

A Comparative Study of Suffering Writing from the Perspective of Polyphonic Narration — Taking To Live and The Field of Life and Death as Examples

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Abstract. Based on Bakhtin's polyphonic narration theory as the core framework, this paper analyzes and compares the different forms of suffering writing reflected by the multi-voice narration in *To Live* and *The Field of Life and Death*. *To Live* highlights the "irresistibility" of suffering through "monologic polyphony", triggering reflections on the meaning of individual existence; *The Field of Life and Death* shows the "collectivity" and "historicity" of suffering through "heteroglossic polyphony", inspiring concern for the fate of the nation. As classic texts of suffering literature, both works structure their narratives with polyphonic multi-voice techniques, presenting a real and powerful Chinese folk society that resists suffering.

Keywords: polyphony, suffering, *To Live*, *The Field of Life and Death*

1. Introduction

As one of the important theorists in the 20th century, Bakhtin put forward influential literary concepts such as "carnival" and "polyphonic novel", which have exerted a profound influence on reader-response criticism, reception aesthetics, deconstructionism and other theories. Among them, polyphony, originally a musical term, refers to the progression of multiple sounds in their own voices respectively. Bakhtin borrowed this concept to summarize the creative characteristics of Dostoevsky's novels: "The complete unity of the world in Dostoevsky's works cannot be reduced to the unity of one person's feelings and will, just as polyphony in music cannot be reduced to the unity of one person's feelings and will." [1]

Bakhtin believed that the essence of polyphony lies in the dialogue between the author and multiple internal personalities, which can better reflect the real state of human nature in real society. As a multi-voice narration, polyphonic texts contain multiple independent and subjective "voices" — these voices may come from the inner monologues, expression of opinions, or even different narrative perspectives of different characters. Each of these voices represents different values, logics or positions, and there is no absolute "right" or "wrong" between them; the author does not "unify" these voices through narrative intervention (such as direct evaluation or implied tendency), but lets them exist naturally, forming the "plurality of truth".

Many novels in modern and contemporary Chinese literature have innovatively adopted the nesting and integration of two or more narrative structures in their narration, namely the creation of polyphonic narration. Whether it is Fugui who lives in suffering under the wheel of history, or the rural groups in Northeast China who suffer from colonial oppression, war and natural violence, Yu Hua's *To Live* and Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life and Death* take root in the land, with deep affection for farmers, and use multi-voice polyphonic narration to show the real and powerful Chinese folk society — the truth of life and the struggle of death. As classic texts of suffering writing in modern and contemporary Chinese literature, *To Live* and *The Field of Life and Death* adopt polyphonic narration to depict the survival dilemmas of individual and collective sufferings, which possess profound value in literary history. However, while the academic research on the suffering narration of these two works has gradually deepened, there is still a large gap in the research on their polyphonic narration modes, and there are few comparative analyses of the two works. This paper will innovatively start from the perspective of polyphonic narration theory, analyze how the two works show the complexity of suffering through multi-voice dialogue, and provide a new perspective for understanding the theme of suffering in modern and contemporary literature.

2. Polyphonic narration and individual discourse of suffering in *To Live*

2.1. Dominant voice: Fugui's "monologic polyphony"

The antonym of monologue is polyphony, yet *To Live* forms a unique "monologic polyphony" under Fugui's active narration.

To Live takes Fugui's "first-person perspective" to actively tell the sufferings that have come one after another in his life. After the death of Kugen, Fugui sighed: "It's better to be an ordinary person in life. Striving for this and that, you end up losing your own life." From a wealthy landlord's son to a poor landless peasant, Fugui experienced the successive deaths of all his relatives — his parents, wife, son, daughter, son-in-law and grandson. He endured almost all the pain in the world, from material bankruptcy to family destruction, from hope to despair, losing everything. However, in his narration, we cannot see fierce resistance or accusation, but more of a submission to fate and a gesture of "passive endurance". Falling into an "unprecedented" loneliness, Fugui did not cry out or complain, but only said "It's better to be an ordinary person in life".

From the perspective of a "survivor" and in the tone of an "eyewitness", he narrates the sufferings he has encountered in his life slowly, from initial resentment to final submission to fate and numbness and hidden pain at the death of relatives, forming a voice of "active narration, passive endurance".

When Youqing died of blood transfusion for the county magistrate's wife, Fugui's reaction was "My mind went blank, as if hit by a hammer", then he "stumbled out". He did not go to argue with the county magistrate immediately or vent hysterically, but chose to bear it silently in great grief [2]. This kind of "passive endurance" is Fugui's intentional neglect and dissolution of factors such as power and human indifference behind Youqing's death, and also a true portrayal of the individual's powerlessness to resist in the face of cruel fate. Fugui's narration is like a calm river, seemingly calm on the surface, but surging with endless pain and sorrow underneath, forming a distinct voice of "passive endurance", which makes readers deeply feel the insignificance and helplessness of the individual in the face of suffering.

As the main voice of the "musical composition" of *To Live*, Fugui's story is narrated by Yu Hua in an increasingly plain style. The plainer the writing and the shorter the description, the more

calmly Fugui's numb pain strikes the readers' hearts. Through Fugui's seemingly simple and casual words about his understanding of suffering, the narrative achieves "self-dissolution". At the end of the story, Fugui borrows the villagers' words to mock himself and the old ox as "two old immortals". His "understatement" of suffering forms a tension with the heaviness of suffering itself, implying a questioning of the meaning of suffering. Dissolving the heavy narrative, "To live is just to live".

Genette once distinguished two concepts: "homodiegetic narrator" and "heterodiegetic narrator" — the former participates in the story, while the latter does not. "A homodiegetic narrator is not as free as a heterodiegetic one; he must tell his own story or what he has seen and heard." [3] Connecting Genette's narrative theory with polyphonic theory, different narrators belong to different voices. As the main voice and homodiegetic narrator of *To Live*, Fugui is the innermost layer of the narration. That is to say, a homodiegetic narrator tends to tell the story infectiously to arouse emotional resonance from the audience. There are also many implicit "heterodiegetic narrators" in the work, such as "I" — a free folk collector who does not participate in the story, and the implicit voices of other characters [4].

2.2. Recessive voice: the "unspoken" of the silent

In *To Live*, the recessive voices include not only other characters in the story, but also the undeniable historical voice. These fragments exactly reflect the most prominent characteristics of "polyphony" and "monologue" as Bakhtin believed: "The author of a polyphonic novel does not drown out the voice of the protagonist as an independent subject with his own authority and voice" and "interprets the deep picture of an era in dialogue".

The happiness and sufferings of the dead relatives are presented fragmentarily through Fugui's memories, forming an "absent voice" in contrast to Fugui's "being alive". "I don't want any blessings; I just hope to make a new pair of shoes for you every year." Jiazhen's most simple wish reflects a sense of order and security she seeks in the current chaotic and restless life. As a recessive voice narrator, Jiazhen supplements Fugui's life story more completely, strengthens the sense of urgency of the current situation in the turbulent era, highlights the warmth of Fugui's early family happiness, and forms a contrast with the sufferings encountered later, enriching readers' feelings.

The chapter about Erxi marrying Fengxia is the happiest voice in the story. "This crookedly-headed guy is really lucky." The happiness of their marriage lifts the tone of the whole story. The reluctance of Fugui and Jiazhen when seeing Fengxia off and the sincere joy at seeing her happiness are filled with the simplest paternal and maternal love between the lines. The high-spirited voice sets off the ups and downs of the following plot.

Historical violence has "anonymity". Historical events such as land reform and the Great Leap Forward do not appear directly as "voices", but oppress Fugui's survival as a background, forming a "silent voice" and also an "antagonistic voice" in this paper. Bakhtin believed that Dostoevsky's talent lies in "being able to hear the dialogue of his own era", which is also reflected in *To Live*. "I saw many Kuomintang soldiers leave with their travel expenses, and I also wanted to go home. I missed Jiazhen, my mother and Fengxia... Long Er became my scapegoat and was arrested and shot... The village set up a public canteen, all ironware at home was collected to make steel, even kitchen knives were handed over... Later I learned that he was taken to struggle meeting by bad guys and shaved into a yin-yang hairstyle." These fragments together form the historical skeleton of *To Live*. Yu Hua does not directly comment on history, but through the eyes of Fugui, an ordinary farmer, lets us see how the torrent of history engulfs personal fate, causes one tiny accident after another inadvertently, and destroys Fugui's happiness one after another. This is precisely where the novel is shocking. The recessive historical voice is like a carriage rushing forward at a high speed,

leaving deep ruts in people's hearts, and also reflecting the tension between the historical voice and the individual voice.

Genette once defined "homodiegetic" and "heterodiegetic", referring to the relationship between the narrator and the story being told. It is homodiegetic when telling a story related to oneself, and heterodiegetic otherwise. "I" in *To Live*, as a folk collector independent of Fugui's story, belongs to the free "heterogeneous world". As an "implied author", "I" increases the hierarchy of the text, appears in the text from time to time, communicates with readers, produces a "defamiliarization" effect, makes readers feel "detached" and think rationally. "I" is an important voice of the polyphony in this paper [4].

What "I" see and hear form the "present tense" frame of the novel, while the long life narrated by Fugui is the core story of the "past tense". It is through "my" ears that Fugui's past events are "heard" and "recorded" and presented to readers. Fugui's story itself is extremely tragic, but if he tells it directly to readers in a crying way, it may seem sensational or suffocating. The existence of "I" provides a possibility of "pause" and "filter" for Fugui's narration. The calmness of Fugui's narration forms a huge tension with the tragedy of the story content, and "I", as an intermediary, bears this tension. Readers not only directly feel the tragedy of the story, but also see Fugui's calmness through "my" perspective. This dual experience makes the impact of the story more internal and lasting, avoids direct and excessive sensationalism, and achieves an artistic effect with both delayed emotional response and internal narrative resonance. At the end of the novel, "I know that dusk is fleeting, and night falls from the sky. I see the vast land exposing its solid chest, which is a gesture of calling, just as a woman calls her children, and the land calls the coming of night." This poetic and philosophical perception has surpassed "my" individual perspective and risen to a universal thinking about land, life and time. It is "I" who summarize this story about "living" for Fugui and all readers. Fugui interprets "living" with actions, while "I" point out the relationship between this kind of living and land and fate with words. Through "my" perception, the theme of the novel is sublimated from a single person's story to a thinking about the essence of all human life.

3. Polyphonic narration and collective discourse of suffering in *The Field of Life and Death*

3.1. Collective voice: farmers' survival instinct and ignorant consciousness

"In the countryside, people and animals are busy living and busy dying together." In *The Field of Life and Death*, Xiao Hong vividly depicts the "tenacity of life" and "struggle of death" of the rural people at the bottom (preface by Lu Xun). Different from *To Live*, *The Field of Life and Death* has no protagonist who takes the initiative to speak. Xiao Hong uses fragmented dialogues and behaviors of characters to form an "unconscious voice" of the people, showing the survival dilemma of the group.

The collective dilemma shows farmers' survival instinct and ignorant consciousness. As Hu Feng wrote in Afterword to Reading *The Field of Life and Death*: "They live like ants, reproduce muddle-headedly, and die messily."

Erliban and his goat run through the story. In the poor countryside, Erliban regards his goat as his relative, quarrels with his wife for losing the goat, and even "entrusts" the goat to Zhao Laosan before leaving. "Brother Zhao, take care of it for me as long as you live." The same goes for Wang Po selling her horse. The old goat, the horse and other animals in this paper together form a background of interaction between human and animal life activities. The fates of humans and animals are juxtaposed, and neither can dominate their own life and death. Under the torrent of the times, humans are as mediocre and onlooking as animals, showing the numbness of the people in the

world of the field of life and death and their indifference to the vitality of life. The novel equates human reproduction, labor and death with animal reproduction, enslavement and slaughter, revealing the dissolution of human nature and the primitiveness and animalization of life under the pressure of survival.

Survival becomes the primary requirement, human dignity is completely lost, and the standard of value is reversed. In the world of the field of life and death, "a blade of grass is worth more than a human life." This alienation of value is most strikingly reflected in childbirth, which should be regarded as the fire of human reproduction and species continuation. New life, the fire of hope, is regarded as a burden because of the survival pressure it brings. "I'll sell her, I'll throw her to death!" Before Xiao Jinzhi could feel the pain suffered by her mother again, she left this world.

From valuing things more than humans, hating childbirth, to destroying one's own flesh and blood, Wang Po, Fifth Aunt, Jinzhi, Chengye, Erliban and others' simple reactions to life and death, lust and war form a "collective voice". Xiao Hong clearly outlines a track of how human nature and ethics collapse step by step under the pressure of survival, reflecting that the harsh environment and scarce material in the world of the field of life and death have extinguished morality and human nature step by step, and destroyed people's awareness of life. Chen Sihe mentioned in *Folk Tragedy from the Perspective of Enlightenment — The Field of Life and Death*: "Chinese folk society is actually very powerful." [5] Therefore, I think Xiao Hong intentionally destroyed this powerful folk society with the suffering of survival in advance, making the broken souls unable to bear the oppression of suffering, wanting to resist everything, and burst out a new, resistant, suffering-destroying and enlightened folk power from the inside out.

3.2. Natural law voice: repetitive cycle of life (birth, old age, illness, death)

In addition to the suffering of survival caused by external material scarcity, Xiao Hong also forms a "natural law voice" through the high-frequency narration of "childbirth" and "death", implying the fatalism of suffering and showing the urgent need for enlightenment of the human spirit in the feudal, barbaric, backward and ignorant folk society. As Chen Sihe wrote: "When a group of writers came to the central city from folk society and engaged in literary creation, they unconsciously brought their own life energy. What they wanted to express is how Chinese folk society survives under high pressure and in a very cruel living environment." [5]

Xiao Hong cruelly juxtaposes human reproduction with animal reproduction, and vividly shows the undignified pain of women before, during and after childbirth. Both body and spirit suffer torture and torment. "A suffering woman, if there is a hole beside her, she will jump in! If there is poison beside her, she will swallow it... A woman lies in blood, soaking her body in blood." The narration of death is also numb. "Her eyes, the white of her eyes turned completely green, a neat row of front teeth also turned completely green, her hair was like burnt, close to her scalp. She was like a sick cat, lonely and hopeless." The process of Yueying's death is a naked display of physical decay. The process from a human to a "ghost" and then to a "cat" is the process of her being deprived of human nature and finally returning to an animal. Her death, unmourned, is only the end of suffering [6].

"Mass graves, corpses scattered there. No one buries them, wild dogs roam among the corpses... Dozens of people died suddenly in the whole village, just like wheat blown down by the wind suddenly." Death here is massive and dehumanized. Humans are compared to "wheat blown down by the wind", the value of life is reduced to the minimum, completely subject to an irresistible natural force, which is the embodiment of "fatalism".

The "natural law voice" is the grand background sound of the "collective voice". Through the high-frequency cycle of "birth, old age, illness and death" such as Jinzhi's and Fifth Aunt's

childbirth, Wang Po's suicide, Yueying's illness, the plague in the whole village, and Japanese aggression, it shows the fatalistic suffering fate of the people at the bottom, the feudal barbarism and backwardness of the national spirit under the suffering fate, and the numbness of their psychology.

3.3. Narrator voice: Xiao Hong's compassion and criticism

The theme of *The Field of Life and Death* is not only to reflect the suffering of Northeast farmers and their spirit of resistance during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, but also to inherit Lu Xun's deep intention of digging out the inferiority rooted in the soul of the Chinese nation. The "interventional" comments of the "narrator voice" constitute an "enlightened voice" in dialogue with the collective voice.

There is an obvious break in the text of *The Field of Life and Death*. The first ten chapters describe in detail the hardship and numbness of Northeast farmers' survival, and the latter part describes the tragic scene of Japanese invasion and the farmers' awakening to go to the battlefield. It highlights Xiao Hong's profound depiction of the deformed living state and shocking morbid soul that have lasted for thousands of years on that "field of life and death", and the break with the subsequent text reveals the author's inability to cope with the theme of the War of Resistance. However, this also clearly shows the author's real creative intention. Throughout the whole text, what *The Field of Life and Death* presents is the ordinary daily life of farmers day after day and cycle after cycle — those seemingly trivial and calm days, but under the ordinary surface, it exposes the silent carving and destruction of people's hearts by the deeply rooted ignorant culture. People unconsciously become slaves of ignorance, and more sadly, they are completely unaware of this, still content with the survival rhythm of "busy living and busy dying", as if all this is their innate fate. Through the vivid description of the collective spiritual numbness and survival morbidity, Xiao Hong conveys her attitude of fiercely criticizing national inferiority and her belief in national character transformation.

When Chengye threw Xiao Jinzhi to death, the author could no longer bear her anger at this disregard for life and extreme violence. "Why did the baby come to such a world? Let her go back with resentment! So short! Only a few days of small life!" When Jinzhi was violated by Japanese soldiers, the author cried out for her: "On the street at night, what kind of world is this?... She is as unnoticed as a sleeping puppy in a wooden barrel, as if they do not exist in the world." "Only women are thinner in the countryside in summer, just like farming horses." She lamented the women who were like "reproductive tools" without dignity on the "field of life and death". These "interventional" sharp criticisms show the female writer Xiao Hong, who is full of kindness and justice, crying out for folk enlightenment.

3.4. Heteroglossic polyphony: governing the whole text

The polyphony of *The Field of Life and Death* is "heteroglossic polyphony" depicting collective suffering. There is no strong time line or logical chain in the book. Xiao Hong mostly describes fragments, showing the characteristics of prose. Erliban looking for a goat, Fifth Aunt giving birth, Jinzhi going to work in the city... One after another "heteroglossic" fragments of different groups without linkages constitute the movement of *The Field of Life and Death*, which is a way of polyphony that brings infinite tension to the novel space. The "heteroglossic polyphony" of collective suffering switches between different characters and scenes, breaking the single perspective and strengthening the "multi-faceted nature" of collective suffering. Multiple voices

coexist equally, forming tension between the narrator and characters, and between characters, reflecting the complexity and symbiosis of collective suffering.

At the same time, the "heteroglossic polyphony" narration is not only reflected in the description of suffering, but also in the "enlightened voice". With the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the people on the Northeast "field of life and death" show their unique "heteroglossic" voices of awakening to resist Japan. Although the awakening is limited, it is still full of enlightened power. Zhang San organized the "Sickle Society" to resist rent increase; Li Qingshan organized an anti-Japanese team; Erliban's "leaving to resist Japan" was late, but the most convincing, indicating that no one can be spared or continue to be numb in the face of the crisis of national subjugation and genocide. People have gradually got rid of the initial stage of ignorance and chaos in different ways. These numerous fragmented and humble voices survive numbly in the "heteroglossic polyphony", and also present a microcosm of the people's awakening and enlightenment on the Northeast field of life and death in the "heteroglossic polyphony".

4. Comparison of polyphonic narration and differences in suffering writing between the two works

4.1. Analysis of the correlation between polyphonic narration and suffering writing

Different from narrative techniques such as "juxtaposed stories", "multi-perspective narration" and "unknown perspective" (children's perspective, fool's perspective), the most prominent feature of polyphonic narration is that the creator is concealed, and multiple subjects and voices speak equally and freely without being affected by the author's subjective will. Polyphonic narration can be either one-sided narration of a single narrative subject, parallel narration of multiple stories, or intervention of an omniscient God and supplement of the author's thoughts (such as Xiao Hong's "interventional criticism"). The two aspects are intertwined in parallel, forming a very charming narrative tension. Especially for suffering writing, suffering is most clearly and directly seen through the perspective of the parties concerned. However, the state of "those concerned are confused" or the unbearable pain caused by suffering will hinder the parties' perspective and reflection on suffering. At this time, polyphonic narration with multiple voices and God's perspective plays an extreme role, making suffering writing complete a narrative artistic performance incisively and vividly.

4.2. Differences in polyphonic composition

Both *To Live* and *The Field of Life and Death* adopt the writing technique of polyphonic narration, but differ in specific application. For the core voice, *To Live* is dominated by individual voice, narrated from Fugui's first-person perspective; *The Field of Life and Death* adopts equal collective voices. Whether it is Erliban, Zhao San, Wang Po or Jinzhi, their voices are fragmented, with no main narrator or core character. From the perspective of voice relationship, the voices in *To Live* have a master-slave relationship. Fugui is the dominant voice, and the voices of relatives such as Jiazhen, Fengxia, Youqing and Erxi, the historical background voice, the fate voice and the voice of "I, the folk collector" are all recessive voices, subordinate to Fugui's first-person dominant voice; in *The Field of Life and Death*, each person's story has its own voice, which is an equal superposition and dialogue of multiple voices, no master-slave relationship, and a writing of collective stories on the Northeast "field of life and death". From the perspective of narrative focus, *To Live* focuses on Fugui's life story, the contingency and inevitability of Fugui's personal fate. *The Field of Life and*

Death focuses on the cycle of survival and breakthrough of anti-Japanese resistance of Northeast people in that era.

4.3. Causes and effects of polyphonic differences

To Live was created in 1992, an important work in which Yu Hua shifted from "avant-garde" to "realism". Influenced by the American folk song Old Black Joe, Yu Hua wrote Fugui's story to think about the meaning of living, so it focuses more on individual survival. The Field of Life and Death was created in 1933, narrating the survival status of farmers and their awakening process of anti-Japanese resistance on the occasion of the life and death of Northeast China before and after the September 18th Incident, focusing more on collective ignorance and awakening. Through the narration of Fugui's "monologic polyphony", To Live tells the story of Fugui's gambling away his family property, experiencing social reforms such as civil war and land reform, and the successive death of relatives, highlighting the fateful "irresistibility" of suffering and triggering readers' reflection on the meaning of individual survival. Through "heteroglossic polyphony", The Field of Life and Death tells the stories of Yueying's death from illness, Xiao Jinzhi's early death, Zhao San's failure to organize the "Sickle Society" to resist rent increase, and hatred of Japanese invasion, showing the "collectivity" and "historicity" of suffering and inspiring readers' reflection on national character and concern for national fate.

5. Conclusion

Both works adopt the method of polyphonic narration, breaking the limitation of "single suffering discourse". However, due to the differences in voice composition and narrative focus, they present two different aspects: "the depth of individual suffering" and "the breadth of collective suffering". Polyphony makes suffering writing transcend simple "accusation" or "sympathy": suffering in To Live is the background of "living", and suffering in The Field of Life and Death is the prelude to "enlightenment". They respectively show two kinds of folk forces: "individual persistence" and "collective awakening". Different polyphonic voice narration methods present different textual effects, whose core is to show the complexity of suffering and the diversity of human nature through multi-voice dialogue, providing a richer expression path for literary suffering writing.

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