

DISCUSSING THE CHANGES OF THE TIMES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MICRO-NARRATIVE WITH FAMILIES IN THE ALLEY AS AN EXAMPLE

Wang Ziqi

Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology, No.219, Ningliu Road, Jiangbei New Area, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China 210044

<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2025.1039>

Received: 28 June 2025/Published: 14 July 2025

ABSTRACT

In the ever-changing landscape of the great era, the lights in the alley houses exude a warm charm. Families in the Alley distinguishes itself with its unique micro-narrative approach. Rather than adopting the conventional method of simply narrating the grand history and centering on significant events and heroic figures, it subtly takes a micro-perspective. Through the daily minutiae and life transitions of several families in the alley, it unfolds a tender and heart-warming tale of alley life. This micro-narrative perspective not only breathes life into the past, making it vivid and palpable, but also, through the interwoven connections in the lives of ordinary folks, offers readers a distinctive means to perceive the shifts of the era, which calls for in-depth exploration.

Keywords: "Families in the Alley"; Micro-narration; Changes in the Times.

1. INTRODUCTION

The story of *Families in the Alley* is set in the late 1970s. It recounts the stories of three families over two generations in an alley near a cotton-spinning mill in Suzhou. By taking this small alley as the core stage to carry the story, it subtly portrays the most mundane and genuine lives of ordinary people. Readers are led to feel as if they are standing right in the alley, watching everything happen with their own eyes, hearing the neighborhood chatter, and immersing themselves in the local street-level life.

2. PRESENTATION MODES OF THE MICRO-NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Micro-narrative is a form of storytelling that zeroes in on individuals, small groups, or specific local events. By depicting and presenting these relatively mundane and trivial elements, it offers a reflection of life. It typically hones in on a small slice of life and reveals broader and more profound aspects of society, the era, and history through the nuances. Micro-narrative is frequently encountered in research fields like art and history. For instance, "Curatorial Orientation and Construction of Museum Narrative Exhibitions from the Perspective of Micro-History" indicates that the micro-history perspective is a research approach centered around individuals and daily life. It stresses a bottom-up historical account, taking into consideration the lives of ordinary people and their impact on the historical process. In museum narrative exhibitions, this is

demonstrated through the detailed depiction of specific events to showcase the macro-historical background and social changes from a micro-scale.¹

In the realm of literary creation, *Families in the Alley* takes a close-up look at several families residing in an alley within a residential area for employees of a cotton textile factory in Suzhou. Through a micro-perspective narrative approach, it unfolds small stories centered around the mundane events in the daily lives of specific ordinary characters. This work portrays the vicissitudes and growth of these ordinary people during the period of social transformation from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, and offers a glimpse into the social landscape of that era. The book depicts a multitude of characters with diverse personalities and vivid images, and unfolds the grand social, historical, and cultural context of that time through the life attitudes and fates of ordinary individuals. The plot of the novel revolves around issues including neighborhood relations, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts, children's education, and the responsibilities and contributions of eldest sons and daughters. In the neighborhood, there is harmonious mutual-help, yet there are also those who are pushy and overly greedy. The novel depicts the pure and lovely budding romance between teenagers. It also shows the awkwardness and tentativeness between young men and women, where genuine affection is intertwined with considerations of family and future interests. Additionally, there are irreconcilable family conflicts that persist in middle-aged couples. The characters are vivid, full-blooded, rich, and colorful. There are the long-suffering and magnanimous eldest sons and grandsons, as well as the disrespectful and partial elders; there are those with proper conduct, high emotional intelligence, and a sunny disposition, and those who are precocious and struggling with family relationships; there are those who firmly argue their points and never give up, and those who are easygoing and always tolerate others' faults...

In the novel, it's quite prominent and typical to describe the responsibilities and contributions of the eldest sons and daughters. For instance, there are Zhuang Chaoying, Wu Shanshan, Li Jia, and Lin Wufeng. Although these four characters all hold the position of the eldest son or daughter, the psychological burdens they bear and the "responsibilities" imposed by their original families differ. In particular, the contrast between Zhuang Chaoying and Lin Wufeng is very striking. Zhuang Chaoying took on too much, overemphasizing his personal responsibilities. Even after forming his own family after marriage, he still acted with his habitual way of thinking, putting the interests of his small family behind that of his original big family. His stubbornness not only caused a rift in his marriage with his wife Huang Ling but also left his daughter Zhuang Xiaoting puzzled. Of course, Zhuang Chaoying's extreme behavior was not solely caused by his personal fixed mindset of "the eldest should contribute more". The main instigators were his parents, who both suppressed and instigated. His parents showed extreme partiality and constantly made demands on Zhuang Chaoying. They even ignored his sister Zhuang Hualin, a kind-hearted soul who went to the countryside as an educated youth in place of her younger brother Zhuang Ganmei. However, in the end, Zhuang Ganmei's family didn't show the slightest gratitude and wouldn't even offer her a bed. Zhuang Chaoying, who had long been praised by her parents for being filial, was like a child asking for candy. The more her parents praised her, the more filial she became, and the more filial she was, the more she gave in. When his parents uttered a few words, Zhuang

¹Zhang Li: Curatorial Orientation and Construction of Museum Narrative Exhibitions from the Perspective of Microhistory, Art and Folklore, Issue 3, 2024, p. 5.

Chaoying was caught in the middle and became the scapegoat. He voluntarily heaped more responsibility onto himself without limit, determined to shoulder it even if it cost him his life. His wife blamed him for not considering their children, and his parents resented him for failing to fulfill his duty as the eldest brother. Caught in a dilemma, he endured grievances from both sides and felt extremely frustrated.

The novelist intentionally accentuates the partiality of Father Zhuang and Mother Zhuang, crafting such one-sided parents who take the wrong side, constantly making demands on Zhuang Chaoying, a sensible and self-sacrificing child. Even though both children are equally precious to them, they show no empathy for the hardships between their children. And Lin Wufeng, who lost his father in his childhood, helped his mother raise younger siblings, successfully established a firm place in the village, fiercely fought back against those bullying villagers, spent money and effort to bring younger siblings to adulthood, had no lingering worries after the matter was done, kept his achievements in the background, and also won the gratitude and dependence of younger siblings. In the interaction among siblings, two factors influence whether the relationship is good or not. Part is attributed to parents, and the other part lies in having siblings who are considerate and sensible as good teammates. The tragedy befalls Zhuang Chaoying and Zhuang Hualin, where they are not only burdened with a pair of biased parents but also a younger brother Zhuang Ganmei who is utterly ungrateful. The confluence of these two misfortunes leaves the siblings no choice but to swallow the bitters of life.

In addition, the novel vividly captures the essence of daily life through trivial anecdotes from everyday scenarios. A notable instance is the brash behavior of Song Ying, known as a troublemaker, who takes her son Lin Dongzhe to vie for a house. Another example is how Lin Wufeng ingeniously overcomes the issue of neighbors' deliberate bullying by exploiting human frailties. It can be said that in *Families in the Alley*, from a microscopic viewpoint, the inner turmoil of ordinary characters, the frictions in neighborhood interactions, and the disputes and reconciliations within families are all depicted. No aspect is overlooked, and every nuance of each character's life is portrayed in great detail, allowing readers to truly empathize with the joys and sorrows of these ordinary folks. Such scene descriptions may seem trivial and ordinary, but it is precisely where the charm of micro-narration lies. They present the most authentic appearance of life to readers, enabling us to sense the earthly flavor of life in these minute details.

3. THE NARRATIVE STRATEGIES OF REFLECTING THE CHANGES OF THE GREAT ERA THROUGH THE FATES OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

The stories in *Families in the Alley* span several significant historical periods. They cover the material shortage during the planned economy era in the late 1970s, the psychological stress arising from the reform of state-owned enterprises, and then the ever-changing scene after the reform and opening up.

The author reflects these macroscopic era changes by focusing on the life changes of the characters in the alley. For example, in the planned economy era, *families in the alley* relied on various ration coupons to sustain their lives. When purchasing daily necessities, they had to plan carefully and be quick-witted to get what they wanted. The limited-supply goods constantly made them worry about meeting their basic living needs. However, with the advent of the reform and opening-up policy, Li Yiming in the alley was able to buy a telephone and independently run a general merchandise business. People's lives started to become more colorful, and their consumption options became increasingly diverse. The changes in the life trajectories of these

individuals under different historical backgrounds are like a mirror, clearly showing the grand historical transformation of the whole country from material shortage to gradual affluence and from isolation to openness. It enables us to see how macroscopic historical changes have truly seeped into the lives of ordinary people, altering their fates and ways of living.

The story of *Families in the Alley* spans important historical periods, and the significant changes of these eras have left deep imprints on the lives of the alley residents. On the eve of the reform and opening up, there was a scarcity of supplies. The *families in the alley* relied on various ration tickets to sustain their basic livelihoods. One had to use vegetable tickets to buy vegetables, meat tickets to buy meat, and daily-use item tickets to buy toothpaste. Even the meat for the Spring Festival was only obtained with great difficulty through the queuing and cooperation of several children in the alley. Everyone lived a frugal life, and every purchase had to be planned ahead. With the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, some individually-owned small businesses gradually appeared in the alley. Li Yiming opened a small grocery store, and Huang Ling later started a small lunch service. The younger generation now has more opportunities to pursue their dreams. Zhuang Tunan and others managed to change their destinies by getting into universities, while Xiang Pengfei carved out a niche for himself in the business realm. It can be said that a series of significant historical events unfolded alongside the lives and daily routines of the people in the alley. For instance, historical events like the resumption of the college entrance examination, the return of educated youths to urban areas, the reform of state-owned enterprises, and the price reform were all more or less deeply reflected in the daily lives of the ordinary folks in the small Suzhou alley.

At the start of the novel, the college entrance examination was reinstated in 1977. As a high-school teacher, Zhuang Chaoying, with his sharp professional intuition and foresight in children's education, devised a detailed study plan for his son Zhuang Tunan and gave free tutoring to the kids in the alley. Along with Huang Ling's efforts to protect and strive for the interests of their children, it finally enabled their two children and their neighbor's son Lin Dongzhe to board the "train" of the college entrance examination, an opportunity that could change their lives. They grasped the chance that education offered to young people during the era's change, enabling them to break away from their original life trajectories and pursue more extensive development prospects. In 1978, educated youths started to return to the cities, and the family disputes of these returnees became a significant plot in the book. Zhuang Hualin went to the countryside in Guizhou instead of her younger brother Zhuang Ganmei. Nevertheless, in the end, the younger brother didn't show any gratitude for his sister's sacrifice. He even refused to offer a bed for his nephew Xiang Pengfei, which had an impact on Zhuang Chaoying's family and resulted in a series of family conflicts and arguments. Moreover, after Wang Fang, the daughter of the well-connected Wang family, came back from the countryside, she received a series of cold and sarcastic comments from her family. Li Jia's family was in a difficult financial situation. All these were the consequences of the issue of educated youths returning to the cities. With the advent of reform and opening up, individual economy was restored and developed in 1979. Li Yiming, living at the entrance of the alley, got a business license and became an individual business owner after failing the college entrance examination. Xiang Pengfei, having failed the college entrance examination twice, also seized the opportunities of the era to start his own business. Eventually, he reaped great rewards and became a "ten-thousand-yuan household". Song Ying's snack stand, jointly run with her partners, was thriving as well. Through the development trajectories of these ordinary people, it is shown that the rise of individual economy has provided young people with new employment and

development avenues, reflecting the diversified development of the economic landscape in the changing times.

Moreover, against the backdrop of state-owned enterprise reform, state-owned enterprises like cotton textile mills are confronted with numerous changes. These include adjustments to the factory's management system and employment system, which have an impact on the work and lives of textile factory workers. In the novel, after Lin Wufeng was disciplined for taking a part-time job, he resolutely left the cotton textile mill and headed to Guangdong to start a new career. Song Ying also accompanied him and took a leave of absence while retaining her salary. All these instances illustrate their different choices and the directions their fates took during the wave of state-owned enterprise reform, mirroring the impacts and opportunities that economic system reform brought to ordinary families. In March 1988, Shanghai led the way by adjusting the retail prices of 280 commodities, officially initiating the "price reform attempt." Once launched, it rapidly spread across the country, triggering a wave of commodity hoarding and bank runs.²

Zhuang Tunan, Lin Dongzhe, and Xiang Pengfei also capitalized on the "regional price differences" created by the price reform attempt to make a fortune. In the novel, the daily life scenes of the alley residents are depicted, showing that they monitored price changes daily. A chaotic situation of panic-buying daily necessities emerged, vividly illustrating the disruption and impact of this historical event on ordinary people's lives. Finally, this "price reform attempt", which presented both challenges and opportunities, was brought to an end by the central government's tough economic policy of "macro-control and rectification" issued in October 1988.³

While reflecting major events of the era through the narration of such small daily-life events, the story also intersperses some iconic small events related to specific years. For example, there was the stampede at the Lujia Ferry in Shanghai in December 1987, and the hepatitis A outbreak in Shanghai in January 1988. In addition, the novel portrays changes in family values and the awakening of female consciousness. Among them, Song Ying, a "rebellious figure", leads the new trend. Initially, Huang Ling endured hardships in her husband's family. Influenced by Song Ying, for the sake of her child's college entrance examination and the family's future, she finally chose to fight back, breaking free from the shackles of traditional family concepts and showing the awakening of female self-awareness. Moreover, Zhuang Chaoying once brought many conflicts to the family because of blind filial piety. After his daughter was beaten, he woke up and abandoned blind filial piety. This shows that under the influence of the era, people are re-evaluating traditional filial piety and trying to strike a balance between family affection and interests. *Families in the Alley* vividly reflects the impact of national policies on the fates of every ordinary person and small individual through the changes in their individual lives. It also enables readers to directly perceive how macro-historical transformations actually shape the life trajectories of every ordinary person via the fates of these small figures.

²Li Zuojun, Tian Huimin: *Walking Hand in Hand with Reform: China's Reform, Opening-up and Great Rejuvenation 2*, Beijing: China Economic Publishing House, 2021, p. 195.

³Da Mi: *Families in the Alley*(Volume 2), Chengdu: Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2024, p. 318.

4. THE NECESSITY OF THE MICRO-NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In contrast to the traditional grand narrative, which typically focuses on significant historical events and political decisions, *Families in the Alley* adopts a micro-narrative perspective, directing its focus towards the daily lives of ordinary folks. As the life scenes and emotional experiences presented in micro-narrative are more in tune with our real-life situations, they feel like stories unfolding right beside us, vivid and full of warmth. Through the ordinary daily life portrayed in *Families in the Alley*, people can sense the changes of the era. By starting from daily life and delving into the core of human nature, it allows people to reflect on the era. In this way, it recreates another form of "strange life" that transcends real-life experiences.⁴

Grand historical narratives, which focus on overall social development trends and major changes, tend to overlook specific life details and individual differences to some extent. In contrast, *Families in the Alley* employs a micro-narrative approach. As it often tells stories about specific people and events that are close to real life, it can easily strike a chord with readers, making them feel as if these stories are taking place right beside them. This, in turn, enhances the work's allure and readability. By delving deep into the specific lives and inner worlds of individuals and starting from the micro-perspectives of ordinary people and small events, the micro-narrative can reflect the overall social landscape, the characteristics of the era, and the social structure at the macro-level. Micro-narrative is widely applied in various fields of literary works, including many novels depicting urban life and some movies and TV shows that center on the lives of ordinary people. It complements macro-narrative and together they enrich people's expression and perception of the world. Therefore, this kind of narrative can precisely showcase the characteristic that "a grain of sand in the era weighs like a mountain on an ordinary person." When later generations learn about terms such as "leaving one's post without pay" "transformation of state-owned enterprises" and "price reform", since a long time has passed and these terms are quite unfamiliar, they may not be emotionally moved. However, when they understand this series of era-related policies and reforms by reading real-life daily accounts, they will have a more profound experience and insight, and their understanding will be deeper.

Some micro-narrative works may be overly restricted to the trivialities of individual lives, lacking an effective connection to and in-depth presentation of macro-history. Consequently, these works appear to have a limited scope, merely remaining at the level of life stories. Therefore, *Families in the Alley* adopts a different approach. It eschews the direct narration of grand events and centers the narrative on ordinary people. From the micro-perspective of daily life, it enables readers to feel the warmth of history from a civilian viewpoint. This distinctive narrative style makes it stand out among numerous historical-themed works, providing readers with a brand-new way to interpret history. While subtly portraying the little details of the lives of people in the alley, it artfully connects the characters' life changes and ideological evolutions with different historical periods. In this manner, readers can always clearly perceive the grand historical background behind the stories of ordinary people, achieving an organic combination of the micro and the macro.

Through micro-narration, the great energy within ordinary people can be portrayed. Huang Ling is in a traditional family relationship, where she has endured a great deal of unfair treatment

⁴Zhang Yanqian: "Examining Grand History through Micro-Narrative: An Analysis of Fang Yingwen's Echoes from the Mountains", Journal of Shangluo University, No. 3, 2019, pp. 34-35.

in her husband's family. Her in-laws gave her a hard time, and her husband failed to understand her. Nevertheless, she persevered in the face of these challenges. Influenced by her neighbor Song Ying, she started to bravely fight for her rights and oppose the unreasonable family relationship. Huang Ling's husband, Zhuang Chaoying, is a high-school teacher. Although he often has trouble distinguishing between the interests of his immediate family and the extended family, he is concerned about current affairs and highly values his children's education. He guides them to change their fates via the college entrance examination, helps them study hard and make positive progress in the post-resumption environment of the college entrance examination, and sets them on their individual growth paths. Song Ying has a feisty yet kind-hearted nature. She often defends Huang Ling and offers her comfort. When confronted with the changing personality of Shan Shan, she shows confusion and sadness, presenting a complex and endearing character image. Lin Dongzhe, the son, grew up alongside the children of the Zhuang family. Amidst the era's transformations, he was well-aware of the significance of learning and continuously pursued self-improvement. Moreover, Zhuang Xiaoting, a fictional character, evolved from being fearful, sensitive, and quiet into an outspoken and self-expressive person. Guided by Lin Dongzhe, the socially-adept "Wolong", the evolution of Zhuang Xiaoting's personality was truly astonishing. Of course, this "Fengchu" also boasted her own distinct charm, possessing both courage and perseverance. These families engaged in the typical daily interactions and mutual assistance of neighbors, while also experiencing occasional minor spats. They went through numerous mundane aspects of life together, including housing distribution, children's education, family internal conflicts, and personal development. Propelled by the tides of the times, profound alterations occurred in their lives, outlooks, and family dynamics. *Families in the Alley* adopts a micro-narrative approach to guide readers into the lives of ordinary people. As every ordinary person is a participant and witness of history, the book broadens readers' historical horizons, allowing them to comprehend the entire panorama of history from a more extensive perspective.

The book's delicate portrayals of characters' emotions and vivid recreations of life scenes allow readers to effortlessly step into the shoes of the story's characters, sharing their joys and sorrows and developing a strong sense of empathy. When readers resonate with the life experiences or happy moments of the alley families, they can gain a better understanding of the difficulties and opportunities people encountered in a specific historical period, feel the significant impact of social changes on individual lives, and thereby deepen their insights into the passage of time. The book not only portrays the characteristics of different eras, including the changes in the housing allocation system of state-owned cotton textile factories, the influence of the restoration of the college entrance examination system, and the transformation of female roles, but also explores the kindness in human nature, such as the mutual understanding and support among neighbors, the profound affection between spouses, and the resilience shown by individuals in tough situations. As a result, the novel not only exudes a sense of historical gravity but also overflows with warmth and positive energy.

5. CONCLUSION

Through its distinctive micro-narrative perspective, *Families in the Alley* has successfully presented a magnificent life story on the small stage of the alley, setting ordinary people against the backdrop of the grand era. It enables us to perceive the extraordinary significance of the era embedded in ordinary life and offers us a fresh and empathetic way to uncover the lives of ordinary folks amidst the changing times. The lives of ordinary people are also a crucial part of the era.

Their joys and sorrows, along with the changes in their lives, all bear the imprints of time and mirror the rhythm of the era. This narrative approach reminds us that when researching and comprehending history, we shouldn't solely focus on those large-scale events and heroic figures. Instead, we should also value the roles played by ordinary people in the historical process and the stories they've gone through. Greater importance should be attached to the value of micro-narratives, and the creation of more works starting from the lives of ordinary people should be encouraged. In this way, our understanding of history can be continuously enriched and improved, and history can truly become a story of the era and the nation jointly written by all the people.

REFERENCES

- [1] Da Mi. *Families in the Alley* (Volume 1) [M]. Chengdu: Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House, January 2024.
- [2] Li Zuojun, Tian Huimin (eds.). *Walking with Reform: China's Reform, Opening-up and Great Rejuvenation* (Volume 2) [M]. Beijing: China Economic Publishing House, January 2021.
- [3] Zhang Yanqian. Examining Grand History from a Micro-narrative Perspective: On Fang Yingwen's *The Echoes of the Mountains* [J]. *Journal of Shangluo University*, 2019, 33(3): 34-37.
- [4] Zhang Li. Curatorial Orientation and Construction of Museum Narrative Exhibitions from a Micro-history Perspective [J]. *Art and Folk Custom*, 2024, 3: 4-11.