Analysis of Narrative Strategies in the Biographical Film "The Grandmaster" from the Perspective of Social Identity Theory

Li Yang, Hushinaidi Hamid

City Graduate School, City University Malaysia
Corresponding Author Email: 81203540@qq.com

Abstract

This paper analyzes the narrative strategies of the biographical film "The Grandmaster" from the perspective of social identity theory, exploring the dynamic transformation of identity and social identity among characters like Ip Man. Using Turner's self-categorization theory, the study reveals how the film employs multiple perspectives, non-linear narrative, and complex group relations to depict characters' self-categorization and identity processes in different contexts. The findings indicate that "The Grandmaster" not only skillfully portrays Ip Man's multiple identities through its sophisticated narrative techniques but also highlights the tension between cultural heritage and personal growth. This research aims to provide a new theoretical framework for the study of narrative in biographical films and to deepen the understanding of social identity in cultural texts.

Keywords: Biographical Film, Social Identity Theory, Multiple Narratives, Identity Recognition

Introduction

Biographical films, as a unique genre and a significant branch of cinematic art, explore the complex relationships between individuals and society, as well as issues of identity through the portrayal of real people and events. The choice of narrative strategies in these films not only influences how the story is told but also shapes the audience's understanding and recognition of the characters' identities. "The Grandmaster", a successful biographical film, not only showcases the legendary life of martial arts master Ip Man but also reveals his identity transformations across different social backgrounds and cultural contexts through various narrative techniques. How narrative strategies in biographical films affect character identity has become a key area of interest for scholars. This paper, using social identity theory, analyzes the narrative strategies of "The Grandmaster" and examines the dynamic changes in the characters' identity within the film.

"The Grandmaster" employs non-linear storytelling, multiple perspectives, and rich cultural symbols to depict Ip Man's journey from an ordinary martial arts enthusiast to a grandmaster. These narrative techniques enhance the artistic appeal of the film and reflect Ip Man's identity

conflicts and recognition in various social roles. This paper conducts a detailed textual analysis to explore how "The Grandmaster" utilizes narrative strategies to construct and present Ip Man's social identity, examining the cultural and social significance behind it.

In recent years, biographical films, as an important genre, have attracted substantial academic attention due to their ability to recreate real people and historical events. "The Grandmaster," a biographical film about the life of Chinese martial arts master Ip Man, has achieved significant success in both visual and narrative aspects, sparking widespread discussion on cultural and social levels. While existing studies have analyzed "The Grandmaster" from aesthetic and historical reproduction perspectives, there remains a lack of research on its narrative strategies from the perspective of social identity theory. This gap forms the motivation for this study. Social identity theory posits that individuals gain self-identity through group membership and construct social reality through interactions between groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, a thorough exploration of how "The Grandmaster" shapes and reflects social identity through its narrative strategies will not only enrich the research perspectives on biographical films but also provide new insights into the interaction between cinema and social culture. In "The Grandmaster", Ip Man's identity extends beyond that of a martial artist; his multiple identities within the contexts of family, society, and historical changes provide rich material for analysis. Through Turner's theoretical framework, we can better understand how the film presents the dynamic changes in Ip Man's identity and social roles through its narrative strategies.

The significance of this study lies in revealing the complexity and dynamics of identity and social roles in biographical films from the perspective of social identity theory. Analyzing the narrative strategies of "The Grandmaster" not only deepens our understanding of the historical figure of Ip Man but also provides a new theoretical framework and methodology for the study of biographical films. This analysis will serve as an important reference for further exploration of social identity's representation and influence in cultural texts.

Literature Review
In the study of Chinese cinema, biographical films hold a significant position. As a unique genre, biographical films not only convey rich historical and cultural information through the depiction of historical figures and real events, but also explore the complex relationship between individuals and society.

The narrative strategies of biographical films are diverse. This paper focuses on single narrative, dual narrative, and multiple narratives. These narrative techniques not only influence the pace and structure of the story but also shape the audience's perception and understanding of the characters. Biographical films reconstruct historical figures and events through various narrative strategies. The narratives in biographical films not only aim to represent historical facts but also focus on portraying the inner world of the characters and the dynamic changes in their identity (Custen, 1992). As Wiley (2011) points out, biographical films explore the multiple identities and inner conflicts of characters through complex narrative structures and delicate emotional expressions.

Li (2015) analyzed the narrative characteristics of Chinese biographical films, noting that these films balance artistic expression and cultural heritage in their representation of history and character portrayal. In recent years, Chinese biographical films have gained significant

influence on the international stage. For instance, "The Grandmaster" (Figure 1) employs unique narrative techniques and visual styles to depict the legendary life of Ip Man, a historical figure.

Figure 1: Poster of the movie "The Grandmaster" sourced from the internet: http://www.1ting.com/cover/cover96646.html

"The Grandmaster", as a successful biographical film, employs various narrative strategies, including nonlinear narrative, multiple narratives, and the use of cultural symbols. The nonlinear narrative breaks traditional chronological order by interweaving different time points to present Ip Man's growth and identity changes. The use of multiple narratives allows the audience to understand Ip Man from different characters' perspectives, enhancing the three-dimensionality and realism of the characters (Wong, 2013). Additionally, the rich cultural symbols in the film, such as martial arts, rituals, and traditional music, not only enhance the artistic appeal of the film but also reflect Ip Man's social identity and cultural background. Through these symbols, the film reveals Ip Man's identity recognition and conflicts in different social roles (Zhang, 2014).

Social identity theory, proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, emphasizes that individuals construct their self-concept and social status through identification with social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Tajfel posited that individuals form self-identity through social categorization and social comparison, and enhance self-esteem through in-group favoritism. Turner further developed the self-categorization theory, exploring how individuals engage in self-categorization, identity transformation, and dynamism in different contexts (Turner, 1987). This theoretical framework provides an essential perspective for analyzing the identity recognition of film characters.

From the perspective of social identity theory, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the identity recognition issues in "The Grandmaster". Ip Man's identity transformations in different social roles, such as transitioning from a husband and father within his family to a

grandmaster in the martial arts world, and then to a national symbol, reflect his self-categorization and identity recognition in various contexts (Chen, 2017). This dynamic and diverse identity demonstrates the complex roles and multiple identities individuals hold in society. Additionally, other characters in the film, such as Gong Er and Ma San, also display rich identity recognition issues. Gong Er's struggle between family honor and personal pursuit, and Ma San's choices between loyalty and betrayal, are all aspects that can be deeply explored through social identity theory (Wang, 2016).

Although previous research has revealed the narrative strategies and identity recognition issues in biographical films, specific analysis of "The Grandmaster" remains insufficient. Existing studies mainly focus on the film's artistic achievements and visual style, lacking systematic analysis of its narrative strategies and identity recognition. Particularly, the in-depth exploration of character identity transformation and recognition through the framework of social identity theory requires further study.

Research Gaps
In biographical films, narrative strategies not only determine the way stories are presented but also directly influence the audience's understanding and identification with the characters' identities. Although extensive research has explored the narrative strategies and social identity issues in biographical films, there is still a lack of in-depth analysis of specific cases. This paper, from the perspective of social identity theory, focuses on the Chinese biographical film "The Grandmaster" and aims to fill this research gap.

Existing research on film narratives primarily focuses on Western biographical films, with relatively little attention to the narrative strategies of Chinese biographical films. Li Mei (2015) pointed out in her study of Chinese biographical films that these films balance artistic expression and cultural heritage in their historical representation and character portrayal, showcasing unique narrative characteristics. However, these studies predominantly approach the films from the perspectives of cultural heritage and historical representation, paying less attention to how narrative strategies in biographical films affect character identity recognition and the dynamic changes in social identity. Particularly for films like "The Grandmaster", which feature complex narrative structures and multiple perspectives, there is a lack of systematic analysis and in-depth discussion.

Social identity theory, proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, has wide applications in social psychology, but its application in film studies, especially in biographical films, remains relatively limited. Although some scholars have attempted to apply social identity theory to film studies, such as Chen (2017), who analyzed cultural heritage and identity transformation in Ip Man films through social identity theory, these studies mostly remain at the theoretical level and lack in-depth analysis of specific film texts. Especially for a biographical film like "The Grandmaster", existing research rarely systematically explores the relationship between its narrative strategies and character identity recognition.

"The Grandmaster", as a successful biographical film, employs various narrative strategies, including nonlinear narrative, multiple narratives, and rich cultural symbols. Through these techniques, the film portrays Ip Man's journey from an ordinary martial arts enthusiast to a grandmaster. However, existing research mainly focuses on the film's artistic achievements

and visual style, lacking systematic analysis of its narrative strategies and identity recognition issues. Wong (2013) and Zhang (2014) discussed the visual style and cultural symbols in "The Grandmaster", respectively, but did not deeply explore the relationship between its narrative strategies and character identity recognition. Additionally, although some studies suggest that the film enhances the three-dimensionality and realism of characters through multiple perspectives Wang (2016), how exactly these narrative strategies showcase Ip Man's identity transformation and recognition process remains to be further studied.

Social identity theory provides an essential framework for understanding the dynamic changes in character identity and social identity in "The Grandmaster". Ip Man's identity transformations in different social roles, such as transitioning from a husband and father within his family to a grandmaster in the martial arts world, and then to a national symbol, reflect his self-categorization and identity recognition in various contexts (Chen, 2017). This dynamic and diverse identity demonstrates the complex roles and multiple identities individuals hold in society. However, existing research rarely uses social identity theory to systematically analyze the narrative strategies of "The Grandmaster" and reveal the dynamic process of character identity recognition.

Moreover, other characters in the film, such as Gong Er and Ma San, also display rich identity recognition issues. Gong Er's struggle between family honor and personal pursuit and Ma San's choices between loyalty and betrayal are all aspects that can be deeply explored through social identity theory (Wang, 2016). Existing research mostly focuses on the single analysis of individual characters, lacking systematic study of overall narrative strategies and multi-character identity recognition.

A review of existing literature reveals that although studies have explored narrative strategies and identity issues in biographical films, there is still a lack of specific analysis on "The Grandmaster." Particularly, in-depth research on character identity transformation and recognition within the framework of social identity theory remains insufficient. The innovation of this study lies in combining social identity theory with the narrative strategies of biographical films, providing a new analytical perspective that helps to uncover identity issues in biographical films. This study systematically analyzes the narrative strategies of "The Grandmaster" from the perspective of social identity theory, exploring the dynamic changes in character identity recognition and the construction process of social identity within the film. This research not only fills the gap in existing literature regarding case-specific analysis but also offers a new theoretical framework for narrative studies in biographical films. Through an in-depth analysis of the narrative strategies in "The Grandmaster," we can better understand how biographical films use multiple perspectives and complex narrative structures to showcase characters' multiple identities and social recognition.

The specific contributions of this study lie in its systematic analysis of the narrative strategies of the biographical film "The Grandmaster" from the perspective of social identity theory. It aims to reveal how the film constructs and conveys specific social identities through character development, plot arrangement, and visual presentation. Firstly, this study expands the research field of biographical films, filling the current gap in the application of social identity theory to film narrative analysis. It provides new theoretical frameworks and methods for the narrative study of biographical films. Secondly, through a case study of "The Grandmaster,"

this research demonstrates how cinematic art reflects and influences the audience's perception of social identity, thus revealing the role of film as a cultural product in the construction of social identity (Smith, 2012). Lastly, the results of this study not only contribute to a deeper academic understanding of the narrative functions of biographical films and provide theoretical support for filmmakers, but also offer new perspectives for both creators and audiences. This helps them better understand and utilize narrative strategies, enhancing the artistic expression and social impact of biographical films, and promoting a multi-layered understanding of film art and social culture.

Data Collection and Methodology

This study will adopt qualitative research methods, including textual analysis and case studies, to explore the narrative strategies of the biographical film "The Grandmaster" and its identity issues from the perspective of social identity theory.

Textual analysis is one of the primary methods of this study. By closely examining the film "The Grandmaster", the research will investigate its narrative strategies and the construction process of character identity. The textual analysis will focus on narrative structure, narrative perspective, narrative techniques, and cultural symbols. It will emphasize key scenes, character dialogues, and visual symbols within the film to reveal their underlying social identity significance. Additionally, the study will explore the narrative strategies of "The Grandmaster", particularly its use of nonlinear narrative, multiple perspectives, and cultural symbols. This narrative analysis will reveal how the film uses complex narrative structures and diverse perspectives to portray multiple identities and social recognition.

The researcher will also use a case study approach for an in-depth analysis of "The Grandmaster", examining the dynamic changes in character identity and the construction process of social identity in biographical films. The case study will incorporate social identity theory to analyze the identity transformations and recognition issues of the main characters (such as Ip Man, Gong Er, and Ma San), examining how their identities change in different social contexts.

The data collection will include film text analysis, literature review, and expert interviews to ensure the comprehensiveness and depth of the research.

By closely examining the film text of "The Grandmaster", the study will gather firsthand information about narrative strategies and character identity recognition. This includes multiple viewings of the film, detailed recording of key scenes, dialogues, and visual symbols; transcription of important dialogues and scenes into detailed textual records; and thorough analysis of key scenes to explore narrative strategies and character identity construction. The analysis will also cover visual symbols in the film, such as cinematography, set design, and costumes, revealing their roles in constructing character identities.

After organizing and reviewing the collected literature to form a detailed introduction to the research background and theoretical framework, the researcher will use academic databases (such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and CNKI) to search for relevant literature on social identity theory, biographical films, and narrative strategies. The focus will be on analyzing research literature related to "The Grandmaster", discussing the gaps in existing research and the

innovations of this study. Through reviewing relevant academic literature, the study will gather background information on social identity theory and biographical film narrative strategies.

By interviewing film scholars and experts in related fields, the researcher will obtain in-depth insights into the narrative strategies and character identity recognition in "The Grandmaster". The researcher will design a semi-structured interview outline covering issues related to narrative strategies, character identity, and social identity theory. The interviewees will include film scholars, sociologists, and cultural studies experts, ensuring the authority and professionalism of the interview content. The interviews will be conducted face-to-face and online, with detailed records of the experts' views and insights. Finally, the interview content will be organized and analyzed, combined with the film text and relevant literature, to form a comprehensive analysis of the narrative strategies and character identity recognition in "The Grandmaster".

By conducting a detailed analysis of the film text of "The Grandmaster", the study will examine its narrative structure, analyze the film's timeline, explore the use of nonlinear narrative, analyze different character perspectives, and discuss the role of multiple perspectives in character identity recognition. The study will also analyze the narrative rhythm of the film, discussing its role in emotional expression and character development. By analyzing the main characters (such as Ip Man, Gong Er, and Ma San) in detail, the study will explore their identity transformations and recognition issues, self-categorization and identity recognition processes in different contexts, character dialogues' roles in constructing identities, and the impact of social contexts on character identity recognition. Additionally, the analysis of visual symbols in the film, including cinematography, set design, and costumes, will explore their roles in constructing character identities and their cultural significance.

This study will systematically analyze the narrative strategies of the biographical film "The Grandmaster" and its identity issues from the perspective of social identity theory using qualitative research methods and multidimensional data collection. By integrating film text analysis, relevant literature, and expert interviews, the study will reveal how the film uses multiple perspectives and complex narrative structures to depict multiple identities and social recognition. The research findings will provide a new theoretical framework and methodology for the study of narrative strategies in biographical films, offering theoretical support for filmmakers to enhance the artistic expression and social impact of biographical films.

Findings
This study, through detailed textual analysis of the biographical film The Grandmaster, literature review, and expert interviews, reveals the unique aspects of the film in terms of narrative strategies and identity recognition. The Grandmaster skillfully depicts the tension between cultural heritage and personal growth through its complex narrative techniques. The main characters, especially Ip Man and Gong Er, experience profound internal conflicts and struggles with identity recognition as they balance personal growth with the preservation of traditional culture. This tension serves as the core driving force behind character development and becomes one of the film's primary narrative themes. The findings of this study demonstrate how The Grandmaster constructs and conveys issues of social identity and

identity recognition through its complex narrative structure, multiple perspectives, and cultural symbols.

I. Nonlinear Narrative and Identity Recognition

The Grandmaster employs nonlinear narrative, interweaving different time points to portray Ip Man's growth and identity changes. This narrative strategy breaks away from traditional linear storytelling, allowing the audience to understand the character's multiple identities across various timelines. Nonlinear narrative not only enhances the film's artistic appeal but also provides a deeper understanding of Ip Man's identity recognition process in different contexts (Wong, 2013). For instance, the film begins by showcasing Ip Man's fame in the martial arts world and then uses flashbacks to depict his life in Foshan. This temporal interweaving enables the audience to witness Ip Man's journey from an ordinary person to a grandmaster, understanding his multiple identities in family, martial arts, and society. Through this method, the film successfully conveys the diversity and dynamic nature of Ip Man's identity (Zhang, 2014).

II. Multiple Narratives and Character Development

The Grandmaster uses multiple narrative techniques, allowing the audience to understand Ip Man from various characters' perspectives, thereby enhancing the three-dimensionality and realism of the characters. This multi-perspective narrative technique enriches the story's layers and reveals the complex social relationships and identity recognition issues among the characters (Chen, 2017). For example, the film presents Gong Er's adherence to family honor and her feelings for Ip Man through her perspective. Gong Er's struggle between family duty and personal pursuit reflects her identity transformation and recognition in different social contexts. Through Gong Er's perspective, the audience gains a deeper understanding of her identity recognition process as a female martial artist and her conflicts between family responsibility and personal emotions (Wang, 2016).

Additionally, Ma San's narrative line depicts his choices between loyalty and betrayal. Through his story, the audience can observe his struggles with social roles and eventual identity recognition. Ma San's character is not merely a simple antagonist; his complexity and multifaceted nature are fully explored through the multiple narrative techniques (Chen, 2017).

III. Cultural Symbols and Identity Construction

Cultural symbols in the film, such as martial arts, rituals, and traditional music, not only enhance the film's artistic appeal but also play a crucial role in constructing character identities. These symbols convey the social identities and cultural backgrounds of characters like Ip Man through visual and auditory means (Li, 2015). For instance, the frequent martial arts duels in the film showcase Ip Man's martial prowess and, through the cultural symbol of martial arts, convey his social identity and values. These scenes highlight Ip Man's status in the martial arts community and his adherence to traditional martial virtues, emphasizing his identity recognition and social role (Wong, 2013).

IV. Social Context and Identity Transformation

From the perspective of social identity theory, this study reveals the dynamic changes in identity recognition and the construction process of social identity in The Grandmaster. Ip Man's identity transformations in different social roles, such as transitioning from a husband

and father within his family to a grandmaster in the martial arts world and then to a national symbol, reflect his self-categorization and identity recognition in various contexts (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, in his life in Foshan, Ip Man's identity is primarily that of a family pillar and an ordinary citizen. However, as the social environment changes and he rises in the martial arts world, he gradually becomes a grandmaster and gains new identity recognition in a broader social and historical context. Through this identity transformation, the film illustrates Ip Man's self-categorization process in different social contexts, revealing the dynamic and complex nature of social identity (Turner, 1987).

V. Character Dialogues and Identity Recognition
Analyzing the dialogues between characters in the film reveals their importance in constructing character identities and conveying social recognition. For example, the dialogues between Ip Man and Gong Er not only showcase their emotions and relationships but also communicate their respective identity recognitions and social roles (Chen, 2017). Gong Er's references to family honor and her father's teachings in her dialogues with Ip Man reflect her recognition and adherence to her family identity. Similarly, Ip Man's dialogues reveal his understanding of martial arts and commitment to traditional values, illustrating his identity recognition process and social role (Wang, 2016).

VI. Expert Interviews and Theoretical Support
Through interviews with film scholars and experts in related fields, this study further validates the findings from the film text analysis. These experts provided in-depth insights into the narrative strategies and character identity recognition in The Grandmaster, supporting the study's conclusions (Li, 2015). The experts noted that The Grandmaster effectively showcases the multiple identities and social recognition processes of characters like Ip Man through nonlinear narrative and multiple perspectives. The use of cultural symbols and social contexts not only enhances the film's artistic expression but also plays a significant role in constructing character identities (Wong, 2013).

Conclusion
This paper explores existing literature on social identity theory, narrative strategies in biographical films, and related studies on "The Grandmaster". Through the lens of social identity theory, this paper reveals the dynamic changes in character identity recognition and the construction of social identity in the film. The filmmakers employed nonlinear narrative, multiple perspectives, and rich cultural symbols, successfully depicting the identity transformation and recognition process of characters such as Ip Man. By combining the perspective of social identity theory, a deeper understanding of the narrative strategies in "The Grandmaster" and their role in character identity recognition can be achieved.

These findings not only provide a new theoretical framework and methodology for the narrative study of biographical films but also offer valuable theoretical support for filmmakers, helping them better understand and utilize narrative strategies to enhance the artistic expression and social impact of biographical films. Future research should further explore identity recognition issues in biographical films, especially through multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks, to provide new perspectives and methods for film studies.

Acknowledgments

References

Chen, Y. (2017). Identity transformation and cultural inheritance in Ip Man: A sociocultural perspective. Journal of Chinese Cinematic Arts, 15(2), 101-118.

Custen, G. F. (1992). Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History. Rutgers University Press.

Li, M. (2015). The narrative characteristics and cultural heritage of Chinese biographical films. Chinese Film Research, 12(4), 45-56.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), Psychology of Intergroup Relations (pp. 7-24). Nelson-Hall.

Smith, J. (2012). Cinematic narratives and social identity: A framework for analysis. Journal of Film Studies, 24(3), 345-362.

Turner, J. C. (1987). Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory. Basil Blackwell.

Wang, L. (2016). The portrayal of identity and conflict in The Grandmaster. Asian Cinema Studies, 10(3), 123-140.

Wiley, C. (2011). Biographical films and the art of historical storytelling. Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 31(1), 55-75.

Wong, K. W. (2013). The Grandmaster: A cinematic journey of martial arts and identity. Hong Kong Film Review, 9(1), 77-89.

Zhang, X. (2014). Cultural symbols and identity in The Grandmaster. International Journal of Film Studies, 11(2), 89-104.