

# The Study on the Spatial Narrative in Jin Yucheng's *Flowers of Shanghai*

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Spatial narrative, as a unique literary narrative technique, focuses on advancing the plot and shaping characters through meticulous portrayal of space, providing readers with rich visual and perceptual experiences. This paper examines the spatial narrative utilized in Jin Yucheng's novel, *Flowers of Shanghai*. Through an in-depth analysis of the spatial narrative techniques in the novel, this paper asserts that such an exploration has far-reaching consequences in broadening research perspectives and fostering interdisciplinary collaborations between literature and geography. Furthermore, the paper explores the unique aspects of narrative perspective, narrative structure, and narrative time in *Flowers of Shanghai*, and how these elements perfectly combine with spatial narrative to create a fascinating literary world for readers. The aim of this study is to deeply explore the artistic value and literary charm of the novel through a comprehensive interpretation of the spatial narrative in *Flowers of Shanghai*.

*Keywords:* *Flowers of Shanghai*, spatial narrative, Jin Yucheng, narrative strategy, magical elements

## Introduction

Jin Yucheng, originally named Jin Shushu, is a prominent contemporary Chinese writer born in Shanghai in 1952. His novel *Flowers of Shanghai* has garnered significant attention in the literary community. This work achieved the top position in the annual rankings of the Chinese Novel Association and won prestigious awards such as the ninth Mao Dun Literature Prize, demonstrating its exceptional literary value. Notably, the origins of *Flowers of Shanghai* are quite unique; the novel was initially presented as a form of online text, which added vibrant life and a distinct sense of realism to its creative process. After undergoing multiple revisions and meticulous refinement, *Flowers of Shanghai* was finally published in 2012. Upon its release, the novel received widespread acclaim for its unique narrative style, profound historical context, and rich character portrayals.

## The Composition of Spatial Narrative in *Flowers of Shanghai*

In his work *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre is one of the earliest scholars to discuss the need for categorizing space within narratives, stating that "space can be material, mental, or social... and the knowledge of space should ideally integrate these three types, allowing themes to navigate fluidly among different spatial realms" (Zhu, 2005 p. 489). This paper will explore this concept through two dimensions: macro space and micro space. Macro space refers to environments that embody unique regional cultural characteristics, specifically the spatial narrative within the city of Shanghai.

### Macro Space

The depth of a writer's thought and aesthetic perspective is undoubtedly profoundly influenced by their natural environment. Writers situated in diverse geographical contexts exhibit significant differences in their creative styles. This variance is vividly reflected in their literary works, with the writer serving as a bridge connecting the natural environment to the literary world. The influences of the surrounding natural environment are directly integrated into their literary creations, endowing the works with unique regional characteristics and artistic qualities. Jin Yucheng, as a native of Shanghai, has undeniably been shaped by the city's natural geographical environment, which has greatly contributed to the development of his literary style.

In Jin Yucheng's novel, the intricate depiction of natural geographical scenery becomes an essential narrative technique, used to create atmosphere and propel the plot forward. In the second chapter of the story, the journey of Mei Rui, Mr. Kang, Miss Wang, and Hong Qing to Yuhang features detailed descriptions of the natural landscape. Feeling weary of her mundane life, Miss Wang's husband suggests a vacation in the countryside to help her relax. However, Miss Wang herself is drawn to lively and playful interactions, prompting her to invite Mr. Kang and Mei Rui—who share a subtle relationship with her—along on the trip, aiming to orchestrate an engaging drama.

The width of the waterway changes, the waves shimmer endlessly, and the white grass and reeds on both banks appear distant and near, brushing past Mei Rui's chest like delicate mist. The four of them gaze upward, with the mountains resembling beautiful maidens and the water glistening like cheeks, amidst endless mulberry fields and lotus ponds, with few voices around... They set off toward a place reminiscent of a Peach Blossom Spring. (Jin, 2013, p. 31)

In terms of spatial layout, the author constructs a broad and profound waterway space through carefully selected natural elements and imagery. The depiction of the changing width of the waterway and the white grass and reeds along the banks creates a three-dimensional spatial picture, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the layered and dynamic qualities of this environment.

From a detailed perspective, the author enhances the expressiveness of the spatial narrative through meticulous portrayals of natural elements. Analyzing this passage from the viewpoint of spatial narrative, the intricate depiction of the natural environment not only establishes a clear backdrop for the story but also effectively facilitates the progression of the plot through spatial transformations and extensions. As the small boat moves along the waterway, readers adopt the characters' perspectives, constantly shifting their angles of observation and range of vision, thereby experiencing the fluidity and changes of the space. This spatial fluidity not only enhances the dynamism of the narrative but also provides imaginative possibilities for the subsequent development of the plot. Moreover, *Flowers of Shanghai* features numerous instances where natural scenery intertwines with character activities, creating a unique narrative rhythm and atmosphere. For example, in Chapter Eight, during the luxurious banquet hosted by Mr. Xu, Miss Wang, after drinking, has a falling out with Li Li and becomes unconscious. Mr. Xu assists her upstairs to rest. In the afternoon, while the group listens to storytelling in the garden, Miss Wang and Mr. Xu delay their descent. After the performance, a passage describing the natural scenery is interjected:

The courtyard fell silent, the western sun warm on the eyes, as autumn winds and rustling leaves drifted through the pink walls, accompanied by the sounds of chirping sparrows, distant roosters crowing, and dogs barking, all because this place was, indeed, serene. (Jin, 2013, p. 117)

Following a series of tense and noisy events, such as the extravagant banquet and the intense argument between Miss Wang and Li Li, this delicate description serves as a refreshing stream, guiding readers from the

preceding chaos and clamor into a tranquil and serene space. The tranquility of the courtyard and the warmth of the afternoon sun starkly contrast with the earlier turmoil, further emphasizing the characters' inner turmoil and conflicts. When people fall silent, nature fills the void with its own sounds. This depiction expands the spatial narrative, capturing the bustle of city life while simultaneously creating a sense of desolation and emptiness in the world around.

### Micro Space

“Space is never empty; it always contains certain meanings. Space influences every individual's activity and life, and its location often affects people's actions” (Wu, 2007, p. 402). Jin Yucheng's novel emphasizes the creation of life scenes, showcasing the trajectories of characters' destinies within micro living spaces. In conjunction with the previously analyzed macro space, this section focuses on interpreting the micro spaces in the novel, particularly through a detailed discussion of road spaces.

In modern cities, streets attract significant attention from literary figures due to their universality and historical significance. In the first half of the 19th century, with the rise of modern cities, Edgar Allan Poe used streets as a backdrop in works such as *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, laying the foundation for the depiction of streets in modern urban literature. The external material form of modern cities is primarily constructed by buildings and roads. As a vital link, roads tightly connect independent buildings, forming the spatial structure of the city. Streets are not only central components of urban geography but also important carriers of spatial narrative.

In *Flowers of Shanghai*, Jin Yucheng meticulously describes various streets, including Sinan Road, Huaihai Road, South Shaanxi Road, Changle Road, and Xikang Road. These streets intersect to create a panoramic view of Shanghai, spanning from the banks of the Huangpu River to those of the Suzhou River, crossing through the Luwan District and extending to the western suburbs. Through Jin Yucheng's portrayal, readers can deeply appreciate the geographical structure and urban character of Shanghai.

The initial meeting between Husheng and Abao occurs on the street, where they are introduced by Teacher Song; subsequently, Husheng, Abao, and Betty encounter Xiaomao while on their way to buy movie tickets, thus forging their connection. Husheng and his classmates participate in the “Destroy the Four Olds” campaign on Huaihai Road, while Abao and Xuezhi part ways on Wuding Road. These roads serve not only as important carriers of spatial narrative but also as critical factors propelling the plot forward. For instance, after the Cultural Revolution led to school suspensions and revolutionary chaos, Shuhua and Husheng often wander the streets:

A bus numbered 41 approached, and suddenly a middle-aged man on the roadside lunged at the front of the vehicle. With a sharp crack, the bus came to a sudden halt, blood splattering five steps away, and a crowd gathered immediately, voices rising in a din... Husheng noticed a small, round, wet red ball on the cover of the roadside gutter, and upon closer inspection, saw a solitary human eye—black and white, a single eyeball connected by purple veins, with white fluid dripping, mingled with blood. (Jin, 2013, p. 157)

The changes in the street provide readers with a fluid perspective. This excerpt reflects Jin Yucheng's exceptional control over narrative rhythm and his restrained depiction of the death scene. The narrative voice remains extraordinarily calm, making it difficult for readers to feel emotional fluctuations, thereby accentuating the inherent brutality of death itself. As a public space, the “road” embodies the desolation of Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution through the perspectives of Shuhua and Husheng, illustrating the spiritual trauma inflicted upon individuals. This depiction captures the distinct atmosphere of Shanghai during a specific historical period, with the roads bearing and reflecting the course of history.

### Spatial Narrative Strategies in *Flowers of Shanghai*

Space, as a core element of narrative, plays multiple and crucial roles in the storytelling process. The presentation of various unique and typical spatial forms often results from the application of diverse spatial narrative strategies. These strategies not only enrich the layers of the narrative but also make the representation of space more vivid and three-dimensional, adding depth and breadth to the story.

In *Flowers of Shanghai*, space is not merely a physical location; it serves as an important narrative tool employed by the author to weave the story, shape characters, and convey emotions. The transformations and flow of space provide a rich backdrop for the development of the plot while subtly guiding the readers' emotions and perceptions. This chapter focuses on exploring the strategies of spatial narrative, offering an in-depth analysis of the spatial narrative techniques reflected in the text based on a detailed interpretation of the narrative structure in *Flowers of Shanghai*.

#### Narrative Perspective: Combining Multiple Spaces

The narrative perspective describes the intrinsic relationship between the narrator and the story. In spatial narrative, perspective plays a crucial role, representing specific viewpoints and subjective inclinations that effectively render spatial depictions in the narrative more concrete, vivid, and visually engaging.

*Flowers of Shanghai* adheres to the traditional "storytelling" narrative style found in classical Chinese novels. Jin Yucheng modestly refers to himself as a low-profile "narrator", who remains in the background while the plot primarily advances through dialogue among characters. He simultaneously adopts techniques from the new novel, combining "zero focus", "external focal narration", and "internal focal narration". "Zero focus", also known as omniscient perspective, allows the narrator to perceive and describe the psychological changes of any event or character as if from a divine viewpoint. "External focal narration" maintains objectivity without delving deeply into the inner worlds of characters.

At the beginning of the novel, these three types of focus are combined in the following description:

The fragrant mountain road ahead, the eastern side of Fuxing Park, to the northeast, glimpses of my grandfather's solitary villa, and behind to the west, the Nicholas Orthodox Church on Gaolan Road... During the thunderstorm phase, it was eerie and fearful, yet beneath the sun, visually pleasing. Betty clung tightly to Abao, her small frame leaned in, hair flying. A strong southeast wind blew, and the sounds of boats on the Huangpu River, the broad buzzing of a horn filled the air... (Jin, 2013, p. 13)

As Abao and Betty sit on the rooftop, the expansive view allows for a depiction of Shanghai from Abao's perspective using "internal focal narration" to illustrate the cityscape. This also employs long-range description, shifting from east to west as if a camera is moving, allowing readers to perceive the church as eerie and enhancing the sense of realism. The perspective then shifts to "zero focus", moving closer to narrate the innocent interaction of the two youths, transitioning back to the "storyteller" viewpoint. The subsequent dialogue returns to "external focal narration", while the final sentence shifts back to "zero focus" to depict Abao's inner world. This brief passage shifts between four perspectives, showcasing Jin Yucheng's masterful use of spatial narrative techniques.

In *Flowers of Shanghai*, the use of "external focal narration" is prominent, particularly in the narration of events surrounding the disappearance of Abao and Betty. The author ultimately provides no detailed explanation; rather, it is through Shuhua's recounting that we learn, "Abao and Betty have turned into two fish swimming in the Huangpu River." Similarly, during a dinner party, when Su An "pressures" Miss Wang to have an abortion, the readers remain unaware of whether this is Su An's spontaneous act or Mr. Xu's arrangement. In these

instances, the author employs external focal narration, presenting the progression of events through character dialogue, adopting the stance of an observer and leaving the characters' internal emotions unexplored, thereby creating suspense and allowing readers space for imagination.

In literary narratives, the clever use of spatial elements often exerts a profound influence on narrative perspective.

The truck drove north, passing countless low, dark houses, crossing the Suzhou River, chimneys towering into the clouds, pedestrians thin and dark. Arriving at Zhongshan North Road, the scent of spices filled the air, the oxidized iron pigment factory emitted thick dust; large fields, farmhouses, willows, cucumber patches, tomato fields, and fields of millet and edamame, all of this constitutes Shanghai. Finally, a neat row of houses appeared; Cao Yang New Village arrived. (Jin, 2013, p. 144)

This passage, through precise and delicate spatial descriptions, not only showcases the multifaceted nature of Shanghai as a metropolis but also subtly guides the readers' visual focus and emotional experience. The narrative perspective is dynamic, shifting with the movement of the truck, constructing a sense of observation and perception in motion. This fluidity is evident not only in the geographical transitions but also in the capture and description of different spatial characteristics. The narrative perspective possesses a high degree of focus, not merely listing spaces but vividly portraying the unique atmosphere of each through carefully chosen details.

#### **Narrative Structure: Dual Spaces**

Narrative structure refers to the organization, arrangement, and construction of a work's content, establishing the overall framework of the text and determining the sequence and style of the story or narrative. A common narrative structure in ancient Chinese chapter-based novels is "two flowers bloom, each expressing a branch," where the narrator separates multiple storylines and unfolds them individually, enhancing clarity and coherence. *Flowers of Shanghai* follows this narrative structure. Upon first reading, one notable feature in its table of contents is the absence of any subheadings or introductory texts. However, the unique chapter numbering—using traditional characters for odd-numbered chapters and simplified characters for even-numbered ones—creates an engaging arrangement that sparks the reader's curiosity.

In *Flowers of Shanghai*, character dialogues are presented in continuous writing, primarily using commas and periods, usually beginning with "xx said", directly revealing snippets of life without embellishment. Long dialogues might span over twenty lines, with the segments not striving for tight logical coherence but rather exhibiting a free-flowing presentation. These independent dialogue fragments function like deconstructed spatial units, juxtaposed to construct an overarching conversation.

The entire narrative employs a dual-line structure, with odd-numbered chapters set in the 1960s and 70s, while even-numbered chapters take place in the 1990s. This dual narrative structure manifests as interwoven timelines. One timeline focuses on the childhood of the three protagonists during the 1960s and 70s, characterized by a light and joyful narrative style; the other timeline portrays the adult world of the 1990s, where characters are depicted more realistically, and Shanghai emerges as a symbol of desire, conveying a sense of bleak desolation amidst urban life. The narrative structure comprises two main temporal narratives, each chapter further divided into independent sections, with each section showcasing unique narrative times that collectively form the narrative content of the work. In the odd-numbered chapters, most segments revolve around the experiences of protagonists Abao, Husheng, and Xiaomao, with each segment recounting a story of one character.

### **Narrative Time: Juxtaposition and Transformation of Space**

Narrative time refers to the temporal sequence and rhythm in which the story is unfolded and presented to readers, listeners, or viewers. It results from the narrator's rearrangement and reconstruction of story time according to specific intentions and creative needs. "Narrative texts featuring prominent spatial structures adopt a synchronic model that contrasts with the linear development of time. A typical manifestation of this is the transformation of temporal elements by spatial intentions" (Zhou, 2021, p. 35). Space and time are inseparable; in *Flowers of Shanghai*, Jin Yucheng employs a distinctive narrative technique: he manipulates time through the use of space, emphasizing spatial elements while relatively abstracting temporal clues. This technique allows the passage of time to be demonstrated through spatial transitions and presentations, providing readers with a novel reading experience.

In *Flowers of Shanghai*, the development of the plot is not marked by a linear progression of time but relies on changes in spatial scenes to drive the story forward. For instance, in the third section of the first chapter, after Xiaomao and Husheng bid farewell at the intersection of Changle Road, their addresses hint at their starkly different backgrounds and class statuses—Xiaomao lives in a large cuckoo clock in the western suburbs, while Husheng resides in the Rad Apartment on Shimen Road. Subsequently, Xiaomao takes bus 24 toward the Changshou Road area; at this point, the text does not continue tracking his actions but shifts to describe the surrounding environment, such as "Caoxie Bang" and "Yaoshui Lane", vividly sketching the character of the "Lower Corner" area. The narrative then abruptly flashes back to "the previous day", focusing on Xiaomao's experience collecting and playing with cigarette cards, concentrating on the space and time relevant to his activities from the day before. Xiaomao's walking path is referenced again, with "a pedestrian bridge at the end of Xikang Road" becoming a new spatial focal point, only to shift back to the mundane lives of the ordinary residents in the cuckoo clock lane. The narrative then begins a new paragraph, detailing the conditions of Xiaomao's family's ground floor, naturally revealing that he has returned home.

In this lengthy narrative segment, Xiaomao's walking time is diluted, and through the interjection of two recollections, the text transitions directly to the description of Xiaomao's family home, skillfully diminishing the linearity of time. This narrative technique, which showcases the flow of time through spatial representation, imparts a unique sense of spatial leap to the novel, resulting in a multi-dimensional narrative structure. In this narrative approach, time appears compressed and reshaped, no longer developing along a singular linear trajectory but interweaving with space to construct a complex narrative system.

Within the text, the spatialized model eschews traditional linear development, adopting a non-linear narrative structure. This structure significantly differs from temporal models. The incorporation of spatial imagery effectively reconfigures the story's time and narrative rhythm. Throughout the narrative, the text interweaves different spatial scenes, endowing the plot with a sense of discontinuity and fragmentation. The esteemed literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin stated, "When space is extensively described, the 'pause' in the order of time becomes inevitable" (Zhou, 2021, p. 36). The use of spatial imagery in the narrative not only effectively regulates the rhythm of the storytelling but also significantly enriches the spatial characteristics of the scenes. Through meticulously constructed spatial imagery, the author creates a three-dimensional, multi-faceted sense of space in the text, allowing readers to envision vibrant and vivid images in their minds. These images are not mere visual representations but complex psychological experiences that intertwine emotion, memory, and imagination.

Thus, it can be asserted that the spatial narrative strategies in *Flowers of Shanghai* are one of the key factors contributing to the novel's success. They break free from the constraints of traditional narrative modes, presenting the complexities and vibrancy of life through fresh perspectives and techniques. This innovative narrative approach not only brings new possibilities to contemporary literature but also offers readers a more novel and profound reading experience.

### Conclusion

Jin Yucheng writes *Flowers of Shanghai* from the omniscient perspective of a "storyteller", capturing everything that unfolds in the city of Shanghai. His creative process employs various narrative techniques, integrating multiple literary elements, making the work as dazzling as a profusion of blossoms.

This article primarily utilizes spatial narrative theory to analyze *Flowers of Shanghai* through three aspects: the influence of space on the author's creation, the composition of spatial narrative, and the strategies of spatial narrative. Through detailed textual interpretation and in-depth analysis, we unveil the author's writing approach, allowing us to glimpse his unique narrative charm and rich artistic connotations. The work skillfully intertwines personal experience, spatial composition, and narrative strategies, constructing a vibrant and multifaceted narrative world.

Spatial narrative expands the aesthetic and artistic value of the novel, which can be seen as a form of spatial art. *Flowers of Shanghai* builds a complex and orderly spatial system through meticulously designed spatial scenes and elements. From the bustling streets of the city to the tranquil fields of the countryside, and from public spaces to intimate environments, each scene carries rich symbolic significance and cultural meaning.

In summary, the spatial narrative of *Flowers of Shanghai* is a literary masterpiece filled with wisdom and innovation. Its unique spatial constructions and narrative strategies offer us a fresh perspective and understanding. With Jin Yucheng's bold exploration of spatial narrative writing, we can look forward to further investigation into the value and significance of spatial narratives in literary works, contributing more to the development and innovative practice of literary theory.

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