

Characterization of Intellectuals in Short Stories of Nam Cao (Vietnam) and Lu Xun (China)

Van-Dau Quach (Wendou Guo)

School of Chinese Language and Literature, Hunan University, Hunan, China
Military Academy of Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam

Nam Cao and Lu Xun are among high-profile writers who gain wide appreciation. The movements of literary assert this over the latter half of recent century in our country. That reality persistently points us to an urgent need for researches on Nam Cao and Lu Xun. Tints of literary worldviews of Nam Cao and Lu Xun, though upon which numberless research works, both domestic and foreign, have provided multi-directional insights and exploration of artistic creativities, remain misevaluated. Bich Thu, the author of *Nam Cao, His Life and Legacies*, counted out 191 articles and books themed Nam Cao. They were edited by writers of Nam Cao's generation namely Nguyen Huy Tuong, Nguyen Dinh Thi, To Hoai and Nguyen Hong, and even distinguished scholars such as Ha Minh Duc, Phong Le and Nguyen Dang Manh, so on. Regarding Lu Xun, there is no denying the fact of his brilliant artistic ideology. Although Vietnamese readers have gained a late knowledge of him for just a half of century, his name is laid somewhere in the heart of our people, integrally and consistently. Vietnam's reader generations restlessly learn about and research on Lu Xun. A pioneering merit badge should be rewarded to the renowned literary critic Dang Thai Mai, for his introduction and translation of Lu Xun to Vietnamese readers since 1943. The most interesting coincidence of Nam Cao and Lu Xun is that their profiles are imbued with the characters in their compositions. Mentioning Lu Xun cannot help a reference to AQ, meanwhile the name of Nam Cao apparently recalls a Philistine Chi. AQ as well as Philistine Chi have become characters of the society's spiritual life and long live with the eternal brilliance of their two creators. That coincidence draws countless number of researchers. The "matching point", referring to the subject of farmers and intellectuals, between Nam Cao and Lu Xun's works has been explored to some certain extent. This elicitly invites us for deeper studies. The author of this article, in response to such invitation, delves into the subject with respect to characterization of intellectuals in Nam Cao and Lu Xun's short stories.

Keywords: Nam Cao, Lu Xun, intellectuals, characterization, short stories

Introduction

The world of intellectuals in short stories of these writers are created in many "matching points". The two persons of letters generally told the life of an intellectual against the backdrop of a family, pub or boarding house. Nam Cao and Lu Xun normally took intellectuals as the main characters, or the protagonist of their stories. Intellectuals, holding the soul of a story, were linked to the events developed in the plot. Two realist

Van-Dau Quach (Wendou Guo), Doctor, School of Chinese Language and Literature, Hunan University, Hunan, China; Military Academy of Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam.

writers investigated the mentality of characters through harsh challenges, in attempt to discover and analyze the personality of a society's class. Consequently, Nam Cao and Lu Xun's short stories had no hero or villain intellectual. Even *Hoang*, in a Nam Cao's 1948 composition *The Eyes*, was named a "reactionary" character but not a villain.

Lu Xun whereas characterized his works in purpose of "curing" people's spirit with inveterate illnesses, which were mentally resulted from long-established feudalism and persisted as a national contemporary tumour. His pen thus stayed alert to keep analyzing and dissecting. Society's diseases, attributed to human's defects, were emphasized and assigned to profound yet dramatic comprehensive meaning and philosophies. Characters of Nam Cao and Lu Xun's works, distinguished from each other in such aspects as above said, both evidenced the high level of characterization, not only comprehensive but also specific and of socio-historical subtlety.

The writers assigned those characters to their artistic perception and aesthetical ideology upon human. Therefore, the characters were stick to the composition's theme and confided with writers' ideologies and sentiments. Basing on the figural structure of characters, genres of protagonist in Nam Cao and Lu Xun's writings can be pointed out as follow: typical character; individualized character; ideological character. Thorough comprehension about the uniqueness of such characters plays an integral part of research on Nam Cao and Lu Xun's intellectual characterization.

Typical Character

Typical is a general term referring to objects of the same type. "Typical character is the focal demonstration of social and moral virtues of a certain kind of human in a certain period. This character aims to generalize the category of personalities and hence is called typical" (Dang, 1985). Nam Cao met Lu Xun at this point. Two writers of two generations and two countries are matched on kindred subjects of teachers and writers, when it came to intellectuals. This "match" was coincidence and explainable. Both writers had intellectual background, teaching experience and one-time high profile of literary composition. Form of intellectuals, writer or teacher, in fact, constructs just the facade of their works. Only the internal structure primes us with the conscience that in Nam Cao's short stories, typical characters were of human figure.

Lu Xun's short stories were also told with obsolete intellectuals and new intellectuals being confused among life choices. Nam Cao characterized poor intellectuals of multiple backgrounds. *Dien (Bright Moon)* was a private school teacher who harboured literary aspiration but lost his job and relied on his wife upon school's dissolution. *Hai (Off Track)* was bound to poverty for another reason. He was a writer living with his wife and children. His weakness and pulmonary heart disease prevented him from working and confined him to an austerity with the theory of "moderation". *Ho (Redundant Life)* was agonized by the burdensome family with a depressed wife and young children, as he lagged behind the race for livelihood. In *Sweeping House Lesson*, a countryside writer's family gradually fell into difficulty, destitution and indigestion, eventually the situation of one-meal-per-day extreme poverty. The babysitter was dismissed. All white clothes were dyed brown against lack of soap. More heartbreaking images featured a five aged child holding her younger brother like a cat slovenly dragging a mouse and getting panicked for being beaten because of her inability to sweep the floor. Such stories are just among the evidences of our argument.

Pre-revolution (1945) poor intellectual was the focus of Nam Cao's composition. His intelligent knowledge about disadvantaged intellectual families in cities and countryside, especially his own experiences, enabled Nam Cao to select sharp features and build typical circumstances for his character to struggle in. *Hai* in

Off Track, though caught pulmonary heart disease, needed to eat for living. He once said “Soon death means yet to die. But if I didn’t teach, it will come to instant death, because no one can live without eating” (Nguyen, 2001, p. 87). He was thence “off track” to beg for doctor’s affirmation of health situation in order to continue his work. When meeting Thu, his old friend and being treated with alcohol and a night of *Tru* singing, Hai was “off track” again to enjoy all entertainment. After satisfied, he turned back to his theory of “moderation” to fit his conditions.

Nam Cao’s realistic style mingled with satire has created characters shuffling in adversities: pulmonary heart disease contract yet teaching; abstinence yet drinking and *Tru* singing. That contradiction triggered a laugh of bitterness and pity, and a consciousness of how diabolic the poverty was. It was wicked and at the same time mocking and ridiculing human, banishing them to a half-dying life amid a pauperized society. Poverty pushed intellectuals’ families to tearful life. Nam Cao selectively put the genuine stuffs of life into his works, in the right place and at the right time.

Nam Cao’s poor intellectual characters were structured more complexly. He carried out omni-directional discovery of their personality in seek of their nature. They respected dignity, which was though unfaithfully threatened and trampled. They abundantly nurtured ambitions and dreams that were unreachable. They profusely nursed goodwill but behaved pessimistically sometimes. Such characters as Ho (Redundant Life), Hai (Off Track), the no name writers in *Laughing and Sweeping House Lesson* apparently revealed more diversified personalities and internal conflicts. They were passive before hardship yet self-conscious of their “unwanted living”. For that reason, Nam Cao’s poor intellectual protagonists were always mentally nagged and tormented. Even if the stuffy dark society with pincer jaws of colonists and feudalism gripped them in beggary, their conscience kept rising to struggle, in the least sense that they strived to maintain human’s virtues, the love between husband and wife and between dad and children. The resemblance and difference between Nam Cao and Lu Xun’s intellectual characterization have been proved in that way.

Individualized Characters

Individualized character is a complicated type of character. As mentioned above, personality is deemed the primary object of literary comprehension. This “personality” term is assigned to a broad sense. However, not all literary character can reflect the structure of personality. Therefore, in a narrow sense, personality is described as an individualized person, an individual with outstanding personalities. An individualized character is carved from not only this and that social attributes which are countable, but also the inter-relations between such attributes, between attributes and the surroundings and situation.

An individualized character is normally imbued with internal conflicts, absurdities and transformations. The individualization is consequently self-developed and the character is not merely homogenous with itself. “On the other hand, building typical personalities which are both individualized and typified at the same time is a required standard of realism—as said by Engels” (Phuong, 1997, pp. 288-289).

This is in fact the forte of two mentioned realist writers, who pursued sturdily the exploration of human psyche. In *The Death of Muc*, Du was a young intellectual. Coming back from a long journey, his soul remained pure and emotional. He held a secret sadness for the death of an old black dog. He released his dream-teeming soul under the hometown moon and beautiful scenery. The figure of Du is similar to such young intellectuals as Dien (Bright Moon) and Ho (Redundant Life), etc., and one-time Nam Cao himself, whose

hearts were just above student-aged and overflowing with ambitions and aspirations. Du's long journey closely resembled Nam Cao's trip to Sai Gon.

Through such ventures, Nam Cao himself and his young intellectuals tasted the bitter failures at the threshold of life. Nam Cao had proved his intimate knowledge of intelligentsia, since he characterized them into life-like persons who bore souls, thoughts, torments and agonizing choices between good and bad, lofty and ignoble, optimistic and pessimistic, so on, in different situations. First of all, intellectuals in Nam Cao's short stories felt great fondness for literature and identified themselves in their painful work. Dien (Bright Moon) would rather earn five dongs for living by his pen than take a job which earned him hundreds of dong per month.

Meanwhile, Ho (Redundant Life) "ground himself down in passionate fondness for literature" (Dang, 2002b, p. 74). Nam Cao characters came under enormous strains, just like what happened in real life. Dien (Bright Moon) lost his teaching job because of school's winding up and had to rely on his wife in his hometown. Dien wrote, but "writing for those long years, Dien earned no money" (*Nam Cao*, 1997, p. 101). The poverty invited countless troubles and misfortunes: Dien's father left home. Dien's mother toiled away as a hired porter. His younger sister worked as house maid. Dien failed to afford his own family, not mention to giving his mother any help. "Dien's mind had been swarmed with trivial worries" and bound with money matter all the times. It is such exposure to penury that revealed the mentality and personality of characters.

Truly so, the family burden, especially an utilitarian and philistine life style of the wife, who heaped scolding on her children, evoked in Dien a thought that he was useless. Dien's sentiment for her was just compassion, a pity but not a love. That was why Dien once thought of running away. Run away to stay fresh in soul. Dien would do anything to earn his bread. Then he would calm down and write. Only runaway helped Dien to find "a graceful silhouette" that might give him a passionate love. The writer persisted in the last legs of his exploration into character's pessimistic feelings. He gave a veracious description of a coward man who wanted to flee family burden and discard his conscience to follow a selfish lifestyle in seek of a vain air castle love. Character's psyche was not a downstream movement. Nam Cao showed his subtle and profound understanding about human inner world. Dien witnessed his wife "fagging away all day", "his little daughter crying breathlessly" and "the elder daughter soiled with snotty nose mucous and saliva" whereas he himself was useless and could not lighten their burden (Dang, 1969).

Nam Cao's characters were dogged by tragedies, in both terms of situation and mentality. Ho became sullen, bad-tempered and went mad towards his wife, children and himself. That exhibited a rational psychological movement, in respect of the situation. Nam Cao's sharp pen delved into his characters' innermost feelings, and structured the figure of intellectuals with sequences of internal conflicts. Ho, as well as numberless other poor intellectuals, who were good hearted and talented yet ground down by money worry and could not get better off, had to let a lifetime unused. Ho, Dien (Bright Moon) and their heaps of contemporaries were conscious of their "redundant lives". The poverty-stricken intellectual in *Laughing* bore the same feelings with Ho. He feared of "being dead while living. A dull death of those quite truly living but using their living for nothing" (WANG, 2002). The sense of a redundant life was precisely the most tormenting feeling and most enormous mental tragedy for poor intellectuals under the pincers of colonists and feudalism before the August Revolution (1945). Lu Xun, the master of short stories, also mingled his individualized characters with the structure of typical characters. "The Outcry and Wandering", which were composed between 1918 and 1927, were evidences for this.

This period of time followed in the wake of China's failure in 1911 Revolution. The country was seething with a new wave of democratic revolution, which was led by the communists and spearheaded the strongholds of feudalism and invading imperialists. New intellectuals found their historic role in receiving the new opportunities of age. But what would they do when facing life choices? The intelligentsia described in Lu Xun's stories meticulously reflected this social phenomenon through each character's personality. Fang xian in "Duanwu festival" was a kind of intellectual who satisfied with what he had. He avoided rubbing against mandarins since bourgeoisie compromised with the feudalists.

Working as a teacher, he so cringed himself with the theory of "the same", that students misunderstood of his career as a teacher concurrently amandin. To be undisturbed, he dared to request for nothing. Even though people wronged him for being psycho, he just kept silent. Despite his over-half-year salary being unpaid, he kept silent. He kept silent in seek of peacefulness, but the livelihood burden never stop disturbing him. There were only two dishes in his daily meal. Thanks to the colleagues who rushed to the officials for the debt and got crushed head by the soldiers, he, without any effort, had his salary paid. The payment was like salt tossed into sea, compared to his debts. New Year comes, the poverty of his family had been pestering him to see the children did not really enjoy a happy life, so he always feels embarrassed, pathetic. That time was when Fang xian had no gut to mention his once theory of "the same". In fact, he harboured a discontent toward the government and was full of pent-up resentment to social injustice against his benefits.

Conclusion

Summing up, with individualized characters, Nam Cao and Lu Xun had diversely and abundantly built their world of intelligentsia. Their matching point attributes to a very typical characterization of "redundant life". The circumstances where incurred a "redundant life", the greatest tragedy of intellectuals, were caused by a pauperized society which confined them to the poverty with no way out. Lu Xun gave "redundant life" personality another shade of characterization that was "self-satisfied" character, whose vicious circle symbolized the trend of quiet-seeking, solitude, day-dreaming and isolation among some intellectuals at that time.

Reference

- Anh, D. (28th April, 1991). Lu Xun—Master of novel. *Newspaper of Times Knowledge*.
- Dang, T. M. (1969). *Path to study and research*. Hanoi: Literature Publishing House.
- Dang, T. M. (1981). *Selected works of Lu Xun*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Dang, T. M. (1985). *Memories of youth*. Hanoi: New Work Publisher.
- Dang, T. M. (2001). *Lu Xun—An example of struggler*. Hanoi: National Literature Publishing House.
- Dang, T. M. (2002a). *Selected works of Nam Cao* (Vol. 1). Hanoi: Literature Publishing House.
- Dang, T. M. (2002b). *Selected works of Nam Cao* (Vol. 2). Hanoi: Literature Publishing House.
- Ho, S. H. (2000). Chinese literature in Vietnam's universities. *Newspaper of Education and Times*.
- Luong, D. T. (1997). Lu Xun and Us. *Journal of Literature*.
- Nam Cao* (Vol. 3). (1997). Hanoi: National Literature Publishing House.
- Nguyen, D. M. (2000). Vietnamese writers—Images and styles. Ho Chi Minh City: Youth Publishing House.
- Nguyen, D. M. (2001). *Writers, ideology and style*. Hanoi: Literature Publishing House.
- Nguyen, M. C. (1997). Figure of realism personality. *Journal of Literature*, 98.
- Phuong, L. (1997). *Literary theories*. Hanoi: Education Publishing House.
- QIAN, L. K. (1999). *An understanding about spirit*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Truong, C. (1981). Lu Xun in Chinese cultural revolution. *Journal of Literature*, 34.

WANG, D. B. H. (2002). *Wandering*. Beijing: Social Sciences Publishing House.

WANG, F. R. (2006). *Historical and contemporary situation of study on Chinese Lu Xun*. Publishing city: Fujian Educational Publisher.

ZHANG, M. Y. (2001). *Chinese history of Lu Xun study. A look back on Chinese cultural phenomenon in 20th Century*. Guangdong: Guangdong Educational Publisher.

ZHOU, D. L. (2005). *Chinese modern history of literature*. Beijing: Peking University Press.