

Analysing How to Portray the Independence of Characters in Literary Film Adaptations with The Example of Lust and Caution

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Abstract. This study aims to distinguish the disparities and commonalities between textual and visual characters through an exploration of the relationship between film adaptation and textual creation. Employing an indirect research approach, scrutinise the evolution of characters from the original novel, often considered as their archetypal source, and their development within the film's central narrative and character portrayal. The investigation reveals a fundamental dichotomy: in the parent novel, character trajectories stem from the author's subjective choices, whereas in the film adaptation, characters and the central plot are depicted from an objective standpoint. This observation highlights the complementary nature of textual and film narratives. Initially, textual creation relies on the foundation laid by the cinematic adaptation. However, as the film narrative matures into an independent entity, an intertextual relationship emerges between the two mediums. This interplay between text and film opens up new avenues for textual creation, enriching the creative landscape. In summary, the analysis illuminates the intricate interplay between textual and visual character development, shedding light on how each medium influences and informs the other, ultimately contributing to the evolution of storytelling.

Keywords: Quantitative analysis, literature research method, image characters, text characters.

1. Introduction

When comparing literary works with the art of cinema, their relationship with the subject of study transcends national, linguistic, cultural, and even disciplinary boundaries [1]. The method of comparison serves as a universal research tool, offering a means for humanity to acquire knowledge that is open-ended and unrestricted by temporal or spatial constraints. It primarily functions as a mechanism for assessment, refining the interpretation of specific aspects within literary works as products. In the realm of artistic creation, any form of literary work is initially presented as a self-contained creation, while its subsequent introduction to the market transforms it into a product. This transformation into a commodity underscores the tension between art's inherent essence and its commercialisation, implicating aesthetic and political considerations. Therefore, it is imperative not to conflate post-production artistic evaluation with the motivations that drove the initial creative process when analysing a work in its pure form. Adaptation exhibits remarkable cross-media attributes, allowing for diverse and multifaceted expressions, ranging from local and ethnic dimensions to commercial aspects [2].

The fundamental distinction between literature and film art lies in their respective creative cores; literature's essence resides in the author's spirit, whereas film constitutes an autonomous world. In the realm of film adaptation, the objective is not to employ visuals as a medium to convey the creator's literary spirit but rather to utilise this spirit as a foundational backdrop for constructing a "new world" matrix. Many films find their origins in stage plays or literary works, yet the purpose of adaptation is not merely preservation but innovation [3]. Broadly speaking, films can be categorised as faithful adaptations, unadorned adaptations, or loose adaptations. Nonetheless, this classification simplifies the spectrum of adaptations, as most films fall within the grey area between these categories. Consequently, it is essential to adhere to both the principles of adaptation and the structural framework of narrative drama. This paper analyses the character Wang Jiazhi's independence in the

film adaptation of "Lust, Caution" by comparing her portrayal and the similarities and differences between the novel and the film.

2. Analysis

2.1. Chang Eileen's Wang Jiazhi

Regarding the adaptation of "Lust, Caution," the overall narrative remains true to the original, yet its fundamental essence undergoes a significant transformation. In Chang Eileen's narrative, the character Wang Jiazhi assumes the role of the protagonist, imbued with the weight of destiny. Chang Eileen's short story "Lust, Caution" revolves around a cohort of devoted young students who, with the aim of eliminating Mr. Yi, the head of the secret service, dispatch Wang Jiazhi, a key member of the student theatre troupe, to masquerade as an affluent wife. This enables her to entice Mr. Yi into collaborating with the team to complete the assassination mission. However, Wang Jiazhi possesses no knowledge of intimate relationships between individuals, compelling her to make a profound sacrifice by becoming involved with Liang Leunsheng, one of the theatre troupe members, to fulfill the mission. Regrettably, just as Wong Chia Chi uses her physicality to engage in intimacy with Mr. Yee, he suddenly receives an urgent evacuation notice from Hong Kong. This marks the failure of the assassination mission, causing Wong Chia Chi and the theatre troupe members to part ways and drift apart. Two years later, as Hong Kong falls, Wong Chia Chi relocates to Shanghai. Unexpectedly, the troupe reestablishes contact with her, requiring her continued cooperation to execute the previously abandoned plan. Wang Jiazhi reenters Mr. Yee's sphere of influence, undergoing various trials and tribulations, eventually gaining Mr. Yee's confidence. Yet, during the mission's execution, Wang Jiazhi experiences an unforeseen shift in her mindset. She falls in love with Mr. Yi and, at a critical juncture, allows him to escape without revealing her true identity, ultimately rendering the mission a resounding failure.

In *Interaction between Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Literature*, it is mentioned that the film adaptation conforms to the real context and achieves the deviation from the sublime by means of postmodernist irony, thus abandoning the profound thoughts on the rationality of the Enlightenment and realistically recreating the complicated landscape of the secular era [4].

By extracting the minor characters from the flood of the times and enriching the background of the times by showing the fate of their tasks, firstly, the character traits can be enriched, and the spirit of the theatre they hold can be amplified; secondly, the characteristics of the times can be outlined by amplifying the drama of the characters' destinies. In this work, the deviation from the sublime can be embodied through the specific direction of the characters, while in the real world, the sense of deviation mainly stems from the best efforts to avoid politicizing the fate of the characters, avoiding attaching cultural ideology to the characters, and preventing them from being imprisoned in a kind of political carnival of the collective unconscious.

Therefore, analyzing characters, themes, and conflicts from a narrative point of view and the narrator will be of great help in analyzing the text. Narrative point of view is divided into the protagonist's point of view and the author's point of view. The protagonist's point of view is usually intended to be a substitute for the subjective spiritual core of the narrative, which can be reflected in time and space, plot, perspective, and point of view. The author's point of view, on the other hand, is intended to be the vehicle of the author's narrative, presenting strong personal colors and personal references.

In the process of text creation, there are real characters as a template, which is not such a rare thing, but most of the supporting materials about the character archetypes in *Lust, Caution* are untested. So in the author's writing, Wang Jiazhi in the end was given such a character fate; this is an open question.

If it is a real character, it is influenced by the color of the times. If it is a created character, then it is another female character under Chang Eileen's pen that expresses its own emotional expression because most of the experiences of female characters under Chang Eileen's pen are highly overlapped with Chang Eileen's own experiences in her early years. The political stance of *The Lustful Ring* is

controversial because if the story is based on a real character, then the author is playing the role of a narrator. If it is a creative character, then it is a subjective narrative. The basis for judging that the story is a real creation is that Zhang Eiling, in her correspondence with Song Qi and his wife, talked about the source of the material for a manuscript ("spying") before the novel was published.

The source of this story was provided by Song Qi, and in the late 1980s, the PLA soldiers who were then in charge of guarding Guan Mengling compiled the posthumous manuscript and published it under the title "Autobiography of a Junta Colonel." Later on, inside the book, there was a section called "Two or Three Things About Dai," which was written about a Junta agent, Dai, who planned to kill a head agent, Ding Mochun, who was said to be the prototype of Mr. Yi. So Dai planned to recruit a young and beautiful woman named Zhu in Shanghai as an agent. Later, Miss Zhu became Ding Mochun's mistress. When the time was ripe, Dai wanted Miss Zhu to assassinate Ding Mochun, but at that moment, Miss Zhu was touched when she learned that Ding Mochun was willing to buy a ring for himself, so she gave up her original plan, and the operation was declared bankrupt. It is precisely because this story is highly similar to that of the Lust Ring that it has led to such speculation.

Although Chang Eileen's works have been difficult to enter the realm of mainstream literature for quite a long time due to her political stance and her "maverick" consciousness, which was different from the mainstream culture of the society at that time, the "blankness" and "love" in her works have always given readers endless space for imagination.

However, the "blankness" and "love" in her works can always give readers infinite space for imagination. In Chang Eileen's novels, she herself is an all-knowing entity, who enters and exits the hearts of the female protagonists at will, disclosing their voices of resistance to the world and revealing their ability to create their own destinies.

Obviously, the shaping of characters in "The Lustful Ring" revolves around the trajectory of Wang Jiazhi's actions, and the role of other characters is to serve Wang Jiazhi, while Wang Jiazhi serves Chang Eileen. Due to the limited length of the novel, although Wang Jiazhi is at the center of the narrative, Eileen's portrayal of Wang Jiazhi cannot be considered "full," and she gives Wang Jiazhi more of Eileen's own emotional appeal. Even against the backdrop of the Anti-Japanese War, Eileen did not deal much with the historical and contemporary factors, but only focused on Wang Jiazhi's personal love-hate relationship. The reason why it can be quickly established that Eileen's Wang Jiazhi is a character who puts her personal feelings above all else is because Eileen's usual technique is to portray life in Shanghai and Hong Kong in the thirties, supplemented by the hero's inability to do what she wants to do in the context of the big time. Interspersed with many vivid metaphors and similes with a strong personal style of "Zhang's High-light Sentences." Generally, a well-written prose sentence that is concise yet declarative in nature. Most of the final characters' endings are mainly aimed at sublimating love, emphasizing personal sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of women.

The ending of Wang Jiazhi in the novel is unexpected and unreasonable. Firstly, through the narrative text, it can be found that her address to the assassination target changed during the mission, from "Mr. Yi" to "Yi," which is direct evidence that Wang Jiazhi's emotion has changed from far to near. Furthermore, when the author describes Wang Jiazhi's state of mind, the narrative gradually transitions from the expectation of completing the mission to the expectation of the target of the assassination, the former being the hope that the organization's efforts have not been in vain, and the latter being the love for Mr. Yi that is gradually becoming more and more apparent. When Wang Jiazhi's failed assassination attempt is revealed, the author writes in Mr. Yi's monologue, "They were in a primitive relationship of hunter and prey, tiger and despair, the ultimate possession. This is how she was born his man and died his ghost" [5]. This is the ending of the whole novel, love is inevitable, sacrifice is also inevitable, this is the main theme and intention of the novel *Lust, Caution*.

2.2. Ang Lee's "Mrs. Mak".

When two different media change communication from text to video, apart from addition and modification of the plot, the original main idea of literature becomes an important dimension. The

novel's plot and the film's plot are generally the same; the film borrows from the original in terms of character relationships and the plot but greatly exceeds the original in terms of intention.

The film "Lust, Caution" does not reverse the established ending of the text but adds many episodes in which Wang Jiazhi, as "Mrs. Mak," spends time with Mr. Yi, so that the characters' emotional growth and development become concrete, and the tone of the original text changes from romanticism to tension. The focus of the novel is on the idea of facing love rather than sacrificing oneself while also reflecting the difficult choices made by the minor characters in a larger context. The film, on the other hand, weakens all the plots about the main character's blindness for love and focuses on the progression of states in which the minor characters make personal choices.

This way of alteration is similar to the dramatic adaptation of the text, except that the video presents the dramatic space within the camera, while the theater presents the space directly to the audience. In the process of creating a film text, all that needs to be done is to build the context of the time, visualize the characters, establish a reasonable relationship between the characters, and then construct events that mobilize the chemical and physical reactions between the characters. Then filming and production takes place.

In the famous "Jijngen controversy," Marx and Engels discussed characterisation and environmental description requirements, gradually developing the "typical" as the core of aesthetic principles in realism. Engels also stated that classic works of art should depict "typical characters in typical environments." This embodies the Romanticism of cinema, where civilization and light and shadow intertwine.

Following this argument, it is deducible that the typical background shapes the destinies of characters. The term "typical environment" aims to make dramatic events, temporal and spatial settings, and character relationships (forming the scenario) highly representative, showcasing the objective conditions and factors of the real world [6]. The phrase "typical character" signifies that a character represents not only an individual but also their social identity, with their thoughts and actions mapping their position in the broader social structure and real social relations. The character's actions should express the fundamental demands of the social group they represent.

For Marx and Engels, individual situations should fundamentally align with the group and the social condition. Individuals are both free and a synthesis of social relations. Social relations are both objective and the object of transformation in human practice. The concrete "this one" can encompass the abstract "many," displaying a high degree of discernment.

When the film cuts to the main characters after explaining the social background at the beginning, it is mentioned that the revolutionary group in the film is formed by students. The initial purpose of the group is to set up a drama club and to stage public performances to raise funds for patriotic causes. Wang Jia-zhi's role as the main character is also highlighted by their status as a student. One of Lai Jinxiu's lines in the film is "Then a drama club can stage Ibsen's Doll's House, and Nala can portray the character and recite the lines backwards".

The language of the text in this episode indicates the period of time in which the characters are socially set. The proliferation of imitations of Ibsen's plays during that period became a unique phenomenon of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, which made Ibsen a realist and gave his ideas and plays a certain political significance. The success of the patriotic plays in Hong Kong shows that at that time, both laborers and students, as well as people of benevolence, were more or less influenced by the combination of foreign and local cultures.

This was the fundamental premise behind the assassination attempt by Wong Chia Chi and the others. A Doll's House, on the other hand, was considered supportive of the women's liberation movement, and the classic line, "First and foremost, one is a human being," was once considered a feminist statement [7]. In China, there were not many foreign literary figures like Nala who were household names. Early Chinese feminism was a struggle against the old forces and actively drew on Western notions of demands for equality, independence, and freedom. With the help of different cultural media and the close interaction and mutual integration with the Chinese revolution, it was constantly enriched and developed, and eventually constructed its independent discourse system [8].

Theatre and literature played a crucial role in this process, as the "Nara-type" plays of the 1920s began with the imitation of *A Doll's House*. Against the backdrop of the May Fourth Movement, the Enlightenment Movement gradually took root in the hearts of millions of Chinese people, and gave new hope to thousands of women, so Nala would not turn back into a doll, and Lai Jinxiu would not willingly become "Mrs. Yi."

Ang Lee takes "pretending to be Mrs. Mak" as a clue, and with this solid channel to be fleshed out, the fate and purpose of the characters can be realized.

In textual adaptation, portraying characters according to their natural historical background and in the context of contemporary society is necessary. Firstly, a person's motivation is subject to two aspects - personality is a potential necessity, and situation is an external stimulus, both from the nature of the heart and subject to the situation. In this way, one can truly and appropriately convey the truth of human nature, the human heart, and the human condition, with the inherent possibility of history and artistic authenticity. As Caixin said: the writer's understanding of the characters can completely disregard historical facts.

The purpose of all theatre is to promote the emancipation of human beings, and to search for and understand the essence of human beings and their lives, and the same applies to historical theatre, where history is the material and background, life is the essence, and characters are the core. Today, we talk about "modernity," which is reflected in theatre art. It is very important to reiterate the historical characters with the aesthetics and cognition of today's people, put aside all stereotypes, and reconceptualize their inner souls and hidden motives.

In theatre art, it is important to reaffirm the historical characters with the aesthetics and cognition of modern people, to put aside all stereotypes, to reconceptualize their inner souls and hidden motives, and to create characters with the aesthetic characteristics of modern people. In novels, the narrator and the point of view are often inconsistent, while in theatre texts, the narrator mostly sees through their own point of view, even if through the point of view of others. Readers care about "focusing on the content" and "whether the speaker is reliable" rather than "the reliability of the point of view" [9].

In the process of shaping characters, one must respect the objective advance of the laws of history, acknowledging the subject choice in the social and historical development of the dynamic. The objectivity and inevitability of the laws of social and historical provisions of human activities are subjected to the constraints of the regularity of the human being as a subject of history. The direction, goal, and way can be chosen, and the correctness of the choice can only be tested by practice.

In literary adaptation, the requirement is to base oneself on the aesthetics and social significance of the text and the aesthetic trend and social connotation provided by the adaptation itself, which acts as feedback to the literary work in the light of the current social reality, thus reflecting the new values and aesthetic orientation of the adaptation era. The high standard should be aesthetic value and artistic truth.

For the shaping of historical characters, the power is in the hands of the writers who can give full play to their imagination and creativity. The only limit is to write out the "inherent possibilities of history" and artistic authenticity. The so-called inner possibility needs to be examined in the context of the drama and the logical pattern of the context, meaning the constraints and regulations of the context on the motivation.

3. The Intertextuality of Image and Text

Ang Lee has reset the relationship between Mr. Yee and Wang Chia Chi. The personalities of Wang Jiazhi and Mr. Yi in the film are dressed not very differently from those in the novel, but the difference is that Wang Jiazhi's autonomous choice in the novel becomes extenuating in the film. Wang Jiazhi and Mrs. Mak represent their two faces, Wang Jiazhi as a symbol of rationality and ideal pursuit, and Mrs. Mak as a symbol of sensual longing for love and desire.

Ang Lee uses a lot of close-ups and montage shots to express the spiritual world of the novel's text. The film's symbolic imagery features are very obvious, and the overall tone of the film changes with the ebb and flow of the characters' emotions.

Ang Lee's adaptation of "Lust, Caution" makes up for the shortcomings of the current market of imaging literary works with excessive reference to the original work. The strength of literary works lies in brevity and metaphor, so if literary depictions were copied, they would crowd out the creative space of the film. Ang Lee has fleshed out the textual white space and characters to a great extent while maintaining the relevance of the work, and it is an excellent piece of cinema.

As videoised narratives mature, alienated literature is gradually reduced to a tool for pandering to the film market, and the two then collaborate to form a fixed and bizarre mode of production. The creators of the texts hope that their stories will one day be filmed, but they do not want the filmed characters to exist independently. So the characters are always entangled in the style of the parent text, and while a few characters are successful because they are unlike the book and are well portrayed by the actors, they soon become unsustainable.

The flaws in this mode of production also gradually became apparent, as there was no pattern to the characterisation at all, with mesmerising settings, exhilarating pacing, and great and complex meanings, all constructed by the parent book in the world of the text, and all of these were of course important. However, none of them are fundamental to the composition of characters in the world of images. Whether they are people constructed or people practiced in the real world, they are separate individuals at different latitudes, but never become templates for each other.

In terms of adaptation, theater adaptation and video adaptation share many commonalities, particularly in screenwriting methods and concepts, especially in the art of cinema, treated as theater free from technological constraints. Therefore, the considerations relevant to the study of theater creation should also apply to the study of video creation. Firstly, combining scriptwriting and narratology is essential. Secondly, when analyzing a text, redefining its connotations and extensions is necessary. Thirdly, the text should be regarded as an organic narrative whole, not analyzed in isolation [10].

Regardless of the predetermined meaning of the protagonist in the image world and the life laid out at the beginning of their creation, the protagonist's existence and suffering are merely a part of the creator's life. The protagonist's true journey begins when they identify themselves in the world of images. This necessitates an exploration of the similarities and differences between character portrayal in written and visual media. The physical and chemical distances between written characters convey a different perception compared to the physical and chemical distances between visual characters.

Words serve an associative function, but fixed words do not necessarily construct the same mental bridge for everyone. Impact is specific to the imagery, or more precisely, the unique imagery of a creator or a creative team. A questionnaire without a standard answer cannot demand respondents to provide an answer that satisfies everyone.

Film adaptation is essentially the transformation of a narrative text, often referred to as "cinema on paper," from the mind to the screen. This process demands two things from the producer: a fertile imagination and the technology to bring that imagination to life. The act of adaptation involves two forms of artistic creation, which can be quite challenging for both film creators and authors when they become entwined or when one interferes too much. The thrill of creation in the visual realm can be lost, as can the literary charm in the narrative. Ultimately, it resembles a painting of a tiger, and both sides lose.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Lust, Caution* stands out as a remarkable work among Chang Eileen's extensive literary repertoire, particularly in terms of its visual representation. Through a comprehensive analysis of the factors contributing to the success of this work, we have gleaned valuable insights into the

significance of character portrayal and the establishment of historical context in the transformation of text into imagery.

Characters serve as the bedrock upon which the narrative unfolds, while the backdrop of the era sets the stage, determining the overarching ambiance of the story and the fundamental trajectory of its characters. It is essential, in the process of scrutinising both text and image, to refrain from mechanically dissecting them in isolation. Instead, it is imperative to establish a seamless connection between the two, deciphering the narrative's direction, textual coherence, and its primary intentions.

This research has yielded a pivotal revelation: image characters, molded by the literary work as the source text, are not mere embodiments of the textual characters; rather, they emerge as distinct entities within an alternative medium. Nevertheless, the exploration has illuminated certain limitations. In the contemporary landscape characterised by profound intertextuality between image and text, the traditional art of textual white space is gradually eroding, overshadowed by the prevalence of montage techniques in modern text creation.

As a consequence, it becomes arduous for the audience to embrace characters that deviate from the textual descriptions, given the inherently figurative nature of text. This, in turn, imposes significant constraints on character development within the realm of video adaptation. It is an aspiration that the art of textual representation will persistently fortify its traditions and leverage its unique strengths while embracing innovation. Simultaneously, we encourage creators in the visual medium to carve out a more expansive creative space for characters when navigating the terrain of adaptation and original creation.

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