

Narrative Analysis of Film Adaptation of Literary Works – Take the Joy Luck Club as an Example

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Abstract: From a narrative perspective, the novel and the film *The Joy Luck Club* tell the same story, but they use different narrative strategies. There is still a gap in research comparing the novel and film texts of *The Joy Luck Club* from a narrative perspective. This paper compares the narrative texts of the novel and the film version of *The Joy Luck Club*, analyzing the similarities and differences between the narrative of the literary work and its film adaptation and their effects through five aspects: narrative structure and narrative perspective, artistic expression, plot, imagery transformation, and narrative frequency. Ultimately, it is found that although the film version of *The Joy Luck Club* has altered the original novel in terms of plot, it still respects the core ideas that the author wanted to express. Furthermore, due to its unique presentation method, it also achieves sound artistic effects.

Keywords: *The Joy Luck Club*, film adaptation, literature, narrative analysis

1. Introduction

In 1993, a film version of *The Joy Luck Club* was released in the U.S. by Chinese-American director Wayne Wang to mixed reviews, but it still grossed a lot of money at the box office.

It is argued that director Wang's adaptation of the original text into a film text deliberately appeals to Western aesthetics and magnifies the backward and ignorant side of China, which can lead Westerners to misunderstand the actual appearance of China. Secondly, the film's story is incomplete. Due to the limited length of the film, the story is cut off from its causes and consequences, confusing the authenticity of many episodes and potentially creating obstacles to the audience's understanding. In addition, the film's storytelling approach is singular. The film has many characters, involving four families and three generations of twelve women, but each woman's story is presented in the mode of freezing - contemplation - memory - awakening - back to reality, which can seem dull, and there is a more obvious repetitiveness.

Since Tan's work focuses mainly on the depiction of mother-daughter relationships, the existing research literature on *The Joy Luck Club* is mostly devoted to cultural intermingling, mother-daughter relationships, and identity, with less research on the narrative aspects of the text. However, the narratives of novels and films are different, and this paper hopes to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their adaptations through the study of narratives and deepen the connection between literary works and film adaptations.

Using CAS analysis, this paper analyzes and compares the narrative discourse and plot connections in novels and films through some narrative principles of literary works adapted for film, as well as the effects of literary works adapted for film, and finally analyzes whether the adapted films fully embody the connotations expressed in novels in terms of narrative (their strengths and weaknesses).

2. Analysis of the Difference between the Content of Novel and Film

2.1. Narrative Structure and Narrative Perspective

In the novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan uses a first-person retrospective narrative with sixteen stories divided into four chapters, each with four stories. There are seven narrators, with the mothers narrating the first and fourth chapters and the daughters narrating the middle two chapters. Each of the sixteen stories is relatively independent and can be read separately or in combination, and there is no one main plot that covers each story, nor is there a climax or conclusion [1].

A reading of the entire text reveals that the narrative of *The Joy Luck Club* does not follow the natural time pattern but is related to Chinese mahjong. Xu Jin first suggested in a paper published in 2000 that Amy Tan arranged the stories according to the order in which Chinese people play mahjong [2]. Mahjong is a game invented by the ancient Chinese, and it is the most complex and interesting game to play. Its basic play is simple and easy to learn, but there are extremely many variations in it, and the matching combinations vary from person to person.

The seating of four mothers playing mahjong is shown in the following diagram (Figure 1).

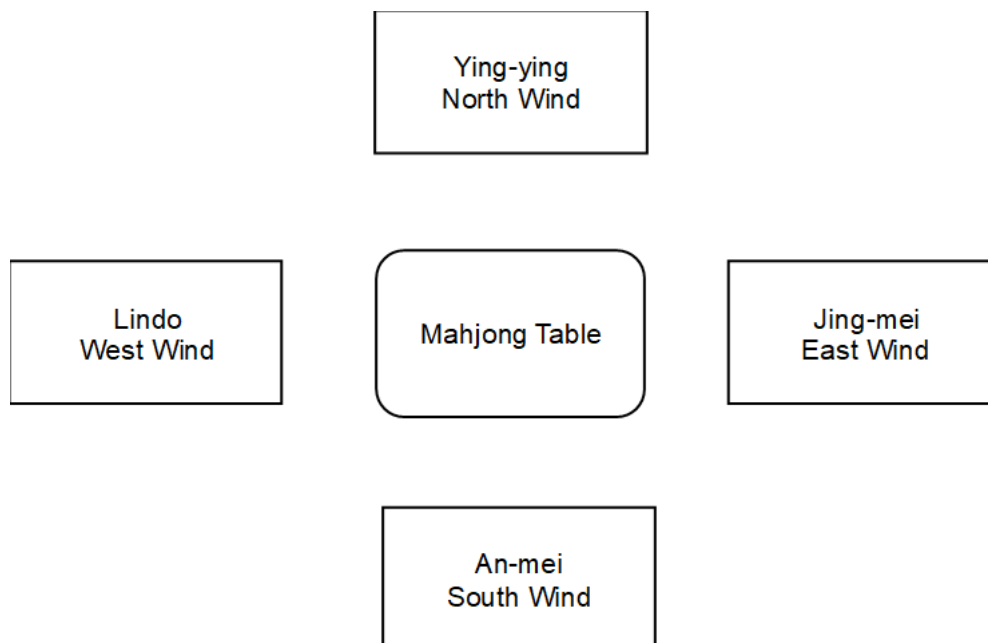


Figure 1: Seating plan.

The narrative order of the first chapter is sequentially arranged according to the southeast-northwest order of the seats: Jing-mei, An-mei, Lindo, and Ying-ying. The narrative order of the third chapter is exactly the opposite of the above. "Auntie Linda is the east wind, I am the north wind, the last to play, Auntie Ying Ying is the south wind, Auntie An is the west wind" [3], so the order of playing cards is: Lindo, Ying-ying, An-mei, Jing-mei. The narrative of the daughters in chapter 2 is in this order, while the order in chapter 4 is the reverse of the above order.

The whole story begins with Jing-mei sitting at the east side of the mahjong table, where her mother used to be, and ends with her return to the east, also known as China, which marks the journey

of mother and daughter from mutual incomprehension to understanding, from confrontation to reconciliation, and separation to inheritance.

The German philosopher Oswald Spengler stated in his book *The Decline of the West* that culture goes through spring, summer, autumn, and winter and finally dies - thus completing its life cycle [4]. Inspired by this, Northrop Frey believes that literature is a similar cycle. He proposed the Four Seasons Theory in his book *The Anatomy of Criticism*. He found that the center of gravity of literary creation in Europe for over 1,500 years changed in the order of myth-legend-tragedy-comedy-irony. Frey also summarized the structure of literary narrative into four basic pattern types, corresponding to the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Spring corresponds to comedy, summer to romance, autumn to tragedy, and winter to satire [5].

The narrative method of *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan also corresponds to Northrop Frey's Four Seasons Theory. The first part, *Feathers From A Thousand Li Away*, in which Jing-mei replaces her mother and recounts her early experiences in China with the other three mothers, is the beginning of the novel and the prototype of spring. The second part, *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates*, is narrated by the four daughters, by which time all four families have already established themselves in the United States, and the children have grown up, with Waverly becoming a chess champion. At this point is the prototype for summer triumphs. In the third part, *American Translation*, all three daughters' marriages are in trouble: St. Clair and her husband are having a rift; Waverly wonders if her mother Lindo will be happy with her new white boyfriend, and Rose is going through a divorce with her husband. This section is the archetype of the fall of death. The fourth section, *Queen Mother Of The Western Skies*, becomes the mother's narrative again. In this section, An-mei tells the story of her mother's tragic life and her eventual suicide for her sake, while Ying-ying tells the story of her first unhappy marriage in China, her decision to abort the baby in her womb in revenge, and her heart's devastation, turning her into an invisible ghost. This part is the prototype of winter destruction.

Frey also sees the literary form as a cycle: winter is followed by spring, and tragedy and satire are followed by comedy [6]. In the final story of the book, *A Pair Of Tickets*, Jing-mei and her father return to China and are reunited with their long-lost half-sisters, fulfilling their mother's wishes and ending happily.

However, the film version of *The Joy Luck Club* does not take such a particular narrative approach, but rather abridges and adapts the plots of these stories, stringing them together in a certain chronological and cause-and-effect order for the audience to watch. The French writer Roland Barthes introduced the concept of a Core Event, which is the event that drives the development of the plot, based on the position of an event in the plot [7].

Unlike the 16 separate stories in the novel, there is a central event that runs through the film: a farewell dinner for Jing-mei's upcoming departure to China to reunite with her two half-sisters. The film begins with Jing-mei replacing her mother in a mahjong game with her three other aunts. Then continue with the four families telling their respective stories of mothers and daughters through flashbacks. The climax of the film is when Lindo tells Jing-mei that it is up to Jing-mei to tell her two sisters that their mother has died. The film ends with Jing-mei finally meeting her two sisters in China.

2.2. Artistic Expression

Film and television are forms of artistic expression derived from fiction but different from the narrative structure of fiction. The novel *The Joy Luck Club* begins with the fable of the swan, whose loss foretells the destruction of Suyuan's dreams and her unfortunate American life. While the film begins with a shot of a goose feather accompanied by an off-camera voiceover. The story of the swan feather is told to the audience by the voiceover, accompanied by a bleak soundtrack. The white goose feather is hidden in the black picture, and the audience does not see a clear and complete picture of

the feather until the end of the story. The novel is narrated by the characters, while the film uses audio-visual means, the artistic means are different, but both start with the story of the swan.

In terms of temporal structure, fiction is a temporal art with obvious ephemeral characteristics, while the film is a temporal and spatial synthesis art, too much narrative will hinder the audience's understanding. Therefore, the film begins with a scene at a party to send Jing-mei to China, and the whole film is based on this scene, showing the story of four mothers and daughters in China and the United States through flashbacks. This art form breaks through the limitations of time and space and has the characteristic of transcending time and space, allowing it to interpret or recreate the past, the modern, and the future with ease. In contrast, the novel is divided into four main parts, with parallel descriptions between each part. There is no link between the past and present stories, nor is there a transitional part that helps to ensure the continuity of the novel's content by beginning each part with a legend or myth.

The film's cinematography places much of the content of the novel's narrative directly within the evolving plots of the characters themselves, making for a smoother connection. For example, Lindo shows off his daughter's magazine cover after she wins several chess tournaments, but in the novel, this scene is originally narrated by the daughter.

There are also many scenes of reconciliation in the film, the proportions of which do not correspond to those in the novel. To highlight the theme of understanding, the director deliberately omitted some of the conflicts. By doing so, the audience will be more likely to focus on the part of mutual understanding and ignore the conflict, which satisfies the public's expectation for a comedic film and better expresses the reconciliation between Chinese and American cultures that Amy Tan wanted to show in the original novel.

2.3. Plot

The three basic elements of fiction are characterization, storyline, and environmental description. Of these, the most important is the storyline. The film has the advantage of dealing with time spacing, and the pace and rhythm of the narrative are more distinct. The American narratologist Chatman suggested that films mainly use two ways to deal with time spacing: omission and scene [8].

The first part of Ying-ying's story, the second part of Waverly's story, the third part of Rose's story, and the fourth part of Lindo's story are omitted from the movie. The reason for omitting things that have little to do with the theme is to highlight the theme. The novel uses the past tense, while the movie tells a story that is happening now. The story of mother and daughter is arranged in scenes where they are talking to each other, thus emphasizing that they are in constant communication, not in isolation and confrontation.

Although Tan does not agree with Wayne Wang's additions and deletions to the novel, they agree on the need to preserve the core of the novel, so that the novel and the film remain consistent in their overall structure. As Bernard said in his *Anatomy of film*, an adaptation can retain the essence of the original, even if it changes plot details, adds or subtracts characters, or changes the ending [9].

2.4. Transformation of Imagery

The author Amy Tan uses a lot of images in her novels. For example, there are references to various forms of jade and jade ornaments, which reveal not only the charm of Chinese culture but also the Chinese connotations that mothers hold on to and the deep love they have for their daughters. The banquet is also one of the images in the novel. For Chinese families, family gatherings play a significant role in the process of family harmony and personal growth, and eating and talking are a means to enhance emotional communication. And Chinese people have a lot of rules for eating, and etiquette is especially important in a grand banquet. There are not only the seating arrangement and

language but also the arrangement and names of dishes at the table. Imagery can enhance the author's conceptual description of a particular content, whether in a novel or a movie.

The title *The Joy Luck Club* is also a kind of imagery, but the imagery of *The Joy Luck Club* in the movie and the novel has different meanings. In the novel, the symbolism of *The Joy Luck Club* is twofold: the characters' escape from the real world and their hope for life. In reality, Chinese women are squeezed by the mainstream society in America, and the weekly *The Joy Luck Club* is their only way to escape from reality. In the film, however, *The Joy Luck Club* has a new cultural connotation, with people of different races, women busy preparing meals, men talking about business and ball games, children chasing and playing at home, and all kinds of delicious meals on the table. Through a series of shots and scenes, the director transforms *The Joy Luck Club* from a private space with symbolic imagery in the novel to a public space for friends to gather.

2.5. Narrative Frequency

When interpreting Genette's theory, Israeli scholar Raymond Kennan believed that frequency must involve repetition, which is a phenomenon realized by excluding the unique characteristics of each event and only retaining the characteristics shared by similar events [10]. In the novel, the four mothers bear the trauma of the past life and the expectation for the new life. They all hope that their children can have a new life. However, after arriving in the United States, the daughters could not escape the fate of being injured. What happened to the mothers greatly impacted the daughters' education and marriage so that the daughters inevitably possessed the characteristics of the mothers, and the mother's tragedy was repeated to varying degrees.

Director Wayne Wang pays more attention to the repetition of the integration of mother and daughter generations. At the beginning of the film is another important repetition - a piece of goose feather. In the novel, the goose feather only appears at the beginning, but in the film, it appears three times in the opening, middle, and end credits. At the beginning of the film, it carries Suyuan's expectations; in the middle of the film, it is explained to the audience that although the feather is not worth much, it carries Suyuan's expectations. At the end of the film, Jing-mei takes the feather left by her mother and wants to give it to her sisters. These are Wang's adaptations of the original novel, in which the swan feather only appears in the beginning.

3. Discussion

Both the novel *The Joy Luck Club* and its film adaptation have achieved great success. Both the novel and the movie are similar in terms of their communication, and the movie adaptation of the novel respects the original in terms of the thematic ideas it wants to embody. The success of the film version of *The Joy Luck Club* is primarily due to its unique artistic expression. Wang has kept the core events of the novel in the film, while the subsidiary events are adapted as necessary through the relationship between the characters and the events. The audience-centered perspective of the adaptation also achieves outstanding artistic effects. Thus, after adapting the novel text, the film text of *The Joy Luck Club* constitutes a different narrative text through a series of narrative strategies and achieves different aesthetic effects.

Compared with fiction, the film has the advantage of being more compelling. This is because the images presented in front of the audience are direct and real, and the audience can feel the same thing without other intermediaries, while novels are entirely different.

As a male director, Wayne Wang has tried to restore the novel to its original form while at the same time diminishing its female undertones. However, as a Chinese director who has never been to China and does not speak Chinese, although *The Joy Luck Club* is a successful work, it still has its shortcomings.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the narrative structure and perspective, artistic expression, plot, imagery transformation, and narrative frequency of the novel and the film *The Joy Luck Club*.

In terms of narrative structure and perspective, the novel adopts a mahjong-style narrative structure, which corresponds to Frey's Four Seasons Theory, while the film has a central event throughout, linking the plots in a certain chronological and causal order for the audience to watch. In terms of artistic expression, the novel and the film use different artistic means to convey to the audience the author's desire for cultural reconciliation between China and the United States. In terms of plot, due to the length limitation, director Wang has cut the plot of the novel but still retains the core of the novel. In terms of imagery, the themes and attitudes of the modern novel are more often metaphorically represented through imagery symbols. The novel has many imagery elements about Chinese culture, and the film changes the symbolic meaning of certain imagery to show the integration and coherence of Chinese and Western cultures. In terms of narrative frequency, director Wang intentionally repeats some episodes to portray the cultural conflict between China and the United States at a deeper level, as well as the author's hope for mutual acceptance and integration of Chinese and American cultures.

Since few studies are comparing the novel *The Joy Luck Club* and its film adaptation from a narrative perspective, the researcher was unable to refer to the relevant literature and was constrained by his cognitive level and comprehension in writing the study, which had certain limitations in the process. In addition, the researcher hopes that this study will be helpful to subsequent researchers studying literary works and their film adaptations and that it will, to some extent, illustrate the various valuable connections and implications of the study of literary works and film adaptations.

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