

Causal Circular Narrative and Time-Space Construction of the Movie *Little Big Woman*

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Chinese film *Little Big Woman* takes the father's funeral as the main line to tell the story of family affection and real-life emotional entanglements. In the narrative with multiple clues, we go back to find the hidden reasons, and the gradually clear reflection of the past is related to the real situation of the characters. Causal cycle narrative is not only a narrative strategy, but also a narrative logic with deep Chinese traditional cultural and philosophical connotations.

Keywords: *Little Big Woman*, causality, temporal and spatial processing, narrative thread

Little Big Woman is the debut work of Chinese director Xu Chengjie, which will be released in 2019. The film tells the story of a father who left home for many years on his deathbed and left a last wish to go home. The day of his father's death was his mother's birthday. The sudden change disrupted everyone's plans and disturbed everyone's thoughts. In the process of preparing for the funeral, the past events and the relationship between family members gradually emerged, and the family love story gradually unfolded. The title of the film *Little Big Woman* is not only the name of a song sung by the protagonist Lin Xiuying at the beginning and the end, but also the realm pursued by a dish, and a true portrayal of a person's lonely spiritual situation. The film uses the song *Little Big Woman* sung by Lin Xiuying in a taxi as the beginning and end echo, showing that after a curious search and exploration, she finally feels relieved and reconciles with the past years. The starting point coincides with the ending point, and the film reveals the helplessness and desolation of the excessive intervention of parents in traditional families and the continuation of generations through the formal causal loop narrative.

Causal Cycle Narrative Highlights the Theme

The film starts with a sudden death event, and uses the characters' psychological demands and the fulfillment of their wishes as an important narrative driving force to guide the audience into anticipation of the progress of the event. In the movie *Little Big Woman*, the father who had been away from home for many years suddenly returned to Tainan and died in Tainan Hospital. Before he died, he struggled to express his wish "I want to go home" in front of his youngest daughter. He was able to go home during his lifetime, but he didn't. Instead, he wanted to go home after death. The unreasonable choice left the audience with a huge question. Why did he go

home? For family members, the two outcomes of “death” and “going home” are problems and dilemmas that need to be faced again. Mother *Lin Xiuying* could not forgive her husband who betrayed her family and refused to divorce. She was willing to arrange a funeral for him but refused to take him home. The eldest daughter *Chen Wanqing*’s cancer recurrence, marital accidents and the death of her father made her rethink her life; the second daughter *Chen Wanyu* earnestly persuaded her daughter to study abroad and repeated her growth process and chose to study medicine in order to let her father return home and bring honor to the whole family; The third daughter, *Jijia*, has a secret relationship with her father’s lover *Cai Meilin* and wants to let him go home according to her father’s last wish, so she repeatedly conflicts with her mother. Strengthening the differences in personality traits and values has become an important strategy for the film to advance the causal narrative. The mystery finally revealed in the film is that it was the mother *Lin Xiuying* who stole the seal of her grandfather for the loan, and the father *Chen Bochang* worried that *Lin Xiuying* would not get the support of her family, so he chose to take responsibility and infamy instead of *Lin Xiuying*, and protected *Lin Xiuying*’s big family in a way of forbearance and perfection.

In addition to the relationship between characters, the important motivation to advance the narrative is also based on the characters’ unique personalities and inner psychological motivations. Wanting to live a good life is an important psychological motivation of *Lin Xiuying*, and it is also the hidden cause of family conflicts. At *Lin Xiuying*’s birthday party, she showed her relationship with her natal uncle, and also felt the potential influence of her grandfather on *Lin Xiuying*’s family. The two fathers in the film are both present in the form of absence, but they both control and influence their daughters in a subtle or obvious way. The mother lost her husband in order to get the support of her grandfather, and the second daughter, *Chen Wanyu*, chose a career she didn’t like in order to please her father; in order to protect her father, the daughters offended their uncle and hurt their mother’s feelings. For the invisible shadow of patriarchy, the attitudes of the two generations of women are completely opposite. *Lin Xiuying*’s generation chose to bear the pressure from their father and brothers silently, and even sacrificed their own happiness by concealing the truth. The generation of *Chen Wanqing* and *Chen Wanyu* chose to resist openly, expressing their dissatisfaction with their uncle’s snobbery and vanity, and expressing their sympathy and support for their wronged father who left with actions. The warm and sweet clip of the father and daughter sharing a pack of snacks in the bedroom of the three sisters also reveals a sad atmosphere.

Through this causal circular narrative method, it reflects the director’s reflection on patriarchal concepts and his conscious compassion for women’s subordinate status. Usually, in the process of arranging the plot according to the narrative logic, the film does not tell the whole story, but chooses to reserve it, forming narrative suspense. *David Bordwell* pointed out when analyzing the causal relationship of the storyline: “Generally speaking, if any movie wants to create a mysterious atmosphere at any time, it only needs to keep some ‘causes’ in the story, and only explain it in the plot” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 96). The result of the event can be “The hidden cause” in *Little Big Woman* is besides the reason why her father left home and wanted to go home. At the end of the film, *Lin Xiuying* chose to sign the already yellowed divorce agreement and gave up attending the funeral as a wife. I have always been obsessed with holding a funeral for my husband, and I started a secret contest and competition with *Cai Meilin*. In stark contrast, I suddenly gave up and quit in the end. The film does not seem to explain the specific reasons, but leaves it to the audience. To guess and associate. The climax of the film directly presents the unexplained result, and this intriguing ending leaves room for the audience to think and reminisce.

The two wives compete for the ownership of their husbands after death. A similar plot is also shown in the film *Love Education* directed by *Zhang Aijia*, which reflects the restraint and influence of traditional values such as patriarchy and husbandry on women.

Memory and Imagination Construct Subjective Perspective

The way a film handles narrative time defines its style. In the movie *Little Big Woman* tells the ten-day preparation for the funeral and the emotional story of a family for decades in 120 minutes. The film as a whole is mainly arranged in sequence, and individual details and plots are presented in the form of memories. There are four memory scenes in the film. The first three memories are about the mother *Lin Xiuying*, and the memories are caused by her daughter, granddaughter and father's lover *Cai Meilin*. The medium that connects the past time and space constructed by memories with the real time and space is the life scenes and specific details that can trigger memories. The first memory started when *Lin Xiuying* saw an old suit left by her husband when she was tidying up old clothes. From the clothes, she thought of the scenes and events related to it. The details of the props of the suit cleverly connect the present time and space with the past time and space, and produce an effect of looking at things and thinking about others, and this dress was burned together with the signed divorce agreement at the end, becoming *Lin Xiuying's* farewell to the past. That's also an important sign of forgiving her husband.

The second memory is about sunglasses. According to the reason for wearing sunglasses in the funeral home photo, *Lin Xiuying* recalled the scene when she took a kitchen knife and took her two daughters to a small hotel to find *Chen Bochang*. The reappearance of the plot scene triggered by the details of the photos, the sunglasses are just a pretext, the real content of the memory is to explain the fact that her father betrayed the family and *Lin Xiuying's* past experience of humiliation.

The third memory is about the funeral of *Lin Xiuying's* father. This memory is connected with the present time and space with emotion and emotion. *Lin Xiuying* met *Cai Meilin* by chance to understand the real reason why her husband left home. The resentment towards her husband, the guilt towards her father, the reason for her troubled and painful life is a deep misunderstanding. From the knotting of contradictions to the untying of the ropes that bind people's hearts, the two funerals in different time and space form an inner emotional dialogue and harmony echo.

The fourth memory is after sharing a dessert from the father in the sisters' triple bedroom. Recalling the warm and happy scene of the family eating grapefruit and washing their faces together on the Mid-Autumn Moon Night when they were children, it is a rare and touching moment for the daughters to feel the father's love in their memories. The similarity of emotional atmosphere and the identity of the details of objects and props have become an important link and transitional factor connecting the past time and space with the real time and space. Through these few memories, the image of the absent father gradually became clear, and the reasons behind the father's last wish gradually surfaced.

There are also two romantic and imaginative scenes in the film, which are the hallucinations produced by the externalization of the protagonist *Lin Xiuying's* inner subconscious, and are also the natural expression of the character's inner emotions. In the first paragraph, *Lin Xiuying* recognized *Cai Meilin*, and the latter left the scene in embarrassment. In the taxi, the exhausted *Lin Xiuying* leaned on her daughter *Jiajia's* shoulder and fell asleep. In her sleep, *Jiajia's* shoulder became *Chen Bochang's* Shoulder. The neon lights outside the taxi and the window

glass blurred by the drizzle suggest that *Lin Xiuying* has entered a dream and hallucination. The sense of trance and illusory sense of warmth and reliance for a moment further set off *Lin Xiuying's* sense of loneliness and powerlessness. Although *Lin Xiuying*, who has a strong nature, cannot forgive her husband due to the pressure of secular public opinion, she longs for her husband to go home, longs for someone to rely on, and longs for family reunion.

The other is that at the end of the film, *Lin Xiuying* did not go to her husband's funeral, but took a taxi to the suburbs. In the taxi, *Lin Xiuying* sang the song *Lonely* again. As the singing spread and flowed, *Lin Xiuying* had hallucinations again. In her imagination, she saw *Chen Bochang* singing that soul-stirring and tactfully sad song with her *Little Big Woman*, like a true portrayal of the helpless and lonely life of the protagonist, also reveals the main theme that the film wants to convey. Only by truly letting go can one get true inner fulfillment. The insertion of the lyrical passage of singing makes the originally flowing plot events come to an objective pause. This method is used to prevent the rapid flow of event time, thereby cutting time and making time a point of space. Memory and imagination are not only an important means for the film to deal with the relationship between time and space to stitch the narrative, but also an important means to explore the depth of the narrative and present psychological time and spiritual space. The presentation of the spiritual space of characters is one of the most important dimensions of narrative space. The ethical essence of the family as an existing entity is spirit, and the spiritual core of the individual must be converted to universal ethical values. If the family loses its support in the spiritual space, the rationality and truth of the family will inevitably collapse, it is bound to be difficult to maintain in reality.

By focusing on the subjective point of view, the audience can enter the inner world of the character and see the dimension of the character's inner psychological cognition and the intensity of emotion. The four memories and two hallucinations are not only the protagonist's sorting out of the past, but also the examination and review of his own emotional process, which helps the audience understand the final behavior of the characters, and thus makes the causal relationship in line with the logic required by modern marriage values.

Composite Narrative with Multiple Plot Clues

The former Soviet Union's famous literary theorist Mikhail. On the basis of studying the relationship between time and space in the novels of Rabelais and Dostoevsky, *Bakhtin* proposed the famous "Hronotop" theory of the integration of time and space, which mentioned that in works of art, time and space are One of the ways is to "let many protagonists in different spaces gather in the same space and place to have face-to-face communication and dialogue, just like in a drama, or use a few clues to intersect different plots, so that readers' minds form a situation of coexistence (large dialogue)". The father's death plot presented at the beginning of the movie *Little Big Woman* puts the convergence and fusion of characters and clues in the same space scene, forming a unique situation similar to a stage play, which is easy to form behavioral interactions between characters and dramatic conflicts.

The main plot line of the film *Little Big Woman* is the father's funeral, the invisible clue is the emotional entanglement of the parents, and the subplot line is unfolded by the personal stories of the three daughters. The overall narrative perspective of the film is an objective perspective, interspersed with the subjective perspective of mother *Lin Xiuying*. Generally speaking, no matter how the subplot line develops, it will eventually converge

to the main plot line, or sometimes the subplot line will disappear automatically to highlight the causal relationship of the main plot. The opening part of *Little Big Woman* explained six things at the same time, namely *Lin Xiuying's* birthday party, her granddaughter's return from Taipei, *Chen Wanqing's* dance studio felt that her body was abnormal, Chen Wanyu's clinic received a call from a teacher, Chen Wanqing mailed a divorce agreement, *Jiajia* Restaurant received *Cai Meilin* called and learned that his father was hospitalized. Several clues move forward alternately and in parallel, the description of the relationship between the characters and the real situation of the family members is gradually unfolded, and the conflict is in the preparation and brewing stage. The opening part ends with a small climax at the passage of the father's death and the mother's birthday party.

The film enters the main part at 21 minutes. Since *Lin Xiuying* went to the hospital to inquire about the phone number of the person who sent *Chen Bochang* to the hospital, the investigation and exploration with doubts began. Curious about what kind of person the husband is with, this kind of exploration is secretive and cautious, even quietly. At this time, other people don't know, only the audience and the parties know, and even the young and innocent granddaughter doesn't know how grandma is what to do. Another question brought about by the limited perspective narrative is when other characters in the play will find out, and what kind of conflicts will arise after discovering. The existence of the subplot clue of the youngest daughter *Jiajia* mediates and promotes the interaction between the mother *Lin Xiuying* and the lover *Cai Meilin*. During the investigation, the two women carefully tested each other and secretly competed with each other. This process probably went through three rounds of contacts and implicit contests. In the frank conversations they met in the temple, the mutual misunderstandings and suspicions were finally relieved and released.

In addition to this main plot line in the main part, the film also sets up a subplot line about the personal lives of the two daughters. The eldest daughter *Chen Wanqing's* romantic and free personality is more similar to her father *Chen Bochang*. Her divorce and cancer recurrence happened at the same time and paralleled her father's death and funeral, which increased the complexity of the narrative. The second daughter, *Chen Wanyu*, forced her adolescent daughter to go to the United States to study, hoping to have more choices in the future, hoping to correct her regret of studying hard to please her father, getting admitted to medical school, and working in a job she didn't like. The way of coercion and intervention is exactly the same as that of uncle and mother, forming a new intergenerational causal cycle.

In the two subplot lines, the eldest daughter *Chen Wanqing* plays more roles, the plot is relatively complicated, and the inner emotions of the characters are relatively delicate and in-depth. The narrative space and environment are also more diverse, from dance classrooms, hospitals, to seaside, funeral parlors, Under the overpass, the film uses more pen and ink to show her pain, hesitation, helplessness and nostalgia for life and relatives. Facing the intersection of illness and marriage failure, *Chen Wanqing* finally chose to escape and give up. From her mother, she has seen the price of endurance and compromise, and choosing to give up in accordance with her inner feelings may be another real face. *Chen Wanqing's* rebellion had a certain impact on her mother *Lin Xiuying's* final choice, and the healing of the mother-daughter relationship also indirectly helped *Lin Xiuying* change her position.

The two subplot lines that develop in parallel form a comparison, contrast, and interactive inspiration with the main plot line. The two subplot lines will disappear automatically after their respective functions are fully

utilized, so as not to distract the audience from the main plot line. Whether *Chen Wanqing* really divorced in the end, whether the operation will be done, whether *Chen Wanyu's* daughter went to study in the United States, these clues were not explained in the film in the end, but the audience will not continue to pursue the result, because the significance of the existence of the two subplot lines is to highlight the main line. The causal and logical relationship between the plots before and after, as *Xie Jianhua* pointed out in the article *The End of the Beat and the Narrative Turn of Current Movies*: “When the story has a clear value and ideology, the narrator has a standard for choosing events, and the development of the plot with logic, the timeline organization is more economical, and the narrative is naturally more efficient” (Xie, 2021, p. 2). Similarly, the overall completion of the story is based on the protagonist’s core problem solving and implementation degree as an important basis. On the contrary, if the subplot line is too complete, it may have the effect of distracting the guest, and the automatic disappearance or incompleteness of the subplot line is also in line with the realistic metaphor of the limitation of personal perspective and the complexity and fluidity of life itself.

At the end of the film, the farewell ceremony of the funeral parlor and the singing passages of mother *Lin Xiuying* in the taxi are presented alternately in a parallel montage. On the one hand, there is a solemn bowing farewell ceremony of relatives presented in slow motion, and on the other hand, *Lin Xiuying* bids farewell to her husband with an affectionate singing voice, and also bids farewell to a helpless marriage. *Lin Xiuying*, who was obsessed with her identity as a wife, burned the signed divorce agreement together with her husband’s old clothes, got rid of the constraints of a marriage certificate, and fulfilled her dream of reuniting with her husband in her romantic imagination. *Cai Meilin* who accompanied *Chen Bochang* through the last journey of his life, respected *Chen Bochang's* last wish to go home but finally attended the farewell ceremony as his wife. The two sets of shots are edited in parallel, the two wives bid farewell in two ways, the two women go from the conflict and confrontation of competing for status to active reconciliation and mutual understanding, and the unexpected ending is full of drama and sense of fate. Whether the initial puzzle is solved or not, and whether the last wish of the deceased is fulfilled, the film does not seem to have a clear answer, but the plot setting is relatively clear. The living made choices about their own lives, and the film leads the audience to experience the experience together. It expresses the helpless sentimentality of life and death and the heavy texture of family life.

Conclusion

The film *Little Big Woman* breaks through the traditional prose and poetic aesthetic tendencies unique to oriental family ethics films. The overall omniscient narration and the restrictive narration of the retrospective part jointly create the suspense and emotional atmosphere of the film. The narrative structure adopts the predicament description at the beginning, the investigation actions of the protagonist in the main part, the relatively complete ending explanation and the transformation of emotional cognition at the end, all echo in a unified style from beginning to end. The film follows the traditional classic narrative mode in terms of causality, time-space relationship, viewpoint and structure processing. The skillful and smooth image expression, the integration of visual modeling, musical emotion and symbolic meaning make it a unique work with rich and intriguing meanings.

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