

[Studies in Literature]

# Rituals and Survival: A Comparative Analysis of Female Destiny Narration in Tai Jingnong's *Wedding* and Lu Xun's *Blessings*

ZHONG Xinying

Shanghai International Studies University, China

Received: March 5, 2026

Accepted: April 18, 2026

Published: June 30, 2026

**To cite this article:** ZHONG Xinying. (2026). Rituals and Survival: A Comparative Analysis of Female Destiny Narration in Tai Jingnong's *Wedding* and Lu Xun's *Blessings*. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(2), 137–147, DOI: 10.53789/j.1653-0465.2026.0602.015

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2026.0602.015>

**Abstract:** This paper takes Tai Jingnong's short story *Wedding* as the research object and conducts a systematic comparative analysis with Lu Xun's *Blessings*. Both works depict widows struggling to survive under the heavy pressure of feudal ethics, yet they ultimately face distinct destinies. This paper argues that such differences should be understood through the interaction between the feudal ethical order and the folk world, rather than being simply attributed to individual personality traits. Drawing on ritual-custom interaction theory and narratology, this paper examines how different social structures shape the women's space for survival and how different narrative strategies influence readers' perceptions of female fates. While *Blessings* adopts a first-person internal focalization narrative that strongly guides readers' emotions, *Wedding* employs a restrained third-person narration that leaves moral judgment largely to readers themselves. This study reevaluates Tai Jingnong's unique narrative style in this work and highlights his distinctive position in modern Chinese rural fiction.

**Keywords:** Tai Jingnong; *Wedding*; ritual-custom interaction; narratology; female fate

**Notes on the contributor:** ZHONG Xinying is an undergraduate student majoring in Translation and Interpreting (with a Double Major in Business Administration) at Shanghai International Studies University. Her research interests focus on translation studies and literary studies. Her email address is zhongxinying0628@126.com.

## 1. Introduction

Tai Jingnong (台靜農, 1903–1990), a native of Huoqiu County, Anhui Province, was one of the core members of the Weiming Society (未名社) and an important local writer in the history of modern Chinese literature. According to Lu Xun's diary, the two met over 180 times. The title of Tai's first collection of short

stories, *Sons of the Earth* (《地之子》), was also personally chosen by Lu Xun, which shows the deep friendship between them. When Lu compiled *A Collection of New Chinese Literature: Volume II of Novels*, he included a maximum of four works by a single writer, and four of Tai's short stories were among them, indicating Lu's high recognition of Tai's creative value. Lu once commented on Tai: He has made contributions to literature. When everyone was writing about love and exposing the darkness, no one was more diligent than him in bringing the life and death in the countryside and the smell of the earth onto the paper (Lu, 1957). This evaluation accurately captures the core features of Tai's writing: rural rootedness, a focus on the lower strata, and a plain depiction of the life and death of ordinary people.

However, his works have long failed to receive academic attention commensurate with his literary achievements. Compared with his contemporaries such as Lu Xun and Mao Dun, specialized research on Tai's novels is still relatively scarce. As of April 30, 2026, a search on CNKI using "Tai Jingnong's *Sons of the Earth*" as the keyword yielded only 17 academic journal articles, and there are only 6 concerning "Tai Jingnong *Wedding*(《拜堂》)". Therefore, this paper takes *Wedding* as the research object and attempts to fill this gap.

*Wedding* is set in a rural area in northern China and tells the story of a marriage between Wang Er (汪二), a poor farmer, and his widowed sister-in-law, Mrs. Wang (汪二嫂). After her husband's death, Mrs. Wang faced a tragic situation of being sold by her husband's family or living in solitude, and she was four months pregnant. To survive, she proposed to marry her brother-in-law to secure a legitimate status for the unborn child. Wang Er sold his cotton-padded jacket and used the money to buy incense and yellow paper, and he married Mrs. Wang late at night. There are two special features of this wedding: first, the ceremony was held at midnight, which goes against traditional wedding customs; second, the marriage was conducted in secret without the knowledge or approval of Wang Er's father, who was still alive. Mrs. Tian (田大娘) and Mrs. Zhao (赵二嫂) were invited as witnesses to jointly witness this simple yet solemn ceremony late at night.

Behind this secret wedding at night, in what ways do the discipline of feudal ethics, the logic of human relationships in the folk society, and the survival will of individual women collide and intertwine? How does Tai use his unique calm writing style to freeze all these in silence? As a latecomer compared to Lu Xun's time, in what ways do the protagonists in Tai's *Wedding* differ from Mrs. Xianglin (祥林嫂) in Lu's *Blessings* (《祝福》)? How do these two authors write about the female characters in their stories? These are the questions this paper hopes to explore.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Literature review

Some tended to position Tai as Lu's successor due to their intimate relationship, believing that his novels inherited Lu Xun's style and content. However, as research deepens, this simplistic assertion has come under increasing scrutiny. Xia (2002) pointed out that the fundamental difference between Tai and Lu lies in that the latter focused on revealing the spiritual tragedy and digging into the deeply-rooted ills of national character, while the former focused on presenting the survival tragedy, faithfully depicting the human survival situation, and even presenting a cruel sense of realism with naturalistic colour when showing the destruction of life. By sorting out

Tai's home-returning experiences from 1924 to 1925, Hu (2025) argued that in *Wedding*, Tai did not examine the villagers from a condescending, critical stance but rather understood their survival wisdom and resilience in suffering from within. Yang (1993) also holds that Tai's plain-language descriptions are simpler and gloomier than Lu's, and that the two pursue independent artistic pursuits, highlighting Tai's unique value as an independent research object.

In the specialized research on *Wedding*, Zhu (2002) pointed out that the core artistic technique of *Wedding* is "writing sorrow with a happy scene", using a festive ceremony as the narrative shell to compress the heavy tragedy of the bottom-level life, creating a strong emotional tension. She also noticed that Tai's narrative style is fundamentally different from that of contemporary local writers such as Xu Jie (許傑) and Wang Luyan (王魯彥). The latter two often permeated their subjective critical stance into the narrative, while Tai "remained calm" and "always maintained a narrative distance," presenting events in a straightforward manner with almost no commentary. This observation provides an insight into the most distinctive traits in Tai's writing.

In recent years, the folklore perspective has brought a new dimension to the research on *Wedding*. Pan (2018) pointed out that these ritual behaviors are not simply manifestations of ignorance for the villagers, but spiritual supports for seeking comfort and meaning in a difficult situation. It reveals the duality of the folklore practice in *Wedding*, which is both a carrier of the feudal ethical code and a way for ordinary people to maintain their dignity of survival. Therefore, it acts as an important basis for understanding the complex tension between the feudal ethical code and the folk world.

In summary, the existing research has accumulated valuable results at three levels. First, it has established Tai's independent artistic features different from Lu's; second, it has revealed the internal relationship between the characters' initiative and the folklore mechanism in *Wedding*; third, it has initially touched on the uniqueness of Tai's narrative style. However, there is a void in introducing narratological concepts into the systematic analysis of *Wedding* and constructing an integrated analysis framework.

Therefore, this paper attempts to introduce a more systematic theoretical perspective to comprehensively examine the ethical structure and narrative strategy in *Wedding*.

## ***2.2 Theoretical framework***

The analysis of this paper is based on two interrelated theoretical dimensions. One is the ethical structure, which is used to examine how social norms and daily practices jointly shape the characters' behavioral choices and the direction of their fates. The other is the narrative mechanism, which is used to analyze how the narrative mode affects the readers' perception and judgment of the characters' fates. The following elaborates on them respectively.

### ***2.2.1 Ethical structure***

In this paper, "the world of feudal ethical code" refers to the institutional order system based on the Confucian ethical principles. This system emphasizes the hierarchical structure and moral norms, and has a strong binding effect, especially on female roles and marriage relationships. In this system, individual behavior aims to maintain social order and moral legitimacy, and any behavior deviating from the norms may be regarded as immoral or even deviant. "The folk world" refers to the field of daily practice that prioritizes human relationships and real-life survival needs rather than the strict adherence to abstract ritual norms.

The two mutually penetrate and regulate each other. As Liu (2008) suggests, ritual and custom are at different levels of the state and the folk. Elite culture permeates lower-level people through the educational process of transforming custom through ritual, while folk customs also regulate and adapt to ritual norms in daily practice, ultimately forming a complex pattern of ritual in custom and custom in ritual. In addition, from an anthropological perspective, the folk world can also be related to the concept of “little tradition” (Redfield, 1955). Redfield divided the culture of human society into the “great tradition” dominated by the elite class and the “little tradition” spontaneously formed in the grass-roots society. The latter focuses on empirical knowledge and daily behavioural patterns and has a certain degree of independence and flexibility compared with the elite ritual system. This echoes with Liu’s idea, and further shows that the folk world is not a simple copy of the feudal ethical order but a practical field with internal logic formed in specific life situations.

With regard to *Wedding*, the ethical conflicts can be interpreted as a dynamic structure containing tension and elastic space. The opposition of Wang Er’s father to the marriage represents the normative power of the feudal ethical order, while Mrs. Tian and Mrs. Zhao’s assistance to Mrs. Wang reflects the folk world’s adjustment of the ritual based on the logic of human relationships.

### 2.2.2 *Narrative mechanism*

Narrative perspective refers to the position and manner in which the narrator sees the story, determining how readers perceive the story world through whom and in what way. In the omniscient perspective, the narrator theoretically can enter the minds of all characters and is not limited by perception. However, the omniscient perspective does not mean that the narrator necessarily fully utilizes this omniscient ability, that is, to actively choose to restrain and refuse to enter the characters’ minds, only presenting external behaviours and dialogues.

This echoes the theory of the “implied author”. Booth (2005) notes that the meaning of the text arises not only from the story content itself but also from the value stance conveyed by the narrative mode. Even if the narrator does not directly make moral judgments, the author still constructs an implied attitude through tone selection, detail arrangement, and the distribution of the narrative focus, guiding the readers’ understanding and judgment. In other words, silence itself is also a narrative strategy, and the restrained narrative also conveys the narrator’s stance.

Furthermore, Zhao (2015) argued that the degree of closeness or alienation between the narrator and the characters in terms of emotion and value evaluation directly determines the readers’ way of perceiving the characters’ fates. Specifically, when the narrative distance is relatively close, the text often directly conveys sympathy or criticism, guiding the readers to form a clear emotional response; when the narrative distance is relatively far, the narrative tends to be restrained, and the readers need to judge the meaning of the characters’ behaviours by themselves with less guidance.

To sum up, Booth focuses on how the implied author’s value stance is conveyed through narrative choices, while Zhao explores how these choices produce specific emotional effects during readers’ reading. The two together constitute the theoretical basis for this paper’s examination of Tai’s narrative style.

Combining the two theoretical dimensions above, this paper constructs a dual-analysis framework. On the one hand, it examines how the interaction between the world of feudal ethical code and the folk world restricts the characters’ behavioural choices from the social-structure level; on the other hand, it analyzes how the bystander-style narrative shapes the readers’ perception of these choices from the narrative level. Through this

framework, this paper attempts to make a more explanatory comparative analysis of the differences in the fates of women in Tai's *Wedding* and Lu's *Blessings*.

### 3. Character Analysis in *Wedding*

#### 3.1 *Female images*

The three female characters in *Wedding* – Mrs. Wang, Mrs. Tian, and Mrs. Zhao – despite their different circumstances and personality traits, echo each other.

Mrs. Wang is the most proactive character in this group. Her situation is clear at the beginning of the novel: her husband has been dead for less than a year, and she is four months pregnant. She has no mother-in-law to rely on and faces the fate of being sold by her husband's family to “raise capital for a business”. However, she does not sit still waiting for death. She urges Wang Er to buy incense, paper, and candles, asks why no firecrackers are bought, and firmly believes that “a matchmaker is indispensable at night”. When Wang Er is reluctant to take action, she goes alone late at night with a small bamboo-woven lantern to invite Mrs. Tian and Mrs. Zhao respectively. Her reason is always clear and firm: “Since we've lost face, we must seek good luck. We have a long life ahead and need to get by.” This sentence appears three times in the novel, twice from her mouth and once from Mrs. Tian's, showing that she prioritizes survival rather than strict adherence to feudalism.

However, Mrs. Wang's initiative does not mean that she has completely freed herself from the shackles of the feudal ethics. At the end of the wedding ceremony, when Mrs. Tian says “Kowtow to your dead brother in the underworld too”, she “tears fall to the ground, and her body trembles and twitches”. This moment of breakdown is the novel's most intense emotional moment and also the real exposure of the character's inner self: she can get through the difficulties in the mortal world, but she can't overcome the hurdle of her dead husband in the underworld. The feudal ethics and morals have been internalized into an inerasable psychological pressure on her. Shame and resilience coexist in her, constituting the internal complexity of this character image.

Her choice is not a conscious subversion of the feudal ethical order, but a search for maximum living space and self-rescue within the framework of etiquette and custom. What she wants is not to break the norms, but to strive for a status for herself and her unborn child in the gaps of the norms, and to strive for the possibility of “having a long life ahead and needing to get by”.

Mrs. Tian and Mrs. Zhao enrich the picture of the female group in the novel from another dimension. Although their appearances are brief, they each show the mutual assistance and friendship among folk women in their own ways.

After listening to Mrs. Wang's story, Mrs. Tian says, “What's the point of a small-family woman keeping her chastity? Besides, there's no one to support her. Even among the young mistresses of big families, how many can keep their chastity?” She admitted the realistic difficulties of widowhood in reality, instead of a direct criticism of the feudal ethical concept. With understanding and sympathy for Mrs. Wang's situation, Mrs. Tian doesn't refuse to help on the grounds of feudal ethics.

When Mrs. Zhao was woken up by Mrs. Wang late at night, she, without hesitation, said, “I'll go, I'll go. Wait for me to change my jacket”, and then changes her clothes and goes out. The detail of “changing a

jacket” indicates that she considers this matter serious.

During the wedding ceremony, Mrs. Tian and Mrs. Zhao are active participants and promoters of the ceremony who guide every link of the ceremony. When Mrs. Wang loses control of her emotions while kowtowing to her dead husband, Mrs. Tian says “We must seek good luck. We have a long life ahead and need to get by”, pulling the ceremony back from the verge of collapse. This sentence is almost the same in wording as what Mrs. Wang has repeatedly said, suggesting a resonance among the three women in their will to survive, which is the common belief of this group.

The female characters in *Wedding* share some similarities. In the face of the constraints of the feudal ethical norms and the pressure of real life, they all quietly look for a living space with a kind of tenacity. None of them directly challenges the feudal ethical order, but quietly deviates from the normative requirements of the feudal ethics for women’s behavior in their specific actions. This deviation is a natural manifestation of survival rationality driven by the logic of human relationships, which is the most specific and vivid manifestation of the “folk world” defined in this paper.

### 3.2 *Male images*

In sharp contrast to the resilience and mutual assistance of the female group, the two male characters in the novel are passive and selfish. Wang Er and his father compress Mrs. Wang’s living space in different ways.

Wang Er is always in a passive position throughout the novel. The wedding ceremony is urged and promoted by Mrs. Wang from beginning to end, and Wang Er’s inner thoughts repeatedly reveal his evasion: “If it weren’t for Sister-in-Law’s daily urging, we could have just skipped the kowtowing and muddled through.” His attitude towards this wedding is at most “to cover up the shame”, rather than a real sense of responsibility from the bottom of his heart. When Mrs. Wang suggests setting off firecrackers and inviting a matchmaker, he thinks it’s unnecessary and refuses to take action on the grounds of “feeling embarrassed”, shifting all the embarrassment of facing outsiders to Mrs. Wang. Before the ceremony, he secretly checked if his father was asleep. This detail shows his timidity and implies that he always avoids this marriage rather than faces it.

Wang Er’s passivity is not necessarily due to his belief in feudal ethics or to real guilt over his dead brother, but rather a manifestation of his cowardice and selfishness. He clearly knew that the social criticism and moral pressure brought by this marriage would ultimately be borne by Mrs. Wang alone, and he could choose to “muddle through”, reflecting the indifference to women’s situations in the feudal society.

The image of his father is more complex. He was the most direct spokesperson for the feudal ethical world in the text, openly opposing this marriage. In the teahouse, he says angrily, “I have told Wang Er before to sell this young widow to raise capital for a business. Damn it, he didn’t listen, and now they’ve got together!” However, upon closer examination of this statement, we can find that his motive for opposition is not simply moral conservatism, but rather the consideration of interests.

Wang’s father’s daily behaviour also formed an irony to his image as a defender of feudal ethics. He “holds a small wine pot in his right hand and a white bowl with a small piece of tofu in his left hand”. Despite the family’s financial difficulties, he indulged in personal pleasures every day. He was dissatisfied when he saw his son buying incense, paper, and candles, but never asked about the family’s actual difficulties. This duality of selfishness and conservatism makes Wang’s father a person who acts selfishly in the name of feudal ethics.

At the end of the novel, on the morning after the wedding, there are three tea-drinkers in the teahouse who come to congratulate Wang's father. Their attitudes are worth careful reading. Wu San (吳三) says, "Congratulations to you, old man. Your second son has settled down", with a rather simple tone. Qi the Second (齊二爺) says "It's good. Otherwise, where could your second son settle down in these days", with a solemn attitude, expressing a realistic recognition. And Xiao Jin (小金) says "Anyway, it's like 'the fat won't flow into other people's fields'", which seems to be a teasing and sarcastic remark, degrading this marriage to a worldly calculation of taking advantage. The three's congratulatory attitudes differ, ranging from kindness and recognition to ambiguous teasing. Therefore, a proper interpretation might be that these congratulations reflect an ambiguous acceptance of their own stances and emotional colours. Moreover, upon receiving these congratulations, Wang's father "keeps his head down and silently drinks his wine" without again strongly opposing. This silence may indicate a certain loosening of the feudal ethical order in the face of real-life pressure, but it is not appropriate to overinterpret it as a fundamental change in Wang's father's attitude.

#### **4. A Comparative Analysis of *Wedding* and *Blessings***

In Tai's *Wedding* and Lu's *Blessings*, the two protagonists were placed in extremely similar social contexts: both are widows, both are under the constraints of feudal ethics, both face the threat of being sold off by their husbands or being left alone and helpless, and both struggle to survive in a world where the social value of women is measured by their compliance with the patriarchal order. However, their fates are completely opposite. Mrs. Xianglin died alone on a snowy night of the New Year's Eve, collapsing under the combined forces of the rejection of the ethics, the indifference of the common people, and the heavy pressure of her spirit. Mrs. Wang, on the other hand, completed that simple yet solemn wedding ceremony in the dead of night. She entered a new life with an unknown yet still open future. What is the source of this striking difference?

Attributing it to differences in their personalities between "awakening" and "passivity" is an overly simplistic explanation, for it reduces the structural issue to individual moral evaluations, obscuring what is truly worth questioning. A more subtle reason for this difference lies in the completely different social structures in the two novels, as well as the completely different narrative strategies adopted by the two authors when presenting these structures. Therefore, this chapter will analyze from these two dimensions: 4.1 examines the differences in the social structures of the two novels, specifically exploring how the interaction between the ethical world and the folk world operates in different ways in the two texts. 4.2 section turns to the narrative mechanism level, analyzing how the different choices of narrative perspectives and distances made by Tai and Lu shape the way readers perceive the fates of these two women.

##### ***4.1 Differences in social structures: how the ritualistic world and the folk world affect the two women***

As established in Chapter 2, the ritualistic world corresponds to the normative power of the great tradition, and the folk world corresponds to the practical logic of the little tradition. The mechanism of ritual-society interaction indicates that they are not binary opposition, but form dynamic tension and negotiation in specific situations. When the survival pressure is strong enough, the folk world has the ability to temporarily suspend the constraints of ritualistic norms in daily practice.

In *Blessings*, the ritualistic world and the folk world imposed almost no gap of suppression on Mrs. Xianglin. The ritualistic order represented by Mr. Lusi (魯四老爺) defined Mrs. Xianglin's remarriage as "degrading customs", explicitly deprived her of the qualification to participate in sacrifices, and imposed the punitive force of ritualistic norms on her daily life. However, the more fatal pressure came from within the folk world. Liu Ma (柳媽) used "hell and atonement" to exaggerate Mrs. Xianglin's mental burden, leading her to donate the threshold to exhaust her remaining savings, yet failing to bring any substantive relief. Other people in the town played the role of spectators, repeatedly consumed Mrs. Xianglin's grief over the loss of her son and transformed her tragedy into a topic for casual conversation.

From the perspective of ritual-society interaction, the folk world in *Blessings* did not effectively regulate or adapt to the ritual norms. On the contrary, the folk world internalized and strengthened the moral judgment of ritualism on women's remarriage and disloyalty, allowing the constraints of ritualism to be reproduced and strengthened through the daily discourse of the folk. It completely lacked the ability to distance itself from the official ritualistic order. The little tradition not only did not provide any elastic space for Mrs. Xianglin, instead, it became the transmission mechanism for the normative power of the great tradition to penetrate downward. Under such structure, Mrs. Xianglin's situation was completely enclosed. The ritualistic world exerted pressure from above, the folk world surrounded her from the side, and she could neither obtain redemption by meeting the ritualistic norms, such as donating at the threshold, nor find refuge in the logic of human kindness in the folk world. Therefore, when all the practical paths were closed, Mrs. Xianglin could only turn her confusion to the metaphysical level and questioned, "After a person dies, does there really exist a soul?" in order to seek the last possible hope from the spiritual level. Her passivity was not a sign of the inevitable result of structural enclosure.

In *Wedding*, the social structure presents a completely different appearance. As a counterpart of Mr. Lusi, although Wang Er's father explicitly opposed this marriage and openly expressed his dissatisfaction, his opposition remained at the level of words and did not transform into a substantive blocking of the wedding. The wedding was held in secret at night, and he was completely unaware of it; the next morning, facing the congratulations of the tea drinkers, he "lowered his head and drank his wine silently", without reiterating his fierce opposition. The normative power of the ritualistic order encountered disintegration in this specific context.

In sharp contrast to *Blessings*, in *Wedding*, the folk world deviated from the ritualistic norms. After hearing Mrs. Wang's words, Mrs. Tian said, "What does a small family care about? Besides, there is no one to lead; even the daughter-in-law of an elite family, how many can stand to be a widow?" Mrs. Tian and Mrs. Zhao's statement and action followed a typical practice logic of the little tradition. She did not directly negate the ritualistic norms but temporarily suspended their moral requirements during widowhood, acknowledging the practical consideration of survival. As a result, during the wedding, the moral judgment of the ritualistic order on levirate marriage was put aside, and instead, the action logic centered on human kindness and survival rationality of the folk world was activated.

To sum up, Mrs. Wang is confronted with a ritual and social structure that has some flexibility, and the folk world provides her with substantial support. Her proactive planning has a realistic foothold. Mrs. Xianglin, on the other hand, is faced with a completely closed ritual and social structure, and the folk world not only does not provide any flexibility but also becomes an amplifier of the pressure of moral norms.

#### 4.2 *Differences in narrative mechanisms: how narrative perspective and narrative distance shape readers' perception of female destiny*

Apart from social situations, another reason readers may have different experiences reading these two novels is their distinct narrative mechanisms.

*Blessings* adopts the first-person internal focus perspective, and the narrator “I” is the direct participant and witness of the story. Readers’ perception of Mrs. Xianglin’s fate is always realized through the author as the medium of perception. This perspective setting directly leads to the extreme contraction of the narrative distance. The sympathy, confusion, and helplessness of “I” towards Mrs. Xianglin’s fate are conveyed directly to readers through the first-person directness, and readers have almost no space for independent judgment. When Mrs. Xianglin asks “After a person dies, does there really exist a soul?”, “I” replies, “Perhaps...” I think. This hesitant answer, when narrated in a very close proximity, conveys the moral dilemma and sense of helplessness of ‘me’ almost without any filtering to the readers, compelling the readers to share this sense of guilt and helplessness with ‘me’.

From the perspective of the implied author, Lu’s choice to have the narrator ‘I’ directly intervene and express emotions is a strategy for conveying the implied author’s value stance through the narrator’s presence. ‘I’’s speechlessness and evasion are precisely the implied criticism of the limitations of the enlightenment discourse that a self-proclaimed intellectual has no other options but hesitation and evasion when faced with real suffering. The contraction of the narrative distance makes this irony hit the readers with the greatest emotional intensity: the readers are present with ‘me’, sharing that sense of helplessness, and thus cannot remain aloof.

In comparison, *Wedding* adopts a third-person omniscient perspective, but Tai chose to only present the external behavior, dialogue and scenes of the characters, without any moral judgments on any character’s actions or clear emotional signals to the readers.

Such active non-intervention is Tai’s core narrative strategy choice. For example, Wang Er’s inner monologue on his way home is one of the few paragraphs in the novel that directly presents the inner activities of the character: “Getting married with the sister-in-law, there are indeed such cases in the world, but it is not considered a good thing. My brother died only a year ago, and this is what happened. It’s somewhat regrettable.” However, even here, the narrator only presents Wang Er’s psychological activities in their original form, without any evaluative intervention. Readers can only understand this character through their own judgment.

The portrayal of Wang’s father is achieved through the juxtaposition of details to convey the implied author’s value. Tai writes in the text that he “holds a small wine pot in his right hand and a white bowl in his left hand, with small pieces of tofu in the bowl”, and then writes that when he sees the incense paper, he says discontentedly, “Damn it, what are these things for?” The comparison of his luxurious personal enjoyment and the stingy criticism of the wedding supplies for his son leads the readers to form a judgment on this character on their own. This is exactly what Booth said about the operation of the implied author. The author’s value stance is conveyed through the selection and arrangement of details, rather than through the direct statement of the narrator.

Tai’s narrator maintains the maximum distance from the characters. The narrator does not enter into the

moral evaluation of the characters, does not align with the emotional stance of any character, and there is no narrator as an emotional intermediary between the reader and the characters in the text. Therefore, the reader must rely entirely on their own judgment to understand the characters, must decide for themselves what the tenacity of Mrs. Wang means, how to evaluate Wang Er's cowardice, and what the relationship is between Wang's father's selfishness and conservatism, thus allows Mrs. Wang's agency to be fully presented. Readers directly confront this person, and will form a deeper impression on Mrs. Wang's strive for survival and the direct collision with rituals.

In conclusion, the differences in the fates of the women in *Wedding* and *Blessings* result from the joint action of the two levels of social structure and narrative mechanism. The social structure constitutes the raw materials for the narrative level. Differences in the elasticity of the interaction between rituals and customs determine the space of choice available to the two women and fundamentally shape the differences in their action logic. In terms of narrative mechanism, it determines what readers ultimately extract from these raw materials, thereby further reinforcing or undermining the characters' agency at the level of the reading experience. These two aspects are independent yet interact with each other.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the portrayal of female fates in Tai's *Wedding* from two aspects: social structure and narrative mechanism, and conducts a systematic comparison with Lu's *Blessings*.

In terms of social structure, the comparative analysis in this paper shows that the difference in the fates of Mrs. Wang and Mrs. Xianglin is due to the relational structure between the world of feudal ethics and the folk world in the two novels. In *Blessings*, the folk world not only fails to form any effective adjustment or resistance to the feudal ethical norms, but also transmits and amplifies the pressure of feudal ethics. However, in *Wedding*, driven by the real-life survival dilemma and the logic of human relations, the folk world constitutes a passive yet effective deviation from feudal ethical norms.

Regarding narrative mechanism, this paper indicates that the readers' different perceptions of the agency of the two female characters are actively constructed by the completely different narrative strategies of the two writers. Lu uses a first-person, internal focalization narrative in *Blessings*, with an extremely close narrative distance. The readers' emotional responses are strongly guided by the narrator, and Mrs. Xianglin's subjectivity is partially obscured by the narrator's sympathetic gaze. On the other hand, Tai uses the third-person omniscient perspective in *Wedding*, but actively chooses not to fully utilize the omniscient ability. Instead of the narrator's direct intervention, he maximizes the narrative distance and leaves the space for judgment entirely to the readers. Therefore, readers can directly feel Mrs. Wang's subjective initiative from each of her actions in the text.

This study contributes to the reevaluation of Tai's unique position in the genealogy of Chinese contemporary rural novels. The analysis in this paper shows that the differences between Tai and Lu in narrative perspective and narrative distance are not merely differences in stylistic preferences, but reflect the different choices of the two writers regarding the relationship between the narrator and the narrative object in their respective works. In *Blessings*, a narrator with an enlightenment stance is placed at the center of the rural novel, and the narrator is tasked with witnessing the suffering and conveying criticism. Tai Jingnong, on the other hand, integrates

meaning into the details of the story world.

Despite that, several gaps still remain. This focused research approach facilitates an in-depth, detailed interpretation of the texts, but to some extent limits the universality of the research conclusions. Whether the narrative features identified in *Wedding* constitute Tai's consistent strategy across his overall creation or are unique choices in this text remains to be further investigated. The answer needs to be further explored through a systematic analysis of other works in *Sons of the Earth*.

In addition, the scope of comparison in this paper is limited to the two texts. Future research can expand the comparative perspective to a wider range of portrayals of widows and remarriage in rural novels during the May 4<sup>th</sup> period, including relevant works by contemporary writers. Thus, the structural features presented in *Wedding* and *Blessings* can be examined in a more macroscopic literary-historical context. This will also be the author's next research direction.

### References

- Booth, W. C. (2005). Resurrection of the implied author: Why bother? *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, 75–88.
- Redfield, R. (1955). The social organization of tradition. *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 15(1), 13–21.
- ZHANG Hongjin. (2026). *Gulliver's Travels* from the perspective of narratology: The intertwining of satire and power critique. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(1), 203–207.
- 胡丹穎:《重新發現的『風景』——台靜農小說〈拜堂〉再闡釋》,《文教資料》,2025年第21期,頁25–28。
- 劉志琴:《禮俗互動是中國思想史的本土特色》,《東方論壇》,2008年第3期,頁1–8。
- 潘應:《台靜農〈地之子〉民俗風情的成因與價值》,《皖西學院學報》,2018年第4期,頁73–76。
- 夏明釗:《台靜農小說集〈地之子〉述論》,《寧波職業技術學院學報》,2002年第4期,頁43–48。
- 楊劍龍:《台靜農:深受魯迅影響的地之子》,《江淮論壇》,1993年第3期,頁81–88。
- 趙毅衡:《敘述分層的符號學考察》,《貴州社會科學》,2012年第12期,頁22–28。
- 朱偉華:《『以樂景寫哀』的鄉土小說——台靜農〈拜堂〉賞析》,《貴州師範大學學報(社會科學版)》,2002年第1期,頁93–95。

(Editors: ZOU Ling & JIANG Qing)