

# The Multiple Dimensions of Space: Spatial Narrative Types and Socio-Cultural Mapping in New Century Chinese Novels

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## Abstract

*This study explores how spatial narratives in new-century Chinese novels reflect and engage with China's rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape. Since the mid-1990s, China's accelerated marketization and globalization have profoundly altered traditional lifestyles and public aesthetics, significantly influencing literary creation. How do contemporary Chinese novelists employ spatial narratives to represent these changes, and what insights do these narratives offer into modern Chinese society? Employing textual analysis grounded in Lefebvre's spatial theory and Soja's Thirdspace concept, this paper examines the manifestations and functions of physical, psychological, and social spaces in new-century Chinese novels. Findings reveal diverse and complex spatial narratives: fragmented physical spaces reflecting globalization's impact, psychological spaces highlighting identity recognition anxiety, and social spaces exposing modern society's alienation and class disparities. This study contributes to a deeper application of spatial narrative theory in Chinese literary research, offering new analytical tools for understanding modern literature and its reflection of social changes. It provides insights into the characteristics and trends of new-century Chinese social culture, promoting further research and theoretical development in related fields.*

**Keywords:** *New-Century Chinese Novels, Spatial Narratives, Sociocultural Transformation, Physical Space, Psychological Space, Social Space.*

## Introduction

Since the mid-to-late 1990s, the process of marketization and globalization in China has continuously accelerated, with high technology, the internet, new media, visual imagery, consumerism, and popular culture becoming keywords in the cultural context of the new century. These changes have drastically altered people's traditional lifestyles and mental states, and have also influenced public aesthetics. The new century is not only a society enlightened and disseminated by mass media but also deeply influenced by it. This cultural context presents the existential situation and challenge that new century literature must face. As China entered the new century, profound changes in the social, economic, and cultural environment had a far-reaching impact on social structure and cultural identity, prompting new features and trends in literary creation. Notably, spatial narrative, as an important narrative strategy, has been widely applied and innovatively developed in new century Chinese novels. Space is no longer just the background of the story; it has become the core carrier of the writer's thoughts and expressions. Profound changes in social culture and theoretical background underpin this phenomenon.

The rise of spatial theory in the 1980s laid the foundation for studying literary spatial narrative. Spatial theory, represented by Lefebvre and Soja, provides theoretical support for understanding spatial narratives in literature through the exploration of the social construction and symbolic meaning of space. In "The Production of Space," Lefebvre proposed that space is not only a physical existence but also a reflection of social relations (Lefebvre, 1991). Edward Soja further developed this theory in "Thirdspace," emphasizing the socially constructed nature of space (Soja, 1996). British cultural geographer Mike Crang, in "Cultural Geography," explored the meaning of space in literature, arguing that space is not merely a simple setting but a heterogeneous and multifaceted space containing social significance (Crang, 1998). Literary spaces, though based on real or imagined spaces, provide interpreters with a platform to integrate the ideas of their own era. In "Paris, Capital of Modernity," American Marxist geographer David Harvey demonstrated the dominant role of capitalist political-economic relations in shaping modern Parisian urban spaces by analyzing urban spatial experiences in Balzac's "La Comédie Humaine" (Harvey, 2003). This work

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provides a paradigm for literary urban space criticism.

In China, the accelerated processes of urbanization, globalization, and informatization have gradually expanded the application of these theories. The rapid transformation of Chinese society has profoundly changed people's spatial experiences and perceptions, which in turn affects the spatial forms of expression in literary creation.

However, existing research mostly focuses on the theoretical framework and classification methods of spatial narrative, emphasizing its importance in novel narration while lacking in-depth analysis of the specific relationship between spatial narrative characteristics and the socio-cultural background. Jiang Zhengyun pointed out that literary space, constructed through language, psychology, and culture, presents complex, multidimensional characteristics (Jiang, 2013). In "Research on Spatial Narrative," Long Diyong classified space into story space, formal space, psychological space (Long, 2015), and existential space, providing new possibilities for cross-media and interdisciplinary research. Fang Ying proposed the concept of "spatialization of narrative," emphasizing that space can become the main element of the narrative, not just the background (Fang, 2017). Dong Xiaoye focused on how spatial narrative effectively expresses the complex experiences of modern society. She believed that spatial narrative reflects the intricate temporal and spatial experiences and cultural context of modern society, and can express narrative themes and convey the author's thoughts and emotions through scene depiction and spatial relationship construction (Dong, 2012). Although these studies provide an important theoretical foundation for understanding spatial narratives in new century Chinese novels, there is still ample room for further exploration of how spatial narratives are specifically presented and function in these novels

The value of this study lies in two main aspects. Theoretically, combining spatial theory with textual analysis of new century Chinese novels deepens and expands the application of spatial narrative theory in contemporary Chinese literature research. Practically, analyzing the spatial narrative in new century novels provides new entry points and analytical tools for understanding and interpreting modern literature. Additionally, the study reveals how spatial narratives reflect social and cultural changes, aiding in a deeper understanding of the characteristics and trends of new century Chinese social culture. This, in turn, promotes further research and theoretical development in related fields.

#### *Theoretical Foundations of Spatial Narratives in the New Century: From Lefebvre to Soja*

In the concept of literary space, spatial theory plays a crucial role, providing a fundamental cognitive framework. Contemporary spatial theory has undergone a structural transformation, initially benefiting from French philosopher Lefebvre. His book "The Production of Space" constructed a comprehensive contemporary spatial theory, transforming Marx's social-historical dialectics into a spatial ontology, thus achieving a foundational transformation for the first time (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre, based on "social space," introduced the triadic dialectical ontology of social-history-space and the triadic methodology of spatial practice-spatial representation-representational space. This opened the path to a triadic dialectics of spatiality, injecting new thinking into spatial theory.

In the past, people typically conceptualized space in two dimensions: material and spirit. Material space refers to specific physical forms understood through designation and analysis, while spiritual space is interpreted as "conceived space," a psychological representation of the significance of physical space and social life. However, Lefebvre criticized this binary opposition, arguing that an insurmountable gap exists between the material and spiritual dimensions (Lefebvre, 1991). He believed that under this quasi-logical presupposition, people cannot understand the relationship between the spiritual and practical realms. To avoid the limitations of reductionism on the complexity of spatial thought, Lefebvre incorporated the concept of social space and established a triadic dialectics of space to bridge the gap between material and spiritual space (Lefebvre, 1991). He believed that true knowledge of space should be the "triadic dialectics" that connects material, spiritual, and social space. He stated, "We are concerned with the space of epistemology, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of imagination such as planning and design, symbols, utopias, etc." Space is a multidimensional, complex phenomenon that encompasses aspects of spirit, physicality, and society. Its existence and development

stem from human social practices, manifesting through human creation and existence, becoming an integral part of life processes and various types of spatial production. Social space is both the product and process of social production (Lefebvre, 1991). It differs from material and spiritual spaces, yet includes and partially depends on them. Due to the diversity of social practices, this space has infinite possibilities for change, presenting diverse appearances and multiple symbolizations. It becomes a constantly changing, contradiction-filled tension field where various opposing forces converge.

Building on Lefebvre's spatial theory, Edward Soja, from the perspective of postmodern geography, proposed the concept of Thirdspace. He aimed to break the binary opposition of spatial thinking and lead space toward more open, diverse, and dynamic dimensions. Soja viewed Thirdspace as the othering of physical and spiritual spaces, breaking binary opposition assumptions invasively, thereby surpassing both and encompassing all possible spatial knowledge (Soja, 1996). In Soja's Thirdspace, subjectivity and objectivity, abstraction and concreteness, reality and imagination, the known and the unknown, repetition and difference converge. It represents the integration and overlap of physical, spiritual, and social spaces, characterized by infinite openness, heterogeneity, and dynamic generation, encompassing all spatial connotations.

In summary, the rise of spatial theory has provided a robust theoretical foundation for understanding spatial narratives in new century Chinese novels. Lefebvre's "trialectics" broke the traditional binary opposition between material and spiritual, offering a comprehensive framework for spatial analysis. Soja's concept of "Thirdspace" further enriched spatial theory, transforming space from merely a physical or psychological existence into a complex system encompassing social practices and cultural symbols. Against this theoretical background, we can more profoundly understand the diversity and complexity of spatial narratives in new century Chinese novels. By integrating these spatial theories, this paper will further explore the specific manifestations and cultural significance of physical, psychological, and social spaces in new century novels, thereby revealing how these spatial narratives reflect and shape the sociocultural changes in modern China.

#### *Expansion and Fragmentation of Space: Physical Spaces in New Century Novels*

Physical space refers to space composed of material and perceptible elements, known as the space of practice and perception by Lefebvre and the "Firstspace" by Soja. Physical space includes areas where objects and humans exist and operate as material entities. Mieke Bal pointed out that the filling of space is determined by the objects within it. The shape, size, color, and arrangement of objects in a space determine its effect and influence perception (Bal, 2002). The space referred to here is physical space. Vivid and prominent spatial imagery is key to constructing physical space. Spatial imagery can endow space with characteristics and meaning, forming the overall image of a place or area, such as the tall, blood-red sorghum in Gaomi Township in "Red Sorghum Family." Space is not only the image of specific objects or people but also possesses abstraction and comprehensiveness. It is the overall image of a place or area and the meaning it conveys. For example, space images like home, cemetery, prison, forest, and sea. The names of these places set their spatial boundaries (home), define their functions (prison, cemetery), and indicate certain characteristics (the sea indicating its color and volume, the forest indicating its vastness, ease of getting lost, and ability to hide secrets). Additionally, space is sometimes endowed with ideological connotations. In European literature, towers are equated with monarchy, and labyrinthine spaces are associated with chaos, contradictions, and confusion before the overthrow of a dynasty.

In the new media era, physical space generally exhibits two tendencies: the expansion of regional space and the fragmentation of material life. These tendencies are reflected in the narratives of new century novels. The development of globalization, transportation, and communication technologies has enabled people to easily cross regions and even move between countries and continents. The expansion of regional span no longer limits people's activities and information transmission, greatly expanding physical space. Simultaneously, people can easily access information and culture worldwide through the internet and digital media, no longer confined to their geographical location. Wandering, drifting, and traveling have become common themes in new century novels, especially among post-80s writers who grew up during globalization. Complex, fluid, and heterogeneous spaces are highly attractive and universally appealing to them.

Han Han's "1988: I Want to Talk with This World" uses a traveling car as a vehicle, weaving through real scenes, past memories, and mysterious personal relationships. He expresses his views prompted by what he sees and hears on the road, creating a new concept of the Chinese "road novel" (Han, 2010). Zhang Yueran's "Cocoon" tells the story of three families across three generations, exploring ideals, beliefs, and redemption (Zhang, 2016). Beyond the characters' fates and the changing times, the shifting of spaces also plays an important role in the story. For example, in the Li family, three generations have experienced spatial changes. Compared to the grandfather who moved from the countryside to the city and the father who moved from his hometown to Beijing and Russia, the daughter, Li Jiayi, travels extensively, visiting more places and transitioning between locations more frequently. The grandfather misses his hometown, the father is tired of drifting, while the daughter has become accustomed to constant movement. The different attitudes toward space across three generations form a sharp contrast.

"Travel," as a highly symbolic form of spatial mobility, always evokes an infinite longing for distant places and foreign lands. For humans, distant places are not real destinations because they can never truly be reached. However, these places represent redemption from daily life and manifest idealized existence and transcendent aesthetics.

Meanwhile, people can use devices like mobile phones and computers to access information or share social media updates anytime and anywhere, no longer restricted to specific locations and times. The pace of life has quickened, and time has become a precious resource. In this context, physical space has become more fragmented, and people's daily lives, activity ranges, and time have become more dispersed and fragmented. Among novels reflecting this tendency, Li Er's "Brother Yingwu" and Jin Yucheng's "Blossoms" are particularly representative (Li, 2018; Jin, 2013).

The novel "Brother Yingwu" uses Brother Yingwu's activity trajectory as a clue, trying to connect multiple external spaces to endow the term "Yingwu" with vast spatial complexity. For Brother Yingwu, "responding to things without being burdened by them" is a lifelong goal he pursues, which not only influences the narrative structure established with space transitions in the novel but also regulates the trend of these fragmented space transitions. Therefore, in the eyes of readers, Brother Yingwu's daily life is showcased in various spaces in different contexts. The spaces Brother Yingwu is involved in, such as political-business circles, literati circles, Jianghu, market places, and family, are complex and full of noise and clamor—in Jeju University, Brother Yingwu often has conflicts with Ge Daohong and Fei Ming due to differing opinions; in political-business circles, although Brother Yingwu is a professor, he is marginalized; in the United States, he can only follow Mr. Cheng's words; in the family, he is tired of dealing with his wife's problems. Brother Yingwu maneuvers between various spaces, but no matter how hard he tries, he cannot escape the predicament of marginalization.

The fragmented narrative and profound depiction of Shanghai's urban space in the novel "Blossoms" make it a work with spatial characteristics. Shanghai, as the location of the characters' actions in "Blossoms," is vividly described by the author in the novel: "Head out of the tiger window, ah night, layers of roofs, the cries of Shanghai opera, neon is eye-catching, swirling light beads, soft red for ten miles, thousands of flowers like the sea." "...Small clothes hanging in the window, unfamiliar, a few white wings fluttering on the black tiles." This is a virtual scene describing the bustling Shanghai at the beginning, but the entire space is filled with sound, light, and scenery. "Tiger windows" are unique to Shanghai, derived from the Shanghainese pronunciation of the English word "roof." Due to housing shortages in old Shanghai, people added attics between the second floor and the roof, with windows on the roof, called "tiger windows." Because the attic is very stuffy in summer, early Shanghai people used to mock those living in three-story attics as "bare-chested," implying very poor people. "Layers of roofs" highlight the numerous and dense houses in Shanghai, indicating a large population and very crowded living spaces. "Ben Tan" refers to Shanghai opera, the description of "neon" reflects the prosperity of Shanghai, and the strong color contrast between the "black tiles" and white "small clothes" is like the wings of a bird being flapped, showing a glimpse of beauty in a difficult life. "Blossoms" presents the complex appearance of Shanghai and the intertwined destinies of its characters through meticulous spatial narrative and recurring plots.

In conclusion, physical spaces in Chinese novels of the new century are not merely backgrounds for stories,



but narrative elements laden with rich symbolic meanings. By depicting specific physical spaces, these novels not only showcase the concrete settings for character activities but also reflect sociocultural changes. The descriptions of these physical spaces not only enhance the sense of reality and visual effect in the novels but also profoundly reveal the psychological states of characters and the complexity of social environments. Through detailed portrayals of physical spaces, novels of the new century provide readers with an important perspective for understanding the social and cultural changes in modern China.

*Projection of the Inner Self: Psychological Spaces in New Century Novel Narratives*

Psychological space is an internal, subjective space, constructed by coloring, filtering, deforming, and editing the external world with emotions and consciousness, and it is also the projection of the inner world onto the external world. Psychological space belongs to Soja's "Secondspace," which is the spiritual aspect of space, but Secondspace encompasses much more than psychological space. In Soja's view, Secondspace is the conceived space, constructed with various symbols such as words, charts, lines, and colors (Soja, 1996). In literary narrative, the psychological space of characters is particularly noteworthy. Psychological space is the inner reflection and editing of physical space. Soja emphasized in "Thirdspace," "On one hand, our actions and thoughts shape the space around us, but at the same time, the collective or social production we live in creates larger spaces and places, and human spatiality is the product of human motives and environmental or contextual composition" (Soja, 1996). Then the translation preface mentioned: "Space is seen as a concrete material form, which can be represented, analyzed, interpreted, and at the same time, it is a spiritual construct, a conceptual form representing space and its life significance." (Lu, 2005) The living environment and internal concepts of individuals are the core elements of psychological space, while the external environment and personal social practices also influence the individual's psychological space.

In the new media era, people have access to more information and diversified values through social media, network platforms, and other channels. However, this diversification of information and values has not completely eliminated the importance of identity recognition but has instead intensified the anxiety of identity recognition. Due to the explosive growth of information, people have to find their points of recognition in the information and relate them to their identity. At the same time, the continuous development of big cities has deepened the differentiation and group formation of identity. In this context, urban fringe people drifting in big cities feel helpless and isolated due to differences and anxieties in identity recognition. This anxiety of identity recognition, seeking self-construction, and the individual's spiritual concerns in the city are reflected in various forms in novels.

Di An's novel "Jingheng Street" is set on a commercial street named "Jingheng Street" in the center of Beijing, which is also the name of the male protagonist, Guan Jingheng (Di, 2019). The female protagonist is named Zhu Lingjing, also taken from a street in Beijing—Lingjing Hutong. The cultural attributes represented by these two place names are modern consumer culture and old Beijing cultural tradition, respectively. Guan Jingheng and Zhu Lingjing have internalized different cultural attributes, which determine their respective philosophies of action. The novel frequently features Guan Jingheng's soliloquy: "No one knows him, no one knows he is the child who lives in the courtyard at No. 4 Fengming Road." "He can't take Lingjing back to No. 4 Fengming Road, he's already decided, absolutely not." This soliloquy showcases Guan Jingheng's mental anguish and also highlights the spatial conflict between Jingheng Street, Lingjing Hutong, and Fengming Road. This conflict represents the hierarchical order and cultural politics in physical space, the squeezing of urban space onto small town space. Fengming Road always looks up to Jingheng Street with an inferiority complex, while Jingheng Street attracts countless young people from Fengming Road with the allure of a big city. For the "Guan Jinghengs," Beijing is not only a geographic coordinate but also a symbolic space for their subject construction and the generation of existential meaning, representing a new sense of identity and promises for the future. Therefore, this sense of identity and promise for the future is also one of the reasons for the identity anxiety faced by young people from small towns when they move to the city. They have to find their position and value in the new urban environment, as well as face the pressure and recognition difficulties from their original social relationships and cultural traditions. This identity anxiety is not only an internal personal issue but also reflects the constant transformation and collision of physical and cultural spaces during the urbanization process, as well as the diversification and changes in identity recognition brought about by globalization and the

expansion of regions in the new media era.

Unlike the psychological and spiritual conditions reflected in Lu Yao's "youth entering the city" narrative mode in "Life," if Gao Jialin represents a declaration of struggle that bottom-level youth can achieve real success through hard work after the reform and opening up, Guan Jingheng proves that the city operated by capital, seemingly full of infinite tension, has long sealed off the path for city entrants to realize their dreams. He longs to succeed in the big city and achieve class leap, but the process is filled with offense, confrontation, and non-recognition. Di An sets this story against the background of the prevailing virtual economy and fan economy, but when Guan Jingheng throws himself into the capital discourse he dreams of, he manipulates the rules controlled by capital power in a more skilled way to gain personal interests, even intensifying it. He is the successor of Gao Jialin, but Gao Jialin's contradictions and pains—the conflict between pursuing success in the city and betraying morality—are not resolved in him but are instead intensified. In this gilded age, the resilience and diligence embodied in traditional value ethics have turned to the opposite, becoming desires and cruelty in the main spirit, further proving the failure of universal values. In "Life," after Gao Jialin fails to enter the city, he can still reestablish self-identity by returning to his hometown. However, the change in the contextual era leaves Guan Jingheng without a hometown that can reaccept him, nor can he truly integrate into city life.

Similarly, Xu Zechen's "Beijing Drifter" series narratives, set against the background of a big city, attract outsiders like magic, who flock here with confidence, hoping to make a fortune. Before coming to Beijing, they had all received higher education to varying degrees. Bian Hongqi in "Ah, Beijing" used to be a middle school teacher in a small town in northern Jiangsu; Juyan and Tang Tuo in "Juyan" were college graduates before coming to Beijing; Yi Chang'an in "Jerusalem" also used to be an English teacher in a rural primary school. If they were not in Beijing, with their education and abilities, finding a good job and seeking a stable life would not be difficult. However, their material desires make their dreams not just an inherited complex from their parents, but also because, in their minds, entering the city means a transformation and recognition of identity, which is also a symbol of identity. Therefore, how "identity" is recognized becomes a crucial issue, and the identity anxiety caused by identity marginalization and suspension permeates all aspects of daily life. After entering the city, they not only fail to rebuild their identity well but also find it difficult to integrate into the city. This "sense of drifting" and "sense of failure" reflect the spiritual crisis in the struggles of contemporary young people.

Psychological space, as an important narrative dimension in Chinese novels of the new century, reveals the complex inner world of characters through the projection of emotions and consciousness. Psychological space not only reflects the impact of external reality on characters but also reveals their inner conflicts and struggles. In the new media era, psychological space has become more complex and volatile, with the diversification of information and values filling characters' inner worlds with uncertainty and anxiety. Through in-depth portrayal of psychological space, novels of the new century not only present readers with a multi-layered psychological world but also provide new perspectives for understanding individual predicaments in modern society. The narrative approach of psychological space not only enriches the expressive techniques of novels but also profoundly influences readers' understanding of modern life and self-cognition.

### *Construction of Heterotopias: Social Spaces and Subaltern Writing*

Social space is interpersonal space built on the relationships of various social elements. Social space includes both material and spiritual dimensions, which intersect and interact with each other. It is not only a product but also a force, being both the cause and effect of human practical activities. Social space is formed by the mixture, intersection, change, conflict, and interaction of various forces and elements. Political, economic, power, racial, class, cultural, and other factors are important components of social space. In discussing social space, Lefebvre particularly emphasized the social relations of human reproduction, such as the physiological and psychological relations between different genders and age groups, as well as production relations, such as the division of labor and its organization (Lefebvre, 1991). Additionally, social space includes specific representations of the production and reproduction of social relations. Social space has strong political, strategic, and ideological characteristics. It has always been a repository of various forces

and a place for the implementation of strategies. When distinguishing between the three types of space, Certeau also pointed out that social space mainly emphasizes political and economic factors. Harvey discussed social space in the third part of "The Condition of Postmodernity." His analysis mainly included production relations, capital operations, class relations, and other factors. The structure of social relations formed by these factors shapes social space (Harvey, 1990).

With the acceleration of the modernization process in contemporary China, social culture has changed in many aspects. Technological progress, market development, political and cultural openness, and the acceleration of urbanization are the main manifestations of social modernization. The technological explosion has rapidly connected the entire country and even the world. The market is constantly expanding and changing, and the gaps between different cultures are gradually narrowing. The influence of religious beliefs and traditional customs is gradually weakening, interpersonal relationships have undergone significant changes, and population mobility has increased. The development of social productivity has promoted historical progress but has also led to the gradual differentiation of social structure. In new century novels, the "bottom class" as a group in a certain social spatial position has begun to receive increasing attention from writers.

In recent years, the acceleration of the modernization process has led to significant changes in the spatial pattern of cities and villages. The rapid development of urban space and the decline of rural space have replaced the previous mode of vertical parallel development between urban and rural areas. Although the urban-rural dual structure still exists in urban-rural interaction, it has now undergone a spatial shift, evolving into a new disparity within the city, the so-called "heterotopia" (Foucault, 1986). The emergence of this "heterotopia" space is a breakthrough in the traditional binary opposition spatial narrative of "either urban or rural." The bottom class is used in the social structure to refer to the lowest social class, and the object referred to is people. In the process of urbanization development, the issue of the bottom class gradually becomes prominent, and the spatial significance of the bottom class becomes increasingly evident. Jameson said: "All such abstract violence and later forms of homogeneity arise from the initial division of plots, and this division transforms the market's monetary forms and the logic of commodity production back into space" (Jameson, 1991). The initial division of plots resulted in the emergence of cities and rural areas. The vast rural areas occupying most of China's land are the true home of the bottom class. But the "city" as opposed to the rural areas is not synonymous with wealth. Urbanization has attracted most Chinese people, but the soaring housing prices have left the bottom class only able to live in another type of naturally divided plot within the city—those dirty, marginal corners such as urban villages, shantytowns, urban-rural junctions, recently built low-rent housing by the government, and even containers and tricycles outside the government's permissible range have become the living spaces for the bottom class. These bottom-class people, such as migrant workers drifting in cities, left-behind elderly and women and children in rural areas, the second generation of the poor, ant tribe, cabinet tribe, and people living in cramped quarters, have become the main constituents of heterotopia space. "Heterotopia" is born in urban space but has a close relationship with rural space. It is at the boundary of urban and rural social spaces and is a heterogeneous factor for both urban and rural spaces. Crossing boundaries and cultures is the most prominent feature of heterotopia space. Therefore, focusing on heterotopia space has become a direction for spatial narrative in new century literature.

From the perspective of themes, works about migrant workers account for a considerable proportion of bottom-class literature, such as You Fengwei's "Mudfish" (You, 2005), Chi Zijian's "Andante under the Moonlight" (Chi, 2006), Sun Huifen's "Migrant Workers" (Sun, 2008), Jia Pingwa's "Happy" (Jia, 2011), Li Hushan's "Peace" (Li, 2012), Yang Zhijun's "The Last Migrant Worker" (Yang, 2021), and so on.

Jia Pingwa's novel "Happy" takes Liu Gaoxing as the protagonist and narrator, using his arrival in the city as a scavenger as the storyline. At first, Liu Gaoxing did not realize the huge gap between the city and himself. He thought that as long as his kidney was sold to the city, he could merge with the city. He tried to play in Furong Garden, a symbol of city leisure, regarded the city's prostitute Meng Yichun as his goddess, and even fantasized that the customer Wei Da was the person who received his kidney. Liu Gaoxing established

a virtual identity with the city based on self-persuasion of life's value. But this self-persuasion is not based on confidence, but on an Ah-Q-like inferiority and self-deception.

From a modernization perspective, the city represents the modern urban culture of industrial civilization. Various relationships within the city are built on organizational structures of interest and utilitarian principles, emphasizing practicality but lacking warmth. Nevertheless, from a survival perspective, everyone yearns for the material superiority brought by modernization. Especially those migrant workers who come to the city with hopes of pursuing wealth and dreams. However, they are powerless in the face of the harsh reality of increasingly solidified social classes.

Liu Gaoxing tries to get close to the city, but it becomes increasingly clear that the gap between himself and the city can never be bridged. It is precisely because the city is constantly expanding that Liu Gaoxing can make a living in the city. This implies the fate of the countryside: it has no vitality of its own and can only continue to exist by integrating into the corners of the city and becoming part of it. Therefore, although the city completely rejects Liu Gaoxing, he objectively still becomes part of the city. Jia Pingwa depicts not a static city that has achieved arrogance and wealth, but a city that is building and growing itself in pain and filth. While this city rejects assimilation, it is also forced to rely on the very people it rejects. In this contradiction, the city continues to expand, bringing prosperity and poverty, as well as a longing for prosperity and an infinite fear of poverty. The novel describes how rural people become "city people," with the city becoming their living space while also providing labor and undesirable jobs for the city. Rural people with nowhere to go enter the city, becoming a new survival group in the city. "Happy" takes the contradiction and conflict between urban and rural spaces to the extreme. The two are sharply opposed but deeply integrated and inseparable. And those "outsiders" in the city, with their unavoidable fate of homelessness and drifting, seem destined to experience the alienation, exile, and cruelty of humanity in the emotional ups and downs of the era. Their bodies and spirits are placed in dislocated spaces, struggling to survive.

In conclusion, social space plays a crucial role in Chinese novels of the new century, reflecting the complexity and diversity of modern society by showcasing characters' interactions within various social relationships. Social space encompasses not only interactions on material and spiritual levels but also involves the interweaving and conflicts of various factors such as power, economy, and culture. The construction of social space not only reveals characters' social identities and class positions but also reflects the alienation and estrangement between individuals in modern society. Through detailed depictions of social space, novels of the new century provide readers with a unique perspective to observe and understand the social structure and changes in modern China. In this process, the narrative approach of social space not only enriches the narrative techniques of novels but also enhances their depth and power in reflecting social realities and expressing social criticism.

## Conclusion

In new century novels, space has gained more symbolic meaning, becoming a crucial means of expressing themes, exploring culture, and depicting characters' inner worlds. In studying new century Chinese novels, spatial narrative as a key literary device has enriched narrative dimensions and deepened our understanding of modern sociocultural changes. This paper reveals the importance and diversity of spatial narratives in modern literature through a comprehensive analysis of physical, psychological, and social spaces in new century novels. With the rapid development of marketization, globalization, and informatization, high technology, the internet, and new media have become key terms in the cultural context of the new century. These changes are reflected through spatial narratives in new century Chinese novels, profoundly illustrating the transformation of modern social culture.

The expansion and fragmentation of physical space in novels not only showcase specific locations for characters' activities but also reflect sociocultural changes. Psychological space, through the projection of emotions and consciousness, reveals the complex inner world of characters, exposing their individual predicaments and mental states in modern urban life. Social space, by showcasing characters' interactions within various social relationships, reflects the complexity and diversity of modern society, embodying



changes in social structures and cultural diversity.

This paper contributes to contemporary Chinese literary studies by deepening and expanding the application of spatial narrative theory through the combination of spatial theory and textual analysis of new century Chinese novels. Theoretically, it provides a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates the study of physical, psychological, and social spaces, offering new perspectives for understanding and interpreting spatial narratives in modern literature. Practically, through the analysis of specific novels, it offers readers a vital perspective to observe and understand social and cultural changes in modern China.

In the spatial narratives of new century novels, the three main types—physical, psychological, and social spaces—exhibit opposition, intersection, and boundaries, often blending and permeating each other to varying degrees. Through careful depiction and exploration of these spatial narratives, new century novels create richer and more complex narrative spaces, offering readers a profound reading experience. In this era of change and innovation, we anticipate the emergence of new types of spatial narratives, injecting vitality into literary creation. Future research can explore the specific manifestations and significance of spatial narratives in different literary works, especially within the context of informatization and globalization in the new media era, further revealing the development trends of modern society and culture. Additionally, the application of spatial narratives in other literary genres, such as poetry and drama, can be explored to comprehensively understand their broad influence and diverse manifestations in literary creation. It is hoped that this research will provide useful references and insights for understanding and analyzing spatial narratives in new century Chinese novels, promoting further research and theoretical development in related fields.

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