughter, and he *seems* to ridicule his own foolish panic as well as deride the refugees who were no threat at all” (*LXQJ* 7: 220, italics added). The word “seems” shows that the character-bound narrator does not enter into the teacher’s heart and can only guess from his words and actions. However, this guess conforms to the internal logic of the narrative mode, and is expected. The teacher’s expression looks completely ridiculous to the reader. This glimpse into the teacher’s inner world in

Lu Xun's "Remembering Past Times" corresponds exactly to what Genette observes in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. He writes about the special uses of narratives with internal focalization:

We must interpret as indices of focalization those openings onto the psychology of characters other than the hero which the narrative takes care to make in a more or less hypothetical form, as when Marcel guesses or conjectures the thought of his interlocutor according to the expression on that person's face [...] Since Spitzer, critics have often noted the frequency of those modalizing locutions (*perhaps, undoubtedly, as if, seem, appear*) that allow the narrator to say hypothetically what he could not assert without stepping outside internal focalization; and thus Marcel Muller is not wrong in looking on them as "the alibis of the novelist" (202-03).

The servants' almost apathetic reaction to the rumor about long-haired rebels stands in stark contrast to the reaction of the local rich men, Jin Yaozong, and reveals the true character of the latter. That "Remembering Past Times" is narrated and observed by a character-bound focalizer-narrator is conducive to the forming of a unified artistic style for the whole story. It also stimulates the readers to draw their own conclusions.

However, focalization and narration are not necessarily combined in a single narrator-character; they can be separate, even in first-person fiction (Rimmon-Kenan 73). In first-person retrospective narratives two different visions play a role in turn: one is the vision of the narrator "I" looking back; the other is the vision of the "I" in the past. They can reflect different degrees of understanding: the former is capable and seasoned; the latter is childish and naive; the former knows the real situation of the events, while the latter is short of overall comprehension of the events. In "Remembering Past Times," the boy is the focalizer, his adult self is the

narrator. The nine-year-old boy is the dominant, but not exclusive focalizer. When the teacher suggests to the rich man a way to deal with the long-haired rebels and the rich man leaves the school thanking the teacher, the narrator remarks:

It is really true that people used to say that, search as you might in the town of Wu, you would never find a wiser man than Mr. Tu. My teacher could have lived very well at any time whatsoever, and he would have seen to it that he came to no harm. [...] Using the words of today's evolutionists, it is probably a heredity of ancestors (*LXQJ* 7: 218).

Obviously, this narrator's intervention goes beyond the mind of the boy narrator-focalizer. The aim of the commentary is not to explain the plot, but to persuade the reader to agree with the narrator's judgment of the events. Here, with irony, the narrator's commentary on Mr. Tu steers the reader to interpret him in a certain way. However, the form (people say...), and the content of the commentary could only come from the narrator "I," the adult self. We may say that the narrator assumes the task of commenting his character. Genette already noticed this situation in narratives:

The use of the "first person," or better yet, oneness of person of the narrator and the hero, does not at all imply that the narrative is focalized through the hero. Very much to the contrary, the "autobiographical" type of narrator, whether we are dealing with a real or a fictive autobiography, is--by the very fact of his oneness with the hero—more "naturally" authorized to speak in his own name than is the narrator of a "third-person" narrative. There is less indiscretion from Tristram Shandy in mixing the account of his present "opinions" (and thus of his knowledge) with the narrative of his past "life" than there is on Fielding's part in mixing the account

of *his* with the narrative of the life of Tom Jones.[...] The autobiographical narrator, having no obligation of discretion with respect to himself, does not have this kind of reason to impose silence on himself. The only focalization that he has to respect is defined in connection with his present information as narrator and not in connection with his past information as hero (198-99).³

There are several reasons why “Remembering Past Times” did not receive much attention when it was first published. First, the story was written in the old classical language. The writers in the new literary movement of the May Fourth era prided themselves in fighting against the old literature and promoting the new. Their most important formal aim was to replace classical Chinese with the modern vernacular. Hu Shi, a leading figure in the new literary movement said: “It’s better to use the living language of the twentieth century than the dead words from three thousand years ago” (28). He thought that a new language was crucial for a new literature:

My purpose [...] is simply to suggest the creation of a literature in the national language and a national language suitable for literature. Our aim in the literary revolution is merely to create in China a literature in the national language. A national language may be established only after we have produced a literature in the national language, --only after we have established a national language suitable for literature. (245; Průšek’s translation, 175)

It is understandable that progressive people did not pay much attention to works written in the old classical Chinese language at a time when a totally new cultural language system was introduced by the new literary movement. The second main

³ Genette adds in a note: “Of course, this distinction is relevant for the classical form of autobiographical narrative, where the narrating is enough subsequent to the events for the narrator’s information to differ appreciably from the hero’s. When the narrating is contemporaneous with the story (interior monologue, journal, correspondence), internal focalization on the narrator amounts to focalization on the hero.”

reason for the neglect was that Lu Xun's very successful later vernacular stories came to overshadow "Remembering Past Times."

Yet, "Remembering Past Times" should not be ignored. Although its language system was related to the old one,⁴ it was close to the direction of the new literary movement. It adopted some modern techniques from foreign fiction, defied some outmoded conventions, and displayed some important characteristics of modern fiction. Meanwhile, it also anticipated some elements that reappeared time and time again in Lu Xun's subsequent short stories, for example, the construction of the plot, the cool dialogues, the use of irony. The dialogues of "Remembering Past Times" are different from those in traditional Chinese fiction, which were instruments for developing the plot and determining the structure. Here, as Průšek points out, the dialogue is quite autonomous. It is simply a form of presentation of a certain atmosphere, a certain situation, or a set of human relationship, as it is in the works of Hemingway, Joyce, Faulkner and others. It is interesting that in Chinese literature it is Lu Xun, writing in the old classical language, who departs from the old mode. The whole setting of the story shows that Lu Xun's work has affinity with new trends in European literature (174-76).

Thus we can see a basic trend in Lu Xun's literary works with regard to the use of narrative modes: he started with the traditional narrative mode of zero focalization, and moved towards the use of different narrative modes, including internal and external focalization. Seen from this perspective, "Remembering Past

⁴ Průšek qualifies the importance of the new language system: "Without wishing to deny the importance of a new literary language close to and freely drawing on the colloquial language, we must admit that the fundamental requirement was not a new language, but a new writer brought up in a modern way and capable of looking at the world with modern eyes, endowed with a new and very different interest in certain aspect of reality. A revolution had first to take place in the minds of writers, and then it could find its expression in their work" (*Precursor* 175-76).

Times” is an important turning point. A new page was started; the use of different modes was introduced into modern Chinese fiction.

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《懷舊》：魯迅文言小說與新觀念首次整合的嘗試

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〔摘要〕

在中國小說的發展中，敘事模式從零聚焦敘事向內聚焦和外聚焦敘事的轉換，是傳統小說向現代小說轉換的一個重要標誌。這一轉換由晚清小說始，在魯迅的小說中得以成功地完成。《懷舊》是魯迅創作的第一篇小說，除了它所採用的語言系統是與舊的語言系統相關聯外，它更多地是與新文學運動聯繫在一起的。在敘事模式上，它成功地運用了第一人稱內聚焦敘事，在傳統敘事模式向現代敘事模式的轉換中具有開創性的意義，因而，從魯迅小說創作對於敘事模式的採用中，《懷舊》是一個重要的轉捩點，它在小說敘事模式的轉換中開闢了新的一頁。

關鍵字：敘事模式 轉換 魯迅 《懷舊》 內聚焦敘事

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