Individual Memory and Social Performance: A Study on the Narrative Functions and Interrelationship of Domestic Spaces and Public Spaces in Bai Xianyong's “Taipei People”

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Abstract. At present, the academic community's research on "*Taipei People*" written by Bai Xianyong has achieved comprehensive depth at the macro level. In addition to the research achievements in the profound themes, delicate emotions and unique linguistic styles in the novel, scholars also examined the mutual verification of space and time within the text. However, the research on the spatial refinement in the novel "*Taipei People*" and the role of these different spaces on the novel remains a noticeable deficiency. This study focuses on such a situation. With the theme of exploring the home space and public space in *Taipei People* and the complex tension between the two, it uses multiple methodologies such as microhistory and spatial narratology to interpret and analyse. This article argues that the space in *Taipei People* can be roughly categorized into home space and public space. The two carry different narrative meanings; however, due to the non-interruption of space, the two spaces are often full of tension, manifesting in three relationships of opposition, penetration and parasitism. At the same time, the two types of spaces and three relationships are built on the accumulated cultural and emotional strata. Building on these insights, this research aims to build a model of spatial relations for the study of the novel "*Taipei People*" and strive to provide an analytical framework for the study of spatial interactions.

Keywords: *“Taipei People”*, spatial narrative, domestic space, public space, cultural identity.

1. Introduction

In the research field of *Taipei People,* a growing number of scholars have paid attention to the macro perspective of space-time interaction, but the house space and public space and their respective narrative functions have not been systematically elaborated. And this research skills can break through the theoretical limitations of macro research and delve deeply into the cultural psychology behind the space. Based on this, this study mainly centers on the narrative function and interaction of home space and public space, with its core exploring how the two spaces affect the identity and nostalgia-induced anxiety of characters. When discussing Bai Xianyong's exile writing, Yan Xin pointed out that it was precisely Bai Xianyong's own exile experience that enabled him to accurately portray the psychological transformations and cultural identity dilemmas of the characters in *Taipei People*. This provides an authentic emotional core for the spatial narrative of the novel[1]. The research method is based on spatial narrative, and a large number of texts are used to analyse the logic and historical trauma behind the spatial description.

This research aims to provide some new analytical directions and reference types for the spatial narrative research of *Taipei* People, and construct a more detailed spatial research framework. As Zheng Shaonan pointed out, the interpretations of "*Taipei People*" should not be confined to the time dimension. Bai Xianyong endows space with expressive and dynamic significance through "spatialisation of time" and "temporisation of space", which provides key theoretical support for this study to cut into spatial narrative [2].

2. Two Kinds of House Space and Their Narrative Meaning

It is classified according to the narrative functions it undertakes, and the home space in the novel is roughly divided into two categories. One type is shaped as a museum that preserves memory, and

the other type is shaped as a stage for social performance, and numerous conflicts and contradictions have arisen on this stage.

First of all, most of the home space is often depicted as a nostalgic memory fortress in *Taipei People*. These spaces are warm, traditional, and infused with recollections of mainland China; from this level, they are often a dystopian existence [3]. Take "*Liang's Father's Yin*" as an example, the novel does not describe Mr.Piao's life linearly in chronological order, but by describing the symbols of the Chinese-style courtyard, purple bamboo, the four treasures of the study, calligraphy and painting, tea and other symbols inside the house space, so that the house space actively participates in the narrative. Only by recognizing the narrative meaning carried by these old things can readers understand the full weight of Mr.Piao's identity. These items that have deeply intertwined with the life on the mainland in the past, can instantly transport the characters back to the past, imbuing the narrative of the novel more psychological and full of stream of consciousness. Liao Zheping believes that the deep narrative driving force lies in cultural nostalgia. For the protagonist, home space is a cultural concept that bears the sum of all Chinese memories. Mr.Piao's study is a typical case[4]. Mr.Piao's study has been crafted as a miniature museum in Nanjing of the Republic of China. Here, the heroic past of Nanjing of the Republic of China stands in stark contrast to the loneliness of Taipei. Such a spatial structure has exhausted the identity anxiety and historical trauma of immigrants wordlessly. This kind of space is not only containers of cultural memory, but its emotional connotation has also experienced the generation and sublimation process identified by Deng Kaiyue: "from regional nostalgia, and then falling on to cultural nostalgia... and further ascending from cultural nostalgia to philosophical nostalgia"[5]. The structure of the house shapes the structure of the narrative. The creation of this kind of home space, as analysed by Tan Yongli, typically reflects the "time and space misalignment in the living room of the mansion". It is "the space of the 'small history' of the individual and family to connect with the 'big history' of social changes and the trend of the times", in which the characters try to cling to the illusion of the past [6].

Secondly, beyond this home space, which is shaped as a "memory museum", another type of home space engages in the narrative more vividly and dynamically. Lacking strong traces of the past, that is to say, the characters feel a weaker sense of familiarity inside this kind of home space, so the characters in this kind of space are compelled to maintain fragile illusions through daily performances. Sociologist Owen Goffman put forward the "Pramatic Theory" in his pioneering book *Self-presentation in Daily Life*, which argues that individual social behaviour is analogous to a theatrical performance. People present to the audience in a specific "front desk" area through carefully controlled speech, behaviour and environmental set and strive to maintain a Ideal self-image [7]. The "backstage" is a private space for the performers, where the audience can escape their expectations for the role. In this kind of more interactive home space, the home defines the actors, characters and the audience; within this closed space, the conflict between the front desk and the backstage is constantly amplified, inevitably leading to an eruption. The most paradigmatic case comes from " *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream* ". Dou's Mansion, ostensibly a powerful "front desk", failed to cover up some "backstage" attributes [7]. Mrs. Qian's financial straits, declining social status, and the deterioration of physiological function in Taipei were finally reflected in the fact that she attempted to sing " *The Interrupted Dream* " but her voice was already hoarse. Mrs. Qian's loss of voice on this "stage" is a direct reflection of her inability to maintain the "front stage" performance. Similarly, Zhang Yu pointed out when analysing Zhu Qing, the heroine in "*A Handful of Green*", that the character "is only under the disillusionment of love and the blows of reality, her heart gradually hardens inwardly, protecting herself by closing off her inner world"[8].From this perspective, whether it is Zhu Qing or Mrs. Qian, they have transformed their inner trauma into an external and rigidified performance, and the home space is the key place for the performance as well as where they ultimately collapse. Judging from the narrative effect, the twist and climax of the core plot are catalysed by the house space of Dou's Mansion. The splendour of this house space and Mrs. Qian's down-and-out reality form a sharp conflict, which is a profound narrative that occurs on the stage of Dou Mansion, a specific house. It is easy to see that the home space as a "stage" is more fluid than the home as a

"memory museum" [7]. When the sharp thorns of reality broke through the curtain of the performance, the home, which should have provided a sense of identity and security, instantly became a ruthless tribunal.

3. Two Public Spaces and Their Narrative Meanings

In the novel, public spaces are roughly divided into two types according to the different narrative functions it carries. One emphasizes a stark mirroring of past and present, while the other is shaped into a cultural juximposition. Because the public space is generally more open and inclusive than the home space, the plots unfolding within the public space is more intense; the contradictions between characters, reality and the past are also more obvious, and the overall narrative is more vivid.

First of all, a part of the public space exists as a mirror image. The public space constantly reminds nostalgic characters to face the reality of Taipei society, forcing them to face the decline of social status and their own aging. Among them, the "New Park" in " *Stars Shining in the Sky*" is a paradigmatic mirror-like public space. When discussing the lyrical tradition of modern Chinese novels, Wang Dewei noted that Bai Xianyong's works "especially possess an unforgettable sense of trauma" [9]. The new park is just such a poignant mirror. The man who is honored as the "master" in this new park used to be Zhu Yan, a renowned Shanghai film and television star. In Taipei's new park, he is an ageing spiritual leader who is admired by a few young people. This public space ruthlessly reflects the drastic changes in his identity and the loss of his youth. In terms of narrative function, the new park externalises the inner world of the characters, and the behaviour of the characters in the new park can be understood as a performance of the character's inner struggle. Due to the publicity and openness that public spaces possess, the self-deception and illusions of the characters in the public space cannot sustain themselves here. Su Fangze believes that Bai Xianyong is deeply influenced by modern Western consciousness and excels at using symbols and psychological analysis to reveal the plight of characters. Parks, streets and other public spaces have become direct mirror stages to examine this kind of modernizing conflict[10]. The master imitates the past in the reality of the new park, and the young body and the passage of time are constantly narrative, ultimately revealing the awkwardness and emptiness of the characters disconnected from the times. When discussing the absurdity of "*Taipei People*", Yang Xuemin pointed out that this cruel contrast between "present" and "past" renders "today's life meaningless", and the characters "trapped in a fragmented world", and the public space is the cold stage that reflects this absurdity of survival [11].

Secondly, another part of the public space is constructed as a cultural juxtaposition. These public spaces are not mere venues for listing different cultures, but a place where various history, community and culture coexist and collide. Duan Yifu astutely observes in *Space and Place* that when people fail to transform strange "space" into familiar "places", they will have a strong sense of alienation and no sense of belonging [12]. For example, Wang Xiong, the protagonist of " *The Crimson Azaleas*", committed suicide on the beach after raping his maid Ximei. And public spaces such as beaches directly participate in advancing the plot and elevating the theme. The sea cuts off the connection with the mainland, symbolising the complete fulfilment of the desire to "return home", while the beach space assumes the function of narrative, swallowing both the character and the immigrants' hope of returning. As a boundary between land and sea, the beach can be regarded as a critical space, and narratively, it also embodies the critical state of the character's identity. Immigrants neither belong to the new environment of Taiwan, nor can they return to their old homes in the mainland. The characters are suspended in a state of in-betweenness. The beach turns the abstract drifting into a tangible environment in which a character can enter and eventually be engulfed by. The beach is just like the "absolute space" described by Duan Yifu. It cannot be given any cultural meaning and cannot become an emotional "place" [12]. The narrative participation of the beach is decisive and terminal. The death of characters within beach spaces not only points to the rupture of geography and identity, but also highlights a struggle with the theme of existence. Just like the discussion of the dilemma of fate in Bai Xianyong's works: "when confronted with impermanent and mysterious fate,

they... still fight against fate from their own positions and standpoints... reflecting a kind of 'dignity of tragedy'"[13].The public space of the beach is the ultimate stage to enact this silent struggle and witness its end.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Narrative Relationship between Home Space and Public Space

Throughout the narrative of "*Taipei People*", the author believes that the home space and the public space are by no means disconnected and opposite. There is a complex narrative tension between the two house spaces, driving the plot development through constant confrontation, penetration and parasitism, and reveals profound novel themes.

Among the three relationships of confrontation, penetration and parasitism, opposition is the most prevalent. It represents the most direct manifestation of home spaces resisting the encroachment of public spaces. In "*Forever Yin Xueyan*": "...There is a heater in winter and a cold air conditioner in summer. Sitting in the Yin's Mansion, one can easily forget the coldness and humidity of Taipei City outside. [14] "As a home space, Yin's Mansion tries to fend off changes in the real world by establishing a clear space fortress. Moreover, this confrontation is not only reflected in the geographical isolation, but also more profoundly reflected in the characters. Xu Zhuangtu in "*Forever Yin Xueyan"* tried to live a life of "struggling in Taipei during the day and indulging in the Yin's Mansion at night". The Yin's Mansion at night is full of fatalism, nostalgia, decadence, and a hedonistic atmosphere; and Xu Zhuangtu's gain here is not a good rest, but deeper anxiety and exhaustion. Such negative emotions are carried by him out of Yin's Mansion and into the commercial world of the daytime. In the novel, he became "irritable" and "strict to his subordinates", and in the face of business challenges, his firm will no longer exists. In the end, the tearing of individual identity caused by confrontation pushed Xu Zhuangtu to his death. Xu Zhuangtu's demise is precisely an embodiment of spatial opposition.

The penetration relationship between spaces further reflects how public space erodes the boundaries of home space. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard emphasised that the house should be a "shelter against the outside world" [15]. When the shelter function of the house is destroyed, the spiritual world of the character will face catastrophic damage. The typical penetration relationship appears in the "*Huaqiao Rongji*". In this novel, Mr. Lu's cousin far away in Hong Kong is the embodiment of the public space.He cheated Mr. Lu's life savings in the name of contacting Mr. Lu's fiancee on the mainland. This money is not only the income of Mr. Lu's years of labour, but also his whole hope to realise the vow of love, rebuild his past life and build a better future. Under such a narrative, this kind of economic plunder has a deeper meaning, and it has achieved a fatal penetration of spiritual beliefs and emotions into Mr. Lu's home space. Therefore, Mr. Lu is also powerless to defend the space of his home and relieve his depressed emotions through self-destructive behavior. In the end, Mr. Lu did not die in the noisy public space, but fell into the home that had been eroded and hollowed out by the public space. Such infiltration occurred inside the home space. Duan Huifang's analysis of Mr. Lu's tragedy in "*Huaqiao Rongji*" confirms this process. She pointed out that after Mr. Lu's savings was cheated, "the spatial anxiety that had been suppressed for fifteen years finally erupted", and the subsequent retaliatory actions was the inevitable result of the erosion of the house space by the external real logic [16]. This reveals how fragile the boundaries of the home space are in the face of a powerful public space.

The parasitic relationship is presented as a more complex and subtle form, which often appears in the space of "house-like". They are neither pure homes nor complete public domains, but special forms that parasitic on the boundary between the two. The "house-like" is close to the "third space" revealed by Homi Baba, which is a kind of "border zone" generated in the cultural contact zone [17]. Dou's Mansion in " *Wandering in the Garden, Waking from a Dream*" is a paradigmatic example. Dou's Mansion became a typical parasitic space during the banquet. It maintains the material form of the house, but exercises the social function of the public space. Personal emotions, past grievances

and the decline of social status are all openly staged in this space. After Mrs. Qian stepped into the Dou's Mansion, every gesture and expression of hers is subject to public scrutiny and interpretation. The essence of home space has been hollowed out by the performance nature of public space. For Mrs. Qian, Mrs. Dou and other immigrants, they can neither replicate their lives in the mainland nor integrate into the current Taipei society, so they parasitise on this border and try to find a home by repeating the highly ritualised Shanghai-style living habits. As Huang Zihan pointed out, in a space like Yin Mansion, "at first glance, the sound of mahjong, banquet, Shanghai dialect, and drama sounds are intertwined into a unique sound background", which makes exiles "reconstruct the past in exile" and find a home in auditory illusions [18]. These parasitic spaces are both a manifestation of survival strategies and a symptom of identity predicament, which expose the people rootlessness of both culture and emotion[19].

4.2. Emotional and Cultural Layers of Spatial Narrative

Through the above analysis of public space and home space and its relationship, readers can clearly perceive the success of spatial narrative in the novel "*Taipei People*", and this success depends on the mutual integration of literary emotion research and cultural archeology. Space is not only the most direct carrier of emotions, but also an archeological place for the interaction of different cultural strata.

The "layered accumulation theory" proposed by Gu Jiegang in "*Debates on Ancient History*" originally aimed to reveal the characteristics of ancient historical legends that "the later the times, the longer the ancient history period of the legend" and "the more magnified the central figure becomes" [20]. This view is reflected in the spatial narrative of *Taipei People* as a cultural strata that exists in physical space. Take Yin's Mansion as an example, three very distinct strata can be identified within this home space: the bottom layer is the cultural mechanism of traditional China, such as Confucianism's respect and ethical order; such as the aesthetic taste of Jiangnan gardens; the middle layer is the modern cultural layer of the Republican period, which basically reflects Shanghai-style social etiquette and Western Furniture, Western clothing; and the surface layer is a temporary restoration layer after moving to Taiwan. The specific appearance is the mixed functions of immigrants in the home space or public space after moving to Taiwan, as well as make-up substitute artifacts. These cultural strata together build the background of the narrative and promote the development of the plot.

Accompanied by the cultural strata of objective existence is a kind of fluid emotional strata. The state of this emotional strata is similar to the "structure of feeling" theory proposed by Raymond Williams. It is a "social experience of dissolving state" and a "forming consciousness" [21]. The formation of this emotional strata is inseparable from the shaping of female characters. As the researchers pointed out through the analysis of the female image in *Taipei People*, these figures "are isomorphic to the image of discrete communities[22]. The female image is not only 'others' at the level of gender identity, but also reflects the psychological state and identity anxiety of people who possess 'discrete experience' in a specific historical period". In the novel, whether it is the home as a "memory museum" or as a public space of "cultural juxtaposition", this emotional experience of dual "others" is deeply engraved. Therefore, the archeology of the spatial emotional strata is inseparable from the analysis of the discrete anxiety and identity persistence of the characters. Take Yin's Mansion as an example, the cultural strata here are reproductions of the layout of Shanghai-style houses, the emerging consumer imprint in Taipei, and the social entertainment of immigrant community. And it is different emotions that continue to permeate these cultural strata: traditional homesickness, nostalgia for modern life, existential identity anxiety, etc. It is the penetration of the emotional strata that covers a layer of historical melancholy for the narrative of the novel.

Readers can perceive that the cultural strata and the emotional strata are not isolated. They jointly facilitate the development of the narrative. Cultural rupture creates the tension of the narrative, and the emotional continuation provides the psychological authenticity of this tension. From this perspective, the cultural strata and the emotional strata broaden the nostalgia space, emotional space

and spiritual space for the novel [23]. Interacting with each other, they collectively explore profound themes such as identity construction and historical trauma.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that the public space and the home space in "*Taipei People*" carry different narrative meanings, and the two spaces are full of tension, resulting in the opposition, penetration and parasitism of the public space and the home space. Through classification and analysis, the author's further conclusion is that Bai Xianyong, by means of spatial narration, has accomplished an in-depth portrayal of cultural emotions and historical trauma, while providing an important spiritual reference for modern individuals trapped in cultural predicaments. This research offers a lot of valuable reference significance for the spatial morphological division within the novel text, builds a blueprint for the analysis of discrete literature, and provides a sustainable analysis framework and interpretation path for related research. Future research will focus on the interpretation of spatial narrative and identity construction in more texts, thereby further expanding the applicability of spatial narrative in modern and contemporary literature.

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