

Analysis of Space Narrative in Su Tong's *My Life as Emperor*

Lai Ningna

School of Chinese Studies and Exchange, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai 200083, China

Abstract: *Affected by personal life experiences, Su Tong can keenly have the feelings in different spaces, so his works have obvious spatial awareness. In writing My Life as Emperor, Su Tong used spatial narrative techniques to shape the two spaces of Pinzhou and the Xie Palace to express the theme of loneliness in life, and also told the state of reincarnation between the history and personal destiny through the circular space form.*

Keywords: *My Life as Emperor, the Xie Palace, Pinzhou, spatial form, space narrative*

1. Introduction

There is a clear sense of space in Su Tong's novels. Su Tong himself once wrote: "Space or location, when you give it life, it is alive, and even some kind of 'literary image'." which express his emphasis on space narrative. The space in the literary works is also the product of the author's unique life and experiences which is full of personal emotions, just like Lao She is obsessed with Beijing and Shen Congwen with Xiangxi. Hence, to analyze the space narrative of *My Life as Emperor*, we first need start with Su Tong's life experience to show the source of the space narrative in his works, and then gradually experience the spatial narrative characteristics formed in *My Life as Emperor* from Su Tong's personal space experience.

2. Su Tong's personal experience and space writing

Gaston Bachelard analyzed in "The Poetics of Space": Space is not only a place of stay in the physical sense, but also a dwelling place for human consciousness. Bachelard's spatial poetics unfolds the thinking and imagination of space from the perspective of phenomenology, constructing the poetics of dwelling space with existential significance.

Su Tong was born in a family of six in Suzhou in 1963. Both his parents are ordinary employees and live a very difficult life. Because of the poor earnings, the family gave Su Tong a noisy and invective environment. He once said, "What I often encounter is the dark and lengthy dusk. My parents yelled each other at home. My sister hid behind the door and sobbed while I under the eaves was looking at the long street and hurry-up passersby, with a sense of resentment after being injured in my heart." The gloomy atmosphere of "home" brought Su Tong's earliest space experience and had a great influence on Su Tong's creation in the future. In an interview, Su Tong once said, "A lot of times I was alone at home and lying in bed. At that time, I started to let my imagine run away with me. If I were to find the connection between my childhood life and my current career, this might be the most obvious incident." The impact of this kind of spatial experience is deeply rooted, so the original family of the protagonist in Su Tong's article often brings him the source of his madness and loneliness.

The "Qimenwai Street" in Suzhou City is also an important link in Su Tong's space experience. The experience of walking and living in this old street with hundreds years of history has brought Su Tong's understanding of the gentleness and elegance, which constitutes the "Xiang Chenshu Street" in his works. Suzhou's distinct Wu Nong's soft language and the smell of rain and wet are unique and feminine in the culture of the south of the Yangtze River. At the same time, the rotting branches and leaves, smelly rivers, and muddy streets in the humid climate of the south constitute a kind of sentimental and faded beauty. The graceful languidness and decadent aesthetics floating in the space of Jiangnan ancient town constitute the aesthetic style of Su Tong's novels. Growing up in Suzhou, Su Tong eventually settled in Nanjing. As the "Ancient Capital of the Six Dynasties", Nanjing has

experienced the ups and downs of the times. It is full of the gold powder atmosphere of the capital of the emperors, and also reveals the sense of corruption that has been ravaged by war, and the cultural atmosphere and rich history of Nanjing let it be infused with a sense of vicissitudes of life that represents the splendor and extravagance of the end of the prosperous age. Suzhou and Nanjing constitute the spatial memory of Su Tong's life. Under the influence of the atmosphere of these two cities, Su Tong's works have exquisite and soft language, graceful and gentle, but they have constructed a beautiful and decadent lost space.

These real material spaces, such as the depression and loneliness of the family space, and the femininity and decadence of the Suzhou and Nanjing spaces, are not a place for Su Tong to get rid of the dark tones of life. Su Tong has a special pursuit for the psychological world outside of the material, and he needs a fictitious space to release his own life state. He builds a free and magnificent spiritual space outside of the oppression of incomplete reality. Here, Su Tong will take personal emotions as the starting point to escape the lonely and compassionate reality that cannot be eliminated in life, and to involuntarily analyze the self-real pursuit of life. In Su Tong's articles, the obsession of the protagonist's memory is used as the expression point of this special spiritual space, which has become an important guide to guide the protagonist's behavior.

Su Tong's personal experiences have made him very sensitive to the existence of space. The nostalgia for the physical space of home, Suzhou and Nanjing, and the pursuit of spiritual space have become the spatial experiences that have had a profound impact on Su Tong. The spatial consciousness born under these experiences is finally integrated into Su Tong's narrative, making him complete the narrative in the way of space writing to convey the inner feelings full of Su Tong's characteristics.

3. Spiritual and physical space: the collision between the Xie Palace and Pinzhou

My Life as Emperor is a new historical novel by Su Tong, which shows the exploration of human nature and survival through the fictional Duanbai's life as an emperor. Obvious spatial narrative techniques appeared in this work, among which the Xie Palace and Pinzhou appeared the most. For exploring the space narrative in *My Life as Emperor*, it is necessary to complete the division of the spatial form of the Xie Palace and Pinzhou, and explain the functional role of these two spaces in narrative. Henri Lefebvre pointed out in *The Production of Space*: "We are concerned with three kinds of space: material, spiritual and social. These three kinds of space appear self-condemned in the unified critical theory, and they all exist in the form of isolated and scattered knowledge according to what he has observed." the Xie Palace and Pinzhou respectively represent the social space and spiritual space constructed by Su Tong for Duanbai.

Lefebvre believes that space has not only natural attributes, but also social attributes. "Any society and any mode of production will produce its own space." In contrast to the natural environment shaped by nature, the social behavior among people triggers social relations, thereby shaping a social space. "Social space is not only the field of behavior, but also the basis of behavior." From a narrative point of view, the formation of person characters and the development of their destiny are closely related to the current social environment.

In the novel, the palace of the Xie Empire is a space where Su Tong shows the degeneration of human desire and the collapse of ethics, and Duanbai is gradually depressed and mad in such a space. At the beginning of the story, the Xie Palace is an abyss of desires. The former concubines fight in the palace, Madame Meng comes to power and Dai Niang's hands are cut off; the new emperor, as a figurehead under the control of the queen mother, ascends the throne, and there are his brothers who are eager to snatch the throne behind him. What everyone sees is power and human feelings are left aside. Only the desire for power rules everything. Duanbai lives in such a space that he learns to use privileges to chase pleasure. He cuts off the tongue of the concubine in the cold palace, forcibly asks to see the private parts of Swallow's body, and exiles Duanwen Duanwu, but this indifferent and distorted environment eventually makes him feel bored in desire. The game in which Duanbai and Swallow exchange their identities in the western tour really makes Duanbai fear power for the first time. Everyone only recognized the person wearing the black panther dragon crown as the king, not the real Duanbai. The pursuit of power has separated the person itself from an individual, and it has become an identity and a symbol. In such a space of ethical collapse, Duanbai executed Li Yizhi with capital punishment, hoping to suppress the existence of desire with his crazy desire for power. However, the Xie Palace has already caged the entire group in the space, and Duanbai is unable to extricate himself from it after all.

"The Palace of the Xie empire" is the background of the story created by the author Su Tong. Under such a background, the author, through the perspective of the protagonist "I" who has the status of the emperor in the novel, pulls the reader into the author's fictional historical environment naturally, without a feeling of strangeness. On the other hand, "The Palace of the Xie empire" is the beginning of the story. The palace means mystery and dignity to the common people. It is a symbol of the emperor. However, that the palace is full of conspiracy, hypocrisy, greed and deceit is shown by the experience of "I" becoming the king of the Xie empire. Through the almost real portrayal of "the Palace", it has achieved the deconstruction and dissolution of "the Palace".

In the restraint of repressing social space, Duanbai cannot find the meaning of his existence, and his spiritual sustenance becomes a place where Duanbai releases his feelings and finds his true pursuit. In his writing, Su Tong gave such a spiritual space --- Pinzhou to Duanbai, so that he can pin his soul here. The carnival in Pinzhou makes Duanbai feel the warmth of the world, which is completely different from the existence of the gloomy palace, even though in Duanbai's narrative that "The impression of the carnival of the Laba Festival in Pinzhou left in my mind has been gradually diminishing." The human warmth in his memory of Pinzhou has become his lifelong pursuit. It is also his journey of atonement for escaping from the real space and heading to his spiritual space that he becomes the Emperor of Tightrope and goes to the Pinzhou Circus. Duanbai falls in love with Lady Hui, a girl representing Pinzhou in his heart, and takes her to the Xie Palace. It is a head-on confrontation between Pinzhou and the Xie Palace. Lady Hui described by Su Tong has to be sent away, which symbolizes the impossibility of integration of spiritual space to social space. Although spiritual space can bring relief, once it returns to reality, what remains is still an unsolvable proposition—dense loneliness and loss.

Compared with the single form of the palace, the space of the folk is diverse and open. "I" find myself again from folk. And "I" am no longer a puppet emperor at the mercy of others. "I" become the emperor of me, who is a real man with flesh and blood and life pursuit. In the life stage of the protagonist's escape, readers witnessed a geographical space full of fresh vitality along with the escaping experiences of the protagonist "I". These "moving locations" are extremely meaningful for showing the protagonist's psychological state at different times.

4. The circular space form: the fate under the cycle of history

Joseph Frank first proposed the concept of "spatial form" in *Spatial Form in Modern Literature*. Frank believed that traditional narratives should obey time and causality, and the plot needs to be unfolded in a certain order. Works such as *Reminiscence of the Years* and *Ulysses* juxtapose images, words, sentences, and thoughts in the text. Such spatial effects are called "spatial forms". The circular space form is one of them. Long Diyong's *A Study of Spatial Narrative* borrowed *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to explain it, thinking "no matter how the novel writes that this past 'passes', that it will eventually return to 'future' is the beginning of the novel. So, the structure of the novel forms a time circle." , which expresses an eternal theme of cycle. In *My Life as Emperor*, Su Tong also uses a circular spatial narrative form to show the cycle of history and personal destiny and the spiritual loneliness that the individual cannot escape.

At the beginning of the story, Duanbai walks into the throne in the turbulent dynasty and opens up a new political pattern. A few years later, it is overthrown by Duanwen and another new pattern appears. In the end, Peng state conquers the new-born dynasty. Even though the story covers the incidents such as the western tour, the marriage of Peng state, Duanwen's departure, Duanbai's expulsion from the royal family and drift in some folk places, these small incidents are like stones in the river, which can separate the water flow, but cannot change the direction of the river. There have been two establishments of new dynasties and three overturns of dynasties, and finally returning to the starting point of the regime. Through these, Su Tong shows readers that the overall trajectory of history is still operating in the mode of establishment-overturning-establishment, as if it is endless reincarnation.

Under the cycle of history, personal destiny cannot escape either. Although a single individual possesses a variety of complex emotions and personality characteristics, once the social space in which they are located has similarities, the individual will gradually move towards similar endings due to their own identity when they are affected by the space. Dai Niang is chopped off by Madame Meng because of her good pipe. Later, Lady Hui is framed to give birth to a dead fox due to the emperor's love. Madame Yang is forcibly strangled to death for questioning that the former emperor's edict, and later the concubine Han is kicked to death, because she is pregnant and avoid hanging herself for protecting her baby. The women in the Xie Palace have their own characteristics, but the ending is the same. For

ordinary people, the leader of Peng state, Shaomian, occupies the Xie Empire, which has shocked people just for a short time. Soon after, "the residents of Changzhou are now dressed in cumbersome and bloated clothes of Peng state." "People look tired and indifferent." Under the social space shaped by history, personal destiny and status have been tightly bound together, which is called a link in the reincarnation destiny. As Duanbai said, "I have dreamed of Duanwen countless times... find that both of them are deceived people who have been fooled by history."

Duanbai discovers personal destiny uncontrollable and full of lonely, and always wants to break the barrier to find his own spiritual world, but in fact, although he is hating the Xie Palace, he completes to form Tightrope Emperor Traveling Circus when he become a commoner in Pinzhou. Then he chooses to go to Xiejing, which is a request made by Yusuo, but it would not have been possible if he had not wanted it. Duanbai has been looking for spiritual salvation, but his life has already been marked by loneliness because of his living habits, which has become an inseparable part of his personal life. At the end, Duanbai finally leaves Xiejing to study at Bitter Bamboo Monastery, which seems that he has found a place for his life. Compared with the fact that Duanbai goes to the Xie Palace from the study at the beginning of the story, he just returns to the original point, and his loneliness cannot be insoluble to the end.

The novel tells the life experience of an emperor. Time is sequential, but space is circular. "I" was born in Beijing, and was crowned in Beijing. Later, "I" left the capital and began a life of escape, but fate allowed "me" to return to the capital to perform acrobatics. "I" witnessed the death of Swallow and others. Also, "I" witnessed the destruction of the Xie empire by Peng state in the capital. Born in the place where I grew up, "I" spent my time as an emperor in a place full of joy and sorrow, and in the end all was completely destroyed. The story seems to have returned to the original point. The young "I" was studying at Jinshantang, and the later "I" was studying at Bitter Bamboo Monastery. The same "The Analects" has a different mood. Su Tong's use of this "circular space form" actually conveys his historical outlook and values by narrating the experience of the protagonist in the novel. With the help of the protagonist's ups and downs in life, and the large number of joys and sorrows the author experienced, what he actually wants to express, through the mouth of the protagonist of the novel, is that the laws of history are unsearchable, and that the insignificant individuals in the torrent of history will never be able to achieve true freedom before the gears of fate turn, and will always be carried away by the times. This is also Su Tong's search for the eternal dilemma facing the destiny of mankind.

5. Conclusion

Su Tong wrote in the preface of *My Life as Emperor*, "I am obsessed with the destiny of the characters' turbulence, just because I am often surprised and intimidated by the impermanence of life and history." Such a spatial narrative method tells personal destiny under the historical reincarnation can only repeat, and the loneliness and loss that cannot break through destiny are unavoidable pains in life. Su Tong hides his unique life experience in his spatial narrative creation, dissecting human nature through narrative, and "unlimited use of the power of human and human nature to open up the wrinkles between the life and the spiritual world". This kind of expression style and consciousness finally makes *My Life as Emperor* present a unique literary world.

References

- [1] Gaston Bachelard. Translated by Zhang Yijing. *The Poetics of Space*. Shanghai Educational Publishing House, 2009.P11
- [2] Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space, in Modernity and the Production of Space*, Bao Yaming . Shanghai Educational Publishing House, 2003.P87
- [3] Joseph Frank. *Spatial Form in Modern Literature*. Peking University Press, 1991.P2
- [4] Long Diyong. *A Study of Spatial Narrative*. SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2015.P93
- [5] Zhu Liyuan. *Contemporary Western Literary Theories (the Second Edition)*. East China Normal University Press, 2005.P489
- [6] Su Tong. *The Secret of the River*. The Writers Publishing House, 2009.P71
- [7] Su Tong, Fu Xiaoping. *I Firmly Believe that the Whole World can be Moved to Xiang Chenshu Street*. Yellow River Literature, 2013.10
- [8] Zhou Xinmin. *Su Tong. Opening the Wrinkles of Human Nature - an Interview with Su Tong*. Novel Review, 2004.2.P28
- [9] Jiang Guangping. *Listen Carefully to the Sound of the World - Dialogue with Su Tong*". *Literature Education (Middle)*, 2010.1