

Lu Xun and Liang Hong's Depictions of Hometowns in the Context of Reconstructing Rural China

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Abstract. Hometown is a core theme in Chinese literature. Over the past century of modernization, China's rural society has gone through two fundamental reconstructions of social order. Lu Xun recorded great rural changes through enlightening fictional novels, while Liang Hong used non-factual texts to document rural shifts. Lu Xun focused on the collapse of the spiritual order in early-modern rural China, while Liang Hong looked at the breakdown of the physical rural order in contemporary times. Though coming from the same cultural root, their writings take different paths and together create a literary picture of rural society across a hundred years. Taking rural reconstruction in old and new eras as the main thread, this paper analyzes the spiritual similarities and writing differences in their rural works from four aspects: historical background, character building, narrative style and value position. It compares Lu Xun's criticism of national character and ideological enlightenment shown in his typical characters with the grassroots survival struggles amid urban-rural transition reflected in Liang Hong's real-life cases. It explores the spiritual inheritance and changes of century-old rural literature, and offers a comparative reference for understanding its spiritual system and modern transformation.

Keywords: Rural reconstruction, Writing about one's hometown, Lu Xun, Liang Hong, Non-fiction literature

1. Introduction

Rural land forms the foundation of Chinese civilization. It is also a key field for Chinese literature to reflect society and think over human nature. During a hundred years of modernization, two-layer structural crises, spiritual and physical, have given birth to a rural-writing tradition with different styles yet shared inner spirits.

In the May-Fourth period, the fall of the feudal system and the enlightenment movement brought by the spread of Western ideas greatly shook the traditional ethical values in rural areas and left old-style villages in a spiritual vacuum. With vernacular novels such as *My Old Home* and *The New Year Sacrifice*, Lu Xun built critical rural narratives. He looked back at his hometown from an enlightening viewpoint, exposing how feudal rules chained human nature and twisted people's minds. He set the "enlightenment and criticism" tone for modern rural literature.

Entering the 21st century, market economy and urbanization have completely reshaped traditional farming civilization. Empty-village phenomena, broken families, fading human bonds and lost local culture have become common realities. Scholar-writer Liang Hong records real-life conditions of modern villages in her non-fiction works *China in Liangzhuang* and *Leaving Liangzhuang*. She focuses on the sufferings of left-behind people and those drifting between cities and villages, creating a sympathetic documentary writing model for rural literature in the new century.

Up to now, plenty of targeted studies have been done on Lu Xun's enlightening rural narratives and Liang Hong's non-fiction rural writings. Still, systematic comparative research across different times and literary forms remains insufficient. In particular, few studies carry out comparative analysis based on the core framework of "the century-long reconstruction of rural order". This paper first analyzes the backgrounds of different rural crises in old and new times to find out why the two writers paint such different rural images. It then compares their narrative skills, character creation and value positions to show how rural literature shares origins while developing in different directions. It tries to make clear the inheritance and innovation within a hundred years of rural-themed writing.

2. Era-specific differences in rural transformation

2.1. Differences between the two generations rural crises

The fundamental differences between Lu Xun's and Liang Hong's hometown-themed writings come from the huge gaps between the rural crises of their two eras.

The modern-era rural crisis stemmed from the decay and collapse of traditional order under outside influences. Imperial power, the scholar-gentry class and clan organizations were the three major bonds holding traditional rural China together, and they fell apart under the impact of Western ideas spreading east after the Opium War [1]. The end of the imperial examination system stripped scholar-gentry elites of their institutional foundation. The 1911 Revolution brought imperial rule to an end, yet it failed to change life for ordinary people. Warlord conflicts and heavy taxes made grassroots suffering even worse. Modern enlightening ideas only circulated among city intellectuals and could not reach rural communities. In *My Old Home*, the line "many children, famine, heavy taxes, soldiers, bandits, officials and local tyrants" sums up the seven-fold pressure borne by farmers in the old society [2]. Clan authority built on blood ties kept growing weaker. Large numbers of educated rural elites moved to cities, paralyzing clan-run management, moral education and public services in villages. Old clan rules and ancestral teachings gradually lost their power over villagers. Long-term feudal moral control, class oppression and grinding poverty left local people spiritually numb and morally distorted. Without shared values, they fell into spiritual emptiness, forming the group of ignorant, obedient rural people seen in Lu Xun's works.

The new-century rural crisis arises from the powerful force of urbanization, which brings about the overall fading-away of rural civilization. Traditional rural life centered on multi-generation families living together and passing down farming and scholarly traditions. Urbanization shattered this pattern. Large numbers of young and middle-aged labourers left villages, leading to hollowed-out and ageing rural communities. Economically, the old farming-and-scholar tradition broke down; farming shrank and large areas of land were left untended. Culturally, folk customs faded and human connections grew cold, putting the physical rural homeland at risk of disappearing. Millions of migrant workers find themselves stuck in an awkward position: "They cannot return to

their hometowns, nor can they fit into cities". Left-behind residents suffer from broken families and emotional loss [3].

At the heart of modern-era rural hardship lay the total decline of people's spirits, ethics and human nature. This historical background explains why Lu Xun centered his writing on spiritual criticism. His hometown-related works respond directly to the spiritual breakdown of rural society. He viewed his native land as an outsider living away from home, and used fictional characters and plots to magnify the spiritual illnesses of his age. He hoped to awaken ordinary people and rebuild rural spiritual values [4].

The core of today's rural crisis is that villages are no longer closed, self-reliant spiritual communities. Instead, they have become physical spaces steadily swallowed up by modernization. Liang Hong aims to record and expose the physical disappearance of rural China, so as to draw public attention to rural problems. She faces reality through documentary writing, and tries to preserve in words the struggles of ordinary people as the physical rural world falls apart.

3. Cross-temporal and cross-spatial comparison of traditional and contemporary local figures

People are the most vivid driving force behind changes in rural society. Writers' depictions of ordinary grassroots individuals essentially give concrete form to the rural crises of their times. Lu Xun wrote about hometowns through realistic fiction and created a set of typical lower-class characters, who stand for different spiritual troubles among rural people in the old days. Liang Hong turns to non-fiction to record rural life. Using real-life people, events and experiences, she documents the collapse of physical rural communities and the hardships of displaced people amid urbanization, building a brand-new documentary narrative for rural literature in the new century, which is greatly different from Lu Xun's style. This chapter picks three pairs of comparable characters to tell apart the gaps between their writing modes. It sums up the general artistic features of hometown-themed writing and shows how rural order has been reconstructed across old and new times.

3.1. Luntou and fifth auntie

Land sits at the heart of traditional rural society. It is not only a resource for farming, but also carries clan values and people's spiritual beliefs [5]. Under the feudal land system, Runtu spent his whole life tied to the land, trapped by old social rules as well as farm work. In modern times, the old custom of sticking to one's hometown can no longer hold true. Farming is no longer a steady way to make a living. Even though farmers still work the land, they can no longer find a sense of identity or spiritual home, and get stuck in many hard troubles.

In *My Old Home*, the writer creates two different pictures of hometown by comparing past and present. Young Runtu stands for a beautiful countryside untouched by cruel old rules, and shows warm, equal relationships between people. Grown up Runtu, beaten down by hunger, wars and strict social ranks, becomes dull and lifeless. His sad story reflects the shared fate of ordinary farmers in that age. The feudal land system and all kinds of pressure took away people's energy and will to fight back. It broke the kind, helpful spirit of village life, showing the poor people's sad situation — people felt sorry for their misfortune, yet upset by their lack of resistance.

Grandma Wu stands for the elderly left behind villagers. Her children work in cities year round, so she takes care of the young family members all by herself. After her grandson drowns, she lives beside the river to mourn him. Through this character, Liang Hong points out modern day rural problems. Urbanization takes away villages' people and culture. The spiritual culture built around

land falls apart. Warm connections among villagers disappear. People become lonely, which harms their mental and physical health. Older farmers love their hometown deeply, yet they have to face fading villages and separated families. Grandma Wu's pain shows the loss of population and warm human ties in today's countryside, and reveals how city expansion damages the gentle values of old rural life.

Runtu's tragedy comes from the mental chains of the feudal system, while Grandma Wu's suffering results from modern social changes. As old rural values disappear, the whole rural world falls into decline. From Lu Xun's Runtu to Liang Hong's Grandma Wu, the lives of these two generations of farmers show how China's rural crisis has changed. Farmers' mental troubles shift from numbness caused by feudal pressure to the gradual loss of rural spiritual beliefs and local customs brought by unbalanced city country development.

3.2. Xianglin sao and chunmei

From Xianglin's Wife in *The New Year Sacrifice* to Chunmei in China in Liangzhuang, these two generations of rural women fought against gender rules of their times and died in the end. Xianglin's Wife was destroyed by feudal customs, old religious beliefs and men-centered power together. Her death proved how the old social order "destroyed people". Chunmei slowly broke down and died because of broken families and inner emptiness caused by people moving between cities and villages. She became a silent price for social change.

The New-Year Sacrifice was the most important custom in Luzhen. It stood for the spiritual rules of feudal villages. Trained by old beliefs and social rules, Xianglin's Wife wanted to be a "normal person" accepted by the old world. The peaceful festival stood in sharp contrast to her sad story. She was finally pushed to death by the cold-hearted villagers of Luzhen, which showed how people had lost their feelings. Her tragedy shows how harmful the old rural spiritual order could be. Through this character, Lu Xun showed the cruel side of old customs and criticized the village people's shared ignorance and coldness.

Chunmei stands for the sad fate of left-behind women in today's countryside. Her life is similar to that of millions of such women. Her husband worked in cities far away year after year. She stayed in the village alone, tied down by family work and village life. With no one to comfort her, she suffered heavy mental stress. She was not controlled by old feudal rules, yet she killed herself and became a victim of the spiritually empty countryside. No single person was to blame for Chunmei's death. It came from many pressures such as family separation and inner loneliness. Her death echoes Xianglin's Wife's story: after these women died, society kept running as usual. The deaths of poor women could not change the existing social rules and would soon be forgotten by time [6].

Both Xianglin's Wife and Chunmei show the common tragedy of rural women in different ages. They died because of pressure from social systems. Neither could change the established order. They were only silent costs of social shifts, and their stories show women's long-time sufferings in China's countryside over one hundred years.

3.3. Ah Q and uncle guangliang

When social order changes sharply, ordinary working people bear the direct pain of the times. Their living situations show how stable rural social order is. From Ah Q to the migrant workers of Liangzhuang in *Leaving Liangzhuang* two generations of poor people living on society's edge are trapped between different systems. Ah Q fooled himself with his "spirit-victory method" and was destroyed in the end. Migrant workers like Uncle Guangliang live in a twisted time of city-country

transition. They earn money through hard physical work and suffer from broken-up self-identity. Both groups are poor outsiders without steady lives or a voice of their own. They suffer from social pressure passively and become the sacrificed people. The differences in their lives show the one-hundred-year change of villages: spiritual homes turning empty, and real-world hometowns falling into ruin.

After the 1911 Revolution, the breakdown of social order caused mental damage among common people like Ah Q. Ah Q stands for the deep-seated bad habits of people in old China. When rural spiritual order fell into chaos, ordinary villagers lost their sense of right and wrong. Unable to change reality, they escaped into daydreams. His meaningless death proves that mental numbness can be worse than material poverty. For people in modern-day countryside, taking migrant jobs is mostly a forced choice brought by survival pressure [7]. Uncle Guangliang is a tragic example of these migrant workers. For many years, he did dangerous and poisonous work with no safety protection. He wore out his health just to make a living and later got sick and injured. Factories took advantage of workers and blocked ways for them to fight for their rights. Left with no help, he could only bear everything and got no legal protection.

Uncle Guangliang's life shows the hard reality for modern rural workers. Stuck between cities and villages, they can neither move ahead nor go back. Cities welcome their labour but will not accept them as real city residents. They are always outsiders on the edge of city life. Unlike Ah Q's foolish numbness, these workers clearly understand their low social position. They do not use the "spirit-victory method". They work hard yet cannot get a stable life, and can only drift back and forth between cities and villages [8].

3.4. Enlightener and recorder

Differences in creative goals mark the key divide between fictional and non-fictional literature, and shape how Lu Xun and Liang Hong portray characters differently. Lu Xun shapes characters to serve his core themes. He uses typical fictional writing to create symbolic figures that highlight social problems of his era. Aiming to enlighten the public and criticize national weaknesses, he sympathizes with grassroots suffering while exploring the institutional and spiritual roots behind such pain. His typical characters represent groups of people and reflect the shared spiritual features of their times.

In contrast, Liang Hong's non-fiction writing respects the true nature of real people. Her themes emerge naturally from authentic individual experiences. She preserves full and genuine personalities, presenting vivid, independent individuals instead of symbolic images. With sincere empathy and compassion, she shows the real face of rural life and reflects widespread group hardships, making her writing warm and touching. This method follows the core principle of non-fiction: restoring real life and ensuring narrative authenticity.

The contrast between the two writing styles reveals the evolution of rural literature over the past century — shifting from ideological enlightenment and social criticism to realistic recording and humane compassion.

4. The spiritual commonality between two generations of rural literature writing

Across a hundred years of time, Lu Xun's and Liang Hong's hometown-themed writings share the same human-centered spirit, forming the spiritual heritage of century-old rural literature. Both writers care about people's real-life conditions, show deep sympathy for rural land and ordinary

grassroots lives, and take on intellectuals' social duties. Together they record the crisis of rural civilization and trace the hundred-year course of traditional rural society.

4.1. Land attachment

Hometown is the spiritual home for Chinese people, with blood-bonded emotional ties that can hardly be broken. As Liang Hong puts it, her personal feelings about China's countryside form the starting point of her thinking, and shape how much weight land carries in her world view. Both Lu Xun and Liang Hong hold the feeling of "deep love mixed with sharp pain" toward their hometowns. Behind their criticism and records of suffering lies their deepest attachment to native land.

Shaoxing, Lu Xun's hometown, stayed inseparable from him all his life. *In My Old Home*, he feels sad about the run-down real-world hometown and villagers' mental numbness, while recalling the beautiful countryside of his childhood. His sharp criticism is not meant to reject rural areas. Instead, it carries his hopes for his hometown and the nation's future. Giving up comfortable city life, Liang Hong travels and writes as a daughter of Liangzhuang. She writes a biography for the village and captures its present-day look. Basically, she tries to hold on to the fading homeland and protect the broken rural cultural roots with words.

Lu Xun grieves over the fall of the spiritual countryside, while Liang Hong laments the disappearance of physical rural homes. Though their forms of expression differ, they share the same inner feelings. Both regard hometown as the foundation of national culture and personal spirit, and refuse to see native land collapse completely amid social changes.

4.2. Life care

China's hundred-year-long rural literature sticks to the core idea of putting people first. Social changes finally show in the life experiences of ordinary rural people. Both Lu Xun and Liang Hong focus on poor rural groups. They use ordinary people's life stories to show what their times are really like and pass on human care [9].

Lu Xun's rural writings center on ordinary people's spiritual tragedies. He describes the pain and pressure rural folks go through during social changes. He shows the sad fates of common people trapped by the feudal system. He thinks about the whole age through individual lives, and believes ordinary people's mental awakening is the key to national progress. Liang Hong writes about vulnerable groups such as left-behind old people and rural women. She keeps speaking for rural ordinary people. She shows their daily lives, sufferings and real wishes to the public, so people can see their struggles and helplessness.

To understand the countryside and its times, we first need to understand the people living there. Though themes change with time, both writers keep caring about ordinary weak rural residents. This steady focus on common people gives these century-old rural writings warm and solid power.

4.3. Contemporary reflections amidst the civilizational crisis

Modernization often brings painful changes to old-time traditions. Even so, it remains the main driving force for social progress in modern China. Lu Xun and Liang Hong look into cultural troubles caused by modernization from different standpoints [10]. Their works show the social duty and human care of intellectuals.

To Lu Xun, changing only social rules cannot build a complete spiritual culture. In that case, modernization will stay nothing more than outer appearances. So he called for people's mental awakening, hoping to break the mental chains on ordinary folks. His thoughts focused on repairing and rebuilding modern-day spiritual culture, and offered real spiritual support for China's modern development [11].

Liang Hong mainly thinks about how villages and local culture fade away. She says rural culture makes up a key part of Chinese civilization, and villages pass down old traditions. If we let villages lose people and break local cultural links, our nation will lose important cultural roots [12]. She writes down real-life rural conditions. She calls on people to face rural hardships and protect traditional farming culture. She hopes modern development and the survival of rural culture can move forward together.

Though one hundred years apart, their ideas match each other. Cultural progress needs both tradition and new changes. Such worries about the times push their hometown-related writings past simple literature, and give them long-lasting thought value [13].

5. Conclusion

Lu Xun and Liang Hong's writings about countryside across different times record China's rural changes over one hundred years. These works carry both literary value and real-world meaning. In literature, they push rural writing from fictional criticism and enlightenment to real-life non-fiction records. They broaden the creative space of rural literature and keep its old writing tradition alive. In real-world practice, Lu Xun shows how important people's minds are for social progress. Liang Hong truthfully describes modern-day rural troubles, offering written references for rural construction.

From Lu Xun's criticism of old-time rural spiritual chaos to Liang Hong's records of present-day countryside, these century-long writings show how villages fell apart — first in people's inner world, then in real life. The two writers lived in different ages and used different writing forms, yet they both stick to human-oriented values and take on social duties. Lu Xun points out mental problems in old rural communities. Liang Hong writes down real troubles during city-country social shifts. Together their works lay out the whole development path of China's hundred-year rural literature. Reading their works again can give us some useful ideas for rebuilding today's rural culture.

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