
THE ART OF CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION THROUGH PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION IN LU XUN'S SHORT STORIES

Hau Phuong Ngan Nguyen^{*1}, Chi Nguyen Nguyen²

¹Faculty of Social Science Education, School of Education, Dong Thap
University, Vietnam.

²Lecturer, Faculty of Social Science Education, School of Education, Dong Thap
University, Vietnam.

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***Corresponding Author: Hau Phuong Ngan Nguyen**

Faculty of Social Science Education, School of Education, Dong Thap

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ABSTRACT

When discussing the achievements of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun is regarded as one of the most representative writers frequently mentioned by scholars. He made significant contributions to the genre of short stories in both domestic and international literary circles. Lu Xun's contributions extend across both content and artistic aspects. In terms of artistic achievement, the art of constructing character personality through physical description, although not yet widely disseminated or extensively studied, remains vivid and remarkable. Therefore, this study focuses on examining the art of constructing character personality through physical description in several of Lu Xun's representative short stories, while also comparing them with selected works of classical Chinese narrative literature. Through this approach, the study aims to generalize the writer's distinctive and creative inheritances in this aspect by examining his works from the perspective of modern poetics and situating them within the cultural-social context of early twentieth-century China. In doing so, it seeks to explain the relationship between art and reality in Lu Xun's literary creation.

KEYWORDS: *Art, physical description, character personality, short story, Lu Xun.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Lu Xun made great contributions to the modernization of Chinese national literature. His short stories contain a sophisticated combination of profound content and elaborate artistic techniques. In terms of art, the technique of constructing character personality through

physical description, inherited from the traditional art of spirit transmission, is a research direction that reveals the writer's creative inheritance in character construction.

In Vietnam, previous studies on the artistic aspects of Lu Xun's short stories have mainly followed two major approaches. The first approach focuses on poetics in order to explore the principles of the writer's artistic creation. These studies examine elements such as the narrator image, tone, form, and language to identify the distinctive artistic features of Lu Xun's short stories (Tieu, 1988; Thu, 2005). This perspective shows that researchers pay particular attention to the artistic form of a literary work and regard it as an independent artistic whole capable of creating literary value without relying on historical or social factors. Recently, a second approach has emerged, combining poetics and sociology. This approach systematizes the art of character construction in Lu Xun's short stories and compares it with Chinese narrative works in order to identify the writer's inheritances and innovations in relation to tradition. In terms of inheritance, Lu Xun employed traditional techniques such as putting the finishing touch, seeing the large through the small, and character typification. On that foundation, he carried out many important innovations in character construction in accordance with the spirit of modern literature. Characters in Lu Xun's short stories not only represent different social types but also become discursive subjects reflecting ideological conflicts and the spiritual tragedies of Chinese people in the early twentieth century. At the same time, the innovation of the narrator image expanded the expressive capacity of the short story and created a polyphonic quality in the works. Therefore, it can be affirmed that the art of character construction in Lu Xun's short stories made a significant contribution to the modernization of classical Chinese fiction while establishing the writer's pioneering position in modern Chinese literature (Ngan *et al.*, 2026). The technique of constructing character personality through physical description was mentioned in the above study within the framework of seeing the large through the small. However, the discussion was limited to the aspect of inheritance and did not fully clarify Lu Xun's individual creativity in applying this technique to character construction. In particular, previous studies have not adequately addressed his attention to physical details, especially the eyes, as a means of revealing character traits and conveying the spiritual maladies of the Chinese people, moving away from the didactic tendency commonly found in character portrayal in classical narrative works.

On that basis, this study approaches Lu Xun's works from the perspective of modern poetics-the second research approach to the artistic aspects of his short stories-in order to examine the technique of constructing character personality through physical description. Through this

approach, the study aims to reveal Lu Xun's originality in employing traditional artistic techniques to focus on the people and remedy the shortcomings of the national character. At the same time, the study places Lu Xun's short stories within the cultural-social context of early twentieth-century China in order to explain the relationship between art and reality.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

- Research materials: To support the study of the technique of constructing character personality through physical description in Lu Xun's short stories and to place them in relation to selected works of classical Chinese narrative literature, thereby identifying the writer's creative inheritance, this study focuses on Lu Xun's short stories in *Call to Arms* and *Wandering*. In addition, the study refers to representative classical Chinese works such as *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and *The Scholars* in order to highlight Lu Xun's creative inheritance in applying traditional techniques to the construction of character personality through physical description.

- Research methods:

+ Analytical-synthetic method: This method is employed to identify and synthesize the representative features of the technique of constructing character personality through physical description and to analyze Lu Xun's creative inheritance in this artistic aspect.

+ Poetic method: This method approaches the selected short stories as independent artistic wholes in order to draw conclusions about Lu Xun's creative consciousness in the technique of constructing character personality through physical description in comparison with earlier writers of classical Chinese narrative literature.

+ Narratological method: This method focuses on analyzing the modes of storytelling and narrative organization in Lu Xun's short stories, which directly influence the formation and development of character personality.

+ Comparative method: This method is used to compare the technique of constructing character personality through physical description in Lu Xun's short stories with that in classical Chinese narrative works in order to identify similarities and differences. On that basis, the study aims to generalize Lu Xun's inheritance and innovations in the art of character construction, thereby demonstrating his pioneering role in modern Chinese literature.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Theoretical overview of the classical narrative terms and modern short story

3.1.1. *Classical narrative*

Classical narrative works (Chinese fiction) in classical Chinese literature developed along a path very different from that of the West. For a long period, fiction existed as a branch of historiography, associated with recording events, narrating strange tales, everyday stories, and accounts of human relationships and worldly affairs. Tracing its origins, Lu Xun was the first scholar to compile a history of Chinese fiction. He stated: “As for China, people often say that there should be a history of fiction divided according to dynastic boundaries, and this is certainly not a shallow or groundless opinion”; “Up to now, Chinese fiction has had no history. What existed first appeared in histories of Chinese literature written by foreigners, and later there were also works written by Chinese scholars, but they were all very brief, amounting to less than one-tenth of a book. As a result, fiction has remained unclear” (Tan, 2002). He also recalled a statement by Zhuang Zhou: “Cultivating xiaoshuo in order to seek favor from a county official” (The External Things, Zhuangzi), but explained that the term originally referred to trivial and commonplace sayings that contained no profound principles and therefore did not carry the same meaning as the term xiaoshuo used in later periods. Huan Tan stated: “The School of Fiction gathers trivial sayings and fragmented stories, using examples to create short books; nevertheless, they can still serve as lessons for self-cultivation and household management”. According to Confucius: “Although it is a minor Way, it certainly contains something worthy of appreciation; however, if pursued too far, it may lead to obstruction”. Lu Xun interpreted this statement as follows: “For this reason, the gentleman does not practice it, yet neither does he abolish it. Those with some knowledge of village and rural life who are capable of writing should continue doing so and not neglect it. If among their words there is even a single useful statement, it may still be regarded as the opinion of an ordinary person or someone from the countryside” (Tan, 2002). In general, Chinese fiction was initially regarded as a minor form of learning existing on the margins of orthodox scholarship. It referred to trivial, ordinary, and popular stories that were not considered to contain significant meanings or moral principles, and it originated from the tradition of historical chronicles.

From the twentieth century onward, the term classical narrative came to be used within a new terminological system established to classify newly emerging forms of fictional prose narratives, including short fiction (duanpianxiaoshuo), medium-length fiction (zhongpianxiaoshuo), and long fiction (changpianxiaoshuo). The short story gradually

replaced earlier forms such as chuanqi, zhiguai, and zhiren narratives, while the novel adopted numbered chapters or simply separated narrative sections with textual symbols, replacing older forms such as huaben, shuoshu, chapter-divided novels, and historical romances.

3.1.2. Modern short story

From the twentieth century onward, the term duanpianxiaoshuo has been used to refer to the short story genre. Compared with the novella and the novel, the short story is a short narrative form characterized by brevity, a limited number of characters, a compact structure, and diverse themes, including private life, social affairs, and epic subjects. Its most distinctive feature is its brevity, which allows it to be read in a single sitting. This genre is usually written in prose and deals with most aspects of human and social life. However, the short story does not present life in its entirety. Instead, it focuses on a particular relationship, state, phenomenon, or characteristics to explore an idea, a way of life, a principle of human existence, or people's responses to life. Therefore, short stories often have few characters, few complex events, and limited plot lines. The plot of a short story is usually limited to a specific space and time and aims to reveal meaningful insights into life and human beings. Its structure generally does not develop through multiple narrative layers but is often built on contrast, comparison, or artistic association.

In the modern era, the short story developed a new form with a strong spirit of innovation in artistic thinking. It became a distinctive feature of modern literature and gradually established an important position in the development of world literature. Therefore, the short story can be considered a relatively late phenomenon in literary history (Long, 2009; An, 2023; Ngan *et al.*, 2026).

3.2. Research results

3.2.1. The technique of constructing character personality through physical description in classical Chinese narrative works

In the tradition of Chinese narrative literature, especially from zhiguai stories of the Six Dynasties period and chuanqi tales of the Tang dynasty to huaben stories of the Ming and Qing dynasties, many writers used the technique of constructing character personality through physical description at an early stage. Seemingly minor elements such as a physical feature or a small gesture were often used as artistic signs to summarize a character's personality, social status, or social rules in order to convey moral and ethical values.

In *The Girl in Green (Lüyi Nü-Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio)*, Yu Jing meets a young woman who has just praised him outside the temple window. He is described as

being “surprised and standing up to look, only to see a girl in green clothes and a long skirt, graceful and beautiful beyond compare” (Linh, 2003). Yu also notices that “her waist was less than two hand spans wide” (Linh, 2003). This delicate and graceful appearance not only describes her beauty but also suggests her refined, gentle, and otherworldly personality. More importantly, these details also foreshadow the unusual nature of Lüyi Nü. The character’s extremely slender and soft appearance seems unreal, making her appear as if she does not fully belong to the human world. This is explained at the end of the story when her identity is revealed: Lüyi Nü is actually a ghost (Ngan *et al.*, 2026). Therefore, physical description serves not only as a way to portray appearance but also as a tool for the writer to construct character personality, create a mysterious atmosphere, and prepare for the development of the plot.

In *Using Stories to Express Great Principles (The Scholars)*, the character Wang Mian is a typical example showing that Wu Jingzi does not directly praise his integrity but instead presents a few external details to express it. The details that Wang Mian made a hat in the style of Qu Yuan; that in the spring weather, among blooming flowers and green willows, he wore a tall hat and loose clothes, sang freely while holding a whip, drove an ox cart carrying his mother around the village and by the lake, while groups of children ran after him laughing and he paid no attention to them, reveal a delicate, sensitive, and pure artistic soul. As a result, the character appears to be someone who follows aesthetic inspiration rather than pursuing fame and wealth.

From Lüyi Nü to Wang Mian, it can be seen that in the Chinese narrative tradition, elements such as appearance, gestures, and demeanor were often constructed as artistic signs that reflected the personalities and qualities of characters. Based on the traditional belief that a person’s appearance reflects their inner nature, external features were often closely connected with inner qualities, making physical appearance a mirror of the inner self. At the same time, these details also had a foreshadowing function, helping readers anticipate the characters’ destinies, psychological development, and roles in the progress of the plot. In this way, writers in classical Chinese literature were able to convey character personality in support of moral instruction and didactic purposes.

3.2.2. Spiritual maladies in Lu Xun’s shortstories

At that time, the situation in China actually needed a new direction. Lu Xun was also searching for a way forward. The Xinhai Revolution in 1911 ultimately turned out to be only “old wine in a new bottle”, changing the form but not the content. The writer once expressed, after witnessing people happily watching the execution of a fellow villager in public: “If

people are still ignorant and cowardly, then even if they are physically strong, they can only become the kind of people who are beheaded in public, or the kind of people who stand and watch such meaningless executions. On the other hand, if they are sick and weak and may die a little earlier, it is not necessarily unhappiness. Therefore, what we need to do first is to change their spirit, and in my view at that time, there is nothing better than using literature to change the spirit” (Tan, 1994).

Lu Xun was not the first person to propose the slogan of reforming the national character, but he inherited it and developed this idea to a deeper level of human nature. He became a great writer first because he used his pen as a weapon to fight for the path of national liberation. Lu Xun, as both a thinker and a writer, realized this goal clearly and deeply through literature. He brought literature down from the “ivory tower” into real life, and at the same time removed the long-standing idea that literature should serve morality (“wen yizai dao”), so that literature could return to its true nature: focusing on human beings and awakening human conscience. Throughout the twentieth century, this idea became a kind of moral and spiritual command in modern Chinese literature.

Serving as microcosms of a slumbering nation, the characters in Lu Xun’s short stories profoundly mirrored the distinctive spiritual maladies of early 20th-century Chinese society. The content of Lu Xun’s national character reform includes two parallel aspects: destruction and construction. First is the removal of feelings of inferiority, conservatism, a spirit of false satisfaction, and a passive attitude of accepting the status quo. With a spirit of compassion for suffering and anger toward lack of struggle, he did not mock the people for entertainment, but to awaken them. The deeper meaning of this idea is to force people to become aware of their real position and condition. This spirit was applied in the practice of the Chinese revolution, when raising awareness became a driving force for the masses to stand up for themselves.

In his first short story, *Diary of a Madman*, which belongs to a system of works where the plot is largely dismantled, the writer, through the image of the Madman, exposes the history of thousands of years of Chinese feudal society as a history of cannibalism. In the history of Chinese literary criticism, some scholars argue that the Madman is just an ordinary mad person. First, idealizing the Madman into a non-ill revolutionary fighter and treating every statement of his as a truth reflecting reality goes against the intention of the work and the writer. Second, a true democratic fighter, who is strong and firm, would hardly become so weak and easily mad; and once he is mad, how can he still continue to fight? If he still shows fighting courage while mad, then why, after recovering, does he enter the official system and

submit to reactionary forces (Chanh *et al.*, 2023). The Madman realizes the false and hypocritical nature of the people around him on a bright moonlit night, but after recovering from his illness, he submits. This is exactly the half-hearted and backward state of the people that the writer wants to eliminate.

Lu Xun wants to remove the type of personality similar to Belikov (*The Man in a Case*) and Wei Lianshu (*The Lonely Man*), because they are people who “close the door and wrap themselves in blankets”. At the very beginning, Lu Xun writes: “Now, looking back, I realize that my friendship with Wei Lianshu was somewhat unusual: it began with a funeral and also ended with a funeral” (Tan, 1994). The narrator states that Lianshu: “He made himself lonely. Like a silkworm, he spun a cocoon around himself and trapped himself inside it. He should look at life in a more positive way” (Tan, 1994). This is because he did everything he once hated and opposed everything he once supported. As stated by Liang’s grandmother, as told by Liang’s younger brother: “In the past, he was even more afraid of children than of adults, always gentle and soft with them. Recently, however, he has changed completely; he talks more and jokes more. The Liang children like playing with him very much; they run into his room as soon as they have the chance. He invents many games to play with them. Whenever they ask for something, he makes them bark like dogs or bow their heads to the ground before he agrees to buy it” (Tan, 1994).

Fang Xuanyue (*Dragon Boat Festival*) is also a very harmful type of person. Previous scholars have argued that he understands right and wrong and feels anger when seeing elders oppress young people or soldiers beat rickshaw pullers, but when it comes to struggle, he shrinks back and only seeks personal safety. Lu Xun aims to eliminate this weak character, because for him, such people can sometimes be more dangerous than enemies (Giang *et al.*, 2005). Fang Xuanyue has knowledge of right and wrong and feels angry when he sees injustice, but he then uses empty reasoning to keep himself safe. Even when falsely accused or unpaid, he remains silent as long as his personal status and interests are not affected. He even secretly criticizes those who stand up for justice: “The minister falsely accused him of mental illness; as long as his position was not affected, he refused to speak out. His salary had not been paid for more than half a year; as long as he still had enough income from his official position, he refused to ask for it. Not only did he not demand it, but when other teachers united to request payment, he privately thought they were being reckless and complained too much. When he later heard colleagues mocking teachers, he only became slightly annoyed. Afterwards, he convinced himself that his annoyance came from the

government owing him money; unlike other officials, even if they did not teach, they could still remain calm as usual” (Tan, 1994).

To a certain extent, these people are the reason why the enemy can rise and gain dominance. And when the writer strongly calls for the removal of these illnesses, it is also the moment when the idea of healing is established, and the hope for the liberation of the people is further developed. Literature, in Lu Xun’s view, is a knife that directly cuts into the spiritual disease of society-painful but necessary-to open and build the possibility of rebirth. The writer had full faith in a revolution different from the surface-level direction and policy of the Xinhai Revolution. Similarly, the question “What does this mean?” (Tan, 1994) asked by the mother of the revolutionary Xia Yu contains an implied answer to healing. The power of literature is greatly strengthened because Lu Xun was a major thinker of modern China. He himself once asserted that his writing purpose was to ‘expose the spiritual illnesses of society’ in order to awaken people. Therefore, the characters in Lu Xun’s short stories are both vividly individual and symbolic of the social and spiritual issues of an entire era.

3.2.3. Character construction through physical description in Lu Xun’s short stories

From a microscopic detail to the macroscopic generalization of the artistic technique seeing the big from the small, Lu Xun made certain inheritances and innovations. By using specific external details, Lu Xun places within his characters hidden “icebergs”. These may represent the true nature of fate or distinctive personality traits that the writer carefully constructs in an artistic way. As Giang *et al.* (2005) argue, when reading Lu Xun’s short stories, one can see that there is no plot or detail that is too small to grow into something larger, and no feature that is only particular and cannot become universal. All those seemingly small and scattered details are carefully typified and are intended to refer to the broader and more general social reality.

From the observation and recognition of social illness and the situation of Chinese society, especially after the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, Lu Xun deliberately gathered and condensed these realities into one person, a few people, a teahouse, or a village. This is a highly conscious arrangement by the writer in order to express large ideas within the limited scope of a short story.

Seen from the basic theoretical system of early Chinese painting, the concept “using form to express spirit” (yixingxieshen, 以形写神) proposed by Gu Kaizhi refers to the idea that when painting, one should not only pursue the external appearance, but also the inner essence and spirit of the object. In his view, painting form can transmit emotion; this emotion comes from

the painter, and they should also include their understanding of life in the painting (Thuc, 2020). In literature, this technique is used to describe external details in order to highlight the inner soul, personality, demeanor, and temperament of the character, achieving a unity of form and spirit (combination of both).

In Lu Xun's short stories, external details are also used to reveal character personality, similar to classical Chinese fiction. The writer does not describe appearance in a complete or elaborate way but usually selects only a few typical features such as the face, skin color, eyes, posture, or clothing to express the inner nature. In particular, among external details, he pays special attention to the eyes and their subtle changes, which are the most vivid elements in expressing character personality.

Kong Yiji is described as "a tall man with greenish eyes among deep wrinkles, often with several scars, and a messy beard like a tangled heap" and he is also associated with clothing: "Although he wore a long gown, it was both dirty and torn, as if it had not been mended or washed for more than twenty years" (Tan, 1994). This appearance helps reflect his conservative, stubborn, and poor character, showing that he is easily despised and eliminated by society. In particular, the eyes of this failed intellectual highlight his fearfulness and loneliness in the society he lives in.

The narrator in *The Lonely Man* describes Wei Lianshu: "He was small and thin, with a long face. His messy hair, beard, and thick black eyebrows covered almost half of his face" (Tan, 1994). From this description, the image of an introverted, depressed, and lonely intellectual emerges. He appears in the period of the Xinhai Revolution, having partly absorbed bourgeois democratic ideas and still having the potential to rise against feudalism and call for social reform, but he is easily influenced, compromises, and eventually surrenders. If Lü Weifu is also such a type of intellectual but still wants to live, Wei Lianshu completely turns away from life. He can no longer feel pain as a driving force for awakening; he is even willing to do what he once denied and reject the values he once accepted and respected (Ngan *et al.*, 2026). This is the weakness of the petty-bourgeois intellectual of that time. However, readers do not completely hate him, because as Lu Xun suggests, before becoming a person who gradually loses humanity, Wei Lianshu once loved the innocence and purity of children, shown through his "bright eyes shining in the darkness" (Tan, 1994) - the only beautiful detail in his appearance.

Lu Xun clearly depicts the psychological traits and personalities of Chinese female intellectuals: they hold many ideals, dreams, and aspirations. However, when facing failure, they easily become pessimistic, discouraged, and unstable, becoming isolated, drifting away

from their original ideals, and eventually dying both mentally and physically. The character Zijun in *Regret for the Past* represents such a woman. She was influenced by the May Fourth Movement: anti-Confucianism, free love, etc. She came to Quansheng with thoughts not bound by social prejudice in order to pursue her legitimate desire: “My brother belongs to me, no one has the right to interfere in my life” (Tan, 1994). However, from the beginning, Zijun still carried traditional ideas hidden in her subconscious. When hearing about patriarchal family systems, the breaking of old customs, gender equality, and writers like Ibsen, Tagore, Shelley, etc., she nodded in agreement with innocent eyes. At this stage, the female intellectual only agrees in theory. In reality, when Quansheng shows her “a copper-engraved half-length portrait of Shelley cut from a magazine” (Tan, 1994), she only glances at it and “then lowers her head, as if embarrassed. In these aspects, she has probably not yet escaped the constraints of old thinking” (Tan, 1994). Zijun has a round face, slightly pale skin, dimples on her cheeks, thin white arms, wearing a striped cloth shirt and dark trousers, and she often walks into Quansheng’s room with the sound of clattering shoes and a soft smile, revealing her dimples as in her early love period. When Quansheng confesses his pure and passionate love, Zijun’s face turns pale, then gradually blushes, and her eyes are innocent like a child’s, showing a mixed feeling of joy, sadness, surprise, and doubt. When recalling the past, Zijun stares into empty space thoughtfully, her face gentle, and her dimples become deeper. After living with Quansheng for some time, she becomes fatter and her complexion becomes rosier, but she often looks sorrowful, especially when she forces herself to speak and smile, sweating all day, with hair sticking to her forehead and increasingly rough hands. When hearing Quansheng express his feelings, she gives a cold glance but says nothing, her face still sorrowful. When she receives the news that Zijun has lost her job under dim light, her face looks extremely miserable. When it comes to having to send her child Sui away because they cannot support it, her expression becomes more tragic than ever. At night, her tragic expression becomes even colder. Sometimes, that expression also shows a hint of warmth; her eyes suddenly shine again with the innocent joy of the past, but sometimes also show fear and panic. Although she gradually becomes numb, when she realizes that Quansheng is forcing himself to speak and smile, she loses her previous numb calmness and tries to hide it. When Quansheng finally breaks up with her, Zijun sits silently, “her face gradually turned pale, then yellow like a dead person, and in an instant returned to normal, her eyes once again shining with purity and innocence” (Tan, 1994). From these details, especially the eyes, it can be seen that she is very sensitive, pure, and sincere. She is a vulnerable type of character but also knows how to hide her feelings, which reflects the

subtlety of a woman. However, the thousand-year-old feudal burden placed on women means that it is not easy for them to fight to the end. These aspects are clearly shown by Lu Xun through external details, especially the eyes and their rich changes, using the technique of character construction through physical description.

Through physical appearance reflecting personality, the writer highlights the social nature of the characters, contributing to the generalizing power of the system of typical characters in typical situations in Lu Xun's short stories. From there, each character appears with different traits, and each trait reveals or hides certain social and human conditions that need to be cured.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Research shows that although Lu Xun's short stories carry the spirit of innovation in modern literature, they still inherit the technique of constructing character personality through physical description from traditional Chinese novels. However, the writer also introduced his own creativity, especially in the use of external details, in particular the eyes and their subtle changes, to depict inner emotional life and reflect issues related to character personality, which are also personalities representing national characteristics. Through this, the technique of constructing character personality through physical description not only serves the function of creating the aesthetic individuality of characters but also becomes a means of expressing Enlightenment thought and social criticism. From the perspective of poetics combined with the socio-cultural context of early twentieth-century China, it can be affirmed that the art of constructing character personality through physical description is a typical expression of the combination between inheritance and innovation in Lu Xun's short stories, contributing to the artistic value and profound ideological significance of his works.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the research results, it can be seen that further exploration of the artistic techniques for character construction that Lu Xun inherited and creatively developed based on tradition will open new approaches. Through this, it will help clarify more clearly the development of Chinese narrative art from classical to modern literature, as well as the relationship between art and reality in his works. Not only limited to inherited innovation, future studies may also focus on Lu Xun's innovations compared with tradition when contrasted with classical works. A typical example is the discourse nature of character monologues in his short stories, in

order to see the multiple dimensions of both inheritance and innovation in the writer's work, thereby contributing to confirming Lu Xun's pioneering role in modern Chinese literature.

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