The Construction of Spatio-temporal in the Character Narratives of Records of the Grand Historian: Taking the Basic Annals of Xiang Yu and The Biography of General Li as Examples

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Abstract. *Records of the Grand Historian*, China's first biographical general history, achieved a fundamental transformation from the "chronological spatio-temporal" to the "person-centered spatio-temporal" in its narrative approach, and thus holds significant research value. This study takes *The Basic Annals of Xiang Yu* and *The Biography of General Li* as typical cases, using the method of literature analysis to deeply explore the revolutionary concepts, construction mechanisms and influences of the narrative spatio-temporal construction of characters in *Records of the Grand Historian*. The research reveals that in the two case studies, Sima Qian, through the refinement and condensation of spatio-temporal, as well as the ingenious arrangement of the spatio-temporal structure, transformed the objective spatio-temporal into a stage for exploring the fate of characters, their spirits, and even the laws of history. The research suggests that the temporal and spatial narrative in *Records of the Grand Historian* is not only a model of literary creation, but also a profound embodiment of Sima Qian's historical thought of "exploring the relationship between heaven and humanity and understanding the changes throughout history". It holds significant value in shaping the cultural memory and spiritual core of the Chinese nation. This study also provides certain references for future research in the fields of Chinese historiography and Chinese narrative literature.

Keywords: *Records of the Grand Historian*, spatio-temporal construction, character portrayal, the relationship between heaven and humanity, the changes throughout history.

1. Introduction

Records of the Grand Historian is China's first biographical general history, covering a wide range of events. It records the lives of many historical figures and holds significant research value. In academic studies, scholars often explore various aspects such as historical perspectives, the authenticity of historical materials, or the choice of words and sentence structures [1-3]. Furthermore, there have been studies that have focused on the influence of *Records of the Grand Historian* on Chinese culture in subsequent generations and even on the academic circles of other countries [4, 5]. This provides a framework for the discussion in this article regarding the influence of the *Records of the Grand Historian* on the construction of spatio-temporal. Some scholars have already paid attention to the unique way in which *Records of the Grand Historian* describes historical events and scenes. For instance, some scholars have pointed out that Sima Qian pioneered the tradition of biographical literature by focusing on characters, extracting details, and employing literary techniques such as the "coincidence method" [6]. The scholars' discussions implicitly address the narrative spatio-temporal, but do not consider "spatio-temporal construction" itself as the core issue. For another example, in the narrative of wars, Sima Qian had the awareness of vividly depicting the scenes of battles. His descriptions of the "Flaming Bull Formation" and the "East City Rapid Battle", as well as Li Guang's shooting of tens of thousands of Han cavalry, made the readers feel as if they were right there [7]. It is worth noting that there are also studies that have discussed spatio-temporal narrative in *Records of the Grand Historian*. Some research has analyzed the narrative techniques of *Records of the Grand Historian* from two perspectives: chronological narration and supplementary narration in terms of time, as well as reverse narration and insertional narration in terms of space. It is pointed out that through methods such as "parallel development of two lines" and "scene creation", the text forms

a unique textual tension [6]. Although the article's definition of spatio-temporal differs from that of this paper, the discussion on the way characters are portrayed in this paper provides theoretical support for this article. Recently, some scholars have pointed out that the narrative style of *Records of the Grand Historian* weakens the characteristics of "time flow" and "linear development" [8]. This article provides a great deal of inspiration for this article.

However, these studies have two main gaps: Firstly, some of the studies, although they did involve the construction of spatio-temporal, merely regarded it as a writing technique and did not analyze spatio-temporal as the main focus from the perspectives of narrative mechanisms and historical methods. Secondly, some studies have mentioned the temporal and spatial techniques in *Records of the Grand Historian*, and some have discussed the factors of fate and historical inevitability involved in biographies [8, 9]. However, none of these have been able to systematically integrate the concept of spatio-temporal with Sima Qian's historical and philosophical thoughts of "exploring the relationship between heaven and humanity and understanding the changes throughout history".

This study aims to explore the unique concepts and mechanisms of spatio-temporal construction in the narrative of *Records of the Grand Historian*. To define the research boundaries, the "spatio-temporal narrative" discussed in this paper specifically refers to the narrative style in *Records of the Grand Historian* where the fate of characters serves as the core, and the objective spatio-temporal framework is selectively chosen, refined, and structured. Through the analysis of specific cases, this paper reveals how Sima Qian created such a "spatio-temporal framework of characters" that carries the inner character, fate and even philosophical connotations of the characters, and how this feature served the historical thought of "exploring the relationship between heaven and humanity and understanding the changes throughout history". Finally, it explains its profound cultural value.

2. The Spatial and Temporal Concepts in the Narrative of Records of the Grand Historian

2.1. The Spatial and Temporal Concepts in the Narrative of Records of the Grand Historian

Before the *Records of the Grand Historian*, the concept of spatio-temporal in historical books was entirely a tool to serve the narrative. For instance, *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, which served as the starting point of chronological history books, had a completely cold and precise spatio-temporal framework, and it strictly followed the chronological order of events. *The Spring and Autumn Annals* records that in the summer of the first year of Duke Yinzong of Lu, Zheng Zhuanggong defeated Gongshu Dan at the location of Yan. It only contains the most basic elements of time, person, event and location. There is no description or elaboration of the time and place in the narrative. it is merely a record, a coordinate. Such a spatio-temporal structure is a "chronological spatio-temporal", which is very objective, but lacks narrative tension.

Zuo Zhuan developed to some extent based on *The Spring and Autumn Annals*. Through adjustments of spatio-temporal, it assists in narrating events and reveals the historical causal relationships. The narrative of *Zuo Zhuan* has the characteristics of "detailed elaboration of the brewing process and brief description of the process" and "detailed elaboration of the aftermath and brief description of the process", tending to analyze the reasons for victory in the brewing and aftermath stages [10]. The fundamental purpose of the arrangement in *Zuo Zhuan* is to explain the logic of the success or failure of wars. The spaces naturally change in chronological order, making the process of events more realistic and clearer. Although *Zuo Zhuan* made some adjustments to the length of time, such operations were actually only to be able to focus more on the causal logic of the victory or defeat of wars. Such causal laws themselves have nothing to do with spatio-temporal. Spatio-temporal still did not obtain an independent narrative status, and they themselves do not carry other meanings.

In conclusion, from *The Spring and Autumn Annals* to *Zuo Zhuan*, these historical materials fundamentally serve the objective historical recording or the interpretation of historical laws. Spatio-temporal are the "chronological spatio-temporal", and they do not become the core narrative means

for depicting the fates of individuals. It was not until the emergence of the biographical general history *Records of the Grand Historian* that spatio-temporal became an indispensable part of the narrative of characters.

2.2. "Person-centered Spatio-temporal" in Records of the Grand Historian

As the first biographical history book, *Records of the Grand Historian* naturally shifts its narrative focus from "events" to "people". This transformation brings about a significant change in the concept of spatio-temporal: the narrative spatio-temporal shift from the objective physical coordinates to the stage that showcases fate.

From the perspective of the structure, the purpose of *Records of the Grand Historian* is to record people, and the entire book is organized around these characters. This objective requires Sima Qian to break away from the linear, objective spatio-temporal of the chronological style. When organizing the materials, he first considers how to shape the characters through the use of spatio-temporal. That is why, in the same spatio-temporal setting, different ways of portrayal can result in completely different emotional tones. The Battle of Gaixia was the end of a hero's career for Xiang Yu. However, in *The Biography of Emperor Gaozu*, one can feel a sense of victory and glory. This shows that the spatio-temporal depicted by Sima Qian have been meticulously crafted and endowed with meaning. In order to better reflect the psychology, circumstances and even fate of the key figures, the spatio-temporal concepts in *Records of the Grand Historian* underwent a fundamental transformation.

The *Records of the Grand Historian* transforms the objective spatio-temporal dimensions into an active stage for exploring the fates of characters and the spirit of history. Further analysis reveals that this transformation of spatio-temporal is a profound manifestation of Sima Qian's historical thought of "exploring the relationship between heaven and humanity and understanding the changes throughout history" in the realm of narrative art. The chronological framework of historical works such as *Zuo Zhuan* is unable to accommodate this kind of philosophical speculation about individual power and fate. It is also difficult to explore historical laws through narration. Instead, it can only record events. However, the person-centered spatio-temporal depicted in *Records of the Grand Historian* provide conditions for the exploration of the relationship between heaven and man as well as the laws of history by focusing on key moments and conforming to the rhythm of fate. Meanwhile, in this choice and shaping of spatio-temporal by Sima Qian, there lies his judgment on historical junctures. The "person-centered spatio-temporal " can be regarded as an important carrier for expressing historical laws. The specific presentation method will be discussed in the following text.

In conclusion, the revolution from "chronological spatio-temporal" to "person-centered spatio-temporal" was brought about in terms of concept because the subject matter of *Records of the Grand Historian* shifted from "events" to "people". The portrayal of characters is the starting point and ultimate goal of the spatio-temporal construction in *Records of the Grand Historian*. The narrative logic of the biographical style determines that the criterion for choosing spatio-temporal is no longer "when and where major events occurred", but "when and where was it decisive or typical for the portrayal of this character". For instance, in *The Basic Annals of Xiang Yu*, the author omits many of the political decrees he implemented after achieving dominance, instead focusing on the events at Gaixia and Wujiang River. The narrative process is simplified while the characters are given greater prominence.

3. The Mechanism of Spatio-temporal Construction in the Narrative of Records of the Grand Historian

In terms of presentation, the spatio-temporal in *Records of the Grand Historian* no longer strictly follow the natural rhythm of spatio-temporal, but instead exhibit a more flexible characteristic. Based on the need to shape characters and interpret fate, spatio-temporal can be freely focused or elongated/compressed, thereby forming two core mechanisms: "extraction and condensation" and

"architecture following fate". They create core scenes that carry profound emotions and symbolic values, or establish narrative rhythms that echo the psychological trajectories of the characters.

3.1. Extraction and Condensation of Spatio-temporal

To shape the characters and explore their destinies, one cannot do without those "crucial moments" that can most determine the course of their fate and most highlight their personalities. Sima Qian selected these moments and arranged them within a highly expressive "central scene". At this moment, this scene has been given intense attention, carrying an emotional and symbolic value far exceeding its physical significance.

Take the case of Xiang Yu's suicide at the Wujiang River. Xiang Yu fled in defeat all the way to the Wujiang River and then committed suicide. However, Sima Qian did not describe the long journey of his escape. Instead, he excluded other time and place details and focused all the descriptions on this crucial moment. *Records of the Grand Historian* provides detailed descriptions of the language, actions and psychology of Xiang Yu during this brief period. The struggle and the sense of tragedy all burst forth in this single spatio-temporal, creating an extremely strong tension. Under such an arrangement, spatio-temporal no longer simply represent the time and location where events occur. This approach is not for narrating events, but rather to deeply integrate spatio-temporal with the characters.

This not only reflects the protagonist's personality traits, but also presents the individual fate under the powerful historical force. When the focus of the narrative is entirely concentrated on one point, the causes and processes of the events and other parts can be disregarded. Sima Qian condensed the entire narrative into the moment of his suicide at the Wujiang River, creating a reflective scene that explores the relationship between heaven and humanity, as well as the changes throughout history. Xiang Yu, as the epitome of "humanity" — his individual dignity and decisiveness were fully manifested through a series of actions such as refusing to cross the river, giving away the horse, and committing suicide. This transformed his tragic fate into pressure in specific circumstances. Was the death of Xiang Yu due to personal reasons or was it predestined? The concentration of spatio-temporal brings the individual and fate into a fierce confrontation at the same moment, transforming the abstract philosophical questions into a gripping and tense narrative situation. Sima Qian's account of this specific spatio-temporal also concretizes and visualizes the laws of historical evolution. Every detail of Xiang Yu's suicide at the Wujiang River is meticulously presented. The outcome of Xiang Yu's fate transcends a mere personal tragedy, prompting people to reflect on the laws of history.

At the same time, this tragic moment on the Wujiang River has also been endowed with profound symbolic significance. It symbolizes the choices between life and death, honor and disgrace, and represents a heroic fate. When people mention the Wujiang River, they will think of keywords such as heroism, dignity, and decision-making. This particular spatio-temporal has thus been permanently imprinted in the memory of Chinese culture.

3.2. Ingenious Arrangement of the Spatio-temporal Framework

The narrative style of Sima Qian does not strictly follow the length and width of physical spatio-temporal; instead, it meticulously designs the spatio-temporal. The underlying logic of this approach lies in the trajectory of the characters' destinies and the author's philosophical exploration of the relationship between heaven and humanity and the changes throughout history.

Take *The Biography of General Li* as an example. Sima Qian adjusted the fate of different time periods and sketched out the fate trajectory of the characters. For instance, in the battles of Shangjun and the Yanmen Pass, the spatio-temporal were relatively limited — the battle was in full swing on the battlefield. This rapid and dense rhythm of spatio-temporal evoked an excited mood, and it also coincided with Li Guang's fate of showing his prowess in battle. At the same time, the limited spatio-temporal give a sense of certainty. Everything here is determined by Li Guang's strength and wisdom. From the time Li Guang was demoted to his hometown until several years later when he achieved no notable accomplishments, spatio-temporal were compressed and expanded abruptly, giving rise to a

sense of desolation and emptiness. Finally, Li Guang drew his sword and committed suicide in the northern deserts. The time frame remained the limited duration of a war, but the location changed to an unfamiliar host country. This contrasts with the several battles described at the beginning of the article. The unfamiliar space reflects a profound sense of powerlessness, the short rhythm is extremely oppressive, and everything seems to be controlled by fate.

In *The Biography of General Li*, the changes in the rhythm of spatio-temporal allow readers to experience firsthand the helplessness of a hero's life full of missed opportunities and unpredictable fate. And this sense of destiny is framed within the historical process. Li Guang had outstanding personal abilities, but his way of doing things was somewhat incompatible with the official system. This was not just a problem for Li Guang alone; it was a common predicament faced by countless military and political talents. Having talent but lacking "luck" is a kind of "fate", and it is also an inevitable historical phenomenon that leaves people feeling helpless. This manipulation of spatio-temporal not only makes the entire narrative full of ups and downs, but also subtly aligns with the characters' psychological states and even their fates, presenting an extremely powerful artistic appeal and triggering people's philosophical reflections.

4. The Artistic Value of the Spatio-temporal Construction in the War Narratives of Records of the Grand Historian

4.1. The Wisdom of Historical Perspectives

The spatio-temporal narrative of Sima Qian embodies his revolutionary historical perspective. History is not a mechanical arrangement of significant events; its true essence and driving force lies in "human".

Records of the Grand Historian adheres to the "human-centered" historical perspective. In its narrative, the construction of spatio-temporal is strictly geared towards the understanding and exploration of "human". The event itself and the completely precise timeline are no longer the focus. The focus is on the scene of Xiang Yu's decision-making on the banks of the Wujiang River, and on Li Guang's glorious yet unfortunate life. The course of history is constructed by the will, character and fate of each individual.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of characters, Sima Qian also delved further into the exploration of "the relationship between heaven and humanity" and "the changes throughout history". In the condensed time frame of "Xiang Yu's suicide on the Wujiang River", the resentment of Xiang Yu contrasts with his previous heroic demeanor. In the well-balanced time design of *The Biography of General Li*, the sense of fate that Li Guang endured throughout his life, marked by repeated misfortunes, is vividly portrayed to the fullest extent. The highly dramatic scenes not only created the tragic hero but also compelled the readers to ponder the complex relationship between individual strength and fate. Meanwhile, Sima Qian incorporated his historical insights such as "Those who win the support of the people will gain the world" and "The situation is stronger than the individual" into the key decisions of the characters or the dramatic life stories. The spatio-temporal portrayal by Sima Qian presents a unique way of revealing history, first eliciting empathy from readers, and then prompting them to think. In conclusion, Sima Qian elevated historiography to the level of philosophical speculation, making *Records of the Grand Historian* not only a historical book but also a profound exploration of human nature and fate.

4.2. A Model of Literary Creation

The spatio-temporal construction technique of Sima Qian is a model in Chinese narrative literature.

In terms of narrative style, Sima Qian's account of events is highly dramatic. He condensed, trimmed and adjusted the historical timeline, transforming the key scenes into tense dramatic scenes. He also meticulously designed the time and location of the protagonist's entire life, significantly enriching the narrative expressiveness. This approach transformed historical narratives from dull

records into thought-provoking literary works with gripping plots. This provides a reference for the plot design in later historical accounts, legends, dramas and novels.

In terms of character portrayal, *Records of the Grand Historian* meticulously constructs a spatio-temporal framework to reveal the individual traits, personality, and even the life trajectories of the characters. Later historical biographical literature, note novels, as well as classical long novels such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin*, when depicting heroic figures and important scenes, all bear the imprint of *Records of the Grand Historian*.

4.3. The Impact of Cultural Treasures

Through the efforts of Sima Qian, spatio-temporal no longer merely served as the backdrop for events; instead, they were bound to the spirits and destinies of the characters, giving meaning to spatio-temporal. The historical moments within specific times and spaces eventually solidified into the common cultural genes and spiritual strength of the Chinese nation.

The *Records of the Grand Historian* has contributed countless idioms and anecdotes to Chinese civilization, greatly enriching the content of Chinese culture. For instance, "being surrounded by enemies on all sides" and "committing suicide at the Wujiang River" are no longer merely historical stories. Li Guang's life is not just a series of events over a certain period of time. By reinterpreting spatio-temporal to give it meaning, Wujang River has become a symbolic cultural site representing "dignity" and "life choices", while "being surrounded by enemies on all sides" no longer refers to a specific tactic at Gaixia, but has transformed into an idiom meaning "being in an isolated and helpless situation".

On a deeper level, the creation of spatio-temporal in *Records of the Grand Historian* plays a significant role in shaping and transmitting the national spirit. The values embodied in these narratives — dignity, courage, wisdom, loyalty and integrity — have been deeply integrated into the cultural core of the Chinese nation through generations of telling and reading. They have become cultural benchmarks for Chinese people to understand history and reflect on reality. Almost every Chinese person can find emotional resonance and spiritual guidance in these stories.

5. Conclusion

This study, through the analysis of *The Basic Annals of Xiang Yu* and *The Biography of General Li*, systematically expounds the concepts, mechanisms and influences of spatio-temporal construction in the character narrative of *Records of the Grand Historian*. *Records of the Grand Historian* carries out a fundamental revolution in the concept of spatio-temporal, transforming the spatio-temporal used for recording events into a "person-centered spatio-temporal" that serves the portrayal of characters and the exploration of their destinies. In the two cases, this transformation is mainly achieved through two major narrative mechanisms: one is the refinement and condensation of key moments, focusing the spatio-temporal on the dramatic scenes that reflect the characters' images and determine their fates; the other is the meticulous arrangement of the overall temporal structure, so that its rhythm will be in harmony with the characters' psychological states and the trajectory of their destinies. The creative use of spatio-temporal by Sima Qian not only enhances the literary appeal of historical records, but also enables spatio-temporal to carry the characters' personalities, destinies, and even profound cultural connotations. All these provide valuable references for future generations.

This article fills the gap in the existing research in the field of spatio-temporal narrative, systematically revealing the wisdom of the spatio-temporal construction in *Records of the Grand Historian* from the perspectives of narrative concepts, spatio-temporal mechanisms, and historical methods. This research not only offers a new perspective for understanding the literary value and historical wisdom of *Records of the Grand Historian*, but also provides inspiration for the development of Chinese narratology and the deep relationship between historical research and practical activities.

Future research can continue to advance in the following areas. Firstly, the theoretical framework of this study can be applied to other chapters of *Records of the Grand Historian* as well as to later historical narrative works, such as *History of the Han Dynasty*. This will enable researchers to test and expand the applicability of this theory. Furthermore, this study only explores the two most representative construction methods of the time space mechanism. In the future, correlational studies between "spatio-temporal construction" and other core narrative techniques of *Records of the Grand Historian* such as the "coincidence method" can be conducted, so as to more comprehensively grasp the narrative art system of Sima Qian. Finally, one can delve deeper into the inheritance and development of the spatial-temporal design in *Records of the Grand Historian* as reflected in Chinese narrative literature.

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