

Tavern, Road, Moon: A Comparative Study of the Use of Imagery in the Novels of Lu Xun and Wang Zengqi

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Abstract: The imagery in the novels of Lu Xun and Wang Zengqi frequently overlaps. This paper selects the three common images of “tavern,” “road,” and “moon” for comparison, aiming to analyze the unique emotions and deeper meanings each image carries in the works of these two writers. Lu Xun’s novel writing is bold in its innovation, breaking free from the constraints of traditional frameworks, with most of his imagery reflecting and bearing the significance of the times, together constructing a literary world that profoundly reflects social realities and human nature. Inspired by Lu Xun, Wang Zengqi’s novel writing follows a path that returns to the ordinary, pursuing the beauty of harmony. The imagery in Wang Zengqi’s novels embodies a love for life, fulfilling his creative ideal of “bringing warmth to the human world” and his persistent pursuit of expressing the beauty of human nature.

Keywords: Lu Xun, Wang Zengqi, novel, imagery.

1. Introduction

Lu Xun’s novel language combines vernacular with classical Chinese, taking “enlightenment” and “character building” as its mission. His literary works are profound in thought, carrying a strong sense of social responsibility and mission. This pioneering stance and spirit of enlightenment in his novel writing have continuously inspired later writers. This literary philosophy led him to emphasize reflecting social realities in his creations. Wang Zengqi, in some of his works, mentioned that he was inspired by the linguistic artistry of Lu Xun’s novels.

Imagery can be classified in various ways. The “tavern,” “road,” and “moon” respectively represent social imagery, temporal-spatial imagery, and natural imagery. These three representative images provide us with a unique perspective to analyze the distinct understanding and emotional investment that Lu Xun and Wang Zengqi bring to these shared elements in their novel writing. In Wang Zengqi’s novels, these images often contain the everyday colors of ordinary people, returning to a profound insight and depiction of the essential meanings of life.

2. A Comparative Study of the Imagery of the “Tavern”

In modern literary works, it is common to use public spaces such as taverns and teahouses as settings to depict and focus on diverse social groups, where various cultural ideas converge and clash. This is especially evident in Lu Xun’s writings. His “Xianheng Tavern,” “Yishiju Tavern,” “Maoyuan

Tavern,” and “Hua Family Teahouse,” among others, all serve as public spaces that carry profound social significance. These taverns are not merely stages for the characters’ activities but also act as mediums through which the author deeply observes and critiques the times and society.

In Kong Yiji, the name “Xianheng” of Xianheng Tavern is derived from the Tuan Zhuan on the Kun Hexagram in the Book of Changes, which states: “The earth is thick and bears all things, its virtue is vast and boundless; it contains and supports, and all things prosper.” This implies harmony, prosperity, smoothness, and auspiciousness. However, this positive connotation starkly contrasts with and ironically underscores Kong Yiji’s tragic fate in the novel, turning the tavern into a literary space rich in symbolic meaning. Xianheng Tavern is a place Kong Yiji frequents and witnesses his life’s tragedy. As a traditional intellectual of humble status, penniless and living in destitution, Kong Yiji becomes an outcast in Xianheng Tavern. The indifference and even mockery from the tavern owner and staff, along with the customers’ behavior of using him as a source of amusement, make Xianheng Tavern a microcosm of society at the time. Through constructing this space, Lu Xun aimed to explore remedies for the nation’s ills and fulfill his mission of enlightenment. By setting the scene in Xianheng Tavern, Lu Xun skillfully uses irony to vividly portray Kong Yiji’s life tragedy. Kong Yiji’s plight becomes a microcosm of the fate of traditional Chinese intellectuals in modern times. Simultaneously, this setting profoundly reflects the various social maladies and contradictions of the time, making the novel’s theme more distinct and profound [1].

However, in Wang Zengqi’s literary world, the element of the tavern takes on a completely different aspect. In *Anle Ju*, a representative novel, the tavern does not bear the weighty social significance seen in Lu Xun’s works. Instead, it returns to the most fundamental and simple level, where the imagery of the tavern becomes a symbol of the humble and everyday life of ordinary people. The tavern in *Anle Ju* is neither overly embellished nor dramatized; everything is straightforward and pure. Whether it is the characters, the food, or the drinks, they all exhibit a state of natural simplicity derived from everyday life. This simplicity and purity not only make the tavern more realistic and believable but also allow the readers to focus more on experiencing the characters and emotions. The imagery of the tavern also appears in *The Three Friends of Winter* with “Ruyi Tavern” and in *The Old Man Who Collected Waste Paper* with “Liu’s Roasted Meat,” continuing this same direction. In Wang Zengqi’s works, the tavern is not intended to reveal profound social realities; it is merely a place where drinkers can relax, unwind, and enjoy everyday pleasures. The tavern becomes a part of the daily life of city dwellers, where they savor inexpensive food and drink, and these ordinary details contribute to the calm and peace in their lives.

The construction of the tavern imagery in Wang Zengqi’s novels reflects a deep appreciation and love for daily life. He believes that it is these seemingly trivial and ordinary aspects of daily life that constitute the essence and beauty of life. In the tavern, people can reconcile with the burdens of life and find spiritual freedom in the harmony of the everyday. This celebration and love for ordinary life turn Wang Zengqi’s taverns into poetic and beautiful literary spaces. The depiction of the tavern does not strive for grand narratives or profound exploration of its underlying social significance, but rather focuses on the everyday lives of the citizens, thus presenting the simplicity and reality of people within the tavern [2]. Although these taverns may not serve as microcosms or typical representations of modern society, it is precisely this ordinariness and everydayness that more authentically reflect people’s daily behaviors and living conditions, where they interact, share snippets of life, and navigate the entanglements of emotions. Through his delicate writing, Wang Zengqi vividly portrays this interpersonal emotion and local sentiment, and this sense of daily life and populism allows readers to quickly resonate, deeply feeling the warmth found in the little things in life.

3. A Comparative Study of the Imagery of the “Road”

In both Lu Xun's and Wang Zengqi's works, the “road” is often used as a metaphor for the trajectory of life. Whether long or short, wide or narrow, smooth or rough, roads symbolize different stages and experiences in life. In Lu Xun's works, the “road” is frequently closely linked to social change, as seen in the streets of Medicine and the platform in Peking Street Scene, reflecting the social landscape and the state of people's lives at that time. In contrast, the “road” in Wang Zengqi's works is not grand or epic but rather the ordinary road closely connected to the daily lives of the citizens. Although Wang Zengqi's works focus more on daily life and human relationships, the characters and scenes in his stories also indirectly reflect social changes and the characteristics of the times. Both writers use the “road” to portray the difficulties and struggles that characters face in life. Whether it is the peasants and intellectuals in Lu Xun's writings or the ordinary people in Wang Zengqi's stories, they all experience various challenges and hardships on their respective roads. Both authors skillfully use symbolism and metaphor to enrich the meaning of the “road,” using this concrete symbol to convey more abstract ideas and emotions.

In Lu Xun's classic work *Hometown*, the imagery of the “road” is repeatedly mentioned. It not only carries the text's optimistic and hopeful meaning but also deeply reflects the light of hope that Lu Xun draws from the reverse aesthetic implications of the road, achieving self-redemption and rebirth in adversity. The “road” in Lu Xun's works is closely tied to the fate of his characters, such as the friendship between Hong'er and Shuisheng, symbolizing hope and longing for the future. In *Hometown*, the imagery of the “road” is often depicted through specific scenes and plots, such as the “gray-white road,” allowing readers to intuitively grasp its symbolic significance [3]. In contrast, Wang Zengqi in *Lost Way* focuses more on portraying the imagery of the “road” through the characters' inner monologues and psychological activities, enabling readers to gain a deeper understanding of the characters' inner world and emotional changes. The “road” in Wang Zengqi's novels clearly reflects the characters' fate and life choices. Through the characters' loss and search on the road, he reveals their inner world and life philosophy.

Additionally, Wang Zengqi excels at using vivid natural descriptions to portray the natural landscapes and cultural characteristics of different regions and seasons. When depicting the “road,” he often places it within a harmonious and serene natural environment, allowing readers to feel a sense of tranquility and beauty. For example, in *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, he describes the natural scenery around Biqi Temple, such as the reeds, the purple-gray reed tassels, and the green duckweed, creating a fresh, otherworldly, and peaceful rural setting [4]. This portrayal of the natural environment not only provides a backdrop for the “road” but also fosters a harmonious atmosphere within the work.

Wang Zengqi's narrative style often seeks a natural, smooth, and spontaneous flow. He uses the imagery of the “road” to link the story together, giving the entire work a harmonious and tranquil tone. For instance, in *A Tale of Big Nur*, he describes the natural scenery of Big Nur and the lifestyle of the people living by the water, naturally leading the story to the readers. He also uses the “road” to connect different characters and events, making the entire story appear cohesive and unified.

4. A Comparative Study of the Imagery of the “Moon”

In the tradition of Chinese literature, the moon is often a natural object through which poets and writers express emotions and ideals. Throughout the development of literature, both Lu Xun and Wang Zengqi continued the classical use of the “moon” in their novels, drawing from and transforming Chinese literary traditions in their creative work. They deeply understood and skillfully inherited the essence of ancient poetic creation, not only drawing inspiration from the vast ocean of

ancient poetry but also, in the face of the changing tides of their times, endowing this ancient symbol with new life and meaning through their unique perspectives and profound emotions.

In Lu Xun's works, the "moon" is often imbued with a cold and severe tone, reflecting deep social conflicts and the complexities of human relationships. With his sharp prose, Lu Xun exposed the darker aspects of society and revealed the complexities of human nature, making the "moon" a symbol where social criticism and humanistic concern intertwine. In Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman*, the "moon" carries multiple layers of meaning. Firstly, it represents the changes and revelations in the character's inner world, with the changing moonlight reflecting the protagonist's complex and contradictory emotions. Secondly, the moonlight symbolizes a critique and reflection on the realities of society, highlighting its hypocrisy and the individual's suffering. Lastly, the moonlight also offers the protagonist a sense of hope and salvation, serving as a glimmer of light in his otherwise maddening existence.

Moonlight is also employed in the novel to create a bleak and desolate atmosphere. This atmosphere not only enhances the novel's readability and emotional impact but also profoundly reveals the harsh and unforgiving nature of social realities. Under the illumination of the moonlight, the darker sides of society are magnified, allowing the reader to deeply sense the protagonist's fear and despair.

Moonlight often reflects the protagonist's inner fears and struggles within the novel. In the oppressive social environment, the protagonist feels like a solitary figure under the moonlight, facing the threat of being "eaten." This fear and struggle not only depict the protagonist's psychological state but also imply the widespread spiritual crisis and moral decay of the time. Under the moonlight's glow, the protagonist gradually becomes aware of the absurdity and hypocrisy of society and begins to entertain thoughts of resistance. The moonlight acts as a catalyst for his rational awakening, sparking his criticism of feudal ethics and his reflection on societal realities. Through the protagonist's awakening and resistance, the novel expresses a desire for social change and a pursuit of human liberation.

The moonlight is not only used to describe the inner world but also to expose the ugliness and absurdity of society. Lu Xun contrasts the coldness of the moonlight with the protagonist's madness, highlighting the hypocrisy of society and the individual's suffering. The moonlight also symbolizes the decline of feudal ethics. For instance, the text mentions, "I haven't seen this moonlight for over thirty years [5], seeing it today invigorates me." Here, the "moonlight" might suggest changes in the social environment and the weakening of feudal ethics. Typically regarded as a symbol of light and hope, in Lu Xun's writing, it is used to reveal the dark aspects of society. By contrasting the brightness of the moonlight with the cruelty of reality, Lu Xun criticizes the distortion and oppression of human nature by feudal ethics, as well as the injustices of society.

In contrast, the "moon" in Wang Zengqi's works presents a different aspect. Wang Zengqi, with his uniquely poetic and prose-like language, integrates the moon into everyday life. In his writing, the "moon" is not only a celebration of the beauty of nature but also a tribute to the brilliance of human nature and the goodness of life. In Wang Zengqi's *A Tale of Big Nur*, the "moon" initially evokes a sense of lightness, suspension, tranquility, and allure. Wang Zengqi uses the moon as a scenic element to lighten the weight of the narrative content, making the burdens of reality more bearable. With skillful use of the moon's imagery, he presents a heavy real-life story with a light touch, thereby dissolving the tragedy of love.

In Wang Zengqi's depiction, the moon becomes a symbol of love. When Qiaoyun and Shiyi find themselves amidst the reeds on the sandbar, the description of the moon replaces detailed narrative, symbolizing the sublimation of their emotions and the union of their bodies. This metaphor infuses the entire scene with poetry and beauty, leaving the reader with boundless imaginative space. The moon also reflects Qiaoyun's psychological and emotional changes throughout the story. From the

initial fear and helplessness after falling into the water, to the gratitude and dependence upon being rescued by Shiyi, and finally to the relief and satisfaction after their union, Qiaoyun's emotional journey is closely intertwined with the portrayal of the moon. The waxing and waning of the moon seem to subtly hint at the fluctuations in the characters' fates and emotional upheavals.

Wang Zengqi uses the moon as a guide for plot transitions, enhancing the aesthetic connotations of the story through its imagery. In contrast, Lu Xun uses the transformation of moonlight to reveal the protagonist's inner world and the social realities they face. He contrasts the moonlight with the protagonist's madness, thereby heightening the story's impact and expressiveness.

In both Wang Zengqi's *A Tale of Big Nur* and Lu Xun's *A Madman's Diary*, the use of moon imagery is ingenious, though their focuses differ. Wang Zengqi emphasizes the creation of a light, beautiful atmosphere through the moon, highlighting a longing for a pure world. On the other hand, Lu Xun focuses on using the changes in moonlight to reveal the inner turmoil of his characters and the social realities, reflecting the injustices of the time and the numbness of people towards the ideas of "eating" and "being eaten." The similarities and differences in their use of imagery reflect the distinct literary styles and ideological tendencies of the two authors.

5. Conclusion

Lu Xun was a pioneer and trailblazer of modern Chinese literature. His novels marked the beginning of the modernization of Chinese fiction and laid a solid foundation for its subsequent development. Lu Xun boldly innovated and explored novel forms, such as using a diary format in *A Madman's Diary*, breaking away from traditional narrative structures. His works integrated various techniques, including realism and symbolism, forming a distinctive artistic style that profoundly influenced the development of modern Chinese literature. Wang Zengqi, a significant figure in contemporary Chinese literature, played a pivotal role in bridging the past and future, and is regarded as one of the key representatives of prose fiction. His works are known for their fresh, natural, and elegant style. Wang Zengqi's novels not only continue the essence of traditional literature but also pioneer new literary styles and techniques. His fiction is characterized by unique aesthetic tastes and artistic charm, offering deep philosophical insights along with beautiful artistic forms and language styles. This diversity of aesthetic appeal has infused contemporary literature with new vitality. The works of both Lu Xun and Wang Zengqi embody the inheritance of national culture. Through the absorption, transformation, excavation, and recreation of traditional culture, they have showcased the cultural charm and spiritual ethos of the Chinese nation. These works have not only enriched the connotations and extensions of contemporary literature but also made significant contributions to the inheritance and development of national culture.

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