

A Study of Notes on the Intangible from the Perspective of Bakhtin's Polyphony Theory

Yichun Zhao

School of Humanities and Media, Ningbo University, Ningbo, China
236000411@nbu.edu.cn

Abstract. The paper adopts Bakhtin's classic polyphonic theory as the core analytical framework to examine the narrative logic and existential ideas embedded in Tiesheng Shi's full-length novel *Notes on the Intangible*. Combining textual close reading with theoretical research methods, this study analyzes how the novel abandons the traditional single and authoritative narrative perspective, sets up contrapuntal symbolic relationships between different character images, and reorganizes temporal and spatial clues based on personal memory and subjective impression. Such narrative arrangements construct an open textual space featuring equal dialogue and multiple coexisting voices. Rather than conveying fixed philosophical viewpoints through the author's monologue, the novel's reflections on core existential themes, including physical and spiritual disability, interpersonal loneliness, as well as the contradiction between individual difference and universal equality, are fully presented through external dialogues between different characters and internal spiritual conflicts within each individual. The complicated and paradoxical nature of human survival is thus displayed through continuous interactive discourse practice. This narrative attempt not only echoes the core ideas of Bakhtin's dialogism in a concrete literary way, but also reflects Tiesheng Shi's unique creative pursuit of transforming personal life suffering into universal philosophical thinking. It also provides a typical literary case for contemporary Chinese literature to carry profound existential exploration through unique narrative writing.

Keywords: Polyphonic, Dialogue Theory, *Notes on the Intangible*, Narrative Structure

1. Introduction

The concept of the polyphonic novel was first proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Different from traditional monologic novels controlled by a single authorial consciousness, a polyphonic novel is characterized by the coexistence of multiple independent and irreconcilable spiritual voices. In this theoretical context, the author's ideological perspective no longer occupies a dominant and overriding position, but exists equally alongside the inner consciousness of various characters, forming an open textual state sustained by constant dialogue and mutual negotiation [1]. Bakhtin further refined this core literary principle as dialogism, which focuses on the interactive tension and spiritual communication between different subjective consciousnesses [2].

Completed in the 1990s, Tiesheng Shi's representative novel *Notes on the Intangible* has always been regarded as a special work in contemporary Chinese literature due to its rejection of traditional plot-centered writing, symbolic character setting and strong speculative temperament [3]. Applying Bakhtin's polyphonic theory to interpret this novel can not only provide a mature theoretical perspective for sorting out its complex narrative form and profound existential thoughts, but also realize the localized application and practical verification of polyphonic theory in the Chinese literary context, which helps to deepen the comprehensive understanding of both the theoretical connotation and the textual spiritual value [4].

2. The polyphonic nature of narrative structure

The polyphonic features of *Notes on the Intangible* are primarily manifested in its dismantling of the absolute narrative authority typical of traditional monologic novels. Rather than relying on the author's one-way ideological indoctrination, the text constructs a discursive field in which multiple ideological subjects coexist, enabling an equal and confrontational dialogic relationship between the narrator and various symbolic characters, which lays a solid foundation for equal dialogue among diverse ideological consciousnesses.

2.1. Dialogic transformation of narrative relationship

The novel opens with the proposition "I am part of my impressions, and only all my impressions make up who I am", which defines the identity of the narrator "I". Instead of acting as an omniscient and authoritative storyteller, the narrator turns into a limited participant and speculative thinker inside the text, shifting constantly among recording, conjecturing and reflecting. This breaks the conventional hierarchical relationship between the author and fictional characters [2]. Characters marked by letters such as C, Z, O and L are no longer passive carriers of the author's ideas, but gain independent subjectivity to voice their own perceptions. Their viewpoints often contrast and refute the narrator's speculation. The repeated discussion over the identity of a "traitor", for instance, unfolds exactly through mutual examination between the narrator and multiple character perspectives [5]. Such writing practice realizes Bakhtin's proposition of the author's new stance in polyphonic fiction, namely that the author and protagonists engage in dialogue as equal spiritual subjects [4].

2.2. Symbolic counterpoint of the character system

Most characters in the novel are referred to by English letters, carrying prominent abstract and symbolic features. Letters including C, L and Z are respectively attached to specific life predicaments, emotional dispositions and value orientations. To be specific, C symbolizes physical disability and spiritual transcendence, while L represents romantic desire and poetic sincerity [6]. Rather than appearing in linear chronological order with complete life trajectories, these symbolic figures function like independent musical voices in polyphony, existing side by side in parallel, interweaving, echoing and confronting one another [3]. Their fates mirror each other and jointly form a meaning network of human existential possibilities. The adoption of symbolism and contrapuntal composition enables the novel to move beyond individual destiny narration and present the general human existential situation in a synchronic way [7].

2.3. Impressionistic organization of time and space

Corresponding to the synchronic layout of characters, the novel abandons the linear and coherent time logic of traditional epics. Memories of childhood gates, youthful romances, middle-aged contemplation and fictional hypotheses are juxtaposed and restructured according to the narrator's inner mood and associative impressions. Such narrative construction creates a textual space where the past, present and future interpenetrate [8]. Within this space, what has happened and what might have happened occupy equal narrative weight and jointly participate in meaning production. This unique temporal-spatial structure serves the demand of dialogism, providing an essential platform for the collision and communication of diverse voices and consciousnesses [7].

3. The polyphonic connotation of ideological content

Within the framework of the polyphonic narrative structure, Tiesheng Shi does not express his existential philosophy through a straightforward didactic monologue. Instead, he integrates core ontological propositions into the interaction of diverse characters' consciousness. Breaking free from the shackles of singular value judgment, the novel regards the life experiences, internal speculations and value choices of different characters as independent vocal parts. Centering on such themes as the essence of disability, existential loneliness and the paradox of fate, it launches extensive dialogues. Diverse, contradictory and complementary ideas coexist and interpenetrate one another, revealing the complexity of existential contemplation in dynamic interaction and embodying the core essence of ideological expression in polyphonic writing.

3.1. Expansion and deepening of the connotation of "disability"

In the novel, "disability" initially refers to C's physical imperfection. As the perspective of C intertwines with those of L, Z, O and other characters, the conceptual boundary of disability is continuously expanded. It gradually transcends individual physical defects and metaphorically points to the finitude, incompleteness and inherent limitations universally existing in human life [9]. C's physical disability serves as a distinct symbolic representation, while other characters' spiritual paranoia, frustrated ideals and inability of emotional communication reveal the universality of such existential limitations from different dimensions. The novel thus constructs a multi-layered writing of disability, resonating individual physical experience with the shared existential predicament of humanity [3].

3.2. Absoluteness and relativity of loneliness

Loneliness constitutes the fundamental existential state faced by nearly all characters in the novel. On the one hand, the text depicts the insurmountable barrier of mutual understanding between individuals, such as the separation of F and N caused by historical circumstances, and the breakdown of L's romantic relationship due to his extreme pursuit of emotional frankness. On the other hand, it further explores the internal dimension of loneliness, manifested as inner division and self-dialogue of characters: Z's inner struggle between arrogance and fragility, and O's spiritual conflict between belief in equality and realistic cognition [10]. Such inner micro-dialogue embodies the deeper form of loneliness. Meanwhile, the narrator's persistent writing itself can be regarded as an effort to break through loneliness and establish spiritual communication [11]. Therefore, loneliness is not merely a static existential condition, but also a dynamic driving force that stimulates spiritual dialogue and existential pursuit [12].

3.3. Dialogic development of core existential paradoxes

The profundity of the novel lies in its transformation of eternal existential paradoxes into concrete ideological conflicts among different subjective standpoints, which is mainly reflected in three aspects.

First, contingency and necessity. Trivial accidental events such as the door Z pushed open in childhood and C's unexpected physical injury profoundly shape their life trajectories. By repeatedly hypothesizing alternative life paths, the narrator opens up possibilities of fate and maintains ongoing dialogue and interrogation with established realistic necessity [8].

Second, difference and equality. This is the ideological conflict running through the whole novel. Painter Z's belief in hierarchical difference stands in direct and irreconcilable opposition to teacher O's faith in universal equal love. Their marriage becomes the field where these two ideological standpoints clash fiercely. Meanwhile, C's anxiety about the qualification of love as a disabled person and politician WR's pursuit of institutional equality, join the grand debate over human ideals and realistic existence as different independent voices [5]. The novel never arbitrarily judges right or wrong, but fully presents conflicting standpoints to reveal the inherent complexity rooted in human nature.

Third, the spiritual and physical tension in love. Through the figure of poet L, the novel explores the internal contradiction between spiritual loyalty and diversified carnal desire in romantic relationships. L's extreme pursuit of sincerity exposes multiple conflicts between romantic ideals, social ethics and individual instincts. This thematic exploration unfolds amid multi-layered dialogues involving L's self-analysis, interpersonal interactions and the narrator's speculative comments [5].

4. Conclusion

Centered on Bakhtin's polyphonic novel theory, this paper comprehensively explores the polyphonic characteristics of *Notes on the Intangible* from two core dimensions: narrative structure and ideological connotation. By dissolving the absolute authority of traditional narration, constructing contrapuntal relationships between symbolic characters and restructuring the impression-based temporal and spatial order, the novel successfully shapes a multi-voice narrative structure dominated by equal dialogue. All profound discussions on existential propositions, such as disability experience, universal loneliness, and the contradiction between difference and equality, are unfolded through the spiritual confrontation and communication between different subjective consciousnesses, realizing a perfect integration of unique narrative form and in-depth philosophical speculation. This literary practice not only fully confirms the practical explanatory power of dialogism, but also highlights Tiesheng Shi's unique poetic pursuit of elevating personal life predicament into a universal exploration of human existence.

Nevertheless, this research still has room for further expansion in historical context correlation and multi-theoretical integration. Subsequent research can introduce existential philosophy and psychoanalytic criticism to reinterpret the core textual concepts such as otherness and memory. Future studies can also place *Notes on the Intangible* in the comparative vision of Chinese and foreign polyphonic literary creation, so as to further explore its unique ideological connotation and special literary historical status.

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