

# Hidden Narratives in the Creases of Life: A Review of Li Hao's Life Behind Life

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## ABSTRACT

*A good novelist should be a good psychologist. He understands the reader's psychology and knows how each character in a story would react differently to an event. This game-like process is full of fun and embodies the spirit of play. (Li Hao) Logical coherence, detailed historical context, and unique narrative angles combine to create exquisite stories. Li Hao, as a "story magician" working behind the scenes, continues to draw inspiration from life and infuse it into his literary creations. his works can be seen as an exploration of hidden narratives in the folds of life.*

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## I. "NON-EVERYDAY" CREATION

Li Hao's short story collection *Life Behind Life* compiles his works from 2020, including *Life Behind Life*, *Absurd Novel*, *Love Novel*, *Autumn Frenzy*, *The Mother Who Releases the Eagle*, *Story Café*, *Shadow Warrior*, *Wooden Boat and River*, and *Prajā's Last Breakfast*. The eponymous short story unfolds the Oriental image of the "father" as a life bearer, depicting the silent burden of men under family and societal pressures. The protagonist externalises his 委屈 and burdens into "warm lies" for his family, creating a paradoxical identity of "bearer" and "liar". The story uses magical realism in everyday details

(like "neural extension" of plotlines) to reveal the psychological struggles beneath the surface of life. Li Hao's writing centres on intellectual narrative and existential exploration, with the following dimensions:

### A. Thematic Focus: Existential Dilemmas and Human Exploration

Li Hao's writing carries a "singer-like" loneliness, with a touch of compassion for modern people's existential struggles in its "non-everyday" nature. His works often revolve around existentialist themes like survival and death, fate and chance. He digs into the mysteries of human existence like a

"mole", especially focusing on intellectuals' struggles and introspection in wars and power struggles.

I've been teaching "Shadow Warrior" for three years or more. Actually, with a little calculation, I could accurately say how long I've been in the Training Cave, but I don't want to calculate or even resist it. I deliberately avoid thinking about "time". Time, for me and our Shadow Warriors, is meaningless. Our "days" are not of a uniform length; it depends entirely on the training content and specific needs. Sometimes, a Shadow Warrior must lie still in the snow, adjusting his breathing and heartbeat, merging with the snow and rocks until his "day" ends, when grass has sprouted and azaleas cover the hillside. Moreover, for confidentiality, many Shadow Warrior trainings are conducted in the Training Cave, where all time is the flickering of lights and torches, with no distinction between morning, dusk, noon, or night. All time is the same, so there's no need to count it. (89)

The extreme situation of the "Shadow Warrior" reveals the complexity and absurdity of human nature. He rejects "lighthearted drunkenness", using "heaviness" to counterbalance the weightlessness of the times. "In his so-called 'interests' that consume a lot of his time and energy, how much is an excuse, how much is a cover? Why has he been delaying revealing his cards? Is it because he also feels fear or regret?" (15) Through the "father" image, the author questions the entanglement of history, authority, and individual responsibility.

#### B. Narrative Structure: Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Everyday

Li Hao constructs a highly deceptive "non-everyday" everyday picture through family members' perspectives. The father's mundane behaviors like getting up early to cook, fishing, and swatting flies are woven into a seemingly impenetrable "web of life". This narrative strategy parallels Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*—when Gregor Samsa turns into a cockroach, his family maintains its daily routine until the breakdown. Li Hao's uniqueness lies in completely hiding the "abnormal" within the "normal": the father's fishing "addiction" becomes a smokescreen to cover the truth, and even his uncle's "nonsense" becomes a tool for complicity. This structure forces readers to find answers in the crack between "life" and "life behind", using a "belated" narrative structure to deconstruct the everyday, like discovering hidden writing in the

creases of an old photo. This technique echoes Kafka's *Metamorphosis* but emphasises "suspending morality"—by switching between fiction and reality, it pushes characters out of moral judgment, showing the multifaceted nature of human nature.

#### C. Language Style: Ironic Coldness and Poetic Metaphor

His texts are known for ironic coldness and dense metaphors. Li Hao's language is full of ironic coldness. The mother's "endless" daily complaints and the father's "repetitive" drunk words deconstruct "family conversations". His uncle's "nonsense" and the mother's "rebuttal" become a battleground of power discourse. This language style keeps the text in tension between surface narrative and deep truth, forcing readers to find traces of "new occurrences" in the musty smell of "old days". The father's "performance" and "violence" in swatting flies, the functional reversal of the erhu and fishing rod, etc., are given dual symbolic meanings, becoming micro-metaphors of power relationships. This language style is both restrained and full of tension, like "hidden writing in the creases of an old photo", requiring readers to decode it repeatedly.

In the postscript to *Life Behind Life*, Li Hao wrote: "In this story collection, I tried to make each writing have different dimensions, different presentations and questions. I don't want them to have self-repeating parts." He has proven this with his actual works.

## II. "DUALITY" OF DETAILS: METAPHORICAL SYSTEM OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS

Repeated details in the novel are endowed with dual meanings:

#### A. Fish and Fishing:

The detail of the father "plundering" his uncle's fishing gear (rods, floats, hooks) suggests an attempt to control life under a guise. The overcrowded fish jar, "overflowing with fish," metaphorically represents the suppressed tension within family relationships. The contrast between the uncle's "bait theory" and the father's "impatience" becomes a microcosmic metaphor of power dynamics. The father's sudden obsession with fishing, influenced by uncle's hobby at surface level, hid narrative trickery in fact.

The "Addiction" of Fishing: The father "plundering" his uncle's fishing gear and declaring "we'll catch our own fish from now on" is less about a passion for fishing than a compensation for a sense of the control of life. By "making his own fishing gear," he transforms "passive acceptance" into "active creation," attempting to dominate the family power structure. The Transfer of "Addiction": The paradox between the father's "non-addiction" to erhu (a two-stringed instrument) and his "addiction" to fishing highlights a shift. Erhu symbolizes "responsibility absence" (going to the brick factory), while fishing serves as an excuse for "habitual absence." The erhu and fishing rod become keys to deconstruct the role of family, as the father uses a "new hobby" to shift his gaze from old life, masking anxiety with "addiction." Metaphor: The "addiction" to fishing is the father's struggle for control over life, while "making his own fishing gear" is his attempt to rebuild order in the family. This "addiction transfer" is a microcosm of power game.

#### B. The Scene of the Father Swatting Flies:

One of the most tension-filled scenes in the novel. "Performative": The father's "meticulous and detailed" swatting of flies, as if "each swing must be calculated for route, speed, and force," contrasts with the mother's mocking "fiddling." This "performative" attempt to cover up insecurity with a "perfect" act exposes his inner turmoil.

"Violence": The father "uses full force" to swat the flies, causing "the two flies that had just landed to be reduced to a bloody pulp, along with a section of fish intestines that also became blurred." This violence is not only a "punishment" for the flies but also an outlet for the loss of control in life. The "blurring" of the fish intestines overlaps with the flies being "reduced to a bloody pulp," suggesting the invisibility of the truth—the father attempts to conceal the "life behind life" through violence.

Metaphor: The "performative" and "violent" act of swatting flies represents the father's resistance and compromise within the family power structure. He tries to maintain superficial harmony through a "perfect" performance, while violence reveals his inner anxiety.

#### C. Mother's "Endless Talk" and "Complicit Silence"

The mother's tolerance of the father's "fishing" appears as "ceding power" but is actually a "complicit silence." "Endless talk": At the dinner table, the mother "endlessly" talks about trivial

matters like nails, "Little Fatty," and the wonton shop, trying to mask the abnormal with the mundane. Her tolerance of the father's "fishing" is a "complicit silence"—she maintains superficial harmony through "endless talk," while the "silence" reveals her fear of the "life behind life."

Metaphor: The mother's "endless talk" and "complicit silence" are a microcosm of the family power structure. "Complicit silence": Her emphasis on the uncle being "worth the price" exposes the utilitarian logic in family relationships. She upholds family stability—superficial harmony—through "complicit silence," but the "silence" also reveals her powerlessness, even fear, toward the "life behind life."

#### D. Father's "Craftsmanship" Spirit

The father's sigh, "If a worker wants to do his work well, he must first sharpen his tools," is one of the most philosophical details in the novel.

"Craftsmanship spirit": By "making fishing gear himself," the father attempts to restore order in the family. This "craftsmanship spirit" is, in reality, his struggle to regain control over life. He tries to maintain superficial harmony through a "perfect" performance, but his "craftsmanship spirit" exposes his inner anxiety.

Metaphor of "sharpening his tools": His sigh about "sharpening his tools" suggests his attempt to control life through "tools." His "craftsmanship spirit" is a microcosm of the family power structure. The conflict between this "instrumental rationality" and "emotional rationality" is the central contradiction in the novel—the father tries to stabilise the family through "tools," while "emotion" reveals his fear of the "life behind life."

Metaphor: He attempts to control life through "tools," but "emotion" exposes his fear of the "life behind life."

Li Hao, through the "duality" of details (e.g., the "addiction" and "transfer" of fishing, the "performative" and "violent" act of swatting flies), constructs a tense microcosm of the family, like a "mirror" of the family power structure.

The mother's tolerance of the father's "fishing" appears as "ceding power" but is actually a "complicit silence." The modern family evolves into a more concealed game—the father restores order by "making fishing gear himself," the mother competes for discursive power through "endless talk," and the

children are forced to become witnesses to this power struggle. Her emphasis on the uncle being "worth the price" exposes the utilitarian logic in family relationships. The father's "craftsmanship spirit" is less about an obsession with fishing and more about a pathological pursuit of "control"—by making his own fishing gear, he attempts to restore order in an out-of-control life. This power struggle reaches its climax in the sigh of "one person, one truth": when the father gazes at the fish tank, he may be regarding family members as "observable objects." Li Hao admits: "The 'father' is, to me, a uniform, a symbol—it symbolises strength, authority, and power, the overarching figure of 'patriarchy,' everything that lies behind this power, and a kind of Eastern way of thinking..."

### III. CONCEPT OF TIME: THE "FOLDS" OF LINEAR TIME

Li Hao constructs a unique "folded temporality" in *Life Behind Life* through nonlinear narrative structures and alienated treatment of everyday time. The father's "habitual absence" on Sundays, juxtaposed with his earlier "dutiful absence" at the brick factory, forms a time-based montage. This echoes Proust's "involuntary memory"—the "mildew" scent of past dawns becomes a catalyst for belated realisation. Crucially, the father's "pretended" duration creates a temporal gap with the family's "afterthought," suspending "life behind life" as a spectral presence in the text's shadows. Core Features of Li Hao's Temporality:

#### A. Time as an "Unfinished Puzzle"

The story collection fragments time into "slices of life" via nested narratives and shifting perspectives (e.g., alternating child/adult views). In the eponymous story, rituals like fishing and swatting flies turn time into "repeatedly folded pages," masking historical fractures beneath surface calm. Unlike Wang Meng's "time as flowing water," Li emphasizes time's suspended nature—truths emerge belatedly, requiring readers to piece together fragments.

#### B. Alienated Everyday Time as Power Metaphor

Li transforms mundane time (e.g., the "performative" duration of swatting flies) into a micro-theater of power relations. Time becomes an "elastic entity" stretched or compressed, as seen in *Autumn Busyness*, where agricultural repetition

clashes with inner turmoil, revealing modernity's erosion of natural time. Similar to A Lai's "spatialized time," Li focuses on individuals' passivity under temporal violence.

#### C. Existential Time: Cycles and Breaks

Repetitive scenes (e.g., cyclical dialogues in *A Story of Café*) imply temporal entrapment, while "exotic imaginings" (e.g., fictional geography in *Wooden Boats and Rivers*) break cycles. Time holds equal weight to plot and character, but Li's escape is not Forsterian linear redemption—it unfolds through intellectual writing (e.g., nested stories) to carve fissures in the temporal maze.

#### D. Festive Time as Counterpoint

Though festivals are absent, Li's exploration of "everyday time" mirrors their function as "time variations." The father's "ritualized" swatting parallels festivals' "exceptionalism," but while the latter evokes collective effervescence, the former exposes individual absurdity.

Li Hao's temporality merges existentialism and postmodern narrative: time is both a "folded enigma" and a site of power discipline, ultimately leading to "life behind life"—a realm of eternal questioning, devoid of answers.

In *Life Behind Life*, the portrayal of the father as a bearer of life's burdens resonates widely with readers. The "liar's paradox"—where he conceals the truth to preserve familial warmth—is praised as "a portrayal of Eastern family dynamics that cuts to the bone." Li Hao's writing embodies a tension between intellect and poetic sensibility: he dismantles life with the precision of a "craftsman" while probing human nature with the depth of a "philosopher," ultimately crafting what he calls an "absurdist novel, a love story."

By treating life as an "unfinished puzzle," *Life Behind Life* ultimately unfolds as a parable about the limits of cognition. The success of the father's "pretense" stems not only from his masterful performance but also from the family's habitual reliance on the "everyday." Through this microscopic universe of domesticity, Li Hao exposes a shared modern predicament: we (as Seamus Heaney wrote, "weigh so light in the balance") perpetually navigate existence through "belated realization," failing to truly perceive the "life behind life." This state of unresolved inquiry may, in fact, constitute the novel's most profound truth—inviting readers to

close the book yet continue scrutinising the folds of their own lives, seeking anomalies obscured by the veneer of "normalcy."

#### IV. REFERENCES

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#### V. AUTHOR PROFILE

Wang Zuyou, male, Ph.D., professor. Graduated with a Ph.D. in Literature from Xiamen University in 2006, under the guidance of Professor Yang Renjing. Conducted a one-year visiting scholarship at Chatham University and the University of Pittsburgh.

Research Focus: American literature and literary translation. Published 17 monographs, nearly 100 academic papers in journals such as *Foreign Literature*, and edited/co-edited 7 textbooks. Completed 7 research projects. Poems by Wang Zuyou: *A Collection* (2025) is collected by Harvard University Library.

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