

The Construction of literary character in Chang An

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Abstract

Chang An, the inaugural work of the "New Culture" series by Light Chaser Animation, offers a glimpse into the life stories of Tang Dynasty poets such as Gao Shi and Li Bai within the historical context of the dynasty's rise and fall. This animation piece effectively portrays the distinctive traits of Chinese literati, providing a collective character portrait. Diverging from the fantastical themes of "New Legends" and "New Gods," Chang An places a central focus on meticulously reconstructing historical details and narrating the intricate character-driven stories. Its underlying intent is to establish archetypal personalities and images representative of Chinese literati. Given this context, this paper employs a narratological perspective to delve into the process of character and image development of the literati in "Chang An," with an exploration of structural dynamics, binary narratives, and the interplay of imagery.

1. Introduction

Chang An was released nationwide in July 2023. It is foreseeable that as the inaugural work of the "New Culture" series by Light Chaser Animation, it will set new records in the rising trend of Chinese animation. Additionally, the highly authentic Tang Dynasty artistic style and language portrayed in the film provide a complete expression of the Chinese aesthetic concept of "vibrant charm" (Sun, 2023). Light Chaser Animation has grown over the course of ten years and has become a leading company in animation industry in China. After the release of the "New Legends: White Snake" series, it gradually found its development direction (Zhang, 2023). By using both Chinese and foreign cultural symbols, it has constructed a unique sense of aesthetics, highlighting the essence of national aesthetics and providing a practical reference for the rise of Chinese animation (Deng and Yuan, 2023). Originally, the term "literati" mainly referred to individuals with literary virtues. In ancient China, cultured individuals generally represented power and status, occupying the upper echelons of society for an extended period (Zhu, 2023).

Chang An narrates the growth of the dual male protagonists, Gao Shi and Li Bai, during the period from the prosperous Kaiyuan era to the turmoil of the An Lushan Rebellion. It unfolds the economic, social, and cultural aspects of life during this time through character-driven storytelling. The film interconnects many literati figures, including Wang Wei, Du Fu, Cen Can, Zhang Xu, Wu Daozi, He Zhizhang, Cen Fuzi, and Dan QiuSheng, weaving their poetry, wine, and stories into a vivid tapestry of the flourishing era of the Great Tang Dynasty and the subsequent decline. It offers a fresh perspective on the typical portrayal of Chinese literati characters and destinies. Chang An also delves into the psychological and emotional landscapes of these historical figures, providing a more intimate look into their inner worlds. The film masterfully captures the complexities of their relationships, their personal struggles, and the societal pressures they faced, all within the context of a rapidly changing political climate. This depth of characterization adds a layer of realism and relatability to the film, allowing modern audiences to connect with these historical figures on a more profound level. By doing so, Chang An transcends the boundaries of a traditional historical drama, becoming a poignant exploration of the human condition set against the backdrop of a pivotal era in Chinese history. The film's success is not only a testament to the power of storytelling but also a reflection of the growing maturity and sophistication of the Chinese animation industry, which is now capable of producing works that resonate with both domestic and international audiences.

2. Harnessing Ontological Potential through Structural Dynamics

Interpreting Chinese narrative works primarily involves examining the alignment of their structure and techniques. In Chinese narratives, there is often a coexistence of opposites, creating a "field of tension" at the center of interconnection and fusion. This field comprises both internal and external components, with the internal aspect being the aesthetic pursuit and philosophical realm of "harmonious centrality," while the external aspect encompasses the dual unity of opposing forces that generate behavioral dynamics. Together, these internal and external elements form a dynamic narrative framework (Yang, 2019). Accordingly, energy can be categorized as follows: intrinsic ontological potential, extrinsic positional potential, and the variable potential arising from the interplay of internal and external factors. Chang An adeptly harnesses this dynamic narrative framework to breathe life into its portrayal of the Tang Dynasty poets. The film's narrative structure is designed to accentuate the interplay between the poets' inner worlds and the external forces that shape their destinies. This approach not only enriches the storytelling but also provides a more nuanced understanding of the historical context in which these poets lived and created their art. By skillfully navigating the "field of tension" between opposing forces, Chang An offers a compelling exploration of the Chinese literati's journey through adversity and triumph, capturing the essence of their poetic spirit and the enduring legacy of their works. This intricate balance between internal and external dynamics is a testament to the film's narrative prowess and its ability to bring the rich tapestry of Chinese history to life on screen.

Ontological potential refers to the dual or multiple aspects of character personalities and the effects of their energy release within specific contexts. Different characters, when faced with the same situation, will react differently due to their distinct personalities, resulting in different stories and life trajectories. Similarly, narrative works can enrich and give depth to character portrayals by designing various scenarios to test different aspects of a single character, making the character image more multifaceted and vivid. Chang An builds upon these two types of

scenario designs and strengthens the repeated presentation within the same space. This fully unleashes the energy of character personalities, i.e., ontological potential. Through a reasonable handling of the three structural elements of "sequence," "connection," and "contrast," the film transforms Li Bai into the "exiled immortal" Li Bai and brings Gao Shi back to being the "ordinary mortal" Gao Shi.

In general, the sequence is usually composed based on the combination of time and logical relationships. However, narrative structural sequences can be rearranged in accordance with a unique understanding of the world. In *Chang An* before presenting the encounter between the dual male protagonists, there is a significant real-life scene set aside. After Gao Shi is severely wounded on the battlefield, a vague scene of two young boys riding horses appears in his mind. Following this, a strong north wind howls, and the candlelight is dim as Gao Shi waits in his tent for the commanding general. When the commanding general enters the tent, he doesn't inquire about the current state of the war or how to defend the country. Instead, he utters the name "Li Bai." The camera lingers on the "River and Mountain Heroes Collection," enough to focus the theme on Changan and the poets. The story of the dual male protagonists then begins from the vague scene of the young boys riding horses at the start of the film. Upon hearing the name "Li Bai," Gao Shi's heart is filled with countless ripples, as his life often echoes with memories of Li Bai. At this moment, the narrative is bound to be highly detailed. Without a carefully arranged structural sequence, the serendipity and inevitability of the life-and-death encounters and intertwined destinies of the dual male protagonists would not unfold. It is precisely the placement of these character events that makes the construction of character images more natural and profound. It allows the audience to comprehend the interplay of coincidence and necessity as they gaze into the narrative.

G. W. F. Hegel once proposed that characters in drama do not express themselves purely as solitary, lyrical individuals. Instead, they come together as a group, forming relationships through conflicts in character and purpose. It is precisely these relationships that constitute the basis of their dramatic existence (Hegel, 1958). Narrative art depicts multidimensional realities through linear language, requiring the continuous laying of threads and the careful execution of cutting and bridging actions during the process of connecting narrative threads. Coherence is an essential component in combining character events into an inseparable whole. *Chang An* employs both direct and indirect connections to construct character personalities within various foreshadowing, both overt and subtle. Through an abundance of foreshadowing and repeated references, Gao Shi undergoes a transformation from a straightforward and somewhat awkward fallen aristocrat to a highly skilled strategist capable of deceiving opponents and devising plans from miles away.

Firstly, sumo wrestling serves as a hidden foreshadowing element, symbolizing Gao Shi's path to mastering "deception techniques." From learning sumo wrestling with Li Bai to years of dedicated practice in Liangyuan, resulting in remarkable progress and ultimately defeating the formidable Jizhou Army vanguard, including Li Bai, Gao Shi's "sumo wrestling skills" progress steadily, demonstrating his mastery of the essence of deceit, which also represents his strategic expertise. Secondly, Gao Shi's state during literary gatherings serves as an overt foreshadowing element, illustrating his process of seeking his own path. During the gathering in Yangzhou, he cannot comprehend Li Bai's obsession with wine and women. In the gathering in Changan, he quietly observes Li Bai and the other poets reveling in poetry and wine. After Li Bai's entrance into Daoism and his first joyful drinking session, Gao Shi finally transitions from discomfort and observation to profound understanding, embarking on his own path in life. Thirdly, various elements such as his leniency toward Tibetan captives, feigned self-mutilation, stories related to Shibao City, external legends, and his relationship with Li Bai serve as overt foreshadowing,

demonstrating Gao Shi's transformation into a poet-military strategist with meticulous thinking, exceptional tactics, and god-like military acumen.

The contrasting elements in *Chang An* primarily manifest in the different attitudes and choices of the dual male protagonists when facing the same situations. From Yellow Crane Tower to Yangzhou, from Changan to Liangyuan, from Jizhou to Jinan, Li Bai's seemingly "passionate" and "dynamic" nature and Gao Shi's "calm" and "quiet" demeanor form the two-level contrasting and co-constructive context discussed earlier. They also represent the characteristic traits of two typical Chinese literati. When facing agreed-upon meetings, Li Bai disregards the one-year agreement set with Gao Shi and the urgent letter he received from Changan, while Gao Shi always honors each appointment. When presented with opportunities, Gao Shi first considers the lack of sentiment between his ancestors and the county magistrate. In contrast, Li Bai strides forward, believing that his talent is equivalent to ten thousand acquaintances and a hundred million years of friendship, even though he never gets to meet the noble lady. Throughout their respective journeys, Gao Shi, amidst the graceful dancing figures in the general's tent, witnesses the sorrow of all living beings, and amid the splendid lights of Changan, he discovers the unwavering commitment and aspirations within himself. On the other hand, Li Bai seems to be repeatedly propelled by fate, constantly wavering between pursuing fame and achieving transcendence, ultimately rowing his light boat across the "myriad mountains" with regrets over the ephemeral nature of fame and the inefficacy of Daoism.

3. Using Binary Narratives to Drive Growth and Transformation

The essential path to telling a good Chinese story lies in shaping typical Chinese character personalities. In the case of *Chang An* the primary task of narrating the stories of poets is also to shape characters with distinctive features of Chinese culture. Narration can speak to the audience through a complete life form, thoroughly presenting the growth and transformation of character images within the narrative. In terms of temporal narration, it can employ opposing yet unified narrative techniques such as forward chronology, reverse chronology, foreshadowing, and retrospective storytelling (Yang, 2019). Through a combination of various binary narrative structures, *Chang An* uses a narrative approach that combines forward and reverse chronology, historical and fictional elements, and both tragedy and joy to construct the inevitable development process of Chinese literati characters, establishing typical images of Chinese literati. From the perspective of the elderly Gao Shi, the film recalls their encounter, acquaintance, and friendship. It is only at the end, when Gao Shi reflects on the inevitable tragic endings shared by all literati, extinguishes the candle, and concludes the reverse chronology section, that the narrative transitions back to the story of reclaiming Yunsan City, echoing the beginning. Within this framework, the story of Li Bai is interwoven with a reverse chronology section, including Li Bai's recollections of why he left Yangzhou, why he left the Xu family in Anlu, and the reasons for his escape from the Youzhou army. Through the interplay of forward and reverse chronology, the film presents the individual experiences and shared encounters of Gao Shi and Li Bai.

Unamuno believed that the tragic consciousness of life stems from the yearning for immortality, while the sense of tragedy in Chinese poetry and literature is more closely tied to personal life ideals and experiences (Cai, 2023). The intertwined lives of Li Bai and Gao Shi, as well as their interactions with Du Fu, have been a focal point of academic attention. Existing sources related to Du Fu indicate that in the third year of the Tianbao era (744 AD), the three of them forged a deep

friendship during their travels. The New Book of Tang records, "They once traveled together, Li Bai and Gao Shi, passing through Bianzhou. They ascended Chuitai, deeply moved and expansive in their sentiments, and their depths of emotion were unfathomable" (Ou, 1975). However, the actual life outcomes of these three poets were markedly different. Despite enduring years of hardship in the early stages of his life, Gao Shi ultimately achieved a position of prominence in the Tang Dynasty that surpassed that of other renowned poets. His lengthy tenure in office was unparalleled. In an era where the lives of literati typically concluded tragically, Gao Shi's unique path led him to the highest echelons of decision-making. The Old Book of Tang records, "Since the Tang Dynasty began, among poets, only Gao Shi reached such heights" (Shen, 2002). His political acumen is evident, as portrayed in the film. However, the movie incorporates various adaptations in the details of Gao Shi's interactions with Li Bai and Du Fu. These adaptations represent the film's primary means of elaborating on the intricacies of character and image formation in the context of literati life.

Gao Shi's birth year remains undetermined, with recorded accounts ranging from 696 to 706 (Zhang, 2011). Li Bai was born in the first year of the Chang'an era (701 AD), while Du Fu was born in the first year of the Xiantian era (712 AD). There is no historical evidence to confirm that the initial encounter of Li Bai and Gao Shi occurred during their youth; in fact, these three poets were middle-aged during their documented travels together. However, the film's depiction of their youthful journey aims to present the idealism and aspirations of literati when they were young. By selecting the starting point of their youth and narrating their experiences, the film endeavors to portray the inevitability of their growth as completely as possible, allowing the audience to understand how Li Bai became Li Bai and how Gao Shi became Gao Shi. In his youth, Li Bai was aware of the ambition hidden within Gao Shi's heart, and he did not hide his own desire for fame and his aspiration to retire and seek Tao. The ideals of literati are often lofty and grand, yet they can also exhibit political naiveté. Within the story constructed by the film, Li Bai's impulsive actions are evident when he walks away after witnessing Cui Hao throw down his writing brush. This reflects his youthful impulsiveness. When he discovers An Lushan's treasonous intentions, his first instinct is to send a memorial to the court, even against the advice of others. If not for the intervention of those who cautioned him, his life might have come to an early end. After becoming an official in the Hanlin Academy, he adopts a high-profile approach, inevitably making many enemies and eventually being forced to leave Chang'an. Lastly, during the An Lushan Rebellion, he naively joins Prince Yong's cause (Ye, 1982). These stories, blending fact and fiction, enhance Li Bai's character, depicting him as a poet with strong romantic ideals and highlighting the tendency of Chinese literati to possess grand romantic ideals yet fall short in political acumen. These elements contribute to the typical tragic endings in the lives of literati.

In contrast, Gao Shi did not possess the exuberance of youth. He struggled with a stutter and faced difficulties in reading. After years of reflection, two attempts to seek fame in Chang'an yielded no results, and he made three trips to Liangyuan, amassing strength for future endeavors. Gao Shi never seemed to live his youth like other poets, lacking the carefree and indulgent spirit, but he displayed patience and resilience. While he shared the aspiration to serve the country, his focus was on practical contributions and the strategies of kings and emperors. Ultimately, he developed a far-sighted political insight, accurately grasping the bigger picture and predicting changes with precision. He became an exceptional figure among literati, possessing political wisdom beyond the ordinary. Moreover, the film portrays Gao Shi as a representative of literati who, despite his profound political machinations, harbors deep affection for Li Bai. During the Rebellion of Prince Yong, Gao Shi carries out a "rescue through non-rescue" action toward Li Bai (Zhang, 2013). While he appears indifferent on the surface, he secretly contacts Guo Ziyi for

assistance. Although this event is not recorded in historical accounts, this portrayal of Gao Shi's character in the film answers the longstanding debate about whether he attempted to rescue Li Bai. Finally, Gao Shi embarks on a journey across the land with the collection of "River and Mountain Immortals," ultimately achieving the highest ideal of literati: success followed by retirement.

4. Evoking Literary Sentiment through Imagery Combinations

Interpreting and analyzing the imagery in films are crucial aspects of film aesthetics research. Gu Chunfang suggests incorporating methods and concepts from the study of imagery interpretation into the research of film aesthetics, establishing methods for imagery generation, recognition, comprehension, and interpretation (Gu, 2022). Yang Yi presents three principles for the use of imagery (Yang, 2019): firstly, imagery should possess distinctive and vivid characteristics while naturally pointing to implicit meanings, avoiding blandness and obscurity. Secondly, imagery should be repeatedly emphasized at narrative junctures, serving as a link. Thirdly, imagery's juxtaposition with contrasting elements should convey a sense of reversal and turbulence, penetrating societal facades and life's tragedies through multiple refractions. In *Chang An* the use of imagery and imagery combinations illustrates the grand perspective and broad-mindedness of Chinese literati, who are willing to make pacts with the heavens and empathize with all living things. This imagery contains a juxtaposition and impulse regarding life and ideals, revealing the unique sentiments and openness of Chinese literati. *Chang An* masterfully employs visual metaphors and motifs that resonate with the audience on a deeper level. The film's imagery is not merely decorative; it is integral to the narrative, reflecting the poets' inner turmoil and their response to the world around them. The film's aesthetic choices, such as the use of color, lighting, and composition, are deliberately crafted to evoke specific emotions and to enhance the storytelling. These visual elements work in concert with the narrative to create a rich, immersive experience that transports viewers to the heart of the Tang Dynasty. The result is a film that is not only a feast for the eyes but also a profound meditation on the human condition, as seen through the lives of the Chinese literati. *Chang An*'s imagery is a testament to the power of visual storytelling and its ability to convey complex themes and emotions with elegance and sophistication.

Firstly, a total of 48 Tang poems were selected as a group of poetic imagery, forming a dynamic chart of excellent Tang poetry. In this chart, every poem is cherished and appreciated, playing a significant role in shaping the characters of literati. These 48 poems are authored by 20 poets, with Li Bai contributing 21 representative poems. Gao Shi's poems include five famous pieces: "Farewell to Dong Da," "In the Song Dynasty," "Song of Yan," "Farewell to Liu Dajiaoshu," and "Farewell to Wei Canjun." Other famous poems in the chart are from renowned poets such as Wang Wei, Wang Changling, Du Fu, and Cen Can. Taking Gao Shi as an example, the *Old Book of Tang* records, "When Gao Shi passed the age of fifty, he began to pay attention to poetry. Within a few years, his physical appearance gradually changed, and his temperament grew elevated. After composing each poem, he was praised by admirers" (Shen, 2002). Although there are not many poems attributed to Gao Shi in the film, they hold significant meaning in shaping his character and image. In one scene, Gao Shi, at the age of thirty, recites, "Don't worry that the road ahead lacks kindred spirits, who in the world does not recognize you?" This simple and hearty farewell poem reveals the unadorned and straightforward nature of the young Gao Shi. When Li Bai visits Liangyuan and engages in a moonlit conversation with Gao Shi, he cannot help but praise the beauty in Gao Shi's heart with the words, "Amidst lonely autumn grass, the

sorrowful wind blows a thousand miles." On the occasion of Gao Shi's military service in Jizhou, although he fails to find the Khitan main force and receives orders to return to his base, he observes celebrations and revelry in his tent. Helplessly, he writes the famous lines on a wooden tablet, "Before the soldiers, life and death hang in the balance; Amidst beautiful women, songs and dances continue." Years later, Li Bai has risen to fame in Chang'an, and Gao Shi receives an invitation to visit him. On his way to Li Bai's residence, he encounters Du Fu, who exclaims, "The pure wind has traveled thousands of miles, and a traveler returns by the river." These verses naturally present Gao Shi's life experiences and the process of character development, securing the contours of his character like a lock.

Secondly, using the imagery of the Roc bird, the film showcases the ultimate aspirations and yearnings of Chinese literati, represented by Li Bai, for the path of fame and the way of retreat. In his youth, Li Bai studied comprehensive strategy under Zhao Rui, which emphasized an all-encompassing view and valued strategic planning, with the goal of becoming an imperial military advisor and achieving unprecedented greatness (Lei, 2022). The film begins with a great Roc bird, capturing the panoramic view of Yunshan City from the bird's perspective. This imagery is presented again when Gao Shi is struck down by enemy soldiers, portraying the scene as the "Roc Soaring in the Sun." Subsequently, various images of the Roc bird and celestial cranes appear throughout the film. When Li Bai and Gao Shi first meet, Li Bai demonstrates his bird-calling technique, creating a scene of "Celestial Cranes Accompanying an Immortal." At this moment, Li Bai expresses his life's ideal, aspiring to be like the great Roc bird, soaring to achieve fame before ultimately retreating to seek Dao. Therefore, the Roc bird becomes an externalization of Li Bai's spiritual persona, symbolizing the freedom to roam between heaven and earth. It also represents the gallant strategist who is unyielding in the face of adversity. Just as Li Bai recites "Bringing in the Wine" and enters a boundless imaginative state, the flock of birds at this moment embodies Chinese literati. They are extraordinary, soaring directly upwards, and using their fluttering wings to realize ideals and ambitions through their talents, transcending the past and present, and spanning the three realms. They compose a magnificent and romantic anthem of heroism among Chinese literati, outlining a grand blueprint for Chinese literary heroism. Near the end of the film, after being pardoned, Li Bai recites poetry while being accompanied by a group of birds. He paddles a small boat towards the moon, once again summoning the birds. With the company of the birds, he sails towards his final destination as the "Exiled Immortal."

Finally, by juxtaposing contrasting images, the film conveys the literati's sentiments, allowing for an infinite perception of the characters within the constraints of limited visuals. The use of imagery is not a case of "the more, the better." It emphasizes moderation and naturalness, with the aim of condensing meaning and spiritual essence. Simultaneously, it should establish connections, permeate the narrative structure, and maintain aesthetic significance, resulting in an effect that is thought-provoking and leaves a lasting impression. In the film, the image of the moon reflected in a cup appears twice. In Buddhism, the metaphor of the moon reflected in water is often used to describe unreality: "The Bodhisattva knows that the nature of phenomena is like a mirage, like an illusion, like a heat wave, like a horse's hoofprint in water, like a bubble, like a dream, like lightning, like a cloud—everything is like this" (Tang, 2014). This imagery symbolizes the perplexity and helplessness that young Li Bai and Gao Shi feel when discussing life, as if their reflections are captured in the round moon within the teacup, unable to escape the fate of being obliterated by the ripples caused by a gentle breeze. Another example is after An Lushan's rebellion, witnessing the sudden downfall of the prosperous Chang'an city, with its palaces and temples engulfed in flames, and the people fleeing in panic. However, amidst this chaos, a dancing courtesan gracefully dances on the flying eaves, evoking a stark contrast. This stark

contrast arouses a desire in the viewer to save the country and the people. Gao Shi, following Ge Shuhan, witnesses the reality that whether they exit or not, the outcome of the Battle of Shibaocheng is certain defeat. This sets the stage for his later strategic defense of Yunshan City.

5. Conclusion

Chang An, as the pioneering installment in the New Culture series, boldly endeavors to sculpt the archetypal image of the classical Chinese literati, capturing the essence of the era's cultural and intellectual vibrancy. Through its narrative, the work paints a vivid tapestry of the illustrious poets of the Tang Dynasty, skillfully blending their unwavering loyalty to the imperial court with their profound love for their homeland. This intricate interplay between personal and national narratives is encapsulated in the powerful assertion: "As long as there is poetry, Chang'an will endure," symbolizing the enduring spirit of the poets and the city they called home. In its portrayal, Chang An mirrors Aristotle's timeless wisdom in "Poetics," where he posits that the poet's role transcends mere documentation; it is to envision the potential, to capture not just the events that have occurred, but those that could unfold (Aristotle, 2022). This perspective is echoed in the work's approach to its subjects, as it delves into the poets' lives, exploring their growth and development against the backdrop of a nation's fortunes.

The narrative structure of Chang An is designed to maximize the impact of its poet-protagonists, employing a binary narrative technique that allows for a deep exploration of their journeys. This method not only provides a rich historical context but also offers a psychological examination of the poets' inner worlds. The result is a multi-dimensional portrayal that brings to life the complexities and nuances of the literati's character, their struggles, and their triumphs. By achieving this, Chang An not only offers a fresh interpretation of the Chinese literati's persona but also pioneers a new approach to character and image construction in the realm of historical and cultural narratives. It stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of poetry and the poets' role in shaping the collective memory and identity of a nation. In essence, Chang An is more than a historical reenactment; it is a celebration of the enduring spirit of poetry and the poets who, through their words, continue to inspire and influence the world long after their time.

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