

Loss and Return of Self-identity in Youth Movies: Taking the Chinese Film *Us and Them* (后来的我们) as an Example

ZHANG Lin

Liaocheng University, Liaocheng, China

The year of 2018 marked the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening-up program. In the wake of 40-year economic development at a great speed, the sharp changes in individual living conditions accompanying urbanization process and the resultant self-identity issues are similar to those situations encountered by Western developed countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and are reflected in youth movies with reform and opening-up as the background. Thus, based on the self-identity theory, an interpretation of individual development and dilemma in modern Chinese youth movies not only acts as a theoretical attempt, but also broadens the dimension in which such movies are interpreted, creating the value of interaction with society. Taking the youth movie *Us and Them* (中文片名: 后来的我们) as an example, this paper adopts the semiotic approach for text analysis, and abstracts "young girl", "Beijing", "sofa" and other symbols from this movie to form the symbolic interpretation of three channels for building self-identity in modern society. Through "modern-traditional" diversion in terms of three dimensions in the process of self-identity, this movie is found with trial and effort to describe and heal the self from the perspective of creative mentality, forming a metaphor of the loss and return of self-identity among modern Chinese. The outcome of analysis indicates that, when encountering self-identity crisis in modern society, the Chinese masses divert culturally from the modern to the traditional, banking on eliminating self-identity crisis with traditional family identity and family culture, which reflects that the family ethics still maintain core values in the modern Chinese mass culture.

Keywords: *Us and Them*, self-identity, family identity, family culture, reflection

On April 28, 2018, the *Us and Them* released in cinemas in the Chinese mainland earned total box-office returns of RMB1.36 billion, known as the highest-grossing film released in the "May Day" time slot of 2018. More than being themed by youth stories, it added depictions of and reflections on the society, the times, hometown and the self, spicing up youth movie with realism. 2018 marked the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening-up program. The 40-year modernization with rapid development was filled with the practice and contradiction of personal ideals, retreat and loss of traditional family values, fading of the countryside and drifting in cities. This movie has, with the retrospect into the youth, presented the collective pain suffered by Chinese in social upheaval, went beyond the narrative scope of existing youth movies, and created innovative significance of the theme. Through expression of self-identity crisis in modern society, this

movie is found with trial and effort to describe and heal the self from the perspective of creative mentality, forming a metaphor of the loss and return of self-identity amongst modern Chinese. Meanwhile, an interpretation of modern Chinese masses' self-identity using symbols in the movie helps to understand the Chinese mass culture.

As the maiden work of Liu Ruoying (1970-), the movie *Us and Them* has Zhang Yibai (1963-) as its producer and stars Jing Boran (1989-), Zhou Dongyu (1992-) and Tian Zhuangzhuang (1952-). It has filmed the experience and perception of life among Taiwanese and Chinese mainland youth groups in a time span of four ages (1952-1992) during the 40-year social development under China's reform and opening up policy, serving as a comprehensive expression of the mass culture during China's 40-year development. Adapted from Liu Ruoying's early prose *Go Home to Celebrate the Spring Festival*, this movie told a story of two youths from a small town in northeast China: Lin Jianqing (starred by Jing Boran) and Fang Xiaoxiao (starred by Zhou Dongyu), who were acquainted with each other on a train returning home, and then fell in love, broke up, separated and met again—a decade-long emotional entanglement between them. As a Taiwanese director of “post-70s generation”, Liu Ruoying incorporated her understandings of the self, city and hometown after modernization into the performance given by Chinese mainland actors of “post-80/90s generations”, and this indeed, through combining the self-expression of “post-50s/60s generations”, endowed the movie with the innovation of subjects in creation. Interaction among different times and collision of different cultures naturally blended into the narrative of youth love.

Self-Identity in Youth Movies

Since the development of Western industrial society, scholars have kept reflecting on the individual spiritual crisis hidden behind the appearance of economic prosperity. Western scholars represented by Erikson, Mead and Giddens have focused on individual-society interactions from the perspective of psychology and sociology, and put forward self sameness and self-identity theories, in order to interpret the crisis encountered by personality development in a society with highly developed industrial technologies.

The status quo of Chinese society bears some resemblance to a series of social issues emerging in Western developed countries (represented by the USA) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: the urbanization process has brought about sharp changes in individual living conditions, and further caused the chaos of individual identity and disruption of historical continuity. Thus, from the perspective of self-identity, and by virtue of semiotic approach, the interpretation of individual development, dilemma and problem-solving in modern Chinese youth movies not only acts as a theoretical attempt, but also broadens the dimension in which such movies are interpreted, creating the value of interaction with society.

According to the American psychologist Erik H Erikson: “In order to experience wholeness, a young adult must feel a progressive continuity between the person he has become after a long childhood and the one he is expected to be in the future, and also between the person he assumes himself to be and the one others see and want him to be” (Erikson, 1998, p. 73). Failure to experience such self wholeness and continuity during growth may cause the self to fall into chaos of identity. According to Erikson, the formation of self-identity is closely related to society—“when discussing the identity, we shall not separate individual growth from social changes” (Erikson, 1998, p. 10). Mead the founder of symbolic interactionism hold the point that: “An individual must be

a community member before he finds his self” (Mead, 2005, p. 127). In fact, self is a process of social interaction, which can only be established through interactions with society and others. By contrast, the British sociologist Giddens perceived self-identity as: “an self comprehended by the individual reflectively based on his personal experience. In this sense, although the identity still concerns the continuity across time and space, such self-identity is the continuity interpreted by the actor reflectively” (Giddens, 1998, p. 39). Thus, more than the self-society or self-other interaction expressed by meaningful symbols, self-identity is self-continuity built by an individual in real life through reflection, and such a subjective continuity delivers stability and safety across time and space.

Three Dimensions for Building the Self-Identity in Youth Movies

Based on the above analysis, this paper builds self-identity from three dimensions: interaction between the self and others, interaction between the self and society, and self-reflection. Also, it abstracts “young girl”, “Beijing” and “sofa” from the movie to form symbolic interpretation of the others, society and objects of reflection in youth movies, thus establishing recognition of both modern and traditional cultures, while the individual self-identity is finally diverted from the modern to the traditional through transformation of meanings of symbols in this movie.

From both the traditional and modern angles, this paper analyzes the three dimensions for building self-identity, and goes beyond the narrative scope of youth movies to depict this movie as one generation’s pursuit for modernization. Through a movie’s typical symbolic narrative, the reverse side of China’s social and economic development has been revealed, reflecting how difficult it is to form modern individuals in the atmosphere of upheaval of the times.

Interaction between the Self and Others: “Atomic Individual” and Family Identity

The movie *Us and Them* uses realistic narrative to attract audiences to explore the meaning of human existence: young adults are torn by the gigantic social machinery in the context of swift economic development, but the painful growth of youth hasn’t ended yet, and the myth of youth will eventually transform to a motif of growth, arousing ontological thinking in the philosophical sense. If individuals are said to, when adapting to the consumerism-dominated metropolis lifestyle, undergo painful psychological transformation and lose their self-identity, the “post-80s generation” that has been edified by both traditional and rural cultures will, after gaining the identity of “new citizen” in a metropolis, start to retell and look back upon hometown life, and try to resist the nostalgia and loneliness of urban life via rebuilding traditional family identity. It’s the desire that tears the youth, and the hometown that heals the wound. Xiaoxiao, the young girl in this movie, is not only a symbol of youth movie, but also an emblem of the unity of identities in both metropolis and hometown.

As the first object of desire for the hero Jianqing, Xiaoxiao was an individual with a high degree of abstraction, intangibility and labeling, whose social relationship (as an independent individual) was not what the entire movie attempted to establish. Her family relation was simplified as her mother’s voice in an occasional brief call and her late father’s portrait on the wall in the former home, both of which appeared only once. Apart from this, she had no longstanding kinship or social relationship, even no cogent explanation of her by-then situation when she met Jianqing again after a decade. With no depiction of her life and work, Xiaoxiao was more like an empty symbol, serving as the object of Jianqing’s desire in his youth. Just like “Beijing”

desired by Jianqing, Xiaoxiao as his object was a unique individual, a girl who “can play cards, drink and curse, and is different from other girls”. Such a girl is anti-traditional and emblemizes modern society.

The symbolic meanings of “staying in Beijing for over five years” and “big house” to Jianqing were exactly established via Xiaoxiao, and finally became the objects of Jianqing’s desire. For Jianqing, a house emblemized success, signifying the gaining of urban dweller’s identity and the fulfillment of a middle-class dream. At that time, Jianqing’s pursuit of metropolis life was embodied by a male’s desire for and pursuit of a female, while both Xiaoxiao and metropolis had the same anti-traditional modernity, thus constituting the collective temptation to young adults represented by Jianqing.

At the end of this movie, Xiaoxiao’s cultural signification was diverted from the modern to the traditional—Xiaoxiao mailed the parcel to her hometown, implying that her final destination was hometown instead of the USA. At the same time, Jianqing’s father as a representative of the traditional Chinese patriarchal culture wrote a letter to Xiaoxiao, admitting her family identity ceremonially by words, thus bringing Xiaoxiao’s “return to hometown” into the order of traditional Chinese family ethics. If Xiaoxiao, as a representative of modern urban culture, constituted the desire of a young generation for metropolis life a decade ago, her return to hometown after a decade was in line with the traditional Chinese family ethics, creating an imagination of “new citizens” returning hometown spiritually after “moving to cities”.

Through reflection on the youth and reconfirmation of family values, this movie finally eliminated Jianqing’s self-identity crisis, achieving the unity of inter-generational values. In the classic triangle composition, Xiaoxiao is put in the middle of Jianqing and his father. The symmetric layout formed a metaphor of the value conflict between Jianqing and his father, and Xiaoxiao in the middle served as a connector between the parent and offspring, and the foreign land and hometown. In the depth-of-field shot, Xiaoxiao and Jianqing’s father appeared in the foreground and Jianqing in the background, which strengthened the unity between this young girl and traditional family values, and foreshadowed Jianqing’s return to his family identity after a decade.

Interaction between the Self and Society: Metropolis Complex and Family Cultural Identity

Beijing, as the center of China’s economy and politics, was abstracted into a signifier of the metropolis, and formed a symbol of binary opposition to the small town in northeast China. Both Beijing and the small town established a space background of this typical story about young people worked hard to establish themselves in a metropolis. In order to stay and gain a foothold in Beijing, Xiaoxiao the “Beijing drifter” and Jianqing the college graduate tried every means to make a living (e.g. self-employment, real estate sales, street stall, delivery). Even when they were overstretched, they still dreamed of success and rising into the middle class in this metropolis full of opportunities and magic. When Xiaoxiao and Jianqing hesitated about taking a taxi, Jianqing said: “Perhaps I would make a fortune tomorrow!”; Xiaoxiao sat in the taxi and leaned over the window, yelling in the wind: “We’re going to be rich!”. Such a narrative force based on the dream echoed the common emotions of every young or middle-aged person who was working hard or had ever earned a living in a metropolis. Although this movie cannot be seen as a return to the theme of realism, we can feel a strong sense of “reality” from multiple plots. Such a depiction based on real emotions interconnects the movie’s narrative with the life experiences of all-age audiences, thus creating significance of the times.

Urban memories of the “post-80s generation” were also embodied in the visual presentation from underclass narration, such as the green train on which they first met each other, the electronics wholesale market in Zhong Guan Cun, and the “shared flat” rented by Jianqing. When Jianqing led Xiaoxiao to his rented flat for the first time, the camera went with their movement, and used a long-take through Xiaoxiao’s subjective perspective to show the appearance of underclass’s “shared flat”—a narrow space filled with all kinds of people. It was exactly such a cheap “shared flat” where the collective memories of those hardworking “Beijing drifters” derived. When the hero and heroine fell in love with each other for the first time, the camera rose slowly from the inside of their room, and gave a high-angle long-take to deliver a metaphorical visual landscape of cheerful and bustling atmosphere in each crowded cubicle, which was not only a true portrayal of the underclass, but also the starting point of dreams and the original urban memory to those drifters.

Beijing and the small town in northeast China were metaphors of Chinese city and countryside respectively, both antagonistic and interdependent to each other. Their antagonism was embodied in the city’s development rapidly and the countryside’s fading gradually, while their interdependence lay in that the urban culture was rooted in the countryside, and the rural culture was nourished by the modern urban culture and also got its identity value in the modern society. The city-countryside interdependence was also reflected in mutual correspondence of visual images. When Jianqing moved out from his first rented flat, the contrast of tone and the characteristic description of spatial environment highlighted the hero’s upset feeling and the interpersonal indifference in urban society. At the same time, in the depiction of Spring Festival celebrated in the small town of northeast China, there was only one friend staying to dine with Jianqing’s father. The cheerless image and sad theme ran through both spaces simultaneously, making the city and countryside echo and unified with each other emotionally. This not only presented the times with urban development so fast that might leave one at a loss, but also served as a metaphor of the gradual fading of a small town and the incoming of an aging society.

At the end of this movie, Jianqing returned home and started to make “steamed red bean buns” representing paternal love and tradition. Reliving the traditional cultural customs brought the envisioning of family life and reconfirmation of family culture. Both family and hometown served as a comfort to the youth at a loss, and formed the motif of growth together with love. They healed the wound of urbanized individuals during their transformation, integrated the traditional and modern, achieved self’s recognition of family culture, and also established the form of city-countryside interdependence with emotional interconnection.

Self-reflection: Decline of Youth Myth and Rebuilding of Urban Individuals

Youth is a period in which one keeps changing and growing, and finally seek out his own social role or status for adult life. This transitional period is precious, and we go through it with full energy, vigor, longing for a better life, and expectations for a perfect marriage, family and career in the future. Also, the ignorance and sensitivity of youth are always accompanied by many fierce conflicts, such as ideal V.S. reality, hardworking V.S. bonding, modern V.S. traditional, and vital impulsion V.S. moral rules; therefore, the youth movie works are always associated with the growth theme, reflecting the youth’s real experiences based on love, friendship and kinship.

The *Us and Them* also delineated the youth myth, establishing audiences’ recollection and imagination of their youth. However, the tendency to realism in this movie enabled it to elaborate the narrative to go beyond

the campus and face double pressure from work and life. With persistent attempt made and setback suffered during the adaptation to city life, the conflict between ambitious youth and cruel reality made the youth myth go beyond a self-sufficient ideal society and correlate with the macro-society in adult world. At this moment, the “youth myth” vanished, just like the sofa that had to be abandoned. Despite it being mottled and ragged, the sofa was still a paradise for youth. However, the unexpected adult society wiped out that paradise permanently, and the unprepared youths were forced to enter a lonely and indifferent adult society. Moving out of the rented flats twice symbolized the lost paradise to the youth. The first shared flat rented by Xiaoxiao and Jianqing was crowded and narrow, but it indeed, through descriptions of all character relations, established a society of worldly life with traditional Chinese communicative culture. Obviously, such a society was not a typical example of modern society, and could never breed new citizens who met the requirements of modern urban culture. Therefore, the migration in this movie was more an emblem of migrating from a paradise for the youth to an ice-cold modern commercial society. The epitome of such society - the second rented flat - was covered by the atmosphere of cool hue in color, implying the inevitable vanishing of youthful and rural cultural identity. It was exactly in this plot that Jianqing was alienated from Xiaoxiao, which led to the final breakup; and only after the breakup, Jianqing could eventually gain the qualification and opportunities to enter the city in terms of narration.

Sofa, as an emblem of youth myth, served as a turning point of the entire narration. If a spiritual paradise was presented before the sofa was discarded, which was aesthetic, romantic and beyond the material limit, the “infinitely beautiful youth” myth was overturned after the sofa was discarded, showing the cruelty of youth. In terms of the audio-visual language expression, this passage was delineated as a narrative through full-length shot, rich in the subjective color. The sofa in the close-up faded away in a subjective back-step shot, symbolizing both the end of youth myth and the beginning of modern individual rebuilding.

Three kinds of hue were adopted in this movie for cross-narration: the warm hue, cool hue and black/white hue. The contrast of hues placed a critical structure of consumer society in the dual signifier of symbols, veiled it in the youth love movie, and formed a symbolic metaphor of spiritual home. These hues expressed the director’s negative value perception of modern identity after “moving to cities”, rural aesthetics & romance, and geographic isolation between countryside and modern metropolis, providing the possibility for the urbanized individuals to return hometown spiritually. In the end, with the help of Xiaoxiao, Jianqing also returned his hometown spiritually, and the image regained colorful hue from black and white.

Conclusion

In the narrative mode of youth movies that tell cruel stories of youth, the *Us and Them* elaborately incorporated traditional Chinese rural concepts and family ethics into young love. It was not only a spiritual comfort to those who were caught in the loss of self-identity and emotional anxiety in the modern society, but also emotional catharsis of migrators who lived far from home and had no time to attend to their nostalgia. Just like Liu Ruoying the director said: “Instead of it being exclusive to myself, I hope this movie can resonate with every audience”. So, when this work is embedded in a context of the hurried consumer society, who can say that such a movie plot with youthful feelings and symbolic nostalgia cannot serve as an emblem of all-age Chinese audiences seeking for and satisfying their own spiritual demands?

More than embracing numerous opportunities, these forty years of reform and opening-up in China also witnessed generations spending efforts in promoting urban development. The isolation in time and the rapidly changing society helped to build an self, but also caused the loss of self. As an envisioned signifier, “home” evoked the emotional resonance among audiences. From the above three dimensions (i.e. the interaction between the self and others, interaction between the self and society, and self-reflection), this paper has parsed the traditional family topic based on modern love stories in the youth movie, and solved the self-identity crisis in modern society with kinship and hometown. It reflects that Chinese masses divert culturally from the modern to the traditional, banking on eliminating self-identity crisis with traditional family identity and family culture, which reflects that the family ethics still maintain core values in the modern Chinese mass culture.

References

- Chen, M. (2006). On the development of young directors' filmmaking in China. *Contemporary Cinema*, 3(132), 81-84.
- Erikson, E. H. (1998). *Identity: Youth and crisis* (M. Z. Sun, Trans.). China: Zhejiang Education Publishing House.
- Giddens, A. (1998). *Modernity self-identity* (X. D. Zhao and W. Wan, Trans.). SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- Mead, G. H. (2005). *Mind, self and society* (Y. S. Zhao, Trans.). China: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- Qi, L. R. (2013). *Chinese semiotics*. China: Orient Publishing Center.
- Sharff, S. (1995). *The elements of cinema-toward a theory of cinesthetic impact*. New York: Columbia University Press.,
- Todorov, T. (2004). *Théories du symbole* (G. Q. Wang, Trans.). China: The Commercial Press.
- Yin, H., & Liang, J. J. (2019). A year of reviewing realism: 2018 memo for domestic film creation. *Contemporary Cinema*, 3(276), 4-12.