

Spatial narrative and the multidimensional innovation of *Records of the Grand Historian*

Chunyu Zhang

School of Liberal Arts, Nanjing Xiaozhuang University, Nanjing, China

23010134@njxzc.edu.cn

Abstract. This paper aims to explore spatial narrative in the *Records of the Grand Historian* using spatial narrative theory, thereby further studying the multidimensionality and groundbreaking nature of its narrative. Spatial narrative theory originated in the West and is a major theory in the study of novels. This paper applies this theory to the study of the *Records of the Grand Historian* because its writing style is highly vivid, reminiscent of a novel, and the phrase "The Grand Historian said" also exhibits the characteristic of narrator intervention found in novels. Although the *Records of the Grand Historian* is not a fictional text, its literary quality is exceptionally outstanding compared to other previous historical works. Furthermore, the *Records of the Grand Historian* also breaks through linear time and focuses on spatial narrative. Therefore, this paper uses textual research and case study methods to study the spatial narrative in the *Records of the Grand Historian*. Drawing on the concept of spatial narrative proposed by Chinese scholars and the spatial narrative theories of Foucault and Lefebvre in Western literary theory, this paper explores both the macroscopic spatial narrative in the *Records of the Grand Historian* and the microscopic spatial narrative in specific chapters of the *Records of the Grand Historian*. Ultimately, it was concluded that the *Records of the Grand Historian* is a historical work that transcends the fluidity of time, and is also an extremely exquisite work that combines documentary and literary qualities in terms of spatial narrative.

Keywords: spatial narrative, *Records of the Grand Historian*, representational space, heterotopia

1. Introduction

As China's first comprehensive history written in the biographical style, the *Records of the Grand Historian* is not only a milestone in the genre of Chinese historical writing, but also stands out in its narrative approach, exerting a profound influence on later generations. Previous historical works, such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, presented history in a linear chronological order as annalistic histories; while works like the *Discourses of the States* and the *Strategies of the Warring States*, as histories organized by state, used the establishment of different state regimes as their criterion for dividing history. However, the *Records of the Grand Historian* takes the identity and status of historical figures as the theme of each chapter, writing this monumental historical work in the form of biographies. This not only breaks the previous rule of annalistic history books writing history linearly according to time, but also breaks the tradition of national history books dividing history drastically according to different national regimes. Because the *Records of the Grand*

Historian, as a biographical history, is flexible and diverse in its temporal narrative, current scholarly research on its narrative primarily focuses on its temporal aspects. However, as a historical work, the *Records of the Grand Historian* also possesses multidimensionality and groundbreaking spatial narratives.

At present, Yang Huajian's *A Study on Spatial Narrative* in the *Records of the Grand Historian* systematically and comprehensively discusses the explicit and implicit spaces constructed in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, focusing on the geographical space of the *Records of the Grand Historian*. It has pioneered a discussion on the spatial narrative existing in the *Records of the Grand Historian* [1]. However, there are relatively few domestic works on the spatial narrative of the *Records of the Grand Historian*. There are only works that explore the temporal narrative of the *Records of the Grand Historian* and study the spatial narrative, such as Long Diyong's *Spatial Narratology*. Furthermore, there are few domestic academic papers that combine Western literary theory with the study of *Records of the Grand Historian*. Therefore, this paper will attempt to apply the theory of spatial narrative from Western literary theory to the study of the *Records of the Grand Historian* from the perspective of spatial narrative. This paper attempts to explore the spatial narrative in *Records of the Grand Historian* using Long Diyong's "theme-juxtaposition narrative" theory, Foucault's "heterotopia" theory, and Lefebvre's "representational space" theory, and to excavate the value and significance of the spatial narrative in the *Records of the Grand Historian*.

2. Theoretical explanation of spatial narrative

2.1. Western theoretical foundation

Spatial narrative theory is one of the Western theories applied to novel criticism. Because narrative has long been considered to possess temporal fluidity, theories of spatial narrative arose much later than narrative theory itself. Joseph Frank's commentary on the agricultural fair scene in *Madame Bovary* is considered the precursor to the development of spatial narrative theory. This scene illustrates, on a small scale, what I mean by the spatialization of form in the novel. In terms of the continuity of the scene, the flow of time in the narrative is at least terminated: attention is fixed within a limited time frame on the interaction of various connections. These connections are juxtaposed outside the narrative process, and the entire meaning of the scene is given only by the reactive connections between the various units of meaning [2]. Later, Michel Foucault discussed the connection between space and society in terms of "space, knowledge, and power" [3]. In his book *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre further integrated space and society: "Space contains multiple relationships, and any society, and thus any mode of production, will produce its own space" [4].

Besides the relationship between space and society, spatial theory also includes the traditional binary opposition spatial theory and the later developed ternary spatial theory. Edward Soja's book, *The Third Space*, explains the three major concepts of "material space", "social space" and "spiritual space" [5]. Similarly, Lefebvre's work *The Production of Space* also emphasizes the theory of the triadic dialectic of space. This mainly includes spatial practice, spatial representation, and representational space [3]. The introduction of this concept breaks through the previous simple binary opposition of space. In summary, spatial narrative is undoubtedly closely related to breaking the fluidity of time, social production, and spiritual construction.

2.2. Spatial narrative in the *Records of the Grand Historian*

In his book *Spatial Narratology*, Long Diyong proposed a narrative method: theme-juxtaposition narrative. Works under this narrative structure are "a structure similar to a 'story collection' that connects several narrative threads through a common 'theme'" [6]. This narrative is argued to be a spatial narrative in this book because "theme" and "place" are words with the same root and origin. "The 'place' also collects events,

experiences, history, and even language and thought. An event exists in a place, which is equivalent to existing in a framework of things" [6].

The entire *Records of the Grand Historian* can be considered a work of "thematic-juxtaposed narrative" constructed within the context of "heaven and earth". Firstly, the *Records of the Grand Historian* is a historical work categorized according to the historical figures' identities using sections such as *Annals*, *Hereditary Houses*, and *Biographies*. Each of these sections—*Annals*, *Hereditary Houses*, and *Biographies*—is itself a "theme". Within each theme, the narrative between chapters does not follow a linear, chronological flow. While some chapters overlap in timeline, their narrative focus is placed in different spaces. For example, in the *Annals of Xiang Yu* and *Annals of Emperor Gaozu*, the "Feast at Hongmen" is mentioned in both chapters. The feast begins with Cao Wushang revealing the secret to Xiang Yu and ends with Liu Bang's successful escape. Although both narrate the same event, the *Annals of Xiang Yu* emphasizes the banquet at Hongmen, while the *Annals of Emperor Gaozu* focuses more on the description of Liu Bang and others at Hangu Pass. The narration of the same event at the same time emphasizes different spatial locations, breaking through the limitations of a single temporal and spatial narrative.

The characters are the central theme of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, while heaven and earth serve as the "location" for the narrative thread. Sima Qian, in his *Letter to Ren An*, stated his purpose in writing the *Records of the Grand Historian*: "to investigate the relationship between heaven and humanity, to understand the changes of ancient and modern times, and to establish a unique perspective". His heartfelt words also highlight the "location" of the *Records of the Grand Historian*. The relationship between Heaven and Man" refers to the connections between human affairs and the world. Therefore, the *Records of the Grand Historian* places the theme of "human beings" within the context of "Heaven and Earth". From the perspective of the entire *Records of the Grand Historian*, Sima Qian's arrangement itself is a manifestation of spatial narrative. The entire book employs a "theme-juxtaposed narrative", which interweaves the narrative time and space of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, making the narrative thread less simplistic. The *Records of the Grand Historian's* vision spans heaven and earth, and ancient and modern times, representing a significant breakthrough compared to other previous historical works that simply followed a linear chronological narrative.

3. Specific spatial narrative analysis

3.1. "Heterotopia" in the *Records of the Grand Historian*

"Heterotopia" is an important concept in Foucault's spatial theory. Yang Shengping explained and analyzed Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" in his paper *Heterotopia and Space, Order — Foucault's Heterotopia Thought and Inspiration*. He mentioned that "heterotopia sometimes manifests as the heterotopia with utopian characteristics mentioned above. Foucault believed that they belong to extreme heterotopia. In his view, in such heterotopia, although people do not realize their ideals in real society, they can realize these ideals indirectly through illusion or compensation" [7].

This concept undoubtedly aligns with the Fengshan ceremony at Mount Tai recorded in the *Treatise on the Fengshan Ceremony of the Records of the Grand Historian*. This chapter of the *Treatise on the Fengshan Ceremony* details the purpose and importance of the imperial Fengshan ceremony. Since ancient times, every emperor has performed the Fengshan ceremony, which was considered a sign from Heaven and a tool to justify the ruler's imperial status. The Fengshan ceremony not only consolidated the imperial throne but also directly reflected the emperor's desire for auspicious omens. The text mentions that there were emperors who acted on their own without the arrival of auspicious omens, but there was never an emperor who saw

auspicious omens but did not go to Mount Tai to hold the Fengshan ceremony. It can be seen from this that Mount Tai, where the Fengshan ceremony was held, can be considered an "extreme heterotopia" here. Even if there were no auspicious omens during the emperor's reign, he could still achieve the ideal of national peace and prosperity by holding the Fengshan ceremony. Mount Tai is undoubtedly the carrier and medium for realizing this ideal [8].

Mount Tai, as the site of imperial sacrifices, embodies a response to auspicious omens. Emperors used this sacred ceremony to consolidate their thrones. Even if no auspicious signs appeared during their reign, they would still create the illusion of good fortune descending upon the land through the sacrifices. They used the absolute power of Heaven to compensate for the nation's misfortune, indirectly realizing their ideal of auspicious omens and further consolidating their rule.

3.2. Representational space in the *Records of the Grand Historian*

The concept of representational space originates from Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. Representational space is a rather special part of the triadic dialectic of space. They manifest themselves as various symbolisms, sometimes encoded and sometimes unencoded, related to the hidden or secret aspects of social life, and also related to art (art may ultimately be defined more as the code of representational space than the code of space) [4].

In his paper *Social Spatial Practice and Spatial Representation and Representation—An Interpretation of Lefebvre's Production of Space*, Zhang Yibing explains representational space. The space around people is not only the space of objective physical existence, but also the space of subjective perception and subjective meaning. Representational space is a space with subjective feelings and sensory meanings given by people. It emphasizes "my experience" [9]. Therefore, in summary, representational space is not merely a simple geographical space, but a comprehensive result of individuals within that space imbuing it with subjective emotional color. The construction of representational space requires the subject to subjectively and artistically shape the space. It possesses not only geographical significance but also symbolic meaning and an artistic expressive function.

Therefore, when exploring the representational spaces in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, we should focus on spaces with symbolic meaning. Looking at Chinese history, many officials, experiencing life's upheavals, would write poems and essays along their journeys, expressing their reflections on life. These poems and essays imbued many locations with artistic significance. Thus, the representational spaces in the *Records of the Grand Historian* are often inextricably linked to literary works. The Xiang River in the *Biography of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi* is a typical example:

The first half of *The Biographies of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi* recounts Qu Yuan's life experiences, while the second half focuses on Jia Yi. The key link between the two is the Xiang River, which Jia Yi crossed. When Jia Yi passed by the Xiang River, he thought of Qu Yuan, who, disheartened by the incompetent emperor and the rise of treacherous officials, drowned himself in the river. Emperor Wen of Han, also misled by slander, demoted Jia Yi. These similar life experiences created a cross-generational resonance between Jia Yi and Qu Yuan. Consequently, Jia Yi composed a poem in remembrance of Qu Yuan while crossing the Xiang River, expressing his lament of being born at the wrong time.

Qu Yuan was a patriotic poet of the Warring States period, and Jia Yi was a virtuous minister of the Western Han Dynasty. Sima Qian, however, chose to include them in a single biography. Connecting them is the Xiang River. Qu Yuan once wandered along the Miluo River, lamenting his life of persecution and unfulfilled ambitions. Later, Jia Yi, also exiled, passed by the Xiang River and experienced a spiritual resonance with Qu Yuan. The Xiang River is undoubtedly the "representative space" through which Jia Yi expressed his sorrow at

being born at the wrong time. Here, the Xiang River is imbued with the artistic code of unfulfilled ambitions by both Qu Yuan and Jia Yi. The narrative about the Xiang River here not only breaks the flow of time but also constructs a space symbolizing patriotism and being born at the wrong time.

In addition, there is also a "representational space" in the *Biographies of Assassins*: when Jing Ke embarked on his journey to assassinate the Qin emperor, the crown prince of Yan and his retainers all wore white to see him off. When they reached the Yi River, Gao Jianli played the zither, and Jing Ke sang along. The soldiers on the side couldn't help but shed tears and stepped forward to sing for him, "The wind is howling, the Yi River is cold, the brave warrior goes forth, never to return!" Jing Ke embarked on his tragic journey amidst the song [8]. The banks of the Yi River were the place where Jing Ke set off. This is actually a typical "representational space". Jing Ke's assassination attempt on the King of Qin was a desperate last stand for the State of Yan under the oppressive power of Qin. Furthermore, before the assassination, Fan Yuqi voluntarily offered his own head as a bargaining chip to gain the King of Qin's trust. Therefore, Jing Ke faced not only the threat of the King of Qin ahead, but also the expectations of the people of Yan behind him, and the price of Fan Yuqi's life. Success or destruction—it was either one or the other. When the soldiers sang "The wind howls, the Yi River is cold", the cold Yi River was not merely a natural product of the frigid weather, but also a subjective interpretation that Jing Ke, facing a perilous fate, imbued with its own imagery. The coldness of the Yi River is a psychological projection of Jing Ke's tragic heroism and resolute determination.

The construction of representational space in the *Records of the Grand Historian* not only allows historical figures to break through the limitations of time and be connected by space, but also makes the emotions and moods of the characters leap off the page, giving the *Records of the Grand Historian* a strong literary color and profound humanistic connotation. The existence of representational space reflects the literary nature of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, allowing the *Records of the Grand Historian* to release the emotional color of historical figures while recording historical facts. It is also a kind of poetic expression [10].

4. Conclusion

As the first comprehensive history of China written in the biographical style, *Records of the Grand Historian* combines factual and literary qualities. Its spatial narrative is evident not only in minute details but also on a macro level. This spatial narrative not only adds a spatial dimension to its narrative but is also a crucial factor in its literary expression.

This paper explores the spatial narrative in *Records of the Grand Historian* using the concepts of Foucault's "heterotopia" and Lefebvre's "representational space" from the perspective of "theme-juxtaposed narrative". It discovers the manifestation of spatial narrative in both the whole and the parts, and examines the connection between spatial narrative and its literary quality. However, this paper is limited to the manifestation of these three concepts in *Records of the Grand Historian*; the relationship between other spatial theories in Western literary theory and *Records of the Grand Historian* is not explored. Future research could include analyses of other theories within Lefebvre's triadic dialectic of space.

References

- [1] Yang, H.J. (2021) *A Study on Spatial Narrative in the Records of the Grand Historian*. Dissertation, Shaanxi University of Science and Technology.
- [2] Frank, J. (1991) *The Idea of Spatial Form*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- [3] Wang, Q. and Qin, S.Y. (2024) Narrative Analysis and Interpretation of Village and Town Public Space from the Perspective of Tripartite Space. *Urban Development Research*, (1), 31.

- [4] Levere, et al. (2025) *Bonding Layer and Process of Fabricating the Same in Semiconductor Devices*. Patent TW202510120(A).
- [5] Zheng, B.Q. (2016) Key Words in Western Literary Theory: Space. *Foreign Literature*, (1), 9.
- [6] Long, D.Y. (2008) *Spatial Narratology*. Dissertation, Shanghai Normal University.
- [7] Yang, S.P. (2023) Heterotopia and Space, Order: Foucault's Thought of Heterotopia and Its Inspiration. *Journal of Huazhong University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 37(4), 10–18.
- [8] Han, Z.Q. (2017) *Annotations on the Records of the Grand Historian*. Jiangxi: Jiangxi People's Publishing House.
- [9] Zhang, Y.B. (2025) Social Spatial Practice, Spatial Representation and Characterization: An Interpretation of Lefebvre's The Production of Space. *Journal of Wuhan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 78(3), 64–76.
- [10] Fan, Y.Q. (2025) *A Study on Shi Tiesheng's Spatial Poetics of the Temple of Heaven from the Perspective of Foucault's "Heterotopia"*.