

Original Paper

Non-Existent “Liuchuan”—Review of “The Long Confession”

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Abstract

Following the two works “A Quiet Dream” (2016) and “Fukuoka” (2019), Director Zhang Lu once again interpreted a new “three-person” story in “The Long Confession” (2021). This article, based on Foucault’s “heterotopia” theory, analyzes Director Zhang Lu’s work from three dimensions: “the cross regional nature of fragmented memory, the fluidity of emotional rivers, and the polysemy of character language.” The aim is to observe and explore the director’s profound thinking on memory, emotions, language, and image itself, as well as the complexity, variability, and captivating beauty of human emotions.

Keywords

memory, emotion, language, image itself

1. The Cross Regional Nature of Fragmented Memory

Foucault elaborated on his proposed “heterotopia” as “alternative spaces”: “These actual utopians are real places outside of places-gardens, cemeteries, shelters, opportunities, prisons, clubs, big villages... I dream of creating a science about these mysterious, controversial, and extraordinary spaces that we live in, called heterotopias”, Director Zhang Lu used light and shadow as a medium, using reality as a basis, Transplanting the dreamy memories of past years into seemingly trivial life, portraying for the audience a “heterotopia” in his heart (also in the protagonist’s heart), that is, the “transregional nature of memory”. The director’s skillful and effortless use of film narrative techniques is evident in both dreamlike and close to the eye.

At 13’21 into the film, against the backdrop of a spacious and well-arranged room, the iconic subtitle “Directed by Zhang Lu” appears on the screen. At this moment, a man walks out from the background of the inner room, and his brother enters the foreground from the left, starting a conversation. This is Zhang Lu’s consistent narrative style, using the search/resolution of an inner dilemma as a reason to embark on a journey of life or memory roaming. The narrative structure of “The Long Confession” is

based on the pursuit of a woman named A'chuan (played by Ni Ni) who suddenly disappeared from their lives by two brothers, Lichun (played by Xin Baiqing) and Lidong (played by Zhang Luyi). Years ago, this woman named "Liuchuan" had left without saying goodbye, disappearing from the lives of the two brothers, and both of them have unresolved guilt and affection towards A'chuan.

Although the two men are brothers, they are very different in personality from a visual perspective. Besides the "dead fish eyes" that younger brother Lidong described about Lichun, it seems to be the only similarity between the two men. Based on their age and experience, it seems that only exhaustion and weariness from life are left in their eyes. When Lidong learned that he was seriously ill and didn't have much time left, he invited his brother to travel together to uncover the scars of their memories. From Houhai in Beijing to Yanagawa in Japan, the mysterious woman they encountered linked not only a love story with no result, but also a youthful memory of them, a misunderstanding and a chance for communication between the two brothers, and a memory dialogue triggered by geographical mobility. The scene moved from Beijing to Liuchuan and then back to Beijing, memories slowly stripped away. People's actions constantly outline the past amidst the alternating scenery and changing environment, also constantly crossing back into memory from the present moment. To some extent, they are all nostalgic for a certain stage of the past, so they cannot let it go. In the unfamiliar atmosphere of a foreign land, seeing familiar people is like entering a "heterotopia" of memory. Foucault described his "heterotopia" as "alternative space": "These utopias of actual existence are real places outside the place—gardens, cemeteries, shelters, opportunities, prisons, clubs, large villages... I dream of creating a science about these mysterious, controversial, and extraordinary spaces we live in, calling it heterotopia." Unlike utopia, which relies on imagination to exist, heterotopia itself is an escape from existing order in time and space. In Yanagawa, it seems that the beginning of spring has truly entered this space beyond life, and in the midst of recalling old memories in winter, he created new memories of his own.

2. The Flowability of Emotional Undercurrents

Returning to the title of this film, "The Long Confession", also known as "Yanagam". Yanagam is a place name and also a person's name in Chinese "Liu Chuan", the object of confession, but in a broader sense, it can actually be a virtual reference. Because this is destined to be a confession without a specific goal, it is a statement and confession related to love, family, and personal emotions. Each of the person in the film has their own confusion, but they throw the same confusion to the audience: what is the pursuit of a person's life? Is it regret for misunderstanding, compensation for mistakes, curiosity about unknown possibilities, or the pursuit of romance?

There were many references to the love story between Yoko Ono and John Lennon in the film, as a metaphor to describe the unspeakable emotional flow between the characters. When Lidong and Lichun first came to the bar where A'chuan was singing, he immersed himself in singing "Oh My Love" and elegantly held a glass of wine in front of the two brothers, starting the three of them on a walk where

ambiguous emotions began to flow on the streets. When A'chuan and Lichun sat chatting on chairs outside a small shop, Lidong rode Chuan's bicycle in front of them wandering, not far away and not close, observing from a distance without getting too close. Soon, a more dramatic scene unfolded, and the relationship between the three turned into an interaction between four people. The owner of the inn who was waiting for A'chuan and his party to arrive at the shop was an English friend who introduced A'chuan to Yanagawa, Japan. Lidong, who also wanted to be alone with A'chuan, always maintained a polite distance when he finally met him, pulling one corner of the polygon to try to balance its shape.

In this constantly changing polygon, several men have confessed their love to A'chuan's character. The female character played by A'chuan is like a point, extending one branch after another, spreading out a network of interpersonal relationships. However, this point cannot be close to just one line, because this origin has become a symbol, a sign, an intangible object of confession.

The film reaches an emotional climax in a hallway scene with three people. A'chuan suddenly runs forward, reminiscent of a classic scene from the 1960s François Truffaut film "Jules et Jim" that captivated Jules et Jim's Catherine. In that moment, the three forget all immorality and unpleasantness. In this tribute, director Zhang Lu's "three-person" story reaches its peak. In the long passage of time, it is unclear whom they are trying to confess to, and because this confession will never have an answer or result, it becomes prolonged.

3. The Polysemy of Character Language

It is impossible to separate Zhang Lu's directorial work from his Korean identity and filming experience. In addition to his tolerance and exploration of different regional cultures, he also attempts to break the limitations of language through film. In "The Long Confession", he dissolves and erases the differences between different languages, and amplifies the ambiguity and multiple meanings of words. The most common occurrence is the simultaneous use of multiple languages by several characters during conversations.

When Lichun was in Japan and needed to communicate face-to-face with unfamiliar Japanese people, he had to rely on Lichun to translate. The two brothers had completely different personalities when chatting with others, with Lichun always seeming to want to compare himself with his younger brother in terms of appearance and masculinity. Even when chatting with the bar auntie, he enthusiastically asked such questions. Lichun couldn't help but secretly compare himself to his brother in his heart, because when facing A'chuan, his brother was his biggest "competitor". The true feelings of the two brothers were revealed through the words of others, adding another layer of ambiguity to the translation.

When facing another innkeeper who also likes A'chuan, several people sat together and spoke in Chinese and switched to Japanese, with English mixed in the conversation. The indirect language pattern made the understanding between people more reliant on things beyond language. Even in just a few words, A'chuan's mysterious feeling became even stronger. In addition, the film also highlights the

ineffectiveness of everyday language by borrowing from literary and musical language, emphasizing the functionality of the “third language”. Just like when Korean tourists sing Korean songs while riding a boat, they are strangers in a foreign land, but warmth and longing can still be felt in their songs.

In order to find A’chuan in Japan, Laidong secretly learned Japanese several years in advance, and hid his admiration for A’chuan in his words and deeds. During the spring equinox, he always joked about irrelevant matters related to men and women. When expressing love or other non-verbal conversations in another language (not the mother tongue of daily communication), it seems easier to say and adds more infectivity, which is the ambiguity and ambiguity of language. Just as Kazuo Ishiguro’s literary works may not convey their artistic charm 100% through translations into other languages, using different or the same language may not necessarily lead to mutual understanding among humans. Silence may also be a way to reach each other. The languages of multiple countries, the reproduction of multiple images, and the overlapping of multiple emotions are destined to dissipate this long confession, along with the death of Lidong, in a nonexistent “Yanagawa”.

I’m afraid she’ll never be happy here on earth. She’s an apparition, not a woman for one man.

—“Jules et Jim” (1962)

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