



The Ontological Study of TV Series “A Lifelong Journey”: The Intersection of Narrative, Performance, and Culture

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Abstract

Background and Aim: *A Lifelong Journey* is a landmark Chinese television drama that reflects the socio-political and cultural transformations of modern China over the past five decades. This study aims to explore the series' narrative and performative strategies, its role in cultural dissemination, and its impact on audience engagement through an ontological lens.

Materials and Methods: The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative methods such as literature review, textual analysis, and interviews with quantitative audience surveys. This framework provides a comprehensive analysis of the series' thematic depth, character development, and audience reception.

Results: The findings reveal that *A Lifelong Journey* successfully integrates historical authenticity with relatable storytelling, achieving record-breaking viewership and critical acclaim. The series' nuanced performances and high production values contributed significantly to its success, while its cultural resonance enabled it to engage both domestic and international audiences.

Conclusion: *A Lifelong Journey* is a cultural artifact that bridges personal struggles with collective memory, reflecting China's modernization process. It highlights the potential of television dramas as a medium for cultural exchange and underscores the importance of narrative and performative innovation in fostering audience connection.

Keywords: A Lifelong Journey; Television Drama; Cultural Dissemination; Narrative Analysis; Performance Art

Introduction

The TV series *A Lifelong Journey* is a long novel by the contemporary famous writer Liang Xiaosheng. Published by China Youth Publishing House in 2017, the book won the Second Wu Cheng'en Long Novel Award, and in August of the same year, it won the Tenth Mao Dun Literature Award. In 2022, the TV series *A Lifelong Journey* directed by Li Lu and Yuan Junping, adapted by Wang Hailing and Wang Daou, was aired on the Comprehensive Channel of China Central Television.

Television drama art emerged along with the development of television broadcasting art. Starting from television short dramas, and medium-length dramas, to television serials, it has increasingly gained attention from the public over more than half a century, exerting influence on various aspects of daily life from different perspectives. The performance creation of actors is a crucial aspect of television drama creation and a key factor in determining the success of a television drama. Outstanding television drama works often prompt discussions about specific actors or characters they portray, highlighting the significance and value of performance art in actor creation or the creation of the entire television drama (Duan, 2023).

With the arrival of the new century and the advent of the internet and the digital age, television drama development has entered a new era. Simultaneously, propelled by new platforms, television drama creation has made significant progress and development in terms of themes, styles, and genres, as well as the requirements and advancements in filming and technical equipment. Academic theories related to television dramas have achieved considerable success in studying various aspects such as the attributes, narrative, temporal and spatial elements, and aesthetic aspects of television dramas (Fang, 2023). However, research on performance art, an integral component of television dramas, appears to be scarce and insufficient in terms of research methods, approaches, and the ability to continuously innovate the characteristics of performance art, defining its unique value and future development direction. Most research efforts are focused on drama and film performance, while television drama performance, which should ideally attract



enthusiasm from billions of viewers worldwide, seems relatively neglected. Television drama performance art has long followed the development trajectory of film and theater performance art. Although it is understandable from the perspective of the development pattern of performance art, as all three share similarities in fundamental tasks, creative requirements, and objectives, research on the characteristics, presentation methods, and positioning of television drama performance falls short.

This article starts from the perspective of the creation and manifestation methods of television drama performance, focusing on the relationship between naturalistic and character-based performances in the creation of actor performances in television dramas. It argues that television drama performance creation not only requires actors' naturalistic involvement but also demands depth in character-based creation. There exists a dialectical relationship of contradiction, unity, transformation, progression, integration, and extension between them. The dialectical relationship between naturalistic and character-based performance creation in television drama enables actors to continuously deepen their theoretical basis for portraying their characters.

The rationale and significance of the content to be discussed in this article are as follows:

1. Over the years, the practice and creation of television dramas have flourished, with significant advancements in both production and broadcasting platforms in China. From producing and broadcasting thousands of episodes annually in the last century to tens of thousands of episodes per year in this century, including the introduction of a large number of excellent foreign television dramas, the development of the Chinese television drama industry currently ranks among the best. *A Lifelong Journey*. However, theoretical research on television dramas, especially in-depth studies on specific topics, still requires continuous attention, development, and progress.

2. The art of television drama performance has long drawn inspiration from and followed the footsteps of the development of film and theatrical performance arts, both in practice and theory. So far, theoretical studies on television drama performance art have utilized concrete analyses, such as those in *A Lifelong Journey*, to research cultural values, artistic creation, and character development. By examining television drama art from both historical and contemporary perspectives and employing diverse viewpoints, multidimensional approaches, and various methods, a comprehensive evaluation of television drama art has been conducted. This approach aims to reconstruct the developmental trajectory of television dramas and provide an objective and impartial research assessment of the television drama *A Lifelong Journey*.

Objectives

1. To explore how themes of real life and human nature are portrayed through narrative and character development in *A Lifelong Journey*.
2. To examine how the performances of the cast and the creative team's artistic innovations enhance the series' impact and audience resonance.
3. To analyze how *A Lifelong Journey* reflects China's social transformation and modernization process through cultural dissemination and a global perspective.

Literature Review

The TV series *A Lifelong Journey* is based on the acclaimed novel by Liang Xiaosheng, published in 2017 and recipient of the prestigious Tenth Mao Dun Literature Award. This adaptation, directed by Li Lu and Yuan Junping and first broadcast on CCTV in 2022, marks a significant cultural milestone in the landscape of Chinese television dramas. The series chronicles the lives of ordinary individuals against the backdrop of China's socio-political and cultural transformations over the past five decades, offering a rich narrative that intertwines personal struggles with historical events (Liang, 2019). Its focus on universal themes such as resilience, family loyalty, and social progress has resonated deeply with audiences, earning widespread critical acclaim and record-breaking viewership.

Television drama art has undergone significant evolution alongside advancements in broadcast media and digital platforms. Beginning with short-form dramas and progressing to serialized productions, the medium has developed into a prominent cultural phenomenon, influencing various aspects of daily life.





Particularly in the 21st century, the integration of sophisticated production techniques and innovative narrative strategies has elevated the artistic and cultural value of television dramas (Fang, 2023; Huo & Zhang, 2022). However, despite these advancements, academic attention to the art of television performance remains limited. Research has primarily focused on film and theatrical performance, often overlooking the unique characteristics, methods, and challenges inherent to television drama performance. This gap is especially pronounced given the medium's global reach and its ability to reflect and shape societal values (Duan, 2023).

This study seeks to address a core research problem: how does the TV series *A Lifelong Journey* employ narrative, performance, and cultural representation to reflect and influence the evolving socio-cultural identity of modern China? This question gains significance in the context of *A Lifelong Journey*, serving not only as an artistic achievement but also as a cultural artifact that encapsulates the complexities of modern Chinese life. Through its realistic portrayal of human experiences and ethical dilemmas, the series provides a lens for understanding both individual agency and collective memory during periods of rapid societal change (Li, 2022; Jiang & Zhao, 2022).

The importance of this research lies in its multifaceted contributions to the academic and artistic discourse surrounding television dramas. First, it emphasizes the critical role of performance art in engaging audiences and bringing depth to narrative themes. The series exemplifies the dialectical relationship between naturalistic and character-based performances, where actors balance authentic emotional expression with nuanced character development (Duan, 2023). By analyzing these techniques, the study sheds light on how innovative performance strategies can enhance the impact of television dramas.

Second, this research underscores the broader cultural significance of television dramas in fostering global understanding and cultural exchange. The international success of *A Lifelong Journey*, bolstered by Disney's acquisition of its overseas broadcasting rights, highlights the potential of television dramas to act as bridges between diverse cultural contexts (Huo & Zhang, 2022). By exploring universal themes and authentic narratives, the series showcases China's modernization and contributes to a deeper global appreciation of its cultural heritage.

Finally, this study highlights the benefits of television dramas as platforms for societal reflection. By addressing questions such as "What should people be like in reality?" *A Lifelong Journey* encourages audiences to engage with moral and ethical issues, fostering a deeper understanding of humanity's shared experiences and challenges (Liang, 2019). This research, therefore, provides a valuable framework for analyzing how television dramas can simultaneously entertain and educate, serving as both artistic achievements and vehicles for cultural and ideological dissemination.

In summary, this study aims to bridge gaps in the current literature by examining the narrative, performative, and cultural dimensions of *A Lifelong Journey* through an ontological lens. It highlights the series' contributions to both artistic practice and cultural discourse, offering insights into the evolving role of television dramas in reflecting and shaping modern society.

Conceptual Framework

The model is constructed based on literature research. Within it, the background of the era, social context, and media channels are factors influencing the development or acceleration of the research subject. Cultural value, artistic creation, and character development are the results of changes in the research subject. The application of this research model in the study will demonstrate the following functions: 1. Description of environment and conditions; 2. Historical status review; 3. Analysis of new social and cultural factors; 4. Summary of object states data; 5. Confirmation of analysis results.

Thus, the following textual discussion framework can be formed as Figure 1.



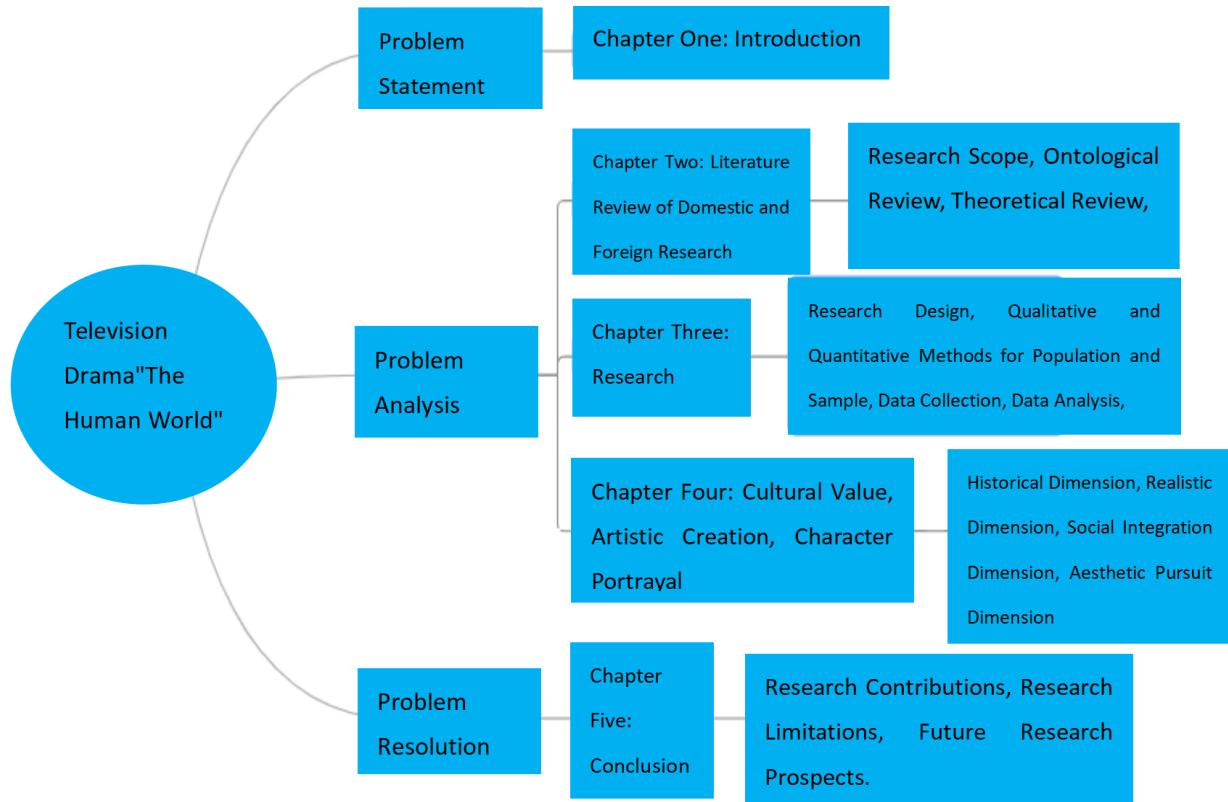


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Note: Constructed by the researcher

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed research design that combines qualitative and quantitative methods to gain comprehensive insights. Qualitative research is utilized to explore the essence and attributes of phenomena through methods such as literature review, historical research, and observation. A literature review is used to examine existing academic works and relevant texts, providing the theoretical foundation for the study. Through these methods, the researcher gains a deeper understanding of the topic by drawing on prior studies and established knowledge.

In contrast, quantitative research is employed to test hypotheses and analyze variables through measurable and statistical methods. The premise of quantitative research is that phenomena exist independently of the researcher and follow inherent, repeatable patterns. This approach allows for the identification of causal relationships between variables and the quantification of different dimensions of the research subject. In this study, the quantitative approach is applied using questionnaire surveys, which help gather data from a large sample and analyze group-level trends and patterns.

2. Data Collecting

The data collection for this study is multi-faceted and includes both qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a well-rounded understanding of the research topic. Key strategies for data collection include:

Questionnaire Surveys: These surveys provide broad, quantitative insights into the opinions and behaviors of a large sample of respondents, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of social dynamics and meaning generation.

Interviews: In-depth interviews allow for a more qualitative exploration of individual perspectives and personal experiences, offering rich data for analysis.



Observations: Observational data help capture real-world interactions and behaviors that may not be fully conveyed through self-reported measures.

Literature Review: A review of existing academic works and theoretical texts helps contextualize the study's findings within the broader field of research.

These data collection methods are designed to complement each other, combining the depth of qualitative research with the breadth of quantitative approaches.

3. Qualitative Research

Qualitative research in this study involves methods such as literature review, historical research, textual analysis, interviews, and observation. These methods allow the researcher to explore the meanings, contexts, and processes underlying the phenomena being studied. Textual analysis is used to examine the content of relevant works and media, providing a deeper understanding of how narratives and representations influence the study's focus. Interviews and observations are employed to capture personal insights and real-world experiences, which add qualitative depth to the data gathered.

4. Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach is adopted for data analysis, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the collected data. Qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, will be analyzed using content analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights. For the quantitative data obtained through questionnaire surveys, statistical methods will be used to interpret the data. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, will be calculated to summarize the respondents' characteristics and answers.

Statistical software like SPSS will be used for more advanced data analysis, including inferential statistics. This includes one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and multiple regression analysis, which will be employed to test hypotheses and examine relationships between variables. These statistical techniques provide a robust framework for validating the research hypotheses and achieving the study's objectives.

Results

The success of *A Lifelong Journey* during its 2022 Spring Festival premiere marked a significant milestone in Chinese television drama history. The series garnered widespread acclaim for its ability to connect deeply with audiences across multiple sectors, including politics, business, academia, and the military, and achieved remarkable viewership metrics on both traditional and digital platforms. The following sections expand on its achievements in viewership impact, performance excellence, and cultural influence.

1. Record-breaking viewership and Audience Impact

The broadcast of *A Lifelong Journey* on CCTV-1 set a new benchmark for prime-time television dramas in China, achieving the highest ratings in nearly eight years with a CVB platform peak rating of 3.351. On the iQiyi streaming platform, the series surpassed 10,000 in popularity, and its first-round viewership exceeded an impressive 400 million, demonstrating its ability to captivate a diverse audience. The series resonated deeply with viewers, who praised its exploration of themes such as human nature, loyalty, and resilience, as well as its authentic depiction of ordinary life. Many noted that the drama provided not only entertainment but also a reflective lens through which audiences could "see the world and oneself in the dazzling light."

The exceptional audience response highlights the series' alignment with Liang Xiaosheng's philosophy of "good-person literature," which prioritizes the portrayal of moral struggles and human virtues. By presenting relatable narratives rooted in daily life, the series transcended its medium to become a cultural phenomenon, sparking discussions on social values and historical reflection. The widespread engagement across sectors underscores its significance as a unifying cultural product that resonated with both grassroots audiences and intellectual elites.

2. Excellence in Creative Execution and Performance



The success of *A Lifelong Journey* is attributed to the collaborative efforts of a highly skilled creative team and a cast of talented actors. With over 100 roles, the series relied on what the director described as the "four pillars and eight columns," comprising the Zhou siblings, Zhou Bingkun's wife Zheng Juan, and a supporting ensemble of exceptional performers. These actors, including Ding Yongdai, Saina, Huang Xiaolei, Cheng Taile, Sui Junbo, Song Chunli, Yu Zhen, and Zhang Kaili, delivered nuanced performances that brought depth and authenticity to their characters.

The director emphasized the adaptability and versatility of the cast, noting their ability to convincingly embody complex roles. For example, Song Chunli's portrayal of Li Suhua, the matriarch of the Zhou family, exemplified the quiet strength and sacrifice of a generation, while Yu Zhen's depiction of Zhou Bingkun captured the internal conflicts of a man caught between familial obligations and personal aspirations. These performances were not only praised by audiences but also contributed to the series' broader thematic exploration of loyalty, love, and resilience.

The involvement of industry veterans further elevated the series' quality. Art director Wang Shaolin, known for his work on *Full of Love Courtyard*, brought meticulous attention to the design of period-accurate settings, while cinematography director Zhang Wenjie, recognized for *Awakening Era*, ensured the visual storytelling was both dynamic and evocative. Editing director Cao Weijie, acclaimed for *Let the Bullets Fly*, skillfully integrated the narrative's multiple timelines, creating a seamless and engaging viewing experience. These contributions underscore the high production standards that set *A Lifelong Journey* apart from other contemporary dramas.

3. Cultural and Global Influence

Beyond its domestic success, *A Lifelong Journey* also made significant strides in cultural export. Approximately a month into its filming, Disney acquired the overseas broadcasting rights, signaling the series' potential to resonate with international audiences. This strategic move allowed the drama, which reflects 50 years of economic and social transformation in Northeast China, to showcase authentic Chinese narratives to a global audience.

The international reception of the series highlights its role in promoting "Chinese stories" on the world stage. By addressing universal themes of human resilience and social change, the series bridges cultural divides and fosters a deeper understanding of China's unique modernization process. This achievement aligns with the broader goal of constructing a mainstream national imagination, as articulated by director Li Lu, who described the series as a tribute to the era.

The ideological dimension of the series further enriches its cultural significance. By focusing on ordinary lives within a historical framework, the series not only celebrates individual agency but also underscores collective progress, making it a poignant representation of contemporary Chinese identity. Its ability to balance personal and societal narratives positions it as a benchmark for future television dramas seeking to combine entertainment with cultural resonance.

Conclusion

This study provides an ontological exploration of *A Lifelong Journey*, analyzing its cultural, social, and artistic dimensions through qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The qualitative approach reveals how the narrative, character development, and thematic depth reflect broader social realities and human experiences. By utilizing a literature review and historical research, the study contextualizes the series within the larger framework of Chinese television drama evolution, highlighting its role in portraying critical historical moments, such as the Cultural Revolution and the reform and opening-up period. The focus on textual analysis further illustrates the intricacies of character portrayal, emphasizing the dialectical relationship between naturalistic and character-based performance.

Quantitative methods, including questionnaire surveys, demonstrate the series' widespread impact on viewers. Statistical analysis of audience feedback reveals a strong emotional resonance, with themes such as "human nature, loyalty, and vitality of life" cited as key highlights. The integration of expert interviews and observational data underscores the series' professional achievements, particularly in performance, cinematography, and storytelling. The interdisciplinary nature of this study—drawing on music aesthetics,



communication studies, and new historicism—provides a multidimensional understanding of how *A Lifelong Journey* serves as a bridge between personal struggles and collective memory.

However, the discussion also acknowledges certain limitations. While the series excels in its depiction of historical and social contexts, some characters lack sufficient depth, creating a sense of narrative flatness in certain aspects. Despite this, the series remains a testament to the enduring power of storytelling in capturing the essence of human resilience and societal transformation.

Discussion

The results of the research found that *A Lifelong Journey* portrays themes of real life and human nature with remarkable depth and authenticity through its narrative and character development. The series weaves personal stories into the fabric of China's socio-political history, highlighting individual struggles and triumphs amid broader societal changes. Key themes such as resilience, familial loyalty, moral dilemmas, and personal growth are explored through the lived experiences of the Zhou family, making these themes relatable to viewers across diverse demographics.

This may be because the narrative employs a multi-generational approach, which not only situates characters within their historical contexts but also examines how these contexts shape their decisions and values. For instance, Zhou Bingyi's political ambitions and Zhou Bingkun's focus on family responsibilities offer contrasting yet complementary perspectives on loyalty and sacrifice. Consistent with the concept of ethical realism (Jiang & Zhao, 2022), the series effectively uses relatable characters to engage audiences emotionally while prompting reflection on universal questions of morality and human nature.

These findings underscore the series' capacity to resonate deeply with viewers by reflecting on their lived experiences and broader social challenges. By doing so, the series serves as a mirror for its audience, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of the shared human condition.

The research also revealed that the performances of the cast and the creative team's artistic innovations significantly enhanced the series' impact and audience resonance. The actors' portrayals of complex, multi-dimensional characters contribute to the series' emotional authenticity and cultural relevance. For example, Song Chunli's performance as Li Suhua captures the quiet strength of a mother navigating the hardships of generational change, while Yu Zhen's portrayal of Zhou Bingkun reveals the psychological toll of balancing familial expectations with personal aspirations.

This may be because the creative team emphasized collaboration and attention to detail during the production process, ensuring that performances aligned closely with the series' thematic depth. The integration of naturalistic and character-based performance techniques reflects a dialectical relationship that allows actors to inhabit their roles fully, creating characters that feel both authentic and relatable (Duan, 2023). Beyond acting, the creative team's innovative use of visual storytelling, such as seamless transitions between historical and contemporary timelines, further enhances the series' narrative cohesion and emotional resonance.

These innovations underscore the importance of high production standards and collaborative artistry in television dramas, setting a benchmark for future productions seeking to balance narrative complexity with audience engagement.

Additionally, the research found that *A Lifelong Journey* effectively reflects China's social transformation and modernization process through its cultural dissemination and global perspective. The series serves as both a historical record and a cultural artifact, portraying the impact of pivotal events such as the Cultural Revolution, economic reforms, and urbanization on everyday life. By situating the Zhou family's experiences within these broader historical narratives, the series bridges personal struggles with collective memory, fostering a deeper understanding of China's modernization journey.

This may be because the series incorporates universal themes of resilience and human connection, which transcend cultural boundaries and appeal to international audiences. Disney's acquisition of the series' overseas broadcasting rights exemplifies its potential as a vehicle for cultural exchange, showcasing authentic Chinese narratives on the global stage (Huo & Zhang, 2022). The series also aligns with the





ideological aim of constructing a mainstream national imagination by celebrating individual agency within a collective framework, making it both a cultural product and a contributor to national identity.

Consistent with the work of Feng and Zhou (2024), the series balances collectivist and individualist values, offering insights into the evolving cultural identity of modern China. Its emphasis on ordinary lives within historical contexts makes it a poignant representation of how societal transformation affects personal and family dynamics.

The discussion highlights how *A Lifelong Journey* succeeds in achieving its objectives by intertwining personal narratives with historical contexts, leveraging innovative performances and production techniques, and contributing to cultural exchange. The series exemplifies the potential of television dramas to serve as platforms for artistic expression, cultural representation, and societal reflection. These findings not only reinforce the significance of *A Lifelong Journey* as a cultural artifact but also provide a framework for analyzing the broader role of television dramas in shaping and reflecting contemporary societies.

Recommendation

1. General Recommendations

Balancing Historical Authenticity and Relatable Storytelling: Television drama creators should prioritize integrating historical contexts with relatable narratives, as exemplified by *A Lifelong Journey*. This approach helps audiences connect with the broader societal themes while staying engaged with the personal stories of the characters.

2. Strengthening Actor Training in Performance Techniques: Acting programs should emphasize both naturalistic and character-based techniques, enabling actors to convey complex emotions and nuanced character arcs. This dual focus can enhance the depth and relatability of performances in television dramas.

3. Promoting Cultural Representation in Global Markets: Media producers and policymakers should invest in projects that highlight authentic Chinese stories, leveraging international platforms to share narratives that reflect China's modernization and cultural heritage. Such efforts can enhance the global visibility and appreciation of Chinese television dramas.

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