

Analyzing the uniqueness of the child's perspective in Chi Zijian's novels from the perspective of narratology

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Abstract

Born between the white mountains and the black waters, Chi Zijian is a unique figure in the contemporary Chinese literary world. A review of Chi Zijian's novels reveals that nearly half of them adopt a child's perspective for narration. By depicting the world through the eyes and mindset of a child, this narrative approach has had a crucial impact on her writing style. This article will analyze the uniqueness of the child's perspective in Chi Zijian's novels from a narratological perspective, summarizing the textual structural characteristics and narrative features of Chi Zijian's child perspective by combining three aspects: person narration, gender characteristics, and individual characteristics. The dynamic change of the narrative perspective adds tension to the text, which is a change in aesthetic expectations and also a spiritual cleansing.



Full Text Article



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Introduction

Since the 1980s, Chi Zijian has made a splash in the literary world with her piece *"The Fairy Tale of the Arctic Village"* marking the beginning of her over thirty-year writing career. Over the course of more than thirty years, Chi Zijian has continued to write tirelessly, becoming a uniquely positioned author in the realm of contemporary literature. Regarding Chi Zijian, the writer Su Tong has made a classic description: "Probably no other writer has maintained such a consistent creative rhythm, a stable aesthetic pursuit, and a bright and clear literary quality for over twenty years of writing as Chi Zijian has." This creative style is particularly evident in Chi Zijian's early works.

In her early works, Chi Zijian preferred to view the world through the eyes of a child, depicting with simple words the snowy small town of her memories, the trivialities of her childhood, and the warmth and coldness of human relationships as she imagined them. In Chi Zijian's writings, works narrated from a child's perspective make up a significant portion, including *"The Fairy Tale of the Arctic Village"* *"The Misty Moon Cowshed"* *"The Sleeping Daguqigu"* *"The Plague of the Luo Suo"*

River" and *"Primitive Landscapes"* all of which use a child's perspective to tell their stories. Additionally, *"Sunset at the Bowl Kiln"* *"The Reverse Sprite"* and *"Meinu on the Shore"* also insert a child's perspective within narratives that employ multiple viewpoints. Thus, the child's perspective has become an important narrative angle in Chi Zijian's works.

Perspective, originally a term in painting, refers to the need for painters to choose an appropriate angle to depict things when observing them. Later, it was borrowed by literary narration, emphasizing the angle from which the writer observes and tells the story in their work. Mr. Yang Yi once said, "Perspective often goes unspoken, yet it is ubiquitous." If you read a work with an awareness of perspective, you will feel that there is no place without perspective. It is evident that perspective is a "problem where pulling one hair will move the whole body," and its choice directly affects the aesthetic effect of the text. The perspective of childhood, as a special viewpoint outside the traditional narrative classification, refers to depicting the world through the eyes and mindset of a child, using a child's tone to make aesthetic judgments about the world that align with the child's psychological and cognitive patterns. Here, "children" generally refers to individuals in a stage of physical and mental immaturity, corresponding to the psychological concept of "children."

The perspective of children was first utilized by Mr. Lu Xun in *"Nostalgia"*. With the development of narratology, many writers have paid attention to the topic of children's perspective. In contemporary times, the use of children's perspective by writers such as Mo Yan, Su Tong, and Tie Ning each has its own characteristics. However, Chi Zijian's children's perspective is unique. This poetic quality comes from her Childhood experiences, creative choices, female perspective, and individual creation.

The Impact of Childhood Experiences

As Chi Zijian said in *"The Fairy Tales of the Arctic Village"*: "Without innocence, there is no childhood; without childhood, there would be no mature and fulfilling today."

The childhood experiences of a writer have a significant impact on their creation. As a female writer born in the northernmost region of China, Chi Zijian's works are established with a unique character in the history of China's new literature development. However, her initial choice of a child's perspective was not deliberate. The carefree life of her childhood was unforgettable, filled with fantasies and youthful vitality. Childhood seemed like a spring that constantly bubbled forth, and thus *"The Fairy Tales of the Arctic Village"* came into being. This autobiographical work sees Chi Zijian herself as the innocent and playful girl "Yingdeng," observing the entire world with wide eyes. Chi Zijian has said, "I like to narrate stories from a child's perspective. This perspective makes me feel that fresh, innocent, and simple literary atmosphere can spread freely like morning mist... Of course, this is probably related to my childhood experiences." During her childhood, Chi Zijian lived with her grandmother for many years in the Great Xing'an Mountains, which were both muddy and full of spring light. There were wet summer sunsets, vast snowstorms, reflections of houses and cooking smoke, as well as Soviet grandmothers and songs. Her childhood life laid the foundation for the rest of her life and her subsequent writing.

The personal temperament of the writer is also very important in choosing the perspective of children. Early influenced by Russian literature of suffering, Chi Zijian viewed literature as a

spiritual activity with religious feelings (according to Zhou Jinglei's interview), aiming to achieve a compassionate effect in the end. Although she often writes about religion, suffering, and death in her novels, everything she describes is spiritual, death is "full of vitality," and the endings of suffering always carry a "warm" color. Known for her "warm writing," Chi Zijian's imagery is rough, but her brushwork is delicate; the mood is sad, yet there are a few strands of warmth amidst the desolation. In the ending of *"Duck Like a Flower"* although the fugitive is still sentenced to death, the duck standing on the grave, looking like a beautiful flower, brightens the entire story filled with sadness. In *"Sunset at the Bowl Kiln"* the appearance of the complete bowl shining with a dark red luster at the end casts a warm sunset-like hue over the less-than-perfect ending. This kind of personal ethical belief, similar to religion, is actually a reflection of her respect and care for life, influencing her choice of narrative in her novels. What can be seen is that Chi Zijian constructs not a fairy-tale-like paradise, but a rural society filled with misfortune and heartache. It's just that several layers of suffering are lightly covered by Chi Zijian's warmth and goodwill.

Furthermore, choosing the perspective of a child can be seen as an inevitable choice for writers to reminisce and look back on past life experiences. Nostalgia for modern people has shifted from reminiscing and reliving the past to seeking answers from the past, and then looking towards the future. Cassirer once stated in *"An Essay on Man"* that memory is not a simple reproduction of past events; it is a creative reconstructive process. This is not merely a narrative of recollection, but rather, based on memory, through the author's processing, a new world is constructed. The author's recognition of the childlike spirit and this conscious exploration are always inseparable. Just as in the modern jungle of material desires, Chi Zijian looks back on her hometown and childhood with a sense of scars. When the harmonious ecological environment is crushed by the overwhelming modern industrial train, the pure truth, goodness, and beauty in people's hearts are gradually eroded by modern material civilization. She urgently wants to return to childhood, back to that pure and sincere sanctuary in her memory.

Flexible narrative approach

At the narrative level, Chi Zijian often employs different narrative perspectives based on the needs of the plot, combining the viewpoint of children to tell stories, which gives the stories a unique poetic flavor. Combining Chi Zijian's novels from a child's perspective, and categorizing them by perspective, there are roughly three types: one is the third-person narrative perspective, where the narrator tells the story from the viewpoint of an observer, often creating an image of an innocent child and recounting their life and stories from childhood. This type is most widely used in Chi Zijian's works, such as *"Sunset at the Bowl Kiln"* *"The Misty Moon Cowshed"* *"The Sleeping Daguqigu"* *"The Plague of the Luo Suo River"* etc. Another is the first-person narrative perspective, where the narrator tells the story from the viewpoint of a character in the story, reminiscing about childhood life, such as *"The Fairy Tale of the Arctic Village"* *"Primitive Landscapes"* *"Come See the Snow, Friends"*. The third type involves the alternating use of first-person and third-person perspectives, which can also be seen as a fluidity of perspective, or a blend of omniscient and limited perspectives, such as *"All the Nights in the World."*

Firstly, from the pure perspective of a child in the first person, there exists only one kind of gaze. It is the perspective of the events the child is experiencing. Since a child's perspective often focuses on everything in the world, but is not coherent in thought, their gaze is frequently drawn to other things in front of them, leading to breaks from the previous narrative. This fragmentation is presented in the text as a composition of disjointed fragments. This is particularly evident in Chi Zijian's acclaimed work *"The Fairy Tale of the Arctic Village"* "Stars, stars, they're everywhere in the sky. Which one am I? Mom said that when I was born, she dreamed of a star falling into her arms. Oh, I'm so tired. My hair feels heavy, and my chest is very tight." From the perspective of the first-person narrative, the entire text lacks a complete plot, or rather, the plot is downplayed, which gives her novels a poetic, prosaic quality. This narrative style, akin to prose poetry, allows the reader to immerse themselves in the story, following the perspective to experience the beauty and innocence of a child's life, enjoying the beautiful natural scenery and the simple, rustic local customs.

Secondly, in the third-person limited narrative from a child's perspective, often due to the child's innocence and the limitations of their thinking, the intervention of an adult perspective is needed to perceive the essence of things and reveal their patterns. Thus, the child's perspective must not only possess the unique experiences of a child but also be interwoven with the author's perspective, serving as an off-screen narrator, taking on the role of an observer and narrator of the external world. For example, in *"The Misty Moon Cowshed"* Bao Zui accidentally witnesses the intimate moment between his stepfather and mother, which leads to his stepfather accidentally injuring him and turning him into a simpleton. As a result, he is forced to live with the oxen in the ox shed every day. Even when his stepfather is on the brink of death, he refuses to live with him again. The story is told from Bao Zui's perspective, combined with third-person narration, and the entire text is imbued with a sense of alienation from the adult world. In this kind of narration, the writer can easily become estranged from the child they are narrating about. On one hand, the writer needs to rely on their personal experiences and feelings to guess at the child's emotions, while on the other hand, they must act as a narrator, responding to the reader's own experiences and feelings. This estrangement and sense of alienation is a unique flavor brought by the use of person narration.

Finally, apart from these two narrative modes, there also exists the third-person omniscient perspective. The narrator observes things like a god, but this omniscient viewpoint can damage the realism of the story. Therefore, Chi Zijian also tends to intersperse the narrative with the limited perspective of certain characters. In *"Bathing in Clear Water"* the story is told by an all-knowing narrator about the tradition of bathing in the northern rural town of Li Town during the New Year. Within the omniscient perspective, the viewpoint of Tianzao is interwoven, on one hand explaining why Tianzao insists on having his own basin of clear water for bathing despite some complaints and discomfort among family members. This, to a certain extent, shortens the distance between the reader and the characters, making it easy for the reader to understand Tianzao's actions and thus like and sympathize with this cute and sensible child. On the other hand, the author sets the story within a very short period of time, and the depth of the limited perspective extends the distance of time and space infinitely. Through the child's perspective, a warm scene in the ordinary life is discovered. The child's perspective also contributes to Chi Zijian's unique narrative style. The interpenetration

of the adult and child perspectives, the combination of the omniscient and limited perspectives, this polyphony in perspective gives the novel a poetic feature, adding more flavor to the content.

The Poetic Aura of Female Creators

Unlike male writers such as Mo Yan and Yu Hua, there exists a natural emotional bond between women and children, which unconsciously leads female writers to write about children. Male writers often use the perspective of children to depict the survival dilemmas of children and deeply inscribe the psychological traumas they endure. They engage in profound contemplation of historical situations and social humanity, using violence, loneliness, and hunger to portray an alternative form of traumatic growth. The world of children they depict is one that is deformed, cold, and absurd, and this stark writing reveals the ugliness and darkness of human nature.

However, due to the inherently gentle and delicate sensibility of female writers, their portrayal of the child's perspective inevitably carries a search for personal growth experiences and the essence of being. This is reflected in their writing with poetic characteristics. Chi Zijian, as a member of the group of female writers, is no exception. Early Chi Zijian's novels do not attract readers with dramatic twists and turns, nor are they known for depicting characters with distinct and individual personalities. Instead, they build a uniquely poetic style through the delicate expression of emotions and the capture of everyday life imagery.

Moreover, the perspective of children is an excellent angle from which to present a poetic style. A century ago, Tyler proposed the famous animism theory in *"Primitive Culture"* - that all natural things think and act like humans. Children's thinking, as a form of linear thinking, is characterized by its primitive and simple nature. In the eyes of children, animals can speak, the boundary between humans and objects is blurred, and the entire world is fresh and wonderful. They can naturally communicate with all natural things in spirit. Thus, in Chi Zijian's childhood landscape, there are vast snowfalls, splendid evening skies, dilapidated old kilns, potato flowers emitting a faint fragrance, and mushrooms as numerous as stars. In *"The Sleeping Daguqigu"* the setting sun is described as a child who has played himself out, while in *"Flower Petal Rice"* the wind is said to be of varying thickness and strength, capable of blowing cracks into clouds and making them cry; animals are also loyal and spiritual, such as the salmon in *"The Sleeping Big Guqigu"*, the yellow dog "Fool" in *"The Fairy Tales of the Arctic Village"*, the dog Bingliu in *"The Sunset over the Bowl Kiln"* and the juane in *"The Misty Moon Cowshed"*. They accompany children as they grow up; even the titles of the stories are filled with endless reveries of natural scenery, such as *"Kiss Potato"*, *"The Sunset over the Bowl Kiln"*, *"Primitive Scenery"*, *"The Fairy Tales of the Arctic Village"*, *"Snow Curtains"* and *"The Noonday Song of the Green Grass"*.

Innocent and pure-hearted children possess delicate souls that uncover the poetry in life. When reflected in novels, this imbues the narrative with poetic language and stirs romantic sentiments, resulting in the poetic characteristics of the text. "My heart is heavy. I lie barebacked in the corner, pressed against the wall. I think of the moon. I think of the stars. I think of the great river. I think of the ants, butterflies, dragonflies, and bees in the vegetable garden. I think of the morning glories, broad beans, and the necklace of my dreams. I think of the faint crescent moon. I truly wish to become one of them." With this perspective, the spirituality of nature is fully explored, thus giving rise to the ethereal world in Zijian Chi's writings, with fish that can cry, horses that understand human emotions, and potato flowers with a subtle fragrance. Under the strange and beautiful

moonlight, a child's heart is joyfully leaping, and the innocence and purity of a child vividly come to life on paper.

The Warmth of Individual Characteristics

Although both are female writers, both are regional literature, and both view life through the lens of a child's perspective, the works of Xiao Hong and Chi Zijian are touching and lead one into the pure and warm world of children. However, there are differences between the two.

"*The Biography of Hulan River*" is a childhood memoir written by Xiao Hong after experiencing the vicissitudes of life. The text focuses on her childhood life and the customs and scenery of her hometown, but what is more noteworthy is the author's deep pain and infinite loneliness while writing. Xiao Hong acts as a narrative observer in the work, providing a distant perspective. While readers experience endless fun in the colorful world of childhood during their reading, they also sense a touch of desolation in the subtext. She wrote in "*The Biography of Hulan River*": "The household items are all in pairs, even the bricks sunbathing have the sun to accompany them." But beyond the words, it was only I who was alone. The seemingly innocent words were scrutinized from an adult perspective, where joy intertwined with loneliness. As childhood faded away, all childhood memories were sealed in distant folk paintings. This memory coexisted and influenced Xiao Hong, but it could not be changed.

In the works of Chi Zijian, rural memories are no longer a spiritual refuge of a sorrowful era, but rather the destination of civilization. Modern civilization is developing at a rapid pace, and the essence of primitive life has almost been worn away. When people lose themselves in modern life, unable to find their true value and place, they look back to their childhoods.

Chi Zijian attempts to call for the return of civilization through writing from a child's perspective. On one hand, the adult perspective might overlook the beauty of ordinary life due to habit, but the choice of a child's perspective may be a reclamation of the goodness and warmth of human nature. In "*Bathing in the Clear Water*", Tianzao, starting at the age of eight, has to heat water for his family to bathe every year, but he has never had a real basin of clear water for himself. So in this year, having his own basin of clear water becomes his sole wish. Through the narrative of the story, Tianzao's busy figure moves us, and we see a diligent and lovable boy, as well as a warm and happy family.

On the other hand, life is not just about kindness and poetry; there is also ugliness and danger. Using a seemingly naive and innocent perspective, the true nature of things is more thoroughly revealed, with a cold irony dissecting human nature. In "*The Little Millstone in the Madhouse*" the little millstone does not discriminate against the patients in the mental hospital but gets along with them harmoniously. The novel uses the child's perspective of "the little millstone" to observe this small society within the mental hospital, documenting the words and deeds of these "madmen." In the story, the little millstone looks at the long train line paper that Zhang Laodao gives him and thinks it looks like "a chick breaking out of its shell, swaying its cute little head in the evening breeze." It is particularly fresh and vivid. These "madmen" in the eyes of normal people are seen as real friends by the little millstone, as dear companions to be with whenever there is time. After the little millstone leaves the mental hospital, he discovers that the outside world is not as he knew it.

And under this pure child's perspective, normal people become abnormal, while these mental patients also yearn for a space for equal dialogue, seeking understanding and comfort for their souls. Additionally, the madmen and fools in Chi Zijian's writings are moving, such as Baozhui in *"The Misty Moon Cowshed"* and Lingtiao in *"The Plague of the Luo Suo River"*. Their actions may be slow or foolish, but they actually reflect a series of social issues, a childlike heart, a kind of simple innocence shining on them, while the pure joy of childhood contrasts with the sadness of human nature.

Chi Zijian adds a touch of warmth and the light of humanity to rural life. In *"Bathing in the Clear Water"* the simple and warm family bathing ritual becomes particularly heartwarming when viewed through the eyes of a child. *"The Fairy Tales of the Arctic Village"* uses a child's perspective to break free from the constraints of adult expression, making the complexities of the human world seem simple when intertwined with the child's world. *"The Little Millstone in the Insane Asylum"* inverts the normal world and the world inside a mental hospital, leaving one to ponder who the real outsiders are. Through the eyes of a child, heavy social issues are made tangible and allegorical. This childlike perspective acts like a thin veil, and in the process of seeing flowers through the mist or the moon through the water, everything takes on a poetic quality, imbued with a warm gaze. For adults, it is the child who retains innocence and a childlike heart who is the true savior. If Xiao Hong's world of children is a heartwarming backyard garden, a bright but fleeting highlight, then Chi Zijian's world is a soft and enduring pale color. She does not indulge in great joys or sorrows, nor does she view the world with cold indifference; instead, she looks at the entire world with an all-embracing and benevolent gaze.

"Writing with warmth" is like a double-edged sword; on one side, it is the writing style that Chi Zijian is most adept at, her gentlest weapon. On the other, it is also seen by critics as her greatest flaw. Because she consistently adheres to warmth, her writing touches only lightly on the deeper aspects of human nature and cannot starkly reveal the profound dangers within. In an era when writers of various schools were coldly narrating scars, Chi Zijian stood apart, turning inward to find poetry and warmth in the beautiful childhood. She steadfastly held onto her narrative beliefs. Under the child's perspective, the beautiful scenery and kindhearted human emotions, the search for one's truest self, and the happy experiences of childhood that will never return—could these be the ideal utopia that the writer has found, the ultimate way to combat the world's coldness and noise?

Conclusion

Yang Yi mentioned in *"Chinese Narratology"*: "The author creates a narrator and a 'origin point' of perspective in a work, thus forming a narrative fan, and in the rotation of perspectives, a 'circle' of the narrative world is created." The child's perspective in Chi Zijian's works has contributed to her unique narrative style.

Since she emerged onto the literary scene in the 1980s, nearly half of her works have adopted the child's perspective. It can be said that Chi Zijian's warm and poetic writing style and the writing of the child's perspective have grown together. The child's perspective has contributed to Chi Zijian's creation, and under her writing, it has acquired a unique charm. She has created various child characters with different personalities in her works. They present the raw state of life with a simple

and innocent perspective, taking the reader into a fresh, simple, and pure aesthetic space and time, feeling the perfect integration of humans and nature, and an aesthetic critique of modern society.

Acknowledgment

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