

Original Research Article

The transformation of narrative and emotional structure in rural films: A case study of *The Night Rain South Township*

Zhenyang Wang

Chengdu College of Fine Arts, Sichuan Conservatory of Music, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610051, China

Abstract: Taking *The Night Rain South Township* directed by young director Li Binbin (also known as Li Binbin) as the research object, this paper explores the intergenerational transformation and emotional structure changes of the "leaving hometown—Returning to hometown" narrative mode in the image creation of the new generation against the background of accelerating urbanization in contemporary Chinese society. Through the "literary film" expression characterized by downplaying dramatic conflicts, weakening character growth trajectories, and concealing grand themes, the film presents a "detached" emotional attitude and rural cognitive style. This paper argues that this narrative strategy not only stems from the superficial and fragmented rural life experience of post-90s creators but also reflects the fundamental changes in the emotional connection between the youth group and their hometown in the "post-rural era". Combining the audio-visual language, narrative structure and cultural context of the film, the study analyzes how it integrates modernist expressions into classical aesthetic images, thereby reconstructing the significance of "rural areas" as psychological space and cultural identity. The paper points out that while *The Night Rain South Township* expands the aesthetic boundary of rural films, it also exposes the limitations of the new generation of creators in grasping historical depth and social thickness, thus providing a typical text for understanding the intergenerational transformation of contemporary Chinese rural narratives.

Keywords: rural narrative; emotional structure; literary film; youth film; leaving hometown—Returning to hometown

1. Introduction: The times' variations and intergenerational succession of rural narrative

Since the reform and opening-up, "leaving hometown" and "returning to hometown" have always been one of the core motifs in Chinese literary and artistic creation. From the decline of hometown depicted by Lu Xun to the Loess Plateau in the lens of the Fifth Generation directors, rural narratives have long carried multiple metaphors of national history, social transformation and individual fate. However, with the deepening of urbanization and the structural rupture of intergenerational experience, especially the post-90s group becoming the main body of creation and reception, the internal logic and emotional tone of rural narratives are undergoing significant shifts. The film *The Night Rain South Township* is a typical text born in this context. Co-produced by teachers and students from the School of Media and Communication of Northwest Normal University, the film's main creators such as director Li Binbin, screenwriters Zhang Qian and Lin Heng are mostly young filmmakers. Released nationwide on December 2, 2023, the film has sparked discussions on the new trend of rural theme creation with its weakened plot conflicts, vague emotional expressions and serene visual style.

This paper aims to analyze how its narrative strategy, emotional structure and audio-visual language reflect the thematic transformation caused by intergenerational experience differences through a close reading of *The Night Rain South Township*. The study will point out that the "detached" attitude presented in the film is not accidental but an aesthetic projection of the alienation between the post-90s generation and rural areas. On this basis, this paper further explores the challenges of historical depth and social cognition faced by the new generation of rural films while expanding the possibility of expression.

2. *The Night Rain South Township*: The "weakening" of narrative strategy and the "detachment" of emotional structure

Based on the rural recollection of young director Li Binbin, *The Night Rain South Township* presents

distinct "weakening" characteristics in narrative. The film intentionally avoids the intense conflicts and growth fables common in traditional rural narratives, and instead constructs a "de-dramatized" prose-poem style through fragmented daily fragments, vague interpersonal interactions and suspended emotional states. This narrative strategy not only weakens the causal logic of the plot but also leaves the characters in an "unfinished" state of growth.

2.1. The dissolution of plot conflicts and the concealment of growth narratives

Traditional rural narratives often rely on sharp contradictions—Such as the confrontation between individuals and families, modernity and tradition, cities and villages—To promote the plot and deepen the theme. For example, classic films such as *Yellow Earth* and *Red Sorghum* all construct historical reflection and cultural criticism through strong dramatic tension. However, *The Night Rain South Township* intentionally avoids this model. The film tells the process of rural youth Chen Yu returning to his hometown from Guangzhou and leaving again, but his communication with relatives, friends and even female teacher Cheng Lin is fragmented and superficial, failing to form a coherent emotional context or meaning sublimation.

This treatment is not a lack of narrative ability but a conscious aesthetic choice. The film refuses to shape the return to hometown as a spiritual conversion or moral redemption, and also avoids making the countryside a simple contrast to urban dilemmas. Chen Yu's return and departure seem plain and even accidental, and the character lacks a clear growth arc. Just like the ambiguous relationship between him and Cheng Lin in the film, it is always shrouded in a "dreamlike sense of alienation" and fails to develop into a typical love narrative. This weakening of conflicts and growth makes the film form a sharp contrast with traditional rural films. Its narrative power no longer comes from the promotion of external events but relies on the flow of internal emotions and the creation of atmosphere.

2.2. The social root of "detached" emotions: The rupture of rural experience of a generation

The "detached" emotional state reflected in *The Night Rain South Township* has profound social and intergenerational roots. Most of the film's main creators and the young characters depicted belong to the post-90s generation, which is a product of China's rapid urbanization period. Many post-90s from rural backgrounds left home to study or work at an early age. They lack personal participation in agricultural production and failed to deeply integrate into the rural social network. This life trajectory of "leaving hometown before taking root" has led to their rural experience being characterized by fragmentation, symbolization and emotionalization, rather than a profound recognition based on labor and community.

Therefore, their "return to hometown" is often not accompanied by a heavy moral burden or historical inquiry, but more a temporary emotional stop and a vague psychological recollection. Chen Yu's return to his hometown in the film does not trigger intense family conflicts or value choices, and rural life only exists as a series of visual impressions and loose interpersonal interactions. This narrative method accurately reflects the fragile and complex connection between a generation and their hometown. Director Li Binbin admitted in an interview that the inspiration for filming came from his nostalgia for the interpersonal relationships in his hometown while working in Beijing. This creative motivation based on emotional memory rather than practical participation is itself a manifestation of the "detached" attitude.

3. Classical images and modernist translation in audio-visual language

In the visual and auditory construction, *The Night Rain South Township* presents an aesthetic texture like "still waters run deep". The film extensively uses fixed long shots and long-shot compositions to capture images such as misty rain, morning fog and mountain roads, creating a vague artistic conception similar to "night rain in Bashan" in classical Chinese poetry.

3.1. The construction of "still waters run deep" aesthetics and the internalization of rural landscapes

Visually, *The Night Rain South Township* presents a distinct "still waters run deep" temperament. The film extensively uses long shots and fixed camera positions to capture the natural scenery of Zhenba County in southern Shaanxi: cattle herds in the morning fog, courtyards shrouded in misty rain, winding and wet mountain roads, and endless rain threads. These images are easy to associate with the artistic conception of "night rain in Bashan" in classical Chinese poetry, creating an aesthetic atmosphere of stagnant time and implicit emotions.

However, the film does not stop at the romantic presentation of pastoral scenery. Through modernist image processing—Such as mirror reflection, partial close-ups, sound-image separation and other techniques—The

director attempts to break through the single interpretation of classical images. Rain, fog and mountain roads are not only environmental backgrounds but also externalized symbols of the characters' psychological states. For example, the shot of Chen Yu riding a motorcycle through the mountains, where the fog blurs the boundary between the foreground and the background, implies the character's sense of confusion between his hometown and other places. This treatment aims to show that rural areas are not only external landscapes for gazing but also emotional spaces and identity coordinates integrated with individual inner worlds. The film challenges the rigid imagination of simply regarding the countryside as an "ecological utopia" or an "urban opposite", and instead emphasizes the importance of constructing "psychological rural areas".

3.2. Sound design and the embedding of regional culture

The sound design of the film is also worthy of attention. Continuous environmental sounds—Rain, streams, insect chirps—Intertwined with slow music, create a humid and vague auditory experience, enhancing the sense of immersion and helplessness of homesickness. The use of dialect dialogues (southern Shaanxi dialect with Sichuanese nuances) not only enhances regional authenticity but also serves as a symbol of cultural identity. The interspersed recitation of Li Daoyuan's original text *The Three Gorges* and old pop songs in the film constitute a time layer spanning ancient and modern times, implying the cumulative and complex nature of rural memories.

These sound elements work together with visual images to construct Zhenba as a geographical-psychological space that is both concrete and abstract, both real and vague. It is no longer an intense scene of historical changes but a container carrying personal memories, emotional fragments and cultural echoes.

4. The possibilities and limitations of new rural narratives

The new rural narratives represented by *The Night Rain South Township* show the possibility of shifting from grand social criticism to individual micro-emotional experience. By downplaying dramatic conflicts and strengthening atmosphere immersion, it transforms the motif of "leaving hometown—Returning to hometown" from geographical migration into a spiritual wandering and confirmation.

4.1. The expansion and reconstruction of traditional motifs

The new generation of rural films represented by *The Night Rain South Township* provides a new interpretation path for the traditional motif of "leaving hometown—Returning to hometown". It no longer focuses on grand expressions of social criticism or cultural reflection but turns to the micro-capture of individual emotional states, memory traces and existential experiences. In the film, returning to hometown is neither redemption nor failure, but an emotional wandering and confirmation; leaving hometown is neither a break nor progress, but a continuation of a life state. This treatment breaks the binary opposition of either/or and presents the fluid, ambiguous and non-deterministic relationship between contemporary young people and their hometown.

This narrative turn enables rural themes to get rid of the heavy historical burden and gain a lighter and more diverse expression possibility. It reminds us that rural narratives can accommodate personal essays, psychological sketches and emotional poetics in addition to social epics.

4.2. The dilution of historical thickness and social depth

However, the "weakening" strategy of the film also brings obvious limitations. As a rural-themed work released in theaters, *The Night Rain South Township* is slightly unbalanced in grasping "emptiness" and "reality". The film relies too much on the rendering of emotional atmosphere, while paying little attention to the realistic dimensions such as rural social structure, economic changes and intergenerational conflicts. Interpersonal relationships are superficial, lacking more tense interactions and deeper social connections. This leads to the film gaining stylized beauty while weakening the historical depth and social insight that rural themes should have.

This limitation is partly due to the limitations of the creators' own life experience, and also reflects the possible superficial cognitive tendency of the new generation of directors when dealing with the complex category of "rural areas". How to deepen the understanding of the structural changes in rural society without losing aesthetic individuality will be a challenge that such creations need to face in the future.

5. Conclusion: Intergenerational experience and the future of rural images

With its unique narrative attitude and aesthetic style, *The Night Rain South Township* marks an important transformation of rural narratives in intergenerational succession. By downplaying conflicts, highlighting the "detached" emotional state, and integrating classical artistic conception with modern expressions, the film truly

reflects the relationship mode of both closeness and alienation between the post-90s generation and rural areas. It expands the emotional dimension and formal boundary of rural films, enabling them to accommodate more individual and psychological experience expressions.

But at the same time, the film also exposes the inadequacies of the new generation of creations in grasping historical depth and social complexity. If future rural narratives want to go further on the path of literary films, they may need to seek a more organic integration between the poetic presentation of personal emotions and the profound insight into social reality. Only in this way can rural images not only carry the subtle pulses of the times but also retain their due cultural weight and ideological edge.

References

- [1] Chen Jide, Wei Ling. (2025) On the Aesthetic Construction of the "Love for Place Complex" in Current Domestic Indigenous Films. *Contemporary Film*, 4, 103-109.
- [2] Gao Kai. (2013) Research on Local Film and Modern Image Narration, *News World*, 4, 233.
- [3] Wu Wenge. (2025) The Transformation of Community Narratives in Chinese Local Films from the Perspective of Modernity. *Shanghai Culture*, 092-100.
- [4] Zhang Yu, Yang Wei. (2025) Reshaping Legends: The Legendary Narration of Domestic Local Films Since the New Era. *Film Literature*, 3, 53-55.
- [5] Zhang Haiyan. (2009) The Free Interplay between Symbols and Narration: The Influence of Lotman's Film Semiotics Theory on Film Narratology. *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, 1, 49.
- [6] Li Huanzheng. (2019) Concept and Discourse Rhetoric of Local Films in the New Era. *Art Hundred Schools*, 3, 122-129.