

Abstract

As a representative and significant genre of contemporary Chinese popular literature, Chinese romantic novels today flourish in the context of internet mass culture. This genre has developed a mature mode of production within the culture industry, and has thus emerged as not only a literary phenomenon, but also a social and cultural phenomenon that deserves extensive attention and research. The rise and development of contemporary Chinese romantic novels has not only promoted the flourishing of internet literature, but also provided a new model and opportunity for the development of cultural industries. Moreover, since most of the authors and readers of these works are women, the construction of female images is also one of the core elements of this type of popular literature. Examining the Chinese female images in popular cultural products under a patriarchal society through contemporary Chinese romantic fiction provides us with an interesting perspective on contemporary Chinese society. However, contemporary Chinese romantic novels received little or not academic attention for a long time. Although the situation has improved greatly in recent years, as increasingly more scholars have begun delving into this type of popular cultural product, contemporary Chinese romantic novels nonetheless still represent a rare topic of research.

Within the field of research on Chinese romantic novels, past studies can be broadly divided into two categories: 1. those focused on analysis of text, narrative, or character images; and, 2. those focused on audiences and/or media. The studies that focus on text, narrative, or character analysis typically utilize textual analysis to assess

and categorize the characters and narratives in these novels. The studies that focus on audience or media, on the other hand, typically implement survey and interview methods to explore their readership. However, it should be noted that the main shortcoming of existing research on contemporary Chinese romantic novels is that they generally do not combine character or narrative analysis with audience analysis. They usually treat character, narrative, or audience as independent objects of study. However, one of contemporary Chinese romantic novel's most prominent features is that the author and reader community often participate in the process of shaping the narrative and characters of these novels together.

The research focuses on the following three questions: 1. How can the pattern of female images and sub-genres in contemporary Chinese romantic novels be classified? 2. How can case studies be utilized to analyze the characters, especially female characters, and narrative in contemporary Chinese romantic novels? 3. What social and cultural issues do contemporary Chinese romantic novels engage with via their fictional narratives? Although the answers to these three questions cannot explain everything about contemporary Chinese romantic novels, they do reflect the state of female characters and narrative in contemporary Chinese romantic novels to a large extent. In this research, I categorized the fictional romantic stories in contemporary Chinese romantic novels published after the 21st century into four categories based on the image of the heroine and the story mode. These categories are labelled "Cinderella", "The Gifted Youth and The Beauty", "Female Young Werther and Male Charlotte" and "The New Female Consort Prince" genre.

The above four categories constitute the main patterns of contemporary Chinese romantic novels since the beginning of the 21st century. In this study, I have selected representative works as case studies to explore the characterization of the main characters and narrative modes among these four genres. In addition, due to the material conditions of production of Chinese contemporary romantic novels, both authors and readers are involved in the novel creation process. In analyzing specific case studies, I refer to the attitudes and response of readers as revealed in Douban's short comments. Particularly, due to the controversy among readers surrounding the heroine's image in the "The Gifted Youth and The Beauty" and "Female Young Werther and Male Charlotte" categories, I have collected high-frequency evaluative words in comments describing the heroine and analyzed them. Therefore, unlike previous studies, the analysis of characters and narratives in this research does not rely solely on text analysis but also combines an aspect of audience feedback as a reference. This is the difference in research methodology between this research and previous studies. Although my findings from the research are not yet conclusive, they do provide new ideas and approaches for future studies on contemporary Chinese romantic novels.

Key Words

Romantic novel, contemporary Chinese literature, popular culture, character image