

Identity, Space and History: Entrepreneur Narratives and Spatial-Temporal Metaphors in the Reform and opening-up TV Dramas

Bo Wang^{1,*}, Haoran Gao²

¹ Chongqing University of Technology, Hongguang Avenue, Chongqing, China

² Department of Marxism, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

* Corresponding author

Abstract: In recent years, a number of Reform and opening-up TV dramas set against the backdrop of China's reform and opening up have emerged on television screens. Featuring entrepreneurs as their primary narrative subjects, these dramas depict the historical chapter of reform and opening up by reconstructing the people's innovative and entrepreneurial practices in the economic sphere. This trend not only responds to the new era literary and artistic requirement to "Tell China's stories well," but also provides the audience with an immersive thematic education. Taking this type of work as its research object, this paper analyzes its narrative strategies along three dimensions: the construction and identification of entrepreneurial identity, the construction of real and symbolic spaces, and the historiography of reform and opening up.

Keywords: reform and opening-up TV dramas, entrepreneurial identity construction, spatial narrative, historical writing

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening-up, China has achieved historic accomplishments in the economic field. With the artistic requirement of "Tell China's stories well" being put forward, artists have focused their attention on this historical chapter. How to comprehensively write the historical context of the past four decades, panoramically depict the reform scenes in urban and rural areas, and vividly portray the images of the people of the times has become a creative challenge. In recent years, TV dramas such as *Like a Flowing River*, *The Land of Hope*, and *The Swimsuit Saga* have comprehensively and thoroughly narrated the development of enterprises in rural and urban areas during the era. "As a typical form of realistic TV dramas, reform-themed TV dramas, with their visual expression system, vividly and graphically represent the poetic trajectory of people's spiritual refinement during the period of century transformation and have become the visual writing of 'Chinese modernity'." [1]

2. Subject: The Construction of Entrepreneurs' Images and the Narration of Their Growth

In previous era-themed dramas, the entrepreneur identity was just one of many labels attached to the characters. The reasons for their entrepreneurship and how they overcame difficulties were not elaborated upon, and the entrepreneurial spirit and character were hard to distinguish. In recent years, Reform and opening-up TV dramas have placed greater emphasis on the protagonist's identity as an entrepreneur. By placing the protagonist in crisis situations, these dramas vividly depict his or her entrepreneurial character traits, thereby accomplishing the construction of that identity. Through the staged presentation of predicaments, the protagonist's growth trajectory is delineated, enabling the transformation from a startup founder to a mature entrepreneur. Ultimately, the narrative subject is endowed with an entrepreneurial spirit that transcends the personal, completing the identification of the protagonist's identity.

2.1 The Characters in the Text: The Construction of Entrepreneur Identity

"A character is the person who takes actions in the narrative." [2] Only when the enterprise narrative serves as the core narrative thread of reform and opening-up TV dramas, and the characters' fates are linked to the fate of the enterprise, can the audience perceive the characters in the text through the narrative. Besides the verification of the narrative thread, the construction of entrepreneurial identity also requires the shaping of the character's personality, which is the key factor to upgrade the character from a flat and generalized "entrepreneur" label to a vivid and three-dimensional entrepreneurial image. In recent years, reform-themed TV series have highlighted the entrepreneur identity of the characters through the narrative construction of crisis situations. Here, the crisis situation refers to the critical moment when the enterprise is facing a survival crisis and the subject must make a decision within a very short time. It is precisely at such critical moments that the

character's identity as an entrepreneur stands out from numerous social role labels. In *The Land of Hope*, when the factory is on the verge of bankruptcy, Chen Ma, against all odds, promotes employee shareholding.

2.2 The Growing Individual: The Entrepreneur's Life Trajectory

"Personal history is the history of an individual's growth, the path an individual has walked." [3] It clarifies the dimension of personal history writing—that is, the process of the subject overcoming numerous obstacles and striving towards a set goal. Reform-themed TV series outline the personal growth history of characters from start-up founders to mature entrepreneurs through the phased escalation of difficulties. Because the phased escalation of difficulties not only marks a leap in the character's abilities but also indicates the expansion of the character's vision. In *The Land of Hope*, the New Star Electronics Factory faces two technical crises successively: the first time, Chen Ma, due to lack of experience, blindly expands, leading the factory into difficulty; the second time, he learns strategic judgement from failure and makes more cautious and long-term decisions when facing the technical bottleneck of liquid crystal technology. In *The Swimsuit Saga*, Jinxi Peng difficulties escalate continuously, from initial blocked sales channels to the technical bottleneck of industrial upgrading. Each escalation of difficulty announces that the character's growth has entered a new stage. When the audience looks back at the entire trajectory, they see the growth history of an entrepreneur.

2.3 A Microcosm of the Times: The Endowment of Entrepreneurial Spirit

"A symbol is what humans create and then conventionally use to refer to, identify, or represent the existence of a certain object." [4] Reform-themed TV dramas precisely utilize this symbolic representation technique to link the characters in the drama with the images of reformers in history. For instance, in *Like a Flowing River*, the individual entrepreneur Xun Yang represents the group image of entrepreneurs in the individual economy; in *The Land of Hope*, factory director Chen Ma represents the group image of entrepreneurs in the mixed-ownership economy. This connection requires the appeal of the character's spirit, because the character's spirit can evoke the audience's empathy, awaken collective memory, bridge the gap between the text and the audience's self-awareness, and thus link with the group of people who share similar traits with the characters in the drama, completing the identity recognition of the subjects. The subjects in the drama have different identities, missions, and personalities, but what they share is a common spiritual quality.

3. Space and Time: Spatial Construction and Historical Narration

Space serves as both the arena for characters' actions and the medium for expressing emotions and ideas. Reform-themed TV dramas construct multi-dimensional spaces to provide a stage for entrepreneurs to showcase their economic talents, ultimately aiming to write the history of the reform and opening-up era. These dramas present three levels in the dimension of space and time: the juxtaposition of urban and rural enterprises in real space; the symbolic representation of land and sea in imagery space; and the ups and downs of individuals' fates within these spaces.

3.1 Narrative Space of Enterprises: The Juxtaposition of Rural and Urban Areas

Reform-themed TV dramas focus on urban and rural enterprises against the backdrop of the reform and opening-up era, creating two distinct enterprise spaces. Works such as *Blossoms Shanghai*, *Wild Bloom*, and *The Swimsuit Saga* start with the development of urban enterprises and take the opportunities and struggles of characters in the city as the entry point. Their spatial and narrative lines are single, and the story rhythm is intense, but they cannot present a panoramic view of the historical slice of the reform and opening-up. In contrast, *The Land of Hope* and *Like a Flowing River* adopt a narrative strategy of subject juxtaposition. Subject juxtaposition refers to 'all the stories or plot lines that constitute the text are developed around a definite subject or concept, and there is no specific causal relationship or clear temporal sequence among these stories or plot lines.' They are listed or juxtaposed together merely because they all illustrate the same subject or concept." [5] This subject-juxtaposition narrative strategy can provide a panoramic account of the modernization process of rural and urban areas during the reform and opening-up era.

3.2 Imagery Narrative Space: The Symbolism of Land and Sea

In recent years, reform-themed TV dramas have constructed two imagery spaces through land and sea, either as transitions between scenes or as links between imagery and characters' emotional fluctuations. When land and sea exist as imagery spaces, on the one hand, they symbolize the direction and path of entrepreneurship and enterprise innovation. Land provides a way of survival for inland people; the sea offers vast opportunities for coastal people. In *The Swimsuit Saga*, Jinxi Peng, born by the sea, starts a swimwear business and, with the gifts of the sea, embarks on a path of urban modernization reform. On the other hand, land and sea symbolize thematic connotations: land is heavy and deep, nurturing hope; the sea is open and inclusive, harboring opportunities. On the land that provides a way of survival, the seeds of hope buried deep in the land

metaphorically represent the hope and future of rural reform. In the sea that holds infinite opportunities, the infinite possibilities it contains metaphorically represent the opportunities and risks in urban reform and development.

3.3 Narrative Dimension of the Era: History Unfolding in Space

Reform-themed TV dramas do not directly narrate history but present the time scale through the fate of characters in the transformation of space. In the space of urban and rural enterprises, the vicissitudes of entrepreneurs' fates constitute a yardstick for measuring the process of reform and opening-up. In *Wild Bloom*, Banxia Xu rise and fall in the steel market resonates with the wave of China's infrastructure construction. The characters' shuttling between land and sea is precisely a historical metaphor for China's reform and opening-up from rural reform to urban take-off and from closure to openness. Like *a Flowing River* and *The Land of Hope* both take historical nodes such as the "rusticated youth" going to the countryside and the restoration of the college entrance examination as their narrative starting points. In the dramas, Yunhui Song tills the land and then moves toward a broader world; Chen Ma breaks free from the constraints of the land and seeks development opportunities in the context of the sea. It is precisely through the multi-dimensional narrative spaces constructed by enterprise space and imagery space that these works can complete a full and panoramic writing of the history of reform and opening-up within the limited duration of TV dramas, allowing the audience to see the grandeur of the times in the fates of individuals.

Reform and opening-up themed TV series feature entrepreneurs as their main narrative subjects. Through narrative strategies such as identity construction, growth narration, and spirit endowment, they have created three-dimensional and vivid images of entrepreneurs. In terms of temporal and spatial dimensions, by juxtaposing urban and rural enterprises, symbolizing land and sea, and projecting individual destinies in historical space, they have achieved a panoramic and full-process writing of the reform and opening-up process.

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