

Lin Zhao's narrative of Lingnan

Yuxuan Song

University of Hong Kong, Chinese
Studies, Hong Kong, China
Email: hin322hk@gmail.com

Abstract:

Writer Lin Zhao breaks away from conventional novelistic conventions, where plot becomes secondary. Her works emphasize linguistic finesse and imaginative depth, infused with Western modernist and postmodern narrative techniques. Yet she maintains Lingnan cultural authenticity through her literary choices. Through narrative analysis of character archetypes, narrative perspectives, and environmental settings, the study highlights Zhang Zao'er—a Lingnan maiden whose vivid portrayal captivates readers, along with the magical journey brought by the fictional giant frog. The region's multifaceted magic forms both Lin Zhao's lived experience and the enduring essence of her literary creations.

Keywords: Lin Zhao, novel, Lingnan narrative, Lingnan atmosphere

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Content

Lingnan narrative first refers to the concept of space. Lingnan refers to the area south of the Five Ridges in the south. Due to its unique geographical location and many historical factors, Lingnan contains a variety of cultural colors and diverse languages.

After defining the term “Lingnan”, the next crucial aspect to clarify is “narrative”. Originating in 1960s France, novel narratology explores narrative protagonists and techniques. This paper will examine Lin Zhao's distinctive Lingnan style through the three essential narrative elements: characters, plot, and setting.

1.2 Literature review at home and abroad

As Lin Zhao has just emerged in the literary field,

there are not many documents. At present, there is no relevant research on Lin Zhao abroad.

1.3 Research Methods

The main method is literature research, reference literature, and familiarity with the history and current situation of the tropics and the South. Secondly, the close reading of the works is combined with literary theories such as narratology to further explore the profound language and intention of Lin Zhao.

2. The tidal movement of a narrative subject: from Linjinshu to Linzhao

Regarding the subjects of novel narration, Roland Barthes proposed three categories: the author, the narrator, and the characters. While novels are generally considered fictional, the author's own work

inevitably bears traces of their identity as creators. There exists an intertextual relationship between the author and the characters in the story, where they interpret and enhance each other. So, when Lin Jinlu transforms into Lin Zhao, what changes occur beyond the alteration of the pen name?

Lin Zhao is her current pen name, having previously published articles under the alias Lin Jinlu on Douban. Her debut work “Through the Endless Mud” from the Lin Jinlu era opens with a tidal flat teeming with thousands of mudskippers leaping about. The story follows Hu Beibei (23 years younger than Chen Heng) and her male protagonist Chen Heng, unfolding as an affair unfolds. The narrative culminates in Chen Heng’s critical illness when Hu Beibei makes a poignant visit to his bedside.

The story stops here, where Hu Beibei is kind enough to attend Chen Heng’s funeral, and the ending is still the same piece of ammunition

Fishing. Her writing was as plain as a plain dress in those days as it is now.

The plot of “Xu Li” follows a simple narrative: Zhang Zao’er, a woman burdened by her dysfunctional family—her father’s domestic violence and infidelity, her mother’s emotional fragility—finds herself entangled with the libertine Yang Baima and over twenty subsequent sexual partners. The story culminates in Zhang Zao’er personally killing her half-brother before returning to the woodland where her mother had spent her teenage years. Her mother’s suicide note is then cast into the lake, “passively embracing the sweet destiny that converged from all directions [1].”

When the narrative shifts from the mudskippers to “Liu Xi”, the opening verse proclaims: “I shall journey ¹to the deep valleys of Awa Long.” Here², the pen name transforms into Lin Zhao. The oar inscribed with “Osprey oars and orchid paddles” now propels her away from the mudflats teeming with mudskippers, emerging from Hu Beibei’s endless quagmire. Her escape unfolds through a metamorphosis—transforming from a maiden to an assassin, even a swindler—— Zhang Zao’er [2].

The reason why “Through the Endless Mire” and “Flowing Stream” are linked and compared is because these two articles have some similarities.

First, the romantic relationships in both works involve unconventional dynamics. Chen Heng, 23 years older than Hu Beibei and married with a family, contrasts sharply with Yang Baima—Zhang Zao’s partner who is over a decade his senior and has a regular mistress. While Hu Beibei and Zhang Zao’er serve as third parties in certain contexts, no such third-party elements are discernible in Lin Zhao’s other writings. This constitutes the first similarity between the two works.

Second, Hu Beibei and Zhang Zaoer have the same characteristics. Both protagonists have too many lovers, and both started after being hurt in love.

Thirdly, Hu Beibei and Zhang Zao’er share striking similarities with the author. Lin Jinluo, an avid birdwatcher who can identify every species he sees, shares this passion with Hu Beibei. Zhang Zao’er’s interest in “tree observation” mirrors Lin Zhao’s previous work in botanical research. Such character archetypes are uncommon in the author’s other writings, indicating these protagonists aren’t mere plot devices but rather reflections of the author’s own identity. This creative integration suggests the two main characters could potentially merge into a single persona.

However, it is worth noting that Hu Beibei and Zhang Zaoer are completely different. Why does the same writer have such different reflections on himself?

The evolution of pen names, the stylistic shifts of writers, and the transformations of characters can be likened to tidal changes. The relationship between Hu Beibei and Zhang Zao’er forms a tranquil intertidal zone – the days when Lin Zhao fell ill – that separates them like low tides from the turbulent magic of high tides. This mirrors their distinct personalities and temperaments. Meanwhile, we observe Lin Jinlu’s metaphorical “rowing” as he navigates the shallow waters and mires through the melancholic mudfish leaping in the swamp, ultimately leading to Zhang Zao’er’s deliberate departure.

3. Narrative subject of Lingnan: Zhang Zaoer, a girl from Lingnan

3.1 The Birth of Zhang Zaoer

When Lin Zhao’s characters successfully transition from Hu Beibei to Zhang Zao’er, I noticed that these two protagonists share a similar plot but highlight completely different details of their personalities, namely the dress they wear when meeting their lovers. Years later, Hu Beibei accidentally meets Chen Heng

Hu Beibei took off her veil hat, tucked it under her arm, removed her hair tie and bit it in her mouth, then raised her hand to ruffle her shoulder-length hair into a fluffy mess. When she put the veil hat back on, she thought it looked unflattering, so she simply rolled it up and stuffed it into her bag. She looked left and right, but could think of no other way, so she had to undo one more button[1].

This is Hu Beibei, who was still shy and devoted to Chen Heng at the age of thirty. It was at a bird-watching party that Hu and Chen first met. Years later, she still wore the same clothes, symbolizing that her love remained un-

changed and that she did not hide her true colors. What about Zhang Zai'er?

"She walked over to the mirror and fussed with herself, putting clothes on and taking them off again and again. In the end, she still slipped on that modified Tibetan robe[1]" Zhang Zao'er is a Han Chinese. When she studied in south-west China, there were many Tibetan girls around her. She wore Tibetan robes to cover herself and blur her identity and ethnicity, making her difficult to catch and having a witch-like temperament. This is Zhang Zao'er.

Zhang Zao'er's character is self-constructed through her personal narratives. She recounts her father's domestic violence, the pornographic materials in his box, and his infidelity. These revelations reveal her distrust of male instincts and opposition to patriarchal authority. The story unfolds from childhood fears and fascination with Cantonese, to Yang Baima's romantic history with her. It culminates in her mother's suicide, the birth of a half-brother, and her act of fratricide. This progression explores the narrative subjectivity and perspective within the context of narratology.

The narrative perspective of this book is "I" (Zhang Zao'er), alternating between first-person and third-person viewpoints. Most of the text follows the first-person account, with the third-person perspective introduced from Chapter 2 through "In the afternoon, the child and his father encountered... [1]" until Chapter 6. Each third-person section is interspersed with brief first-person narratives about the "child" and his parents. Throughout the book, we consistently identify this "child" as Zhang Zao'er. This narrative shift enhances the objectivity and authenticity of the storytelling.

Beyond employing a third-person perspective for childhood recollections, Zhang Zao'er frequently adopts an external narrator's voice to critique her own experiences. A striking example occurs in her recollection of her affection for Xiang Di: ³the first-person narrative abruptly shifts to a third-person objective perspective. "Zhang Zao'er and Jin Bian Ruixiang sighed repeatedly." This narrative technique continues throughout their story with Xiang Di, creating a fragmented flow that, in my view, subtly hints at multiple possibilities within the facts themselves—a narrative style reminiscent of the Rashomon effect.

3.2 Is a witch, a nymph, a liar or a child?

"Flowing Stream" reads more like a diary of a young girl's inner thoughts, inherently subjective. This reminds me of Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita," a book that writer Lin Zhao himself greatly appreciates. In "Lolita," the murderer Humbert delivers his own self-revelations and narrative in court. Humbert recounts his relationship with Lolita

and the final murder scene, yet the authenticity of these accounts remains questionable. When the author hints at the unreliability of this story, what kind of character is Zhang Zao'er?

First and foremost, she is the unique Lingnan enchantress. Having watched adult films, played video games, and studied landscape architecture, she harbors a passion for literature and books. Her ⁴veins flow with "half a test tube of dark northern blood, half a test tube of emerald southern heritage." Fluent in Cantonese, she transforms into Tibetan-inspired maidens, though she admits her true preference lies with Salomean-like women. The author imbues her character with abundant Lingnan elements: first, the essence of Lingnan culture; second, its romantic entanglements; and third, its timeless landscapes.

Secondly, she is the Nymph. The novel *Liu Xi* mentions the Nymph three times. Who is this figure? She is the goddess of water elements, typically depicted as a beautiful young woman. Lin Zhao, who deeply admired Nabokov, portrayed Lobi as the Nymph in *Lolita*. These characters are characterized by youthfulness, beauty, and an irresistible allure to the opposite sex. She crafted herself as a pure celestial being, while her male counterparts? A father who strays from morality, Yang Baima with other women's undergarments in his drawers, and a chaotic senior brother. All male characters face innocent maidens like Zhang Zao'er.

Is this truly the case? Is she merely a Nymph as serene as a water lily? When others' existence defines her, she remains Zhang Zao'er, the deceiver. She is the cold-eyed observer of her father's infidelity, the teenage girl with multiple sexual partners, and the murderer who killed her brother. Zhang Zao'er takes advantage of circumstances, bestowing those derogatory and dark labels upon the other self who has nowhere to hide. The violent father who brings her suffering is the other self; the Yang Baima who seduces her into promiscuity and deceives her into giving birth is the other self; the senior brother who is sexually promiscuous is the other self; the Cantonese-speaking classmates are the other self; even the younger brother who usurps paternal love and the stepmother who takes her father's place are the other self. She deliberately shifts all blame onto others, successfully absolving herself of guilt.

She is the Witch of Lingnan, a nymph, or a fraud—but none of these suffice. She is, above all, a child yearning for love. Yet what has Zhang Zao'er been through? A father, enraged, boiled her pet rabbit alive; a father, enraged, beat her mother and herself. A timid mother, beaten by her father night after night, wallowed in an unhappy marriage, too distracted to care for her, and eventually died. Her rebellion is a struggle to be loved.

With Hu Beibei's shadow fading into the background, the image of Zhang Zao'er—the Lingnan maiden who wore traditional Tibetan robes, spoke Cantonese, studied botanicals, and traversed between Xian Shui City and the heat island—became vividly realized. Multiple Lingnan cultural elements converged within her, transforming her into an enigmatic figure as elusive as the region itself. This narrative triumph by Lin Zhao not only captures Zhang Zao'er's essence but also reveals her dual identity: a naive girl and a madman con artist.

4. Narrative atmosphere of Lingnan: subtropical scenery, dialect writing and multiculturalism

4.1 Subtropical features

This is first reflected in books such as *Stream*, *Tidal Forecast*, *Wild Time and Other Stories*, and *Tidal Chart*, which contain a large number of tropical and subtropical flora, fauna and geographical terms.

In her eyes, plants like the *Hibiscus mutabilis*, *Myrtle*, *Bougainvillea*, and the familiar French plane tree stand as distinct boundaries between the two-spined Chinese parasol tree and its hybrid counterpart. The botanical names mentioned in **Liu Xi** number in the dozens, their unfamiliarity adding a layer of rigor, authenticity, and otherworldly quality to the narrative. Lin Zhao guides us through a forest of Lingnan (Southern China's Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan regions).

Beyond flora, **Tide Forecast** and **Wilderness Time and Other Stories** feature numerous botanical terms alongside marine life references: mudskippers, sandpipers, night herons, shrikes, summer birds, intertidal zones, tides, and buoys. These elements imbue the text with a distinctly animal kingdom vibe reminiscent of *National Geographic*, seamlessly woven into emotional narratives that slow the pacing while enhancing reading enjoyment.

All these point to the atmosphere of Lingnan created by the subtropical climate. While describing the landscape such as trees, Lin Zhao also gives us an imagination of Lingnan, which is one of the meanings of the narrative atmosphere of Lingnan.

4.2 Dialect writing

In addition to climate and landscape, the most important aspect of regional characteristics is dialect.

The Lingnan region is home to multiple dialects including Cantonese, Hakka, and Chaoshan. The presence of Cantonese first emerges in **Liu Xi**: "The subtlety of local dialects⁵. Be wary of the rustic... Mandarin is rustic, but un-

standardized⁶ Cantonese is rustic. The Cantonese spoken in provincial capitals is more rustic than Hong Kong's..." Subsequent passages unexpectedly feature Cantonese phrases like "Ah, got it! You pick." The sudden appearance of Cantonese creates a refreshing contrast, revealing the pervasive Lingnan atmosphere. In **Liu Xi**, Zhang Zao'er's character as an "overly expressive person" already feels surreal, while the Cantonese-written **Tidal Chart** about a Qing Dynasty female frog leaves readers utterly disoriented [3].

The first time you read *Tidal Chart*, you'll find yourself pausing every few lines to look up pronunciations and meanings. Words like " (nǎ, a feminine suffix in Cantonese)", " (mā, twin)", " (zǐnǚ, children)", " (cígūding, arrowhead rhizome, a Cantonese term)", " (xíngxíngdingding, alert and steady, a Cantonese colloquialism)"—not to mention the Cantonese slang and songs that pop up throughout the text[4].

The writing of Cantonese is undoubtedly bold, which is a challenge to written language and Mandarin, and a challenge to readers. It "revives" the silent dialect and intends to spread its national culture, which is a reverse Copernican revolution.

Cantonese writing better highlights Lingnan characteristics. Take the superstitious activity of fishermen setting sail for safety as an example. Before the "hanging large mast" ritual, items like "Dragon Mother," "Heavenly Queen," and "Hong Shengye" are placed before the frog. The awakening priest beats a gong to honor deities while lighting incense. A shamaness hangs five elders' crowns, Bagua mirrors, and strings of copper coins on the frog, transforming it into a protective spirit to ensure safety. The shaman chants: "The sound transcends form, its resonance fills all directions; dragons coil, clouds gather, tigers crouch, winds calm [3]." This series of rituals is rich in Lingnan customs, and the use of dialects further enhances this cultural essence.

Dialect writing embodies ethnic and regional identity, much like Dante's substitution of Latin with Italian in his literary works. Lin Bing boldly pioneers this creative approach, celebrating the triumph of Southern Chinese language while subverting conventional literary conventions. Through Cantonese prose that weaves together Lingnan's landscapes, architectural heritage, and cultural traditions, her works transcend conventional fiction. These creations unexpectedly assume the dual mission of chronicling history and preserving cultural continuity.

4.3 Collision of multiple elements and Lingnan

The southeast coast is one of the first places to be exposed to foreign cultures. Both economically and culturally,

Lingnan is synonymous with diversity, richness and avant-garde.

The first element is the collision between foreign influences and the Lingnan region, which imbues Lin Zhao's novels with a dazzling array of cultural elements. As the prelude to **King's Narrative Poem**, Salome and the Zero Grand Arcana of Tarot cards arrive together. The successive appearances of King Sylvestre and Boccaccio, along with Phaemon, Shiva and the Mother of Time from Hinduism, the Frost Giants from Norse mythology, and the thread of Ariadne from Greek mythology follow one after another.

Between these floating foreign elements stand the ancestral halls, bonsai gardens, and traditional Chinese-style homes of Lingnan. This magical blend perfectly captures the essence of Lingnan during that era – a vibrant tapestry of reform and opening-up, the influx of exotic influences, the popularity of foreign novels, and the ever-deepening cultural reach of Central Plains traditions[5].

Secondly, the cyber age injects a mysterious aura into the novel. In the late 20th century, in addition to foreign elements, the advent of the electronic age has made Lin Zhao's novels present magnificent and dazzling elements. For example, the following paragraph:

“Chuck hyper-expression, wanderlust, and a collecting obsession into a crucible—grind, stir, heat, and boom, we get Yang Baima, carrying a case full of love's numbered tags. Pirate: 20310, Druid: 71012, : 49328, Scriber: 54079, and who the hell knows who else[3].”

At first glance, the text seems incomprehensible. However, by connecting with the context and historical references, we can deduce that these numbers represent account IDs from certain software programs, while the preceding Chinese characters are pseudonyms. The list also includes “Masked Writer-BLACK, Scream Soldier Band VCD”, puffed snacks, “Golden Melody Hits”, McDonald's, and the fireworks of Millennium Night [3].

Lin Zhao, a nature-loving writer, creates vivid descriptions of plants and birds that spark contemplation through the stark contrast between mechanical coldness and cyber-punk aesthetics. Zhang Zao 'er's childhood in that small house marked the dawn of the millennium—when internet

chaos, her father's infidelity in chat rooms, her brother's flirtatious whispers, and her encounter with her lover Yang Baima all converged. Though the author doesn't use extensive passages to highlight historical shifts, she skillfully captures the convergence of eras through specific terms and narrative threads. The carnival of the century and the influx of diverse cultures profoundly transformed people's mentalities and lifestyles. It is precisely the author's keen observational acuity that creates a unique Lingnan atmosphere, making it a pivotal element in Lingnan narratives.

5. Conclusions

This is Lin Zhao's narrative of Lingnan, where the maiden and frog guide us through the region, breathing new life into Lingnan through her pen. She is a shepherd of language, an archaeologist of literature, and a naturalist of flora. Embarking on her literary journey, Lin Zhao carries the essence of Lingnan and youthful yearnings. Within her tropical kingdom, she plants trees with words as seeds, using history, foreign lands, and the new era as soil and fertilizer. The lush, moist language—whether flowing in prose or pausing abruptly—takes shape like diverse trees, ultimately forming her own tropical rainforest. Hand in hand, her words intertwine like pigments blending, overlapping, and creating fresh hues. She completes a painting of Lingnan.

References

- [1] Lin Zhao. *Flowing Stream* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2020.4.
- [2] (Song) Su Shi. *Su Shi's Lyrics* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2009.8.
- [3] Lin Zhao. *Tidal Chart* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2022.1.
- [4] Lin Sen. *Swimming Across the Waters of Language: Some Random Thoughts on Lin Zhao*, Liu Xi and Tide Chart[J]. *Shanghai Culture*, 2022(07):41-46.
- [5] Meng Zhaolian. *Author, Narrator, and Storyteller—On the Evolution of Narrative Subjects in Ancient Chinese Novels*[J]. *The Research on Ming and Qing Dynasties Novels*, 1998, (4): 137–152.