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**CULTURAL WAYS OF SEEING: CHINESE VISUAL PERCEPTION
AND INTERPRETATION IN LAO SHE'S "RICKSHAW BOY"
AND "CAT COUNTRY"**

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The article examines visual perception in Lao She's novels "Rickshaw Boy" and "Cat Country" in connection with Chinese cultural traditions of seeing and interpreting the world. The study argues that visibility in these texts does not function as a simple descriptive device. Instead, it structures the reader's perception and shapes the process of interpretation itself. Special attention is paid to the relationship between ordinary visibility, spatial organization, and cultural forms of perception. The comparison of the two novels demonstrates different models of visual experience, ranging from everyday urban observation to distorted and unstable visual worlds.

Keywords: visibility; perception; Lao She; Chinese literature; interpretation; urban space; cultural vision.

The problem of visibility occupies an increasingly important place in contemporary literary studies. Modern criticism no longer treats visual description as a secondary decorative element of narrative. Instead, visibility is understood as a way of organizing perception, directing attention, and constructing meaning [8, p. 16]. Literary space is therefore connected not only with what is represented, but also with how the represented world becomes visible to the reader.

This question becomes especially significant in the context of Chinese literature. Traditional Chinese visual culture developed according to principles that differ from the linear and object-centered logic often associated with European realism. Chinese painting and landscape aesthetics often emphasize relational perception, shifting attention, and incomplete visual structures [2, p. 43]. The observer does not dominate the visual field from a stable external position. Instead, perception unfolds gradually through movement and atmosphere.

These cultural principles influence literary representation as well. In modern Chinese prose, visibility often functions not as fixed depiction, but as an unstable process of perception. Lao She's novels "Rickshaw Boy" and "Cat Country" provide important examples of this tendency. Although the two novels differ greatly in tone and narrative structure, both texts construct worlds in which seeing becomes closely connected with interpretation, uncertainty, and cultural experience.

"Rickshaw Boy" is usually approached as a realist novel centered on urban poverty and social suffering in Beijing [6, p. 89]. The novel indeed contains many concrete visual details. Streets, weather, crowds, movement, and bodily exhaustion appear throughout the narrative. At first sight, this abundance of detail creates the impression of visual transparency. The city seems materially accessible and directly observable.

However, the visual organization of the novel is more complicated than it initially appears. The accumulation of details does not necessarily produce stable meaning. In-

stead, the reader often encounters impressions that resist complete interpretation. As Wang notes, modern Chinese realism often produces unstable forms of perception rather than fully transparent representation [9, p. 54]. This instability can be seen in Xiangzi's bodily experience of the city. After extreme physical strain, he "barely made it to the door before they came out from under him and he landed on the floor" [5, p. 32]. The scene shows that urban space is not only seen by the protagonist. It is also experienced through exhaustion, weakness, and loss of control.

This instability is closely connected with the everyday nature of urban experience. Lao She repeatedly focuses on ordinary actions: walking through streets, waiting for passengers, observing traffic, enduring weather, and listening to conversations. These repeated moments create a rhythm of continuous perception rather than dramatic revelation. The reader experiences the city through movement and repetition instead of through isolated symbolic scenes.

Such narrative organization resembles important aspects of traditional Chinese visual aesthetics. In classical landscape painting, perception often develops through gradual spatial transition rather than through a single fixed viewpoint [10, p. 104]. The observer moves through the visual field, and meaning emerges slowly through relational experience. Similarly, in "Rickshaw Boy", urban space is not presented as a fully organized totality. It appears fragmentary, shifting, and partially incomplete.

The protagonist Xiangzi also experiences the city through unstable visual perception. He attempts to organize reality according to practical goals connected with labor, survival, and personal independence. However, the urban environment repeatedly interrupts these expectations. Lao She connects Xiangzi's perception of the city with bodily exhaustion and emotional pressure. The city is therefore experienced not only as a visual space, but also as a physical burden.

Weather also plays an important role in this visual structure. Heat, dust, wind, rain, and seasonal change constantly shape the visibility of urban space. The environment is never neutral. It affects bodies, movement, emotional states, and social interaction. In this sense, the city is not simply seen by Xiangzi. It is felt through fatigue, fear, and bodily discomfort. Visual perception becomes inseparable from physical experience.

This emphasis on environmental perception reflects broader Chinese aesthetic traditions in which atmosphere carries interpretive significance [7, p. 68]. Instead of sharply separating subject and object, perception emerges through interaction between body, environment, and movement. Lao She transforms these cultural tendencies into modern urban narrative form.

If "Rickshaw Boy" presents unstable perception within an apparently realistic world, "Cat Country" radicalizes this instability even further. The novel constructs a strange and distorted environment in which visual logic itself becomes unreliable. In this article, "Cat Country" is used as a comparative example that shows how unstable visuality can move from realistic urban space to grotesque satirical space. Unlike the material Beijing of "Rickshaw Boy", the fictional world of "Cat Country" is built through grotesque imagery, unstable social signs, and absurd forms of collective life [4]. Visuality in this novel therefore produces estrangement rather than clarity.

Unlike the relatively continuous urban movement of "Rickshaw Boy", visual space in "Cat Country" is frequently fragmented and discontinuous. Objects, public rituals, and social behavior appear exaggerated or strangely simplified. The reader encounters a world that remains visible but difficult to interpret coherently. In this sense, the instability of visual perception becomes part of the novel's satirical structure.

This instability is important because “Cat Country” is not simply fantastical satire. The novel explores the limits of interpretation itself. Visual signs no longer guarantee understanding. Readers constantly attempt to organize meaning, yet the text repeatedly undermines interpretive stability. In this sense, visibility becomes a mechanism of estrangement [1, p. 29].

The grotesque quality of the novel also transforms the reader’s position. In traditional realist narration, visual detail often supports narrative coherence. In “Cat Country”, however, visual detail frequently produces confusion rather than clarity. Excessive visibility weakens interpretive certainty. The reader sees much, but understanding remains incomplete.

This strategy can be connected with modern theories of perception. Mitchell argues that visual representation cannot be understood as neutral reflection, because images and visual signs are always shaped by cultural and ideological conditions [8, p. 30]. Lao She’s fiction demonstrates this instability through narrative form. The visible world cannot be fully trusted because systems of interpretation themselves have become unstable.

At the same time, “Cat Country” preserves important connections with Chinese cultural models of indirect expression. Traditional Chinese aesthetics often values incompleteness, ambiguity, and suggestive absence [3, p. 92]. Meaning is not always presented directly. The observer must actively participate in interpretation. Lao She adapts this principle into a modern satirical context where ambiguity no longer produces harmony, but anxiety and fragmentation.

The comparison between the two novels demonstrates that visibility in Lao She’s fiction cannot be reduced to descriptive realism alone. In both texts, perception remains dynamic and culturally mediated. “Rickshaw Boy” constructs a world of ordinary urban visibility in which meaning emerges slowly and incompletely through repetitive experience. “Cat Country” transforms this instability into a distorted visual system where interpretation becomes increasingly uncertain.

Both novels therefore reveal a specifically cultural dimension of seeing. Vision is not presented as universal or objective. It depends on historical conditions, spatial organization, social experience, and cultural habits of interpretation. Lao She’s prose repeatedly shows that seeing does not automatically produce understanding. The visible world always contains gaps, interruptions, and unstable meanings.

This aspect is especially important for understanding the relationship between visibility and modern Chinese literature. Lao She combines elements of realism, satire, urban narration, and traditional aesthetic perception into complex structures of visual experience. His novels do not merely describe social reality. They also investigate how reality becomes visible and how readers attempt to interpret what they see.

As a result, visibility in Lao She’s fiction functions as more than representation. It becomes a way of questioning perception itself. The reader is forced to confront the instability of interpretation and the limits of visual knowledge. In this sense, “Rickshaw Boy” and “Cat Country” reveal not only different literary worlds, but also different cultural ways of seeing.

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**КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ СПОСОБЫ ВИДЕНИЯ: КИТАЙСКОЕ ВИЗУАЛЬНОЕ
ВОСПРИЯТИЕ И ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ В РОМАНАХ ЛАО ШЭ
«РИКША» И «СТРАНА КОШЕК»**

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В статье рассматривается визуальное восприятие в романах Лао Шэ «Рикша» и «Страна кошек» в связи с китайскими культурными традициями видения и интерпретации мира. Исследование показывает, что визуальность в данных текстах функционирует не как простое средство описания. Напротив, она организует читательское восприятие и формирует сам процесс интерпретации. Особое внимание уделяется взаимосвязи повседневной видимости, пространственной организации и культурных форм восприятия. Сравнение двух романов демонстрирует различные модели визуального опыта – от повседневного городского наблюдения до искажённых и нестабильных визуальных миров.

Ключевые слова: визуальность; восприятие; Лао Шэ; китайская литература; интерпретация; городское пространство; культурное видение.