

Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and Patriarchal Annihilation in *Times Still Turns The Pages*: A Psychoanalytic Perspective

Xinxi Li^{1*}

¹ School of International Education of SUMC, Sichuan University of Media and Communication, Chengdu, China

Email Address

m13570186113@163.com (Xinxi Li)

*Correspondence: m13570186113@163.com

Received: 15 August 2025; **Accepted:** 6 September 2025; **Published:** 9 October 2025

Abstract:

This paper employs Lacan's symbolic order and other frameworks to analyse the characters Zheng Youjun and Zheng Youjie in *Times Still Turns The Pages*, examining how an elite Hong Kong family inflicts spiritual destruction on the children through patriarchal violence—represented by the father as a “doctor/lawyer” figure—and maternal complicity evidenced by emotional silence. Key findings include: (1) Zheng Youjie's diary entry, “I am not important” (repeated four times), serves as a textual ritual of the death drive (Todestrieb); (2) his suicide reflects a pathologically altruistic submission to the Law-of-the-Father; and (3) Zheng Youjun's hallucination in adulthood upon revisiting the diary demonstrates the lingering traumatic effect governed by Lacanian Nachträglichkeit (afterwardness), which manifests as a vengeful return within the surviving sibling.

Keywords:

Psychoanalysis, Patriarchal Oppression, Death Drive, Intergenerational Trauma Transmission, Hong Kong Cinema, Vengeful Return, Childhood Trauma

1. Introduction

Zhuo Yiqian's *Times Still Turns The Pages* (2023) dissects the inner mechanisms of Hong Kong's middle-class families, exposing the patriarchal structural violence lurking beneath their veneer of order and prestige. In this “elite manufacturing factory,” education becomes an alienated exercise of power, with the father figure acting as both disciplinarian and cultural fantasy hub [13]. This institutionalized patriarchy transcends physical violence, deeply embedded in the ideology of “raising successful children.” The family education system and structure collaborate to shape a child subject internalizing authoritative voices [1]. Trapped in this power network, children occupy a non-resistant position, their emotional and mental spaces reduced to silent receptacles. This silence stems not from inability but from language's entrenchment within power structures, rendering subjects voiceless—as [2] observed,

“true silence arises from powerlessness within the linguistic system” [4]. Children express themselves only through diaries, as seen in Zheng Youjie’s childhood repetition: “Daddy won’t hit me anymore.” This diary text serves as a Lacanian “symptom” of unspeakable trauma [10].

Zheng Youjie’s diary in the film is not merely a retrospective text but embodies the structure of psychological trauma through its fragmented, repetitive, and temporally distorted nature. As Caruth observes, “trauma resides not in the initial experience but in its delayed intrusion into consciousness, its repetitive emergence” [3]. Laplanche’s *Nachträglichkeit* further posits that trauma’s true impact often involves later re-encoding of the original event, forming deferred violence [11].

For instance, childhood beatings do not immediately constitute psychological trauma; instead, it is only when Zheng Youjun revisits the diary years later and “renames” his father’s actions that violence achieves its spiritual registration. This delayed reconstruction mechanism aligns with Lacan’s assertion: “the Real, as a fissure, emerges only through the failure of the symbolic system” [10]. Thus, the diary is not a memory of trauma but its witness—a living archive continually reactivated [15]. Trauma, therefore, originates not from a singular event but from the prolonged denial of subjectivity within the symbolic order: the impossibility of failure, crying, or “disappointing.”

Zheng Youjie harbored both fear and a yearning for his father’s approval, a conflict that epitomizes Benjamin and Lacan’s discussions on the fragmentation of the subject: children are not simply oppressed but, in the process of “becoming normalized individuals,” internalize patriarchal logic as part of their own identity structure [2]. This internalization of patriarchal logic leads to a distorted spiritual devotion in subsequent generations, manifesting as a blend of “pathological altruism” and a “martyr complex”: children sacrifice their own desires to preserve family unity and meet parental expectations, adopting a “self-annihilating identity strategy” [14,8]. This represents not just an ethical collapse but a collapse of the very structure of the psyche.

While trauma studies have expanded beyond Freudian repression theory to incorporate Lacan’s symbolic order and mechanisms of *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardness) in recent years, with extensive exploration in literature, memoirs, and other fields [3,11,10], there remains a lack of theoretical engagement at the micro-narrative level regarding family trauma in East Asia—particularly in Hong Kong’s middle-class society, where patriarchal violence intersects with the education system.

Notably, no systematic scholarly work has yet analyzed *Times Still Turns The Pages* as a trauma text through psychoanalytic interpretation, especially failing to uncover the inner workings between the film’s diary texts, patriarchal discourse, and the death drive. Drawing on Freud’s concept of the death drive (*Todestrieb*), Lacan’s symbolic order and *Nachträglichkeit* theory, and Barbara Oakley et al.’s notion of “pathological altruism,” this paper conducts a close reading of the dual-narrative diary texts of Zheng Youjun and Zheng Youjie. It reveals how Hong Kong’s elite families perpetrate children’s spiritual annihilation through patriarchal violence (embodied by Zheng’s father as the “doctor/lawyer” archetype) and maternal complicity (Zheng’s mother’s emotional silence). This present study argues that Zheng Youjie’s repeated writing of “I am not important” serves as a textual ritual of his death drive, that his suicide represents both a pathological spiritual devotion to the Law-of-the-Father and a voiceless testimony to trauma, and that Zheng Youjun’s post-adulthood

hallucinations of his brother confirm how Lacan's *Nachträglichkeit* erodes survivors, constituting a vengeful return of trauma.

2. Theoretical Review

2.1. *Private Diary*

A private diary refers to a daily record written by an individual in a private space. Typically, it is not intended for external readers and serves as a powerful means of self-expression, self-analysis, and emotional catharsis. In the psychoanalytic context, a private diary is regarded as an outlet for subconscious language. It records not only overt experiences but also reveals repressed and denied desires and traumas. It is not merely a form of self-narration but also a process through which the subject tentatively constructs the “self” within the framework of language and the unconscious. Lacan argues that language always belongs to the “Other.” Although a private diary may seem private, it always harbors an attempt to express itself to the “patriarchal order” or “symbolic authority.” To this end, a private diary can also serve as a medium for trauma to “return” (*Nachträglichkeit*). It is a temporal container for traumatic memories, recording “unspeakable” symptoms.

In film texts, private diaries often serve a dual function: on the one hand, they act as narrative devices, driving the plot and revealing characters’ psychology; on the other hand, they function as psychic archives, providing core clues for understanding a character’s traumatic history and the process of subject fragmentation.

2.2. *The Internalization of the Violence of the “Name-of-the-Father” and the Symbolic Order Lacan’s symbolic order is embodied here as the rigid “Law-of-the-Father” within the family*

The “Name-of-the-Father,” represented by the father, becomes an unchallengeable absolute command—the cold numbers of academic performance, the strict tempo of piano exams, and the absolute prohibition on emotional expression. In his childhood, Zheng Youjie suffered a devastating failure in his attempt to enter the symbolic realm and gain a subject position by identifying with the “Name-of-the-Father.” The father’s gaze becomes a deadly distorting mirror. It refuses to reflect Youjie’s true, sensitive, and emotionally needy inner self, forcing him to see only a fragmented and perpetually “unqualified” image defined by patriarchal standards. Each comparison, rebuke, and act of neglect reinforces this distorting mirror. The diary becomes Youjie’s desperate attempt to find a moment of respite and confirm his self-existence under the stranglehold of the symbolic order—a precarious mental shelter he digs with his bare hands in the patriarchal cage. Nonetheless, the act of writing itself is also contaminated by the Law-of-the-Father: he unconsciously judges himself through his father’s eyes even in his private diary, accelerating his internal division and disintegration.

2.3. *Freudian Trauma: Repression, Return, and the “Uncanny Familiarity” in Diary Texts.*

Freud’s trauma theory finds a clinical case here. The daily fragments recorded in the diary—a torn low-scoring test paper, a slap received for crying, a confession dismissed as “useless”—are all frozen slices of traumatic events. These traumas are systematically repressed by the patriarchal family’s compulsory demands for “dignity,” “strength,” and “success,” much like the “uncanny” (the uncanny) objects

expelled from the conscious realm as Freud described. Nonetheless, repressed traumas are destined to return. They stubbornly tear apart Youjie's mental world in the form of soul-consuming anxiety, self-deprecating nightmares, uncontrollable fears, and impulses that ultimately lead to Youjie's self-destruction or silent demise. The film's process of "re-reading" the sealed diary is an archaeological excavation of this buried childhood trauma, cruelly confirming Freud's assertion: the past never passes; it is like magma beneath the ground, destined to erupt at the subject's most vulnerable moment, scorching the present.

2.4. Death Drive: The Complicity between Self-Destructive Impulses and the Discipline of the Law-of-the-Father

In Freud's psychoanalytic system, the "death drive" (Todestrieb) does not simply refer to an individual's desire to die but rather a de-vitalizing impulse rooted deep in the unconscious. It manifests as a tendency toward repetition, stagnation, and disintegration, representing the subject's inclination to "return to the inorganic state" [7]. Opposed to the "life drive" (Eros), the death drive is a force against creation, connection, and identification, especially prone to activation under the dual drive of external trauma and internal repression.

In *Times Still Turns The Pages*, Zheng Youjie's diary writing is a ritualization of the death drive. Through the repeated statements such as "I am not important" and "I really want to leave this world," he gradually constructs a discursive space for self-elimination. Such writing is not merely emotional venting but a linguistic manifestation of what Freud calls the "destructive drive" (death drive in textual formation), a spiritual act that textualizes and ritualizes self-destructive desires. Especially at the end of the diary, when he writes "Goodbye diary," his tears blur the ink, symbolizing the simultaneous collapse of textual and bodily boundaries—the moment when the death drive penetrates the symbolic system [9].

More crucially, this self-destructive impulse is not innate but is triggered and accelerated by the disciplinary structure of the Law-of-the-Father. Zheng Youjie internalizes value symbols approved by his father, such as "University of Hong Kong" and "becoming a teacher," as standards for survival. Once these fail, the "writing" that was previously used for survival exchange transforms into a call to destruction: no longer writing to change the future but writing to eliminate himself. This process clearly reveals how the death drive, under the repression of the patriarchal symbolic order, is summoned and embedded in daily writing practices, ultimately leading to the subject's "spiritual annihilation."

Therefore, *Times Still Turns The Pages* is far from a simple presentation of an individual tragedy. Based on the core text of the diary, it profoundly depicts the trauma-generating suppression mechanism and devastating consequences of children under the crushing of the patriarchal violent machine by using psychoanalysis. The film coldly reveals that this Hong Kong elite family, operating under the guise of "love," is in essence a spiritual concentration camp that devours individual vitality; its symbolic order (the Law-of-the-Father) is the primary culprit behind the creation of trauma; and the forcibly buried traumas (the uncanny) will ultimately manifest in the most tragic ways—through the self-sacrificing devotion of the elder brother Zheng Youjie and the vengeful return of the younger brother Zheng Youjun. Zhuo Yiqian's imagery, set against the backdrop of contemporary society, brings to light with suffocating clarity issues such as the crisis of children's mental health, the

dehumanizing discipline of the family education system, and the intergenerational transmission of patriarchal toxicity. The closed diary has never truly fallen silent; it is an ever-open wound left in this world by a soul strangled by the patriarchal cage, a damning indictment of the eternal coldness and violence of the symbolic order.

3. Review of Related Studies

This study focuses on the psychoanalytic significance of the “diary text” in the film *Times Still Turns The Pages*, attempting to reveal its complex mediating role between structural violence and unconscious dynamics. Specifically, the analysis centers on two key dimensions:

3.1. Patriarchal Structure from Lacan’s Perspective of the Symbolic Order.

Mr. Zheng, the father, not only serves as an authoritative figure within the family but also embodies the “Name-of-the-Father” within the broader symbolic order [10]. The violence depicted in the film is not merely sporadic emotional outbursts but systemic oppression internalized within the child subject through language, discipline, and moral demands (Fink, 2004). Notably, this patriarchy does not operate in isolation; it colludes with the mother, the family education system, and other “patriarchal accomplices” to form a structural network that silences or even destroys children’s desires [2].

3.2. Intersectional Analysis of Freud’s “Death Instinct” Theory and Mechanisms of Intergenerational Trauma Transmission

Zheng Youjie’s suicide cannot be reduced to a mere symptom of psychological illness but should be viewed as an extreme manifestation of the death drive (Todestrieb) triggered by patriarchal repression and failed identification[7]. Repetitive statements in his diary, such as “I’m not important” and “goodbye diary,” reveal the linguistic ritual structure of the death instinct [9]. Zheng Youjun’s hallucinations, emotional numbness, and “symptom replication” in his role as an educator when rereading the diary as an adult confirm the mechanism of deferred trauma return (Nachträglichkeit) emphasized by both Freud and Lacan [7,10,11], as well as [3] notion of how trauma narratives create a “testimonial spiritual resonance effect” between listeners and survivors—a path of intergenerational replication with a “ghostly contagion” quality.

Based on the theoretical intersection of these two dimensions, this paper aims to demonstrate that the seemingly private diary text in *Times Still Turns The Pages* actually constitutes a trauma archive system for analyzing how Hong Kong’s middle-class patriarchal families manufacture, transform, and perpetually replicate psychological trauma. This kind of text not only records the past, but also reveals how the present and the future continue to be devoured by the father’s law, becoming a chain reaction of intergenerational spiritual destruction.

Table 1. Theoretical Framework.

Analysis Dimension	Theoretical Sources	Keywords	Textual Sources
Patriarchal Structure and Symbolic Order	Lacan: Symbolic Order, Name-of-the-Father [10,15,2]	Law-of-the-Father, disciplinary language, family education system, maternal complicity, symbolic repression	Mr. Zheng’s control and violence, the mother’s silence, indoctrination of the “success template”
Death Instinct and	Freud: Death	Todestrieb, repetitive	Zheng Youjie’s

Intergenerational Trauma Transmission	Instinct, Nachträglichkeit [7]; Lacan and Laplanche: Nachträglichkeit[10, 11,9,3]	language, spiritual resonance, hallucinatory structure, intergenerational replication	suicide text (“I’m not important,” “goodbye diary”), Zheng Youjun’s hallucinations and identity fragmentation
---------------------------------------	---	---	---

4. Analysis

4.1. Patriarchy and Its Accomplices under Lacan’s Symbolic Order Theory

a. The Father: The Embodied Enforcer of Symbolic Violence

Theoretical Core: Lacan’s “Name-of-the-Father” (Name-of-the-Father) as an unchallengeable law [10], internalizing violence through linguistic discipline.

Diary Text Evidence:

Achievement in Exchange for Paternal Approval: “To get into the University of Hong Kong, Dad won’t hit me” (4:10:54) — alienating paternal love into an exchange for academic performance [1].

Destroying Emotional Anchors: “It’s my fault for not playing well; Dad drove away Teacher Chen” (8:47:29);

“Whenever I’m unhappy, I watch PIRATE. PIRATE often tells me that one day, you’ll grow up and become the adult you want to be. Don’t give up. Watching it makes me happy. But PIRATE won’t be updated anymore. I always thought the cartoonist was a cheerful person, but why did he jump off a building? Did he also feel he couldn’t become the adult he wanted to be?” (43:37)

— destroying emotional anchors to reinforce authority.

Denying Self-Worth: “Even if I become a teacher, I won’t be as great as my brother” (10:58:47) — internalizing patriarchal comparative logic as self-denial.

b. The Mother: The Silent Accomplice in the Order

Theoretical Core: Maternal absence constitutes emotional violence [2]

Diary Text + Film Evidence:

Silence on Physical Violence: No dialogue recorded during the breakfast scene (5:26:57) — tacitly legitimizing the beating incident.

Collusion in Trauma Erasure: Zheng Youjun’s accusation: “They never mention my brother again” (11:1:01:02) — cooperating with the patriarchal system to erase memories.

c. The Fat Principal: The Preacher of Educational Alienation

Theoretical Core: Theoretical Core: Agent of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1975).

Supplementary Theoretical Explanation: An “agent of power-knowledge” refers to individuals or institutions that utilize and disseminate knowledge within specific social institutions to construct, maintain, or consolidate power relations.

Diary Text Evidence:

“Writing a diary can help you get into the University of Hong Kong like his son” (4:10:54) — instrumentalizing self-expression as a means for academic advancement.

d. The New Piano Teacher: The Technical Enforcer of Disciplinary Power

Theoretical Core: Standardized evaluator in Foucault's "disciplinary society" [6].

Her teaching behavior is not ideological indoctrination but implements physical-spiritual dual discipline through technical violence (e.g., monitoring exam progress). As a depersonalized tool of the patriarchal system, she eliminates the emotional connection left by Teacher Chen and defines art in terms of performance indicators.

Diary Text Evidence:

Emotional Replacement: "I'm not good at playing the piano" (Zheng Youjie's self-narration, 10:58:47) — technical evaluation replaces Teacher Chen's "encouragement and companionship" (contrast with the diary entry at 5:26:57).

The Violent Nature of Silence: No teaching dialogue recorded, only exam progress requirements (film footage at 26:57) — replacing subjective communication with standardization [6].

Patriarchal Isomorphism: Mr. Zheng hires a new teacher immediately after driving away Teacher Chen — the symbolic order fills the emotional vacuum with technical discipline.

4.2. The Spiritual Annihilation of Children from a Freudian Psychoanalytic Perspective

4.2.1. Self-Annihilation Driven by the Death Instinct

a. Zheng Youjie: Devotional Sacrifice

Theoretical Core: The death instinct (Todestrieb) manifests through linguistic repetition [7]; [9].

Diary Text Evidence:

Repetitive Suicidal Thoughts: Four instances of writing "I'm not important" (1/2/3/10) — constructing a symbolic prison for self-elimination.

Devotional Sacrifice: "If I leave, Mom, Dad, and my brother will be happy" (9:57:35) — alienating suicide into altruistic behavior [14].

Farewell to the Family: "Goodbye diary. Sorry" (10[58:47) — synchronizing the end of the text's life.

b. Teacher Chen: The Catalyst for the Annihilation of the Ideal Object

Diary Text Evidence:

"It's my fault... I'm afraid I'll never see her again" (8:47:29) — the collapse of the emotional pillar accelerates self-destruction.

"I want to be an adult like Teacher Chen" (5:26:57) — the shattering of the ideal self-image.

4.2.2. The Deferred Strangulation of Trauma Theory

a. Zheng Youjun: Intergenerational Trauma Continuation + Vengeful Return

Theoretical Core: Clinical manifestation of *Nachträglichkeit* [11].

Diary Text Evidence:

Hallucinatory Invasion: “My brother seems to be beside me” (11:1:01:02) — the vengeful return of repressed trauma.

Intergenerational Replication: “When I grow up, I haven’t become anything remarkable either. I’m not a good teacher, nor a successful husband. You asked if I was married and if I had something to hide. I couldn’t say it then. I didn’t think I could make you happy. I didn’t know what a complete family was like. How could someone like me be a good father?” (12:1:20:59) — replicating the patriarchal pattern of emotional repression.

Vengeful Return: From that day on, I stopped caring about Dad’s expectations for me to become a lawyer or a doctor. It doesn’t matter anymore. — Zheng Youjun’s vengeful return by disregarding his father.

5. Conclusions

As Zheng Youjun sets the diary ablaze, the flames devour not just the pages but also the meticulously crafted protocol of Hong Kong’s elite for systematically eradicating non-conventional lifestyles. Yet, as Freud had long forewarned, what is repressed is destined to resurface. The haunting refrain, “I’m not important,” has permeated generations, finding its way into the suicide notes of students, with the tear-stained script etching an indelible mark upon the collective psyche of the audience. The film offers a stark and unflinching revelation: the true terror of patriarchy resides not in overt violence but in the insidious spiritual and structural ruin it inflicts. It lays bare the profound repercussions of the patriarchal framework within Hong Kong’s elite families on the children’s psychological trauma, manifesting in three distinct yet interconnected ways: (1) the inadvertent triggering of the death instinct, leading to self-destruction; (2) the vengeful resurgence of trauma in the younger brother; and (3) the perpetuation of trauma as a spectral spiritual inheritance, haunting through diaries and memories alike.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This present study primarily employs Freud’s “death instinct,” Lacan’s “symbolic order” and “Nachträglichkeit,” as well as Laplanche’s and Caruth’s trauma theories as its theoretical framework to conduct a multi-dimensional textual analysis of the “diary text” and patriarchal trauma in the film *Times Still Turns The Pages*. However, the study also has the following limitations:

Selectivity of Theoretical Pathways: This study focuses on a psychoanalytic perspective and does not incorporate more comprehensive interpretive pathways from sociology, gender studies, or local cultural contexts (such as Cantonese family education and colonial experiences), which may result in insufficient consideration of the social contexts within the text.

Singularity of Case Studies: The paper analyzes a single film, *Times Still Turns The Pages*, which, while representative, makes it difficult to elucidate the overall mechanism of trauma in Hong Kong’s middle-class families. Subsequent research could conduct a comparative analysis of similar themed films to achieve horizontal theoretical expansion.

Limitations of Textual Sources: This study mainly relies on the film’s dialogue and visual texts to infer spiritual structures, lacking interview materials from the director, screenwriter, and other creators to support the analysis. Future research could

incorporate the film's creative background and intentions behind trauma narratives to enhance explanatory power and accuracy.

Despite these limitations, this study attempts to conduct a close reading intersection of trauma theory, private diary structures, and patriarchal violence mechanisms, providing a possible pathway for re-examining family narratives in Hong Kong cinema through psychoanalysis. It is hoped that this summoning of the "textual ghost" will inspire more researchers to focus on the mechanisms of linguistic violence, emotional repression, and spiritual transmission within families.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] Althusser, L. Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. Monthly Review Press. 1970.
- [2] Benjamin, J. The bonds of love: Psychoanalysis, feminism, and the problem of domination. Pantheon Books. 1988.
- [3] Caruth, C. Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history. Johns Hopkins University Press. 1996.
- [4] Felman, S., & Laub, D. Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history. Routledge. 1992.
- [5] Fink, B. Lacan to the letter: Reading *Écrits* closely. University of Minnesota Press. 2004.
- [6] Foucault, M. Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books. 1975.
- [7] Freud, S. Beyond the pleasure principle (J. Strachey, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. 1920.
- [8] Gilligan, C. In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development. Harvard University Press. 1982.
- [9] Kristeva, J. Powers of horror: An essay on abjection (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press. 1982.
- [10] Lacan, J. The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis (A. Sheridan, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1973), 1998.
- [11] Laplanche, J. Essays on otherness. Routledge. 1999.
- [12] Lee, A. Education and the politics of identity in postcolonial Hong Kong. Hong Kong University Press. 2014.
- [13] Ng, J. The invisible hand: Education and power in Hong Kong. Hong Kong University Press. 2017.

- [14] Oakley, B., Knafo, A., Madhavan, G., & Wilson, D. S. (Eds.). Pathological altruism. Oxford University Press. 2011.
- [15] Whitehead, A. Trauma fiction. Edinburgh University Press. 2004.



© 2025 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)