



Homesickness Metaphor under Family-Nation Isomorphism: A Literary Analysis of Lu Xun's *My Old Home*

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Abstract

“Family-nation isomorphism”, as a fundamental governance paradigm in traditional Chinese society, profoundly influences spatial narrative strategies in literary creation [1]. Taking the metaphorical system in Lu Xun's *My Old Home* as the research object, this paper discovers through close textual reading that the novel constructs a “town-countryside-exile” tripartite spatial structure, projecting the decline of individual families onto the modern predicament of the nation-state. The study reveals that Lu Xun accomplishes a dual deconstruction through the “homecoming” perspective: first, dismantling the idealized rural utopia through the protagonist's disillusioning homecoming; second, exposing contradictions within enlightenment modernity through failed interclass communication. This narrative strategy, with “family-nation isomorphism” as its surface and “critique of national character” as its core, marks the groundbreaking reconstruction of traditional family-nation narrative paradigms in May Fourth New Literature.

Subject Areas

Archaeology

Keywords

My Old Home, Family-Nation Isomorphism, Critique of National Character, Metaphor

1. Introduction

“Family-Nation Isomorphism” is a concept that posits a strong analogy or identity

between the family and the nation. In traditional Chinese society, the family was often seen as a microcosm of the nation, with familial values and structures reflecting those of the state. This paradigm shaped societal norms and influenced literary expressions, particularly in the realm of homesickness narratives.

Lu Xun's *My Old Home* serves as a quintessential example of how this concept is manifested in Chinese literature. *My Old Home* (1921), written during China's turbulent transition from empire to republic, uses the narrator's bittersweet homecoming to interrogate the failures of modernity. While existing scholarship often analyzes the text through postcolonial or Marxist lenses, this study argues that the story's power stems from its subversion of "family-nation isomorphism"—the Confucian doctrine where familial hierarchy models state governance. By mapping the decay of three spatial realms (urban exile/provincial town/rural hinterland) onto the collapse of familial and national identities, Lu Xun exposes how both feudal traditions and imported enlightenment ideals perpetuate spiritual enslavement. This paper pioneers a spatial-metaphorical reading to reveal how Lu Xun's narrative dismantles the "homecoming" trope in Chinese literature, transforming personal nostalgia into a radical critique of national character.

2. The Burdened Homesickness

The text opens with the visual imagery of decay: "Under the pale yellow sky, several desolate villages lay scattered near and far. [2]" Notably, Lu Xun chooses seasonal features such as "deep winter, overcast skies, and cold winds" as starting narrative points. This temporal and spatial setting suggests a dual crisis: it is both the end of the natural rhythm and the transition between old and new cultural cycles.

1) Human Suffering

The misery in *My Old Home* manifests through the degradation of different individuals and the decline of their respective families.

Lu Xun deploys two contrasting metaphors for Mrs. Yang: the "Beancurd Beauty" evokes her youthful allure as a rural vendor, where her beauty symbolized feudal femininity's economic utility. Thirty years later, the "Compass" metaphor operates on three levels: physically, her bent posture mirrors the instrument's angularity, a bodily distortion from bound feet and manual labor; Morally, just as compasses calculate trajectories, her scheming to steal furniture reflects survival arithmetic under poverty; Sociohistorically, this scientific tool's misapplication to human characterization mirrors China's superficial modernity—adopting Western instruments (compasses/enlightenment ideals) without altering feudal mentalities. Her devolution from aesthetic objects to dehumanized tool epitomizes how family-nation isomorphism persists through modernity: women's bodies remain sites for negotiating tradition and progress.

Tremendous changes have also taken place in Jun-tu, a childhood playmate. In terms of physical appearance, Lu Xun meticulously portrays Jun-tu's poverty-stricken family and the hardships of struggling to make a living through his "grey

and wrinkled face,” “rough, clumsy, and cracked hands like bark,” and “worn-out fur cap” and “thin cotton clothes.” Spiritually, Lu Xun emphasizes that in his childhood memories, Jun-tu, who had a broad vision and strong abilities, was energetic and more “dominant” compared to “me,” who lived in a high-walled and deep-courtyard house. However, now he is “like a stone statue.” The multitude of pressures, including many children, famine, heavy taxes, soldiers, bandits, officials, and gentry, have made him “suffer like a puppet.” The transition from childhood vitality to the current statue-like stillness is the result of extreme suffering inflicted by life.

What about “me,” who witnesses all this suffering? This return to the hometown is a farewell to the hometown for “me.” “Our old house, where we have lived together for many years, has already been sold collectively to another family. The deadline for handing over the house is only this year, so we must leave the familiar old house and our hometown before the first day of the new year and move to a foreign land where I earn my living.” For a family that integrates officials, merchants, and gentry, being forced to sell the ancestral home is a humiliating choice. In the “Preface to Shouts,” Lu Xun refers to this experience as “taking a different path and fleeing to a foreign land.” The word “flee” demonstrates Lu Xun’s distress and despair at that time. What plunges “me” into hardship is not only the economic situation but also spiritual confusion. “Me” even hopes to use the imagined and nostalgic *My Old Home* as a modern means of nostalgia to achieve self-redemption, but ultimately only despair remains, because the hometown has become a place of irretrievable decay, sadness, and embarrassment.

2) Interpersonal Indifference

Whether it is “me,” Mrs. Yang, or Jun-tu, we are all disappointed people. Despite our shared disappointment, we remain estranged from each other. The indifference in *My Old Home* is embodied in the estrangement among people. This estrangement stems from calculation and class.

Mrs. Yang begins her calculation from the moment “I” return to the hometown: Verbally, she uses successive “ethical” questions like “I once held you in my arms,” “You’ve become a high official now,” and “The richer you get, the more unwilling you are to let go of a penny, and the more unwilling you are to let go, the richer you get,” attempting to force “me” to give her all the furniture and belongings using one-sided ethical rules and bandit-like logic. In terms of actions, besides openly stealing behaviors such as “slipping my mother’s pair of gloves into her waistband,” she also falsely accuses Jun-tu of stealing and hiding dishes, staging a farce of crying “stop thief” while being the thief herself.

The estrangement between “me” and Jun-tu is class-based. Even though “my” family has declined and is no longer as prosperous as before, Jun-tu is still categorized as a representative of slave mentality. Lu Xun describes the childhood innocence and fun between “me” and Jun-tu in an extremely lyrical and poetic tone. However, when they meet again thirty years later, the respect and the word “master” completely draw a line between them, resulting in a spiritual “farewell.”

The profound understanding of estrangement among people in *My Old Home* is not only expressed through the metaphor of a “thick barrier” but also written by Lu Xun: “I thought: although there is such a barrier between Jun-tu and myself, the children still have much in common, for wasn’t Hung-erh thinking of Shui-sheng just now? I hope they will not be like us, and that they will not allow a barrier to grow up between them. [2]” Compared to Lu Xun’s so-called resolution of estrangement, which is merely breaking the ice and becoming a lubricant for interpersonal communication, communication between children is much easier than among adults. The novel’s childhood of Jun-tu and “me,” as well as Hung-erh and Shui-sheng, is like this. Tragically, if estrangement is one of the strategies of the ruling class for enslaving people and becomes what Lu Xun calls the inferiority of the national character, this artificially cultivated estrangement is interconnected and will gradually solidify across generations, making it difficult to truly eradicate. The hint of the “incense burner and candlesticks” left by the author at the end also implies the metaphor of Jun-tu’s identity as someone who has not yet “become a stable slave.” To become one sooner, he must continue to be numb and kneel. Despite their shared disappointment, people still choose to estrange each other through calculation and class, all hinting at the hopelessness of enlightenment.

3. The Metaphor of Family-Nation Isomorphism

Is the *My Old Home* that Lu Xun refers to merely a place “as small as a postage stamp”? Whether one considers the rich symbolism inherent in the text or logically deduces from Lu Xun’s profound understanding of the homology between the family and the country, “Hometown,” as penned by Lu Xun, transcends the mere confines of a personal hometown. It is a novel that speaks to the Chinese nation; it must be and can only be “China.”

Indeed, the portrait of the hometown serves as a metaphor for old China. *My Old Home* constructs a triple realm [3]. The first realm is the foreign land beyond the hometown. Although “I” refer to the place “I” am about to visit as “another land,” in reality, drawing from Lu Xun’s personal experiences, we know that this was the location at No. 11 Badaowan, where the Zhou brothers raised 3,500 taels to purchase as a family foothold in the capital. Compared to the hometown, it is clearly a more culturally enriched and spiritually elevated space with better opportunities for making a living, an “upper class” that is unattainable for those rooted in the hometown. The second realm is the urban area of the hometown, composed of cultural and social relations among clansmen or neighbors of the same social class, exemplified by the so-called relatives and Mrs. Yang. The third realm is the rural world inhabited by Jun-tu, the most impoverished and suffering, the genuine “bottom class.” On the one hand, they are “busy moon” helpers in the middle-class world, and the urban areas of the hometown are upper spaces they cannot integrate into. On the other hand, the Jun-tus are victims of rural life, with life’s injustices and the powerlessness of individual resistance intertwining to create their difficulties and tragedies. Crucially, these realms are permeable: the narra-

tor's family flees rural poverty only to replicate feudal landlordism in Beijing (via property hoarding), while Mrs. Yang apes urban consumerism (gloves as status symbols). This fluid collapse of spatial boundaries signifies national character flaws transcending class divisions.

The construction of these three realms accurately reflects the class status quo of old China. Regardless of which realm, human suffering and indifference are ubiquitous. The universality of the hardships of people from all classes is a distinctive feature of old China's semi-colonial and semi-feudal society: on the one hand, there are vast and outdated villages where the bottom class lives in misery and spiritual anguish; on the other hand, there is a semi-modern society that cannot truly fulfill its redemption function and is often constrained by broader imperialist political and economic oppression and the ingrained spread of the inferior national character. When people from different worlds are economically oppressed and struggle hard to survive, their spiritual pursuits are also unfulfilled, and they can only compete for limited survival opportunities through infighting and intrigue, making the estrangement between people and the atomization of the inferior national character even more prolonged and intense. Lu Xun uses the word "family" to metaphorize the "country," reflecting the poverty and decline of China through the life difficulties of countless families represented by "I," Jun-tu, and Mrs. Yang. At this moment, homesickness is no longer just homesickness but has ascended to become "national sorrow."

4. The Hopeful Wish for the Homeland

The conclusion of *My Old Home* reads: "When I thought of hope, I suddenly felt afraid. When Jun-tu asked for the incense burner and candlesticks, I secretly laughed at him, thinking he was always an idolater who never forgot his beliefs. Now, isn't my so-called hope just an idol made by my own hands? It's just that his wishes are close at hand, while mine are far-fetched." This monologue profoundly depicts "my" confusion. Being in the first realm, "I" do not possess a higher status than Jun-tu in the third realm. Even though "I" belong to the enlightened, "I" share the same confusion as those being enlightened. "Jun-tu's materialistic idol worship and 'my' spiritual ideal worship (hope) should be equal in essence, or at least similar in spirit. It is not difficult to see that 'I' am quite skeptical of this enlightenment relationship, which also reflects the fluidity and uncertainty of identity. [4]"

If the burdened homesickness is the explicit narrative layer of "Hometown," faithfully recording the sorrows of old China, then the inner monologue of "I" at the end of the text adds tension to the article on a more implicit level—contradictory yet clear, filled with hopeful and desperate struggles, indicating "my" deep consideration and hopeful longing for tradition, reality, society, humanity, and the future, manifesting the Lu Xun spirit of "resisting despair."

"The enlightener is destined not to walk his life's path surrounded by the masses but is doomed to a long spiritual journey of solitude. Therefore, he especially needs firmness and perseverance in spirit. By recognizing the lonely mission of

the enlightener, facing up to all the difficulties of enlightenment, and actively striving on the ruins of despair, no matter how difficult it may be, he must steadfastly continue. This is precisely the demeanor of a great enlightener provided by Lu Xun. [5]"

Faced with the suffering of people in the three realms, Lu Xun is confused but not desperate. He believes that a new generation must have a new life: "They should have a new life, one that we have not experienced." He points out that all three life patterns are unsatisfactory: his own wandering, Jun-tu's numb and bitter life, and Mrs. Yang's utilitarian calculations, all of which are arduous and lack dignity. Although he does not specify a concrete path, he emphatically advocates for a new path. At least such a stance and attitude are firm. And thus, the "departure-return-redeparture" pattern of "my" return to the hometown signifies a clearer and more determined stance in saving the country. When Hung-erh asks, "Uncle! When will we come back?" "I" firmly reply, "Come back? How can you think of coming back before you've even left?" In fact, this is a reminder to oneself that resisting despair must always exist, and only by moving forward and leaving will the path appear.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, Lu Xun's *My Old Home* not only serves as a personal reflection on homesickness but also as a metaphor for the broader struggles and transformations facing China during its modernization process. Through the dual deconstruction of the traditional rural utopia and the inherent contradictions of enlightenment modernity discourse, Lu Xun critiques the national character and calls for a new path forward.

The novel's triple realm structure—the foreign land, the urban center, and the outdated village—mirrors the complex social hierarchies and economic disparities that existed in China at the time. By examining these realms through the lens of "family-nation isomorphism," we gain a deeper understanding of how Lu Xun uses the personal narrative of homesickness to address broader societal issues.

Ultimately, *My Old Home* embodies the hope for a new generation to have a new life, one that transcends the arduous and undignified patterns of the past. Lu Xun's advocacy for a new path, although not specifically defined, signifies a clearer and more determined stance in saving the homeland from its predicament. This stance resonates with the broader aspirations of the May Fourth Movement and continues to inspire critical reflections on China's modern history and future.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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