

# Symbiosis of Narrative Time, Space, and Plot: A Study on the Narrative Art of Xianxia Dramas

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**Abstract:** *As a genre integrating oriental fantasy characteristics and narrative tension, xianxia dramas construct a self-consistent narrative system through their narrative time and space, which is distinct from real-world cognition. Unlike realistic dramas that adhere to the linear flow of time and the physical properties of space, xianxia dramas not only establish the basic framework of the immortal world by reconstructing the temporal dimension and fabricating the spatial dimension but also transform time and space from mere background elements into narrative driving forces. Given the foundational and dynamic value of time and space in the plot narration of xianxia dramas, the following discussion will focus on the two key dimensions of "narrative time" and "narrative space" for a systematic exposition. By decomposing these two dimensions, the study aims to reveal the interactive relationship between time and space in xianxia narrative, as well as their joint support for the fantasy and cultural nature of xianxia narration, thereby deepening the understanding of the narrative logic of xianxia dramas.*

**Keywords:** Narrative Time; Narrative Space; Xianxia Dramas

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## 1. Introduction

Xianxia drama is a new type of ancient costume TV drama that has emerged, developed, and gained popularity in recent years. Tracing its origin, the term "xianxia" first appeared in the late Qing supernatural novel *Xianjian Wuhua Jian* (The Five-Flower Sword of Immortal Swordsmen). Set during the reign of Emperor Gaozong of the Song Dynasty, the story recounts the experience of ten sword immortals who, unwilling to witness the decline of chivalry, resolve to descend to the mortal world to accept disciples and impart the orthodox ways of swordsmanship and chivalry. Both its plot and thematic connotations foreshadow the core of modern xianxia dramas. However, it was not until the sensational debut of *Chinese Paladin* in 2005 that "xianxia" became a high-frequency term in trending topics and formed an independent narrative system. As mainland China's first TV drama themed around "xianxia", it popularized the term "xianxia drama", establishing it as a fixed designation (Wang, 2021, p. 133) and an emerging TV genre. Evolved from traditional Chinese martial arts dramas, this genre often incorporates a wealth of traditional Chinese cultural elements in its content and ideology, drawing from sources including but not limited to myths and legends, ancient classics, Taoist and Confucian thought. It integrates classical mythological elements into fictional immortal story systems, jointly depicting the transformative growth stories and

emotional experiences of immortality cultivators who undergo numerous hardships to achieve profound self-transcendence.

## 2. Core Narrative Plots of Xianxia Dramas

Xianxia dramas construct a world vastly different from reality through their unique plot structures. These plots have clear narrative functions, with all parts closely interconnected to form a complete story thread. Based on narrative logic and functions, they can be categorized into four types: "Destiny and Adventure", "Force Confrontation", "Mystery Investigation", and "Emotional Bonds". These four structures are not mutually independent but interweave to form a three-dimensional narrative framework for xianxia dramas.

"Destiny and Adventure" serves as a crucial driving force supporting the overall narrative, unfolding around the dual logic of "contingency" and "destiny". On the surface, it manifests as unexpected events in the mortal protagonist's life—such as Lingxi accidentally breaking into Youdu Mountain and encountering Jiuchen in *Love and Destiny*, or Chu Xuanji straying into the Shaoyang Secret Realm in *Love and Redemption*. Behind these accidental occurrences lies an inevitable narrative logic that necessarily propels a fundamental transformation in the protagonist's fate. "Destiny and Adventure" directly initiates the main story arc: it not only alters the protagonist's identity and circumstances but also triggers a series of unresolved suspense. Most subsequent plots—whether cultivation competitions after joining an immortal sect, involvement in immortal-demon conflicts, or the formation of emotional connections with other characters—can be traced back to this initial adventure. As the primary driving force of xianxia narratives, it uses initial suspense and narrative tension derived from the protagonist's improved fortunes to draw audiences into the fantasy world, with most subsequent content unfolding gradually from this starting point.

Centered on solving puzzles and revealing truths, "Mystery Investigation" integrates suspense and reasoning elements into a fantasy backdrop, unifying scattered plot fragments into a coherent narrative through logical clues. Secrets in xianxia dramas often feature a gap between surface phenomena and underlying truths, implying complex background information. For instance, the "Lover's Curse Mask" carried by Sifeng in *Love and Redemption* is initially just a "strange object covering his face"; its special functions are gradually uncovered as the plot progresses. Other props, such as the "Soul-Forming Lamp" in *Eternal Love: The Three Lives Three Worlds Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* and the "World-Shaking Jade" in *Till the End of the Moon*, also bear the function of decoding narrative clues. When these clues are finally revealed, audiences experience a stronger sense of sudden realization, having shared the characters' confusion. The narrative process of "Mystery Investigation" is phased, following a progressive logic: discovering clues, generating new questions, resolving partial issues, approaching the core truth. In *The Legend of Jinyan*, mysteries surrounding character identities and destinies are woven into the narrative through gradual puzzle-solving. The rhythm is flexibly adjusted via techniques like "clue interruption" or "new characters introducing new leads", striking a balance between tension and relaxation to avoid monotony.

"Force Confrontation" acts as the backbone supporting the grand narrative of xianxia dramas. Taking conflicts between different camps as its fulcrum, it not only expands the grandeur of the worldview but also constructs sustained external conflicts. Forces in the immortal world are not mere labels of good or evil; each camp operates with unique survival logic and rules. The confrontation between the "Immortal Sects" and the "Wen Clan" in *The Untamed* appears as a battle between good and evil on the surface, but in essence, it embodies the survival

principles of different sects: the Wen Clan seeks to unify the immortal world through force to monopolize resources and power, while the immortal sects' resistance, though justified in name, is rooted in fear of Wen Clan hegemony and a desire to protect their own interests. "Force Confrontation" establishes the core conflict of the plot, intertwining individual fates with the survival of the world. In *Love and Redemption*, the confrontation between the Shaoyang Sect and other immortal sects with Lize Palace evolves from prejudice against demons to a struggle for the "Juntian Cehai", and eventually to camp realignment upon discovering the Heavenly Realm as the mastermind. Each shift in the conflict shapes the characters' fates: Yu Sifeng, ostracized for his demon identity, goes from "proving demons are not evil" to "opposing the immortal sects to protect Xuanji", while Chu Xuanji learns to "make independent judgments" amid the conflict. This narrative of individuals being shaped by confrontation grounds the grand conflict in tangible human experiences.

"Emotional Bonds" are the core element beneath the fantasy veil of xianxia dramas. They integrate plot elements such as adventures, conflicts, and mysteries around the dimension of human nature and emotions, endowing the surreal narrative with resonance that aligns with audiences' emotional experiences. Its narrative scope extends beyond romance to form a network of emotions, including master-disciple affection, brotherhood, family attachment, and compassion for all living beings. In *The Untamed*, the confidant friendship between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji forms a hidden narrative thread, implied in details like the "Tianzi Xiao" wine Lan Wangji hides for Wei Wuxian and the rabbit lantern Wei Wuxian draws for Lan Wangji, rather than through explicit dialogue. This bond leads Lan Wangji to defy the immortal sects and Wei Wuxian to avoid harming Lan Wangji even as the "Yiling Laozu". The master-disciple romance in *The Journey of Flower* is marked by contradictions: Bai Zihua's restraint in "wanting to protect Hua Qianggu but daring not to admit it publicly" and Hua Qianggu's hesitation in "wanting to approach him but fearing to implicate him" drive the plot forward. "Emotional Bonds" cater to audiences' universal preference for emotional content, easily evoking resonance and thus becoming a focal point of creation. The plot structure revolves around these bonds: "Destiny and Adventure" fosters emotional connections, "Force Confrontation" tests their stability, and "Mystery Investigation" clarifies their past causes and effects. Ultimately, all narrative elements gain greater cohesion around the core of emotions.

Nowadays, narration is "no longer a genre concept mainly covering novels (both full-length and short), but a fundamental way for humans to understand the world, society, and individuals in practice" (Wu, 1990, p. 325). With the development of TV multimedia technologies, the form of TV dramas has become relatively mature, while retaining the narrative wisdom derived from literary novels. Its core has always centered on "stories": whether it is the down-to-earth daily trivialities or the time-transcending fantasy legends, they essentially connect scattered fragments into meaningful stories through narrative techniques.

The establishment and excellence of a story are inseparable from the support of narrative plots. As the backbone of a story, narrative plots endow the story with a progressive rhythm and narrative tension through the arrangement of the beginning, development, climax, and conclusion, as well as the integration of key elements. Narrative time and narrative space serve as the key pillars supporting the plot framework of fairy-tale fantasy dramas. The former outlines the timeline of the story, ensuring the logical coherence of multiple plot lines such as reincarnations spanning thousands of years and the cause-and-effect relationships in fairy-tale fantasy themes. The latter presents spatial meanings of different dimensions along with the development of the plot. Together, they constitute the driving force of narration and achieve the narrative depth of fairy-tale fantasy dramas.

### 3. The Function and Presentation of Narrative Time in Xianxia Narration

Within the framework of narratology, a distinction is made between "story time" and "discourse time". Gérard Genette first elaborated on the relationship between the two, arguing that "story time" refers to the chronological sequence of events as they occur in the story, while "discourse time" denotes the "pseudo-chronology" of events in the narration. On this basis, he proposed three key concepts: "order", "duration", and "frequency" (Genette, 1983, p. 35). Professors Shen Dan and Wang Liya (2010) further explained that "story time" refers to the actual time required for the described events to occur, while "discourse time" refers to the time used to narrate the events, whose duration is usually measured by the length of the text or the time required for reading. In traditional novel narration, to construct plots and reveal themes, novelists often manipulate and adjust time at the discourse level—for example, summarizing a long time span in a few words or describing a specific few seconds in detail over several pages. As an audio-visual medium different from novels, television dramas cannot directly present inner monologues but follow the narrative logic of "time serving meaning". Thus, camera shots and audio-visual language become the most direct tools to manipulate the sequence of time and present the meaning of the content. In the narrative art of xianxia dramas, "story time" usually refers to the natural development and actual passage of time in the fictional world, such as retreating to cultivate for a thousand years or sleeping for ten thousand years; "discourse time" generally refers to the length of the drama or the duration perceived by the audience to tell or display these events. Due to the characteristics of xianxia drama characters, their lifespans are generally extremely long, often measured in hundreds of years, thousands of years, or even ten thousand years. The growth, grievances, love-hate relationships, and cultivation breakthroughs of the protagonists often span an extremely long "story time". However, the actual length of television dramas, i.e., "discourse time", is limited, making it impossible to describe every day or every event in the fictional world at an "equal speed" with thousands of episodes. This inevitably leads to an imbalance between "story time" and "discourse time", and even a rearrangement of story events in terms of time. Genette used the term "anachrony" to refer to "all forms of disharmony between the order of story time and the order of narrative time" (Genette, 1990, p. 17). Such situations often occur in xianxia dramas, so they tend to focus on presenting key fragments, turning points, and emotional climaxes within the long "story time". Meanwhile, a large amount of long, relatively plain, or repetitive "story time", such as regular cultivation and long waits, is greatly compressed, merely summarized in a line of dialogue or completely omitted. This alternation between compressing long periods and amplifying short moments forms a rhythmic narrative pace, avoiding the monotony of linear narration. In fact, the manipulation of "story time" by "discourse time" is not a simple reproduction but endows the story with value beyond the events themselves through the "reorganization", "expansion", and "repetition" of time, which coincides with Genette's three core concepts of "order", "duration", and "frequency".

Among them, the breaking and reorganization of linear natural time through "order" is an important narrative technique constituting the narrative layers and reincarnation plots in xianxia dramas. Although film and television dramas often follow the linear time of real life—"past-present-future"—to meet the needs of the plot, they use "prolepsis" and "analepsis" to break the linear constraints of "story time" with "discourse time", making the presentation order of the story different from the actual occurrence order. Specifically, if the narrator predicts an event and its occurrence before it happens, it constitutes "prolepsis", which is described as "flash-forward" in traditional novel criticism and film theory; if the event time is earlier than the narrative time and the narration starts recalling the past from the "present", it is called "analepsis" (Shen & Wang, 2010, p. 116), also known as "flashback". This dislocation of time

order is essentially the narrator's reconstruction of the logic of event presentation and the story structure through control over "story time", with the ultimate goal of accurately guiding the audience's cognitive focus, thereby enhancing the narrative effect and emotional impact.

"Prolepsis" undertakes multiple core functions in xianxia narrative. It not only fits the worldviews unique to xianxia themes such as "destiny and reincarnation" and "retribution for cause and effect" but also strengthens dramatic tension through narrative techniques. Taking *The Journey of Flower* as an example, Hua Qiang's innate special fragrance that attracts demons makes her regarded as a "disaster star" by the villagers, which forms the initial framework of her tragic fate and foreshadows the revelation of her life experience later. More importantly, when Hua Qiang first enters Changliu, Bai Zihua, despite knowing that she is his "life-and-death calamity", still chooses to accept her as his disciple and protect her. This core decision not only goes against the established fate but also directly lays the dramatic foundation for the profound evolution of their master-disciple relationship into forbidden love in the future. Hua Qiang's fate of attracting demons and bringing misfortune to relatives and friends conflicts sharply with Bai Zihua's choice of "knowing it's a calamity but still wanting to transcend it". The "inevitability" of prolepsis and the "resistance" of the characters constitute the core dramatic conflict, making the struggle of "defying fate" more tense. *Eternal Love: The Three Lives Three Worlds Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* also uses prolepsis extensively to lay hidden clues for subsequent stories: when Empress Lexu encounters the golden lotus left by the Father God at Kunlun and merges it into her body, it indicates that her son Ye Hua has an extraordinary identity; when Qingcang is sealed, he curses that "the sealer must pay a price", which foreshadows that Bai Qian will fall into the mortal world to endure calamities (transforming into Su Su) seven years later to strengthen the seal, thus starting the first chapter of her three lifetimes of love with Ye Hua; before Mo Yuan seals the Eastern Emperor Bell with his body, his entrustment to Bai Qian—"Wait for my return"—lays a key foreshadowing for his subsequent awakening. Qingcang's curse and Mo Yuan's "wait for my return" bind destiny and reincarnation. The price of the curse leads to Bai Qian losing her immortal powers and falling into the mortal world as a human, while Mo Yuan's entrustment points to his awakening seven years later. These prolepses make the "three lifetimes of love" no longer a chance encounter but an inevitability guided by destiny, strengthening the worldview logic of "karma and reincarnation" in xianxia dramas. It is worth noting that prolepsis, i.e., "flash-forward, is different from hint. Flash-forward generally has clear prompts and is a pre-narration of later events, which arouses the audience's expectations through temporal directionality. Hints, on the other hand, are mostly vague and can be regarded as a psychological preparation for later events, whose meaning the audience can only comprehend in hindsight" (Hu, 2004, p. 68). Therefore, the content of prolepsis often provides the audience with plot information they have not yet learned (Shen & Wang, 2010, p. 118). Through a closed-loop structure of foreshadowing and echoing, scattered plot fragments form an organic whole, avoiding logical breaks in xianxia dramas caused by their grand worldview and complex timeline. Meanwhile, the audience is endowed with a "God's perspective", enabling them to form an interactive experience of predicting first and verifying later during the viewing process, thereby enhancing their engagement with the plot.

"Analepsis", also known as "flashback", refers to looking back to narrate events that occurred earlier, including various retrospections and memories. In xianxia dramas, it may be the recollection of past grievances in the character's revenge plot, the explanation of modus operandi in the process of solving a mystery, or the narration of past experiences and memories related to the plot and characters. It is more manifested as the narrator's arrangement of the story, often intentionally starting from the middle or the end, and using key information in the

story as analepsis. "Identity reversal" is a common plot in xianxia dramas. Such narratives often present the protagonist's suspicious identity as the initial result, then gradually restore the truth of the identity through analepsis fragments such as multi-party memories and historical revelations. The result is the identity suspense itself, while the real reason is mostly the hidden historical truth. Through the gradual revelation of the truth, analepsis reconstructs the story structure and maintains narrative tension.

Taking the mystery of Jin Mi's identity as the daughter of the Flower God in *Ashes of Love* as an example: the discourse time first presents the result that "Jin Mi can grow clear frost ganoderma" (Episode 7), making Xu Feng doubt Jin Mi's identity for the first time. Later, Jin Mi's true appearance is revealed, resembling the former Flower God, and the Heavenly Emperor begins to suspect that she is his daughter (Episode 13). Subsequently, through analepsis fragments such as "Old Hu's memory of the Flower Realm" and "the Wind God's memory" (Episodes 14 and 17), the "emotional destination of the Flower God" and the true identity of "Jin Mi not being the Heavenly Emperor's daughter but the daughter of the Water God and the Flower God" are gradually traced back. The role of analepsis here is to solve the mystery layer by layer. The audience enters the narrative following "doubts about Jin Mi's identity", and the inserted analepsis fragments such as "the truth about the Flower God's fall" and "the emotional entanglement between the Heavenly Emperor, the Flower God, and the Water God" not only answer the question of "why Jin Mi was sealed by the Flower God at birth" but also connect the identity mystery with the power struggle in the Heavenly Realm, making personal identity a fulcrum to leverage the grand narrative.

"Reincarnation across multiple lifetimes", one of the core frameworks of xianxia dramas, often relies on temporal retrospection. Under this framework, key fragments from other lifetimes are often inserted into the main plot of a certain lifetime to highlight the intergenerational bond or the closed loop of fate. These retrospective fragments are mostly symbolic, such as repeated actions, similar scenes, or key tokens, and are mostly presented in fragmented flashes, not pursuing a complete presentation of the past. In *Love and Redemption*, Yu Sifeng and Chu Xuanji are set as lovers who meet ten times, ending in tragedy in the first nine lifetimes. The beginning of the drama is actually their tenth meeting, and the horizontal line marks the main plot of the story, which basically revolves around their meeting, acquaintance, and love in this lifetime. Meanwhile, fragments from their first nine lifetimes are inserted into the main plot. These retrospective contents are not independent subplots but are presented in fragments to explain the origin of their "destined fate" and emphasize the sense of regret of "meeting nine times but never being able to stay together", thereby naturally evoking the audience's emotional resonance and narrative expectations.

Xianxia dramas often involve long-temporal narration, from the long process of cultivation spanning thousands of years to the fate entanglement of reincarnation across multiple lifetimes. The grandeur of the temporal dimension and the complexity of the past history make it difficult for simple chronological narration to fully carry the narrative information. The use of temporal retrospection techniques can provide support for the rationality of the current plot through the narrative logic of placing the previous result first and supplementing the later cause. This is also consistent with Genette's concepts of "prolepsis" and "analepsis". Among them, prolepsis refers to the "advance presentation of future events". For example, dramas often first show the tragic final outcome of the characters (such as the destruction of their immortal path or the end of their relationship) and then trace back the causal chain leading to this result, allowing the audience to examine the process from the perspective of "known outcome" and lay the groundwork for a sense of destiny in advance; analepsis focuses on the "supplementary

explanation of past events". When characters show special states (such as inexplicable resistance or instinctive protection) or the plot has key turns (such as sudden changes in stance or awakening of abilities), past fragments are inserted to supplement the underlying motivations. These motivations may be intergenerational bonds, childhood traumas, or unfulfilled promises, making the characters' behaviors and plot trends reasonable rather than abrupt.

At the same time, the alternating use of prolepsis and analepsis can further strengthen emotional tension through the triple contrast of past, present, and future. Prolepsis imprints the "established" outcome in the audience's cognition in advance, while analepsis awakens the "lost" past memories. The interweaving of the two amplifies the tragedy in the gap between "knowing the outcome but still watching it move towards destruction". In the case of reincarnation settings, the repetition of similar situations in different time and space will also, through the connection of these two techniques, make the sense of destiny precipitate in the cycle. It is not difficult to see that such techniques not only break the monotony of chronological narration but also reconstruct the narrative context with the rhythm of presenting the outcome first, then tracing back to the present, and finally supplementing through analepsis. The use of such retrospective narration not only allows the grand long-temporal narration to be presented compactly, avoiding information loss caused by a lengthy timeline but also makes the characters' emotions and the depth of the plot more solid through the infiltration of past memories and future foreshadowing. This also makes prolepsis and analepsis jointly become important narrative symbols that distinguish xianxia dramas from other genres, playing a key role in balancing narrative logic and emotional intensity.

#### **4. The Function and Presentation of Narrative Space in Xianxia Narration**

Initially, scholars paid more attention to the significance of time in literary works, believing that even though characters in works need an activity space, the plot still organizes the characters' actions according to the order of time (Stanford, 2005, p. 194). However, in the time and space of actual literary works, time and space are often integrated into a complete whole. Through artistic conception, narrative time often becomes more specific and variable, while narrative space, corresponding to time, plot, and historical development, also presents richer content attributes (Bakhtin, 1996, p. 84). On this basis, classical narratologists proposed the concepts of "story space" and "discourse space", where "story space" refers to the place or location where events occur, and "discourse space" refers to the place or environment where the narrative act takes place (Chatman, 1989). In first-person retrospective narration, the boundary between the two is easier to distinguish. In *Ashes of Love*, the mystery of Runyu's life experience is revealed through the memory narration of Princess Suli, the mermaid clan. At this time, Yunmeng Ze where Princess Suli and everyone are located belongs to the "discourse space"; while the classics pavilion, Taihu Lake, and other places where Princess Suli meets the Heavenly Emperor in the memory belong to the "story space".

Compared with the discourse space, xianxia dramas pay more attention to the story space. As a virtual space, the "story space" in xianxia dramas is not just an "inanimate container" but a "dynamic force" running through the entire narrative (Moretti, 1999, pp. 3, 7). It not only delineates the boundaries for the development of the plot but also provides a concrete carrier for the interpretation of the theme, ultimately shaping the unique narrative charm of xianxia dramas. In the construction logic of narrative texts, there is always a close connection between story space and story structure. The advancement of the plot is not an abstract process divorced from space but relies on specific spatial scenes. Whether it is the restoration of real scenes or

the creation of fictional spaces, it provides the necessary narrative field for the occurrence and development of the plot. The creator's choice and detailed portrayal of the story space actually constitute a potential restrictive framework for the evolution of the plot. The attributes of the space it contains (such as closed or open, real or surreal) and the rules within the space (such as following the logic of cultivating immortals or having special settings) will fundamentally limit the direction of the plot's development. For example, a closed independent space often concentrates the conflicts of suspense plots, while a vast fantasy otherworld is more suitable for unfolding freely extended fantasy plots. This restriction of the plot by space will further affect the direction of theme interpretation. As mentioned earlier, space is not just a "container" carrying the plot but also a specific carrier for conveying content and actions. The imagery it contains can be intuitively presented through specific scenes. For example, the magnificent golden buildings in the Heavenly Realm often symbolize the concentration of power and the stability of order, while the dark and dilapidated palaces in the Demon Realm mostly imply the predatory nature of power and the chaos of rules. The characteristics and imagery orientation of these two spatial scenes form a sharp contrast, which can not only help the audience understand the attribute differences between different camps in the plot but also make the deep meaning behind the narrative (such as the metaphor of "power ownership" and "order rules") more perceptible.

Xianxia dramas build unique spatial fields such as the Four Seas and Eight Wastes, the Six Realms of Reincarnation, and immortal mansions and demon realms based on the virtuality of the "story space". These spaces are not reproductions of real geography but fictional narrative environments that allow the audience to break away from real cognition and immerse themselves deeply. Furthermore, with their built-in rules and imagery metaphors, they become "dynamic forces" that carry themes, distinguish races, and promote narratives.

The story space of xianxia dramas undertakes the function of a "theme carrier". Through the metaphorical expression of spatial imagery, it deepens the audience's understanding and interpretation of the thematic significance of the work. Such virtual spaces are often endowed with symbolic connotations beyond geographical attributes, becoming key carriers for transforming abstract themes into concrete narrative elements. In *Immortal Samsara*, the core function of "Wang Chuan (River of Oblivion)" is not only as a narrative scene for the passage of the dead but also deeply bound to the theme of "obsession and letting go". From the perspective of spatial setting, Wang Chuan has the inherent function of erasing past memories, but in the plot, Yandan stays in Wang Chuan for 800 years and still fails to let go of her obsession. This behavior directly contrasts with Wang Chuan's memory-erasing attribute. Through narrative elements such as "the continuity of Wang Chuan's flowing water" and "Yandan's tattered clothes under the lonely lamp", the question of "whether obsession is a calamity or redemption" is no longer an abstract conceptual expression of the characters in the drama but transformed into a perceptible plot theme. On one hand, Yandan's persistence in memories embodies "obsession", and her final choice to leave Wang Chuan corresponds to "letting go". The spatial attribute of Wang Chuan participates in the presentation and advancement of the theme throughout. The space of "Lize Palace" in *Love and Redemption* is characterized by a closed layout and hierarchical rules. The palace adopts a closed architectural structure as a whole, and there are clear rules such as "men wear masks and are prohibited from contacting the mortal world" inside. These spatial attributes directly point to the theme of "identity confinement and self-awakening". In terms of plot connection, as a disciple of Lize Palace, Yu Sifeng breaks the spatial rules many times. He takes off his mask to reveal his identity and establishes emotional connections with women outside. These behaviors are essentially rebellions against the identity confinement represented by the palace rules. The

collapse of the original rules of Lize Palace in the later part of the drama is not only the result of the plot development but also marks the completion of breaking identity confinement and pursuing self-will. The spatial setting of Lize Palace provides a concrete narrative basis for the theme from beginning to end.

The "race/camp" setting of xianxia dramas is an important source of narrative conflicts. Through visual symbols, rule attributes, and atmosphere creation, narrative space transforms abstract racial characteristics into perceptible concrete forms, not only achieving a clear distinction between races but also laying narrative foreshadowing for camp conflicts and character relationships. This distinction is not just scene decoration but integrates the racial identity attributes, behavioral logic, and value orientations into the spatial design, making space an external mirror of racial attributes. Taking the core space group of *Eternal Love: The Three Lives Three Worlds Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* as an example, the narrative space accurately corresponds to the racial characteristics of the Heavenly Clan, Wing Clan, Qingqiu Fox Clan, and Human Clan through differentiated designs.

The space of the Heavenly Clan (Nine Heavens) uses cool tones, symmetrical layouts, and glazed white jade materials as visual symbols. The columns of Xiewu Palace are regular, and the steps of Lingxiao Palace are solemn, creating a dignified and solemn spatial atmosphere. This design directly points to the racial attribute of the Heavenly Clan that values etiquette and strict hierarchy. Members of the Heavenly Clan are ordered by hierarchy at all levels, with strict rules. Even the crown prince Ye Hua must be punished for his mistakes. Moreover, spatial elements such as "Heavenly Realm barrier" and "palace gate guards" emphasize the closed spatial structure of the Nine Heavens and the camp stance of maintaining a high-level distance from other races.

The space of the Wing Clan (Dazi Ming Palace) adopts dark tones, lava bases, and irregular architectural forms. The palace is built with black boulders, surrounded by flowing red lava, creating an oppressive and treacherous spatial atmosphere. It forms a sharp contrast with the Heavenly Clan, embodying the rebellious and warlike racial characteristics of the Wing Clan. Qingcang, the Wing Lord, aims to overthrow the rule of the Heavenly Clan. The spatial characteristics of his residence, such as the devouring sense of lava and the oppressive sense of boulders, are not only visual expressions of the Wing Clan's resistance to the Heavenly Clan's order but also provide spatial rationality for the heavenly rule that the Heavenly Clan and the Wing Clan cannot intermarry.

The space of the Qingqiu Fox Clan (Fox Cave) abandons the magnificence of the Immortal Clan and the harshness of the Demon Clan, with core elements such as rural thatched cottages, peach blossom-lined paths, and market fireworks, creating a warm and vivid spatial atmosphere. This design of combining immortal hometown with mortal world corresponds to the racial characteristics of the Qingqiu Fox Clan, which is free and easy and values love over etiquette. The Fox Emperor's family does not need to abide by strict immortal ranks. Bai Qian can freely enter and exit the market and interact equally with her clansmen. The openness and life atmosphere of the space become a unique symbol that distinguishes Qingqiu from the constraints of the Heavenly Clan.

The space of the Human Clan (Junji Mountain) constructs an isolated scene with bamboo fences and firewood gates, and mountain mists, creating a quiet and simple spatial atmosphere. It not only highlights the racial characteristics of the Human Clan that lack immortal powers and value emotions but also implies the class differences between races through a strong

contrast with the resplendent Nine Heavens. The mortal Su Su and the Heavenly Crown Prince Ye Hua meet here. Although Junji Mountain temporarily eliminates the identity barrier, it cannot change the essence of the different paths between immortals and mortals, laying a foreshadowing for the tragic ending of their first lifetime.

The narrative space of xianxia dramas is not a static background but often constructs a copy-like mechanism by setting difficulties, limiting rules, and providing rewards to promote the narrative. Characters need to solve puzzles and make choices in a specific space, such as breaking prohibitions and finding clues. The rewards obtained after successfully solving the puzzles, such as treasures, key information, and ability improvements, not only promote the growth of the characters but also become the core driving force for connecting the main plot and solving narrative conflicts. This mechanism transforms space from passive bearing to active interaction, becoming a key link to activate the narrative rhythm.

The plot of the Demon Locking Tower in *Love and Destiny* deeply reflects this mechanism. As a closed space, the Demon Locking Tower first forms a restriction through physical access rules, and outsiders cannot easily enter. To save Lingxi's life, Jiuchen first hides her in the Demon Locking Tower, and at the same time, he must abide by the spatial rule that obtaining the Shennong Cauldron requires compensation. Because the Shennong Cauldron was originally used to suppress the demon dragon Zhuyin, taking it away requires filling the gap with an artifact of equal power. Jiuchen has to replace the Shennong Cauldron with his own Nüwa Stone to suppress the Demon Locking Tower. This process not only allows him to obtain the key prop that can save Lingxi in the future but also completes his personal growth as a god of war and his sacrifice for love. It is worth noting that although the information isolation characteristic of the Demon Locking Tower is not a traditional puzzle, it creates key conflicts by blocking effective communication between characters. To cure Jiuchen, who lost his Nüwa Stone heart, Lingxi is willing to make a deal with Huodou to exchange her hearing for fire essence, resulting in deafness. She fails to hear the truth that Jiuchen conveys with his magic outside the tower, thus misunderstanding Jiuchen's ruthless appearance in the hall and ultimately choosing to commit suicide with a sword. This conflict caused by spatial rules further highlights the in-depth impact of the copy mechanism on the plot trend and theme expression. The obtained reward becomes a key prop to start the next plot, while the copy mechanism pushes the narrative to a new dramatic conflict.

The Blood Drop Cave in *Noble Aspirations* is a closed space connecting the past of the Righteous and Demon sects and the love of the present. Its access rule itself is a core puzzle and hint, as it can only be opened by Zhang Xiaofan and Bi Yao together. This setting not only constitutes a physical restriction on space access but also implies the destined connection between the love of the Righteous and Demon sects. After entering the cave, the layered puzzle-solving structure promotes the progression of the reward mechanism and the narrative plot. At the prop level, Zhang Xiaofan and Bi Yao obtain the first volume of the Heavenly Book and the complete Hehuan Bell magic weapon. The former becomes a key prop to promote the main line of "Heavenly Book inheritance", while the latter becomes Bi Yao's iconic magic weapon. At the narrative level, the inscriptions on the stone walls and the skeletons jointly reveal the love tragedy of the Black-hearted Old Man and the Golden Bell Lady. Although they were leaders of the Demon sect, they missed each other due to obsession. The Golden Bell Lady may have saved the Black-hearted Old Man through a sacrifice similar to the "Infatuated Curse". This past event is materialized through the inscription "The heart is bitter, and I can't bear to look back", forming a metaphor for the love in the present. The dual value of the reward mechanism is materialized here: in terms of material rewards, the Heavenly Book improves

Zhang Xiaofan's cultivation, and the Hehuan Bell endows Bi Yao with stronger combat power; in terms of emotional rewards, the puzzle-solving process of sharing life and death breaks the psychological barrier of their opposition between Righteous and Demon sects. The tragic past of the Black-hearted Old Man and the Golden Bell Lady not only makes their emotions heat up in resonance but also lays a foreshadowing through the text clue of the "Infatuated Curse". Even later, when Bi Yao casts the Infatuated Curse to save Zhang Xiaofan, it is the Hehuan Bell that preserves a wisp of her soul. This ending echoes the historical secrets in the Blood Drop Cave across time and space. The closed nature of the Blood Drop Cave becomes a container for emotional catalysis here. The spatial rules not only complete the explicit narrative of prop acquisition and combat power improvement but also form an implicit design of emotional mirroring through the revelation of the past, making the puzzle-solving reward mechanism deeply serve the expression of character growth and the theme of destiny.

In the narrative logic of xianxia dramas, story space, plot, and characters present a "symbiotic relationship". On one hand, the unique story space setting is a key narrative feature that distinguishes xianxia dramas from other genres. Without the virtual space structure such as the Four Seas and Eight Wastes and the Six Realms of Reincarnation, xianxia dramas would lose their core narrative recognition. On the other hand, the dynamics of space are an important support for the implementation of the plot and theme. Without the promotion of spatial dynamics, the plot would degenerate into a pile of events lacking logical connections, and the characters would fall into a monotonous expression lacking support. When the audience resonates emotionally with the tragedy of Zhu Xian Tai in *Eternal Love: The Three Lives Three Worlds Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* and empathizes with the persistence in Wang Chuan in *Immortal Samsara*, they are essentially attracted by the triple narrative system intertwined with space, plot, and theme. It can be seen that the attention paid by xianxia dramas to the story space is not an accidental creative choice but an inevitable result of their narrative logic. Based on the virtual space, it connects the beginning, development, climax, and end of the plot through spatial dynamics, and carries the in-depth expression of the theme with the help of spatial imagery metaphors, ultimately forming a narrative context that immerses the audience and triggers thinking.

## 5. Concluding remarks

In summary, the story space of xianxia dramas is the "dynamic core" of the narrative. Based on virtuality, it limits the plot trend through built-in spatial rules, deepens the theme interpretation relying on spatial imagery metaphors, and completely breaks the traditional cognition of "space as a container". The dynamics of space not only enable xianxia dramas to form a unique style among many narrative genres, becoming works with both narrative immersion and ideological depth but also provide a practical sample with oriental aesthetic characteristics for the research on the relationship between space and narrative in narrative theory.

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