

Article

The Central Dilemma and Meaning Reconstruction in Yi Zhou's Novel "*Liu Xiaodong*"

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Abstract: Yi Zhou's novel "*Liu Xiaodong*" presents the spiritual struggles of its characters against the backdrop of social change and everyday life, through various interpersonal relationships and living situations. Although the three stories are independent in plot, they are interconnected through character development, narrative perspective, and recurring themes such as searching and questioning. This article analyzes the contradictions and confusions experienced by the characters between ideals and reality, emotions and daily life, focusing on their romantic relationships, generational dynamics, and interactions between intellectuals and businessmen. It further examines how narrative techniques like searching and repetition reflect the characters' psychological states. Rather than merely enduring their realities, the characters engage in self-reflection through persistent inquiry toward others and introspection, ultimately arriving at a renewed understanding of their own circumstances and lives. "*Liu Xiaodong*" not only portrays the spiritual distress of contemporary individuals but also reveals their ongoing inner journey—adjusting to shifting value systems and seeking meaning in existence.

Keywords: Yi Zhou; "*Liu Xiaodong*"; subjectivity dilemma

1. Introduction

Yi Zhou's novel "*Liu Xiaodong*" consists of three novellas: "Depth-Waiting", "And Night Has Fallen", and "The End of All Roads". Although each story stands independently, they are interconnected through the recurring character "*Liu Xiaodong*", the first-person narrative perspective of "I", and narrative techniques such as searching and repetition. The characters in the novel largely find themselves under dual pressures from life experiences and real-world circumstances. They repeatedly confront confusion amid love, family bonds, intergenerational relationships, and the tension between ideals and reality, while also redefining themselves through interactions and conflicts with others. Thus, "*Liu Xiaodong*" does not merely depict the personal trials of a single individual, but rather captures the shifting spiritual states of individuals within the context of societal change [1-7].

Regarding this series of works, existing research has largely interpreted Yi Zhou's creations from perspectives such as historical context, character portrayal, and spiritual connotations. However, the internal connections among the three novellas in "*Liu Xiaodong*" still warrant further discussion. Particularly noteworthy is that the "I" in the narratives remains perpetually in a state of searching and questioning—seeking those who have departed, pursuing the truth behind events, or attempting to understand someone's death. While these searches appear to be directed outward toward others, they ultimately circle back to the self. At the same time, recurring details, language, and scenes throughout the novels imbue characters' real-life struggles with deeper, more complex psychological meanings. In this process, the characters' inquiries about others gradually transform into introspection, manifesting as experiences of guilt, self-reflection, and self-judgment.

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This article examines the formation and manifestation of individual spiritual distress in *"Liu Xiaodong"* from the perspectives of character relationships and their situational contexts, and analyzes how characters come to re-understand themselves amid real-life conflicts and psychological confusion through the novel's themes of pursuit and repetitive narration. It further explores the spiritual trajectory of the work as it moves from entrapment toward reflection.

2. Subjective Disorientation in Relational Disorder

From a narrative structure perspective, "searching" runs through the three novellas of *"Liu Xiaodong"* and becomes a crucial thread driving the development of each story. In "Depth-Waiting" "I" search for Moli husband and child who have run away from home; in "And Night Has Fallen" "I" seek compensation for Xu Guo following a car accident ten years earlier; and in "The End of All Roads", "I" investigate with Xing Zhiping's relatives and friends to uncover the reasons behind his suicide. All three novellas are narrated from "my" point of view, advancing the plot through my actions and dialogues with various characters. From both narrative motivation and process, the three novellas follow a fundamental pattern of "question-resolution": each story begins with an unresolved inquiry and unfolds gradually as the protagonist pursues answers.

The three novellas each tell independent stories, portraying over a dozen distinct characters. Examining the relationships among these characters reveals that while the novels present a relatively clear network of interpersonal connections, each relationship possesses its own unique characteristics, resulting in a complex overall structure. Most prominent are marital and romantic affairs centered on love. These relationships run through all three novellas and share a common trait: the absence of genuine affection and emotional confusion. Protagonists often find themselves loving more than one person at once. In "Depth-Waiting" Moli was the narrator's girlfriend during college; later she marries Zhou Youjian, the narrator's friend. Years afterward, she becomes involved with the middle-aged narrator and Guo, the company executive. Throughout this shifting era, the narrator serves both as a witness to and participant in Moli affections. Notably, "Back then, Moli was a girl who wore a cross on her chest, someone willing to accompany a passionate patient out of moral conviction. But in this age, she must balance being a manager with being loved". In "And Night Has Fallen" the narrator, suffering from depression, falls in love with Yang Fan, a divorced violin teacher. In "The End of All Roads", Ding Tong's relationships during university-particularly with Xing Zhiping and Yin Yu-are contrasted with Xing Zhiping's later affair with his former teacher Shang Ke, as well as Ding Tong's midlife infidelity with her past lover Yin Yu. The love relationships across the three novellas reflect clear shifts in social context. Emotional bonds no longer rest solely on singular, stable intimacy but become increasingly entangled with loneliness, desire, marriage, and real-life circumstances. As characters identities and life situations evolve, their romantic relationships grow more complicated. In youth, relationships are sustained by ideals, beliefs, and emotional identification; by middle age, however, individuals face multiple constraints imposed by life pressures, emotional needs, and practical interests. Once relatively simple intimate bonds gradually loosen. Characters yearn for emotional solace yet struggle to reestablish stable, meaningful connections. Love thus becomes a crucial lens through which the novels explore the protagonists' inner psychological struggles.

Secondly, another set of character relationships in the novel involves two generations navigating through changing times, where the older generation-represented by "we" as middle-aged individuals-often misinterprets the younger generation. In "Depth-Waiting" when "I" find Zhou Xiang, a runaway youth seeking revenge for his mother, I discuss with him whether turning fourteen would alter his legal consequences. I assume he will carry out his revenge before reaching that age, but to my shock, this boy openly and courageously embraces responsibility. In "And Night Has Fallen" I initially believe myself to be an agent of justice for Xu Guo, only to end up becoming an accomplice in her extortion scheme. Each individual in the novel inhabits their own world, interpreting

others from their unique perspectives. These relationships, though intimate, are subtly marked by estrangement; all assumptions seem inherently unpredictable. Amid such disordered connections, the self repeatedly confronts spiritual distress.

The relationship between intellectuals and businessmen is a crucial theme in the novels. Represented by the narrator "I," intellectuals often engage in direct or indirect confrontations with a businessman as the story unfolds and answers emerge-this dynamic also metaphorically reflects deeper collisions within societal development. In "Depth-Waiting" there's Mr. Guo; in "And Night Has Fallen" Chairman Song Lang; and in "The End of All Roads" the bookseller Xing Zhiping. Though these three characters appear in seemingly independent stories, comparing them through the lens of the intellectual-businessman relationship reveals a striking pattern. The businessman Mr. Guo in the first story has little connection to art, while Chairman Song Lang hosts an art exhibition within his company in the second, and the bookseller Xing Zhiping in the third is a fervent devotee of poetry. At the endings of their respective stories, the fates of these three businessmen differ significantly: Mr. Guo remains unscathed after facing revenge from the Zhou family, even turning Zhou Youjian into his subordinate; Song Lang voluntarily loses one million yuan when Xu Guo demands compensation for a car accident; and Xing Zhiping chooses suicide upon learning that his idol's poetry failed to enter literary history. Because of their varying degrees of engagement with art, the outcomes diverge, suggesting differing weights given to ideals versus reality in individual lives. Within this intellectual-businessman dyad, we easily discern a contrast between idealism and pragmatism. Unlike the previous two sets of relationships, the "we" formed by intellectuals and businessmen here exhibits greater internal distance among its members. Although Zhou Youjian ultimately becomes Mr. Guo's subordinate, although the narrator decides to become Song Lang's art director after uncovering the truth, and although everyone attends Xing Zhiping's farewell ceremony after his departure-seemingly indicating some form of reconciliation-from the narrator's perspective, throughout the unfolding narratives and pursuit of answers, the subjects caught in disordered relations endure conflict, confusion, and loss.

In "*Liu Xiaodong*" work, characters are constantly situated within an intricate and interwoven network of relationships. Each individual is a member of the collective "we," yet maintains their own distinct position. There exists an implicit boundary between the individual and the community-one that embeds each person within the relational structure of "we" while preserving an irreplaceable sense of difference. This boundary arises from the ongoing tension between love and interest, kinship and responsibility, idealism and reality. Individuals seek to realize their personal value through these interconnected and often conflicting relationships, simultaneously enduring the psychological struggles brought about by relational imbalances.

3. Seeking Individual Redemption through Meaning Reconstruction

Regarding the protagonists in "*Liu Xiaodong*", Yi Zhou once remarked that they possess a distinct spiritual trait-self-blame, self-reflection, and self-judgment. Rather than crudely attributing various complex problems to the times, they consciously extend empathy from themselves to others, beginning with individual efforts toward self-rescue. The joys and sorrows of individuals emerge on the screen of history; the characters in the novel must confront numerous factors arising from their era and reality. Against this intricate backdrop, the author reveals the loneliness and hesitation of the individual self. At the same time, however, the author explores and questions the fundamental nature of this inner self. Thus, the self portrayed here is not merely lost in solitude, but actively seeks redemption through introspection.

Continuity is a significant phenomenon in the narrative development of "*Liu Xiaodong*" primarily manifested in details, language, and settings. Narrative continuity in detail appears throughout the work-for instance, the author repeatedly uses the phrase "as if boneless" to describe the hands of Xu Guo, Yang Fan, and the mother in "And Night Has Fallen" and consistently employs "blue thin veil" to depict Xu Guo's eyes. Linguistic

continuity also frequently emerges in the novel; for example, in "Depth-Waiting" the narrator's voice is described over and over as "hoarse and coarse, like wind squeezed through sandpaper. Setting continuity is evident in "And Night Has Fallen" where the protagonist repeatedly stands on a concrete block taking photographs of an overpass. Regarding narrative repetition or recurrent narration, Genette defines it as "a frequency relation between narrative and story, a construction of thought." In the context of these novellas, this idea is interpreted as: "If you strictly repeat something meaningless, meaning might just emerge." Meaning seems absent in the lives of the protagonists across these three novellas-the narrator suffers from depression, surrounded by middle-aged individuals who are lonely and weary of confronting reality. All of them feel emptiness amid the constant pull between soul and reality, yet each seeks meaning through solitude and struggle. Concerning the narrator's repetitive act of photographing-deemed meaningless-a monologue reads: "I repeat this routine night after night. The concrete block serves as a reliable reference point; standing upon it ensures consistent shooting angles. I suppose I simply enjoy this sense of absolute certainty-it possesses a simple, stable quality." Through this behavior, the narrator resists the void of reality, confronting its absurdity and unpredictability. Within this pure and steady sense of absoluteness, he reconstructs a meaningful world, affirming individual existence and pulling himself out of the mire of depression.

In these three novellas, "I" am both the narrator and a participant-helping others escape their predicaments while simultaneously examining myself. Throughout the unfolding and resolution of each story, "I" oscillates between past and present, caught in constant questioning and inquiry. The final revelation leaves me with endless contemplation, as I seek redemption through self-reflection and self-judgment. In the closing scene of "Depth-Waiting", when an enemy becomes my subordinate and roars at me: "Xiaodong, the world has changed, do you know? The world has changed!" I feel that "from now on, there is no longer any room for stubbornness." If this moment merely reflects the shock and impact reality has delivered to me, then the endings of the other two stories reveal deeper individual introspection and self-judgment. For instance, in the final monologue of "And Night Has Fallen" I reflect: "Human desire is terrible-it can lead one to sleep with his son's violin teacher, allow one's own hand to take the blame, exploit another's inner vulnerabilities to orchestrate blackmail. Yet, at least everyone suffers from guilt, struggling desperately against inner shame with almost heart-breaking effort." At the end of the story, after the truth is revealed, I grasp the complexity of human nature and the corruption of desire. And yet, I write: "Dawn is near," rekindling hope within myself. Other characters too, in their moments of self-examination, search for redemption. When Xu Guo is involved in a car accident, I confront Song Lang, and his voice drops: "Alright, I'm guilty. It's true. I feel like a sinner... If a million yuan could clear my name today, I'd consider it God's grace." Similarly, Xu Guo's boyfriend finally confesses: "I killed him. Why did I tell her I wanted to go to Japan? Why did I mention Song Lang?" When individuals face spiritual shocks and irreparable pain, they turn inward, confronting themselves, seeking redemption through introspection and repentance-even if sometimes "they fail to achieve redemption, yet the mere emergence of such a desire becomes profoundly precious." In the final lines of "The End of All Roads": "For this world, when Xing Zhiping reaches the end of his path, he owes nothing. But I still owe a huge reckoning." This sense of debt born from self-examination unites past and future, carrying both my reflection on the past and my hope for change in the future.

In "Liu Xiaodong" work, all love and sorrow, joy and loneliness exist within the multitude of subjective perspectives between "I" and others. We find ourselves in situations of conflict with others, who become my "object-existence." Across the three stories, "I" becomes involved in events driven by motives such as searching for someone, collecting debts, or questioning the cause of death, observing events alongside the protagonists and exchanging views. In this process, different subjects form various communities; yet when individual emotional ideals clash with the changes of the times, "we" face rupture and loss. To transform the intersubjective state from one of oppositional

object-existence into an intimate community, lonely individuals seek redemption through reconstructing meaning and self-reflection.

Notably, the reestablishment of core meaning in "*Liu Xiaodong*" consistently occurs within human relationships. After experiencing loneliness, confusion, and self-reflection, the novel's characters must still confront others and affirm their own place through connections with them. Across the three stories, "I" repeatedly enters into others' lives, gradually recognizing the limitations of my own experiences. In the past, understanding others was often colored by one's own judgments; but as events unfold, the characters begin to realize that each individual faces complex life circumstances, and behind every choice lies a depth of reasons that cannot be easily summarized.

The protagonists in "*Liu Xiaodong*" exhibit distinct relational characteristics; they do not exist in isolation within reality, but rather gradually develop self-awareness through interactions, conflicts, and mutual understanding with others. The conflicts in the novel often arise from differences in experience and perspective among individuals-while people remain separated by insurmountable barriers at times, there is also the possibility of reestablishing connections through understanding. The characters' self-perception deepens precisely through these evolving relationships. The novel's portrayal of individual struggles ultimately points toward a renewed connection between people and the world. Existing life experiences and value judgments are challenged in new circumstances, compelling characters to adjust their positions within an ever-changing reality. This process involves both looking back on the past and exploring new ways of living. Thus, personal growth emerges as an ongoing, unfolding journey, during which individuals recognize their own limitations while gradually cultivating an open attitude toward others. The redemption of the protagonist in the novel carries relational significance, occurring through continuous dialogue between the individual and others, and between the individual and reality.

4. Conclusion

Through the portrayal of individual life experiences, "*Liu Xiaodong*" reveals the spiritual condition of people amid changing realities. The characters in the novel exist within complex networks of relationships, constantly adjusting their positions as they confront emotions, responsibilities, and practical choices. The work is not concerned with the outcomes of isolated events, but rather with how these events enter the inner world of individuals and influence their understanding of themselves and others. In this process, the characters gradually become aware of contradictions and shortcomings in their lived experiences, prompting them to reexamine the meaning of their own existence.

"*Liu Xiaodong*" consists of three independent yet interwoven novellas that collectively map the spiritual landscape of contemporary individuals amid shifting realities. Zhou Xiang's sense of responsibility at the threshold of fourteen years old reveals to "I" a fundamental misunderstanding of the younger generation; Song Lang's guilt emerging as he confronts his past; Xu Guo's hand, repeatedly described after a life-changing event-these detailed portrayals and explorations of meaning carry deep psychological symptoms within the characters. Repeated throughout, they form the novel's distinctive narrative rhythm.

The narrators in the three stories are always in search-seeking a missing teenager, uncovering the truth behind a car accident, or understanding why a suicide left. Yet each outward quest ultimately turns inward, confronting the self. This narrative structure itself suggests an important insight: understanding others is inseparable from examining oneself. Moli transformation-from a college student wearing a cross on her chest to a career woman navigating between business and emotion-condenses the fate of an entire generation amid shifting value systems. Xing Zhiping's journey from a devoted poet to taking his own life reveals the profound disillusionment that idealists may face when confronted with reality.

Yi Zhou does not simply place these characters under the broad narrative of an era for explanation; instead, he allows them to experience confusion, express hesitation,

engage in reflection, and even seek spiritual redemption through guilt within specific circumstances. The sense of indebtedness felt by the protagonists is not a sign of cowardly retreat, but rather the starting point for a new beginning. Through repetitive daily actions, the characters search for meaning; in broken relationships, they attempt to reestablish connections; and amid lost values, they persist in trying to understand themselves and others anew. For "*Liu Xiaodong*", the spiritual struggles endured by the characters do not mark an end, but rather become crucial opportunities for them to rediscover themselves and forge new bonds with the world. It is precisely through this ongoing confrontation with reality, self-reflection, and understanding of others that the characters gradually achieve self-redemption.

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