

Navigating Temporal and Spatial Dimensions: Unveiling the Fictional Essence and Authenticity in the Narrative of *The Rise and Fall of Wing Shing Street*

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Abstracts: The novel *The Rise and Fall of Wing Shing Street* delves into the reality of Hong Kong residents deeply attuned to spatial awareness but detached from temporal significance, entangling emotions surrounding time and space. Through narrative interruption and extension, the author portrays the genuine struggles of Hong Kong inhabitants – juxtaposing the blurred boundaries of time and space and the inherent rootlessness of reality within a fictionalized framework. Emphasizing the 20th-century human condition, wherein spatial awareness overshadows temporal understanding, the novel underscores the consequences: a loss of history and cultural identity. With a fresh perspective, the narrative explores the interplay of time and space, accentuating both the fictitious and authentic dimensions. This prompts readers to reconsider their history, culture, and the current moment, ultimately highlighting the pivotal role of temporal awareness.

Keywords: *The Rise and Fall of Wing Shing Street*; Spatial awareness; Temporal awareness; Rootlessness; Cultural identity; Return of the heart

Online publication: November 20, 2023

1. Background

Qizhang Dong (Kai-Cheung Dung) penned *The Rise and Fall of Wing Shing Street* in 1995. Centered around the protagonist Yau Shun, a returnee to Hong Kong, the novel unfolds as he endeavors to uncover the history of Wing Shing Street, only to discover a poignant revelation: “Wing Shing Street never existed; it is just your great-grandmother’s dream”^[1]. This work seamlessly extends the author’s thematic exploration of the city and history, introducing a fresh perspective on the interplay between fictionality and authenticity in the narrative.

The narrative intermittently incorporates the singing of “Song of the Exile,” prompting readers to question its significance. Additionally, the identities of Xing’er and Ah Juan add a layer of complexity, leaving the audience in a deliberate state of confusion.

2. Narrative interruption and extension

2.1. Narrative interruption

Narrative interruption, observed within the novel's vernacular narration, involves the author weaving in the Nanyin lyrics of "Song of the Exile." This intentional disruption in the linear narrative prompts readers to momentarily divert from the storyline, engaging with the deeper meaning of the lyrics. This literacy technique serves several purposes:

- (1) Multilayered meaning: "Song of the Exile" encapsulates cultural symbols (the Nanyin lyrics) now faded, heard only in the adapted Cantonese version. The song, once sung by Xing'er, mirrors the fading presence of Xing'er herself, emphasizing the temporal nature of language and the subconscious acknowledgment of a vanished era – history.
- (2) Contemporary reflection: The inclusion of the Nanyin lyrics mirrors the complexity and contradiction in present-day Hong Kong. Unlike deterministic texts preceding the 20th century, the novel's text is deliberately ambiguous, mirroring the intricate nature of current times. This intentional narrative disruption aligns with an era marked by heterogeneity, emptiness, and forgetfulness.
- (3) Historical and cultural resurgence: By interweaving the disappeared historical and cultural symbol of the Nanyin lyrics of "Song of the Exile" into the contemporary vernacular narrative, the novel stitches together a history that has faded away. This technique creates an emotional intertextuality, intertwining time and space within the narrative.

2.2. Narrative extension

The narrative extension works in tandem with narrative interruption, resulting in plot mirroring, emotional intertextuality, and the interlacing of time and space:

- (1) Plot mirroring: The vernacular narrative introduces a character, Ah Juan, as "a vocal companion I met at the karaoke." The subsequent Nanyin lyrics recount a different time and space, yet with a similar event – "I remember a late mid-autumn evening encounter in the entertainment quarter, and we were side by side, hand in hand, under the moon" ^[1]. This reflects historical similarities and connections.
- (2) Emotional intertextuality: The narrative's first-person perspective wanders without support – "I looked back and saw my shadow stretching into the house... because of the street lamps standing next to the tower." Correspondingly, the Nanyin lyrics evoke a sense of loneliness and sadness – "I see the maple trees and the lights of the fishing boats casting upon my sadness" ^[1]. Different generations share similar emotions under comparable light.
- (3) Interlacing of time and space: The novel employs juxtaposition, weaving various images and symbols outside the narrative process ^[2]. This spatial weaving creates continuous references, forming a cohesive narrative. The fictionalized plot mirrors the intertwining of time and space, epitomizing the rootless existence of present-day Hong Kong residents in a post-colonial context, as Abbas mentioned, "the characteristic of post-coloniality lies in the fact that the different historical dimensions and the sense of history are epochally misplaced, intertwined and entangled, and not easy to be divided" ^[3].

In essence, the novel navigates the complexities of history, culture, and the present by skillfully intertwining narrative interruption and extension, offering readers a thought-provoking exploration of the human experience.

3. Existence, death, and confusion

3.1. Existence

Human existence is woven through the dimensions of both time and space, prompting a lifelong quest for

answers to timeless philosophical inquiries: “Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?”

The question of “Who am I” encapsulates one’s self-perception, with the present “I” serving as the convergence of all past existences. This momentary “I” is resistant to change due to its formation over countless days and nights, yet it remains dynamic, harboring infinite future possibilities. This dynamic “I” acts as a node connecting past existence to future potential, a concept akin to Heidegger’s notion of “here.” Considering the query “Who am I?” should thus focus on its temporal and fluid nature.

Addressing “Where do I come from? Where am I going?” involves a dual perspective encompassing both time and space. Temporally, it involves a journey from the past to the future, emphasizing a forward trajectory rooted in historical awareness (vertical axis). Spatially, it signifies a movement from one destination to another, highlighting a spatial transition (horizontal axis). Balancing these axes is crucial, with emphasis often biased. A focus on the vertical axis centers on history, culture, and emotional consciousness, while the horizontal axis emphasizes present realities and material pursuits.

The world’s pluralism arises from the interplay of vertical and horizontal axes, influencing the formation of a diverse global landscape. Neglecting the temporal dimension leads to an inflated present (“here”) and a lack of historical awareness, fostering cultural rootlessness. Similarly, overlooking spatial considerations may result in close-mindedness or even isolation, as observed in historical instances such as the overconfident Qing Dynasty leading to its end.

3.2. Death

Within the novel, two women, Xing’er, a singer, and Ah Juan, Yau Shun’s present girlfriend, stand out.

Xing’er, the 16 or 17-year-old daughter of drummer Mang Hui, astounds audiences with her Nanyin rendition of “Song of the Exile” at Wangjiang Tower. She exudes charm, known as a “good singer” in her own right ^[1].

Ah Juan, in stark contrast, hides in shadows with a blurred face, her identity shrouded in mystery. Described as a corporeal existence existing in a specific space and time – “Who is she? I don’t mean her name,” “I mean, why is this girl, Ah Juan, sleeping here at this time in this position, like a corpse, like an old photo, causing me to shudder and be confused” ^[1] – Ah Juan lacks a connection to the vertical axis, symbolizing a lack of temporal awareness.

As the author explained, “except that she just happens to exist as a synthesis of all these things in this space and time” ^[1], and shown in **Figure 1**, Ah Juan doesn’t contemplate “who I am” or the temporal dimension of “where did I come from and where am I going?”. Her focus solely lies on spatial fulfillment. Learning about her Canadian citizenship and professional status triggers an eagerness to emigrate – reflecting the prevalent spatial pursuit among many Hong Kong residents.

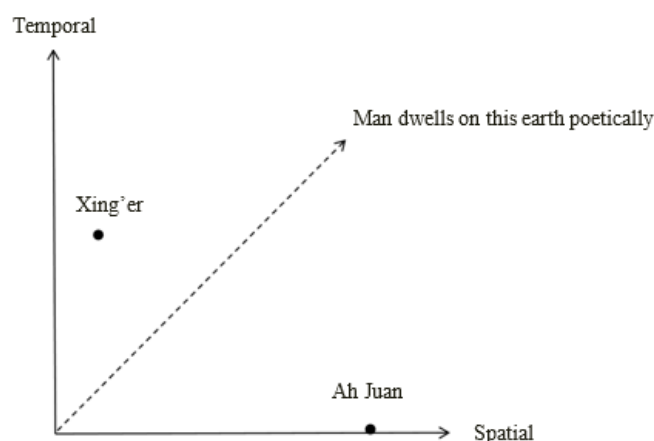


Figure 1. The existence of Xing’er and Ah Juan in the spatial and temporal dimensions

3.3. Confusion

The author navigated the plight of Ah Juan, a rootless individual lacking a sense of time, history, and culture, by intentionally confusing her identity with Xing'er's.

As quoted in the novel - "Who is Xing'er? Xing'er is the great-grandmother, right?" "Ah Juan seems to have a subtle identification with her great-grandmother", "She even puts on a single cheongsam that has been hidden for more than half a century in indigo and dark flowers," "The cheongsam fits her figure perfectly," "She was a mixture of the aroma of youth and the scent of decay," and "It was her flesh, Xing'er's flesh" ^[1], Ah Juan is presented as a possible return of a departed soul, with the narrative blurring the lines between her and Xing'er. By intertwining their identities, the author attempted to infuse life, innocence, and sex appeal into Ah Juan. However, this endeavor raises questions about its feasibility and reflects the broader confusion in the hearts of many Hong Kong residents.

In today's Hong Kong, numerous individuals, like Ah Juan, exist without a past or future. The resulting confusion in character identities underscores the fictionalized nature of the novel, creating a sense of temporal absurdity. The characters' confusion mirrors the protagonist's lack of confidence, symbolizing the broader uncertainty experienced by most Hong Kong residents. The author aimed to illuminate the reality of time and space, akin to Sartre's analysis of Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, where "they were looking back as the car moved forward" ^[4]. Under Dong Qizhang's writing, the 'car' spins in place, creating an illusion of calmness in the eye of a typhoon, amidst chaos all around.

4. Fictionality and reality in culture and history

The evolution of a culture hinges on the alignment between its intuitively imagined reality and the objective truth of nature itself ^[5]. Similarly to the "Song of the Exile" in the novel, the actual societal progression dwindles and its disjunction becomes a part of history, typically recorded in chronological order ^[6]. However, the strategic use of narrative interruptions and extensions aims not only to establish a structural identity between fact and fiction but also to employ literary tools for uncovering the latent content of historical narratives.

This narrative approach recognizes that the meaning of an earlier event can be altered by subsequent occurrences, highlighting the intricate interplay between events as interconnected rather than causally linked. This challenges the conventional linear conception of history, introducing a "retrospective correspondence" or a dynamic system's 'repetition' that replaces the fixed reference points with a more fluid understanding of historical progression.

This substitution, however, results in a literary compression of the past into the present, rendering the present moment unwieldy, confusing, and inauthentic. Paradoxically, the present, engaged in the pursuit of history, loses its historical tone, becoming ambiguous and suspended due to its saturation with the past. The flow that should naturally transition from the past to the present is disrupted, leaving the future uncertain in the wake of a blocked present.

The question arises: is this inauthenticity intentional in the novel? The interplay between fictionality and authenticity in the novel's depiction of culture and history are complementary concepts. Whether examining Yau Shun's perspective or considering the macrostructure of the entire novel, the sense of historical, cultural, and temporal absurdity surrounding Wing Shing Street's present is the ultimate authenticity.

In essence, Hong Kong's rootlessness extends beyond geographical or sovereignty matters – it is a temporal challenge, intertwining cultural belonging with a sense of time and history. The novel suggests that although Hong Kong has returned to China in terms of sovereignty, the genuine acquisition of history and cultural belonging is a gradual process, indicating that the journey toward cultural identity and spiritual

fulfillment is an ongoing and extensive endeavor.

5. Summary

The novel's true purpose conveyed through a fresh perspective, is to illuminate that "Hong Kong possesses a more pronounced spatial consciousness compared to the mainland. Hong Kong residents tend to focus on space rather than time ^[6]. This revelation suggests that individuals lacking cultural roots experience a sense of emptiness, powerlessness, and helplessness. In the context of modern high-tech civilization, there exists an urgent need for individuals to heighten their temporal awareness, rediscover the cultural roots embedded in their minds, and evolve into genuine beings capable of navigating both time and space, with a firm grasp on the past and a hopeful outlook on the future.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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