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An Analysis of Chinese Narrative Poems from the Perspective of the Narrator, the Case Study of Han Yuefu Poems

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Abstract:

This paper explores the narrative techniques in Han Dynasty Yuefu poetry, with particular attention to how the narrator's perspective enhances both storytelling and emotional depth. Through the analysis of selected poems, it highlights how shifts between omniscient and limited perspectives enrich character portrayal and convey complex emotions. By placing Yuefu poetry within the broader tradition of Chinese literature, the study challenges the common perception that classical Chinese poetry is purely lyrical, suggesting instead that narrative elements play a crucial role. It argues for a re-evaluation of these poems, emphasising the interplay between narration and emotion, and how this contributes to the development of Chinese narrative art. Additionally, the paper considers how Yuefu poetry, with its distinct narrative strategies, laid important groundwork for later developments in Chinese literary traditions. This study underscores the importance of looking at ancient Chinese poetry from a narrative perspective, recognising its contribution to the evolution of storytelling in Chinese literature.

Keywords: Yuefu poetry; narrative techniques; Han Dynasty; omniscient perspective; limited perspective; Chinese classical poetry.

1. Introduction

Stories exist because of the narrator; thus, from a holistic perspective, narrative texts are creations of the narrator. In Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, "narrative levels" are described as "narration *in* the story; A character whose actions are the object of narration can himself in turn engage in narrating a story. Within his story there may, of course, be yet another character who narrates another story, and so on in infinite regress. Such narratives within narratives create a stratification of levels whereby each inner narrative is subordinate to the narrative within which it is embedded"[1]. Before discussing narrative levels, it is essential to distinguish between the narrator and the author. Roland Barthes clearly delineates this difference: "The actual author of a narrative work can never be conflated with the narrator of that work. The narrator's signs exist within the narrative itself and can thus be analysed semiotically. However, to determine whether the author himself, regardless of whether he flaunts, hides, or obliterates himself within the work, scatters 'signs' throughout, we must assume a relationship of physical resemblance between the 'person' and his language. This relationship transforms the author into a fully-fledged subject and the narrative into a tool for expressing this subjectivity, a concept that structural analysis cannot accept, as the person speaking within the narrative is not the same as the person writing in real life, and the person writing is not the same as the person existing"[2].

For a long time, Chinese classical poetry has been regarded as a lyrical form of literature that expresses personal emotions and aspirations. The ideas of "poetry expresses one's ambitions, songs extend one's words, sounds follow the song, and rhythm harmonizes the sound" (*Shangshu, Yushu, Yao Dian*), "poetry is the expression of one's ambitions" (*Preface to the Book of Songs*), and "poetry arises from emotions and is adorned with literary embellishments" (Lu Ji's *Rhapsody on Literature*) underscore the central role of emotions and aspirations in the development of Chinese poetic theory. Consequently, when discussing poetry, critics often focus on the feelings and aspirations expressed by the author.

However, poetry is not purely a lyrical form. Even in pre-Qin folk songs, narrative elements were already present: "Cut bamboo, join bamboo; throw earth, chase the beast"[3] (*Wuyue Chunqiu*), vividly depicting the process of making a slingshot from bamboo and then hunting. As a fundamental mode of expression, narrative techniques also appear in classical poetry. In *The Book of Songs*, for

instance, “Seventh Month” narrates the seasonal movements of crickets: “In the seventh month in the wilds, in the eighth month at the eaves, in the ninth month at the door, in the tenth month under my bed.” The poem “The Oath” recounts a woman’s experiences of betrothal, marriage, and abandonment from her perspective, preserving a relatively complete plot. Even though *The Songs of Chu* are highly romantic, they also contain narrative elements, such as the opening of “Li Sao”: “Descendant of the ancestor Kao-yang, Po-yung was my honoured father’s name. When the constellation She-t’i pointed to the first month, on the day *keng-yin* I was born”[4] where Qu Yuan narrates his birth and the origin of his name.

Since the Han Dynasty, the creation of poetry has been explained by sayings like “the hungry sing of their food, the weary sing of their labour.” When collecting folk songs, it was believed that these works “were inspired by emotions of sorrow and joy, arising from events”. These statements all affirm the presence of narrative in poetry and demonstrate a rational understanding of the relationship between narrative and expressing emotions and aspirations. Corresponding to this view, narrative techniques were widely used in Han Dynasty Yuefu poetry. According to an incomplete count from Song Dynasty scholar Guo Maoqian’s *Anthology of Yuefu Poetry*, nearly 150 poems from the Han Dynasty are included, with around 40 containing narrative elements—a significant increase compared to earlier works like *The Book of Songs* and *The Songs of Chu*. It can be said that there is indeed a narrative tradition within the realm of ancient Chinese poetry, yet it has often been overlooked. Therefore, it is necessary to reexamine ancient Chinese poetry from a narrative perspective.

This paper explores the narrator’s perspective in Chinese narrative poems. It will be based on specific works and authors, incorporating traditional poetic narrative theory while judiciously absorbing modern narrative theory. It will investigate the diversity of narrator perspectives and their roles and functions within the narrative of Chinese narrative-long poems.

2. Literature Review

Research on narrative poetry must begin with defining the term “narrative poetry”. In Chinese, the term “narrative” (*Xu Shi*) is composed of the character “*Xu*”, which originally means “*sequence*”. The *Shuowen Jiezi* states: “*Xu* means sequence”[5]. Combined with “*Shi*” (affairs), it refers to arranging events in sequence, that is, narrating events in order. Liu Xie mentions “narrative” several times in his *Wenxindiaolong*: in the chapter “Inscription and Eulogy”, he says, “its narrative is comprehensive and concise, its ornamentation elegant and luminous, with words flowing unceasingly, and ingenious ideas standing firm, revealing the natural talent of the author,” to praise Cai Yong’s concise narrative in his inscriptions; in the chapter “Elegy and Eulogy”, he writes, “observe how his careful choice of words changes the tone, his emotions deeply sad and bitter, narrating like a biography, concluding like a poem, with a rhythm of four words per line, with few slow verses”, in praise of Pan Yue’s narrative style, which resembles a biography. It is evident that by this time, “narrative” had developed into a literary technique that had drawn the attention of critics.

When discussing “narrative”, ancient writers had different requirements for “*Xu*” compared to today. Unlike modern narrative theory, which emphasizes the need for a storyline, plot, or coherence, the mere act of narrating events in language already contains the element of “*Xu*”. For example, in *Zhaomai Zhanyan*, the Yuefu poem “Bound Hair as Husband and Wife” is evaluated as having “the first four lines generally narrate, and the next four lines narrate the event”; in *Siming Shihua*, the commentary on Wu Dang’s “Observing Ancient Poems” notes that “Su’s six seals were the source of disaster; Zhu Bo’s five cauldrons led to calamity”, which is described as ancient narrative poetry. These comments focus only on the direct narration of specific facts. Therefore, even a single line of poetry or the description of a particular action can be considered “narrative” in terms of technique.

Regarding the definition of narrative poetry, Chinese scholars generally have the following views: Wang Yuqi in *Selections of Narrative Poems through the Ages* defines narrative poetry as “a poetic form that depicts people and narrates events, requiring a complete story and distinct character portrayal”[6]. Wu Qingfeng in *Appreciation of Narrative Poems through the Ages* defines it as “a poetic form that primarily recounts people and events... requiring a complete story and distinct character portrayal”[7]. Both viewpoints emphasise the completeness of the storyline and the distinctiveness of character portrayal, aligning with the definition in the *Cihai*, which describes narrative poetry as “a poetic form with relatively complete storylines and character portrayals.” Lu Nanfeng, in *Narrative Poetry in China through the Ages (Pre-Qin, Han, Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties)* points out that “broadly speaking, narrative poetry includes both landscape and descriptive categories. A relatively independent life scene, a sketchy yet perspective-filled portrayal of a natural landscape, can be categorized under the descriptive type; a complete plot, an orderly story, a character image created by the poet, or a self-image can be categorized under the descriptive type”[8]. Li Hongyan, in *Research on Pre-Tang Narrative Poetry*, defines narrative poetry as “poetry that describes events, characters, scenes,

and fragments of life, with a certain story and plot, containing the poet's emotions in the process of narrating events, and often featuring a jumpy structure."[9] Overall, academic definitions of narrative poetry can be divided into two categories: one from the perspective of contemporary narrative theory, emphasizing the need for distinct character portrayals and complete storylines; the other, considering the characteristics of ancient Chinese poetry, is more lenient, focusing on the narration of events rather than insisting on the completeness of plot and character portrayal.

In studying Yuefu narrative poetry, this paper will define narrative poetry as a poetic form that primarily uses narrative techniques, contains complete or fragmentary storytelling or scene depiction, and involves character participation, considering the content of the term "narrative" and the actual poetic creations from the Han to the Wei-Jin period.

3. Analysis

The main characteristic of Han Dynasty Yuefu narrative poetry is depicting a specific scene or segment from life, often using character dialogue or monologue to focus on a particular moment. This approach typically omits the development of the plot and does not concern itself with the completeness of the event. For example, in *Climbing the Mountain to Pick Migu*, the entire poem is held up by the dialogue, revealing the characters and story through the language between the abandoned wife and her former husband. In *The Journey to the East Gate*, the actions ("There is not a measure of rice in the pot, nor clothes hanging on the rack. He draws his sword and leaves for the East Gate, while his wife and child tug at his clothes, weeping") are combined with dialogue ("Your family wishes for wealth and honour, while I, your humble wife, share this gruel with you. You rely on the will of heaven above, but below, we must rely on this yellow-mouthed child. But now, things are different!"). This scene describes a needy husband, disregarding his wife's pleas, taking his sword and leaving home, possibly to engage in desperate measures. These poems can be divided into two categories: shifts between omniscient and limited perspectives, and internal shifts within a limited perspective.

In poems that shift between omniscient and limited perspectives, the narrative often begins with an omniscient viewpoint, summarizing the characters and the situation, before moving to a limited perspective to narrate from the characters' viewpoint within the story. For instance, in the opening of *The Ballad of Mulan*, curiosity is immediately piqued: "Click, click, and click again, Mulan weaves at the door. But no sound of the loom is heard, only the girl's sigh." The narrator observes Mulan's behaviour from an external viewpoint, revealing her sadness. When Mulan says, "I want to buy a saddle and horse to take my father's place in the army", the narrative shifts to her internal monologue, expressing her resolve and responsibility through a limited perspective, thereby deepening the reader's understanding of her inner world.

Later, when "Her parents hear that their daughter has returned, and they help each other out of the city to welcome her", the narrator returns to the external viewpoint, describing the family members' reactions, further advancing the plot. In the end, "The male rabbit's feet kick up, the female rabbit's eyes are blurred; the two rabbits run side by side, how can one tell which is male or female?" the use of metaphor and Mulan's playful monologue reveal her inner thoughts.

Southeast the Peacock Flies, the longest narrative poem in ancient China, employs a third-person omniscient perspective. The narrator not only understands the thoughts and actions of all the characters in the story but can also freely switch between macro narrative and micro psychological descriptions, adding richness to the narrative layers of the work. In the passage "At thirteen, I knew how to weave plain silk, at fourteen I learned to cut clothes; at fifteen I played the many-stringed lute, at sixteen recited from the *Odes and Documents*"[4], the narrator comprehensively showcases Liu Lanzhi's talents and virtues through a first-person perspective, reinforcing the reader's perception of her character. When "When the clerk heard of this, he knew in his heart they must part forever"[4], the narrator delves into the clerk's inner world through an omniscient viewpoint, revealing his inner pain and helplessness. In the line "You must be like the solid boulder, I like a rush or a reed. Rushes and reeds can be strong as well as pliant, just so the boulder does not move"[4], the dialogue takes on characteristics of an internal perspective, directly conveying the emotional interaction between the characters and enhancing the narrative's drama. Through these flexible shifts in perspective, the narrator not only deeply portrays the characters but also presents the complex emotional structure of the story on different levels.

On the other hand, *The Journey to the East Gate* uses a first-person perspective to unfold the narrative, where the narrator directly participates in the story, giving the emotional expression a strong sense of subjectivity and immediacy. "I want to go east, but there is no time for sorrow", the narrator, in the first-person role of "I", directly expresses his sorrow, with a blunt and intense emotional expression that enhances the reader's sense of empathy. "I want to cross the river, but there are no boats", the narrator further expresses his predicament and helplessness

through the first-person perspective, emphasising the depth of subjective emotional experience. “My heart is sad, and no one knows my sorrow”, the narrator not only expresses external difficulties but also conveys inner loneliness and pain through the first-person perspective, with clear narrative lines and concise storytelling in a relatively short piece. As Wang Li argues, this “combination of narrative brevity and emotional depth” [10] is a hallmark of Yuefu poetry’s narrative style. These shifts in perspective are what allow the poems to move fluidly between external events and internal emotions, giving them a unique place in Chinese narrative tradition.

The shifts in the narrator’s perspective effectively enrich the layers of the narrative and make the emotional expression and character portrayal more multidimensional and complex. By flexibly using the narrator’s perspective, Yuefu poetry demonstrates a high level of artistry in narrative technique, providing rich insights for later narrative literature.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of Han Dynasty Yuefu poetry reveals the crucial function of narrative techniques in enhancing the lyrical elements traditionally associated with Chinese classical poetry. Through the use of shifts between omniscient and limited perspectives, Yuefu poets were able to depict not only everyday scenes but also the internal emotional worlds of their characters. This narrative approach allows for more nuanced character development and emotional expression, creating layers of meaning within the text. Moreover, the study positions Yuefu poetry as a significant forerunner of narrative techniques that later became central to Chinese literary traditions. By integrating narration with lyricism, Yuefu poetry lays the groundwork for the evolution of narrative poetry, highlighting the need to reconsider the narrative dimensions of ancient Chinese poetry. This reassessment provides a more comprehensive understanding of its role in shaping Chinese literature and underscores its narrative complexity, calling for increased scholarly focus on its contributions.

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