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Ye Zhaoyan’ s Innovative Narrative Research in Nanjing: A Case Study of Nanjing Biography and Yifeng Gate

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Abstract:
Ye Zhaoyan, a renowned contemporary writer and native of Nanjing, has published nearly ten million words to date. His 2019 urban biography Nanjing Biography and 2022 novel Yifeng Gate both center on the city. This article examines the narrative characteristics and writing strategies of these two works, exploring how Ye reconstructs Nanjing's grand historical tapestry while uncovering the often-overlooked Xiaguan district, showcasing his recent developments in Nanjing-themed writing. Simultaneously, the two works activate both "non-fiction" and "fiction" dimensions, creating a complementary "macro-micro" narrative: Nanjing Biography employs historical depth as its central framework. While Nanjing embodies the "window of Chinese history", Yifeng Gate delves into urban margins and individual destinies through spatial microcosms, offering dual revelations of historical and humanistic significance. Ye Zhaoyan's avant-garde yet nuanced writing establishes a new paradigm in urban literature, providing fresh perspectives on the city-human relationship while serving as a literary mirror for exploring emerging urban narratives in China's modernization journey.

Keywords:
Ye Zhaoyan, Nanjing Biography, Yifeng Gate, Nanjing Writing, Narrative Innovation

1 Introduction

In recent years, the research topic of "urban literature"has gradually become a hot topic in academia, which is essentially an expansion and deepening of previous research fields in urban literature. As the first city in China to be awarded the title of "World Capital of Literature" by UNESCO, Nanjing carries a profound historical and cultural heritage, providing fertile ground for literary creation. Ye Zhaoyan, widely recognized as the most ideal "literary spokesperson" of Nanjing, has maintained a close connection with this city throughout his more than forty-year creative career. His non-fiction urban biography Nanjing Biography published in 2019 and the novel Yifeng Gate published in 2022 are part of his writing journey in Nanjing. It is a comprehensive work of transformation.

While academic research on Ye Zhaoyan depictions of Nanjing has yielded substantial achievements, specialized and comprehensive studies on his two recent works, Nanjing Biography and Gate, remain underdeveloped. There is also a lack of systematic comparative analysis that explores their intrinsic connections and

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complementary elements. This prompts us to consider: Why and how did Ye Zhaoyan use these two contrasting works-one fictional and one factual-to collectively deepen and reconstruct the portrayal of Nanjing? What new possibilities does this innovative narrative strategy offer for contemporary urban literary storytelling?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Nanjing writing from a single work and a systematic perspective

Academic research on Ye Zhaoyan's Nanjing-themed works has yielded substantial results, with the most prolific achievements emerging from studies focused on individual novels. For instance, Wang Z. (2015), in his essay The Spiritual History of "City" and "Humanity": An Analysis of Ye Zhaoyan's Novel Women Racing Towards the Night, demonstrates through close reading how the novel skillfully interweaves the historical evolution of Nanjing with its cultural legacy against a backdrop of turbulent times. Similarly, Yuan B. and Ye L. (2022), in their critique "Nanjing's Legend Through Historical Deep Description: A Review of Ye Zhaoyan's Novel Inscribed in Bone" argue that the work constructs a representative modern urban history of Nanjing by portraying the vicissitudes of ordinary individuals during a transformative era.

Beyond individual works, systematic research has also been conducted from a structured perspective. Zeng Y. (2009), in his article "Ye Zhaoyan's Imagination of Nanjing," systematically traces the author's creative lineage, deconstructing his Nanjing writing into three dimensions: the traditional urban landscape centered on the Qinhuai River, the urban mirror reflecting the flourishing modernity of the 1930s, and the contemporary secular space focusing on multifaceted urban life. In a similar vein, Meng X. (2021), in her doctoral dissertation "On the Temporal-Spatial Construction in Ye Zhaoyan's Nanjing Writing", innovatively establishes a dual-dimensional framework of time and space. By integrating novels and prose texts, she provides a profound analysis of how the author reshapes the city's spiritual coordinates through the superimposition of these dimensions.

2.2 Nanjing Biography

Research on Nanjing Biography has primarily focused on comparative studies with other urban biographies and explorations of local spirit. For example, Zuo F. examines these texts through three lenses: the context of literary production, grand historical narratives, and authorial stylistic choices. By analyzing Nanjing Biography and Beijing Biography, the study reveals a tension between globalization and local identity, vividly illustrating the intellectual dilemma of choosing between these perspectives. Another example is Ge X., who, from the perspective of urban local spirituality, explores the narrative strategies of urban biographies across diverse cultural contexts. His work delves into the interplay between these literary works and the shaping of a city' s spiritual identity. Additionally, Zhou W. analyzes the work's non-fiction narrative style and distinctive linguistic features, contending that Nanjing Biography reconstructs a city's cultural and self-identity by revisiting "rare moments" from its history.

2.3 Studies on Yifeng Gate

Liu X. analyzes the interplay between the Yangtze River perspective and historical experience in the work,

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as well as the avant-garde nature of Nanjing's historical narrative. The essay highlights that beyond reconstructing the city's history, Yifeng Gate points to contemporary Nanjing while metaphorically representing a historical tendency or ideal. Meanwhile, Zhang G. and Wang D., through textual exploration, delve into the protagonist Yang Kui' s image as a "historical hostage," revealing that he is not merely an individual but a symbol of all humanity. Their analysis further examines the novel's narrative framework through temporal, spatial, and aesthetic dimensions, arguing that Yifeng Gate constructs a modern field rich in spatiotemporal convergence, offering readers an aesthetic gateway to an uncharted world.

2.4 Issue raised

In conclusion, this paper examines Nanjing Biography and Yifeng Gate as an organic whole, exploring Ye Zhaoyan' s innovative approach to Nanjing's portrayal. It seeks to answer: How does Ye achieve narrative innovation through the "bidirectional activation" of "non-fiction" and "fiction"? How does he construct a new paradigm of urban writing by coupling "historical depth" with "spatial microcosm"? What fresh literary perspectives and practical insights does this paradigm offer for exploring Chinese-style modernization today?

3 Research Method

This paper adopts the research method of text analysis to try to answer the above questions.

3.1 Nanjing Biography: Historical Construction from a Non-Fictional Perspective

3.1.1 Innovative positioning of genres: Nanjing as a narrative window of China's history

Nanjing Biography adopts the genre of non-fiction urban biography, establishing a narrative framework that "takes Nanjing as the horizontal axis and China's history as the vertical axis." It systematically traces the evolution of this city from Sun Quan's establishment of the capital at Moling in 211 AD during the Three Kingdoms period to the 1949 Yangtze River Crossing Campaign by the People's Liberation Army. Ye Zhaoyan uses history as the framework and dynasties as the thread, closely linking Nanjing's rise and fall with dynastic changes, revealing its profound significance as a unique window into China's history.

The book depicts the gradual growth of Nanjing from a seedling in the fires of the Three Kingdoms, through the prosperity of the Six Dynasties, the partial peace of Southern Tang, the alternation of Ming and Qing, and the turmoil of the Republic of China. From "Moling" and "Jianye" to "Stone City" and "Jiankang," the changes in names reflect the layered accumulation of history; from bamboo fences and earthen walls to the majestic Ming city walls, the evolution of urban architecture also mirrors the trajectory of the times. Nanjing is not only a participant in history but also a witness to the political changes of China. The establishment of the capital by Zhu Yuanzhang marked the rise of southern forces, while the relocation of the capital to Beijing by Zhu Di, which relegated Nanjing to a "secondary capital," revealed the erosion of central authority over local status. Zhang Zhidong implemented the Self-Strengthening Movement here. It also became a microcosm of China's modern transformation. At the same time, Nanjing was a hub of cultural convergence: the southern migration of the Eastern Jin aristocracy facilitated the integration of the north and south, while Li Bai's nostalgic verses about Jinling conveyed poetic lamentation. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, mis-

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sionaries like Matteo Ricci promoted Sino-Western exchanges here. These events collectively shaped Nanjing's unique role as a historical crossroads, highlighting the splendor of its imperial aura and the desolation of its status as a former capital, crafting a grand epic of the city.

Ye Zhaoyan pointed out in Nanjing Biography that Nanjing can be regarded as "the best textbook", with its geographical location and political status making it a bright window to observe the historical changes of China. Between the rise and fall of cities and the transformation of eras, readers read not only about Nanjing, but also about the constancy and perseverance in the historical changes of China.

3.1.2 The integration of artistic characteristics: the organic unity of historiography and literature

Nanjing Biography is not only a city biography, but also a successful organic unity of historical and literary features in terms of artistic characteristics. Ye Zhaoyan's writing strategy of "integrating history into literature" not only adheres to the rigor of non-fiction writing, but also gives historical narrative with literary warmth and depth.

The book effortlessly incorporates official histories, unofficial chronicles, poetry, and theatrical works. Through skillful references to classic texts like Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Historical Records, The Peach Blossom Fan, and Lament for the South, it significantly enhances the narrative's literary depth and expressive power. For instance, The Scholars vividly recreates the grandeur of "annual Cold Food Festival celebrations and nightly Lantern Festival festivities," while The Peach Blossom Fan sketches the social landscape of late Ming Dynasty Nanjing. The integration of poetic works by Zhang Bian and Wang Anshi further reveals the city's cultural refinement and tranquil atmosphere since the Six Dynasties period. These literary elements not only bring historical scenes to life but also allow readers to savor the city's charm and historical legacy through rich details.

Meanwhile, Ye Zhaoyan masterfully captures historical nuances with a novelist's sensitivity while rigorously organizing historical materials as a scholar. Rather than merely listing facts, he weaves personal emotions and historical reflections into his narrative. When discussing Nanjing's "royal aura" and its fate as a "fallen capital," he employs dialectical thinking-using the metaphor of "Pompeii swallowed by volcanic eruptions" to emphasize the city's vicissitudes during the Sui and Tang dynasties. This writing style, which combines literary sentiment as its soul, historical facts as its foundation, and personal historical perspectives as its thread, elevates Nanjing Biography beyond mere historical documentation. It transforms into a philosophical "historical discourse," achieving both a profound historical portrayal and literary expression of Nanjing's past High degree of integration.

3.1.3 The construction of narrative style: the logic of "storytelling" combining history and theory

Nanjing Biography employs a narrative style that seamlessly blends historical documentation with literary analysis, mirroring the storytelling logic of traditional Chinese storytelling. When constructing grand historical narratives, Ye Zhaoyan meticulously references original historical texts, classical poetry, and folk literature to establish a solid factual foundation. Simultaneously, he skillfully interweaves personal commentary

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and emotional reflections, engaging readers as a storyteller who shares insights with the audience.

As depicted in the text, to portray the intricate political dynamics between Sun Quan and Cao Cao, the author writes: “Sun Quan efforts to curry favor with Cao Cao in the north, hoping for his imperial ascension, vividly exemplify the Machiavellian schemes prevalent among warlords during the Three Kingdoms era. Cao Cao is rich in artistic conception, though his prose remains relatively sparse. In his essay Edict on Surrendering Counties to Clarify My Ambitions, he delivers a particularly brilliant rebuttal to accusations of usurpation: Were it not for my existence, who knows how many would claim the throne or proclaim themselves kings? Among all the heroes of the realm, who could rival Cao and Liu Bei? A son should be like Sun Zhongmou. Even Sun Quan, ruling from Nanjing, was no ordinary figure.” With the narrative flair of a novelist, Ye Zhaoyan breathes life into history through storytelling. He achieves this by Through scenario-based storytelling that engages readers, the book transforms static historical records into dynamic narratives. For instance, when describing Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty (Zhu Di) relocating the capital to Beijing, it vividly portrays Nanjing residents’ sentiments: “With bitter resentment in their hearts, they watched the imperial court depart northward. The heavens were about to rain, and the motherland was about to be abandoned.” This “historical fact + commentary” narrative rhythm not only breaks the traditional objective detachment of historical writing but also creates an emotional space that resonates with readers, showcasing Ye Zhaoyan’s unique literary historian style.

In conclusion, Nanjing Biography masterfully blends historical depth, literary artistry, and emotional resonance to vividly portray the city’s historical landscapes and social tapestry. With the wisdom of a historian and the literary flair of a writer, Ye Zhaoyan captures the tangible essence of Nanjing’s brick walls and bustling street life, weaving his profound affection into every narrative thread. This work not only sets a benchmark for urban biographies but also redefines the possibilities of local cultural documentation in the globalized era-rooted in history, empowered by literature, and animated by emotion, it collectively establishes a groundbreaking paradigm for “non-fiction urban writing”.

Table 1 An example of the “combination of history and theory” in Nanjing Biography

Historical figures and events	Historical Commentary	Functional Analysis
Sun Quan moved the capital to Moling	“It's like planting a sapling”	Give history a metaphor for life, vivid and vivid
Nanjing during the Sui and Tang dynasties	“Much like the ancient city of Pompeii swallowed by a volcano... pitiful and helpless”	Create a sad atmosphere of decay and vicissitudes
Zhu Di moved the capital to Beijing	The people of Nanjing, filled with resentment, watched the imperial court retreat northward, as the heavens were about to rain and the mother was about to wed	The emotional impact of historical change is presented from a folk perspective

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3.2 Yifeng Gate: Spatial Poetics in Fictional Narratives

3.2.1 The Transformation of Modern Cities: Spatial Expansion and Historical Disintegration of Xiaguan

After Nanjing Biography, Ye Zhaoyan achieved a geographical spatial shift in the narrative of Nanjing in Yifeng Gate - moving from the city center to the long-neglected peripheral area of "Xiaguan". As the intersection of the Yangtze River wharf and the wave of modernization, Xiaguan is not only a gathering place for all walks of life but also a unique window into the modernization of Nanjing. Ye Zhaoyan uses Yifeng Gate as the narrative origin to connect the changes of the city and the era. He points out that the significance of Yifeng Gate in the modern history of Nanjing and China has been underestimated, with many important historical events and milestones related to Yifeng Gate: such as the Qing army's use of Yifeng Gate to launch a surprise attack on Zheng Chenggong's army. The victory consolidated the Qing dynasty's rule. During the Opium War, British forces recognized Jiangnan as the Qing government's economic lifeline. In the Guangxu era, Zhang Zhidong, then Viceroy of Liangjiang, restored Yifeng Gate and laid Nanjing's first modern road beneath it, paving the way for Xiaguan's port opening. Through meticulous historical research and vivid storytelling, Ye Zhaoyan has brought to light this often-overlooked chapter of history, revealing "another Nanjing" to readers.

In the novel, Yifeng Gate serves not merely as a geographical landmark but as a symbolic space of historical memory. Its recurring cycles of destruction and reconstruction epitomize Nanjing's modernity dilemma. From the Taiping Army's breach of the city walls to the bombardment by British and American warships, the gate stands as a witness to national trauma while metaphorically representing the collapse and reconstruction of traditional order. Through meticulous depictions of landmarks like the coffin shop, trading houses, and Asia Hotel, Ye Zhaoyan constructs a multi-dimensional narrative space. The novel opens with the 1895 reconstruction of Yifeng Gate, where a man named Zhu Laoqi (Old Seven) establishes a coffin shop, drawing a growing crowd of local residents. Nearby, a hand-cranked phonograph repeatedly plays the singing style of Peking Opera's laosheng (male senior roles), creating a parallel narrative that... The text vividly portrays the clash between tradition and modernity. The Asia Hotel, as a symbol of "shelter," dynamically reflects the turbulent history of Nanjing through its shifting fortunes. Through meticulous depictions of these social landscapes, the author conveys how, as Empress Dowager Cixi's reign in Beijing's imperial palace was nearing its end, Nanjing's opening as a treaty port and the broader society were undergoing a transformative rupture between tradition and modernity. This narrative approach from the margins not only expands the spatial dimensions of Nanjing's literary portrayal but also restructures the historical narrative framework of the city.

3.2.2 The interplay of reality and fiction: Textual practice in the light of new historicism

Yifeng Gate stands as Ye Zhaoyan's magnum opus blending reality and fiction, radiating the distinct hues of neo-historical fiction. From the ancient city to the riverbanks, from the Qinhuai to the Yangtze, from imperial courts to commoners, and from urban dwellers to wanderers, this novel expands the narrative depth and breadth of Nanjing's portrayal, revealing profound truths through its expansive scope. The authentic essence lies in the city itself, while the fictional character Yang Kui embodies ordinary lives. Through the symbolic gate's opening and closing, Ye Zhaoyan unfolds dynastic transitions and societal transformations, simultane-

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ously chronicling the tragicomic stories of the urban underclass.

Ye Zhaoyan's works transcend historical constraints, vividly portraying Nanjing's new urban landscape: "The Happy Grove, designed and constructed by Xinqi Ji Construction Company, stands at the heart of Sima Road, a replica of Shanghai's Great World Amusement Park." Against the backdrop of warlord fragmentation and political turmoil, the text particularly highlights the prosperity of Xiaguan District during its modernization process, vividly depicting the area's flourishing after the port's opening. Slogans like "Xiaguan's Happy Grove surpasses Shanghai's Great World" not only reflected the urban residents' vibrant enthusiasm but also mirrored the city's strong aspiration to modernize and integrate into the global community amidst political upheaval. Additionally, Some characters are fictional, such as Yang Kui, while others are real historical figures. The novel mentions Zhang Yinggao (Zhang Wentian), Wu Peifu, Feng Guozhang, and Han Guojun, as well as Ryunosuke Akutagawa's trip to China. These historical figures have varying degrees of "screen time," collectively forming the backdrop of a grand historical narrative. In his novel, Ye Zhaoyan meticulously constructs the narrative, using urban historical spaces such as Yifeng Gate, Qinhuai River, Xiaguan Wharf, Jiangnan Naval Academy, and Yuejiang Tower, as well as spatial installations that bear the fate of characters like Sanren Carriage, Xinqi Ji, and the coffin shop, to integrate fictional characters into the authentic urban landscape and the modernization process of China. It combines the literary expression of Nanjing's history with personal life narratives, and the unique narrative technique reveals the enduring vitality and strength of Nanjing.

3.2.3 The legend of the lesser Mortals: the warm gaze in historical narratives

The novel begins in 1907 and ends in 1927 with the victory of the Northern Expedition. Through a series of major historical events such as the Revolution of 1911, the May 4th Movement and the Northern Expedition, the novel outlines the context of social transformation and tells the struggle and ups and downs of a group of people from the bottom of the society in the tide of the times from the perspective of the common people. The protagonist Yang Kui begins as a rickshaw puller, evolves into a revolutionary, and eventually ascends through political connections to become a prominent businessman. His brothers Shuigen and Feng Banxiong join the underworld and military respectively, ultimately carving out their own paths in commerce and politics. The narrative also features diverse characters such as underworld members, Manchu loyalists, revolutionaries, and foreign firm managers. These characters, like small boats adrift, are swept forward by the torrent of history. The novel follows Yang Kui's life trajectory from "rise to prominence- glory -decline," employing a narrative structure of "city gate—city—nation-state" to reflect Nanjing's complex journey from late Qing Dynasty decline to early Republican-era modernization. Yifeng Gate, more than just a geographical landmark, has witnessed power transitions, military conflicts, and transformations in urban life, becoming a symbol of the era's collective memory.

Ye Zhaoyan explores the emotional complexities and spiritual transformations of ordinary people through his warm humanistic lens. When Yang Kui returns to mundane routines after business failure, and Yi Ju chooses self-reliance after romantic disillusionment, these narratives reveal the author's worldly philosophy: even amidst historical absurdity, common people can still find meaning in daily life. The novel's conclusion, where the coffin shop replaces the once-glorious Sanren Company, suggests how "survival" dissolves "success," highlighting the transcendence of secular existence while diluting the inherent pain of history.

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Although Yifeng Gate has the characteristics of a local chronicle, it actually provides a unique perspective for observing modern China. It is worth noting that we must pay attention to the historical background on which the work is based, as stated in the novel: “The Qing Dynasty was on the verge of collapse, yet Nanjing City was thriving, showing no signs of national decline.” Through this work, the author constantly warns us: beneath the surface of urban modernization and commercial prosperity, there always exists the grand theme of national destiny, and the painful memories brought by that era of national decline must not be forgotten.

In Yifeng Gate, Ye Zhaoyan uses the symbolic as a pivotal element to weave together pivotal moments in Nanjing's modern history, while reflecting the broader historical trajectory through the fates of fictional characters. This creative approach not only continues his deep engagement with Nanjing’s historical legacy but also transcends the conventional framework of urban biographies, imbuing the novel with an epic grandeur.

Table 2 The intertextual relationship between “small characters” and “big history” in Yifeng Gate

Fictional character	Main Experiences	Reflects historical background
Yang Kui (a rickshaw driver)	From a lowly coachman to a revolutionary, to a prominent businessman, and finally to decline	The rise of national capitalism, the disintegration of social structure, and the rise and fall of individuals in the torrent of history
Shui Gen, Feng Yixiong	Join gangs, join the army, and ride the wave of the times	The survival choices and fates of the people at the bottom in turbulent times
Yi Ju (New Woman)	Receive modern education and serve as headmistress of a girls’ school	The awakening of women’s consciousness in the early Republic of China and the progressive forces in the process of modernization

4 Results

4.1 Bidirectional activation: Innovative paradigm of urban writing

Ye Zhaoyan’ s two seminal works, Nanjing Biography and Yifeng Gate, both set in the historic capital, differ markedly in genre, narrative content, structural composition, and thematic focus, yet complement each other to co-create a multifaceted Nanjing universe through Ye’s literary vision. By achieving a “bidirectional activation” through these recent works, Ye Zhaoyan has successfully pioneered an innovative paradigm in urban storytelling.He demonstrated two effective approaches to “geographical writing”: one could transform local biographies into grand narratives with universal significance through in-depth historical research and conceptual refinement, as seen in Nanjing Biography; or craft regional stories that explore themes of humanity and historical context through precise spatial positioning and vivid character development, as exemplified by Yifeng Gate. By combining “historical depth” with “microscopic spatial” narratives, these dual approaches create a “macro-micro” storytelling framework that gives readers a Nanjing understanding with both skeletal structure and flesh-and-blood authenticity. This “dual-track” model breaks through genre barriers. The pile provides new possibilities for urban writing.

4.2 Literary Mirror: Value Enlightenment for Chinese-style Modernization

Ye Zhaoyan’s literary works on Nanjing transcend the boundaries of literature. Through tracing cultural

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roots in Nanjing Biography, the author reminds us to cherish historical "tradition" in modernization. Yifeng Gate serves as a cautionary tale, reflecting on the "starting point" of modernization and its spatial expansion while highlighting the "growing pains" of development. Together, the two works constitute a literary dialogue about "tradition and modernity", suggesting that the writing path of Chinese-style modernization is a complex journey that should not only look to the future, but also look back to the past. It is a complex journey that seeks both development and individual care.

Ye Zhaoyan's Nanjing writing undoubtedly offers multifaceted values and inspirations for exploring Chinese-style modernization. In urban writing, we should pay more attention to rapidly developing and changing cities, continuously excavating their unique historical accumulation and cultural resources, and capturing their inherent development logic and cultural texture amidst the changes of the times. In future development, we should continue to uphold cultural confidence and the spirit of innovation, infusing richer and deeper connotations into the urban writing of Chinese-style modernization, truly telling the touching "China story".

5. Reflection

This study employs textual analysis to comparatively examine Ye Zhaoyan two representative works, analyzing their innovative narrative strategies while primarily focusing on the works themselves and the author perspective. However, a key limitation lies in the absence of cross-comparative analysis with contemporaneous urban writing practices by other authors, which prevents a more comprehensive evaluation of Ye Zhaoyan distinctive innovations. In the future, more extensive comparative vision can be introduced on this basis, or further discussion can be made from the perspective of reader acceptance and communication effect.

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