

# Where Life Goes Back: On the Pursuit Narrative of Yu Hua's Wencheng

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**Abstract.** Yu Hua's *Wencheng* is centered on the pursuit, with Lin Xiangfu, Ji Xiaomei, and Ah Qiang as the key characters, enacting a legendary story of good and evil. The novel uses three locations of Xi Town, North Hometown and Xili Village to frame the reincarnation narrative, while creating an absurd and bizarre aesthetic mood through narrative gap, while repetitive narrative constructs the pursuit into a stable structure. The specific metaphors and imagery of Lin's pursuit are concretely expressed in the transformation of the ego and superego. In terms of the ego, it is the pursuit for his wife, while the essence is to fill his unconscious dependence on his mother. In terms of superego, Lin's journey to find Mei stops at Xi Town due to his incapability, but also because Xi Town promotes the development of Lin's moral consciousness. The pursuit for Mei's ego weakens, while the pursuit for superego of the highest goodness gradually increases. Yu's pursuit narrative shows the twists and turns of life ethics, presenting a pioneering aesthetic and continuous historical implication.

**Keywords:** Wencheng; Pursuit narrative; Self-awareness; Narrative ethics.

## 1. Introduction

"The theme of 'pursuit' is the ultimate concern for human existence." [1] In *Wencheng*, Yu Hua (hereinafter referred to as the "Yu") "provides two different narrative lines centered on the pursuer and the pursued"[2], thus "returning to an examination of human existence and spiritual condition".[3] It is revealed in the first adventure in *Eighteen Years Old*, go out for a long journey, the pursuit to avenge father's death in *Blood and Plum Blossoms*, or the survival in *To Live* which is mostly in the image of a "wanderer". "Yu's pursuit often has the effect that one has to go to a destination to find another person... His pursuit feeds back into the whole process, and the value is actually in the process." [4] The pursuit of *Wencheng* continues in such narrative form, as Yu completes his inquiry into the life value and the possibilities of narrative in the journey of wandering and reunion. This paper probes into how Yu "spread out the picture of chaos in the early years of the Republic of China when warlords and bandits ran amok and people were in dire straits", [5] and how he showed the turbulence of reality and the good and evil of human nature in the journey of pursuit.

## 2. Reincarnation Narrative – Narrative Gap – Repetitive Narrative

What should be noticed primarily is the spatial recurrence in the novel, as an expressive technique that "can be seen as a necessary means to complete the narrative logic." [6] In the repetitive presented spaces, Xi Town has a unique symbolic implication, which once again highlights Ji Xiaomei's (hereinafter referred to as the "Mei") pursuit for self-identity. Mei became a child bride and lived with the Shen family, then came to the north with Ah Qiang (hereinafter referred to as the "Qiang"), and returned to Xi Town after a brief stay with Lin Xiangfu (hereinafter referred to as the "Lin"). From the beginning to the end, Mei's perception of herself was in a state of confusion. After coming to the Shen family, Mei survived as a slave, and the only way she could identify herself was by wearing flowery clothes, yet it was denied to the greatest extent. Xi Town is important to Lin as well, who decided to stay here after the snowfall, while Mei died due to kneeling. "Mei's name was on the right side of the tombstone, and Lin lied on the left side of the coffin. The two were separated closely." [7] Xi Town carries the spirit of Lin, and buries the body of Mei. The start of the tragedy is "*Wencheng*", while the end is Xi Town. It is noteworthy that another important narrative space, North Hometown, is also of typical significance. For Lin, "birth, adulthood, marriage, and death" are the basic facts of

life with the fruitful values. Lin pursued Mei in order to bring her back to North Hometown, underlining a latent dependence and obedience to the peace of life. In addition, Xili Village played an irreplaceable and important role for Mei and Qiang, and her departure was the starting point of Mei's life as well as her drift. Back to Xili Village due to divorce, Mei was down in the dumps, while leaving again was because of Qiang's appearance in Xili. He eloped with Mei, who had considered herself as Qiang's wife since then. Xi Town, North Hometown, and Xili Village, as the three key spatial points of the novel's reincarnation narrative, carry the trajectory of the main characters' fates and the storyline, enriching the novel's narrative in historical and aesthetic connotations.

The second is the setting of narrative gap in the novel. The narrative gap "is a writing without writing, an expression without expression." [8] There are always gaps in the novel's narrative in key places, creating unlimited room for interpretation. For example, Lin's pursuit had different transformations in the early and late stages, mainly to find his wife in the early stage, but gradually changed to search for his spiritual home where his self belonged to in the late stage. It is difficult for the tranquility of North Hometown to reflect such kind of warm color, while only contradiction and conflict reflect the brilliance of human nature. Therefore, the author's setting for Lin's pursuit in the late stage is transformed into a pursuit for his spiritual home. But the result is not directly pointed out and leaves it blank. Another example is the speculation on Mei's identity in the main chapters, Mei's real attitude toward Lin and Qiang, and the reason Qiang decided to elope with Mei. "The discourse of 'absence' becomes more prominent instead, which makes the discourse of 'presence' lose its explanatory authority. The vacancy of absence appears secretive in anticipation of replenishment, and it throws the existing order into a quandary." [9] The role of the vacancy lies in its insufficiency, and the reader will unconsciously fill the vacancy based on his own experience and personal cultural background in reading, thus triggering a series of thoughts on the relationship between the characters.

In addition, the repetitive narrative in the novel should be attached importance to. As Hillis Miller said, "All of novels have a repetitive structure in one way or another, or even in many ways at the same time." [10] The overall structure of *Wencheng* is a repetitive narrative, with two chapters related to Lin and Mei as the main characters. The main chapters focus on Lin's experiences and psychological activities to develop the narrative. The supplement chapters focus on Mei and intersperse with the narrative of Qiang. "The combination of dual time and space in the novel's narrative turns into a dual textual transformation." [11] The movement of Lin from north to south in the main chapters relied on his relationship with Mei for the purpose of finding his wife, while the movement of Mei and Qiang depended on their relationship for escape. From the perspective of Lin, to marry Mei forever was his hope, while the reality was Mei's marriage fraud. The opposition between reality and imagination expanded Lin's expectation of pursuit for Mei. On the other hand, it gathered the betrayal he had experienced, so the only way out was to pursue for Mei. From the perspective of Mei, her marriage with Qiang was an established fact, but her love for Lin was also a truth, and such opposition led to her daughter abandonment for Lin. "The supplement is a complementary narrative to the main chapters, and is another channel to the truth. The rhetoric of *Wencheng* can only be transformed and transferred in the confrontation, rift and conflict between the two texts." [12]

### 3. Self-Awareness -Superego Personality -Human Glory

Freud believed that the ego is essentially a "product of civilization" that "tries its best to make us a moral person"[13]. And "the superego represents the moral imperative"[14] which "concentrates all the noble moral ideas"[15] Lin's "pursuit" in the text has a specific metaphor and imagery, which is related to Lin's sense of self [16] as the transformation of the ego and superego. The ego reveals the reason why Lin necessarily pursued Mei, while the superego reveals the key role played by Xi Town as the image of *Wencheng* in Lin's pursuit.

Lin's pursuit is, in a deeper sense, to fill his unconscious dependence on his mother. One of the reasons is the imprint left on him by his mother as a child and the young Liu Fengmei, which is

regarded as an Oedipus complex that is "the emotional experience of children towards their parents".[17] " There are many Oedipal literary works found all over the world. "[18] After the death of his mother, "Oedipus complex" was therefore once silently suppressed by Lin. When Mei plucked the loom, it arose Lin's repressed unconscious from his mother, and his self-consciousness was satisfied as the past. If the satisfaction had been short-lived, it might not have been strong enough to sustain his belief to pursue for Mei later. But the days with Mei fully exposed Lin's unconsciousness, so Lin would have put into reality. On the other hand, the miss of Liu Fengmei in his youth left a regret in Lin's mind, which was filled by Mei. Lin had already given up Mei, but the pregnant Mei returned to Lin's home and left her daughter behind, satisfying Lin's sense of "offspring". Life is not only the satisfaction of desire by a sensual object, but also is satisfied in the abandonment of a self-consciousness to another self-consciousness or life." [19]These three levels of satisfaction are all due to Mei, and Lin's self-consciousness thus completely identifies with her, which is why Lin decides to pursue her.

The second reason is the relation between Lin and the Tian brothers, which is divided into two parts. One is the relation between the master and the servant, and the other is the "father-son relation".[20] Yu once said that he wanted to rewrite a Bible story of a rich man and his servant. In the text, Lin was the rich man, a man of the highest goodness, while the Tian brothers were the "reverse writing" of the servant, whose arrogance turned into the loyalty in the text. North Hometown was Lin's start, and only when he dealt with his hometown could he leave at ease, while the Tian brothers solved the problems very well. On the other hand, Lin's father died when he was five years old, and the Tian brothers assumed a certain degree of "fatherhood" in Lin's growth, which he lacked for a long time in his life. Compared with Mei, who carried the mission of "finding his mother", the Tian brothers as servants and "fathers" hardly played much of a role in stopping Lin's pursuit. Therefore, the story of Lin's pursuit is bound to happen after Mei's departure.

Another reason why Lin's pursuit for Mei ends in Xi Town is that the experience of Xi Town gives Lin a development of moral consciousness. In other words, his ego personality gradually weakens in the long pursuit for Mei, but his superego personality gradually increases in the pursuit of the highest goodness. As a concretization of the imagery of "Wencheng", the experience of Xi Town makes Lin's ego consciousness transcend the only focus on the practical advantages and disadvantages. His consciousness no longer takes moral behavior seriously, but instead expresses itself as a realization of the highest goodness. Lin felt more spiritual recognition from Chen Yongliang and Gu Yimin. Under the recognition, Lin's conscience gradually developed with the strength of beauty and kindness. The suffering and warmth are everywhere in Wencheng, and the beauty and goodness that Lin represents in the various sufferings he undergoes always endow the reader with strengths for redemption. In the author's portrayal, Lin is not only the representative of conscience, but also the embodiment of the highest goodness. His process of realizing goodness is not only related to the people he meets, but also closely related to the events he experiences in Xi Town. The story of Wencheng takes place in the late Qing Dynasty and the early years of the Republic of China, when society was in turmoil, and natural and man-made disasters existed, but Lin's story in Xi Town gives warmth to the sufferings. As the readers read the novel, they are touched by the warmth of Chen Yongliang's family in the snowfall, observe the goodness from "monk" and his mother, and witness the determination of the people to defend their town. During the decades in Xi Town, Lin's moral consciousness tended to be perfect, and there was a reversal between the ideological perfection and the realistic consideration of pros and cons, which is most evident in Lin's rescue of Gu Yimin. In the process of achieving the highest goodness, the consideration of moral behavior is already superfluous. Lin, who was full of idealism, finally found his home in Xi Town. In his eyes, it is no longer a stop for his fruitless pursuit for Mei. Just as the novel said, "Lin decided to return to Xi Town. His daughter needed her mother, and he needed Mei ... He would wait for Mei to appear in Xi Town day after day." [21] He regarded it as "Wencheng", which becomes the end of Lin's peace of mind.

#### 4. Ethical Landscape-Aesthetic Implication-Historical Connotation

As Ding Fan said, "There are three key words in the value judgment of novels, that is 'historical', 'aesthetic' and 'human'. "[22] The pursuit narrative of Wencheng then shows the soft strength of history, aesthetics, humanity and ethics. First and foremost, the ethical construction in the novel serves as an inner driving force to develop the plots, enriching the emotional connotation while transcending the conflicts between the good and the evil. Since 1990s, the narrative theory has gradually weakened, and pioneering writers have faced different transformations. "The murderous and bloody expression by Yu has almost faded away, presenting a perceptual creation based on observation." [23] In terms of *To Live*, Yu argued that, "Nobility is not the pure beauty, but the transcendence of understanding all things, treating good and evil equally, and looking at the world with sympathy.[24] The "equal treatment" of good and evil in *To Live* gives the novel a modern aesthetic connotation. The ethical relationship between good and evil in Wencheng is no longer a simple dichotomy, as the novel is marked by the "passage of ten years" and Lin's pursuit is divided into two stages. In the second half of his life, the misfortune intersected with frequent departures and deaths, but the main idea of Wencheng is still the good of humanity. Taking Qiang and Mei as an example, from the proposition that "one's development depends on all other people with whom he interacts directly or indirectly",[25] Qiang's pursuit began with Mei in search of detachment and rebellion. He was under the oppressive control of his mother until he escaped from Xi Town with Mei, who actually represents an important part of Qiang's mind as a non-repressed, peaceful existence. When Qiang's mother chased Mei out of the Shen family, Qiang's initial reaction was still towards numbness. Although he was reluctant to leave Mei, he still chose to return to the suppression of filial piety. On the last night before Mei was divorced, what Qiang did, on the one hand, represented a farewell and a return to the suppressed anger, while tried to divorce with her by excuses. The last night of Mei's uncomplaining, the clothes she left behind after she left always impacted Qiang's mind and soul. In the end, "Qiang woke up from his sleep ..... to the dock at the east gate"[26], Qiang chose to leave with Mei, which represents his detachment and rebellion against his family. In the novel, the two ethical forces of good and evil are mutually reinforcing and extinguishing. Liu Xiaofeng has argued that narrative ethics "raises questions about life feeling through the narrative of personal experience, and develops specific moral consciousness and ethical demands." [27] Wencheng focuses on the ups and downs of individuals, their perseverance and warmth, and portrays an ethical picture about the life feeling through the artistic punishment, death and sin.

Secondly, aesthetic connotation of the novel should be paid attention to. Wencheng is able to "display the aesthetic connotation of modernity, but in fact it cannot be separated from a high level of narrative technique." [28] In Wencheng, the pioneering elements are back again. With a methodical narrative rhythm, heterogeneous language rhetoric, and rich and colorful narrative techniques, Yu built an artistic "Wencheng". The violent and bloody description of Zhang Yifu's behavior in the text reminds one of Ruan Jinwu's death in *Blood and Plum Blossoms*. Gu Yimin's tragic torture reminds one of Dongshan's reaction to the acid thrown on him in *Hard to Escape*. The combination of violent narrative and lyrical mechanism makes the warm tone of the novel seem deviant, and the fragility of life becomes an emotional allegory under the cruelty of the environment. The gentle characters in the novel, such as Lin, are instead given a more sympathetic tone by the violence and bloodshed. "Although the pioneering narrative has been significantly suppressed in the creation of novels in the new century, there are still some writers who persist in the artistic endeavor of pioneering narrative." [29] After the 1990s, a large number of pioneering writers transformed, and "the isolated literary landscape initially established by the narrative revolution was soon dissolved by a mass narrative and a consumer discourse." [30] Yu's texts in the new era attempt to respond to this dissolution, and amidst the trend of superficial life writing and secular desire, Yu has developed a natural aesthetic path through his unique narrative aesthetics and rich emotions.

On the other hand, Yu's story in Wencheng is a kind of "national fable", which is "a story about the fate of an individual, a fable about the impact on popular culture and society in the Third World." [31] The story of Lin's pursuit is not simply about the superficial pursuit for his wife, but also about

the deeper pursuit for faith, righteousness and love of the Chinese people in the historical tradition. In the context of the turbulent times, Lin's lifelong pursuit embodies the pursuit for national traditions for beauty and humanity that revolves around the depths of the national spirit. *Wencheng* thus evolves into "a text generated by the interaction of literature, memory and history." In other words, it is "a literary expression, a representation of collective memory and a distortion of individual imagination." [32] More specifically, *Wencheng* does not set a specific year, but only a general chronological framework. In the novel, "ten years passed quickly" and "after the deconstruction of the Qing Dynasty" indicate that the story mainly takes place around the year of Gengzi at the end of the Qing Dynasty. Yu mentioned that "writers of our generation have a great ambition to write a story of the last one hundred years, if not in one work, then in several works." [33] Other works by Yu have similar historical connotations. For example, *To Live* mainly deals with the 1940s, *XU San-guan Selling Blood* is set around the 1950s and 1960s, and *Brothers* is the 1970s and 1980s. The background of the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China (i.e., the beginning of the twentieth century) for *Wencheng* has its own specific significance. It is the best time in terms of its compatibility with the expression of "pursuit". In the text, the author clearly designates Lin's identity as a late Qing gentry, that is, "a group with independent social status and multiple social functions." [34] From the perspective of the old society, the stubbornness of the gentry class, rooted in the countryside because of its unique status and identity, would be extremely strong. The main chapters do not give any account of Mei's story. Therefore, it is a fact for Lin that he was cheated out of marriage by Mei. The gentry in the old society would never pawn their fields and family assets to find Mei, thus the text-based pursuit collapsed directly, which is obviously against the author's creative will. It is also unreasonable to set the time backward. If the story is set backward, Lin's economic situation determines that he will be well educated in the new society, which "strongly influences the education model that has deeply rooted among the people." [35] It will greatly weaken Lin's moral consciousness, then Lin's purpose of pursuing the highest goodness of his own self will also be difficult to achieve. Therefore, the author's setting of the text in time has its depth of consideration. The environment of the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China is based on the intertwining of the old society and the new society, the turbulence and the calm. Therefore, Lin's pursuit reflects the suffering and warmth of the times and the humanity under the historical circumstance.

## 5. Conclusion

"Yu's *Wencheng* is a tragedy that takes 'pursuit' and 'affection' to write about emotions that transcend blood relations and highlight the supreme goodness of humanity in a chaotic world, with narrative of 'pure' character." [36] With the help of techniques such as reincarnation narrative, narrative gaps and repetition narrative, *Wencheng* constructs a narrative centered on "pursuit". It coalesces the waning and vitality, suffering and warmth of time and space in its content, and builds a rich and artistic world by virtue of its pioneering technique and national allegory. The pursuit narrative of *Wencheng* not only links to the times and society, but also reflects Yu's thoughts on the creation of novels. The perspectives of ego, superego and self-awareness reflect the multiple factors imposed on individual lives by the times. The interweaving of multiple ethics in the pursuit process also endows the novel with an epic color, while the aesthetic connotation of modernity is also revealed by narrative. The poetic world of *Wencheng*, which is forged by the structure of historical time and space, the writing of the ups and downs of individual destinies, is interwoven with unique aesthetic experiences. It reveals reflections in contradictions and struggles in life, and demonstrates Yu's unique creative inspiration, spiritual mystery and unique charm.

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