
**THE ART OF “PUTTING THE FINISHING TOUCH” IN LU XUN’S
SHORT STORIES ACROSS THE COLLECTIONS NA HAN AND PANG
HUANG**

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the decline of Chinese feudal society, Lu Xun emerged as a historical witness who left a profound mark on Chinese literature. His short stories surpassed domestic boundaries to achieve international influence, leaving an indelible imprint on the spiritual life of humanity. This success stems from his diverse, profound themes combined with unique, sophisticated artistic techniques. In terms of artistry, the technique of “putting the finishing touch” in particular significantly contributed to shaping the character typologies in Lu Xun’s short stories. This paper examines the art of “putting the finishing touch” within his short stories across two collections, *Nà hǎn* and *Páng huáng*, while drawing comparisons with classical Chinese narrative works such as *Sōu shén jì*, *Lí hún jì*, and *Liáozhāi Zhìyì*. Through this analysis, we aim to demonstrate his distinctive inheritance of classical character-building methods, specifically the “portrait spirit” approach. This technique effectively highlights three character typologies: women, intellectuals, and peasants along with their respective tragedies. By analyzing the texts through the lens of modern poetics and contextualizing Lu Xun’s short stories within the socio-cultural landscape of early 20th-century China, this study elucidates the unique and representative relationship between literary artistry and reality.

KEYWORDS: *Nà hǎn*, *Páng huáng*, character-building art, classical narratives, Lu Xun’s short stories, “putting the finishing touch”.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lǚ Xùn is a great writer not only of China but also of the whole world. Through his pen, he conveyed content rich in realistic depth and the profound art of the essence of traditional Eastern aesthetic theory and modern Western narrative thinking. In that artistic depth, inherited from tradition, the technique of “putting the finishing touch” following the art of capturing the spirit is a research direction that shows the writer’s creative inheritance in character building.

In Vietnam, previous research works mainly focused on three main directions. The first direction focuses on the sociological aspect, about the young intellectual class, the spiritual disease of the people through the character Ā Q; exploring the aspect of Lǚ Xùn as a great critic, and Lǚ Xùn in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Ba, 1961; Luu, 1968; Chinh, 1979; Chinh, 1981). From this, it can be seen that the issues concerned by previous researchers mainly lean towards social, historical, and revolutionary ideological aspects. The second direction pays attention to the poetics aspect, such as the poetics of Lǚ Xùn’s short stories, some issues in Lǚ Xùn’s poetics, and the teaching of the writer’s works in high schools (Tieu, 1988; Thu, 2005). Through this, it is seen that researchers began to consider each work as an artistic whole, separated from historical and cultural factors. Recently, there has been a third research direction combining both poetics and sociological aspects. This is systematizing the art of character building in Lǚ Xùn’s short stories through the two collections *Nàhǎn* (Gào thét) and *Pánghuáng* (Bàng hoàng), comparing them with Chinese short stories from classical to modern times to find the writer’s inheritance and innovation compared to tradition. Regarding inheritance, it includes “huà lóng diǎn jīng” - which is the technique of “putting the finishing touch”, “seeing the big through the small”, and character typification. Regarding innovation, it includes the discourse of character images in character building, and innovation in building the image of the narrator (Ngan *et al.*, 2026). The technique of “putting the finishing touch” was mentioned in the above research; however, it only stopped at the inheritance aspect. It has not clarified the creativity in applying it to build character images by focusing solely on the eyes and their subtle changes in Lǚ Xùn’s short stories through the two collections *Nàhǎn* and *Pánghuáng*. From there, the aim is to find the writer’s creative inheritance by combining poetics and sociology through this technique.

On that basis, this study will approach the works from the perspective of modern poetics. It aims to explore the “putting the finishing touch” technique through the detailed description of the eyes and their subtle changes. This will show Lǚ Xùn’s novelty in using a traditional

technique. At the same time, it places Lǚ Xùn's short stories in the socio-cultural context of early 20th-century China to explain the relationship between art and reality.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

- Research materials: To support the research on the “putting the finishing touch” art in Lǚ Xùn's short stories from the two collections *Nàhǎn* and *Pánguáng*, and to compare them with some classical Chinese fiction to find the writer's creative inheritance, we selected representative works relevant to the topic. These include Lǚ Xùn's short stories in *Nàhǎn* and *Pánguáng*. In addition, the study refers to typical classical Chinese works such as *Sōushén Jì* (Suu thần ký), *Lihún Jì* (Ly hồn ký), *Liáozhāi Zhìyì* (Liêu trai chí dị), etc., to point out Lǚ Xùn's innovation in applying the traditional “putting the finishing touch” technique to build characters.

- Research methods:

+ Analysis and synthesis method: This method is used to analyze the components of the “putting the finishing touch” art. Based on that, it synthesizes typical features and analyzes the writer's creative inheritance in character building.

+ Poetics method: This method aims for a holistic approach. It views each work as a complete artistic whole and a system of techniques. By finding differences within similarities, it identifies Lǚ Xùn's unique style in character building. Specifically, this approach analyzes the selected short stories to draw conclusions about Lǚ Xùn's creative awareness in the “putting the finishing touch” art compared to his predecessors in pre-modern Chinese fiction.

+ Comparative method: This method is used to compare character building using the “putting the finishing touch” technique between Lǚ Xùn's short stories and classical short fiction to see their similarities and differences. From there, it generalizes his inheritance and innovation in the art of character building, proving his pioneering role in modern Chinese literature.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Introduction to the terminology of classical fiction and short stories

3.1.1. Classical fiction

In the field of ancient Chinese literature, the concept of *tiểu thuyết* (fiction) is understood differently from the concept of the novel in Western literature and in modern times. Because from the beginning, fiction was not considered an independent literary genre with high aesthetic value. Instead, it was often classified in the category of *tiểu đạo* (minor path/trivial matters). This concept is reflected in the understanding of the term (classical) fiction. *Tiểu*

thuyết (小說 - xiǎoshuō) is a Sino-Vietnamese word. Etymologically, “小” (tiểu - small) is a pictogram, meaning small, shaped like small scattered objects. Linguistic researchers believe it could be shells or precious stones - a currency used by ancient Chinese people from the late Neolithic period to the Shang dynasty (1600 - 1050 BC). “說” (thuyết - to speak/explain) is a phonetic loan character, meaning to tell, speak, or explain. In ancient Chinese texts, fiction was initially understood as trivial words, which is also the concept mentioned with a similar meaning in the book *Zhuāngzǐ* (Trang Tử). By the Pre-Qin and Han dynasties, fiction meant miscellaneous notes and tales recording stories on the streets, with absurd, superficial content and short forms. The fiction that truly had a narrative nature later all had the original meaning of myths, religious legends, historical literature, and fables in *Zhūzǐ* prose (Prose of the Masters). It is generally considered that Chinese fiction truly began in the Tang dynasty. Classical fiction includes trường thiên tiểu thuyết - “长篇小说” (long fiction/novel), trung thiên tiểu thuyết - “中篇小说” (medium fiction/novella), and đoản thiên tiểu thuyết - “短篇小说” (short fiction).

3.1.2. Short stories

From the 20th century onwards, đoản thiên tiểu thuyết - “短篇小说” refers to short stories, with few characters and tight structures. The content of the short story genre can be very diverse: private life, social affairs, or epics, but its uniqueness is being short. A short story can carve out a life, a period of life, or a slice of life of a character. However, the main and characteristic element of short stories is not the system of events but the perspective on the reality of life. Modern short stories bring a new color from an innovative way of thinking, and it is a late phenomenon in literature.

Regarding the concept, some authors agree that the short story is a short, small narrative genre, usually written in prose, covering almost all aspects of human and social life. The prominent feature of the short story is its limited volume; a short story is suitable for readers to read in one sitting without taking a break. The short framework often makes short stories seem close to folk storytelling forms like folktales, anecdotes, jokes, or short sketches. But in fact, this is not true because it is closer to the novel as it is a narrative form that recreates contemporary life (An, 2023; Luu *et al.*, 2006).

Regarding characteristics, the short story is a primary form of fictional prose. It is built on a contrast, a contradiction or conflict, a misunderstanding, or a breakdown through a phenomenon, an event, a situation, or a feeling that converges in a single moment of a person's life. Actions are usually recounted through a specific, consistent viewpoint of the

narrator. The story takes place with very few characters, and the plot is based on the main character's psychology. The spatial and temporal dimensions are relatively simplified because the short story only focuses on exploiting a brilliant moment, a highly impressive situation, etc., that is most meaningful in the character's life. Actions in short stories also usually happen at a fast pace. Although there is no rule on the number of pages, it requires brevity, compression, and impact. Especially, most short stories will be marked by a surprising and unexpected unknotted ending (Phuong, 2021).

Genres such as *zhìguài* (tales of the strange) of the Six Dynasties, *chuánqí* (tales of the marvelous) of the Tang dynasty, *huàběn* (prompt-books) of the Song - Ming dynasties, or independent story collections like *Liáozhāi Zhìyì* (Liêu trai chí dị) all share the common features of short volume, concise structure, and focusing on a typical event or situation. However, these forms of classical short fiction are still strongly influenced by traditional narrative thinking: characters are typed, the structure leans towards telling events rather than psychological analysis, and they are often tied to educational purposes or expressing life and moral concepts. Therefore, although classical short fiction existed very early, it cannot be equated with modern short stories. It can only be seen as a historical and formal premise for the birth of this genre in modern Chinese literature.

The appearance of Lǚ Xùn marks a decisive completion step in the modernization process of Chinese short fiction. With *Kuáng rén Rìjì* (Nhật ký người điên), for the first time, the modern Chinese short story was fully established in terms of vernacular language, individual consciousness, and the art of construction. Characters in Lǚ Xùn's short stories break out of the mold of moral models or tools to illustrate ideas. They reach the level of individuals, typical individuals with spiritual tragedies, reflecting social contradictions and human consciousness crises in the historical transition period.

3.2. Research results

3.2.1. The “putting the finishing touch” technique in classical Chinese fiction

“Putting the finishing touch” originally comes from the classical aesthetic concept. It refers to using a key, specific detail to highlight the entire artistic image (Ngan *et al.*, 2026). As Liú Dàkuí (Lư Đại Khôi) stated, simplicity is the ultimate realm of literature. Because capturing the spirit is like face reading. To grasp a person's nature, in principle, one must secretly observe them in a crowd. It is like letting people wear hats and clothes, sit neatly, and then observing them closely. When they control themselves and hide their true faces, how can we see their true nature? Everyone's intentions have a way of showing themselves. Gù Kǎizhī (Cố Khôi Chi) said that by adding three hairs to the cheek in a painting, the spirit clearly

stands out immediately, and that person's spirit is probably in the space between the beard and the cheek. When Yōu Mèng (Ưu Mạnh) disguised himself as Sūn Shú'áo (Tôn Thúc Ngao), from the way he rested his hands to his laughing and talking, he looked so similar that people thought the dead had come back to life. This was not because his whole body looked the same, but simply because he captured the spirit of Sūn Shú'áo (Thanh, 1994).

In *Sōushén Jì* (Sưu thần ký), stories about fairies, ghosts, and strange things are usually told in a very concise style, close to historical recording. Using the “dotting the eyes” technique, the writer helped the work fully reveal its truth. In the story of *Nányáng Sòng Dìngbó* (Nam Dương Tống Định bá), after traveling with a ghost and using a trick to control it, Dìngbó spat on the ghost so it could not continue to transform. It showed its true form as a goat and was sold for money. Bao (2016) wrote: “When almost reaching Wǎn (Uỷển) market, Bó carried the ghost. He grabbed the ghost's hair tightly and carried it. The ghost screamed loudly and asked to be put down, but Bó ignored it. He carried it straight to the middle of the market and threw it on the ground; the ghost then turned into a goat. Bó immediately took it to sell, but fearing it would transform, he spat continuously on that goat. He sold it for one thousand five hundred coins and left” This rough but clever action reflects human intelligence, showing that humans can master themselves against the natural world.

In *Lihún Jì* (Ly hồn ký) by Chén Xuányòu (Trần Huyền Hựu), the “dotting the eyes” art is raised to a surreal romantic level. The story is about the forbidden love between Qiànniáng (Tiền Nương) and Wáng Zhòu (Vương Trụ). Because it was forbidden, Qiànniáng's (Tiền Nương) soul left her body to follow her lover and live happily with him, while her physical body still lay unconscious in her bedroom. The detail of the soul and the body meeting again and merging into one, with Qiànniáng's appearance and clothes seemingly melting together, made the portrait of the work complete. The spirit of the work appeared, and the author's ideal also appeared. That is the thought of opposing Confucianism, a love so strong that it can overcome feudal etiquette.

In *Huàpí* (Bộ da vẽ - from *Liáozhāi Zhìyì*), the detail that the female demon is actually “a cruel ghost with a pale green face and jagged teeth like a saw, spreading a piece of human skin on the bed and using a brush to paint on it. After painting, it threw the brush, lifted the skin as if lifting a shirt, put it on, and immediately turned into a young girl” (Linh, 2003) suddenly makes the story come alive. Thanks to the author's detailed description of skin color, face, etc., readers are warned about this character's abnormality. This detail both creates a climax for the story and carries a deep metaphorical meaning about the deceit and dangerous nature hidden behind the usual appearance.

Or Yīngníng (Anh Ninh) in the short story of the same name (in *Liáozhāi Zhìyì*) is a beautiful and charming girl. Pú Sōnglíng (Bồ Tùng Linh) made her the brightest character in the story because she has a very characteristic laugh. Every time Yīngníng laughs, it is a different nuance; no two times are the same. For example, “giggling non-stop”, “laughing loudly”, “laughing crazily like falling down”, “laughing so hard without looking back”, “keeping giggling”, etc. (Tan, 1994). So much so that she was commented: “If only she didn’t laugh, she would be a perfect person” (Tan, 1994). However, those innocent laughs “whether bright, whether laughing crazily, do not reduce her graceful beauty; anyone who sees her feels happy” (Tan, 1994). Chinese women in feudal times had to follow the four virtues (diligence, appearance, speech, and conduct). Laughing loudly was considered ungraceful. Confucianism bound women to only smile shyly, meaning not showing their teeth, to maintain their dignity, modesty, and avoid the reputation of being flirtatious... Therefore, the author captured her spirit through her laugh. Besides being innocent and carefree, it is actually an idea of opposing feudal etiquette.

In short, when using this technique, classical authors dot valuable details for classical fiction quite diversely. It can be a decisive action, bright intelligence, the motif of a soul entering a body, costumes, physical beauty, laughter, etc., to help complete the thought of the work. That is how writers use character images with the goal of conveying morals, ethics, and concepts in feudal times.

3.2.2. Typical characters in typical circumstances in Lǚ Xùn’s short stories

Lǚ Xùn is an excellent writer in building typical images that generalize society. The character system in his short stories is diverse, vivid, and leaves a lasting impression. Mentioning women, there are Aunt Xiánglín (thím Tường Lâm), Miss Ài (cô Ái), or Zījūn (Tử Quân). Xiánglín represents a progressive but not thorough woman. Thinking of the intellectual class, there are Kǒng Yǐjǐ (Khổng Ất Kỷ), Chén Shìchéng (Trần Sĩ Thành), and Lǚ Wěifǔ (Lã Vĩ Phủ). Kǒng has the appearance of an outdated Confucian scholar. Remembering the peasants, there are Rùntǔ (Nhuận Thổ) and Qījīn (Bảy Cân). Rùntǔ is the representative of the peasant whose vitality was worn out by the old society. They all look like people of flesh and blood, close and authentic. This success primarily comes from the fact that Lǚ Xùn persisted with the core principle of realism, which is authenticity, and at the same time, it is closely linked to the method of choosing models in writing. As he himself once affirmed, a writer has two ways to choose a model: one is to exclusively use a specific person, and the other is to gather traits from many types of people to form one person. However, Lǚ Xùn would choose the second way (Phi *et al.*, 2002).

3.2.3. *The characteristic of concise art in writing style in Lǚ Xùn's short stories*

If synthesized, Lǚ Xùn's short stories are indeed not many in number. However, in terms of topics, they are extremely rich. They range from small things in daily life to major issues and current affairs. But no matter what story or issue he wrote about, his writing style was still very concise. Because Lǚ Xùn once admitted that he avoided a lengthy writing style; as long as the meaning is fully conveyed to others, he absolutely would not add or subtract anything. Classical Chinese drama has no scenery; paper flower paintings bought for children on Tet (Lunar New Year) only have a few people. Therefore, the writer believed that this method was very suitable for him, so he did not go describing the moon and the wind, and the dialogues were definitely not prolonged (Bao, 2002).

Lǚ Xùn's pen knows how to capture typical things, with few words but much meaning, sketching a few strokes to make a picture. It carries the endless capacity of words, which is a point that requires genuine appreciation from the readers. This is the artistic feature that dominates Lǚ Xùn's character-building technique.

3.2.4. *The "putting the finishing touch" technique in Lǚ Xùn's short stories*

Sketching simply (outlining basic, simplified strokes) in literature, especially in the short narrative genre, has been proposed and pursued by many famous authors and artists. Pushkin stated that accuracy and simplicity are the top advantages of short stories. Meanwhile, Chekhov believed that simplicity is the sister of talent (Thanh, 1994). Lǚ Xùn also strongly opposed sloppy writing styles. He proposed the eye-drawing method (huà yǎnjīng) in both figurative and literal senses. This is the writer's creative inheritance compared to the traditional "putting the finishing touch" technique. In character building, the important thing is not to fully describe the physical appearance, but to capture and highlight the spirit - their inner nature and temperament.

For example, in *Míngtiān* (Ngày mai), facing the death of Bǎo'ér (thằng Báu), he: "lay on the bed, the spinning wheel still lay silently on the ground" (Tan, 1994). Lǚ Xùn drew the look of Dān Sì (Tur Thiên): "opening her eyes wide to look around in wonder; the things that happened were all impossible things" (Tan, 1994). Her look when facing her child's death became the "eye-dotting" detail, exposing the spiritual paralysis of the masses (Ngan *et al.*, 2026).

In *Yào* (Thuốc), when the seller of human-blood-soaked steamed buns met lão Quán (lão Thuyền), suddenly through his eyes alone, readers could see his unkind nature revealed: "A person in completely black clothes stood in front of him, his eyes like two knives stabbing straight at him, making him shrink..." (Tan, 1994). That is the detail expressing the great

writer's sorrow and condemnation by dotting the eyes of the inhumane executioner who trampled on the life of the revolutionary - Xià Yú (Hạ Du) (Ngan *et al.*, 2026).

As for Rùntǔ (Nhuận Thổ) in *Gùxiāng* (Cố hương), when he reunited with brother Xùn (anh Tấn), he was no longer the boy of the past: "He was twice as tall as before. His previously round face and dark brown skin had now turned pale yellow, and there were also deep wrinkles. His eyes were exactly like his father's eyes in the past, with eyelids swollen and rimmed with red" (Tan, 1944). Although his physical body had grown, it grew along with hard labor and poverty. His eyes, which looked like his father's, are the most key point confirming the inherited hardship of this peasant that the "I" character observed. Physical details do not purely aim to recreate human biological changes, but they are the materialization of fate. The "eye-dotting", on one hand, raises the feeling of premature aging. On the other hand, it signals the vicious circle of the peasant's life, that the child's life repeats the father's tragedy. The poor and resigned fate continues to be tormented by taxes, soldiers, and local tyrants. Through depicting the eyes, Lǚ Xùn captured the spirit of Rùntǔ - a person whose vitality was gradually taken away by life.

In *Zhǐfú* (Lễ cầu phúc), Lǚ Xùn described Aunt Xiánglín's (thím Tường Lâm) eyes 13 times, such as: "perhaps only the occasional movement of her eyeballs proved that she was still a living human being", "her dull eyes suddenly lit up", "her eyes stared fixedly at me",... (Tan, 1994). This was to express the complex feelings in her mind - a person buried by reality, to the point that she could not even live a slave's life and then died on the very day of the benediction ceremony.

After checking the two circles on the county examination notice board, Chén Shíchéng (Trần Sĩ Thành) in *Báiguāng* (Luồng ánh sáng) was described by Lǚ Xùn: "His face became even paler; his puffy, red, and tired eyes lit up in a weird way" (Tan, 1994). That bright look appeared again in the late afternoon when he went home after letting his students leave. It became clear again at night when he remembered the gold and silver his grandmother mentioned when she was alive. The change in his eyes aligns with the character's complex and abnormal psychological development. It goes from exhaustion and confusion after failing the exam to a vague state of excitement when a new illusion suddenly arises. When the path of officialdom completely collapsed, Chén Shíchéng immediately looked for another anchor for his broken faith - the story of the ancestral treasure. His eyes becoming clear is exactly the moment the character lulls himself to sleep with illusions, temporarily forgetting the bitter reality. Through this, Lǚ Xùn showed a familiar psychological rule: when pushed to a dead end, people often choose to take refuge in more easily believable illusions.

To highlight the clear, pure, and untainted innocence of Shùn (cái Thuận) in *Zàijiǔlóushàng* (Trong quán rượu) when compared with the numb soul of the rebellious and defeated intellectual - Lǚ Wěifǔ (Lã Vĩ Phủ), Lǚ Xùn depicted the physical features of this young woman. Although she “had no special beauty” with an “oval, slightly thin, normal-looking face, and yellowish skin” (Tan, 1994), she had “very large eyes and very long eyelashes; the whites of her eyes were as clear as the sky on a cloudless night, but the cloudless sky in the North when there is no wind...” (Tan, 1994). Although Shùn’s appearance was described with a few simplified strokes and she had no special beauty, placing her meticulously described eyes next to the tired, numb look of the intellectual Lǚ Wěifǔ created a contrast. Lǚ Xùn created a contrast between the intellectual and the young woman: the more conscious and thoughtful people were in the old society, the more they fell into a dead end. On the contrary, a pure lifestyle is a rare entity that still retains humanity.

The writer used the technique of drawing eyes and describing the soul to express the deepest places in the mind, increasing the artistic evocative power. After reading these stories by the author, people can experience an immediate mental shift. The writer focused on the eyes and their subtle changes when using the “putting the finishing touch” technique to represent characters exactly as they are in life, neither tragicizing nor romanticizing them. Through this, readers can see the fate of women, peasants, and intellectuals facing adversity. This is a difference compared to the purpose of conveying morals in traditional literature that needs to be acknowledged. The great writer put a lot of thought into language, but the most important thing comes from his deep awareness of objective reality. Because if one breaks away from reality, one cannot reach genuine simplicity. This concise but highly evocative dotting method created conditions for the writer to generalize the broad issues of Chinese society in the early 20th century, from the decline of the feudal intellectual class to the spiritual paralysis of the masses.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Although Lǚ Xùn’s short stories carry an innovative mindset, they do not break away from tradition because he inherited the “putting the finishing touch” technique, which is a creative inheritance. The art of capturing the spirit through the eyes and the concise style of Chinese short fiction were used to create extremely short works with a massive capacity for reality. Through the writer’s aesthetic lens, this art shifted the subjects of spirit-capturing from heroes, beauties, and female demons to the fates of the common people themselves in the old

society: women, intellectuals, and peasants. Under Lǚ Xùn's pen, the "putting the finishing touch" technique became a sharp ideological weapon. It exposed the suffocating nature of feudal society and, at the same time, awakened people's sense of resistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Among the diverse artistic character-building techniques in Lǚ Xùn's short stories, we believe that continuing to explore his creative inheritance techniques compared to tradition to see the relationship between art and reality is a novel issue. Not stopping only at creative inheritance, future studies can focus on Lǚ Xùn's innovations compared to tradition when contrasting his stories with existing classical works. A typical example is the role of the narrator in his short stories. This will help to see the multifaceted inheritance and innovation of the writer, contributing to affirming the great writer's pioneering role in modern Chinese literature.

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