The Mirror of Contemporary Chinese Women:
Images of Women in Contemporary Chinese Romantic Fictions

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1. Introduction

Coinciding with the economic growth of China, people are becoming increasingly more focused on cultural industries, and this is particularly true in the case of young Chinese people in urban areas. Popular literature is an important aspect of current Chinese cultural trends, providing important evidence of shifts in popular ideas and tastes. Similar to manga in Japan, popular literature has a wide following among the young generation in China and has developed a mature commercial chain. Meanwhile, it has also become a source of scripts for numerous Chinese dramas and movies, especially those dealing with domestic and romantic themes. It is a unique cultural phenomenon in current mainland China. In a sense, popular literature is a significant reflection of the social values of current Chinese youth, but in Chinese literary and cultural research, popular literature has been a largely neglected topic.

Due to governmental control on publication content and publisher's demands regarding sales volume, the authors of Chinese popular literature usually publish the first editions of their work online. Therefore, "internet literature" has become the most common descriptor of popular literature in modern China. In terms of popular culture materials, the mode of distribution in mainland China differs from some countries possessing similar cultural backgrounds, such as Japan. Online literature websites, and even social media platforms, represent important channels in the business sector.

Although the original intention of authors posting the first edition of their work to literature websites was to elude control by the government or avoid a cold response from the publishers, the Internet unexpectedly became the key to the success of Chinese popular literature. The Internet has transformed into a gathering place for the younger generation and the fictions posted on such websites have a simple story theme that easily draws young people's attention. In the 2010s, the popularization of the smartphone further facilitated the boom of internet literature.

According to the 44th China Statistical Report on Internet Development by the CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center) as of June 2019, the size of China's online literature reading community is reaching nearly 455 million, up 22.53 million from the end of 2018, accounting for 53.2% of overall Chinese internet users. Meanwhile, the size of the readership using smartphones to read online literature reached 433 million, which is up 25.27 million from the end of 2018, accounting for 51.4% of smartphone internet users. These figures indicate that more than half of internet users in China have the habit of reading online novels. At another level, they also illustrate the inescapable position of online novels or popular literature in the current Chinese society. Also noted in this report is that diversity and youthfulness are currently the most important features of Chinese online literature. Young authors continue to flock to the creative industry of online literature, according to data from China's leading online reading platform operator, China Literature Limited. This is the one of the largest electronic literature commercial companies, demonstrating that writers born in the 1990s accounted for more than 70% of new signings in 2018, and

writers born between 1995 to 1999 accounted for nearly 50%. This means that the

market and the values of the new generation are the two most important factors in

shaping contemporary Chinese online literature. In addition, this report also notes that

Chinese online literature is currently broadening its market and influence overseas,

which provides long-term and greater space for the development of Chinese online

literature. (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2019)

Chinese popular literature can be classified into two types according to the gender

and reading preference of its audience: namely romantic novels for females and fantasy

literature for males. This research will focus on the pattern of female images in

contemporary Chinese romantic novels, and their classification.

1.1 A Brief History of the Development of Chinese Romantic Novels

Historically, it should be noted that romantic novels represent a genre that should

not be neglected in any culture. In Chinese literary history, the romantic novel was

viewed as an independent literature genre or a novel style from the Chuanqi[1] (传奇) of

the Tang dynasty (from 618 to 907). From the Ming dynasty (from 1368 to 1644) to the

early Qing dynasty (from 1636-1735)[2], the Caizi-Jiaren novel[3] (才子佳人小说)

entered its heyday and writers began creating fictional love stories to reflect marriage

and relationships and even the social customs at the time. Such vernacular Chinese

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[1] Chuanqi is a Classical Chinese short story form, first formed in the Tang dynasty. The Tang Chuanqi usually has four main themes: love, tales of the strange, heroism, and history.
[2] The Qing dynasty was officially proclaimed in 1636 in Manchuria. During the same period, the Ming dynasty had not yet been overthrown.
[3] Caizi-Jiaren is a genre of Chinese fiction typically involving a romance between a young scholar and a beauty.

fictions were popular among intellectuals as well as ordinary citizens groups. Meanwhile, subsequent Chinese romantic novels inherited literary traditions from Caizi-Jiaren novels and combined with Western-style literature to form the Yuanyang-Hudie school (鸳鸯蝴蝶派, literal translation: Mandarin Duck and Butterflies school) novels. Notably, the formation of the Yuanyang-Hudie school novel acts as the symbol of the emergence of modern Chinese romantic novels. (Sun, 2017)

The first half the 20th Century was a period of revolution for China. As with other literary and artistic works, the revolution acted as an important social background or theme for romantic novels of this period. The topic "revolution + love" became a new mode of romantic novels. Meanwhile, as represented by Eileen Chang, Haipai (海派, literal translation: Shanghai style) literature primarily focused on the relationship itself and trivia, rather than politics. Since the 1980s, a large majority of female writers were able to discuss the significance and value of women's lives and desires through the form of the romantic novel. Particularly, these romantic novels were created by female writers in Hong Kong and Taiwan, such as Chiung Yao, but eventually spread into mainland China in the wake of the Chinese economic reform. (Sun, 2017) Notably, they laid a solid foundation of romantic novels in the 21st Century in mainland China.

Throughout the 21st Century, the rapid development of internet culture has significantly transformed people's lives. The Internet became a new stage of emotional catharsis for Chinese young women in urban areas. Such devices influenced on communication, information collection, perspective exchanging and even the creation, reading and discussion of literature. Some writers even uploaded their works to free

literature websites. Those websites have attracted a mass of young generation readers and to a significant extent, they have transformed the reading habits of Chinese people. Before the rise of literary websites, print media, such as literary magazines and books, which went through severe censorship, were considered mainstream in the literature market.

2003 was an extraordinary year for Chinese romantic novels as this was the year during which Guiyeoni's *He Was Cool* and *Temptation of Wolves* (also known as *Romance of Their Own* or *True Romance*) both ranked first in the monthly rankings. This symbolized the coming of age of romantic web novels to the public. Notably, some private publishing houses took this opportunity to exploit new writers and launch similar story series, such as the Guo Ni (GirlneYa) series and the Ming Xiaoxi series. (Zhuang, 2013) With industrialized manufacturing, romantic novels formed a model which featured a fixed story pattern and character creation.

Over the next few years, the Chinese internet literature market prospered, and this was especially true for romantic novels. Time travel (穿越) and office-themed romantic novels became the most popular types of fiction while the prosperity and enormous potential of romantic novels were noted by investors. During the 2010s, under the operation of the capital market, TV series and movies which were adapted from romantic novels appeared in the public eye. (Zhuang, 2013) At the present time, those adapted works occupy an important position in the realm of Chinese TV series as well as in the movie market.

To summarize, contemporary Chinese romantic novels have three important

characteristics. First, the first edition is usually posted on literature websites. Second, popular works receive visual adaptations, such as TV series and movies. And third, the stories are relatively stereotyped compare to serious literature. In light of the above characteristics, romantic novels have become a neglected topic in the academic realm of Chinese literature. However, some romantic novel writers express their focus on self-expression and the readers' psychological demands. Annie Baby, a famous Chinese best-selling author, revealed that she focuses on the nothingness and hopelessness in human nature as well as people's souls. Additionally, she believes that her works conciliate readers' souls while also stating, "the essence of writing is releasing the human nature". (Sun, 2017)

1.2 Romantic Novels and the Female Images in Them and Their Readers

Janice Radway conducted a study on romantic novels for middle-class American women in the 1980s and published her findings in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. She highlights that one of the main motivations for female readers of romance novels is escapism. These readers are typically married, have children, possess some financial power, and use romance novels as a means to enjoy their private time. They become immersed in the romantic utopia crafted by the author (Radway, 1991). In the study *Pleasure: One of the Features of Popular Culture of the Contemporary Love Novels (快感：当代言情小说的大众文化特征之一)*, Yuxia Liu emphasizes that readers can escape from the stresses of life or relationships through reading romance novels (Liu, 2006). Despite vast economic and socio-cultural

differences between China and the U.S., research on the relationship between the psychological needs of female readers and romance novels has been remarkably consistent.

Radway also observed that female readers of romantic novels favor stories where the heroine is strong, passionate, intelligent, and capable. While some romance stories' characterizations may not accurately reflect these qualities in their heroines, readers still believe that such personalities exist within the female images, as portrayed by the authors. Additionally, readers maintain that female independence and marriage can coexist, with independence remaining uncompromised by patriarchal style oversight from a male partner (Radway, 1991). Wang Yi conducted a systematic analysis of the male and female protagonists' images in 100 romantic novels published on Jinjiang Literature City (JJWXC, 晋江文学城), one of China's largest online novel releasing platforms, from 2003 to 2018. Wang's paper revealed that: 89% of the female protagonists have stable jobs, while 30% have high incomes, and 55% have medium incomes; regarding education, 80% of female protagonists hold a bachelor's degree, 14% have a master's degree, and 1% possess a doctorate. These figures indicate that Chinese romance readers also prefer heroines with strong educational backgrounds and financial independence. However, Wang also emphasizes that there is a significant gap between the image of women in romantic novels and the reality of Chinese society (Wang, 2020).

In conclusion, romantic novels provide women with a spiritual utopia that allows them to escape from the pressures of reality, while the portrayal of women in these novels reflects the idealized image of women in the readers' minds.

1.3 Character Emotional Patterns: Inner Exploration and Patriarchy

The images of women in both real social life and literary works are shaped by the patriarchal society's standards for women, or in other words, they originate from the male perspective. But what about the images of women in romantic novels in which women are the main audience and authors? How do female authors and readers imagine or shape female images in these romantic novels? This is a topic worth exploring. To this day, the Cinderella model of female images persists as the one of the mainstream images in romantic novels. These characters are beautiful, innocent, and kind; they fall in love with a wealthy male protagonist and live happily ever after. These works portray the ideal relationship and image in patriarchal society: a powerful man and a beautiful woman who is dependent on him. But do these works truly aim to please women who have been domesticated by patriarchal society? Shen Yifei, a sociology scholar, noted in her TED talk that many romantic novels revolve around a man with higher social status and a "Cinderella" character. The higher status man. surrounded by many attractive female suitors, chooses the heroine as his partner, not for her beauty, but for her unique soul and inner being. Shen Yifei also emphasizes that the emotional model women desire is to explore inwardness, that is, to be loved for their souls. (Shen, 2020)

Although the "Cinderella" story remains a mainstream idea, we can observe a greater diversity of character images in contemporary Chinese romantic novels and their female characters in the 21st century. For instance, Nvzun novels (女尊文) are female-dominated stories in which the woman is stronger than the man. These novels

often feature a pseudo-matriarchal social background where gender roles are reversed. The category of Nvzun novels is uncommon in traditional romantic novels, as they portray female characters who are more capable and dominant in the relationship than the men, or the background worldview of the story is set in a society where women are superior. To be clear, this study focuses on novels with male-female relationships as the primary storyline and does not include BL (Boy's Love) or GL (Girl's Love) novels (Japanese-origin English phrases, referring to novels focusing respectively on intimate relationships between lesbians and between gay men), although their audiences are also predominantly female.

Shen Yifei's perspective is remarkaly insightful when analyzing romantic novels targeted at a female audience. Whether it is "the Cinderella" story or other types, the core of these narratives is the unique soul that is favored. This trend is also related to the current situation in Chinese society, where the female employment rate for those over 15 years old has been declining in recent years (down to 58.16% in 2019). Despite this, it remains higher than the average for East Asia and the Pacific (56.183% in 2019). (World Bank, 2021) Economic independence has granted women more autonomy in their emotional needs. This is particularly evident in real life, where the booming "her economy"[4] is a good reflection of this shift. Meanwhile, contemporary Chinese romantic novels often feature numerous descriptions that emphasize the beauty of female characters. For example, in *A Smile is Beautiful* (*微微一笑很倾城*), the

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[4] "Her Economy" was one of 171 the new Chinese words announced by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in August 2007. With the improvement of women's economic and social status, a unique economic phenomenon has been formed around women's financial management and consumption.

description of the heroine's appearance reads:

"*美艳的眉眼，勾人的眼波，永远嫣红的唇色，火爆的身材，贝微微就算穿着 S 大那套很挫的校服出去，也不会有人觉得她真是名牌大学的大学生。*" (Guman, 2018, P3)

The English Translation:

"Beautiful eyebrows, seductive eye waves, eternally sweet red lips, a stunning body, Bei Weiwei, even if she goes out in that very frustrating school uniform of A University, no one would think that she is really a college student at a prestigious university."

Depictions like this are not the exception in contemporary Chinese romantic novels. To some extent, this illustrates the influence of patriarchal society's aesthetic on how women define themselves. For this cultural phenomenon, this thesis highlights some notable points. Despite the current trend of shaping images and storylines in Chinese romantic novels with a focus on diversification, and the large number of female authors entering the creative industry, the self-perceptions and inner aspirations of both the authors and readers of these works are heavily influenced or constrained by patriarchal society. In other words, to a certain extent, the female fantasies reflected in contemporary Chinese romantic novels represent the love fantasies of women shaped and domesticated by patriarchal society. Meanwhile, these works also illustrate women's self-exploration of their emotions and needs in contemporary society.

1.4 Classification of Female Images

In her doctoral dissertation, *A Brief Discussion of the Image of Women in Modern Chinese Popular Fiction* (*略论中国近代通俗小说中的女性形象*), Yu Xiaofeng divided the images of women in popular fiction from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic Period of China into four categories: prostitutes, chivalrous women, housewives, and the women in the new era. The women in the new era are specified to be women with Western education and modern values, while the opposite is the traditional Chinese women, represented by housewives. A similar academic work is Liu Yuxia's *A Study of Female Archetypes in Contemporary Chinese Romance Novels (中国当代言情小说女性原型研究)*, in which she classifies female characters in Chinese romantic novels from the period of the 1980s to the 1990s into four categories: Cinderella, Snow White, Nuwa (女娲), and Huo Xiaoyu (霍小玉). (Li, 2023) In her book, Liu defines the four types in this way: Cinderella, women who come from average or even poor families, but rely on their beauty and kindness to impress men above their social class and enter into marriages or stable relationships with these men; Snow White, women who come from privileged families who are well-educated and pursue romantic love under the influence of Western culture; Nuwa, the mother of human beings and the goddess of salvation in traditional Chinese legend, Liu uses Nuwa to represent the image of iron ladies in romantic novels; Huo Xiaoyu, Huo Xiaoyu represents the image of female sex workers in romantic novels.

From these studies, we gain insight into the evolution and inheritance of female figures in Chinese romance or popular fiction throughout the twentieth century. The audience for fiction has changed dramatically in 20th century China due to women's

increased education and economic capability, and so the categorization of fiction became more diversified. The Xiexia novels (邪狭小说)[5] of the late Qing Dynasty, which took men as their target readership, and romantic novels, which took women as their target audience, split completely in terms of creative thinking and characterization. In Liu Yuxia's study, she classifies prostitutes in romantic novels from the 1980s to the 1990s as a separate type of female image. The image of prostitutes in these romantic novels has a direct inheritance from Xiexia novels of the late Qing Dynasty, and this image of prostitutes also occupies a certain proportion in the romantic novels of the last century that targeted women as readers. However, in the 21st century, sex workers in Chinese romantic novels are rarely found. This is due in large part to the increasing refinement of readership preferences and the rise of women's voices in the creation of novels. Therefore, authors of romantic novels tend to portray images which can make women feel produce empathy in their work.

In addition, the development and integration of female characters in 20th century romance and popular fiction can also be seen. The "Snow White" type in Liu Yuxia's *A Study of Female Archetypes in Contemporary Chinese Romance Novels* has a certain correlation with the "Women in the New Era" in Yu Xiaofeng's *A Brief Discussion of the Image of Women in Modern Chinese Popular Fiction* or they are the embodiment of the same type of characters in the novels of different eras. They all possess a good educational background and family conditions, and they all have the desire for freedom

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[5] Xiexia novels (邪狭小说), one of the novel genres in the Qing Dynasty: the main stories in Xiexia novels focus on the love lives of prostitutes. Xiexia means alley in Chinese and it refers to the abode of sex workers.

and love. There is also a connection between the "Cinderella" and "Housewife". Although they are the heroines or main characters of the novels, and the stories are centered on their affective experiences, they are more subordinate to the heroes in the stories. Such characterization conforms to the requirements and expectations of patriarchal society for women, which also conforms to the concept of love for women domesticated by patriarchal society. Therefore, the image of "Cinderella" has become the most common type of female image in romantic novels around the world. However, it is worth noting that from the late 20th century to the present day, the "Cinderella" type of women in Chinese romantic novels are increasingly transforming into women who are intellectual and those who have assertions. So, these novels are incorporating many of the traits that belong to other types of women, such as having a good educational background, hard work, etc. Kung fu novels or Wuxia novels (武侠小说)[6] and Kung fu culture are uniquely Chinese cultural phenomena, and most of these novels depict the feuds of Kung fu schools and the love-hate relationships of characters in the Wuxia world. The term "chivalrous women" is a general term for women who fight for righteousness in these novels. To a certain extent, "chivalrous women" are similar to Liu Yuxia's "Nuwa" type of strong women, who appear to be more capable and independent than other types of women.

In addition to analyzing the types of images in romantic novels or popular fiction, these studies also analyze the causes and social contexts of the formation of these images. Conversely, the analysis and study of these female images also provide some

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[6] Kung fu novels or Wuxia novels(武侠小说) are an important genre of Chinese popular fiction, mostly featuring chivalrous and righteous heroes.

clues to the academic community about the changing consciousness of women in Chinese society. For instance, the disappearance of the "prostitute" image is related to the changing readership of the novel.

The image of women in romantic novels is also developing and changing as we enter the 21st century. In this research, I have categorized contemporary Chinese romantic novels published after the turn of the 21st century into the following four genres based on their narrative modes or heroine images: "Cinderella," "The New Gifted Youth and The Beauty," "Female Young Werther and Male Charlotte," and "The New Female Consort Prince". (Li, 2023) In the research, I selected representative works as case studies to conduct a detailed analysis of the narrative and character portrayal of the four genres.

1.5 The Objective of the Study

The research focuses on the following three questions to analyze in exploring female images and contemporary Chinese romantic novels.

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?

While unable to comprehensively explore contemporary Chinese romantic novels,

the research derived from these three questions will act as an attempt to explore such cultural phenomenon.

1.6 Data and Collection Tools

In this research, the analysis of the female image takes account of the feedback from the audience to some extent. Especially for controversial genres, "The New Gifted Youth and The Beauty" and "Female Young Werther and Male Charlotte", I collected the high-frequency evaluation words from the comments, and analyzed and explained them. In terms of the information regarding reflection the audience's emotions concerning and attitude towards the work, my research is based on the data of Douban, the largest cultural product evaluation and rating website in China. The reason that Douban is used is because in addition to its dominant position in cultural product reviews in China and its vast database, it also handles various social attributes. Audiences of cultural products do not simply rate works on Douban, but they also exchange specific comments and opinions about them on the platform. Douban's data acts as a strong reference in the research field through targeting Chinese audiences for cultural products. (Li, 2023)

Douban primarily includes three aspects in audience evaluation, scoring, comments, and short comments. As regards socring, ratings are presented on the page in the form of stars ranging from 1 to 5, with each star counting as two points, so that the highest score is 10 points, and the lowest score is 2 points. The difference between short comments and comments is that short comments have a word limit (350 Chinese

characters maximum) for commenters, while comments do not. Since the short comments have more commenters than the comments, in terms of audience evaluation and emotional tendency, I used short comments as the primary data source of this study. Houyi Collector was used to crawl the data of the short comments from Douban and the GooSeeker platform was used to segment texts and to count the word frequency in the short comment texts. (Li, 2023)

2. Literature Review

In this literature review chapter, I will attempt to categorize and analyze relevant academic literature on the Chinese romantic novel and its female characters. In recent years, the rise of popular fiction in China has led to narrative fiction becoming an increasingly important form within Chinese literature and related cultural products. As a literary genre centered on emotions and love, romance novels have had a profound impact on the aesthetic wants and psychological needs of modern Chinese women.

Early studies primarily focused on the development history, literary characteristics, and socio-cultural background of the Chinese romantic novel. For instance, some research highlighted those Chinese romantic novels which emphasized themes such as revolution, love, and family, underlining women's roles and emotional experiences in society and family life. Over time, romantic novels have gradually shifted to feature more contemporary emotions as their backdrop, depicting the emotions and lifestyles of modern Chinese women. Concurrently, some studies have explored the relationship between romance novels and traditional Chinese culture, noting the integration of traditional culture and modern values within the genre.

Moreover, significant attention has been given to the study of female character images in the Chinese romantic novel. On the one hand, some scholars argue that female characters in Chinese romance novels are richly diverse and complex, portraying women from various social classes, ages, and personalities. These female figures reveal multiple facets through different emotions and life experiences, reflecting the social status and emotional needs of modern women. On the other hand, other scholars

contend that certain gender stereotypes and traditional concepts may remain present in the portrayal of women in Chinese romantic novel. For example, much research points out that female characters in many romance novels are overly dependent on male characters and lack independent personalities and actions. This phenomenon is particularly evident in traditional style Chinese romantic novels, demonstrating the influence of traditional gender concepts on female characterizations.

The following is my summary and overview of the relevant literature on existing romantic in general novels and Chinese romantic novels in particular.

2.1 Popular Culture, Feminist Studies, and Romantic Novels

As mentioned in my previous discussion of research about the contemporary romantic novel in China, while this narrative form indeed represents a literary genre, its most significant characteristic is that it is a product of popular culture. Although the main readership and creators of both feminist literature and romance novels are often female groups, these two literary forms cannot be equated. However, in his book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (2009), John Storey has argued that there is a commonality between readers of romance novels and feminist readers, as both are dissatisfied with the current state of women's lives. He concurs with the conclusions of Rosalind Coward in *Female Desire*, pointing out that the narrative of romance novels reflects a female mentality where sexual desire is often seen as the prerogative of men, while women are portrayed as indifferent to it. As a result, romance novels reproduce the Oedipus complex of girls but with a difference: the narratives do

not end with women's helplessness. In these novels, girls actually "replace their mothers and marry their fathers," completing the transition from a position of subordination to a position of dominance (symbolically replacing the mother's position) in romance novels. At the same time, Storey cites Coward's observation that romance novels present a stable world, providing women with a sense of secure dependency and promising them simultaneously both constraints and rights. (Coward, cited in Storey 2009) This perspective does in fact provide a certain degree of explanation for certain narrative realities in the contemporary Chinese romantic novel: regardless of whether the heroines rely on the male protagonists in terms of personality or abilities, they often gain dominance only after entering into a romantic relationship with the male protagonists. In fact, such a romantic relationship is also a form of constraint. In the contemporary Chinese romantic novel, we rarely see depictions of heroines engaging in extramarital affairs while already having a partner. In these fictions the "rights" and "constraints" of female characters are thus two sides of the same coin, in these fictions.

In real life, Chinese women often face more social and cultural constraints compared to men in most situations. Plots involving heroines having extramarital affairs while already in a relationship are relatively rare in the contemporary the Chinese romantic novel. In contrast, heroines are often depicted as loyal, devoted, and unwavering in their affections. Women's moral values and family values hold significant importance in Chinese society, especially in regions where traditional beliefs are deeply entrenched. For women who are already in relationships, loyalty is often seen as highly important. However, due to fewer social constraints on men, such social circumstances often result

in women lacking stability or a sense of security in their emotional lives. Therefore, as Storey suggests, again based on Coward's analysis, the "fantasy world" constructed in romance novels often better aligns with women's expectations of romantic relationships compared to real life. (Coward, cited in Storey 2009) In addition to depicting the constraints faced by women in real society, romance novels also portray women with dominance and stability.

Additionally, Storey incorporates arguments from Janice Radway's book *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. Radway there argues that women hold a "reciprocal" fantasy while reading romance novels: men bestow attention and care on women, and women reciprocate with love. Unlike Coward, Radway argues that romance novels provide readers with motherly care, filling the disappointment they feel about real life and offering alternative emotional support through the love stories between male and female protagonists. (Radway, cited in Storey 2009) Storey (2009) thus concludes that ideal romance novels present readers with a perfect emotional pattern in a triangular structure: fatherly protection, motherly care, and passionate adult love. In these novels, the male protagonists are often depicted as strong and protective figures who display fatherly protection and nurturing towards their female counterparts. They assume the responsibility of safeguarding and sustaining the female characters, providing them with a sense of security and reliance, and becoming their emotional support. The love story between the male and female protagonists is typically filled with passion and romance, emphasizing their deep emotional ties and intimate relationships. These emotions are portrayed as so intense and perfect that readers can

find an idealized emotional state within the novel, satisfying emotional needs that might be lacking in real life. The "perfect" love story between the male and female protagonists offers motherly emotional support for female readers. This emotional pattern resonates with readers' inner desires for love and intimate relationships, making it highly appealing.

From the production to the consumption of romantic novel, every step reveals the desire of female readers for romantic relationships. But where does this desire come from? Ueno Chizuko (2020) has addressed this question in her book *Patriarchy System and Capitalism* (*家父長制と資本制 ― マルクス主義フェミニズムの地平*, Chinese version title: 父权制与资本主义). She has pointed out that the ideology of "romantic love and marriage" is not inherent; this socially accepted pattern originates from the indoctrination of patriarchy and is simultaneously a "trap" set by patriarchy for women. Romantic love liberates daughters from the "domination of their fathers," but they may fall under the rule of the "domination of their husbands." So-called romantic love is a means by which women submit to the "domination of their husbands" and willingly give up themselves. Furthermore, patriarchal society largely excludes women from employment and treats women's labor as insignificant "strategies" at the social level, forcing women to tie their own destiny to marriage. This makes women in patriarchal society desire romantic love and the potential marriage or romantic relationships it can bring. As reflected in romance novels, all cultural products targeting female audiences are deeply tied to romantic relationships.

In addition, some of the judgments expressed by Ueno Chizuko (2015) in her book

Misogyny (女ぎらい：ニッポンのミソジニー, Chinese version title*: 厌女：日本的女性厌恶)* are also highly relevant to the study of female images in current Chinese romance novels. Although Ueno primarily discusses social phenomena in Japan, her conclusions are still applicable to contemporary Chinese society. In *Misogyny,* she argues that patriarchal society divides women into two groups: the "female saint" (圣女) and the "prostitute" (娼妓). This binary categorization labels every woman with independent thoughts. This is reflected in the portrayal of female characters in the romantic novel. Positive characters, often represented by heroines, are portrayed as pure and morally flawless, while female villains are depicted as profligate and corrupt. Her analysis of the parent-child relationship for daughters in low birthrate societies is also incisive. She believes that these daughters are "sons with female faces," receiving a good education and carrying their parents' expectations, just like sons. Reflected in the portrayal of characters in the contemporary Chinese romantic novel, some authors attempt to gradually break free from gender stereotypes in their works. However, these female characters also exhibit contradictions, similar to the conflicted status of daughters in these families, who bear the role of sons in traditional culture while being unable to change the fact that they are daughters.

2.2 Previous Research on Romantic Novels

Previous research on the Chinese romantic novel can be broadly categorized into two main types: 1. that focused on analysis of text, narrative, or character images; and, 2. that focused on audiences and/or media. I shall survey these in turn.

2.2.1 Research focused on analysis of text, narrative, or character images

In the specific field of the contemporary Chinese romantic novel, Liu Yuxia's (2011) *A Study of Female Archetypes in Contemporary Chinese Romance Novels (中国当代言情小说女性原型研究)* has been widely cited. This study focuses on Chinese romance novels published in mainland China during the 1980s and 1990s, which still includes the works of Taiwanese and Hong Kong's authors. In Liu's research, she analyzed female characters in romance novels under four headings, namely, female sexuality (女性性征), female love (女性爱情), taboos (禁忌), and female emotions (女性感情).

Under the heading of female sexuality, she analyzes female gender characteristics in three distinct aspects: eros (性爱), appearance (色相), and chastity (贞操). She argues that these three features are ubiquitous in women's daily lives and can often significantly impact the experience of women. In romantic novels, it is suggested that these are necessary elements of successful creative writing. Regarding eros, she argued that among contemporary Chinese romance novels, authors tend to have a clear delineation between sex and love. In other words, in some contemporary Chinese romantic novels, authors have portrayed the love and erotic objects of female characters as different male characters. Regarding physical appearances, she points out that female figures in Chinese cultural products are dependent on being attractive and charming. Liu believes that this explains why middle-aged female characters do not become the heroines in contemporary Chinese romantic fiction stories. Because these characters

have "lost" their youth and beauty, they have also lost the right to find love. Regarding chastity, Liu argues that this feature can be analyzed into two parts, the differing views of the chastity of married women and that of unmarried women. The author has indicated that in contemporary romance novels in China, married female characters, especially widows, are no longer the focus of chastity concerns. However, the chastity of unmarried female characters continues to be the object of focus in these types of cultural products. Unmarried female characters that lose their chastity for love will often go through certain hardships in the stories. The reason for this is that public perception generates how one is treated if one loses one's chastity for love. Such social public perceptions result from the residue of traditional Chinese moral values.

With regard to female love, Liu classified female love or female images in contemporary Chinese romantic novel into four types: "Cinderella", "Snow White", "Nvwa" (女娲) and "Huo Xiaoyu" (霍小玉). In her study, Liu's classification is based on the character traits of the heroines and story patterns. Such a classification method provides elements of the framework for my own research. Similar to Liu Yuxia's taxonomy, in my dissertation, the classification of contemporary the Chinese romantic novel is based on both the heroine's character traits and the novel's story pattern. In Liu's research, the four types of characters are divided into two groups: "Cinderella" and "Snow White" as against "Nvwa" and "Huo Xiaoyu". The "Cinderella" type of female characters are born into ordinary families, and they successfully change their social class through marriage to the heroes. The opposite is seen with the "Snow White" type of female characters. These female characters are born into the elite class, and

therefore they do not have to change their fate through seeking a romantic relationship. However, these characters do desire a pure love. However, their commonality is that they are all female characters whose family background is important. Another group of female characters, "Nvwa" represents the image of the iron lady character type. "Huo Xiaoyu", in contrast, represents the image of prostitute in contemporary Chinese romance novels, or the image of women who are completely dependent on a male companion. The commonality in these works is that the authors do not emphasize their original family backgrounds, but rather, have typically stressed their individual traits.

Yu Xiaofeng's (2006) *A Brief Discussion of the Image of Women in Modern Chinese Popular Fiction (略论中国近代通俗小说中的女性形象)* is similar to Liu Yuxia's research, though it should be noted that Yu's study does not only focus exclusively on romantic novels. However, because romance novels belong to a subgenre of popular fiction, the character categorizations have provided some significant insights for my research. In her study, Yu classifies female characters generally in modern Chinese popular fiction into four categories: "prostitutes", "chivalrous women", "housewives", and "the women in the new era". These four-character classifications can also be divided into two groups: "prostitutes" and "chivalrous women", as against "housewives" and "the women in the new era". Among these two groups of women, the common characteristic of the first group of female characters is that they are all women that are separated from their families. The "prostitutes" are similar to the "Huo Xiaoyu" found in Liu's study. They are both female figures that are completely dependent on male characters. The "chivalrous women" are

similar to the "Nuwa" type, in that they are strong and independent. The group of "housewives" and "the women in the new era" are similar to what we see in the "Cinderella" and "Snow White" group. These female characters are all female images whose families serve as a label or they have strong social status. Compared to Liu's research, Yu's study places a much greater emphasis on character images and textual analysis.

In Liu's research under the heading of taboos in contemporary Chinese romance novels, she divides such taboos into three aspects: elopement, love-suicide and incest. In her study, she highlighted that, in contemporary Chinese romantic novels, the depiction of these three taboos in contemporary Chinese romantic novels, is often closely linked to the destruction of the hero and/or the heroine in the story. The main reason why elopement, love suicide, and incest are considered taboo in contemporary romantic novels in China, is that they are all behaviors that go against traditional Chinese moral values. As a popular literal and accepted cultural product, contemporary Chinese romance novels must conform to such moral standards or public prejudices, in order to be successful. Under the heading of female emotions, Liu analyzed representative female complexes in contemporary romantic novels in China in her research, such as maternal power, revenge, and gratitude. She suggests that in addition to a romantic relationship, these emotions occupy a large amount of space in the work, and they supply the basis of the story.

The studies of Liu Yuxia and Yu Xiaofeng both explore the character images and emotions in the novel and use this context as the starting point for their analyses. In

contrast, the narrative study represented by *The Study of Narrative Chinese Network Romance Novels(中国网络言情小说叙事探究)* by Bi Yuanheng (2020) explores contemporary Chinese romance novels from a different perspective. In this research, Bi analyzed contemporary Chinese romance novels from the following aspects: spatial narrative strategies, narrative communication, feminist narratives, and narrative language.

Bi's view is that contemporary Chinese romantic novels are entirely a product of the Internet age, with these narratives deeply influenced by the Internet structure or culture. Bi's research claims, in the narrative communication section, that communication in the virtual community or via literary websites is an important influencing factor for the narratives of Chinese contemporary romance novels. The narrative of novels has been greatly influenced by audiences and readership. Authors will often modify their works according to the opinions and beliefs of their audience. As a result, there are significant differences between the initial and later versions of some literary works. Bi also argues that contemporary Chinese romantic novels have, to some extent, been influenced by feminism. Indeed, the feminist elements found in modern novels, are often derived from views that are expressed on the Internet.

Sun Wei's (2017) research, *The Production and Characterization of Romance Genre in the New Century (新世纪言情类型小说的生产与表征)*, is also a study based on contemporary texts found in the Chinese romantic novel. However, unlike previous textual studies, Sun approaches contemporary Chinese romantic novels as cultural products with commercial attributes suitable for research and analysis. As a result, in

her research she discusses viewpoints regarding how cultural industries and market preferences shape the narratives of romantic novels. Sun's research argues that many scholars and critics habitually hold contemporary Chinese romantic novel to the standards of serious literature. This approach is biased toward research or evaluations of the contemporary Chinese romantic novel. Neither authors, distribution platforms or publishers are willing to take on the responsibility of criticizing or exposing controversial topics related to social issues. Readers of the contemporary Chinese romantic novel are the general public rather than the elite class, so these readers are looking for an escape rather than deeply contemplating social issues, largely due to their challenging lives. They are focused on having a pleasurable experience that these novels offer, without over-analyzing contemporary social constructs. Based on the aforementioned reasons, research on contemporary Chinese romantic fictional stories should focus more on the connections between novel texts, audiences, and market preferences.

With text-based research, new technological approaches or research methods have been applied in recent studies. One example is, Wang Yi (2020) in her paper *The Ideal Lover: The Construction of Gender in Romance Novels, research based on 100 completed works on Jinjiang Literature City during 2003 to 2018 (理想情人：言情小说中的性别构建——基于晋江文学城 2003-2018 年百部完结作品的研究).* Through the application of statistical and analytical software, Stata 12 and ATLAS.ti 8, Wang analyzed character traits in contemporary Chinese romantic fiction. Her research focuses on a quantitative analysis of the protagonists' names, ages, heights, education

levels, overseas studying experiences, occupations, job stability, registered residence, income, housing, vehicles, marital history, children, and family economic status. Based on the results of the analysis, she concludes that the ideal romantic partner for a woman is a male that meets the following criteria: aged between 25-30 years old, with a height ranging from 180-190 cm, and a handsome appearance. The man should have a personality that is calm and cool, and a social status that is usually characterized by stable employment. He should also have urban *hukou* (户口, household registration), a high income, ownership of housing and vehicles, no marital history, no children, an affluent family economic status, and no emotional baggage or previous sexual experiences. These findings are consistent with the popular perception of heroes in current romantic novels. Wang's research represents the pattern found in current research conducted on contemporary Chinese romantic novels.

2.2.2 Research focused on audiences and/or media

Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature by Janice Radway (1991) is an academic work that centers around the audience for romance novels as its research core. The field of this work is the American romance novel audience during the previous century. Despite it being from within a different culture, this work is also highly significant for research on contemporary romantic novels in China, and it provides valuable insights. Radway analyzes the readership of romance novels from the perspective of female readers' reading behaviors, preferences, and the influence of a patriarchal society on women. In this study, Radway emphasizes that the

main consumers of these cultural products are female groups. While these works are trying to please their female audiences, they are still cultural products within a patriarchal society. The author interviewed audiences of romance novels in the United States and summarized the reading patterns of romance novels. The results demonstrated that readers often have preferences for storylines and traits that highlight female protagonists. Her investigation revealed that these audiences have a preference for female characters who are independent and do not conform to traditional female stereotypes. In addition, readers do not prefer male protagonists that use violence as a means of discourse. Romance novels are designed to provide a way for readers to escape the pressures of the real life, and they can help readers to distinguish between real and imaginary romantic relationships. Radway believes that reading romance novels is a gentle form of resistance for women to combat the pain and anxiety imposed by a patriarchal society. The reason for this is that women who read romance novels seem as though they might surrender to patriarchal norms. These types of cultural products steer women towards romanticized and negative expectations, thereby inhibiting women's conscious resistance and encouraging complacency regarding the status quo. However, from the perspective of women's reading behavior, these romance novels provide recognition and emotional support to female readers who may be undergoing pain and suffering in real life. Therefore, this type of reading behavior can be viewed as a gentle form of resistance. Radway's research has expanded the study of romance novels beyond the literary field, by incorporating elements of communication studies into the research of romance novels.

Research conducted on romantic novels in the West has incorporated a multitude of elements of earlier communication studies. However, in mainland China, research on contemporary Chinese romantic novel incorporating elements of communication studies only really began to emerge during the 21st century. This occurrence is closely related to changes in the communication media and distribution platforms in China, with regard to romantic novels. During the 21st century, the Chinese romantic novel has gradually broken away from the traditional model of publishing, with the internet becoming the primary platform for initial publication options. This situation has continued to the present day. As a result, studying Chinese contemporary audience behavior or online communities through the exploration of romantic novels has become a recognized research topic. Similar to Radway's research, Chen Xiaohua's (2012) *Female Cultural Communication in Cross-Media Using: A Study of the Cultural Phenomenon of the Romance Novels Network Community(跨媒介使用中的女性文化传播：罗曼史网络社区文化现象研究)* is research conducted on audiences and reading behaviors relating to the romantic novel in mainland China. In terms of a research methodology, Chen adopts a similar approach to Radway. Chen conducted interviews with 51 female readers of Chinese romance novels and analyzed their reading behaviors relating to romance novels in the context of mainland China. Her research findings align to the findings from Radway's study. For the audience for romance novels in mainland China, reading such novels provides an escape from the pressures of reality, and enables readers to distinguish between real romantic relationships and fictional stories. Moreover, in terms of character preferences, it was

found that the expectations of contemporary Chinese women readers are similar to Radway's interviewees. These interviewees preferred to read stories that had strong independent female characters. However, Chen claims in her research that despite the authors' efforts to portray female protagonists with preferred traits in the text of these novels, the stories still revolve around romantic relationships within the framework of a patriarchal society. Different to Radway's research, Chen suggests that internet literature platforms or cultural product communities provide a high-quality communication platform for female readers of romance novels. These platforms enable female readers to not only share their opinions on romance novels, but also communicate events occurring in their own lives. As a result, the behavior of readers of romantic novels not only provides the audience with an escape from real-life pressures, but they also serve as a means for them to communicate and connect with others. Communication behaviors on internet releasing platforms of these novels has helped to alleviate the real-life pressures experienced by the readers of romantic novel.

2.3 Research Methods of Previous Studies

In the research on contemporary romantic novels or popular fictions in China, research methods can thus be divided into two types: research based on text analysis and research based on audience analysis.

Research methods centered on text analysis mainly focus on the analysis and interpretation of contemporary romance novel texts. Such a research method emphasizes in-depth analysis of the literary elements, structure, linguistic style, and

emotional portrayal of the novels. Researchers conduct detailed text analysis of the plot, characters, emotions, language, and other aspects of the novels through specific cases. The characteristics of the novels in terms of writing techniques, emotional expression, and thematic ideas are all explored. The research by Liu Yuxia (2011) that was discussed earlier in the chapter, *A Study of Female Archetypes in Contemporary Chinese Romance Novels (中国当代言情小说女性原型研究)*, as well as *A Brief Discussion of the Image of Women in Modern Chinese Popular Fiction (略论中国近代通俗小说中的女性形象)* by Yu Xiaofeng (2006), are both studies of this type. Additionally, text analysis research on Chinese romantic novels based on a specific theme is also very common, such as *Studies on Evolution History of The Caizi-Jiaren Novel (才子佳人小说演变史研究)* by Su Jianxin (2005). The Caizi-Jiaren novel or "the Gifted Youth and the Beauty" novel is an important genre in the development history of Chinese romantic novels. Su Jianxin discusses the origins, character's images and narrative of "the Gifted Youth and the Beauty" genre by means of text analysis and case studies. Richard Hessney's (1979) *Beautiful, Talented, and Brave: Seventeenth Century Chinese Scholar-Beauty Romances* represents similar research.

Audience-analysis-centered research methods consider the audience of the novel, including reading communities, reading habits, reading experiences, and other aspects of readership. Such a research method emphasizes understanding readers' response and evaluation, reading habits, and experiences of contemporary romantic novels through empirical research, questionnaires, interviews, etc. Researchers conduct comprehensive investigations and analyses of readers' reading experiences, emotional experiences,

aesthetic preferences, and other aspects. This is done as a means to reveal the effects and influences of contemporary romance novels in terms of audience psychology and cultural demands. The thesis, *Female Cultural Communication in Cross-Media Using: A Study of the Cultural Phenomenon of the Romance Novels Network Community(跨媒介使用中的女性文化传播：罗曼史网络社区文化现象研究)* by Chen Xiaohua (2012), as discussed earlier, is a case that focuses on audience analysis of Chinese romantic novels.

These two research methods possess their own unique features in the study of contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Research methods centered on text analysis can thoroughly explore the literary value and creative techniques of the works. Meanwhile, research methods centered on audience analysis can explore the impact of novels on readers in terms of attractiveness, emotional resonance, and cultural communication from the perspective of readers. This helps to deepen analysis on the dissemination and acceptance of romantic novels among reader groups.

Furthermore, with the advancement of research techniques, the research methods in the field of contemporary Chinese romantic novels or popular fiction in China are also being updated. The paper, *The Ideal Lover: The Construction of Gender in Romance Novels, a research bases on 100 completed works on Jinjiang Literature City during 2003 to 2018 (理想情人：言情小说中的性别构建——基于晋江文学城 2003-2018 年百部完结作品的研究)* by Wang Yi (2020) which was discussed earlier is a good example. Although the research is based on the text of the novel, the researcher focuses on quantifying vague descriptions in the works, thereby reflecting the

preferences of the novel's audience. Wang Yi's research methods demonstrate new trends in the research field of contemporary Chinese romantic novels or popular fiction in China. Such researchers are attempting to combine traditional text analysis research methods with data analysis, and inferred audience preferences. To some extent, such mixed research methods may be more objective compared to questionnaires or interviews. This is because it is difficult to determine whether the responses of the audience are being accurately described and analyzed.

2.4 Strengths and Weaknesses of Previous Studies

Chinese contemporary romantic novels have been marginalized in academia due to their being perceived as frivolous and commercialized. In recent decades, however, this topic has gained increasing attention. Both in mainland China and in the Western world, there has emerged a growing body of scholars paying attention to this research topic.

Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance by Feng Jin (2013) is pioneering example of Western research of mixed type. This research focuses on both the audience group for romantic novels and the novels themselves that were released on Jinjiang Literature City (晋江文学城), an online platform in mainland China. At the same time, the author combined Chinese cultural policies into her research and outlined the developmental trajectory of contemporary romantic novels in mainland China. Furthermore, the way in which social and cultural forces have shaped new writing and reading behaviors in contemporary China was also explored. In this

research, Feng Jin pursued an entirely new direction that deviates from the traditional

literary creation mode in China. Due to the unique nature of the distribution methods

of these novels, both authors and readers are actively involved in the creative process

of the works. This type of research has opened up new perspectives on Chinese cultural

products and audience studies during the early 2010s, a period when relatively few

scholars were focusing on research related to contemporary romantic novels in China.

Female Cultural Communication in Cross-Media Using: A Study of the Cultural

Phenomenon of the Romance Novels Network Community(跨媒介使用中的女性文化

传播：罗曼史网络社区文化现象研究) by Chen Xiaohua (2012), the study that I

analyzed earlier, also focuses on audience research related to contemporary romantic

novels in China. The research by Chen Xiaohua and Feng Jin both emphasized audience

studies of contemporary romantic novels in mainland China during the same period.

Compared to Feng Jin's research, Chen Xiaohua's study placed a greater emphasis on

audience interviews and the attitudes of the audience towards these works. However, a

common limitation of both these types of research is the lack of analysis and discussion

on specific works. The focus of both these studies was on the audience of Chinese

romantic novels. However, they shared a common viewpoint in that the uniqueness of

Chinese contemporary romantic novels lies in the active participation of both authors

and readers in the creation of the works. As a result, the text and character portrayals in

these works reflect, to some extent, the outcomes of negotiation between the authors

and readers. Textual analysis has become an indispensable part of research on audiences

of contemporary Chinese romantic novels. In addition, Chen Xiaohua conducted her

research using the questionnaire survey method. Although she was very careful in selecting interviewees, she still could not guarantee that all the answers provided by the interviewees completely expressed their true thoughts without any concealment.

A Study of Female Archetypes in Contemporary Chinese Romance Novels (中国当代言情小说女性原型研究) by Liu Yuxia (2011) is an analysis on the portrayal of female characters in contemporary romantic novels in China. There she has categorized and traced the image of female characters in contemporary romantic novels in China. However, since this research work was published earlier, Liu Yuxia's research does not include the majority of contemporary romantic novels in China that have been released after the turn of the 21st century. In addition, contemporary romantic novels in China have attributes of cultural commodification. In her research, Liu Yuxia completely overlooked this aspect, neither did she explore the influence from the audience on these novels. In her *The Study of Narrative Chinese Network Romance Novels (中国网络言情小说叙事探究)*, Bi Hengyuan (2020) explicitly pointed out the commodity attribute of contemporary romance novels in China and analyzed the narrative and character portrayal in specific works. However, she completely overlooked the influence from the audience on contemporary romantic novels in China.

In summary, the existing shortcomings of research on contemporary romantic novels in China are generally attributed to the lack of integration between character/narrative analysis and audience analysis. Because of this, many studies have overlooked the inherent characteristics of contemporary romance novels in China as cultural products, as well as the interactions between the novels and their readers.

Therefore, future research on contemporary romantic novels in China should focus on integrating character and narrative analysis with audience analysis as a means of gaining a better understanding of the significance and impact of these novels in a more comprehensive manner.

2.5 Findings of Previous Studies

Research on contemporary Chinese romantic novels represents a relatively new field in academia, and there are still many controversies surrounding this subject. Despite the widespread presence and popularity of this cultural phenomenon among readers in society, in-depth academic research is still at a relatively early stage. Existing studies on contemporary Chinese romance novels can be classified into two categories: 1. research focused on the text, narrative and character image of the novels; and, 2. research focused on the audience of the novels. The conclusions deriving from these two types of research are as follows.

From the research on character image and narrative, scholars believe that the characterization and plotting in these novels are often standardized or patterned. Such standardized characterization and narrative approaches are considered to cater to popular tastes and market demands, as they can evoke emotional resonance with readers and fulfill readers' aspirations for ideal love and life happiness. However, such standardized works also have their complexities. Li Yuxia's (2011) viewpoint in her *A Study of Female Archetypes in Contemporary Chinese Romance Novels (中国当代言情小说女性原型研究)* is as follows: the standardized descriptions present in

contemporary romance novels in China have deep historical and cultural connections with classical literature and culture. They are connected to the most primal and intimate human emotions and desires. The conclusion of the paper, *The Ideal Lover: The Construction of Gender in Romance Novels, research based on 100 completed works on Jinjiang Literature City during 2003 to 2018 (理想情人：言情小说中的性别构建——基于晋江文学城 2003-2018 年百部完结作品的研究)* by Wang Yi (2020), also supports the research of Liu Yuxia. Wang Yi's research conclusion is that the male and female protagonists in contemporary Chinese romantic novels conform to the ideal image of a perfect partner in the public's perception. Such a conclusion echoes the findings proposed by Liu Yuxia, suggesting that there is a profound connection between contemporary Chinese romantic novels and the emotions and desires of the public.

In the research focused on the audience for contemporary Chinese romantic novels, scholars generally believe that the reading behavior of these novels provides readers with a temporary escape from reality. In other words, they offer emotional support to the audience group. This viewpoint has gained consensus among scholars, who generally agree that contemporary Chinese romantic novels, as a popular cultural phenomenon, satisfy readers' desires for emotions, happiness, and ideals in their daily lives. Moreover, there is a significant difference between contemporary Chinese romantic novels and similar works from other countries or cultural backgrounds. The release of these works relies on internet platforms, which provide readers with a channel for communication. Readers have spontaneously formed communities for communication among themselves. This kind of interaction among readers has also

become a form of emotional support. Such communication is not only limited to discussing and interpreting the novel's plot, but also serves as a form of emotional resonance and support. Within these communities, readers can confide their emotions to each other, share their lives, and even form deep friendships and emotional connections. Many readers here care for, encourage, and support each other, forming a powerful system of emotional support. *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance* by Feng Jin (2013) and *Female Cultural Communication in Cross-Media Using: A Study of the Cultural Phenomenon of the Romance Novels Network Community (跨媒介使用中的女性文化传播：罗曼史网络社区文化现象研究)* by Chen Xiaohua (2012) have both arrived at such conclusions.

The above is my summary and overview of the relevant literature on existing romantic in general novels and Chinese romantic novels in particular. Although not comprehensive, they to some extent reflect the research status quo in this field.

3. **Cinderella in the Contemporary Chinese Romantic Novel**

As one of the most traditional female images in romantic novels worldwide, Cinderella commonly exists in various cultural products and it is by no means limited to the romantic novel. Currently, there is still controversy in academia regarding the origin of the Cinderella genre's Chinese romance novels.

In China, the earliest Cinderella type story appeared during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) in the short story *Ye Xian (叶限)* in *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*. (*酉阳杂俎*)[7] In the story, the heroine, Ye Xian, is a bright and diligent young girl who is abused by her stepmother after the death of her parents and eventually marries the king of a neighboring country with the help of the immortal and a magical goldfish bone. However, at the end of the story, her stepmother and her stepdaughters are executed. The story of "Ye Xian" was spread in the Guangxi region of China before the Qin (221 BC-206 BC) and Han (202 BC-220 AD) dynasties, and was collected in *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang* by Duan Chengshi in the Tang dynasty. Although the Guangxi region became a part of China during the late Han Dynasty, the local culture of the Guangxi region before the Qin-Han period did not belong to Han culture, which is the dominant culture of China. Simply put, the story of *Ye Xian* is not representative or influential to the cultural works of later generations in China. In his *The Chinese Archetypes of Cinderella Stories and Their Worldwide Significance* (*灰姑娘故事的中国原型及其世界性意义*), Liu Xiaochun (1997) points out that the majority of Chinese folk tales of the "Cinderella" genre are concentrated in Guizhou,

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[7] The Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang (酉阳杂俎) is a miscellany of Chinese and other country's legends and tales. The book was written in the 9th century.

Guangxi, Tibet, Xinjiang, Northeast China, and other regions. These regions were generally not under the domination of Han culture until the Qin and Han dynasties.

In the world, two of the most iconic versions of "Cinderella" are found in the *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and *Mother Goose Tales*. These two versions differ slightly in character and plot design, but the basic story structure and dramatic conflict are similar. Notably, later generations of "Cinderella" type cultural products have also been influenced by these two versions. Most of the Cinderella genre of literature or cultural products in China were created after the 20th century, when Western civilization entered China as a powerful cultural force. Therefore, some scholars believe that despite the fact that the "Cinderella" genre appeared in China, represented by *Ye Xian*, the roots of today's Chinese "Cinderellas" are not native to China. (Liu, 2011) Moreover, the contemporary "Cinderella" genre is changing with the times. The "Cinderella" may no longer be an orphan or have a tragic background. In most cases, "Cinderella" is no longer a dowdy young lady but rather an ordinary young woman. On the other hand, they retain the core of the "Cinderella" story: the romantic relationship or marriage between a woman of lower social class and a man of higher social class. In view of this, I classify men and women into Type A, B and C respectively according to the social class of the characters in the novel.

Type A male and female: upper class, family background is privileged, they hold the wealth or power.

Type B male and female: upper middle class, they do not have a privileged family background, but they have a good career or life through their

own efforts.

Type C male and female: lower middle class, they have neither a distinguished background nor outstanding ability, and live an ordinary life.

In addition, I refer the roles in the classic "Cinderella" story to classify some of the characters in contemporary Chinese romantic novels in this chapter, especially the images of the female character. The categories are as follows:

"Cinderella": the heroine

"Stepmother and Stepsisters": In the contemporary "Cinderella" genre, "stepmother and stepsisters" do not refer to real stepmother and stepsisters of the heroine. In this chapter, they refer to the "obstructors in the relationship development of the hero and heroine" or the heroine's "competitors."

"Fairy Godmother": the person who helps the heroine overcome the obstruction in the development of her relationship.

In the case studies in this chapter, I will use these two categories to label the characters who are being analyzed. The chapter includes four typical contemporary "Cinderella" genre's Chinese romantic novels to analyze.

3.1 The Typical "Cinderella": A Smile is Beautiful and Shan Shan Comes to Eat

The two literary works *A Smile is Beautiful* (*微微一笑很倾城,* the English title of TV series is *Love O2O,* published in 2009) and *Shan Shan Comes to Eat* (*杉杉来吃,* the English title of TV series is *Boss & Me,* published in 2011) are both written by Gu Man, who is one of the best-selling romance authors in contemporary China. These two works are textbook contemporary "Cinderella" stories, from the narrative to the design

of characters' images.

3.1.1 A Smile is Beautiful

In the story of *A Smile is Beautiful*, Bei Weiwei is the heroine and a student at an elite university. The design of Bei Weiwei's character is that she is from an ordinary family, but she is kind and beautiful, and she has demonstrated an excellent academic performance. She enjoys playing online games and she is very good at them. The story of Bei Weiwei and Xiao Nai meets the criterion of a contemporary "Cinderella" story's gender pairing, the combination of Type A male and Type C female. In the first chapter, the author expresses several key traits about the heroine: kindness, intelligence, and attractiveness. To further highlight these traits, the author designed the dramatic conflict, which can be seen as follows.

In the first chapter, Bei Weiwei encountered the betrayal of her "ex-husband" in the game. He chose to divorce Weiwei and then quickly married the "first beauty". She was a female player in the virtual game world with the screen name Xiaoyu-Yaoyao. The reason for becoming "divorced" also seemed very unreasonable for the heroine. However, Weiwei did not hold a grudge against, her "ex-husband". In the latter chapters of the novel, the "ex-husband" vilifies the hero because he covets the heroine's beauty. Xiaoyu-Yaoyao and her friends were jealous of Weiwei's beauty and excellence and were vicious and spiteful toward Weiwei at an offline meeting of the online game. At the party, Xiaoyu-Qingqing who is a friend of Xiaoyu-Yaoyao, implies that the heroine

is not a college student but rather a prostitute.[8]

The plot was designed to highlight the heroine's smart and brave attributes, yet also showing the inner darkness of Xiaoyu-Yaoyao and her friends. These are good examples of flat character images that have been portrayed in this literary work. The heroine is represented as a positive image with courageous characteristics, with the antagonist Xiaoyu-Yaoyao and her friends representing negative images and dark human traits. At the end of this chapter, there is another plot design that embodies conflict and foil much more clearly. Xiaoyu-Qingqing slanders the heroine in front of

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[8]The original text:

"微微心中暗囵，脸上却很镇定，正要说话，小雨青青蓦地嗤笑一声，口不择言地说：“听说现在有些职业的女人哦，很爱说自己是大学生的。”

大家没想到她会说出这种话来，都错愕不已地愣住了。

微微心中大怒，目光一凛，看着她直接斥道：“你一个女孩子，脑子里怎么会有这么肮脏的念头。”

她本来就是盛极的容貌，此刻脸色一沉，竟然很有几分居高临下的气势，不要说被她逼视的小雨青青了，就连旁人都被她的气势镇住。

小雨青青被她一看，竟然心中一慌，眼睛下意识地躲开了。

(Weiwei proved that she is indeed a student of X University to the crowd)

微微笑了一笑，不再多言。

微微虽然长相美艳，目光却端正干净，绝对没法让人往不良的地方想。众人本来就觉得小雨青青说话太没脑子，现在被微微如此一“解释”，更加觉得小雨青青太没家教，想法真的是太肮脏了。” (Gu Man, 2009, Chapter 44, para. 41-45, 51-52)

The English translation:

"Weiwei was embarrassed in her heart, but her face was very calm. Before she could speak, Xiaoyu- Qingqing suddenly snickered and said without thinking: "I heard that women in some occupations love to say they are college students."

No-one expected that she would say such words, and the people all froze in astonishment.

Weiwei was furious, gazed sharply and looked at her and rebuked directly, "You're a girl, how can you have such dirty thoughts in your head."

She initially had an outstanding and friendly appearance, but at that moment her face had lost its cheer, and she showed a commanding expression. Xiaoyu-Qingqing bore the brunt of the direct rebuke, with bystanders subdued by her aura.

Xiaoyu-Qingqing froze in fear and her eyes tried to move away.

(Weiwei proved that she is indeed a student of X University to the crowd)

Weiwei smiled and no more words were spoken.

Although Weiwei's appearance was stunning and composed, her eyes were clear and focused. This demonstrated her determination and people could not make any grimy associations with what was said about her. The crowd already felt that Xiaoyu-Qingqing was brainless, but after Weiwei's "explanation" they felt that Xiaoyu-Qingqing was uncivilized and her thoughts were dirty and out of line."

Xiao Nai in the online game with other men in a chaotic relationship. Her words and actions shock the heroine. The shock comes not only from the anger at the slander, but also from the simplicity of the circumstances of life and character.

In this clip, Xiaoyu-Qingqing's jealousy causes her to openly sow discord between Weiwei and Xiao Nai in their relationship; however, her tactics are countered by Xiao Nai's a strong attitude. On the one hand, we can see the mutual trust between the hero and heroine, and on the other hand, this clip is a good example of the "female war" in romantic novels which have "Cinderella" type heroines. The character design of Xiaoyu-Qingqing in the story is that of a friend of Xiaoyu-Yaoyao, or more accurately, a follower. The novel does not indicate directly whether Xiaoyu-Yaoyao is the core leader of the group, or whether she instructs Xiaoyu-Qingqing to attack Weiwei as a pawn. But in light of Xiaoyu-Yaoyao's attitude towards Xiaoyu-Qingqing, it is not hard to guess that Xiaoy-Qingqing's behavior to a certain extent represents Xiaoyu-Yaoyao's perspective and attitude toward the heroine in the work. As the "winner" of the "female war", Xiaoyu-Yaoyao does not care about Bei Weiwei's existence. However, due to Bei Weiwei's excellent operation skills in the game and the help from Xiao Nai, she steals the show in the virtual world. Likewise, at the offline party, because of her outstanding educational background and pretty appearance, Xiaoyu-Yaoyao's boyfriend, who was "snatched" from the heroine, also develops a crush on Bei Weiwei. This gives Xiaoyu-Yaoyao a strong awareness of the impending crisis: to maintain the status of the "winner", she has to do something.

At this point, we can clearly see the types of female characters' images in the work

A Smile is Beautiful. Bei Weiwei→"Cinderella"; Xiaoyu-Yaoyao and her friends→ "Stepmother and Stepsisters". The "Cinderella" often represents goodness, sincerity, and other positive qualities. The "Stepmother and Stepsisters", as its opposite, represent hypocrisy, internal darkness, and other negative qualities. In addition, the core story in "Cinderella" type fiction is the "female war": that is, the war between women striving for the favor of men. These stories usually end with "Cinderella" as the victor of the "female war." In *A Smile is Beautiful*, Bei Weiwei is a successful "Cinderella" and the absolute winner of the "female war"; she not only wins the love of the hero, Xiao Nai an upstart in the Internet industry but also attracts the attention of her "ex-husband", who once abandoned her. As the "enemy" of Cinderella, Xiaoyu-Yaoyao and her friends hurt "Cinderella" because of their jealousy and dark internal motives. At the same time, they lose the "war" because their jealousy and darkness is no match for the "Cinderella" figure's enduring positive qualities. It is interesting to note the heroine's name "Bei Wei Wei": if one "Wei" is removed from the whole name, the pronunciation is the same as the Chinese word "humble". The author's design conforms to the Chinese literary tradition, using homophonic words to metaphorically describe the core values of the work, the character's personality, or the ending of a story. The word "humble" indeed embodies the core values and heroine's image in the work. Although the heroine is humble and ordinary, she can still win the love of the "prince" because of her kindness and intelligence.

3.1.2 Shan Shan Comes to Eat

The main story of *Shan Shan Comes to Eat* revolves around the love story between Xue Shanshan and her boss, Feng Teng. In the novel, Xue Shanshan is an innocent girl with a rare blood type which enables her to save the boss's sister, Feng Yue, who has the same blood type, from a hemorrhaging during childbirth. Hence, Shanshan, an ordinary financial staffer, attracts her boss, the hero of this novel. After a series of twists and turns, the heroine and hero finally enjoy a happy ending.

The main female characters in this work are Xue Shanshan, the heroine; Feng Yue, the hero's sister; Yuan Lishu and Zhou Xiaowei, Xue Shanshan's competitors; and Mrs. Bai and "Super Star", Xue Shanshan's comparators. I classify the above characters according to the "Cinderella" type and the social class type classification method as follows:

Xue Shanshan → "Cinderella", Type C female

Feng Yue → "Fairy Godmother", Type A female

Yuan Lishu and Zhou Xiaowei → "Stepmother and Stepsisters", Type C female

Mrs. Bai and "Super Star" → "Attendees of the Ball", Type B female.

As the "Cinderella" figure, Xue Shanshan is innocent and kind, and it does not matter that her educational background and work ability are not outstanding. In the second chapter of the novel, the author specifies that Xue Shanshan was hired by the company because she shared the same rare blood type as Feng Yue. It was because of the blood donation to Feng Yue that the ordinary Xue Shanshan was noticed by the hero. In shaping the characters' images, the author portrays Xue Shanshan as different from

her competitors, Yuan Lishu and Zhou Xiaowei. She does not approach the hero deliberately, nor does she attempt to crowd out her competitors in order to gain the hero's attention; she simply shows herself as she is. The sincerity touches the hero, who marries her at the end of the novel. Such characterization and story design correspond with the theory that romance novels provide women with a spiritual utopia to help them escape from the pressure of reality. It also embodies the core value of romantic novel, that the heroine is chosen not for her beauty but for her unique soul and inner being. To manifest this value, the character design of Yuan Lishu and Zhou Xiaowei must be contrasted with Xue Shanshan, despite the fact that they are all Type C females.

Yuan Lishu and Zhou Xiaowei are the two main competitors of the heroine in the story. When portraying their characters, the author deliberately contrasts them with the heroine. They are described as hypocritical and ambitious women. However, objectively, they are indeed more capable or excellent in a worldly sense compared to the heroine. Nevertheless, in the story, they are defeated in the "female war" by the heroine, who is weaker than them in all aspects. This plot design greatly satisfies readers' fairytale-like fantasies about romantic love or relationships and reinforces the promotion of values. For women, honesty and kindness are more likely than talent to be chosen by men as key characteristic in their partners. Moreover, in the cultural context of patriarchal society, ambitiousness for women is not an admirable trait. As a genre that completely conforms to the patriarchal culture, the works of the Cinderella genre naturally do not encourage women to possess such characteristics. Therefore, authors of the Cinderella genre novels do not give characters like Yuan Lishu and Zhou

Xiaowei a happy ending.

The author did not give many descriptions of the image of Mrs. Bai and the "Super Star." However, they are very worthy of discussion. In the author's character image design, Mrs. Bai is the wife of the hero's friend, a Stanford University graduate, a holder of various professional qualification certificates, and she was also the marketing director at her husband's company; the "Super Star" is the wife of another friend of the hero, a popular actress. This part of the description reveals that the author of the romantic novel is not unaware of the common matchmaking situation in reality, the pairing between the Type A male and Type A or B female. It also confirms the theory that the romantic novel is considered a romance utopia created by authors for their readers. Romance writers give female readers a space where they can have fantasy. Even if a female reader is not good enough, a good male may fall in love with her because of her simplicity and kindness. In addition, this design also reflects the values promoted in "Cinderella" genre works, represented by *Shan Shan Comes to Eat*. Although women can achieve worldly success through personal efforts, marriage is the shortcut to changing their social class. Even the author denies the meaning of women changing their social class through their own efforts through the words of the hero in the work. The arrogant dialogue starkly demonstrates the strong binding of women's life values and maternity in the traditional patriarchal social value system.[9]

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[9] The hero tells Xue Shanshan that Mrs. Bai graduated from Stanford University and holds a CPA (Certified Public Accountant) certificate. The heroine tells the hero that she will also work hard to obtain a CPA certificate. The original text:
封腾睨了她一眼，"结果现在她在家带孩子"
"啊？"杉杉圈圈眼，"你到底想说什么？"
"所以。你考那么多证书有什么用，最后还不是在家带孩子。"(Gu Man, 2011, Chapter 35, para.

3.2 The "Cinderella" in the Love Triangle: Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows and Cinderella's Dream

The author of *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows (千山暮雪)* and *Cinderella's Dream (佳期如梦,* the name of the TV series in English translation is *The Girl in Blue)* is Fei Wo Si Cun. She is very skilled in portraying complex characters and images, and the main story line of her works is very intricate. Her two representative works, *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows* and *Cinderella's Dream,* are both very typical of the "two men and one woman" type of love story.

Unlike the previously analyzed *A Smile is Beautiful* and *Shan Shan Comes to Eat*, although these works are both "Cinderella" type works, the design of the main couple pairing is Type A male I - Type C female ←Type A male II. The Type A male I and the Type A male II create a competitive relationship. This is unlike the "Competitors," or the "Stepmother and Stepsisters" types of women in the previous section. Although they are the hero's "competitors," they generally do not "hurt" the hero and such active behavior represents a means of competition. Instead, they appear in the form of a "wooer" or "protector," and wait for the heroine's "choice" passively.

3.2.1 Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows

31-33)
The English translation:
Feng Teng glanced at her and said, "And now she is at home taking care of the children."
"Huh?" Shanshan looked at him. "What do you really want to say?"
"So, getting so many certificates is meaningless. In the end, you're still at home taking care of the children."

The main story of *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows* revolves around the emotional entanglement between the heroine, Tong Xue, and the hero, Mo Shaoqian. The main female characters in the work *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows* are: Tong Xue, Liu Yueying, Mu Yongfei and Lin Zhixian. In accordance with the method of the character classification in this chapter, I have classified the above female characters as follows:

Tong Xue： The heroine, Type C Female， the "Cinderella"

Liu Yueying： Type A Female, the "Fairy Godmother"

Mu Yongfei: Type A Female, the "Stepmother and Stepsisters"

Lin Zixian: Type A Female, the "Stepmother and Stepsisters" turn to the "Fairy Godmother"

In the novel, Tong Xue is the heroine and is portrayed as a simple, kind and forgiving college student. Unlike the previously analyzed "Cinderellas" in addition to not only conforming to the Type A male - Type C female pairings, the character design is the same as the classic "Cinderella." Specifically, this is in the sense that her parents have died, and she is not valued by the adoptive family. To reflect her character traits, the author also designed the corresponding dramatic conflict: her uncle takes advantage of Tong Xue's gratitude and deceives her to go to the hero's residence under the guise of tutoring the daughter of his friend. Consequently, Mo Shaoqian rapes the heroine and threatens that she will become his kept woman on the grounds that her uncle has embezzled public money. In the second half of the story, after Tong Xue discovers that her uncle is complicit in Mo Shaoqian's behavior and was actively "offering" her to the hero, she did not go to her uncle for confirmation or take any revenge. Instead, she

chooses to avoid reality, and simply focuses on her emotions with Mo Shaoqian and Xiao Shan. Although this design does not correspond to reality, and reflects Tong Xue's kindness, it also makes the heroine look weak. However, this design makes the work conform to the romantic relationship principle of the "Cinderella" type story in contemporary Chinese romantic novels the relationship model of the "powerful man and weak woman".

Although this study will not discuss the portrayal of male images in romantic novels in such great depth, I will briefly analyze some important male characters in this chapter as means to better explain the "powerful man and weak woman" pattern. The hero of this work, Mo Shaoqian, due to family domestic calamities, agreed to Mu Yongfei's marriage request, which he regards as a stain on his life. The character design of Mo Shaoqian is proud and strong, but he feels powerless before his own fate, so he struggles with conflicting emotions when facing Tong Xue. Meanwhile, he develops an inexorable love for the heroine, but is unable to let go of past. In the story of *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows*, Tong Xue, as an absolute weakling, takes on a submissive attitude regarding the violence that Mo Shaoqian inflicts on her. Moreover, when she learns about the hero's past experiences and fathers' entanglements, she feels that her own unfortunate experiences are a kind of "compensation" for her father's behavior. Even at the end of the novel, the author portrays that Tong Xue falls in love with Mo Shaoqian. These complex character designs, match the "powerful man and weak woman" relationship pattern of the "Cinderella" type story. Meanwhile, however, it also increases the drama conflict of the novel, thus attracting readers.

The wife of the hero, Mu Yongfei, is also a character worth exploring. She is very similar in character design to the previously discussed Yuan Lishu and Zhou Xiaowei. She is a successful woman in a secular sense and even provides help to the hero when he is in great difficulty. However, due to her overly strong personality and exceptional abilities, she is unable to obtain a happy ending in the "Cinderella" genre's stories.

The object of Mu Yongfei's revenge is the heroine and not her husband, Mo Shaoqian; at first glance, such a plot design may seem very unreasonable. However, if we use the concept of "female war" to analyze Mu Yongfei's behavior, we can obtain and confirm the conclusion above: in "Cinderella" type stories of contemporary Chinese romantic novel, women gain male attention by fighting their own sex rather than by improving or changing themselves. Even the means of revenge against a man is to strike or hurt the woman he loves. While such plot and character design can create effective dramatic conflicts to promote plot development, it also reflects the patriarchal society's way of ruling over women: create conflict among women, then divide and conquer.

Lin Zixian is the admirer of Tong Xue's first boyfriend. She and Xiao Shan's family and upbringing are similar and more suitable. Like Mu Yongfei, she also feels a deep hatred for Tong Xue born of jealousy. Throughout the story, Lin Zixian does not directly attack or hurt Xiao Shan, the source of her pain, but chooses to hurt Tong Xue, her emotional rival. In addition, the author makes her to realize that she was being used by Mu Yongfei when she was seriously ill. As a last resort to fight back, the author does not choose to let her reflect on her absurd behavior, but chooses to let her reconcile with

Tong Xue, then hurt Mu Yongfei and commit suicide. Such plot and character design does enhance the dramatic conflict, but at the same time, it also reflects the "female war" approach to contemporary Chinese romantic novel. From the perspective of character classification, Lin Zixian belongs more to to the "Fairy Godmother" than the "Stepmother and Stepsisters". Her transformation finally makes Tong Xue the winner of the "female war".

Interestingly, Mo Shaoqian and Xiao Shan, who are also competitors, do not clash head-on throughout the whole work. Although the author designs Tong Xue to tell Xiao Shan about her past with Mo Shaoqian and Mo Shaoqian also knows the existence of Xiao Shan and Tong Xue's feelings for Xiao Shan, the author does not engineer a "head-to-head battle" between Mo Shaoqian and Xiao Shan. In my view, the reasons for the formation of this phenomenon are as follows: first, the description of male characters in contemporary Chinese romantic novel is often less than that of female characters. With regard to this point, contemporary Chinese romantic novels are often written by women, who tend to be better at portraying female characters; in addition, the core of these romantic novels is the "female war". Although they are fighting for the attention and love of men, the men in these stories are often symbolic rather than three-dimensional characters. In the "powerful man and weak woman" relationship model, the male characters need only be portrayed as "powerful" or "more powerful" than the female characters. The female characters are the real protagonists of the "female war".

The story of *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows* seems to be a complex love triangle between Tong Xue, Mo Shaoqian and Xiao Shan. But in fact, if we break down the

whole novel, it is not difficult to find that this work composed entirely of "female war" stories, just as in the previous analysis of *Shan Shan Comes to Eat* and *A Smile is Beautiful*. Although the two main male characters are important in the story, the real core of the story is the struggle between Tong Xue, Lin Zixian and Mu Yongfei.

3.2.2 Cinderella's Dream

The story of *Cinderella's Dream* is similar to *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows*. It also revolves around the "Cinderella" figure's love entanglements with two Type A males. The main female characters in the work *Cinderella's Dream* are: You Jiaqi, Ruan Jiangxi, and Meng Heping's mother. According to their respective characterizations in this chapter, I will classify the above female characters as follows:

You Jiaqi: The heroine, Type C Female, the "Cinderella"

Ruan Jiangxi: Type A Female, the "Fairy Godmother"

Meng Heping's mother: Transforms Type C to Type A Female, the "Stepmother and Stepsisters"

Like other "Cinderella" type heroines, You Jiaqi comes from an ordinary family. Her father is a distillery worker, and her mother left her and her father when she was a child. The author's characterization of You Jiaqi is different from that of Tong Xue in *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows* and many other heroines in the same genre. Despite the fact that both *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows* and *Cinderella's Dream* were written by the same author, the character design given to You Jiaqi by Fei Wo Si Cun is that of a beautiful, brave young girl. You Jiaqi shows a polite attitude, neither haughty

nor groveling, when facing Meng Heping's mother's spite. Faced with Meng Heping's mother's coldness and rudeness, she does not flatter her, but chooses to resist her. Although they are eventually separated by Meng Heping's mother, she does not embody the submissiveness of many "Cinderella" type female characters. After realizing that she really loves Ruan Zhengdong, she firmly stays by Ruan Zhengdong's side instead of wavering in attitude. The author, Fei Wo Si Cun, estimates You Jiaqi as "lonely and brave," and in fact, her portrayal of You Jiaqi does reflect such traits.

The author does not give much description of Meng Heping's mother throughout the novel, but her limited appearances leave a deep impression on the reader. Throughout the work, Meng Heping's mother appears five times. The first time is to persuade Meng Heping to give up the relationship with You Jiaqi; the second time is meeting with You Jiaqi through the introduction of Meng Heping; the third time is telling Jiaqi her mother's whereabouts, to warn her to stay away from Heping; the fourth time, she insults Jiaqi's father at a gathering of old friends and her impoliteness generates his serious illness and leads to his death; the last time is on her deathbed, when she confesses to her son with remorse. Her first appearance establishes a snobbish, selfish tone to the character image.

Meng Heping's mother holds a snobbish attitude towards the choice of her son's romantic partner. She wants her son to fall in love with a woman from a well-matched family, rather than choosing someone from an ordinary family. Although she herself was born into an ordinary family, she still hopes that her son will not choose a commoner girl as a partner. In the same chapter, Meng Heping resents her mother's

interference and verbally rebuffs her mother, and points out that she is the daughter of a commoner family. Here, the author inserts a recollection of Meng Heping's mother's youth and discusses an incident between Meng Heping's mother and You Jiaqi's father. The mother's response to her son's questions is "The times have changed. In those days, mothers were so simple in mind. Girls nowadays don't have the same pureness." However, based on the information given by the author, we can reasonably speculate that Meng Heping's mother is not as simple as she claims.

In *Cinderella's Dream*, Meng Heping's mother is one of the key characters who drives the plot. She boasts of the innocence of her youthful mind, but she has abandoned her love to marry the son of a high-ranking official. After making this class leap through marriage, she does not allow an ordinary girl like her to fall in love with her son. In addition to her vanity, she is more afraid that her youthful behavior would be exposed and bring trouble to her life of glory and wealth. She chooses to hurt her son's girlfriend, the daughter of her own former date, You Jiaqi, and indirectly killed her former date and destroyed the life of her son who should have had a happy life. Although she confessed this to her son on her deathbed, she did not tell him that the main reason for her rejection was to cover up her own love experience from her youth.

The character image of Meng Heping's mother is very meaningful to more deeply analyze. On the surface, she is like all the "Stepmother and Stepsisters" we assessed in the previous section, and she hinders the heroine's love affair with Meng Heping. However, on a deeper level, she was also a "Cinderella," and even a successful "Cinderella." The image of Meng Heping's mother is a continuation of the heroines of

the "Cinderella" type of female images. She represents a discussion or imagination of how the "Cinderella" has become a "noblewoman" and how she perceives the "Cinderella" type of girl or how they view themselves. The answer or conjecture provided by the author of *Cinderella's Dream* is that "Cinderella" has a negative attitude towards herself. The author also believes that the simple image of "Cinderella" is just an illusion, but in fact, such girls are full of ambition. To a certain extent, this also represents the public's perception of women in real life who use marriage to move up the social ladder. Needless to say, the "Cinderella" genre is one of the most common subjects of romance fiction worldwide. They give female readers the opportunity to construct a utopia in a spiritual world. However, if the same actions are applied in real life, they are often not positively evaluated by society.

In the work, Meng Ping's mother, a former "Cinderella," feels obliged to warn her son to stay away from such "dangerous people." However, Meng Heping's father does not agree with his mother's approach and believes that it is unnecessary for parents to interfere in their son's love life. Such a depiction and contrast, in addition to advancing the plot and highlighting the image of Meng Heping's mother, also embodies the core of the "Cinderella" genre story, the "female war," although there was no competition between Meng Heping's mother and You Jiaqi. She has the ability to take Meng Heping away from his mother's "rule." This is unbearable to Meng Heping's mother. She does not choose to fight her insubordinate son, but rather regards the "dangerous person," You Jiaqi, as an enemy.

On the one hand, the mother of Meng Heping represents the "Stepmother and

Stepsisters," who hinders the development of the relationship between the heroine and her son. Meanwhile, she was the "Cinderella," and she is like a sequel to the "Cinderella" story. In addition, the attitude of Meng Heping's mother towards You Jiashi also reflects the social evaluation of women who have achieved class transition through marriage in real life.

Ruan Jiangxi is the sister of Ruan Zhengdong, and she is preferred by Meng Heping's mother to be her future daughter-in-law. When You Jiaqi and Meng Heping meet again, she had already become Meng Heping's girlfriend. The role of Ruan Jiangxi should have been designed to resemble the image of the "Stepmother and Stepsisters." However, the author creates Jiangxi as a helper of the heroine who becomes a friend of the heroine. She is similar to the "Fairy Godmother" type of female images in other cases.

3.3 The Fairy Godmother

Ruan Jiangxi (*Cinderella's Dream*, 佳期如梦), Liu Yueying (*Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows*, 千山暮雪), and Feng Yue (*Shan Shan Comes to Eat*, 杉杉来吃) are similar in character design. To some extent, they also represent the "Fairy Godmother" type female image in the contemporary Chinese romantic novel.

Ruan Jiangxi, Liu Yueying and Feng Yue, all come from privileged families and have kind hearts. They do not mind the class gap between the heroines and themselves, and are willing to make friends with "Cinderellas." In addition, they are also willing to help the heroines smooth over difficulties and communicate with the heroes. The

significance of their existence in the novel, on the one hand, is to provide rationalization for the heroines' behaviors or appearances, and to advance the development of the story. On the other hand, these Type A "helpers" also reflect, to a certain extent, the authors' imagination of the ideal female image, and the author's discussions of the "Cinderella" type female images. Among the case studies in this chapter, all of the cases analyzed have a "helper" type character, with the exception of *A Smile is Beautiful,* in which there is no obvious "helper" type character image. To some extent, this reflects the authors' belief that it is difficult for "Cinderellas" to establish romantic relationships with the heroes on their own without help from the upper class or from outside. In addition, compared with the comparison between "Stepmother and Stepsisters" and "Cinderella" type female images analyzed in the previous article, the female images of the "Fairy Godmother" type are almost without defect. They do not have the astuteness of the "Stepmother and Stepsisters" type images, nor the ordinariness or the weakness of the "Cinderella" type heroines. Even Lin Zixian, who changes from the "Stepmother and Stepsisters" type to the "Fairy Godmother" type, is portrayed by the author as a brave and honest person after her transformation.

In terms of characterization and design, the "Fairy Godmother" type of female figure is closer to the secular definition of the perfect female image. They have good upbringing and family status while not being aggressive. Even though the heroine's behavior has challenged their core values, they still have great kindness and tolerance for the heroine or the patriarchal society. But at the same time, because of their "perfection", the authors are unable to create their stories in their image. One reason is

that they are too "perfect", and this "perfection" makes it difficult to establish a dramatic conflict; on the other hand, it is also difficult for the target readers of the novel to create a strong sense of empathy with them. In front of the heroes, they are not the "weaks". Even if these female figures are not subjectively aggressive or ambitious to challenge patriarchal society, their own superior attributes or labels can make people who identify with a patriarchal culture feel uncomfortable. Because, even though they have no intention of challenging in their subjectivity, they have the ability to challenge the social attribute positioning of women in the traditional patriarchal society. Such attributes are absolutely not allowed to appear in the heroines of the "Cinderella" genre.

3.4 Discussion and Summary

The "Cinderella" genre is the most representative genre of romantic novel, and numerous works from all over the world fit into this category. In this chapter, four representative Chinese contemporary romantic novels were selected as case studies to analyze the female character's images in the "Cinderella" genre of romantic novels. I have categorized the main female characters according to their respective social class and roles in the story.

Type C females, the "Cinderella" type, are the heroines within each novel. They are kind and ordinary. Through them, authors construct a romantic spiritual utopia for the readers. The "Cinderellas" win the favor and protection of the "princes" by virtue of their innocence and kindness. In traditional Chinese culture, women exist as subordinates to men. Their social identities are often defined by their relationship to

men, as wives, daughters, mothers, or sisters. Meanwhile, men are the "providers" and "protectors" of women. Although such traditional values are no longer applicable to contemporary Chinese society, their psychological impacts on the Chinese people's inner world continue to the present day. Such traditional social values make women more inclined to look for mates with higher economic ability or social status than their own. The pairing of Type A male and a Type C female fits into the core of the "Cinderella" genre of romance; the main couple in "Cinderella" type stories in the contemporary Chinese romantic novel usually show a "powerful man and weak woman" pattern. The hero is not only superior to the heroine in social class, but also has a stronger personality. The heroine presents submissive traits in many works. However, the author's portrayal of the hero is often symbolic and lacks deeper descriptions. These powerful and symbolic male characters not only satisfy female readers' psychological needs for "female attachment to powerful men", but also draw attention to another core element of these romantic novels, the "female war".

The "female war" often takes place between the heroine, "Cinderella", and the "Stepmother and Stepsisters" type of female characters. This "female war" often constitutes the main story line of this type of novel. The "Stepmother and Stepsisters" type female characters do not have the same uniformity in social class classification as the "Cinderella" type. Some of them, like the heroine, come from a civilian background and belong to the Type C category of women. Others are similar in social class to the hero, coming from wealthy families. In the "female war," female characters often ignore the problems created, pain caused, and mistakes made by male characters. They are

obsessed with hurting their female "competitors" in order to compete for attention or love from the males. The "Stepmother and Stepsisters" type of female characters in the story will lose the "war" because of their own scheming and madness. On the one hand, such design promotes the development of the plot, and also emphasizes the patriarchal society's discipline and management of women. According to the standards of patriarchal society, a "good" woman should be simple, kind and non-aggressive. Moreover, the patriarchal society transfers those conflicts that belong between men and women to conflicts between women and women. In the "Cinderella" genre, this is reflected in the illogical fighting between female "competitors". For example, in *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows*, Mu Yongfei takes revenge on Tong Xue because she cannot win the love of the hero. According to logic, the object of her revenge should have been the hero, not Tong Xue who was loved by the hero.

From the case studies in this chapter, we can get a glimpse of the authors' opinions on the female images of the "Cinderella" type. While these fictional "Cinderellas" satisfy the fantasies of female readers and even the authors themselves, if these "Cinderellas" lived in reality, I doubt they would be perceived so positively. This is reflected in two things: by adding "Fairy Godmother" type characters into their novels, authors offer their heroines help from the upper class. This shows that the authors do not believe that "Cinderellas" can change the social class through marriage by their personal efforts alone; they need the approval of the upper class. In addition, the authors also convey the public view of "Cinderella" type women in reality through a number of characters in the novels: the "Cinderellas" are never able to marry into a wealthy

family by virtue of their innocence. On the contrary, they are ambitious and scheming.

Unlike traditional Chinese novels in the genre of "Caizi-Jiaren" (才子佳人, The Gifted Youth and The Beauty), the "Cinderella" genre places more emphasis on male authority and female submission in the relationships. Currently, there is still controversy among schorlars regarding the origin of the "Cinderella" genre contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Some theories hold that the "Cinderella" genre of Chinese romantic novels was formed as a result of the strong cultural influence of Western civilization on modern contemporary China However, in addition to the cultural influence of globalization, some other scholars have argued that the influence of the collective subconscious in terms of story archetypes should also be taken into account. The "Cinderella" type of story, as a cultural "import", did not suffer from "unconventional" development in China, but was later used in a large number of original Chinese cultural products.

The reason "Cinderella" type stories flourish is that, like other products of popular culture, they are created to please their audience. However, it is interesting that, as a cultural product whose authors and audiences are overwhelmingly female, "Cinderella" type romantic novels are rife with misogynistic values. Although the authors also created the "Fairy Godmother" type of character to reflect the diversity of female figures in the story, the main of these stories is still misogynistic and encourages women to compete with each other to win the affection of men. The female audiences and authors may seem to contradict misogynistic values, but they are in fact unified. These works that convey misogynistic values will not provoke readers, but bring pleasure to

the audiences.

In the narrative of the "Cinderella" genre of romance novels, the heroines possess the virtues of women in the patriarchal society, notably meekness and passivity. Although in some works, the heroines are wrapped in a shell of strength or bravery, at their core they are non-aggressive, in other words, at the end of the story, they all return to a state of being a non-threat to patriarchal society. Their antagonists, the "Stepmother and Stepsisters" type of female characters, have some of the serious personality "stigmas" of women in a patriarchal society, in that they are ambitious and aggressive. Women themselves subscribe to such values under the constant admonition of the patriarchal civilization. They regard the same sex who do not conform to the patriarchal values as different or even enemies, while the women who conform to such values exist as "good women" in the patriarchal society. The writers cater to such values, and give readers confirmation of such values in the process of reading. In the design of the story, the heroines, the "good women" of the patriarchal society, have to overcome the "evil women" of the patriarchal society, the "Stepmother and Stepsisters" type of female characters. The sign of victory is the love from the hero, which can also be interpreted as the approval of the patriarchal society.

Although the Cinderella genre is the most classic romantic novel text type, the scriptwriters have also made significant changes to the original author's character design in the adaptation of derived cultural products. For example, with *Shan Shan Comes to Eat*, the work which I analyzed in an earlier section, the TV version did not maintain the original Xue Shanshan's ordinary performance in business ability. In the

TV series version, the heroine, in order to prove her ability to the hero, passes the accountant's license exam through her own efforts and gets a substantial improvement in her business ability. Compared with novels, TV series are more broadly disseminated and have a wider audience, so such adaptations are more in line with the current public cognition and value orientation. As the public, especially women, gradually question the values of traditional patriarchal society, the scriptwriters have added to the novel's characters designs that contradict the original author's creation in order to cater to such changes and attract more potential audiences. Such adaptations also indicate some change in the public's changes in the values and aesthetic orientation. I again take *Shan Shan Comes to Eat* as an example: the novel version was posted in 2007, while the TV version was broadcast in 2014. During the period between the release of the novel and its adaptation into a TV series, mainland China experienced the rapid rise of the Internet industry. The Internet has not only provided novel writers with a new publishing platform, but the social nature of the Internet has also made the self-expression of ordinary people visible. The questioning of traditional values is accepted by the general public, especially by younger groups. In order to comply with such challenge, the novel's derivative products must also comply with the changes. This is why there are significant differences in characterization and even storytelling between the novels and their adaptations, especially for those works which have a long gap between the text publishing and visual product's broadcast.

The Cinderella genre of romance novels not only satisfies the audience's confirmation of patriarchal social values and the discipline of women, but also reflects

the imaginations of ordinary class about the upper class. Although the Chinese government has been committed to eliminating and denying the existence of social classes in socialist China for a long period of time, and has achieved tremendous economic development during the reform and opening up, China is still a country with a huge wealth gap between social classes. The common people, who make up the mainstream of society, are full of jealous eyes for the upper class who control much of the wealth and public power. However, the fictions provide them with space for fantasy. The upper-class life depicted in these novels may not correspond to real life, but it does correspond to the upper-class life imagined by readers. The heroines are the embodiment of the readers' desire to gaze on the upper class and to change their own social class. Readers of "Cinderella" type stories may not be able to accomplish social class advancement in real life, but the heroines of the stories have experienced imaginary lives on their behalf. The satisfaction brought by such reading experience is incomparable to other types of novels. This has led to the attention of the capital market for such fictions, which is constantly being visualized and has given rise to a number of related cultural products. From another aspect, it also reflects how the current Chinese civilian class has the main discourse power in the popular culture market. These cultural products mainly serve young women of the common class. They have some consumption abilities, but their financial ability cannot support them to have such extravagant lives as those portrayed in the novel. These "Cinderella" style stories give them a spiritual utopia.

Although these "Cinderella" genre narratives are the most typical contemporary

romantic novels in China, their reception among the audience is highly controversial. The following are the top three most liked short comments for *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows (千山暮雪)* and *Shan Shan Comes to Eat (杉杉来吃)* on Douban:

Table 1: Short comments for Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows

Short Comment	English Translation	Number of Likes
1、一个有钱的大帅逼给供应最好的物质享受, 隔两个月跟他睡一觉, 他妈的到底有什么不开心的？？？2、这书千万别落到有些人的手里, 不然又要叫着"女人骨子里就是喜欢被 QJ"了!	1. A wealthy and handsome guy provides (her) with the best material pleasures, sleep with him once every two months. Damn it, what does (she) have to be unhappy about? 2. This book should not fall into the hands of some people, otherwise they will start shouting "Women inherently like to be raped" again!	437
哦哦我还怕吐槽这本被匪我思存的粉丝喷呢 原来不是我一个觉得这本书搓啊! 好欣慰!!! 作为	Oh, I was afraid to criticize this book, which is praised by the fans of Fei Wo Si Cun. It turns out that I am	132

| 男主控对这个男主完全喜欢不起来啊 简直是恶心好么 受过伤害就能乱伤害别人么 再怎么卖弄深情也完全喜欢不起来 女主也没存在感 跟恨的人上床怎么决口不提高潮啊 整本书各种矫情与狗血 还什么这本书让人看到爱情的样子 呸——我再也不会点移动赠送免费读的书了 算了吐槽的我已经老了┓_┏ | not the only one who thinks this book is terrible! As a supporter of hero in usual, I cannot like such hero at all. He is simply disgusting. Can someone who has been hurt hurt others at will? Even if he tries to perform the affectionateness, I cannot like him. The heroine is also unremarkable. How can she have sex with someone she hates and not even mention orgasm? The whole book is full of melodrama and cliches. How can this book make people see the beauty of love? Ugh - I will never again click on a free book from the Mobile Reading | |

	application. Okay, enough of my rant, I am getting too old for this. ⌐_⌐	
三流故事，四流文笔。	An inferior story with more inferior writing.	116

Table 2: Short comments for Shan Shan Comes to Eat

Short Comment	English Translation	Number of Likes
典型的顾漫式卖萌。只是这种卖萌，第一次会觉得可爱，卖多了便没了新意。这本书写了那么多年，结果却是骗骗初中生的东西，如果作者不是顾漫，评分肯定没这么高==	A typical "Gu Man" style of cuteness. However, this kind of cuteness is only adorable the first time, and becomes unoriginal when overused. This book has been written for so many years, yet the result is only something that can deceive junior high school students. If the author was not Gu Man, the rating would definitely not be so high.	98

冲着顾漫笔下女主可爱得不做作给 3 星。在总裁文、小白文泛滥的时下，实在无法给予这样莫名其妙的灰姑娘式爱情故事更高的评价。这样的文能出版，不过仗着她是顾漫。哎呀，我好像认真了。	I give three stars for the lovable but unpretentious female lead in Gu Man's writing. In the current time, president literatures (总裁文) are everywhere, it is difficult to give a higher rating to such nonsensical Cinderella-style love story. This novel can only be published because the author is Gu Man. Oh my, I seem to have taken this too seriously	58
同样是大神级的男人，感觉就是微微的职场版，且不如微微好看。	Although both super capable heroes, I feel this novel is a workplace version of *A Smile is Beautiful (微微一笑很倾城)*, but not as interesting as *A Smile is Beautiful.*	49

To some extent, these short comments suggest, that although the audience takes the time to read these novels, this does not necessarily mean that the audience fully agrees with the values expressed in these works. In fact, these highly liked reviews confirm some of Janice Radway's (1991) theories or viewpoints in her *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. These Chinese readers, like the audience of American romantic novels in the last century, do not like heroes who resort to violence and female characters who adhere to conservative values.

Although, the cases analyzed in this chapter are not representative of the entire Cinderella genre of contemporary Chinese romantic novels, to some extent, the classification and construction of typical characters in these kinds of novels are discussed and analyzed. These analyses and discussions provide some references for the research of China's current popular cultural products and other related fields.

4. The New Gifted Youth and The Beauty in the Contemporary Chinese Romantic Novel

"The Gifted Youth and The Beauty" Novel (*Caizi-Jiaren-Xiaoshuo*, 才子佳人小说), hereafter referred as "GY&B", is the most traditional model of romantic novel in China. Unlike the "imported" Cinderella genre, these novels often typically do not emphasize social class difference between the hero and heroine in their character design. The heroine is not always in an elevated position. In *The History of Chinese Popular Fiction (中国通俗小说史)*, Wang Qizhou points out that there are two stages in the development of character image design in GY&B novels: In the first stage (from the late Ming Dynasty to the early Qing Dynasty), talent was emphasized in the image design of the hero; the design of the heroine's image emphasizes not only beauty as in other genres of romantic novel, but also talents similar to those of the hero. In the second stage (the Yongzheng to Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty), the heroes and heroines of novels began to demonstrate not only talent but also courage, and some novels even emerged with heroes and heroines representing both civil and military classes. (Wang, 2015)

Contemporary Chinese romantic novels of the new GY&B type inherit both narrative and character structure from the classical type. In terms of story structure, the novel of the new GY&B type, like classical novels of this genre, generally adopts the story structure of meeting → falling in love → separating → reuniting. The character design pairs a beautiful and gifted heroine and a capable hero.

4.1 The Development of new GY&B Genre

In terms of the heroine's design, the classic GY&B novel can be divided into three stages. The first stage is represented by *Yingying's Biography (莺莺传)[10]*, where the heroine is a symbol, and her existence only serves to highlight the hero. Such female figures do not have a strong presence or distinctive character, although their creators attach many good qualities to them, such as beauty or talent. The second stage is represented by *The Two Fair Cousins (玉娇梨)[11]*. The heroine's behavior and choices play a driving role in the story's development, but the story's value orientation still serves patriarchal society. In this stage, the female images, especially the heroines, were more vivid and dared to express themselves. The third stage is represented by *The Orchid Dream (兰花梦)[12]*, where the heroine becomes the leading character in the story's development, and the novel's values gradually tend to reflect on society, fate, or human nature.

From the three stages outlined above, we can see the developmental trajectory of the traditional Chinese GY&B novel. They were originally read from a purely male perspective and served a male audience in a feudal, patriarchal society. It has developed into a form literature that reflects the author's self-expression through popular stories. These self-expressions are entirely based on the author's understanding of romantic relationships or society, and can even challenge mainstream values. In this

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[10] The author is Yuan Zhen. *Yingying's Biography* is a work of the Tang Dynasty (618-907).
[11] The author is Zhang Yun. *The Two Fair Cousins* is a work of the early Qing Dynasty (1636-1735).
[12] The author is Yinmei-Shanren. *The Orchid Dream* is a work of the late Qing Dynasty (1840-1912).

developmental trajectory, the heroines have also changed from flat characters that merely satisfy male fantasies to more vivid and subjective female figures. However, throughout the process, the GY&B novel has remained unchanged in its status as popular literature.

The new GY&B genre of Chinese contemporary romantic novels, which inherits the characteristics of the classic GY&B novel, is not static in its characterization. The development of the characterization of this type of Chinese contemporary romantic novels has gone through three stages:

1. In the first stage, although the hero and heroine are superior in ability, they usually come from the civilian class. In addition to serving the reader, writers at this stage also show their self-expression through the love story between the hero and the heroine.

2. In the second stage, the hero and heroine are superior in ability, and the authors also emphasize that they come from the elite class. Even if they are not born into a privileged family, they will make their way to the elite through personal efforts. In this stage, the author's self-expression is significantly reduced. These novels are more focused on giving the reader the pleasure of reading.

3. In the third stage, the authors emphasize that the hero and heroine come from the elite class. Their excellence is the result of high birth, not of individual effort. Such works at this stage fully serve the market and are thoroughly products of the cultural industry.

This chapter will focus on works representative of these three stages of

development, *Red Spider Lily (彼岸花)*, *Silent Separation (何以笙箫默)*, and *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (三生三世十里桃花)* as cases studies, which provide clues to analyze the characters in the novel and the aesthetic orientation of the audience.

4.2 Character Classification

In addition to outlining the development of the new GY&B genre of romantic novels, the classification of characters in the novel is one of the main points of analysis in this chapter. I refer to Su Jianxin's *Studies on Evolution History of the Caizi-Jiaren Novel (才子佳人小说演变史研究)* to classify the characters in the new GY&B genre of novels as follows:

Beauty (Jiaren,佳人): The heroines, who have both beauty and talent. There is generally no class difference between them and the heroes.

Gifted Youth (Caizi, 才子): The heroes, capable young men, are the object of affection for many female characters in the story, but they are firmly in love with the heroines.

Villain: The hero or heroine's love rivals or obstructors. They always try to hinder the development of the hero and heroine's relationship.

In the Character Classification section of this chapter, I will categorize and analyze the characters from the three representative novels in the above way.

4.3 The Case Studies

4.3.1 Red Spider Lily

The *Red Spider Lily (彼岸花)* is a romantic novel published in 2001 by the mainland Chinese author Annie Baby (安妮宝贝).[13] The story of *Red Spider Lily* revolves around the heroine, Qiao, and the hero, Sen. The structure of the story of *Red Spider Lily* is quite different from the other cases discussed in this section. There are two storylines in *Red Spider Lily*: 1. The love entanglement between Qiao and Sen; 2. The love story in the movie script was conceived by Qiao: a complex love experience between Lin Nansheng and Lin Heping. These two sets of storylines are separate but intrinsically linked to each other. The main female characters in the novel are classified as follows:

Qiao and **Lin Nansheng**: Beauty, heroine.

Yang-Lan, **A-li,** and **Zhuo Yang's** [14] **Mother**: Villain, the heroine's competitor, and obstructors.

Like other romantic novels, *Red Spider Lily* also has bright and beautiful characters and fashionable life pictures for readers to imagine and empathize with. Despite its ornate rhetoric, the language is not obscure. Its plot is tight and convoluted, and the book very readable. In terms of these characteristics, it is an excellent commercial work of popular literature. The fact that it has been reprinted several times and adapted into a web series proves this. But on the other hand, the spiritual core of this novel and the author's self-expression are very different from the later romantic novels. The novel explores love and predestination through the love stories of the

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[13]She started to use a new pen name, Qing Shan (庆山), in 2014.
[14]Zhuo Yang is one of Qiao's suitors in the story.

heroines Qiao and Nansheng.

The heroine, Qiao, is a writer who travels to various cities in China, and meets Zhuo Yang, the owner of a video store in Shanghai. The heroine becomes the partner of Zhuo Yang after he breaks up with Yang-Lan. Later, due to the obstruction of Zhuo Yang's mother and Yang-Lan, Qiao breaks up with Zhuo Yang after consideration. Then Qiao meets Sen, the owner of a bar, and falls in love with him because of his thoughtfulness and patience. As Qiao decides to become lifelong partners with Sen, Sen informs Qiao that he is gay.

Lin Nansheng is the heroine of the play that Qiao conceived. Lin Nansheng's mother died in childbirth while giving birth to her. Her father was hit and killed by a truck on the way to bring her back to the city from the countryside. After the death of both parents, she was adopted by her father's subsequent wife and met her stepmother's son, Lin Heping. She fell in love with her nominal brother during their long time together. They have been entangled in this relationship all their lives. After Heping makes it clear that he rejects Nansheng's love and is ready to choose A-li as his partner, a desperate Nansheng stabs Heping with a knife. The relationship ends in tragedy.

Red Spider Lily appears to have two heroines, but Qiao and Lin Nansheng are one with each other. Qiao figuratively projects her thoughts on love and predestination onto the image and story of Lin Nansheng. Unlike the "multilevel surface in one character" of *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (三生三世十里桃花)* and *Silent Separation (何以笙箫默)* analyzed later in this chapter, the image of Qiao and Nansheng is a progressive relationship. Qiao expresses herself through her portrayal of

Nansheng. In other words, Lin Nansheng is reinforcing and dramatizing Qiao.

Aunt Lan, Nansheng's stepmother in *Red Spider Lily*, is also one of the important female figures. She used to be from a wealthy family and good looking. She could have spent her life living in Shanghai, enjoying a glamorous career, marrying a rich, man and living out her life in peace. But because of the Cultural Revolution, Aunt Lan went to work as a female worker in a small-town textile factory. After her marriage, the ambitious woman meets her lover, with whom she gives birth to the hero of the novel, Lin Heping. Her life is a prophecy of Qiao and Nansheng's destiny, and the author also tells the novel's core idea through her words. Before she died, Aunt Lan said to Nansheng, "(I) actually always just want to find someone in my heart and spend my life in peace. But luck is not good. Women are living on luck."[15](Annie Baby, 2003, *Red Spider Lily,* Chapter 6, para 132) Qiao and Nansheng, like young Aunt Lan, yearn for freedom, love, and a glamorous life. But at the same time, they are full of contradictions in their inside world. On the one hand, they are pretentious and do not want to become like Yang-Lan or A-li, that is, "vulgar" women. On the other hand, the heroines still want to find a man who can satisfy all their imaginings and live a long and stable life with him. But the men who could fulfill their dreams rejected their pursuit or, for other reasons, could not stay with them for long. They attribute their romantic difficulties to bad luck or fate.

The images of Qiao and Nansheng well embody the mentality of school girls in urban areas of China in the late 20th to early 21st century. Mainland China in the late

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[15]The original text is "（我）其实心里一直只是想找个人，平平安安地度过一生。可是运气不好。女人是靠运气生活的。"

20th and early 21st centuries showed the tremendous social changes brought about by the reform and opening up policy. During this period, mainland China was more open than in the past. The rapid economic development and relatively open policy made it easier for Chinese people, especially teenagers in urban areas, to come into contact with new things and concepts from the outside world. Some girls on campus were curious and eager for a fresh, more unfettered way of life. But at the same time, they have to follow the rules in their daily lives because of their parents' and schools' instructions. Romantic novels such as *Red Spider Lily* satisfy their curiosity. And the heroine, who is conflicted and restless, is just like these teenagers. They want to try new things but are afraid to make the first move. The rebellious actions of the heroines in the novel are as if readers are exploring their deepest desires. In other words, the heroines become readers' surrogates in the reading process. This can also be reflected in the feedback from Douban. Among the 46 short comments that specifically mentioned the heroine, ten comments directly said that the heroine was very relatable or that the heroine was like the readers themselves; there were 13 short comments indicating that they liked or appreciated the heroines or heroines' story. (Data based on 2001, 2008, 2014, 2015, 2018, and 2021 editions collected by Douban)

Yang-Lan, A-li, and Zhuo Yang's mother impede the development of the relationship between the heroes and the heroines in the novel *Red Spider Lily*. The author functionally shaped them to advance the plot. For this reason, the author has designed their image as mercenary and gold-digging. This is no different in function from the "villain" type of characters in classic GY&B genre novels. However, in

contrast to *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms*, cited and analyzed in this chapter, *Red Spider Lily* does not adopt an overly "stereotyping" approach in portraying the "villain" type of characters. In addition to their role as obstructionists, Yang-Lan, A-li, and Zhuo Yang's mother represent the banal and secularized way of life in the novel. The heroines resist becoming "vulgar" like them but yearn for their "secure life." This contradiction also forms the core idea of the novel *Red Spider Lily*.

Despite being represented by *Red Spider Lily* Chinese romantic novels of this period had good market results. But as well as being commercial, they also show much of the author's self-expression. The reason is that before entering the 21st century, popular commercial literature in mainland China was not mature, and there was no strict classification between serious and popular literature. As a result, writers of romantic novels in mainland China during this period would draw on some styles and ideas of serious literature when creating their works. All these features constitute a stark contrast to later Chinese romantic novels.

4.3.2 Silent Separation

Silent Separation (何以笙箫默) is a well-known work by Gu Man, a writer of romantic novels in mainland China. The novel was first serialized in Jinjiang Literary City (晋江文学城) in 2003 and was first published in volume in 2006. The story revolves around the love story between the heroine, Zhao Mosheng, and the hero, He Yichen, which starts on the college campus and evolves over many years.

In the story, the heroine falls in love at first sight with her college classmate,

Yichen. Later, after some misunderstandings and the obstruction of the hero's adoptive parents' daughter, Yimei, the heroine falls in with her father's arrangement to study in the United States. Seven years later, Mosheng, who has become a professional photographer, returns to the city where the hero lives. By coincidence, Yichen and Mosheng are reunited, and they are able to resolve their misunderstanding and renew their relationship.

According to the system of classification of characters in this chapter, I have categorized the main female characters in the novel as follows:

Zhao Mosheng: Beauty, heroine

He Yimei: Villain, heroine's competitor

The entire length of the storyline of *Silent Separation* spans seven years, and the heroine is not portrayed in a consistent manner throughout the novel. The heroine in her school days is similar to the heroine of many romantic novels in image design. She is the daughter of the mayor, and she is young, beautiful, and full of energy. To pursue Yichen, she tries to fit into the hero's life and accept the challenge of her rival in love, Yimei. While studying in the United States, she experienced too many life changes. First, her father died, and the family fell into economic difficulties. Mosheng had to work hard in the United States to earn a living to support herself. Then she married someone else in a sham marriage to meet the adoption conditions and adopt the child of a friend who was sentenced to prison. Her hard life in America changed her from a cheerful girl to an introverted woman.

Similar to *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (三生三世十*

里桃花) analyzed later in this chapter, the image change of the heroine is also one of the themes of *Silent Separation*. After returning to China, the author portrays the heroine as a rising star in the fashion industry. Unlike her image as a student, she has become reclusive and no longer reveals her thoughts and emotions effortlessly. The author intended to portray Zhao Mosheng as an outwardly tough outwardly but emotionally weak figure, but the fact that the work made Zhao Mosheng's image look inconsistent. In the whole story, the image of Zhao Mosheng can be divided into four stages: 1. campus, 2. living in the United States, 3. returning to China, and 4. rekindling old love with the hero. In the first stage, Zhao Mosheng is a sunny girl. She is brave and cheerful, daring to pursue love. In the second stage, the author designed her as a strong girl who endures humiliation. Although life in America was difficult, she remained brave. In the third stage, she returns to the city where the hero lives. Years of overseas experience had made her reticent and reluctant to reveal her thoughts to others. In the fourth stage, the heroine recovers confidence and openness after falling in love with the hero again.

The transformation of Zhao Mosheng's image from the first to the second stage makes sense, and the author has given ample explanation in the novel to explain the heroine's inner change. However, the image shift from the second to the third stage seems abrupt. The author does not explain how the heroine goes from being a strong and brave person to being silent and cowardly. Although the author makes Zhao Mosheng in the third stage appear superior in the workplace, these descriptions cannot cover up her weakness in character. Such depiction makes the heroine's image seem

torn and disunified.

This phenomenon, on the one hand, indicates that the plot preparation given by the author is not enough. On the other hand, it also emphasizes the hero's image in the later stage of the story. The hero, He Yichen, appears in the story as the heroine's redeemer. The author had to make concessions in portraying the heroine to reflect the deep love of the hero and what he meant to Zhao Mosheng. These concessions advance the emotional development of the hero and heroine, but they also exacerbate the inconsistency in the heroine's image. The heroine of the fourth stage has wholly lost the characteristics of the first two stages. Although she becomes cheerful again, this cheerfulness is not that of an independent personality but dependent on the hero.

I will now refer to the short comments on the three editions of *Silent Separation* that have been included in Douban (2007, 2011, and 2017 editions), where the readers' evaluation of Zhao Mosheng's image can be roughly divided into these categories: 1. the heroine is weak and not smart enough; 2. the image of the heroine is not uniform; 3. the plot related to the heroine is too unrealistic; 4. readers empathize with the heroine and envy her for being able to have a partner like He Yichen. Such evaluations can reflect two points: first, the readership has a clear understanding of the shortcomings of the heroine's image; but at the same time, such character design and storyline also pleased many readers. *Silent Separation* has been republished many times and adapted for radio, television, and film. It is clear that this work has a large number of shortcomings, but a large audience is willing to pay for it. In other words, *Silent Separation* is a booming cultural industry product. It has been reprinted several times,

has various adaptations, and has over 470,000 ratings on Douban (including the novel, TV series, and movie), demonstrating its success. Although the image of Zhao Mosheng is split, her image, especially in the third and fourth stages, provides empathy for many readers. Her love for He Yichen fulfills readers' romantic fantasies.

The other main female figure in *Silent Separation* is Zhao Mosheng's rival in love. The misunderstanding between Zhao Mosheng and He Yichen during their campus days started because of her. But later in the story, she sees the true feelings of He Yichen and helps the hero and heroine clear up their misunderstandings. Although she appears as an "obstructor" at the story's beginning, she later transforms into a facilitator for the hero and heroine. The image of He Yimei plays the following roles in the novel: 1. her adoration reflects the hero's charm from another angle; 2. He Yimei's "challenge" triggers the heroine's "response," which reflects the heroine's bravery; 3. she helps the hero and heroine clear up misunderstandings and drives the plot forward. Unlike Xuan Nü and Su Jin in *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* analyzed in this chapter, He Yimei's image does not have much of a "female war" component. Her character design tends to emphasize more on the character traits of the hero and heroine and drive the plot development rather than creating conflicts.

4.3.3 Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms

Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (三生三世十里桃花, the TV series' English name is *Eternal Love)* was created by the famous Chinese mainland novelist Tang Qi. It was posted in Jinjiang Literary City (晋江文学城)

between 2007 and 2009 and was first published in volume in 2009. The novel was widely acclaimed upon its publication and has been adapted into TV series, movies, comics, and so on. Despite the plagiarism controversy, the novel still made it to the top 10 of the IP (Intellectual Property) Value Ranking of 2016 ENAwards[16]. This shows its popularity and commercial value.

The author draws on concepts from Taoism, Chinese Kungfu novels, and classical legends to construct a unique historical setting. The novel revolves around the love story between the goddess, the princess of the kingdom of Qingqiu, Bai Qian, and the crown prince of the Nine Heavens, Ye Hua. After overcoming all the difficulties, the love entanglement of the hero and heroine across three lives finally had a happy ending. According to the classification of characters in this chapter, I have categorized the main female characters in the novel as follows:

Bai Qian (Si Yin, Su Su): Beauty, heroine

Xuan Nü and Su Jin: Villains, the obstructors in the love story of the main couple

The heroine, Bai Qian, is similar to the heroines in the classic GY&B novel, and her image is full of idealized designs. In the story, Bai Qian is the only daughter of the ruler of the kingdom of Qingqiu. She is outstanding in appearance and possesses divine power, and her personality is apparent in love and hate. In the novel, she experiences three lives of love with Ye Hua. In her first life, Bai Qian appears under the alias Si Yin,

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[16]ENAwards are currently the most authoritative cultural industry and product awards in China. ENAwards are organized by Endata, the most powerful data platform for the cultural industry in China.

and is a disciple of Mo Yuan, the undefeatable God of War. At this time, Ye Hua was not yet born. His soul is a lotus flower on the Kunlun. The heroine was responsible for taking care of this lotus. In the second life, the heroine loses her memory in the mortal world and falls in love with Ye Hua as a human identity. But because of the bullying of Ye Hua's concubines, Su Jin's bullying, she jumped off the Zhu Xian terrace. After jumping from the Zhu Xian terrace in the third life, Bai Qian awoke to her identity as a goddess. In this life, the hero and heroine experienced many trials and finally became a couple.

Unlike the heroine in the Cinderella Type story, authors pay more attention to the her changes, efforts, and choices, when portraying the heroine in the new GY&B type of romantic novel. In this story, the heroine Bai Qian experienced three lives, each with a different identity and personality. The identities of the three lives are Si Yin (Mo Yuan's disciple), Su Su (a mortal), and Bai Qian (a goddess). These three images seem to contradict each other, but they represent the different character traits of the heroine. Moreover, the image construction of Si Yin and Su Su also foreshadows the heroine's transformation into the goddess Bai Qian. In other words, Si Yin and Su Su's image is to serve the construction of Bai Qian's image. Si Yin's character traits are impulsiveness and recklessness, but also because of her reckless behavior, she lost her memory and fell into the mortal world, thus becoming a mortal, Su Su. Su Su fell in love with the god Ye Hua. And because of the weakness and misunderstanding, she chose to commit suicide. Thus, the heroine restored the identity and memory of the goddess Bai Qian. Each identity shift of the heroine is a metamorphosis and eventually becomes the

idealized image, the goddess Bai Qian. In this process, the hero's involvement is only one of the driving factors and does not occupy a determining position.

For the character evaluation of Bai Qian, I refer to the short comments about the narrative on Douban. Douban has collected six versions of *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms*, 2009 edition (Shenyang Press), 2011 edition (Baihuazhou Literature and Art Press), 2012 edition, 2015 edition, 2017 edition (Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House), 2020 edition (China Culture Development Press) respectively. Among the readable short comments, there are a total of 102 that directly mention the heroine. There are 102 words and phrases that are evaluative or emotional towards the heroine. The debate about whether the heroine's image is liked or not mainly focuses on whether the heroine's character image is consistent. From these short comments, we can see that some readers think the heroine is a great-hearted person, while others hold the opposite opinion. They think the heroine is heartless and hypocritical. These arguments stem from the heroine's attitude towards her rival in love. In the story, after regaining her identity as a goddess, Bai Qian takes revenge on her love rivals in the first and second lives, Xuan Nü and Su Jin. Some readers believe that such retaliation is contrary to the generous characterization of the heroine that the author intends to create in the work. However, other readers believe that the heroine's behavior reflects that she is a straightforward person in emotion. And such plot design also give pleasure to readers in reading.

In addition to the differences in values and aesthetic tendencies of the readership, the lack of subtlety in characterization is also one of the reasons for the above disputes.

The author does not give enough explanation or plausibility to the metamorphosis of the heroine's image in the whole story. Although the flat character image is a common fault of popular novels, due to the particularity of the story structure (the entire novel contains the heroine's three lives, and the story of each life can be established separately), the change of the character image is remarkably abrupt. In addition, like *Silent Separation (何以笙箫默)* discussed above, some readers think that the story of *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* is too impractical. Although *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* is a romantic novel with oriental fantasy elements, the heroine is too perfectly portrayed by the author in the story, and almost all male characters in the novel have a crush on her. This has led many readers to criticize the novel and the heroine.

This work's two most prominent female rebels are Xuan Nü and Su Jin. In the story, Xuan Nü is the younger sister of the wife of the heroine's brother, who runs away from the marriage and goes to Kunlun, where she is sheltered by Si Yin (the heroine of the first life). During her stay in Kunlun, she falls in love with the heroine's then boyfriend and marries him. She next tries to hurt the heroine out of jealousy. The other villain is the hero's concubine, Su Jin. She attacks Su Su (the heroine of the second life) out of jealousy and causes her to commit suicide. As the heroine's antagonist, the author portrays the villains as jealous and vicious inside to set off the heroine's charm. In Douban, there are few direct short comments on them, but their emotional tendencies are very similar. Out of a total of six short comments, three of them think Su Jin and Xuan Nü are evil, and one of them directly pointed out that these images are identical.

In the remaining three short comments, the words that have an emotional tendency for them are "美女"(beauty), "吃醋"(jealous) and "热闹"（hilarious）.

Despite the emphasis on the heroine's abilities and actions, the characterization in the novels of the new GY&B style still cannot escape the problem of character image stereotype. In the novel, the image of Su Jin and Xuan Nü are designed to be able to form an opposition and dramatic conflict with the heroine. Because of such character image construction, the story develops the mode of "good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil" in the narrative. Such simple story logic, on the one hand, satisfies readers' preference for happy endings and brings pleasure to reading. On the other hand, it is also very consistent with the functional positioning of romantic novels, that is, to pass the time without deep thinking.

4.4 The Evolution of the Female Image

The female characters in the new GY&B type of Chinese romantic novel are not invariable, which can be seen in the analysis and description of the cases mentioned above. The development of the heroine's character image in Chinese romantic novels of the new GY&B type can be divided into the following stages:

In the first stage, the heroines are excellent and capable, but the authors also usually add some personal expression to the portrayal of the heroines. Therefore, in addition to showing a lot of fantastic qualities in the works, the heroines also have individual characteristics and even shortcomings. These female figures not only cater to market tastes to a large extent but also

incorporate the authors' style or ideas.

In the second stage, the heroines are not only excellent in their abilities but also from the elite class. They tend to be born into families of higher social classes. To develop the novel's plot, authors often design the heroine to do something that causes misunderstanding. Although these misunderstandings will cause them to experience some frustrations and difficulties in the story, they will also grow as these episodes unfold.

In the third stage, the heroines are "perfect." They have outstanding ability, outstanding appearance, and excellent family background. Compared with the heroines of the first and second stages, the heroines of the third stage have no shortcomings and are flatter.

Take *Red Spider Lily (彼岸花)*, *Silent Separation (何以笙箫默)* and *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (三生三世十里桃花)* discussed in the previous section as examples. The first editions of these three works were published in 2001, 2006, and 2009 respectively. The *Red Spider Lily*, published in 2001, not only emphasizes the glamour and fashion of the two heroines but also designs their personalities in ways that do not conform to mainstream values. In the story, Nansheng still shows love to the hero, Lin Heping, after she learns that his chosen lifelong partner is A-li. Such behavior that destroys other people's relationships is not in line with the prevailing moral values of Chinese society. But as a market-oriented work of popular literature, the author still does not hesitate to depict such behavior, which may constitute a moral stain, on the heroine. The reasons for this phenomenon are as follows: 1. This

avant-garde and non-conformist design fully satisfies the rebellious mentality of teenagers; 2. The narrative logic of "true love reigns supreme, regardless of worldly views" is inherited from the 20th-century Chinese romantic novels represented by Chiung Yao's works; 3. The audience for fiction in this period was usually educated female readers who lived in urban areas. They can accept ideas that are not in line with mainstream values. Thus, the heroines in Chinese romantic novels of this period, represented by *Red Spider Lily*, are often personally competent and avant-garde and confront mainstream values in pursuing love. In other words, their maverick shell conceals in a heart that longs for love.

With the rapid development of the Internet industry in mainland China in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, several platforms for online posting and discussing literature emerged in mainland China, represented by Jinjiang Literature City (晋江文学城). These platforms allow people with no professional training to create novels and provide a platform for readers to exchange ideas. In addition, from this period onwards, readers could read romantic novels beyond those selected by publishers and choose directly from the website according to their aesthetic choice. At the same time, the authors design the narrative and characters based on readers' feedback and preferences. Reflected in the actual works, Chinese romantic novels at this time show less and less personal expression by the author, and the proportion of components catering to readers is gradually increasing. Take *Silent Separation,* posted and published in this period, as an example. The heroine, Zhao Mosheng, is more consistent with the "good girl" in mainstream Chinese society compared with Qiao and

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Nansheng in *Red Spider Lily*. Although to increase the dramatic conflict and to portray the heroine, the author devised the plot of Mosheng's fake marriage to adopt her friend's child. However, Mosheng and her "husband" are only a nominal couple in this fake marriage. Such a design is consistent with mainstream Chinese morality. This also makes the novel more accessible to readers who come from conservative social groups. However, it is worth noting that in addition to these designs that cater to the audience, the author still emphasizes the heroine's struggles and choices in work.

In the late 2010s, the new GY&B type romantic novels tended to be mature and patterned in narrative and character design. Such romantic novels have been transformed from personal expressions of the authors to "commodities" oriented to the aesthetics of the market. The heroines of the novel are "perfect" and flattened. The authors are more inclined to emphasize the high birth of the heroines than their struggles. Take *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* as an example. The heroine, Bai Qian, is the princess of the country of Qingqiu and has a strong magic power. Her excellent ability comes not from her hard work or study but from her background. Such narrative and character design are an intense pleasure for readers who want to escape the pressure of real life. As a result, these novels have also achieved significant commercial success. The market performance of *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* proves this.

The opposite of the heroine, the "Villain" type of female character also changed accordingly. The developmental stages corresponding to the heroines are as follows:

In the first stage, the "obstructors" in the relationship between the hero and

heroine possess qualities that are antagonistic to those of the heroine. These characteristics are not all negative. They only exist to emphasize and act as a foil to the characteristics of the heroine. In addition, the "Villain" type of female character at this stage hardly ever attacks the heroine verbally or physically as an obstructor.

In the second stage, the "Villain" type of female character will not only hinder the relationship development of the hero and heroine but also actively challenge the heroine. But when they realize the hero and heroine's true love, they will choose to quit the relationship.

In the third stage, these "Villain" types of female characters challenge the heroine and attack the heroine either physically or verbally. They often have some negative traits that are used to set off the heroine's "perfection."

The female "Villains" in *Red Spider Lily*, *Silent Separation,* and *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* embody this development process. These female "Villain" types of characters are becoming increasingly stereotyped. The meaning of their existence has also changed from serving the characteristics of heroines to providing readers with reading pleasure. Compared to Xuan Nü and Su Jin in *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms,* the female "Villains" in *Red Spider Lily* and *Silent Separation* are not stereotyped. Xuan Nü and Su Jin in the story is the outright villain. Their "evil" is ultimately defeated by the heroine at the end of the novel and ceases to exist. However, the female "Villains" in *Red Spider Lily* and *Silent Separation* just fall in love with the same men as the heroine.

4.5 The Evolution of the Male Image

In the novel of the new GY&B type, the "Gifted Youth" hero is not invariable. Unlike the "Cinderella" genre of Chinese romantic novels, the new GY&B type does not emphasize class differences between the hero and heroine. Thus, the class backgrounds of the heroes and heroines in novels of the new GY&B are often similar. However, it is undeniable that these "Gifted Youth" heroes are still excellent and embody the ideal partner in the hearts of female readers. Especially after the construction mode of the new GY&B type romantic novels has mature, this feature becomes particularly obvious. The heroes of the three works discussed above are as follows:

Red Spider Lily (彼岸花): Shen, Lin Heping

Silent Separation (何以笙箫默): He Yichen

Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (三生三世十里桃花): Ye Hua

Also, similar to the evolution of the female figure in such Chinese romantic novels, the hero's image changes through the following stages:

In the first stage, the heroes are affectionate and imperfect. They even sometimes admit partners other than the heroine into their love lives. But the heroine is unique and irreplaceable within them.

In the second stage, the heroes inherit the affection from the first stage, in addition to which the heroes' loves for the heroine also begin to be exclusive.

In this stage, the only person with whom the hero has a substantial romantic relationship is the heroine. On the other hand, in addition to the trait of affectionateness, the hero also has the qualities of being handsome, excellent in ability, and having many admirers. But the author would also emphasize the hero's efforts in achieving success rather than his birth heritage.

In the third stage, the heroes are like the second stage. They are affectionate, capable, and charming. They are devoted to the heroine. To reflect their devotion, the authors often design them to hurt other admirers besides the heroines. In addition, the authors emphasize that the hero's excellence comes from high birth or talent.

The following discussion will analyze the heroes in *Red Spider Lily*, *Silent Separation* and *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* as examples.

Due to the particularity of the story structure of *Red Spider Lily*, this work has two heroes. They are Sen, who corresponds to Qiao, and Lin Heping, who corresponds to Nansheng. Similar to the relationship between Nansheng and Qiao, Lin Heping is an enhanced and dramatic image of Sen. Their image in the novel is affectionate, and the heroine has a special place in their inner world. But on the other hand, the author also uses their behavior in the novel to represent some implications for the real world. Throughout the novel, Lin Heping and Sen try to transform the heroines, making them "worldly" like everyone else. Combined with the analysis of female characters above, the new GY&B genre of Chinese romantic novels of this period, from character design to story construction, conveys the desire and pursuit of independence for both authors

and readers. Although these works also satisfy readers' fantasies of romance, they also have the attribute of self-expression.

The image of the male protagonist in the second stage is more stereotypical in contrast to the first stage. Compared with the first stage, such images are easier to accept by a larger group of readers. Take He Yichen in *Silent Separation* as an example. In the novel, the successful hero and the heroine are separated for seven years but he is still unswervingly in love with the heroine. Such a devoted and capable male image is very much in line with readers' imagination of the perfect partner. From this stage, authors embody less and less self-expression in their novels, replacing it with schematic characters and narratives.

Ye Hua exemplifies the third stage of the hero's image in *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms.* Like the heroes of the first two stages, he is deeply in love with the heroine, although in the story, he has accepted other women in his love life, like Lin Heping in *Red Spider Lily.* But in this regard, the author designed the motive of action so that Ye Hua is forced to marry Su Jin because of the pressure from his grandfather, the Heavenly Lord. In other words, Ye Hua subjectively has not betrayed the heroine, although his actual behavior constituted infidelity. In addition, the author designed the relationship between Ye Hua and Su Jin in this way. Although Su Jin is Ye Hua's concubine, their relationship is cold. The author uses this to show the hero's loyalty to the heroine. The author's design fully satisfies the reader's imagination of the perfect partner, affectionate and devoted, and of high birth and ability. In addition, how he treats other admirers when the readers put themselves in the heroine's shoes

also shows readers' desire to be the "special one." Not only his attitude, but also his personality is attractive for readers. The author designed Ye Hua as a cold male from behavior to personality, so that only his treatment of the heroine is full of enthusiasm. This reinforces the impression that the heroine or readers who put themselves in the heroine's position are the "special one." The short comments on Douban also reflect these views. The positive short comments on the hero can be divided into two categories: 1. Those liking the hero, especially liking his "exclusive love" and the protection of the heroine; 2. The readers envying the heroine for having a partner like the hero. The negative short comments on the hero are mainly focused on two aspects: 1. The author portrays the hero as too capable; 2. Readers criticize the hero's treatment of Su Su.

By comparing the images of the hero in the three stages, we can draw the following conclusions: Like the female image, the hero's image in the new GY&B type of Chinese romantic novels has also developed from the author's self-expression element to the image that fully conforms to the market aesthetic preference. The lack of emphasis on class differences between the heroes and heroines is the essential defining criterion of Chinese romantic novels' new GY&B genre. The authors of these romantic novels are surprisingly uniform in their choice of designing the social class of their heroes and heroines. They chose to design all the social classes of the heroes and heroines as elites rather than creating them as coming from the commoner class. This is particularly evident in the second and third stages of the new GY&B genre. Such a character design, although detached from the social class in which the vast majority of readers live, fulfills the readers' imagination of the upper class, especially the dream of a perfect

partner from the elite.

4.6 The Summary

The new GY&B genre is one of the essential forms of contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Compared to the Cinderella genre of Chinese romantic novels, the heroine in the new GY&B romantic novels has a higher subjective initiative in the story. They are more daring to pursue their happiness actively and express their feelings. But limited by the authors' poor literary skills and the short cycle of commercial fiction, these novels often lack literary quality. In addition, due to the excessive pursuit of efficiency, authors usually cannot give their works enough polishing time. The reader's feedback on these novels is not always favorable, especially for the heroine's character design. I have collected short comments on the heroines of 30 Chinese romantic novels in the new GY&B genre from Douban. The first editions of these novels were all published in the first two decades of the 21st century, and all have been adapted for film or television. Of these evaluations, the top 10 evaluation terms with the highest frequency were as follows:

Table 3: high-frequency evaluation words of the new GY&B genre

Word	Frequency	English Translation	Property
作	18	Dramatic and spoiled	Negative
玛丽苏	16	Mary Sue	Negative
可爱	16	Lovely	Positive
矫情	15	Picky	Negative

蠢	14	Stupid and silly	Negative
傻	8	Stupid and silly	Negative
渣	8	Scum	Negative
傻白甜[17]	6	Sweet and naive girl	Neutral
独立	5	Independent	Positive
婊	5	Bitchy	Negative

This word frequency list reflects that readers' negative opinions of the heroines in the new GY&B genre of romantic novels, mainly focused on their not being intelligent enough and their over-dramatic performance in the story. In addition, some readers consider these stories revolving around heroines to be "玛丽苏" (Mary Sue) in the narrative. The positive comments are mainly reflected in that some readers think the heroines are lovely or independent.

Referring to the character traits of the new GY&B type romantic novels discussed above, we can conclude that, compared with the contemporary Chinese romantic novels of the Cinderella genre, the authors usually design more dramatic conflicts around the heroine. And in these conflicts, the heroine often occupies the dominant position or even the position of provoking the conflict. On the one hand, this design adds more independence to the heroine in the story. In other words, the authors wanted to add more dynamic behavior to the heroine to reflect the character's "independence" or "assertiveness." On the other hand, if the author does not have enough experience in

[17]"傻白甜" literally means "silly, white, and sweet." In the Chinese context, it refers to a sweet and naive girl.

literary creation, these designs can make the characters' motivations for their actions too rigid or illogical. That is why the terms "作" (dramatic and spoiled) and "婊" (bitchy) are common in the short comments. Not intelligent enough and "可爱" (lovely) reflect a similar situation. Due to the authors' insufficient writing experience, those qualities that were initially intended to reflect the "可爱" (loveliness) of the heroine now make the heroine appear less intelligent.

Furthermore, some readers expressed dissatisfaction with the "玛丽苏" (Mary Sue) style character images or relationship patterns. The term "玛丽苏" (Mary Sue) first came from Paul Smith's novel *A Trekkie's Tale*. In contemporary Chinese Internet culture, the term "玛丽苏" (Mary Sue) usually refers to the overly perfect and adored female characters in novels, TV series, movies, or other fictional works. Such a character appears intensively in novels with a female target readership. They satisfy readers' romantic fantasies, but on the other side, these characters also lead to a severe homogenization of the female image in romantic novels, especially the heroine. Readers are also prone to aesthetic fatigue after reading many novels featuring by such characters.

We can understand such an aesthetic orientation of the female image based on these high-frequency words. Readers expect to see a kind, independent and intelligent woman as the heroine in contemporary Chinese romantic novels belonging to the new GY&B genre. Although some novels are rather crude in portraying the heroine due to the authors' low writing skills and short creative cycle limitations, it is undeniable that the creators of these novels also tried to give the heroines a richer characterization. At

the same time, however, as with the evolution of characterization analyzed in the previous section, character portrayal in the new GY&B genre of Chinese romantic novel has become increasingly flattened and stereotyped as Internet platforms have matured and more readers have flooded in. The narrative of novel stories has also become more consistent with the characteristics of the cultural industry's products. From character design to the narrative, these novels are easy to copy and mass-produce. They no longer have unique self-expression from the authors but rather emphasize the "gimmicks" that attract readers. For example, high birth and innate talent. Represented by *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (三生三世十里桃花)*, the third stage and the later new GY&B type romantic novels well reflect this point.

Finally, a brief overview. The new GY&B genre of romantic novel, from character structure to narrative, is inherited from the most traditional genre of romantic novel in China, the "The Gifted Youth and The Beauty" novel (才子佳人小说, caizi-jiaren-xiaoshuo). In the image shaping of hero and heroine, the new GY&B type romantic novels do not emphasize the social class difference between hero and heroine. The heroines have more initiative in the story and are the real drivers of the novel's plot development. Although different from the Cinderella genre in the structure of character design, they are similar in the imagination of the perfect partner. But because of the differences in the heroine's design, readers will feel more initiative when they put themselves in the heroine's shoes, rather than passively waiting for the hero's attention. In addition, the heroine's growth, transformation, or multifaceted character is also one of the focuses of the authors. For example, the multiple identities of Bai Qian in *Three*

Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms; the different stages of growth of Zhao Mosheng in *Silent Separation (何以笙箫默);* Lin Nansheng's image conceived by Qiao in *Red Spider Lily (彼岸花)*. In this type of novel, authors often try to create multiple "surfaces" or "personalities" to form the complete image of the heroine. In other words, each "surface" or "personality" is just a piece of the "puzzle" that makes up the complete image of the heroine. It is only when put together that they form an entire picture of the heroine.

5. Female Young Werther and Male Charlotte in the Contemporary Chinese Romantic Novel

The Sorrows of Young Werther is a famous novel by German author Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Since its publication in 1774, the work has attracted a large readership, even sparking the "Werther Fever" across late eighteenth-century Europe. In the novel, Goethe portrays a confused young man, Young Werther, who is discontented with society and suffers from unrequited love. Young Werther's discontent and confusion are replicated in the emotions conveyed by Chinese campus love romantic novels (校园言情小说) of the early 21st century. Therefore, in this chapter, I classify and name the characters in Chinese campus love romantic novels in the early 21st century based on those in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. However, it is worth noting that novels in this genre often narrate the story from the heroine's point of view, so that the narrative form can be seen as a kind of "Inverted Young Werther". Thus, in this chapter, the characters of the "Young Werther" type are all female. Charlotte, the object of Young Werther's unrequited love in the original novel, will be used as a character type to refer to the heroine's love interest, the hero. In the title of this chapter, "Female Young Werther and Male Charlotte" (FYW&MC) thus refers to the distinct character types found in Chinese campus love romantic novels in the early 21st century. (Li, 2023)

This type of romantic novel does not emphasize the social class of the hero and heroine, unlike the genres analyzed elsewhere in my research. Some works even do not mention the social class of hero or heroine; instead, the authors put more emphasis on

the youth of their heroes and heroines. The main characters are all teenagers or college students. In addition to the love interest in the main narrative of the novel, this genre uses a lot of space to reflect the friendship and school life of teenagers. These heroes and heroines, especially the heroines, are filled with the confusion, agitation and rebellion of adolescence. Compared with heroines in other types of Chinese romantic novels, heroines in the FYW&MC genre tend to be more daring and less constrained by mainstream values. Their opposition to mainstream values can be embodied in the novel as challenging teachers or parents, or as experiencing abortion, unrequited love, and so on. In order to rationalize these acts of rebellion, authors often design a family of origin for these protagonists that is not conducive to growth. In other words, the authors believe that the reason why these teenagers become rebellious and mentally sensitive is their family and society. Moreover, such works often sanctify death. In the FYW&MC genre of Chinese romantic novels, the authors use "death" as a means to fight fate or refuse to conform to mainstream values. (Li, 2023)[18]

5.1 Classification of the "Female Young Werther and Male Charlotte" Genre of Romantic Novels

The FYW&MC genre of Chinese romantic novels can be roughly divided into the following subtypes:

1. The first type of FYW&MC genre romantic novel mainly focuses on the

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[18] In fact, the main points in this chapter have already been discussed in my paper, *Contemporary Chinese Romantic Fiction: Analyzing the "Female Young Werther and Male Charlotte" Genre.*

heroine's growth and the confusions of adolescence. Although the whole novel revolves around the love story of the hero and heroine, the relationship between them does not occupy a large proportion of the novel. The author focuses on the conflict and distress caused by love. The first type of FYW&MC narrative is referred to as subtype A in what follows.

2. The second type of FYW&MC genre is close to a subcategory of A. These works also focus on the heroine's growth and the confusion of adolescence, but the difference is that the second type of FYW&MC genre focuses the depiction on the love story between the hero and heroine. Their distress and negative emotions become the spice of the love story. The second type of FYW&MC narrative is hereafter referred to as subtype B.

3. The third type of FYW&MC is completely different from the previous two types. This category reflects the adult heroine's nostalgia for her teenage years. The love story between the hero and the heroine and the confusion of adolescence appear in the novel in the form of the heroine's memories, which form the main part of the novel. The author rarely provides much description of the heroine's adult life. The third type of FYW&MC narrative is referred to as subtype C in what follows.

This chapter uses in turn as the representative works of the above three subtypes, *Qiyue and Ansheng (七月与安生), Cry Me A Sad River (悲伤逆流成河)* and *The Best of Us (最好的我们),* to analyze the characters in the novels and the aesthetic orientation of the audience. (Li, 2023)

5.2 Character Classification

I refer to the characters in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* to classify the main characters in the FYW&MC genre of Chinese romantic novels as follows:

Female Young Werther: these heroines are school girls with troubles in their inner world.

Male Charlotte: as the hero, this type of character is the love interest of the heroine.

Albert: This type of character is often a would-be rival, seeking to obstruct the hero or heroine's love by constantly hindering the development of the hero and heroine's relationship.

In the character analysis section of this chapter, I will categorize and analyze the novel's characters based on the classification above. (Li, 2023)

5.3 The Case Studies

5.3.1 Qiyue and Ansheng

Qiyue and Ansheng (七月与安生, the English title of the film version is *Soul Mate)* was written by Annie Baby. It is a short story collected in Annie Baby's anthology, *Farewell Vivian (告别薇安)*, published in 2001. It was also adapted into a film of the same name in 2016. In terms of character design, it is similar to *Red Spider Lily* as it reflects the confusion of teenage girls about life and the future through two heroines. The two heroines in the novel seem to be two independent characters, but their

relationship is like entity and shadow. This is stated by the author in the beginning of the novel: "13 to 16 years old. Those were the three years when Qiyue and Ansheng followed each other like shadows. Sometimes Qiyue was Ansheng's shadow. Sometimes Ansheng is Qiyue's shadow."[19]The main female characters in the novel are classified as follows (Li, 2023):

Qiyue and **Ansheng**: The Heroines, Female Young Werther & Albert

 The story of *Qiyue and Ansheng* revolves around the friendship of two teenage girls and their love for the same man. In the story, Qiyue and Ansheng meet in junior high school and they become best friends and are inseparable. Despite the fact that their personalities and family backgrounds are vastly different, neither of these differences impacts their friendship. This is until the hero, Jiaming, appears and breaks this balance. In the story, the author designs the characters of Qiyue and Ansheng as follows: Qiyue is a gentle girl with excellent grades in school. She was born into an ordinary and happy family and grew up with doting parents. She has no ambitious vision and her only goal in life is to find a partner who loves her and then live her life in peace. Qiyue does not need to fight against fate because she just behaves and lives life as it is designed; she can have everything. Meanwhile, her friend, Ansheng, is completely different. Ansheng is the illegitimate daughter of her mother and her mother's lover so she has never met her father. Her mother has greatly compensated her with money, but cannot be there for her daughter like Qiyue's mother. The absence of her parents makes Ansheng desperately yearn for love from a family. This also influences her to try to experience

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[19]Annie Baby, 2003, Farewell Vivian, *Qiyue and Ansheng*, para 8-9. The original text is "13 到 16 岁。那是七月和安生如影相随的三年。有时候七月是安生的影子。有时候安生是七月的影子。"

Qiyue's life as she lives in her friend's home and eats food prepared by Qiyue's mother. Later in the story, she even seduces Qiyue's boyfriend.

The characters of the two heroines form a structure of unity of opposites. Similar to the same author's uses of multiple "surfaces" to describe a similar character analyzed elsewhere in my other research, *Qiyue and Ansheng* uses two characters to express the confusion and contradictory mentality of teenagers. Qiyue's image represents girls who satisfy the expectations of their schoolteachers and parents. Meanwhile, she also represents the image of such young girls in the eyes of others. They are well-behaved daughters at home and hardworking students at school. However, because their lives encounter no obstacles, the author believes that these "good girls" lack courage when they encounter setbacks or challenges. The author devised the following plot in the novel: In the face of Ansheng's challenge in love, Qiyue does not choose to take the initiative to "take back" Jiaming or end their relationship. Instead, she gives the choice to Jiaming – she wants to let Jiaming make a choice between her and Ansheng. In the story, Ansheng represents rebellious young women who do not conform to mainstream Chinese values. On the other hand, she also represents the rebellion and confusion hidden within the inner world of the "good girls." (Li, 2023)

Qiyue and Ansheng seems like a trite story about two female best friends who fall in love with the same man. In fact, however, the author communicates her own perspective of confused adolescent girls through the love triangle between the two heroines and Jiaming which represents the paradox of obedience and rebellion. In the

novel, Qiyue firmly refutes her male classmates' doubts about rebellious girls.[20] On the surface, Qiyue is arguing for Ansheng. But in reality, she is also expressing the rebellion that has been hidden inside her. The author's design of the novel's ending is quite meaningful. Ansheng is in poor health due to her long wandering life and she dies after giving birth to her daughter with Jiaming. Qiyue hides the girl's origin and adopts her. On the one hand, such an ending reflects the sanctification of death in the FYW&MC genre of contemporary Chinese romantic novel. Meanwhile, the author also makes Ansheng "reconcile" with the world she is fighting against through "death." For Qiyue, Ansheng's death represents the end of youth. As a matter of fact, Ansheng's death has been fated since Qiyue and Ansheng met Jiaming. There is a scene in the novel that reflects this notion. Jiaming bought two jade bracelets, one for Qiyue, another for Ansheng. Ansheng's jade bracelet shattered when she first received it. The destruction of jade represents the death of a female figure in the Chinese literary tradition and the author uses this to hint at Ansheng's fate in the story.

Compared to other FYW&MC genre works, the character design of *Qiyue and Ansheng* is very special. The two heroines, Qiyue and Ansheng, are both Female Young Werther, but at the same time they are both Albert. They both fall in love with the same man so they both try to drive each other away from Jiaming and hurt each other. This is like the beginning of the novel. The two heroines are like entities and shadows, they

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[20]The original text:
　　"七月突然涨红了脸。她站了起来。你不了解他们。你不了解。他们只是感觉寂寞。寂寞。你知道吗。" (Annie Baby, 2003, *Qiyue and Ansheng*, para 100)
The English translation:
　　"Qiyue suddenly blushes. She stands up. 'You don't understand them. You don't understand. They just feel lonely. Lonely. Do you know?'"

have no way to really get rid of each other. The core focus of the novel is the love story between the two heroines and Jiaming. However, throughout the work, the depiction of love is negative. For the heroines, Jiaming's love represents betrayal and hurt. (Li, 2023) At the end of the story, they give up their infatuation with the hero and become each other's "spiritual support." In fact, the English translation of the title of the film adaptation, *Soul Mate*, perfectly explains the ultimate relationship that is formed between Qiyue and Ansheng.

5.3.2 Cry Me A Sad River

On May 4, 2008, the *New York Times* published an essay titled *China's Pop Fiction* which referred to Guo Jingming as "the most successful writer in China today." (King, 2008) The story *Cry Me A Sad River (悲伤逆流成河)* analyzed in this section is one of Guo Jingming's most famous works. (Li, 2023) The novel was serialized in the literary magazine, *ZUI Novel (最小说),*[21] in 2006 and published in 2007. Meanwhile, the film adaptation of the novel was released in mainland China in 2018, and the TV adaptation of the novel was broadcasted on Hunan TV[22] in 2019. In addition to being a huge commercial success, *Cry Me A Sad River* has also sparked controversy among its audiences.

The story of *Cry Me A Sad River* revolves around the short life of the "troubled girl," Yi Yao. At 17 years old, Yi Yao falls in love with a delinquent and gets pregnant.

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[21] *ZUI Novel* was launched in October 2006, and the magazine mainly publishes original fiction.
[22] Hunan TV is a provincial satellite TV station in mainland China. It officially launched on 29 September 1970.

In spite of this, she still has a crush on her neighbor, the hero, Qi Ming, a character who is completely different from her. Qi Ming is an excellent student at school, and is doted on by his parents at home. They go to school together and go home together every day because they are neighbors. Such intimate interaction makes Tang Xiaomi, who also adores Qi Ming, jealous. Yi Yao runs away from the clinic due to the regret she feels when she has an abortion. On the way to escaping, she encounters Tang Xiaomi, who eventually speaks about Yi Yao's lewdness at school. Yi Yao then becomes isolated at school and is subjected to school violence. Qi Ming is the only person at school who is willing to reach out and help Yi Yao but this changes when he meets Gu Senxiang, a beautiful, cheerful girl. Qi Ming falls in love with her and, to not hinder their relationship, Yi Yao deliberately alienates Qi Ming. Meanwhile, Senxiang's brother, Gu Senxi has a crush on Yi Yao. At the end of the novel, Senxiang goes to a warehouse near school for an appointment after receiving a text message forwarded by Yi Yao. This appointment eventually leads to her suicide. Qi Ming and Gu Senxi both believe that Yi Yao is the "murderer" who "killed" Senxiang. To prove her innocence, the desperate Yi Yao jumps from the building of the school.

According to the classification of characters in this chapter, I categorize the female characters in the novel as follows (Li, 2023):

Yi Yao: The Heroine, Female Young Werther

Tang Xiaomi & **Gu Shenxiang**: Albert

The heroine, Yi Yao is a sensitive individual filled with self-contempt. Her father abandons her mother and her, so her mother has to work as an unlicensed prostitute to

support the family. All these factors cause the heroine to have low self-esteem and she is afraid to stand up to school violence. Yi Yao also has a crush on Qi Ming and desperately hungers for affection, but is afraid to tell the hero directly. The author uses a lot of psychological descriptions in his novel to reflect such images and characteristics of Yi Yao. (Li, 2023) However, some readers think that the author's description is too artificial and unreal. Meanwhile, other readers still think that they can resonate with Yi Yao's character. In particular, the author's depictions of the single-parent family and school violence make some readers sympathize with the heroine.

In the novel, Tang Xiaomi and Gu Senxiang act as obstacles to the relationship developing between the hero and the heroine. Tang Xiaomi is jealous of the heroine because of her crush on Qi Ming and she leads Yi Yao's bullying at school. Despite her bullying tendencies, Tang Xiaomi is a coward on the inside. When facing Qi Ming, she cannot courageously chase him. At school, Qi Ming ignores her and this behavior angers her which causes her to take her anger out on Yi Yao, who is weaker than her. This is also evident when she faces Qi Ming's real girlfriend, Gu Senxiang. Because Gu Senxiang is sheltered by her parents and teachers, and has a delinquent twin brother, she does not dare to openly bully Gu Senxiang at school. In the novel, Gu Senxiang is the opposite of the heroine. She has no flaws in her character; she is beautiful and excels at school and she has parents and a brother who love her. She "steals" Qi Ming from the heroine and she has the life that the heroine envies. Notably, both the hero and Gu Senxiang attribute her death to the heroine. The image of Gu Senxiang makes Yi Yao's life in the story seem even more tragic. Although she does not bully Yi Yao like Tang

Xiaomi. Yi Yao's suicide can be attributed to her. (Li, 2023)

Yi Yao's mother is also a noteworthy female figure. In the story, Yi Yao's mother has to work as a prostitute to support Yi Yao. The depiction of prostitutes is very rare in contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Even if a work contains similar images, the author usually tries to minimize the "sexual" element of such images in order to adapt to the reader's receptivity. However, in *Cry Me A Sad River*, the author does not make "adjustments" on this point. In the novel, when Yi Yao is bullied by her classmates at school, her mother's occupation is one of the reasons she is attacked. In addition, similar to other mothers in the same genre, the personality of Yi Yao's mother is aggressive. This woman, tormented by life, is grumpy and she abuses her daughter as a way to vent her dissatisfaction with life. After her death, Yi Yao finds out that her mother had been saving for her tuition and it seems that she is the only one who truly loves Yi Yao. The presence of this character in the novel has the following two meanings: 1. Her love for Yi Yao sets off the hero's love for Yi Yao as being superficial and hypocritical; 2. Through the image of Yi Yao's mother, the author represents the image of a middle-aged woman in an urban marginal group. (Li, 2023)

Compared with subtype A represented by *Qiyue and Ansheng (七月与安生)*, subtype B represented by *Cry Me A Sad River* focuses on the romantic relationship between the hero and the heroine. Although there are scenes of school violence and the hypocrisy of human nature in *Cry Me A Sad River*, the core story of the novel is the love story between the heroine and the hero. The overall tone of the novel is depressing but the language is rich. Such novels fit the sentimental mindset of some adolescent

readers. Additionally, the novel has aroused great controversy because it contains numerous comments on or descriptions of sex, abortion, suicide and people in urban marginal groups. Despite the fact that the main story line of *Cry Me A Sad River* revolves around the romantic relationship between the hero and the heroine, those reflections of marginal groups as the background of the story still catch the attention of readers. The Douban short comments on the novel can be divided into two types: 1. Some readers think that the author adds too much dramatic conflict to the novel in order to show the heroine's suffering. These dramatic conflicts are too unrealistic or dramatic and they do not conform to mainstream values; 2. Other readers believe that the novel presents images of people of the urban marginal group. The reality of life for the marginal group is even more tragic than that portrayed in fiction. The above two opposing views reflect the fact that the urban marginal group is typically invisible in Chinese public cultural products. The general public is unfamiliar with these marginal groups and even think that they do not exist. (Li, 2023) Therefore, in the evaluation of cultural products, some readers have negative attitudes toward the description of marginal groups and those descriptions are exaggerated by the author. This is particularly evident in the evaluation of pop culture products that target young urban populations as their audience.

5.3.3 The Best of Us

The Best of Us (最好的我们, the English translation of the title of the film adaptation is *With You)* is a work of romantic fiction written by mainland Chinese author,

Ba Yue Chang An, and published in 2013. The novel was widely acclaimed upon its publication, and has since been adapted into multiple TV series and films, including the "Zhenhua Trilogy", which comprises *The Best of Us*; *Hello, Old Times (你好，旧时光); and Unrequited Love (暗恋·橘生淮南). The Best of Us* made it to the top 10 of the IP (Intellectual Property) Value Ranking (Net Literature) of 2016 ENAwards, and ranked 89th in the Mopian Hurun Most Valuable Creative Works IP 2017.[23] This shows its popularity and commercial value.

The core story line of the novel is unrequited love between a female high school student, Geng Geng, and her male classmate, Yu Huai. In addition to the romance in the core story line, the author presents readers with a complete picture of high school life in mainland China. *The Best of Us* does not have the oppressive emotions and intense dramatic conflicts of *Qiyue and Ansheng (七月与安生),* or *Cry Me A Sad River (悲伤逆流成河)* analyzed previously, but its portrayal of ordinary and trivial high school life in mainland China has struck a chord with a large number of readers. The work's rating on Douban also proves this: its 2013 edition scored 8.7 (based on 67,793 people) and the 2019 edition scored 8.9 (based on 1,880 people). According to the classification of characters in this chapter, I categorized the female characters in the novel as follows (Li, 2023):

Geng Geng: The Heroine, Female Young Werther

Chen Xuejun & **Wen Xiaoxiao**: Albert

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[23]Mopian Media is a net literature IP operation service provider. Hurun Report is a private company that produces lists and research. The Mopian Hurun Most Valuable Creative Works IP is jointly published by Mopian Media and Hurun Report.

The heroine, Geng Geng, is an ordinary girl with ordinary appearance and ability. She is unexpectedly accepted into Zhenhua High School, the best high school in her city, because of the reduced difficulty of the entrance examination. There, the heroine meets many extremely talented peers, which makes her life at school frustrating. In addition, her unrequited love for the hero, Yu Huai, also distracts her. The author's shaping of the heroine's image and psychological activities has triggered a strong resonance among the audience. The positive short comments on the heroine can be divided into the following categories: 1. The readers think the heroine is like themselves in high school; 2. The heroine's story reminds readers of their own high school days; 3. The adult heroine does not become a member of the elite, but a common person like the readers. Unlike other works discussed as case studies, the heroine of *The Best of Us* has almost no negative comments on Douban. (Li, 2023)

In this regard, it is interesting that Geng Geng, as the heroine of romantic novel, is full of "shortcomings" in her character image: she is neither smart nor pretty; her grades in school are neither excellent nor poor; she was not born into an elite-class family; her mother divorced her father because of his weakness. Such a heroine, full of "shortcomings", has become one of the most popular female protagonists in contemporary Chinese romantic novel. The readers' love for Geng Geng comes from the "shortcomings" that make her image seem extraordinarily realistic, not vacuous and one-dimensional like some other works of same genre. (Li, 2023) In addition, readers are aesthetically tired of the overly perfect characters in contemporary Chinese romantic novel. This is one of the reasons why the portrayal of the heroine, Geng Geng,

in the novel has received overwhelming acclaim.

Chen Xuejun and Wen Xiaoxiao are obstacles to the development of the relationship between the hero and heroine in the novel, but they are completely different from the same type of characters analyzed in the previous section. Their behavior in the story does not harm the heroine, and they do not even openly pursue the hero in the story. They are only the heroine's "imaginary enemies" in the relationship. Chen Xuejun is the hero's classmate in junior high school. She was ostracized by her classmates at school because of her ostentatious appearance and poor grades. The hero was the only person who was willing to associate with her. However, due to the interference of the hero's mother, Chen Xuejun had to distance herself from the hero at school. Another "rival in love", Wen Xiaoxiao is a member of the literature and art committee in the same class as the heroine and hero. She has the same unrequited love for the hero as the heroine. There are two meanings of these rival characters' images in the novel: 1. They are the antithesis of the heroine's image: Chen Xuejun and Wen Xiaoxiao are exceptionally pretty and intelligent compared to the heroine, so that they set off the heroine's ordinariness. 2. They trigger the heroine's anxiety about her relationship in the story. The heroine's psychological activities reenact the readers' mindset of falling in love during their teenage years. This is also corroborated by the Douban short comments, in which many readers have directly pointed out that the interaction between the hero and heroine in the novel reminded them of their own first love. (Li, 2023)

There are two other very important female characters in *The Best of Us*, Geng Geng's mother and Yu Huai's mother. These two characters provide two very typical

images of Chinese mothers. Geng Geng's mother is an aggressive woman who divorced her husband for his weakness and lack of ambition. She loves Geng Geng, but her attitude towards her daughter is harsh and critical. She wants her Geng Geng to become as capable a person as she is, and is disappointed by Geng Geng's behavior at school and mediocre grades. Another maternal figure in the novel is Yu Huai's mother, who is a controlling woman. Because Yu Huai's father is working overseas, the mother must take care of the family alone in China. Because of her husband's prolonged absence, she gives her full attention to her son. She does not allow her son to have contact with girls at school; forced by her pressure, Chen Xuejun distanced herself from Yu Huai at school. Yu Huai is also discontented because of this. These two female figures show readers two typical traits of Chinese mothers, aggressive and domineering. There is no doubt that they love their children dearly, but in their presence, their children do not have autonomy and can only grow up how their mothers want them to. These mothers are furious when their children go against their wishes. Such parent-child relationships are a very real reflection of one of the core conflicts in Chinese families, the suffocating parent-child relationship. (Li, 2023)

The Best of Us uses trivial moments of everyday life to portray the story of the hero and heroine's unrequited love story in high school. Compared to other types of Chinese contemporary romantic novel, the stories in the subtype C of the FYW&MC genre, represented by *The Best of Us*, are more trivial. They are usually made up of elements of school life or everyday life but that is the reason why subtype C resonates so much with readers: these stories are close to the readers' lives. (Li, 2023) In addition,

this narrative is similar to the mode of memory; when readers recall the past, memories appear as fragments in their minds. On the other hand, the author also uses major social events as the background of the story, such as the SARS[24] epidemic in 2003. These designs also make the story in the novel seem real.

5.4 The Main Female Images

The main female images in the FYW&MC sub-genre of the Chinese contemporary romantic novel can be divided into two categories: the heroine, Female Young Werther; and the obstructor, Female Albert. The characteristics of the Female Young Werther in the three subtypes are as follows: In subtypes A and B, the female images of the Female Young Werther type are sentimental. They live in single-parent families. They are ignored by their parents and teachers. These girls are confused about their futures. They often find the meaning of their existence in life through self-harm. Love is used as salvation for them, but love from males hurts them. In the narrative, this love even overwhelms them. In many works, the heroines find their fates in death. In subtype C, the female image of the Female Young Werther type is also a confused girl. However, the female Young Werther type's image in subtype C is closer to real-life teenage girls in mainland China. They are concerned about the boys they have crushes on at school, but they pay more attention to their own future, such as their grades at school. In the end of the story, these Female Young Werther characters are not like subtypes A and B. They grow up smoothly and remember their school crush as a memory. In addition to

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[24]Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.

serving as obstructors, the female characters of Albert type are opposites to the heroine in some FYW&MC narratives. (Li, 2023) This is also reflected in *Qiyue and Ansheng (七月与安生), Cry Me A Sad River (悲伤逆流成河)* and *The Best of Us (最好的我们)*, as analyzed in this chapter. For example, in *Qiyue and Ansheng*, Qiyue and Ansheng are the opposite of one another; Qiyue is well-behaved while Ansheng is rebellious. In *Cry Me A Sad River* and *The Best of Us*, the female characters of Albert type are pretty and capable, but the heroines are ordinary girls.

Compared to subtypes A and B, the heroines in subtype C are seen as less controversial in their Douban evaluation. I take *Cry Me a Sad River* and *The Best of Us* as examples to explain this. In the short comments on Douban that directly refer to the heroine of *The Best of Us*, 57% of comments rate it five stars and 28% four stars, while the ratings for *Cry Me a Sad River* are 19% five stars and 23% four stars. The negative comments about heroines in subtypes A and B are mainly focused on over-dramatization. Despite many readers pointing out that these overly dramatic characters and plots exist in reality, many readers still think that such overly dramatic characters are unrealistic. The similar opinions and evaluations are relatively rare in the short comments about the heroines of subtype C works. (Li, 2023)

5.5 The Wheel of Relationships: Family, Parents and Children

The main characters in the FYW&MC genre of Chinese romantic novels are minors and, in addition to the relationship between the heroes and the heroines, the author also focuses on the relationship between them and their parents. However,

despite the fact that the parents of the main characters are not the central characters in the story of these novels, their images and relationships with the protagonists reflect some of the universal conflicts in Chinese families. Moreover, in the novel, the figures of these parents are like a kind of echo as they repeat the traits or fates of the hero and heroine in the story. (Li, 2023)

In the FYW&MC category of Chinese romantic novel, the image of the mother is often aggressive or possessive. Yi Yao's mother, Geng Geng's mother and Yu Huai's mother are all typical examples. They love their children, but in the course of the story, they also hurt their children with their words or actions. They are completely different from the image of the "loving mother" in traditional Chinese culture and they are the real pillars of the family. In contrast, the father figure is "invisible" in the FYW&MC genre of Chinese romantic novels. (Li, 2023) The word "invisible" does not so much indicate that their images do not exist in the novel, but rather that the images of the father are inconspicuous compared with the mothers' images in the FYW&MC genre of Chinese romantic novel.

In *Qiyue and Ansheng (七月与安生)*, the fathers of the two heroines, Qiyue and Ansheng, are both "invisible," and Qiyue's father is not even mentioned in the novel. Ansheng's father does not appear directly in the story, and any information about him appears only in the narrative related to Ansheng's birth. Ansheng's father is not a man who is faithful in his marriage as he cheats on his wife with a woman who gives birth to Ansheng. However, after Ansheng is born, he never sees her nor does he fulfill his paternal obligations to her. To his wife, he is an unfaithful husband and for Ansheng, he

is an unfit father. In *Cry Me A Sad River (悲伤逆流成河)*, Yi Yao's father abandons Yi Yao and her mother. Yi Yao's mother has to work as a prostitute to support her daughter. Even after Yi Yao's mother dies, he does not reach out to his daughter. Like Ansheng's father, Yi Yao's father is a man who abandons his responsibilities. The absence of "fathers" in the family leaves these daughters desperate for intimate relationships and their "disappearance" is the source of the tragedy of the heroines' lives. (Li, 2023)

Unlike *Qiyue and Ansheng* and *Cry Me A Sad River*, *The Best of Us (最好的我们)* devotes a good deal of space to directly describing the heroine's father. Because Geng Geng's father is cowardly, Geng Geng's mother divorced him. After her parents' divorce, the heroine lives with her father, but despite her father not wanting Geng Geng to be affected by his remarriage she has conflicts with his second wife. Ultimately, Geng Geng's father chooses to let his daughter make concessions so that he is able to maintain his current marriage. Compared to Ansheng's father and Yi Yao's father, the father in *The Best of Us* takes on the responsibility of raising his daughter but he is still inadequate in handling family affairs. (Li, 2023)

To sum up, the FYW&MC genre is founded on the relationship between the heroes and heroines in the story, but also engages with the relationship between the protagonists' parents. The poor intimate relationship of parents increases the dramatic conflict in the novel and these poor intimate relationships also become one of the reasons for the hero's or heroine's confusion and rebellion. Meanwhile, the poor relationship of the parents in these stories also reflects the common phenomenon of family and marriage in China featuring an aggressive mother and a weak father. Pushy

mothers not only try to control their children, they also try to control their husbands in their lives. Their spouses, the fathers in the novel, use escapism as a way to resolve the conflict between them. After the father leaves, the disappointed mothers pay more attention to their children but this also makes home life more stifling for these children. This toxic relationship also affects the relationship between the heroes and the heroines. (Li, 2023) For example, in *Qiyue and Ansheng*, Ansheng, an illegitimate child, replicates her mother's tragedy. She falls in love with her best friend's boyfriend and gives birth to his daughter. In this process, the hero, Jiaming, is "invisible" and he chooses in cowardly fashion to avoid facing conflict and leaves the decision to Qiyue to face Ansheng and the illegitimate daughter.

In the novels in general, the figure corresponding to the father is the hero figure and he tends to be like a younger version of his father. Such heroes are young and attractive, but also cowardly. Since these novels are set on campus, similar to the heroines the heroes are also ignorant teenagers. In some works, the heroes are more valued by parents and schools than the heroines. They are also more in line with the Chinese society's standard of a "good boy." (Li, 2023) The male images of the Male Charlotte type, the heroes of the three works discussed in the previous section, are as follows:

Qiyue and Ansheng: Jiaming

Cry Me A Sad River: Qi Ming

The Best of Us: Yu Huai

Among these works, the images of Jiaming and Qi Ming are most representative.

In *Qiyue and Ansheng*, the author does not give much of a description of Jiaming and he is more like a symbol. This symbol represents the two heroines' imagination of love. Although there is no specific depiction of him in the work, the author is still very clever in presenting the image of a cowardly young man to the readers. There is a scene in the work where Qiyue questions Jiaming after learning that Ansheng is pregnant with Jiaming's child. She asks Jiaming whether the marriage between them was voluntary for him or if their marriage is the result of Ansheng deciding to withdraw from the relationship. In the novel, Jiaming refuses to answer Qiyue's question.[25] The author uses such a plot device to express her opinion to the readers: 1. The heroes or males are cowardly: they are afraid to face the mistakes they have made and do not want to take responsibility; 2. For women, real "redemption" often comes from other women. Qi Ming in *Cry Me A Sad River* is a similar male figure. In the novel, Qi Ming has a crush on Yi Yao but due to the attitude of his mother and vanity, he chooses Gu Senxiang as his girlfriend. Although Yi Yao is isolated at school, he maintains their "friendship." In

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[25]The original text:

"家明看着七月。七月沉默。这样的沉默她维持了三天。然后在一个夜晚，她回到家说，她给安生发了回信，叫安生回家来。

七月说，她这样在国外会病死和饿死。

家明说，七月，对不起。

七月摇摇头。没有对错的。家明。以后不要再说这句话。

我一直想知道你回来是自己做的选择还是安生做的选择。

家明说，我不想回答这个问题。" (Annie Baby, 2003, *Qiyue and Ansheng,* para 267-272)

The English translation:

Jiaming looks at Qiyue. Qiyue is in silence. She keeps such silence for three days. Then one night, she comes home and says that she had sent Ansheng a letter and asked her to come home.

Qiyue says, "She would die of disease and starvation abroad."

Jiaming says, "Qiyue, I'm sorry."

Qiyue shakes her head. "There is no right or wrong. Jiaming, don't say that again. I always wondered if you made your own choice to come back or if Ansheng did."

Jiaming says, "I don't want to answer this question."

reality, he does not want to help Yi Yao genuinely. Even when Yi Yao directly asks him for help, he acts as a coward in choosing to ignore it because of his mother's attitude. Compared to Jiaming, Qi Ming is not only cowardly but he is also selfish. Interestingly, in the novel, Qi Ming's father is indifferent to his family and he shifts all responsibilities for the family to Qi Ming's mother. This cold and selfish nature is very similar to the characteristics that his son, Qi Ming, exhibits. In subtypes A and B, male images like Qiming and Jia Ming are very common. On the surface, they are "good boys" but they are actually cowardly and selfish in reality and their way of dealing with conflict is escapist. (Li, 2023) In subtypes A and B, characters of the Male Charlotte type are unable to face their true thoughts and take responsibility.

Different from the Male Charlotte in subtypes A and B, the heroes in subtype C more closely resemble real male students in mainland China. Such a design can easily trigger the audience's memories of school life and their campus crushes. This point is mentioned by many readers in the short comments of *The Best of Us* on Douban. Although, the heroes in subtype C possess more positive traits than the heroes in subtypes A and B, their love for the heroines is ambiguous. In some works, the authors even design the heroes and heroines to actually become couples after they graduate. Therefore, although they are not cowardly, and they tend to not respond directly to the heroines' displays of affection. Such design not only conforms to the management regulations of secondary schools in mainland China, but also demonstrates that the heroes pay more attention to their studies and prospects than relationships. (Li, 2023) For example, despite the fact that Yu Huai has a crush on Geng Geng, he is more focused

on his grades and the College Entrance Examination. He does not express his inner thoughts to the heroine until graduation. In fact, similar to Yu Huai's image, Yu Huai's father is more focused on his career than his wife and son, and to a certain extent, Yu Huai can be seen as a replica of his father.

To sum up, in the FYW&MC genre of Chinese romantic novels, the hero and heroines are younger versions of their parents to some extent. They copy their parents' personalities and it seems that their fates are similar those of their parents. (Li, 2023)

5.6 Social Change and Audience Attitude

All the novels in the FYW&MC genre that serve as my case studies were published in the first two decades of the 21st century, and the historical backgrounds of the novels are generally concentrated in the period from the late 1990s to the early 21st century. The main characters in the story are secondary students. Based on such character design, we can infer that the parents of the protagonists were born in mainland China between the 1950s and 1970s. Given the historical context, there is a huge ideological gap between this generation and their children. This ideological gap is peculiar to Chinese society. The reform and opening up is the demarcation period of Chinese history after 1949, as it not only brought about national economic reform, but also allowed outside concepts and ideas to infiltrate mainland China. Chinese people born after the 1980s have been deeply influenced by these ideas. Reflecting the ideas about relationships, these Chinese born after the reform and opening up are more open than their parents, and more daring about challenging the existing rules. However, the social standards of

mainstream society are set by the elder generations, and these standards are often out of step with the young generations. Combined with the reverse psychology of adolescence, in addition to the love story between the hero and the heroine, the theme of such FYW&MC romantic novel often features opposition to family, school, and even mainstream social values. Therefore, in the FYW&MC genre, the hero or heroine usually performs actions that are not in line with mainstream social values, such as abortion, suicide, and so on. The authors use such behavior as an expression of resistance.

The one-child policy, in force from 1980 to 2015, has had a huge impact on parent-child relationships in mainland China during the late 20th century to the early 21st century. Compared with parents in the past that likely had many children, mothers and fathers of an only child devote more attention and care to their child. However, this level of attention and care does not come without a price. While giving their child a lot of help and support, some parents expect that their child will become a substitute that will enable them to achieve their personal aspirations. They subsequently exert significant pressure on their child and can become quite controlling. Such a stifling atmosphere combined with differences in values has intensified the conflicts between parents and their child. These conflicts are embodied in FYW&MC genre's works as the "problem family" of the hero and heroine. Often in one-child families, children's attitudes toward their parents are full of contradictions. On the one hand, they reject the excessive control exerted by their parents and want to escape. However, the dependence the child now has on their parents for almost everything makes it impossible for them

to become independent and leave the toxic environment. In popular fiction, authors often devise plots to explain such a situation, including the case where the child rebels against parental control, but later feels guilty about his or her rebellious behavior.

Since the content of the novels is not limited to love stories, unlike in other genres of contemporary Chinese romantic novel, film or television adaptations of these novels are often not limited to the theme of romance. For example, the core theme of the film adaptation of *Qiyue and Ansheng (七月与安生)* is female friendship and female self-redemption, rather than the love triangle between Qiyue, Ansheng and Jiaming. Even the film adaptation of *Qiyue and Ansheng* is considered by some scholars or critics to be a work of feminist thought. The film adaptation of *Cry Me A Sad River (悲伤逆流成河)* is similar to the above, with its central theme reflects the problem of school violence in mainland China. Both thus weaken the original core love story between the hero and heroine. But it is worth noting that the novel *Qiyue and Ansheng* was published in 2001, and its film adaptation was released in 2016, while the novel *Cry Me A Sad River* was published in 2007, and its film adaptation was released in 2018. The thematic changes in these works reflect the changes in audiences' aesthetic preferences for cultural products in mainland China during the first twenty years of the 21st century. The short comments on Douban also reflect these changes. In subsequent research, I will explain and analyze this in more detail.

Although secondary schools in mainland China usually prohibit students' puppy love and parents are also against campus love between minors, the core story in the FYW&MC genre is the "campus crush" story. In this social context, the relationship

between the hero and the heroine becomes the trigger of their conflicts with school and their parents. These struggles become the dramatic conflicts that drive the plot. For example, in *Cry Me A Sad River*, Yi Yao is asked to drop out of school because she is pregnant. This plot leads to the scene of Yi Yao's mother kneeling in the schoolmaster's office to plead her daughter's case. It also leads Yi Yao to understand that the person who really loves her is her mother. There is a similar plot in *The Best of Us (最好的我们,)* wherein Yu Huai lies about Geng Geng being a boy to avoid his mother interfering with his relationship with Geng Geng. This lie exposes the conflict between Yu Huai and his mother. However, these depictions of adolescent rebellion also cause readers, especially adult ones, to criticize the characters in the novels. Let us take the high-frequency evaluation terms in the short comments for the heroines on Douban as an example in the following table (based on 22 FYW&MC genre novels collected on Douban) (Li, 2023):

Table 4: high-frequency evaluation words of the FYW&MC genre (Li, 2023)

Word	Frequency	English Translation	Property
作	18	Dramatic and spoiled	Negative
玛丽苏	15	Mary Sue	Negative
矫情	14	Picky	Negative
可爱	10	Lovely	Positive
绿茶（婊）[26]	9	Angelic bitch	Negative

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[26]绿茶(婊): Literally, 绿茶(婊) means Green Tea (Bitch). This term is often used to describe or refer to women who look innocent but are actually vicious.

贱	7	Mean	Negative
圣母（婊）[27]	6	Hypocritical	Negative
白莲（花）[28]	4	Dissembler	Negative
婊	3	Bitchy	Negative
傻	3	Stupid and silly	Negative
幸运	3	Lucky	Positive
敏感	3	Sensitive	Neutral

Lack of character development is a common criticism of popular literature, and the FYW&MC genre of contemporary Chinese romantic novel is no exception. The plots that authors originally design to increase dramatic conflict make the heroine's characterization seem overly dramatic or unrealistic in some novels. In addition, the inconsistency between the words and actions of the fictional characters is also a common fault in many FYW&MC genre works. The high-frequency words "绿茶(婊)" (Angelic bitch), "圣母(婊)" (Hypocritical) and "白莲(花)" (Dissembler) prove this. These evaluation terms reflect some readers' views that the heroines' characterizations in the novels are hypocritical. The only two positive words in the high-frequency form are "可爱" (Lovely) and "幸运" (Lucky.) Although these two words are positive comments about the heroine, they also reflect the lack of autonomy of heroines in FYW&MC genre works. They seem to be fighting against the outside world, while in fact, in the story, they do not have the ability to actively change themselves or their

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[27]圣母(婊): Literally, 圣母(婊) means Holy Virgin (Bitch). This term is often used to describe or refer to women who are hypocritical.

[28]白莲(花): Literally, 白莲(花) means White Lotus (Flower). This term is often used to describe or refer to those female dissemblers.

circumstances. (Li, 2023)

5.7 Summary

In terms of character classification, characters in the FYW&MC category of contemporary Chinese romantic novel can be classified as Female Young Werther, Male Charlotte and Albert. These terms refer respectively to the heroine, the hero and the hindrance in their relationship. Additionally, since the parent-child relationship is also one of the themes of this genre, parental figures are widely represented in the FYW&MC genre. In the novels, these parents represent allusions to the intimate relationships of their children. Meanwhile, because they were born and raised in a unique period of Chinese history, it is difficult to reconcile the conflict in values between them and their children. In addition, the audience generally do not hold a positive attitude towards the characters in the FYW&MC genre of contemporary Chinese romantic novel. Taking the image of the heroine as an example, the points that the Douban audience criticize mainly focus on the fact that character image is too dramatic or unrealistic. There are two main reasons for this phenomenon: 1. The authors lack professional literary background and the character developments are insufficient; 2. The change of the audiences' aesthetic preference for cultural products in mainland China. (Li, 2023)

In terms of narrative, compared to other genres of contemporary Chinese romantic novels, the main story line of the FYW&MC genre is not clear. The narrative structure of these novels is fragmentary, using many tableaux and anecdotes to piece together the

heroine's school life. While this narrative mode complicates the structure of the novel and makes it less linear, it is similar to the way in which human beings look back on past events. Therefore, these novels can set off readers' memories of their school life and teenage years. This feature is obviously reflected in the Douban short comments on stories of subtype C; a large number of readers commented that the novel triggered memories of their school days, and even reminded them of their first love as teenagers. In addition to stimulating memories, contemporary Chinese romantic novel in the FYW&MC genre mainly reflects the confusion of Chinese teenagers about their lives and futures. These struggles often stem from their dissatisfaction with their families and the school system. (Li, 2023)

6. The New Female Consort Prince in the Contemporary Chinese Romantic

Novel

The *Female Consort Prince* (女驸马, also translated as *Emperor's Female Son-in-Law*) is a Huangmei opera[29] film that was released in 1959 in mainland China. It was adapted from a traditional Huangmei opera, *Rescue Twice* (双救举). The story of the *Female Consort Prince* is as follows: the heroine, Feng Suzhen, is engaged to the hero, Li Zhaoting. Unfortunately, Li Zhaoting's family is on the verge of bankruptcy, so Feng Suzhen's stepmother coerces Suzhen to withdraw from the engagement. However, Feng Suzhen refuses to give up her fiancé because of her deep love for him, and privately sponsors him to take the imperial examination. Feng Suzhen's actions provokes her stepmother, and she frames Li Zhaoting for theft. This accusation leads to the arrest of the hero. After Zhaoting is imprisoned, Feng Suzhen's stepmother betroths her to another man. The heroine runs away from home to escape the new, forced marriage. After escaping, Feng Suzhen disguises herself as a man and takes the imperial examination under the name of the Li Zhaoting. She believes that if she can pass the exam on his behalf, she will be able to save Li Zhaoting from prison. However, very unexpectedly, Feng Suzhen ranks first class in the imperial examination. The Emperor betroths the princess to "her" because of her outstanding abilities. On her wedding day to the princess, Feng Suzhen tells the princess about her experiences and her love for her hero. The princess is moved by the heroine's love for the Li Zhaoting and her courage. Therefore, the princess subsequently intercedes with the Emperor on behalf of

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[29]Huangmei opera is one of the traditional opera forms in China.

Feng Suzhen and Li Zhaoting, in the hope that the Emperor would pardon them. At the princess's request, the Emperor releases Li Zhaoting from prison. At the end of the story, the hero and the heroine are finally married.

The heroine of *Female Consort Prince*, Feng Suzhen, is a "Hua Mulan" or "iron lady" type of female character. The story describes how Feng Suzhen uses a male social identity and she then succeeds in a male-dominated field. The story of the *Female Consort Prince* breaks apart the stereotypical images of a hero and a heroine in a "normal" romantic performance. The characterizations of both the hero and the heroine are subversive in terms of driving the story. This is very similar to the spiritual core of the "Big Heroine" romance novels in mainland China during the early 21st century. Although these 21st century "female consort princes" no longer disguise themselves as men, they are still viewed as the saviors, guardians or avengers within the novels. In addition, at the heart of these romantic fiction stories, the heroine's growth is a clear and recurring theme. At the beginning of the story, they are often seen as naive. However, they grow up to become known as "iron ladies" after experiencing all of their tribulations. The heroines in these Chinese novels have many traits that are similar to heroes in general fiction stories. They are not characters that are sitting around waiting to be saved. Quite the contrary, they are the real "heroes" in these stories. In this chapter, I will refer to the characters in the *Female Consort Prince* to classify and name the characters in Chinese "Big Heroine" romantic novels, during the early 21st century. In order to distinguish the Huangmei opera film the *Female Consort Prince* from other stories, I will refer to this chapter as The New Female Consort Prince. The genre

discussed in this chapter is referred to as the NFCP genre in later texts.

6.1 The Classification of the NFCP Genre

The NFCP subgenre of Chinese romance novels can be broadly classified into the following subtypes:

1. The first type of NFCP category romance novels tend to focus on the personal growth of the heroine. At the beginning of the story the heroine is often viewed as innocent and trusting. After experiencing a number of ordeals, these heroines become capable and scheming, and they can take charge of themselves and control the narrative. In addition to love stories between heroes and heroines, these novels usually focus on court or workplace politics. This is referred to as subtype A in the later text.

2. The second type of the NFCP category focuses more on the heroine's self-awakening. Unlike the heroines as described in subtype A, in the second type of romance novels in the NFCP genre, we see the heroines as capable or courageous from the beginning. Despite this, they often "go with the flow". In these stories, they gradually build upon their own real values after experiencing some suffering, and subsequently act on their beliefs. In this subtype, the love between the hero and the heroine occurs as a result of the misfortunes experienced by the heroine. This is referred to as subtype B in the later text.

3. The heroine in the third subtype NFCP genre of romance novels is a

combination of the first two subtypes. They not only strengthen their personal capacity through their ordeals, but they also build upon their own beliefs. The heroines in this subtype are very similar to the heroines that are found in some traditional Chinese Wuxia[30] fictions. In the story, they gradually grow from reckless girls to chivalrous women. This is referred to as subtype C in the later text.

This chapter will explore the representative works of the above three subtypes, *The Legend of Zhen Huan (后宫·甄嬛传)*, *Too Late to Say I Love You (来不及说我爱你)* and *Bandits (有匪)*, in order to analyze the characters in the novels and to explore the aesthetic orientation of the audience.

6.2 Character Classification

I refer to the characters in the *Female Consort Prince* to classify the main characters in contemporary Chinese romantic novels of the NFCP genre as follows:

Feng Suzhen: anti-stereotype heroine.

Li Zhaoting: the hero. This type of character is the love interest of the heroine.

Feng's Stepmother: the obstructor or punisher of the heroine.

In the character analysis part of this chapter, I will classify and analyze the characters in the novel in the above way. In the Huangmei opera film the *Female Consort Prince*, the princess and the heroine's maid, Hongyu, play the roles of the heroine's powerful "helpers". However, in the NFCP genre, the role of the "helper" is

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[30]Wuxia (武侠) literally means "martial heroes". It is an important genre in Chinese popular cultural products.

to drive the plot, with the relationship between the hero and heroine being somewhat limited. Therefore, in this chapter, I have not analyzed the "helper" as a separate character type.

6.3 The Case Studies

6.3.1 The Legend of Zhen Huan

The Legend of Zhen Huan (后宫·甄嬛传) is one of China's most popular fictions of the 21st century. The story was created by a popular literature writer from mainland China, Liu-Lianzi. The first edition of the novel consists of seven volumes and was published between 2007 to 2009. In terms of writing methods, The Legend of Zhen Huan draws on the classic Chinese novels as represented by the Dream of the Red Chamber (红楼梦)[31]. The story's television (TV) adaptation was one of the most successful TV series in mainland China during the 21st century. In addition to the TV series, The Legend of Zhen Huan was also adapted into other forms of presentations including a drama, a Yue opera, a comical story, and a mobile game. The series was ranked 6th in the Mopian Hurun Most Valuable Creative Works IP 2017. The commercial success of The Legend of Zhen Huan is beyond doubt. Meanwhile, the popularity of the work triggered a boom of cultural products with a "Big Heroine" theme in mainland China. Despite its success, The Legend of Zhen Huan also sparked a plagiarism controversy, like the novels Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (三生三世十里桃花), which were analyzed in the previous chapter. Due to

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[31] Dream of the Red Chamber is a novel written by Cao Xueqin in the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912) of China.

the TV adaptation of the novel is set in the period of the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912)[32],

and the story gave audiences a false perception of the history and that of the Qing royal

family. This situation sparked discontent among some of the descendants of the Qing

royal family, with public criticism in the media made about the TV adaptation of the

work.

Different from traditional romance novels, "Big Heroine" novels such as *The

Legend of Zhen Huan*, usually focus on the relationship between the hero and heroine

and how their bond develops. However, the author is also simultaneously adding

depictions and images of female character to the work. Taking *The Legend of Zhen

Huan* as an example, the author not only vividly describes the heroine, Zhen Huan, but

also details a number of other female figures in the story such as the heroine's allies or

enemies. Additionally, the author demonstrates to the reader how people from different

social classes react to the evident power struggles. By depicting the tragic fate of

various characters in the court, the author reveals the corrosion of the imperial power

on human nature itself. The author expresses the belief that there is no real victor in the

struggle for power. In this section, I have selected some of the main female characters

in the novel for further exploration and analysis. However, due to the particularity of

the imperial harem, I do not classify the characters in *The Legend of Zhen Huan* during

the course of this chapter. This section will divide the characters into two categories

according to their social class: the middle and lower-middle class government officials

and the nobility.

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[32]The original novel is a fictional historical setting.

The Legend of Zhen Huan focuses on the story of the heroine, Zhen Huan. Zhen Huan rises from being a seemingly innocent young woman to a successful and slick politician after experiencing a painful love affair and power struggles at the court. The heroine, Zhen Huan, is a typical representative character from a family of a middle or lower middle class government official. Her struggle in the imperial harem is to ensure her own survival, and not for any perceived exchange of benefits between her family and the royal family. Zhen Huan is chosen to enter the imperial harem as an imperial concubine due to her close resemblance to the deceased Empress Chunyuan. After she experienced many setbacks and struggles, such as being framed, suspected of a crime, and having her lover executed, she eventually became the Empress Dowager, the real ruler of the court. To authentically shape the image of the heroine, the author refers to images of female politicians in Chinese history. For example, the author devises a plot, because of some suspicion surrounding the hero, the Emperor Xuanling. Zhen Huan becomes a banished consort and is sent to the Ganlu Temple to become a nun. Zhen Huan is able to create a meeting of coincidence, in order to see the hero during a royal praying ceremony. The hero again infuses her with his love as a result of this chance meeting, and she returns to the court. The plot is largely based on the experiences of Wu Zetian[33] and Yang Yuhuan[34], influential nobility that are evident in Chinese history. The portrayal of this type of character is someone that is full of ingenuity and cunning,

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[33]Wu Zetian (624-705) is the only female emperor in Chinese history. The title of "empress" in English has two senses, empress consort and empress regnant. Therefore, to avoid ambiguity, I do not use the title "empress" here. She ruled China from 690 to 705.
[34]Yang Yuhuan (719-756) was the Imperial Noble Consort of the Emperor Xuanzong (reigning from 712 to 756) of Tang Dynasty (618-907).

and it presents the fictional story as very similar to stories emanating from Chinese history. Although Zhen Huan is the victor of the power struggle, she also becomes the "loser" in fate. During her long struggle, she defeated her rivals, but she lost her friends, her lover and her pure heart. By the end of the novel, she was to spend the rest of her life in solitude.

An Lingrong is another representative from a family of middle or lower middle class government officials. When compared with Zhen Huan, although they both had a humble background, An Lingrong had a more tragic life. Despite her mother being her father's rightful wife, their life was made very difficult. Due to her mother is not being valued by her father, An Lingrong does not have a high status in the family. She is presented as a dull, sensitive and embarrassing individual. She and Zhen Huan were originally close friends when they first entered the imperial harem. However, her personality traits were causal to her breakup with Zhen Huan in the story, and she then becomes a follower of the Empress. Unfortunately, this leads to her untimely and tragic fate.

Zhu Yixiu and Murong Shilan are two representative figures emerging from noble families. Zhu Yixiu, the Empress, is one of the heroine's main antagonists in the story. She is the younger sister of the late Empress Chunyuan, and the niece of the Empress Dowager. In the novel, the author portrays Zhu Yixiu as a psychologically distorted woman that is obsessed with power because her husband does not pay her any attention. Her husband falls in love with her older sister at first sight and then insists on marrying her and making her his rightful wife. Zhu Yixiu always held a grudge against this

decision.[35] She then devises a plot to poison her older sister. After Zhu Yixiu becomes the Empress, on the surface she portrays herself to be of good character, but in reality, she has been secretly framing the imperial concubines in the harem. Although Zhu Yixiu is ruthless, she actually does love the hero much more deeply, compared to the other imperial concubines. Her personality distortion comes from the Emperor's indifference and somewhat unfair treatment, rather than a natural malevolence. In the novel, Murong Shilan is portrayed as another female figure who is similar to her. Murong Shilan is the sister of the general. The marriage between the hero and Murong Shilan was designed to win the support of the army and consolidate his rule. Although her marriage to the hero is only a political deal made between her family and the royal family, she is truly in love with the hero. She is domineering, yet innocent. Her hurtful actions contrived against the heroine are merely motivated by a desire to maintain her place in the hero's heart, rather than any struggle for power. In this respect, Murong Shilan is an anomaly in the imperial harem.

Apart from their real feeling of love for the hero, Yixiu and Shilan are alike in that they are both victims of the power struggle between the royal family and the aristocracy. Zhu Yixiu originally married the hero before her sister. However, despite the hero already being a prince, he was a strong contender for the position of crown prince. In order to strengthen their political investment, her family agreed to the hero's proposal based on his affection for Zhu Rouze (the Empress Chunyuan). Throughout the pledging process, the Zhu Family did not consult with Yixiu. For the Zhu Family, both

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[35]In the story, Zhu Yixiu is initially married to the hero as a concubine.

Yixiu and Rouze were just tools that were used in their fight for power. The marriage of Murong Shilan was very similar. The hero married Murong Shilan in order to make the Murong family his allies in the crown prince competition, as well as a tool that would consolidate his rule. The Murong family's plan was for Shilan to give birth to the next crown prince, so that they would have total control over the political situation into the future. In order to prevent a possible coup in the future, the hero unites with the Zhu Family to poison Shilan. This causes Shilan to miscarry and she subsequently loses her fertility. Murong Silan was unaware of this devious plot. She simply and completely trusted her husband and her family, until she was finally banished to the Aulic Limbo. It was there that she learned the truth, with that truth leading to her suicide.

6.3.2 *Too Late to Say I Love You*

The novels, *Too Late to Say I Love You (来不及说我爱你),* and the novel, *Mountains Covered by Snow in Evenings (千山暮雪),* analyzed in the previous chapter are written by the same author, Fei Wo Si Cun. The novel was serialized in 2005 on the literature website, Jinjiang Literature City (晋江文学城), and published in 2006. The original title of the novel was *Bi Zhou Chen (碧甃沉),* but since "甃" (Zhou) is not a common Chinese character, the title was changed to *Too Late to Say I Love You*. In 2010, the novel was adapted into a TV series.

The story of *Too Late to Say I Love You* is set in the warlord chaotic period of the Republic of China and it revolves around a love tragedy between Yin Jingwan, a merchant's daughter, and Murong Feng, a warlord. The heroine, Yin Jingwan,

accidentally rescues the hunted hero, Murong Feng, on the train. Later, since her fiancé is arrested, Yin Jingwan asks Murong Feng, who has become a warlord, for help. As a result of this contact, Yin Jingwan and Murong Feng fall in love which causes her to break the engagement and marry Murong Feng. However, to consolidate his power, Murong Feng declares his marriage with Yin Jingwan invalid, and marries Cheng Jinzhi, a woman from a well-known family name. The sad and angry Yin Jingwan leaves the hero and marries Cheng Jinzhi's brother. After learning that the heroine has remarried, Murong Feng plots a car accident to murder Yin Jingwan's husband and daughter out of jealousy. At the end of the story, the desperate heroine chooses to take revenge on the hero by killing herself in front of him with their token of affection, a pistol that was made for her. Based on the classification of characters in this chapter, I have classified the female characters in the novel as follows:

Yin Jingwan: The Heroines, Feng Suzhen

Cheng Jinzhi: Feng's Stepmother

The heroine, Yin Jingwan is a "Women in the New Era" in the Republic of China period. The image of Yin Jingwan is similar to the female image of the "Snow White" type in *A Study of Female Archetypes in Contemporary Chinese Romance Novels (中国当代言情小说女性原型研究)*. Specifically, she has a background of studying abroad and is strongly influenced by Western thought. In the novel, Yin Jingwan is always brave and judicious. She leaves home to save her fiancé and seeks help from the brutal warlord. She had loved Murong Feng, but her pride does not allow her to become the hero's lover or concubine. Ultimately, she completely cuts off her relationship with

Murong Feng. Meanwhile, her bravery and resistance are powerless in the face of war, power and the patriarchal society. In fact, Yin Jingwan's behavior has brought immense trouble for herself. Her father disowns her because she breaks off the engagement with her fiancé and elopes with the hero. Her parents do not recognize this relationship between Jingwan and Murong Feng and this sets the stage for her subsequent tragedy. In the historical context, until the Republic of China period, marriages without parental permission could be considered invalid in China in the civil world. This also gives Murong Feng a reason to unilaterally declare his marriage to Yin Jingwan invalid. The patriarchal society's suppression of brave women becomes the root of Yin Jingwan's tragic fate.

Unlike the Stepmother and Stepsisters type of obstructors in the Cinderella genre, the female characters of the Feng's Stepmother type tend not to directly harm the heroines. Take Cheng Jinzhi's performance in *Too Late to Say I Love You* as an example. Despite her engagement with the hero, the hero chooses to announce that his marriage with Yin Jingwan is invalid but she does not hurt the heroine subjectively. Even in the novel, through a passage on Cheng Jinzhi's sister-in-law, the author shows the thoughts of Cheng's family and Cheng Jinzhi on the heroine and the questioning of the hero's choice.[36] In fact, in the novel, Cheng Jinzhi is portrayed by the author as a resourceful

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[36]The original text:

穆伊漾道: "不就是让他登报与那位姓尹的夫人脱离关系吗？就是因为他答应谨之，肯发这样的启事，我才觉得寒心。姑且不论那位尹小姐是何身份，究竟是妻是妾，这位尹小姐就算不是糠糟之妻，只是随军之妾。但她随在军中，到底算是与他共患难，而且我听说这位尹小姐为了他离家去国，连后路都绝了，他这样薄幸，真令人齿寒。这样的男子，怎么能令人放心？"(Fei Wo Si Cun, 2010, *Too late to say I love you*, Chapter 23, para 33)

The English translation:

Mu Yiyang said: "Let him declare to break off the relationship with Yin Jingwan? I felt disappointed because he promised to send a such announcement. Regardless of the identity of

woman with a background of having studied abroad who is the hero's right hand. However, due to social constraints, as a woman, she cannot carry out her career independently and can only be a family pawn and male appendage. She resents her husband's arbitrariness and infidelity, and rebels against him and from this, we can see that her married life with the hero is not harmonious.

In addition to the heroine, Yin Jingwan and her rival Cheng Jinzhi, Yin Jingwan's mother and the concubine of Murong Feng's father are also two female characters worth analyzing. In the novel, the author does not give much attention to the heroine's mother. In the limited description, the author presents a typical image of a traditional Chinese wife of the elite class she is gentle and comes from an affluent family. Meanwhile, she strictly abides by the principle of "husband is the guide of wife" (夫为妻纲)[37]. She loves her daughter deeply but she does not make any protest to her husband when he breaks off the parent-child relationship with their daughter and simply obeys her husband's decision. Another notable female figure is the concubine of Murong Feng's father. Like Yin Jingwan and Cheng Jinzhi, she is a brave and intelligent woman. In order to survive, however, she has to live as a concubine in the Murong family. The author's descriptions of them are an allusion to the fate of the heroine and Cheng Jinzhi. If they do not awaken and resist patriarchal society, they will only continue the fate of

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that Ms. Yin, whether she is his wife or a concubine. Even if she is not his original wife just a concubine who follows him. But she was with him through thick and thin. And I have heard that Ms. Yin has broken off relations with her family for him. Shame on him for being so heartless. How can we trust a man like that?"

[37] The principle of "husband is the guide of wife" is one of the Three Guiding Principles and Five Constant Virtues (三纲五常). The Three Guiding Principles are ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife. The Five Constant Virtues are benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. The Three Guiding Principles and Five Constant Virtues are important theory in the Confucianism.

previous generations.

Besides the superficial love story, the author communicates her thoughts of the position of women in the patriarchal society. In the novel, the author creates two types of women in the patriarchal society, the followers and the resisters. The followers, represented by Yin's mother and the concubine of Murong's father, have no dignity or freedom despite living comfortably. The resisters, reflected in the characters, Yin Jingwan and Cheng Jinzhi, are not only stigmatized by the patriarchal society, but even pay the price with their lives. After rejecting the arranged marriage and falling in love freely, Yin Jingwan's family abandon and humiliate her as being a slut. At the end of the story, she kills herself to preserve her dignity and resists the power from the hero.[38] Cheng Jinzhi conflicts with the hero to protect her rights and interests and her family considers her behaviors to be unreasonable and jealous.[39] After the heroine committed suicide, the hero does not reflect on his own behavior, but instead takes his anger out on Cheng Jinzhi and their child. Through this work, the author expresses that women are victims in a patriarchal society no matter what social class they are in. In this social context, the "enemy" of a woman is not another woman, but rather the patriarchal society.

6.3.3 Bandits

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[38]The ending of the website serial version is that the car accident planned by Murong Feng accidentally kills the heroine. The original purpose of this car accident is to kill the heroine's husband and child. However, in order to enhance the heroine's resistance, in the published version, the author changed the ending to the heroine's death by suicide.
[39]Jealousy is one of Qi-Chu (七出). Qi-Chu is seven conditions for divorcing the wife in traditional Chinese culture.

The Wuxia novel (武侠小说) [30] is one of the most important genres in popular Chinese literature. The swordsmen or swordswomen created in Wuxia novels are similar to knights found in Western chivalric romance stories. They represent noble qualities such as bravery and loyalty. However, the influence of Wuxia novels and their style has been gradually diminishing since the beginning of the 21st century. The trend of Wuxia novels has been to blend the basis of their stories with other genres. The novel, *Bandits (有匪),* analyzed in this section is one of these representative works, which demonstrates the fusion of Wuxia and romance novels.

The *Bandits* is a romance novel by Priest, who is a popular novelist in mainland China. The novel was serialized in Jinjiang Literature City in 2015 and then published in 2016. The author constructs a fictional setting for *Bandits* by referring to the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589) as found in Chinese history. In the story, the heroine's grandfather establishes a utopian village to support the Southern regime, while sheltering rebels from the Northern regime. After the death of her grandfather, the heroine's mother becomes the new leader of the village. The heroine, Zhou Fei was born and grew up there. The novel illustrates the growth of Zhou Fei and exposes the development of her relationship with the hero, Xie Yun, which is the key part of story. The story of *Bandits* shows how the heroine grows from an impulsive teenager to a successful swordswoman. The relationship between Zhou Fei and Xie Yun seems more like soul mates, rather than couples merely falling love, as seen in general romance novels. Like *the Legend of Zhen Huan (后宫·甄嬛传),* the *Bandits* is a group portrait novel. In this section, I have selected some of the typical female characters found in the

novel to explore and analyze further.

The character and image of the heroine, Zhou Fei, represents the author's ingenuity. The Chinese title of the novel, *Bandits*, and the heroine's name, Fei, both originate from the sentence of the *Book of Odes, Odes of Wei, Qi Yu (诗经·卫风·淇奥)*[40]. The meaning of this sentence is that the self-cultivation of noble men should be constantly enhanced and matured. The sentence is used again later in the story to discipline educated men. By using this quote, the author is conveying to the reader that self-growth should not be limited to men, but that women can grow and be challenged just as much as men. The representation of Zhou Fei is the author's embodiment of this point of view. In traditional Chinese Wuxia novels or romance novels, female images are stereotypical, with their behaviors largely motivated by their relationships with men. Although *Bandits* is a romance novel with Wuxia elements, the heroine, Zhou Fei, is not only responsible for saving the hero, but also a family inheritor and a powerful supporter of the regime. This was a significant breakthrough in the design of female images in romantic Chinese fiction stories. The comments found on Douban also reflects the audiences' recognition of the heroine's image and changes to the genre.

In addition to the heroine, other female characters in the novel also grow or change with their experiences. These characters express the author's core ideas, which include the growth and the awakening of women. Take the heroine's mother for example, Li Jinrong, who is an extremely capable, rational and calm individual. In addition to

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[40]The Book of Odes is the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry. It is one of the Confucian "Five Classics". The original text of the sentence is that "有匪君子，如切如磋，如琢如磨". The English translation: "There is our elegant and accomplished prince, as from the knife and the file, as from the chisel and the polisher!"

managing the village, she has been looking for opportunities to avenge the death of her

father. Although the novel is set during the Southern and Northern Dynasty periods in

China, the author portrays Li Jinrong as a very "modern" woman. Like the mother

figure as analyzed in the previous chapters, Li Jinrong's education of her daughter is

very strict and relentless. She is represented in the village as an "iron lady", despite her

vulnerabilities. In the face of the departure of her husband, Zhou Yitang, she

deliberately displays acts of indifference and an unwavering attitude. But in reality, her

inner world is full of reluctance and sadness.[41] After witnessing an assault that was

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[41]The original text:

"……她从未在李瑾容脸上看见过这样的神色，伤心也说不上伤心，比起方才抓她时的暴怒，李瑾容这会好似已经平静了下来，只是双肩微微前塌，一身盛气凌人的盔甲所剩无几，几乎要露出肉体凡胎相来。

……

李瑾容愣了许久，然后微微仰起头，借着这个动作，她将肩膀重新打开，好似披上了一件铁垫肩，半晌，轻轻地呵出一口气来。……

……

'先父在世时，哪怕插旗做匪，自污声名，也要给天下落魄人留住四十八寨这最后一块容身之地。'李瑾容正色道，'我们南北不靠，以十万大山为壁，洗墨江水为垒，有来犯者必诛杀之。先人遗命不敢违，所以四十八寨以外的地界，我们无友无故，无盟无党，就算是你也一样。'

周以棠神色不动：'我明白。'

李瑾容将双手拢入长袖中：'你要是走，从此以后，便与四十八寨再无瓜葛。'"(Priest, 2016, *Bandits,* Volume One Chapter 5, para 93, 100, 102-104)

The English translation:

……She had never before seen such an expression on her mother's face. It wasn't really sorrow, exactly – but she seemed to have calmed down compared to the violent rage she had been in when trying to seize Zhou Fei. Her shoulders drooped forward slightly. She looked if as all her domineering armour had been stripped from her, and almost mortal.

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Li Jinrong stared dazedly into the distance for a long while. Then she finally lifted her chin, straightened her back and squared her shoulders, and her steely armour was back on. She let out a soft sigh. ……

……

"When my father was alive, he was determined to provide a refuge for the outcasts of the world in the 48 Zhai, even if he had to become a bandit and sully his own name." Li Jinrong said solemnly, "We do not pledge allegiance to the North or the South. With the mountains and the Ink-Washing River as our defense, any attackers would be doomed. As I do not dare defy the mission left to me by my ancestors, the 48 Zhai makes no allies and forges no alliances. The same holds for you too."

Zhou Yitang's expression was unchanged: "I understand."

Li Jinrong drew her hands into her sleeves and said: "If you want to leave, from now on, you will

aimed at her village and the remarkable growth of her daughter, she gradually realized that being tough and cruel does not solve all of her problems or her inner turmoil. Sometimes, it is necessary to compromise and be compassionate to truly achieve the best out of one's life. By the end of the novel, Li Jinrong decides she should follow her inner thoughts and feelings. She then leaves the management of the village to her nephew and goes in search of her husband.

The novel *Bandits* is not just about "new" female figures like Zhou Fei or Li Jinrong. The author also has a unique understanding of the traditional style of female images as illustrated in popular Chinese cultural products. In *Bandits*, she designs two such female characters, Wu Chuchu and Duan Jiuniang. They represent the images of a "weak woman" and a "mad woman", respectively. Wu Chuchu is portrayed as a typical ancient Chinese lady, in that she is gentle, kind and incapable of protecting herself. In the story, her parents and brother are killed by the rebels, but she is rescued by the heroine. On her return to the village with Zhou Fei, she is influenced by the heroine and her bravery, and begins to think about the direction of her life. She comes to the realization that women can be resilient and courageous. After her return, she decides to change who she is and become a strong, determined woman that can look after herself. She learns a lots from Li Jinrong in a short time, and she then chooses to embark on her own journey of personal growth and evolution. Duan Jiuniang is presented as a typical "mad woman". Even the reasons for her being described as a "mad woman" are emblematic of what is found in popular cultural products. When

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no longer have anything to do with the 48 Zhai."

Duan Jiuniang was young, she had an unrequited love for the heroine's grandfather. The heroine's grandfather was subsequently killed by a conspiracy that was planned by the puppet regime. Duan Jiuniang sought to take revenge for his death, but she ultimately failed. After her failure, she drifted in and out of consciousness. Although Duan Jiuniang's background is considered typical, the author did not follow traditional popular cultural products by presenting her as a twisted or deranged woman. The author endowed Duan Jiuniang with characteristics of being a brave and honest person, and a real swordswoman. She taught her martial arts skills to the heroine, and then sacrificed herself to enable the heroine's escape in defiance of the tyranny of the puppet regime. She too, was a heroine.

6.4 The Perfect Images of Male and Female

When the authors created the NFCP genre works, particularly subtype A and B, they tend to add perfect characters that align with their social values. In the works, these figures play two roles: 1. They drive the storyline of the novel; 2. They are the counterpoints of the hero and heroine. In the following discussion, I will use the characters in *The Legend of Zhen Huan (后宫·甄嬛传)* and *Too Late to Say I Love You (来不及说我爱你)* as examples to illustrate this concept.

In *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, there are two "perfect" characters: the heroine's lover, Xuanqing, and the hero's ex-wife, Empress Chunyuan. They contrast the hero, Xuanling, and the heroine, Zhen Huan. Xuanqing was the most favored son of the previous emperor, who wanted to make him the crown prince. However, because his

mother is a foreigner, his father eventually dropped the proposal due to objections from the cabinet. It is because of this that the hero is able to ascend the throne and become the emperor. In the story, Xuanqing not only sees the hero as a brother and monarch, but also as a potential usurper. Compared with the hero, Xuanqing is honest and kind. His presence in the novel makes the hero's image seem more suspicious and cunning. Meanwhile, his death also leads directly to the heroine's revenge. The characterization of Empress Chunyuan is similar to Xuanqing. In the novel, she represents all the good qualities that traditional women possess. She is kind and simple, and in particular feels guilty about her sister, and before she dies, she asks the hero not to abandon her sister, Yixiu, after her death. In the story, she has similar features to Zhen Huan, yet compared to the heroine, she is more unsuited to the brutal struggle for power in the court. The same is true of the characters of Xuanqing the author demonstrates the "perfect" character image through them. Meanwhile, however, through their fate, the author conveys the idea that the victors in the struggle for power often grow up to erase the good and simplicity in their inner world.

In *Too Late to Say I Love You*, the author also designs a similar character, the heroine's husband, Cheng Xinzhi. Compared with the hero, he is more tolerant and honest. When faced with power and a controversial marriage, he makes a different choice compared to the hero. Although he longs for his family's blessing for his marriage to Yin Jingwan, he confesses to his brother that he will not abandon his wife and daughter because of their disapproval.[42] Compared with the hero, Cheng Xinzhi

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[42]The original text:
"程允之从来脾气好，尤其对着夫人，总是一幅笑容可掬的样子，这个时候将茶碗往桌上重重一

does not desire fame and wealth, and he is more daring to face his real feelings. At this

point, he is braver, and such characterization also makes the hero's character image

appear more despicable. As a result, the heroine's revenge in the ending of the novel

triggers a greater sense of resonance among readers.

Another characteristic of the NFCP genre works is that in some works the hero is

not just a Li Zhaoting type figure, but also acts as a Feng's Stepmother type in the story.

Although they have assistance in the process of hurting the heroine in the story, the

heroine's main "enemy" is the hero. Unlike contemporary Chinese romance novels, one

of the primary features of the NFCP genre that I analyzed in other chapters is that the

characters in these novels are not stereotyped. Ultimately, the portrayal of the hero and

heroine is not entirely positive. In addition to being as capable as protagonists in other

genres, they may also possess traits such as being cunning or selfish. In these works,

the authors do not portray the protagonists as perfect fictional characters as they only

narrate and construct the story through the perspectives of the heroines. Notably, the

struggle between the hero and heroine is not a confrontation between good and evil, but

rather a game about profit or survival.

Intentionally or not, the authors of these novels portray their heroes to acts as

spokesmen for the patriarchal society. In their works, they utilize stories to explore the

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撮：'他此次行事，实在是过份，叫我们全家的脸面往哪里搁？'程信之却说：'结婚是我私人的
事情，大哥若是不肯祝福我们，我也不会勉强大哥。'"(Fei Wo Si Cun, 2010, Too late to say I
love you, Chapter 31, para 2)
The English translation:
Cheng Yunzhi has never been gentle, especially to his wife, always a smiling appearance.
However, this time he putted the tea bowl on the table, said: "he has gone too far this time and
brought shame on our family." Cheng Xinzhi said: "marriage is a private matter for me, if brother
refuses to bless us, I will not force brother."

question of whether true love can exist between a man and a woman in a situation of gender inequality created by a powerful and patriarchal society. In regard to the cases discussed above, in both *The Legend of Zhen Huan* and *Too Late to Say I Love You,* the heroines show true love for the heroes at the very beginning of the story. However, as the story progresses, they discover that their "love" is actually a form of control. As a result, they begin to rebel and they later realize that true love can only exist in an equal relationship. The inequity that exists in the relationships only create control and possession that is masqueraded as love. This approach to creation is very different from the other genres discussed in this thesis, especially the Cinderella genre. Notably, some authors even use their works to insinuate that women who submit to such unequal relationships are "pets." For instance, in *The Legend of Zhen Huan,* the heroine suggests that the hero give the character "鹂" (Oriole)[43] to An Lingrong as a title.[44]

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[43]The character "鹂" in Chinese means oriole. Oriole was a common pet of the elite class in ancient China.

[44]The original text：

他的手指抚上我的脸颊，"朕给了你协理六宫的大权，这有什么不行的，而且从前贞贵嫔的封号你也起得极好，"说着把笔交到我手中，"你写一个来看看，若真不好，朕再帮你改就是。"我略略思量，写了一个极大的"鹂"字，笑着侧头问他，"好不好？"

他略皱了皱眉，道："鹂？"

我点头，红翡滴珠凤头金步摇的流苏轻轻打在耳边，凉凉的似四月里的小雨，我柔声道："能歌善舞，性情又像黄鹂一样和顺，是安妹妹最大的长入，而且黄鹂，亦是两情缱绻的鸟儿啊，这般样样周全，就像安妹妹为人一样，真真是难得的。"(Liu-Lianzi 2008, The Legend of Zhen Huan, Volume 6, Chapter 33, para 50-52)

The English translation:

His fingers touch my cheek, "I gave you the power to manage the harem, what's wrong with doing so? And once you had a good title for Imperial Concubine Zhen." He puts the pen in my hand, "you can try to write it, if not good, I can help you to revise." I think about it for a second, and write down a big character "Oriole". I ask him with a smile, "is this good?"

He frowns and asks: "Oriole?"

I nod my head. The tassel on the golden Buyao (Chinese Hair Accessory) touches my ear. The

6.5 The Heroine Born under the One-Child Policy

Compared to the other genres I have analyzed in the previous chapters, the NFCP genre emerged and gained popularity rather later. The NFCP genre only gradually became one of the mainstream genres of contemporary Chinese romantic novels during the late first decade of the 21st century. Notably, the female figures in this genre generally do not conform to the stereotypical image of women in cultural products. In novels, they are not merely the weak who accept protection from males but they instead can also play the role of savior and avenger. In other words, gender roles are blurred in the NFCP subgenre. Interestingly, the NFCP genre tends to have a higher rating on Douban than compared with other genres of contemporary Chinese romantic novels. For instance, in the three works discussed in the previous section, *The Legend of Zhen Huan (后宫·甄嬛传)* had a rating of 8.0 (21,269 reviews); *Too Late to Say I Love You (来不及说我爱你)* had an 8.0 rating (26,944 reviews); *Bandits (有匪)* had an 8.6 rating (19,238 reviews). (I only selected the version with the highest number of reviews). Here, the readers recognize the heroines and other female characters in the NFCP genre more than the romance novels of other categories. As for this phenomenon, I believe that the one-child policy has influenced the audience's evaluation and perception of popular cultural products in mainland China. Or rather, the policy plays a significant role in the creation of cultural works in mainland China. Although Western feminism has also had some influence on those creators and audiences, the one-child policy has provided the

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cool touch is like the April rain. I say softly, "Orioles are good at singing and dancing. And they are a kind of docile birds. These characteristics are the same as An Lingrong. How rare!"

foundation for these ideological shifts to persist. The policy influence that is discussed in this section does not refer to the government's interference in the creation of cultural products, but instead to the influence of policies and society on the tendency of public opinion, audiences and creators.

Ueno Chizuko discusses this point in *Misogyny (女ぎらい：ニッポンのミソジ二ー,* Chinese version's title*：厌女：日本的女性厌恶).* She argues that in families with only one or two children, the daughter serves as the "son with a woman's face." These families do not discriminate in the education of their children based on gender. They are no less invested in their daughters' education than in that of the son and they also have high expectations for their daughters. (Ueno, 2015) Despite the fact that Ueno's view derives from the context of the Japanese society. I still believe that this view applies to urban families in mainland China under the influence of the one-child policy. During the 1980 to 2016 period, nearly all families in the urban areas of mainland China had only one child. Women born in urban China during this period grew up with less gender discrimination within the family than their mothers or grandmothers. They were also groomed as the inheritors of the family and property so they were subjected to less traditional gender discipline. Throughout the course of their upbringing, the gender division of labor in traditional Chinese society was blurred by educators and parents. Notably, one of the core features of the NFCP category, the anti-traditional gender role, caters to the psychology of these young women growing up in families with only one child.

In fact, Ueno also emphasizes the challenges faced by those "sons with women's

faces". Although they grew up in a caring environment, patriarchal social conditioning of women still exists today. Therefore, as they mature, society and their families demand that they be "like sons, but also must be good daughters" (Ueno, 2015). In other words, these women are expected to take on social responsibilities like men. Meanwhile, however, they also have to fulfill the obligations that women have to the family in traditional society so it is difficult not to create a rebellion against such a double pressure. The self-awakening, growth and struggle of the heroine in the NFCP genre satisfy this psychological need of the readers. Therefore, it is easier for the NFCP category to win the audience's favor whether in terms of the anti-traditional gender role or resistance to social discipline. Thoughout the first two decades of the 21st century, the mindset of the audiences for the NFCP genre has also been undergoing a change. They have evolved from tentative rebellion against the story or relationship centered on the hero to directly subverting traditional gender roles. In subtype A and B, represented by *The Legend of Zhen Huan (后宫·甄嬛传)* and *Too Late to Say I Love You (来不及说我爱你)*, the heroines are still women who follow social rules. However, they begin to self-awaken, grow and rebel after facing certain ordeals. The authors of fiction usually focus their novels on those trials and self-awakenings. In addition, the authors still need to add traits such as paranoia or infidelity to the hero in order to pave the way for the heroine's resistance and awakening at the later stage of the story. For example, in *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, the heroine is treated by the hero as a surrogate for his original wife, and the heroine's lover is later executed by the hero. In *Too Late to Say I Love You,* this concept is reflected in the hero's betrayal and the murder of the heroine's

husband and child. Subtype C, which appeared in the late 2010s and is represented by *Bandits (有匪),* directly blurs the gender of the characters in the novel. The female characters in the novel resemble contemporary women in an ideal situation: society and family are less concerned with their gender and more interested in their individual abilities. In the *Bandits,* the hero, Xie Yun, is an exiled and frustrated prince, while the heroine is his protector and supporter. The relationship between them is more like the "princess and knight" after switching genders. However, it is worth noting that the changing of the gender roles in subtype C is not like the pseudo-matriarchal novel (女尊小说). The world perspective of the pseudo-matriarchal novel is a fabricated world in which gender roles are completely reversed. In the pseudo-matriarchal novel, women become the oppressors of men. Meanwhile, in subtype C, the relationship between men and women is more equal and there is more cooperation between them.

The liberation of women is one of the major achievements of the early years of the Chinese Communist government. The concept of "Women hold up half the world" (妇女能顶半边天) was first published by *People's Daily* in 1956, and the slogan was popularized nationwide in 1958. The *Female Consort Prince (女驸马)* was created in this period. Even today, in the 21st century, the *Female Consort Prince* still defies convention and gender stereotypes in its characterization and plotting. Interestingly, the *Female Consort Prince* was not created by a special team organized by the central government and its creative team is actually from the Anhui Huangmei Opera Theater, a local theater in China. However, the opera film received an immense amount of positive feedback from the audience after its public release. Similar to the NFCP genre

discussed in this chapter, such narratives are not created for political purposes. However, their appearance and the audience's positive response largely reflect the influence of policies on the evaluation of creators and audiences in mainland China.

6.6 The Summary

Compared to other categories of Chinese contemporary romance novels, the NFCP subgenre has started to become popular in recent years. However, interestingly, female figures similar to the heroines of the NFCP genre are very common in ancient Chinese legends or literary works. In addition to the work providing the title of this chapter, the *Female Consort Prince (女驸马)*, *Ballad of Mulan (木兰辞)*[45], and *Legend of the White Snake (白蛇传)*[46], are among these types of the works. Heroines in the NFCP genre are generally more aggressive than heroines in other genres; they are the absolute protagonists of the story. They do not wait passively, but take on the role of saviors, guardians, or avengers.

The NFCP category conveys values to the readers that are consistent with the young female demographic born under the one-child policy of China. These young female readers have received the same education as their male counterparts and just like only sons, they are the heirs to their family fortunes and the object of intense pressure from the previous generation. In terms of education and family inheritance,

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[45]The *Ballad of Mulan* is a Chinese folk song of the Northern and Southern Dynasties period (420-589). The folk song tells the story of Hua Mulan, who disguises herself as a man and joins the army for her father. The story was adapted into a movie by Disney and released in 1998.
[46]The *Legend of the White Snake* is an ancient Chinese folk legend. The folk legend tells a love story between a snake spirit and a mortal. The prototype of the *Legend of the White Snake* appeared under the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) or even earlier.

they are seen as "sons with women's faces". But in actuality, the traditional gender roles for women in society have not disappeared. These young women not only have to be able to take charge of their studies and careers like men, but they also have to take care of their families like women in traditional Chinese society. Such expectation places them under twice as much pressure. The growth and resistance of women depicted in the NFCP category satisfy their desire to relieve such pressures. In reality, due to the personal limitations placed on them, the female readers of these novels are not able to achieve their goals like the heroines of the stories. Therefore, these novels provide a spiritual utopia for them. In this utopia, the heroines are brave and decisive. In some NFCP category works, the heroes exhibit dual attributes. They are not just the heroine's love interest, they also act as a Feng's Stepmother type character, the punisher. They love the heroines, but they also represent the oppressive aspects of patriarchal society. Such expressions cater to the ambivalence of the generation of women born under the one-child policy in mainland China. The patriarchal society or patrilineal family nourishes them, but it also oppresses them. In other words, the one-child policy provides the ground for the popularity of the NFCP category. Although the one-child policy is no longer enforced in mainland China, the birth rate continues to remain low due to the high cost of living. Therefore, I believe that the audience's aesthetic preference for the NFCP genre will prevail for a long time or develop based on this aesthetic preference.

In fact, the short comments related to the NFCP category on Douban also show that the readers are more emotionally sympathetic to the genre. The positive short

comments from readers about the NFCP genre can be divided into the following types: 1. Admiration for the heroine who is capable in her career or in self-development; 2. Agreement with the heroine's choice; 3. Feeling sympathy for the heroine's suffering. The heroines of the NFCP category have attracted a large number of readers with their determination and courage depicted in the stories. Although the NFCP category is a subgenre of contemporary Chinese romance fiction, the stories in these novels are not limited to focusing on love alone. They also discuss resistance, growth, and the destiny of women. This also gives the NFCP genre a richer story theme.

Similar to other categories in Chinese contemporary romance fictions, the negative short comments on the NFCP genre mainly focus on the character design or story design being too "Mary Sue" or the heroine's behavior motivation not being clear enough. Those common problems of contemporary Chinese romance novels are also present in the NFCP category. Therefore, some scholars have asserted that the NFCP genre is a fantasy that reproduces male logic rather than changing the logic of gender and power. (Dai, 2021) I am inclined to agree with this view. Compared to other genres of contemporary Chinese romance novels, the NFCP genre focuses more on the heroine. However, it must also be noted that in some works the heroine's success comes from the help of male characters. These male figures are often in the elite or the top power class.

But is the popularity of the NFCP category meaningless? My view is that the popularity of the NFCP category is in a transitional phase. Since the beginning of the 2020s, some creators in mainland China have tried to stop using gender stereotypes to

label popular cultural products. This also means that Chinese popular cultural products are gradually moving from mass distribution to focusing on certain groups. I will discuss this point in further detail in a later chapter.

7. Discussion

7.1 The "Mary Sue": Evolution of the Heroine's Image and Female Consciousness

"Mary Sue" is a very frequently used term in the short comments about contemporary Chinese romantic novels on Douban. In the Chinese internet context, "Mary Sue" refers to the excessively positive qualities that creators assign to female characters in cultural products, and the absurd amount of help and love these female characters receive from men in these stories. This approach to character design has caused audiences to become tired of this type of female figure. As reflected in the comments, audiences have given this type of female character the label of "Mary Sue". In fact, the development of the "Mary Sue" style female figure in contemporary Chinese romantic novels and the process of finally breaking away from this characterization framework reflects the development of female consciousness in mainland China.

In the early 21st century, mainland Chinese romance novels were deeply influenced by Taiwanese romance novels, as represented by Chiung Yao's works, in terms of both story structure and character design. This is especially true of the Cinderella genre that I analyzed in an earlier the previous chapter. The heroines in these works are often born into an ordinary family. Apart from their beauty and kindness, they have almost nothing that attracts attention. However, in the story, such heroines are typically chosen by male heroes from the elite class. In this stage, the characterization of the heroine is decidedly flat. Although these stories all revolve around the heroines and are even narrated from the heroines' perspectives, the heroines themselves rarely take much initiative in the narrative. They act as a completely passive presence in the story, no matter whether

being harmed by the villain or being rescued by the hero. Such character and story design satisfies the readers' fantasy of romance and curiosity about the elite to a certain extent. Meanwhile, the authors often neglect to portray the heroines' personalities. For example, in *Shan Shan Comes to Eat* (杉杉来吃), which was analyzed in the chapter concerning Cinderella, Xue Shanshan, the heroine, is a female character with almost no personality. The only meaning of her presence in the work is to act as a symbol representing an ordinary woman or Cinderella.

Due to the aesthetic differences of readers and some readers' weariness with the "Cinderella" style of "Mary Sue", the creators next attempted to de-emphasize the class differences between the heroes and heroines in their works. Compared to the heroines of the Cinderella genre, these heroines, whom I classify as the belonging to the GY & B genre, are more proactive. They have the same family background and education as the heroes, and are more courageous and aggressive in facing the challengers to their relationships. However, authors still made them "weak" in front of the hero. This even went so far as to make the portrayal of the heroine in the work seem inconsistent over the course of the narrative. Such a depiction is only done to reflect the good qualities of the heroes in the work. Notably, although the character design at this stage or sub-genre of work was different from in the Cinderella genre, these works still did not break away from the "strong male and weak female" framework constructed by Taiwanese romance novels of the mid-to-late 20th century. Take *Silent Separation (何以笙箫默)* as an example, as analyzed in the previous chapter, where the author originally designed the heroine as a competent and independent female photographer. However, in the

being harmed by the villain or being rescued by the hero. Such character and story design satisfies the readers' fantasy of romance and curiosity about the elite to a certain extent. Meanwhile, the authors often neglect to portray the heroines' personalities. For example, in *Shan Shan Comes to Eat* (杉杉来吃), which was analyzed in the chapter concerning Cinderella, Xue Shanshan, the heroine, is a female character with almost no personality. The only meaning of her presence in the work is to act as a symbol representing an ordinary woman or Cinderella.

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process of getting along with the hero, she does not display those independent traits, and her character was forcibly weakened by the author.

In addition to romantic narrative from Taiwan, Japanese and South Korean romantic cultural products, represented by Japanese light novels, *Shojo Manga* and Korean romantic drama series, have also been introduced to the Chinese mainland. These cultural products from a non-Chinese cultural background also play an influential role in the creation of popular cultural products in mainland China. Traces of imitation Japanese and Korean cultural products can be identified in many mainland Chinese romance novels published in the early 21st century. The FYW&MC genre, as I classified it in the previous chapter, is a product of this social context. The stage for the stories in these works is often the campus. However, it must be noted that, in many of the FYW&MC genre's early works, these settings differ vastly from the real-world mainland Chinese campuses. These schools, where the stories take place, are labeled "elite" or "private" by the authors. They look like replicas of schools from Japanese *Shojo Manga* or Korean romance dramas. The creators of these novels completely ignore the fact that public schools are undoubtedly the mainstream of the education system in mainland China and the best schools in both higher and secondary education are all public schools. Although the core idea of the FYW&MC genre in the early 21st century is also to reflect the confusion of adolescent girls, the heroines in these works are more similar to the romantic narrative cultural products of Japan or South Korea in both behavior and language style. Publishers have also been very cooperative in creating *manga* style covers and illustrations for these works. Creators and publishers

attempted to construct a fantasy for young female readers in mainland China that is divorced from the reality of society.

Such a complete disregard for the real world of education cannot be seen in later years. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, a significant number of the FYW&MC genre works perfectly matching Chinese campus life, began to appear in the cultural market of mainland China. This has thus become the dominant genre of contemporary Chinese romance novels in this area. The heroines' "adolescent troubles" are no longer limited to their relationships with their male counterparts. These heroines are more focused on their studies, parents and future than their relationships with the heroes. The authors even portray them as ordinary young women who are neither particularly intelligent nor pretty. This already constitutes a considerable difference from the heroines of mainland Chinese romantic novels at the turn of the 21st century. It is also from this stage that the heroine image of Chinese romantic novels began to gradually break away from the "Mary Sue" model. The love story, which is the core of the novel, also changes from "the love story between the hero and heroine" to "the love story of the heroine". Such a transformation changes the heroine from a flat "symbol" into a true heroine. This is particularly evident in the NFCP genre that was analyzed in an earlier chapter.

In the early NFCP genre, traces of the "Mary Sue" type character design can still be seen. In the case of *Legend of Zhen Huan (后宫·甄嬛传)* and *Too Late to Say I Love You (来不及说我爱你)*, which were analyzed in the previous chapter, the heroines are perfect and addicted to their relationships with the heroes in the first part of the story

just like the heroines in other genres. However, when they experience numerous setbacks, they begin to gain a greater sense of self and realize that they should not be tied down by a sick relationship. The more recent NFCP genre, exemplified by *Bandits (有匪)*, directly changes the structure of the relationship between the hero and heroine, and the heroine becomes the real core of the story.

The transition from the Cinderella genre to the NFCP genre did not happen overnight. The process of this transformation is highly correlated with the level of education of Chinese women. According to the data in the *Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020)* released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, in 2019, the number of female graduate students in higher education was 1.448 million, accounting for 50.6% of all graduate students. Meanwhile, the number of female undergraduate students in Regular Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and undergraduates in Adult HEIs was 15.679 million and 3.923 million, accounting for 51.7% and 58.7%, respectively. This report also states that the gross enrollment rate for higher education in mainland China in 2019 was 51.6%. In comparison, the proportion of female students enrolled in undergraduate and tertiary education was only 41% in 2000 (when the gross enrollment ratio for higher education was 12.5%) and 50.9% in 2010 (when the gross enrollment ratio for higher education was 26.5%).[47] These data also illustrate the expanding education of young women, the

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[47] Except for *Programme for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020)*, the data from the report, *Equality, Development and Sharing: Progress of Women's Cause in 70 Years Since New China's Founding* (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China) and *2019 National Education Development Statistics Bulletin* (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China).

main audience for romance novels. The audience's preference for the relationship patterns of the heroes and heroines in romance novels also changes with education level. It is reflected in the creation of contemporary Chinese romantic novels that the heroines gradually become more assertive and independent. The heroes are at the same time transformed from "dominators" to "cooperators" or even "people in need".

7.2 The Binary Opposition in the Shaping of Female Images

In *Misogyny (女ぎらい：ニッポンのミソジニー,* Chinese version title: *厌女: 日本的女性厌恶)*, Ueno Chizuko discusses the idea that patriarchal society starkly divides women into two groups: the "female saint" (圣女) and the "prostitute" (娼妓). Similar binary representations of women can also be found in the contemporary Chinese romantic novel. Although most creators of these female figures are women themselves, these characters still conform to the cultural context of a patriarchal society. To cater to this cultural context, authors often portray their female characters in stories belonging to one of two opposing groups: positive characters with the heroine at the core, or villains with the female supporting character at the core. In this section, I use the terms "good girl" (the group with the heroine as the core) and "evil woman" (the group with the female supporting character as the core) to refer to them.

The "good girls" are endowed with all the positive qualities that align with the standards for women in patriarchal societies, such as youth, innocence, beauty, kindness, and so forth. For example, Tong Xue, the heroine in *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows (千山暮雪),* is young and naive. Although she is the lover of a married man, the author

"defends" her in the narrative by explaining that the marriage between the hero, Mo Shaoqian, and his wife is involuntary, and that the heroine is forced to agree to act as the hero's lover. Thus, even though Tong Xue commits acts that are not "tolerated" by social morality, she is still portrayed as "pure" and "kind". The novel's story bears a resemblance to the 19th century English novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, which is undoubtedly a monumental work in the history of women's writing. However, in 21st century China, a country and era where most women are free to pursue education and employment, such a story seems to excessively cater to female stereotypes in the patriarchal socio-cultural context. Interestingly, in *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows*, the author's depiction of the villain is similar to that of *Jane Eyre*. The villainess, the hero's wife, is portrayed as a possessive "mad woman", and the hero is deceived and coerced into marrying her. The author attributes to the hero's wife all the traits that women are not supposed to have in the cultural context of a patriarchal society, such as ambition and jealousy. By portraying such a female villain, the author conveys to readers that female characters who do not conform to the stereotypes of women in patriarchal socio-cultural contexts cannot achieve "happiness" in romance novels. The "happiness" in these work does not include the realization of women's self-worth or "success" in the secular sense; rather the author narrowly defines it as obtaining the hero's "love".

Similar characters have been portrayed in other works as well. For example, in *Shan Shan Comes to Eat (杉杉来吃),* Yuan Lishu is one such character, the female villain who has a crush on the hero. She is well-educated and highly capable in the

workplace but she is also ambitious. Her crush on the hero is not solely emotional, but is also motivated by her desire to change her social class through marriage. Like the wife of the hero in *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snow*, Yuan Lishu does not gain the hero's love. The role of this character in the novel serves to contrast the simplicity of the heroine and to convey to readers the idea that innocence and simplicity are the only ways to win a man's love and to gain "happiness". Whether it is Tong Xue and Mu Yongfei (the hero's wife in *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snow*), or Yuan Lishu and Xue Shanshan (the heroine of *Shan Shan Comes to Eat*), they represent binary opposites in character imagery. The heroines are simple, kind, and non-aggressive, while the villains are talented and ambitious as their counterparts. In fact, this dichotomy communicates to the reader that a "good girl" should be simple, kind and ordinary like the heroines of these novels. Conversely, if a young woman is talented, ambitious, and calculating, she may be classified as an "evil woman". Such "evil women" cannot be loved by men and thus cannot gain "happiness". These stories significantly undermine the social value that women can create outside of marriage. The authors may even "distort" some facts in order to "defend" the "perfect" image of the heroine. For example, in *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snow*, Mu Yongfei is an extremely capable businesswoman. Because she falls in love with Mo Shaoqian, she marries him and helps the hero save his father's business. Mo Shaoqian also overcomes difficult times due to Mu Yongfei's help. Her persecution of Tong Xue stems entirely from her desire to protect her marriage. In this process, the hero, the person who should be most responsible, becomes completely "invisible" and shifts all the responsibility to his wife. His wife becomes the sole

"source of guilt" in the story. The author only emphasizes the negative behavior of Mu Yongfei in the "context of marriage defense". Her success in her career her and her husband's betrayal are both ignored by the author. The portrayal of Yuan Lishu in *Shan Shan Comes to Eat* follows a similar pattern.

This mode of shaping female characters is prevalent in contemporary Chinese romantic novels, especially of the Cinderella sub-genre. This characterization, on the one hand, caters to some readers' fantasies of changing social classes through marriage. On the other hand, it aligns with the values of mainstream Chinese society, which dictate that women should not be overly ambitious in their careers and social lives and should focus more on their male partners or families. This type of romantic narrative reinforces the dominant Chinese values for the young female demographic. The heroines and female villains embody the roles of "good girls" and "evil women" in the patriarchal social context, akin to the "female saint" and the "prostitute" described by Ueno Chizuko in *Misogyny*. In the stories of these romance novels, female characters are divided into two categories, mirroring the reality for women: the "good girls" who are loved by men and the "evil women" who are rejected by men. Although the primary audience for these novels is women, and most of the works are written by women, these works still portray female characters as the "Others" in a patriarchal society.

This mode of shaping female characters was particularly common in works from the first decade of the 21st century. However, with the evolution of female consciousness, such patterns of female characterization have also changed. While supporting female characters as contrasts to the heroines remain the primary mode of character

development in contemporary Chinese romance novels, the dichotomous female characterization is gradually being replaced. As a result, this mode of shaping female characters has become less common in more recent works.

7.3 The Romantic Narrative without the Female Villain

As women's consciousness develops and women become more educated in mainland China, the female characters in contemporary romantic novel, primarily targeting young women as readers, are also evolving. Female supporting characters are gradually moving away from appearing as villains in the story. They have transformed from stereotyped villains to fully developed characters with their own personalities and stories. The shift from the dichotomous model of characterization discussed in the previous section to the non-stereotyping model of description has roughly gone through three stages.

In the first stage, the female characters in the story can be divided into two camps. The heroine is the core of the positive characters, and the female villain is the core of the opposing characters. The positive characters possess all the female virtues in patriarchal social and cultural context. In contrast, the negative characters, have the traits that the patriarchal society discourages women from possessing. This was discussed in the previous section.

In the second stage, the role of the villain is no longer filled by female supporting characters. These female supporting characters are no longer villains, although they may still represent obstacles in the relationship between the hero and heroine. The

supporting characters in this stage tend to be successful in the secular sense, attractive, and demonstrate exceptional talent in their careers or at schools. In contrast, the heroine appears ordinary beside them. Take Chen Xuejun and Wen Xiaoxiao in *The Best of Us (最好的我们),* for example: they do not harm the heroine like the female villain in the first stage. They become an obstacle to developing the relationship between the heroine and the hero simply because their excellence evokes an inferiority complex in the heroine. In other words, they are merely "imaginary enemies" in the heroine's love life.

In the third stage, the female supporting characters no longer hinder the development of the relationship between the hero and heroine. The female supporting characters in this stage are more similar to the heroines in the secondary storylines of the novel. The characterization of female characters at this stage no longer exclusively serves the main story or the relationship development between the hero and heroine. They possess distinct personalities and complete story arcs within the novel. Take Li Jinrong and Duan Jiuniang in *Bandits (有匪)* as examples: they do not influence or interfere with the relationship development between the heroine and hero, but rather help the heroine grow into a better, more chivalrous woman. Both Li Jinrong and Duan Jiuniang have independent stories. Li Jinrong, the heroine's mother, is an "Iron Lady" in managing both the village and family relations. Although her role in the story is the heroine's mother, the author still has given her a fully independent personality in the narrative. In other words, she is a wholly autonomous character, and the author has given her a complete story in the novel. Duan Jiuniang's shaping mode is similar. Duan Jiuniang is a woman who has gone mad because her lover was killed, but the author

does not simply portray her as a "mad woman". Although she is mad, she has logical behavior and an independent story. This is a significant departure from the characterization of Mu Yongfei, who is also a "mad woman" in *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snow (千山暮雪)*.

The evolution of the patterns of portraying female characters is gradual, with many transitional characterization modes throughout this process. The characterization pattern in *The Legend of Zhen Huan (后宫·甄嬛传)* is a good example. On the one hand, the representative villainous female characters in the novel, An Lingrong, Zhu Yixiu, and Murong Shilan, align with the qualities of the female supporting characters in the first stage, where female characters not centered on the heroine are villains. On the other hand, they are given the third stage of characterization by the author, where these female supporting characters have independent personalities and stories. In the story, they are all pitiful characters. Another good example is the characterization of in *Cry Me A Sad River (悲伤逆流成河)*. The female characters in this work blend the characterization patterns of the first and second stages. In this novel, two "obstacles", Tang Xiaomi and Gu Senxiang, impede the relationship development between the hero and heroine. Tang Xiaomi is the female villain typical of the first stage of characterization, while Gu Senxiang embodies the second stage of characterization for female supporting characters. She is not a villain, but she deeply attracts the hero because of her beauty and excellent performance in school. This makes the heroine inferior.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that there are no villains in the second

and third stages of contemporary Chinese romantic novel. In some works, the villains are designed as heroes. In other words, these heroes both carry the heroines' love desires on the one hand and become the source of their misery on the other hand. These heroes give love to the heroines, but at the same time, they hurt their romantic partners. A prime example is Cheng Jinzhi in *Too Late to Say I Love You (来不及说我爱你)*. Although he deeply loves the heroine, Cheng Jinzhi cares more about his power than the heroine. As a result, all of the heroine's sufferings stem from her relationship with Cheng Jinzhi and his love. This is even more evident in *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, where the hero, Xuanling, is a suspicious and ruthless man who hurts his concubines and executes his brothers to secure his imperial power. These heroes represent the manifestation of the patriarchal society. By depicting the harm heroines suffer from the romantic relationships between heroines and heroes, the authors explore the question, "What do romantic relationships in a patriarchal society bring to women?" In contemporary Chinese romantic novels featuring this mode of character development, the heroine's suffering often starts with her relationship with the hero. In this sense, therefore, the authors of these romance novels are skeptical of such romantic relationships. And these authors no longer draw an equivalence between obtaining love from men and the value of a woman's life.

Returning to the shaping mode of female characters, the female supporting characters in the second and third stages are no longer the "enemies" of the heroines. They experience the same oppression from patriarchal society as the heroines. Due to the gradual diversification of the female figures, including supporting characters and

heroines, contemporary Chinese romantic novel has evolved from the core of "female war" (the character-shaping mode of the first stage) to stories where women break stereotypes and confront the disciplinary power of patriarchal society (the character-shaping mode of the second and third stages). In the latter part of the second decade of the 21st century, romance novels featuring "big heroines" gradually became mainstream. In these novels, the romantic relationship between the hero and heroine is not the sole theme of the story, and the authors of these works also extensively portray the struggles and efforts of female characters.

7.4 Middle-Aged Women in Contemporary Chinese Romantic Novels

Hai Qing, a famous Chinese actress, once discussed a distinctive social phenomenon in mainland China, the "middle-aged actress predicament", at the FIRST International Film Festival[48]. She explained that it is very challenging for middle-aged actresses in mainland China to find suitable jobs. Despite possessing mature acting skills and extensive experience, they can only secure roles as mothers or housewives. The portrayal of middle-aged women in cultural productions is limited to that of mothers or wives. This phenomenon is not only evident in the films or TV drama series that Hai Qing mentioned at the film festival but also in contemporary Chinese romantic novels: middle-aged women never appear as heroines in contemporary Chinese romance novels. They are either absent from the narrative or appear in the story as the mother or stepmother of the hero and heroine. Furthermore, the depiction of middle-

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[48]FIRST International Film Festival was established in 2006. It is a film festival in mainland China, a service platform focused on the discovery and promotion of young filmmakers and their works.

aged women in these works is more fraught with stereotypes than that of the heroine or the young supporting female characters. The following analysis and discussion provide examples of the portrayal of middle-aged women in the works analyzed in the previous chapter.

In *Qiyue and Ansheng (七月与安生)*, Qiyue's mother is tolerant and gentle. As a result, Qiyue's upbringing is entirely different from the novel's other heroine, Ansheng. Qiyue's mother provides Qiyue with a loving family. In the story, she is a typical traditional Chinese wife and mother. Another middle-aged female figure in this work, Ansheng's mother, is also an excellent example of such a phenomenon. She is entirely submissive to her lover, even leaving her minor daughter alone at home so that she can live with her lover to maintain their relationship. Ansheng's mother is not a good parent, but she is a competent mistress. Similar to Qiyue's mother, the mother of the heroine in *Too Late to Say I Love You (来不及说我爱你)* is a middle-aged woman. She takes care of her daughter in every aspect of her daily life. However, she becomes entirely invisible when her husband severs the relationship with her daughter. The author's portrayal of this plot reflects the complete lack of voice of the woman in the traditional Chinese family. These middle-aged female characters are subservient to their husbands or lovers, regardless of whether they are good mothers or not.

The counterpart to the traditional virtuous wife and mother is another type of Chinese mother: the shrew. These mothers are generally aggressive women who often struggle, treating their husbands and children harshly and displaying hostility towards the outside world. For example, the heroine's mother in *Cry Me A Sad River (悲伤逆*

流成河) works in sexual services to support her daughter. She loves her daughter but also uses domestic violence against her. Lin Nansheng's stepmother in *Red Spider Lily (彼岸花)* is a similar character. She tries her best to support two children, but at the same time, she is not satisfied with her situation. Desiring to change her life, the only way for her to do so is to keep dating new men. However, she continually gets hurt or abandoned by these men. In *The Best of Us (最好的我们)*, the mothers of the hero and heroine are also "losers" in their marriages. The heroine's mother is a successful woman in her career but still feels lost after her divorce and her ex-husband's remarriage. She wants her daughter to do well in school, so her attitude toward her daughter is harsh. Another middle-aged female figure in this novel is the hero's mother. Similar to the heroine's mother, they both have unhappy marriages. However, the hero's parents are not divorced, and the hero's father is absent from the family for an extended period. This absence leads to the hero's mother supporting the entire family. The hero's mother projects her feelings for her husband onto her son, which causes her to interfere with her son's interactions with young girls. The middle-aged female characters of this type have unhappy married lives, which turns them into shrews and resentful women.

In summary, these women are portrayed as either mean or intolerant, and their identities are almost always limited to being mothers. There are two reasons for this phenomenon: 1. The primary readership of Chinese contemporary romance novels is young women, and in their lives, mothers are the most familiar middle-aged women. 2. In the mainstream Chinese social values, the social identity of non-young women is singular - they can only be mothers. The mainstream social culture rejects lifelong

childless women, and women's social values are still tied to marriage, family, and childbirth. Therefore, although the image of young women (including the heroine and supporting female characters) is increasingly diversified in contemporary Chinese romance novels, the portrayal of middle-aged women remains conservatively homogeneous. No matter how colorful and vivid their original character design may be, the authors only emphasize their motherly or wifely attributes in the overall story construction. In other words, while there is no denying that these works are increasingly free from stereotypes of young women, they are still subject to the dominant social culture.

It is undeniable that contemporary Chinese romance novels, particularly those from the later part of the second decade of the 21st century, have increasingly depicted the young female population more diversely under the influence of feminist ideology. Although these works are romance novels, romantic relationships or stories are gradually transforming into just part of the novel's main story for the heroines. Authors still devote a great deal of space to non-romantic relationships in addition to romantic stories. However, in most of these works, the portrayal of middle-aged women is still limited to marital and family relationships, as seen in traditional romance novels. Even works such as *Bandits (有匪)*, which almost entirely overturns the traditional Chinese romance novel model in its depiction and portrayal of the main couple, confines the identity of middle-aged women to that of mothers or wives. In this work, Li Jinrong, despite being a capable chivalrous woman, still focuses on repairing her relationship with her husband. To a certain extent, such character design reflects the fact that

contemporary Chinese romance novels, as products of popular culture, must adapt their characterizations to appeal to young women influenced by feminist ideology, or their authors themselves are influenced by this ideology. On the other hand, these works are deeply affected and constrained by the doctrine of mainstream Chinese society. These two points are reflected in the characterization of women in the novels, where the description of young women in the stories is becoming increasingly diversified, while the portrayal of middle-aged women remains confined to the roles of mothers and wives.

7.5 The Elite Class and Contemporary Chinese Romantic Novels

In his *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School* (2011), Shamus Khan expressed the view that trends or standards that are widely admired by the public are not entirely a result of "free choice". In fact, he emphasizes that the elite have established a set of "rules of the game" in order to solidify the class system. Within these "rules of the game", the elite class have determined what constitutes the symbol of the elite or what should be admired by society. Khan then divides the symbols of the elite into three stages:

In the first stage, the symbol of the elite is lineage. Whether a person belongs

to the elite is determined by their lineage or family background.

In the second stage, the symbol of the elite is wealth. The amount of wealth a

person possesses determines their social class.

In the third, ease has become the new symbol of elite.

These "rules of the game" established by the elite class are pervasive in current

popular culture and trends. Even though the standards or behaviors that are admired by the masses appear to be the result of their own free choice, the elite class, in fact, defines the direction that the popular trend follows. Although Khan's research is based on contemporary American society, his views largely apply to the highly commercialized Chinese society of today's world. The Chinese mainland government used to suppress business, private economy, or the old elite class with stringent measures before the reform and opening-up, and tried to "eliminate" social classes. However, the fact is that the reform and opening-up has changed the social structure built by the government since 1949. The elite class created by the market economy has returned to the center of public view. Therefore, Khan's standards for elite class transformation are also reflected in the character modeling of contemporary Chinese romantic novels, a popular cultural product in the context of the market economy.

Until the early 2010s, the image of the "old elites" defined by lineage and wealth was the most prominent character image in contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Taking the works mentioned in my previous text as examples, in *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (三生三世十里桃花)*, the author created a "elite society" defined by "lineage" through referencing ancient Chinese legends and the ancient noble system. In the story, the reason why the heroine was "betrayed" by the hero for the first time was entirely due to her identity changing from a goddess to a mortal. In other words, she lost her status as an "elite," due to her "lineage". *The Legend of Zhen Huan (后宫·甄嬛传)* also reflects that "lineage" is a considered an "elite" symbol. In the story, the reason why the Empress was jealous of her sister

was largely due to her own insecurity about her "lineage". Although the Empress married the hero before her sister, she is still the product of her father's relations with a concubine. The Empress could never surpass her sister, the daughter of their father with his actual wife. Contemporary Chinese romantic novels of the "Cinderella" genre, represented by *Shan Shan Comes to Eat (杉杉来吃)* and *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows (千山暮雪)*, reflect the second stage of elite groups defined by "wealth." In these novels, the image of the protagonists, especially the hero, embodies the public's imagination of the image of elites defined by "wealth." In the story, they are often wealthy, arrogant, and live a luxurious life.

Works that are filled with the imagination of "old elites" have dominated contemporary Chinese romantic novels in the 21st century. However, in recent years, many authors have attempted to break away from this character portrayal pattern. Authors no longer emphasize the "lineage" or "wealth" of the characters in the novel. Compared to the symbols of the "old elites," authors are more willing to emphasize the personal abilities or charisma of the characters in the novel. Therefore, character images in these novels are more diverse if compared to works from the early 21st century and the most direct reason for this change is the shift in public opinion. Readers gradually began to dislike works with characters in the "old elite" style. This is also reflected in the short comments on Douban. Taking the short comments of *Shan Shan Comes to Eat* on Douban as an example, in all positive comments, 26.5% came from 2011. Meanwhile, the comments from the 2015 and 2019 period only accounted for 6.0 % of all positive comments. These popular culture products that serve the market demand

will naturally follow such changes.

Chart 1: *the positive short comments for Shan Shan Comes to Eat*
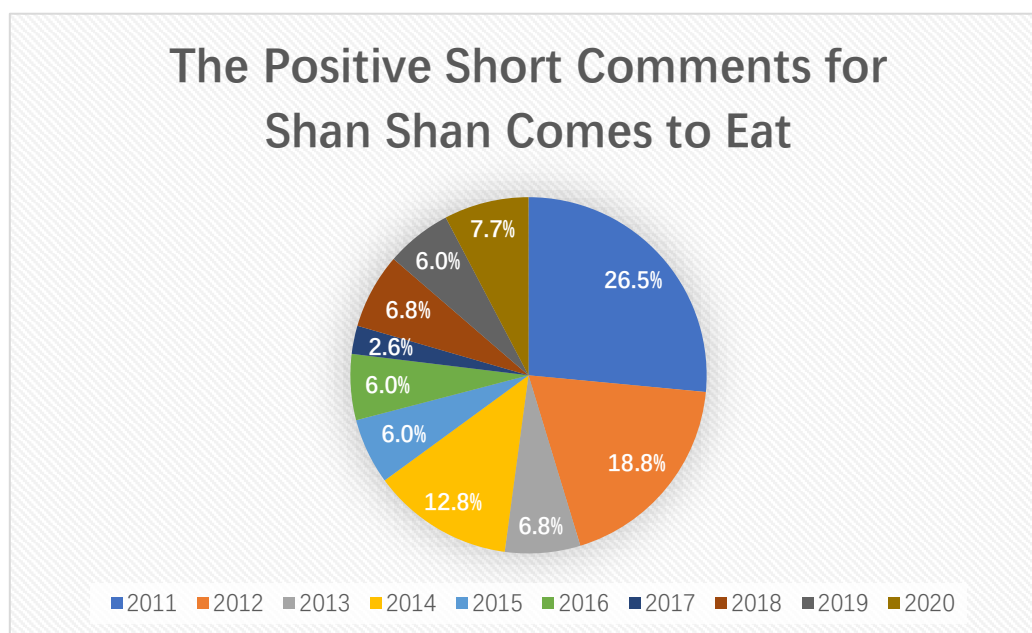
However, is this change really derived from pure "free choice"? In fact, these works that represent the "new trend" do show some degree of easing in Khan's view. Although the characters in these novels are often secularly successful, like the characters in past Chinese contemporary romantic novels, their success is not usually reflected in their "lineage" or "wealth." This kind of success in the novel is often reflected in the personal achievements of the characters. However, in their works, the authors do not depict the struggles that they experienced to achieve these accomplishments. Instead, these works often portray a kind of unrealistic relaxation. Taking the contemporary Chinese romantic novel *Skate Into Lov*e *(冰糖炖雪梨)* by Jiu Xiaoqi published in 2019 as an example, the author portrays the hero as a gifted ice hockey player who can easily win matches. In the novel, the author almost completely ignores the process of the hero becoming a player and instead emphasizes the hero's ease. This study does not cover works published after the 2020s so, it is unclear whether

such a change comes from genuine public "free choice," or whether it is derived from new ideas of elite symbols. Therefore, I cannot draw a conclusion on this matter. However, it is undoubtedly true that contemporary Chinese romance novels are undergoing a process of moving away from emphasizing "lineage" and "wealth" and instead focusing on the personal abilities or charisma of the characters.

7.6 Audience Opinion: Controversy and Evaluation of Contemporary Chinese Romantic Novels

Compared to serious literature, contemporary Chinese romantic novels, as popular cultural products, receive more comments from readers. In addition to judging the quality of work, many readers are also very concerned about whether the works are completely original. Since readers have different subjective standards for plagiarism, many works have been deeply involved in plagiarism controversies. In this section, the controversies and evaluations of contemporary Chinese romantic novel will be discussed and analyzed in the audience's opinion using *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms (三生三世十里桃花)* as a case study.

Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms is one of the most popular Chinese romance novels of the 21st century, but controversies over its evaluation have persisted. The controversies and discussions among the reader community primarily center on these three aspects: 1. The originality of the work; 2. The author's attitude toward questioning; 3. And the narrative of the work.

According to the short comments of the six versions of *Three Lives, Three Worlds,*

Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms included on Douban, the 10 words with substantive

meanings that were mentioned most frequently in the short comments (excluding

auxiliary words, demonstrative pronouns, etc.) are as follows:

Table 5: high-frequency evaluation words of Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms

Word	English Translation	Frequency	Word	English Translation	Frequency
抄袭	Plagiarism	410	喜欢	Like	104
故事	Story	64	作者	Author	56
不错	Not bad	53	好看[49]	Wonderful	49
垃圾	Garbage	37	文笔	Style of writing	37
电视剧	TV series	34	情节	Plot	31

Among a total of 1139 short comments, the word that was mentioned the most is

"抄袭" (plagiarism). Numerous readers accused the story of plagiarizing *Peach*

Blossom Debt (桃花债), a BL (boy's love) novel featuring an immortal hero theme, in

character design and narrative. With the great success of the movie and TV drama series

of *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms*, its influence is

incomparably greater than to that of the novel alone. The derivative works of movie

and TV drama series have brought great attention to it, along with controversy and

doubt. The author, TangQi GongZi, responded to the plagiarism challenge on her

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[49]The literal meaning of "好看" is "good-looking". In the context of short comments, the meaning is "wonderful".

Weibo[50] and denied the accusation. The Sichuan Western Intellectual Property Judicial Appraisal Institute (四川西部知识产权司法鉴定所)[51] also made a judicial appraisal of the work, which demonstrated that the work was not plagiarized in the legal sense. However, this result was not accepted by the challengers. Even some commenters who directly mentioned "plagiarism" said that the purpose of their comments was only to express their displeasure at the "original author" and to give negative publicity to *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms*. On the other hand, many commenters stated that they really liked the story or the characters in work. Some commenters even directly stated that although *Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms* may be suspected of plagiarism, it is still an excellent romance novel. They do not want to discuss whether the work is suspected of plagiarism and only care about whether the work is interesting.

Such a phenomenon indicates that contemporary Chinese romance novels, like traditional romance novels, can grant a sense of pleasure when read. Meanwhile, discussions about the work also provide a channel for readers' self-expression. In the case of the Douban short comments on the work, it can be seen that the reviewers of those short comments who censor plagiarism usually also give the work a low rating, in an attempt to dilute the work's positive ratings. Some reviewers who censor the plagiarism even attack the author and those readers who defend the work or author. They suggest that other readers should also "stay in the same trench" with them. The

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[50]Weibo refers refer to Sina Weibo (新浪微博), a Chinese microblogging website.

[51]Sichuan Western Intellectual Property Judicial Appraisal Institute (四川西部知识产权司法鉴定所) is an intellectual property judicial appraisal institution directly under the department of justice of Sichuan Province.

following sentences are typical short comments:

Table 5: short comments for Three Lives, Three Worlds, Ten Miles of Peach Blossoms

Book Version	Short Comment	English Translation
2015	大家记得给这本书加一个"抄袭"的标签	Everybody should remember to add a "plagiarism" tag to this book
2015	抄袭婊死全家	Plagiarism whores are all dead
2009	抵制抄袭人人有责。。。。何况还抄的这么难看。。。。。。	Resisting plagiarism is everyone's responsibility 。。。。 Moreover, the book is boring
2012	抄袭在外国可是可以和私闯民宅、强暴齐名的大罪啊，说抄袭无所谓的估计都是刀没砍身上不痛吧	Plagiarism is a severe crime in foreign countries like rape, or breaking and entering. Those who say plagiarism does not matter may not be able to empathize.

It can be seen from these short comments that the author has denied plagiarism

and provided a test report from an authoritative identification agency. However, some readers still believe the author's work is not wholly original and should be held legally responsible. They express their personal opinions on the Internet and seek approval, even treating those who have different views as being "heretics". Altogether, these readers try very hard to give the work low ratings; they seem very vocal about it. Nonetheless, the work still achieved average scores of 7.8 (2009 edition, based on 86,640 ratings), 6.6 (2011 edition, based on 1020 ratings), 6.9 (2012 edition, based on 13,230 ratings), 5.4 (2015 edition, based on 1,917 ratings), 4.3 (2017 edition, based on 706 ratings), and 6.6 (2020 edition, based on 706 ratings) and 6.6 (2020 edition, based on 115 ratings) on Douban where the total score of 10.

It is difficult to evaluate which side is the real winner in this public controversy but the situation illustrates the following points:

First, the majority of readers are known as the "silent majority". The "silent majority" here does not mean that they do not express their personal opinions at all but rather that they are not noticed and appear to be very passive compared to the opposing voices. Due to the restriction of data on Douban, only the first 220 short comments on each term (work) are publicly available. However, among the 1,139 public short comments, "plagiarism" was mentioned 410 times. The power of public opinion is evident in these examples. Meanwhile, the majority of readers who wrote such comments gave the work a one star rating (1 star is 2 points in the Douban rating system). Even some of the readers who wrote such reviews took the initiative, hoping that other readers would join them or verbally attack the author and her supporters.

Interestingly, the combined ratings of the works illustrate that these "negative comments" have a minimal impact when forming part of a large base audience.

Second, the public is very concerned about the originality of cultural products. Among the visible short comments, most negative reviews attack the originality of the work, followed by the narrative and character design of the novel. There are two characteristics of contemporary Chinese romantic novels: 1. Most initial work versions are posted on Internet platforms. They do not provide professional editing or review services to the creators as publishers; 2. Most authors of such works have not undergone professional writing instruction or training. These two characteristics make it difficult for amateur creators to define whether their actions are "plagiarism" or "reference" when creating their works. In addition, without professional editing and review, plagiarism cannot be detected before the work is posted. Similarly, despite the audience's focus on the work's originality the plagiarism is defined by the personal view, rather than professional evaluation. This is why, even though the author has provided an intellectual property report to the public, it is still impossible to calm public anger.

The high-frequency word "电视剧" (TV series) is also worth noting. These short comments mentioning "TV series" can be generally divided into two types: 1. Comparison between the adapted work of a TV drama series and the original novel. 2. The reason for reading the novel is due to the interest triggered by watching the TV drama series. Regardless of which type both reflect that the adapted works of film and TV drama series are essential means for attracting readers to contemporary Chinese romance novels. The visual works have dramatically increased the impact of the novel.

However, as popularity and audiences increased, so did controversy. This has led to the "war of public opinion" which was discussed above.

7.7 Contemporary Chinese Romantic Novels and their Visual Adaptations

As was introduced and discussed in an earlier chapter, contemporary Chinese romantic novels have provided a great deal of script material for the current Chinese film and television industry. These film and TV drama series adaptations largely replicate the novels in both story and character design. However, there are also some considerable differences between these visual adapted works and the original novels, especially in the portrayal of female images and narrative. Compared with novels, TV drama series have a stronger influence and wider audience group. Therefore, the characters in visual adaptations tend to be more in line with universal or temporal values. In this section, the cases of *Shan Shan Comes to Eat (杉杉来吃)*, *Qiyue and Ansheng (七月与安生)* and *Too Late to Say I Love You (来不及说我爱你)* will be used to analyze and discuss such a phenomenon.

In the previous chapter, I have introduced and discussed the portrayal of female images in the novel *Shan Shan Comes to Eat*. Compared to the novel, the heroine in the TV adaptation of *Shan Shan Comes to Eat* (the TV drama series is titled *杉杉来了*, the English title is *Boss and Me*), Xue Shanshan is more independent and enterprising. However, in the TV adaptation, the screenwriters kept the main plot of the novel, which is the love story between the hero and heroine. Meanwhile, the TV adaptation of *Shan Shan Comes to Eat* added a plot strand where the heroine works hard to prove herself

as efficient and obtains an accounting certificate to bring her closer to the hero.

The alteration of the female characters shown in the TV drama series, *Boss and Me*, is the most common mode of revision in the film and television adaptation of romance novels. In this model, the screenwriters usually remove some original traits in the romance novels, such as weakness, sentimentality, and dependence on male characters, from the image of female characters, especially the heroine. Meanwhile, they also maintain the primary storyline. Although the female characters usually still need protection and support from the male characters, the male characters will pursue them romantically. It should be noted that these female characters also need to be more independent and tenacious. In the adapted works, the female characters are usually intelligent and brave and have their own ideas and pursuits so that they can fight for their fate and their rights.

The film adaptation of *Qiyue and Ansheng* indicates another model of adaptation of contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Compared to the novel, in the movie version of *Qiyue and Ansheng*, the screenwriter made significant changes to the main story line and character design in the second half of the story. In the movie, Qiyue, who was living a quiet life, runs away from home to find herself and dies of a postpartum hemorrhage. Ansheng in the movie replaces Qiyue. She falls into a traditional family life and adopts Qiyue's daughter. The screenwriter of the movie completely reversed the character design of the two heroines in the second half of the novel. Additionally, the movie version of *Qiyue and Ansheng* weakened the hero, Jiaming. Compared to the novel, the movie weakens the romantic narrative and emphasizes the friendship and support

between women. To fuse two completely separate female images into one, the screenwriters swap the fates of two female characters. Such an adaptation is in line with the author's description where she states that, "the two heroines are one person's two sides"[19]. In addition, to emphasize the point that "the two heroines are one person's two sides", the screenwriters created a plot strand in the movie where Ansheng uses the pseudonym "Qiyue" to publish a novel called *Qiyue and Ansheng* after the real Qiyue's death.

Compared to the original novel, the movie version of *Qiyue and Ansheng* represents more of a feminist film. It replaces the core story of the novel which is the love triangle between Qiyue, Ansheng and Jiaming. The screenwriters changed it to the secondary storyline in the movie. The women's growth and friendship, which are originally the secondary story in the novel, are used as the main storyline in the movie. It is worth noting that the novel *Qiyue and Ansheng* was published in the early 21st century, while its film adaptation was released in 2016. Interestingly, some studies on the rise of female group's discourse and consciousness in social media in mainland China indicate that 2016 was a special year. From this year, feministic topics have been increasingly moving to the center of social media in mainland China and such change has influenced the structure of social media discourse. (Wu, 2021) The screenwriters and creation team of the movie *Qiyue and Ansheng* were keenly aware of this so they adapted the original novel, a standard romantic narrative, into a story with feminist elements. The film's box office results (167 million RMB in mainland China in the year of release) reflect the success of the adaptation. Indirectly, it also established that the

value orientation of the audience in mainland China has changed dramatically in the past two-decades. This has led to a change in their aesthetic direction toward cultural products.

Too Late to Say I Love You presents a different model of popular literature adapted for movie and TV drama series that is common in mainland China. The screenwriters of the TV drama series of *Too Late to Say I Love You* completely overturned the alternative historical story in the novel. The creation team altered the background of the story setting of the TV drama series to the period of the Second Sino-Japanese War, although the TV drama series version kept the main love story between the hero and heroine of the novel. However, to fit the propaganda values advocated by the mainland Chinese government, in the TV series, the heroine does not leave the country to escape from reality because of her failed relationship experience. In the TV drama series, she joins the wartime Red Cross and becomes a nurse. Compared to the original novel, the heroine in the TV series is more independent and decisive. However, the characters in the TV series are more vapid than in the novel because they cater too much to the government's propaganda values.

In summary, the heroines in the film and TV adaptations of contemporary Chinese romantic novels tend to be more independent than their counterparts. Two factors play a decisive role in this adaptation process: the audience's value orientation and the government's propaganda requirements. However, compared to their original stories, the works produced under the influence of either factor are more in line with the universal or temporal values of mainland Chinese society. In terms of narrative, some

works follow their original novels while still incorporating romantic narratives as their core stories. Some works weaken the original love story and strengthen the side story of the novel to express more diversified ideas. Ultimately, these screenwriters tell another story that is based on the novel.

7.8 The Development and Transformation of Contemporary Chinese Romantic Novels

With market saturation and changing tastes in readership, the Chinese contemporary romantic novel has faced various challenges. This section will explore the future direction of Chinese contemporary romantic fiction. As discussed in the previous section, contemporary Chinese romantic novels are evolving. These works have gradually transformed from constructing love utopias for female readers to more thematically diverse popular literature. Although love stories remain one of the main features of the novels, these romantic narratives are no longer the core of the works. In addition to romantic relationships, women's reflections on their existential situation has also been created as a central theme. The characters in the novels, especially those of the heroines, are no longer flawless.

In 2020, the mainland Chinese web writer, Zi Zehua, released a romance novel, *Organic (有机)*, on her personal WeChat public platform. Although this work has not been published or adapted for film or TV drama series, it has subverted numerous contemporary Chinese romance models regarding character design. The novel's heroine is the illegitimate daughter of the owner of the company she works for. She is the direct

supervisor of the hero, but she still becomes the hero's sexual partner. This character design completely deviates from the Chinese romance novel, where the heroine must be morally "flawless". Such character designs are common in works published or released after the 2020s. Authors no longer create heroines to be perfect "dolls". The heroines could be not young, unattractive, unkind, and are even avaricious, lustful, and morally tainted. The authors do not defend these "stains" assigned to the heroines. Even so, these works are still loved by readers. Simply put, China's current young female group gradually accepts that women do not need to carry these shackles of "perfection". This is not only evident in romance novels but also in some of the social focus events on the Internet in mainland China, such as the "reconciliation makeup-free" (与素颜和解)[52] event that appeared in 2022.

Bandits (有匪), analyzed as a case study in the previous chapter and section, combines Wuxia and romance novels well. The creative mode of those Wuxia novels, whose target reader groups are young women in mainland China, is similar to *Bandits*. Compared to traditional Chinese Wuxia novels, the authors have weakened the hardcore depiction of Kung Fu in creating these works as they focus more on the portrayal of characters in their works. Combined with elements from other types of fiction, these romance novels became mainstream in the late 2010s and they have replaced traditional romance novels that focus exclusively on love stories. Similar works include Ding Mo's *Beauty as Filling* (the Chinese title is 美人为馅, a combination of romance and

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[52]"Reconciliation makeup-free" (与素颜和解) was one of the most popular TikTok tags in mainland China in 2022. Some popular beauty bloggers post videos of themselves removing their makeup on their channels. They use such behavior to encourage other women to accept their imperfect appearance.

detective fiction, published in 2015) and Qidaojun's *The Beginning* (the Chinese title is 开端, a combination of romance and fantasy fiction, published in 2021), among others.

In addition, forms of entertainment are becoming increasingly fragmented due to the rise of We-Media platforms represented by short videos. It is difficult for audiences to dedicate long hours of attention to reading. Under such circumstances, romantic fiction, which is dominated by long novels, is also being challenged. During the early 2020s, contemporary Chinese romantic novels gradually became shorter in length. These novels are no longer published on the traditional literary websites, such as Jinjiang Literature City (晋江文学城), but rather on forum websites such as Zhihu (知乎) or photo- and video-sharing social platforms such as LOFTER. These short romance novels attract readers through recommendations on the platforms they were posted on or third-party websites (such as some video or we-media platforms like TikTok or BILIBILI). These "new romance novels" have broken away from the industry chain of the Chinese romance novel, literary websites → publishing houses → film and television, which has become mainstream in the first two decades of the 21st century. These short romance novels, which rely entirely on the Internet, are spreading faster than the longer romance novels or their adapted works, which have physical industries (publishing houses and film and drama production companies) involved in the production process. Because no physical industry is involved in the production chain, these "new romance novels" have lower production costs and standards for their creators. In other words, the lower creation and distribution costs make these works

more accessible for readers to quickly read or buy.[53]

In terms of character design, these short romance novels inherit the heroine traits of the late 2020s and they tend to be independent and ambitious. However, it should be noted that due to the length of the works, the characters in these short romance novels are not as detailed as those in the longer romance novels. However, such a fast-paced story is also well suited to the current fragmented entertainment environment. Meanwhile, due to the extremely short creation cycle of these works, the authors will use some time-limited trending social issues as inspiration for creation and incorporate their personal views into the works.

7.9 Are Contemporary Chinese Romantic Novels an Anesthetic Given by the Patriarchal Society?

There has been a lot of criticism on romantic novel or narrative within feminist scholarship. Feminist scholars generally agree that, despite the fact that romance novels are female-centered texts, they are not as challenging as feminist literature. In these romance narratives, the female character is portrayed in the story as the Other and remains that way, submitting to subjugation from the elite class and men. I agree with this view. An example of this can be seen in *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows (千山暮雪),* which was analyzed in the previous chapter. There, the hero, Mo Shaoqian, embodies a combination of the power and patriarchy of the elite class. Although the

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[53]These novels are not purchased or paid for in the same way as long-form contemporary Chinese romantic novels that have been published. The readers do not have to pay for a work or an author, but rather buy a membership from the platform. The members have the right to read all works posted on the platform.

author adds a lot of plot details to the story to glorify Mo Shaoqian's behavior and the perverse relationship between him and Tong Xue, this does not alter the fact that *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snow* is a classic work in which the heroine is subservient to the elite class and patriarchal society. In fact, in the context of the Chinese Internet, works such as *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows,* where the hero is a successful businessman and pursues the heroine through despite the difficulties, are collectively referred to as "President Literature" (总裁文). Such works of "President Literature" have been categorized as a specific genre on online literary platforms and social media in mainland China. This phenomenon demonstrates how common this kind of work is. It is also interesting to note that among the many contemporary Chinese romantic novels published in the 21st century, *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snow* was one of the earliest works to be adapted as a TV drama series. This is further evidence that, despite the critical attacks on stories of this type, their market feedback remains positive.

Some scholars have expressed concern about the influence of contemporary Chinese romance novels or romantic narratives on young Chinese women's views regarding relationships and marriage. They generally believe that these cultural products have had a negative impact on young women's views on the family. *Research on Relationship Between Female-oriented Network Novels and Contemporary Female College Students' View of Marriage and Love (女性向网络小说与当代女大学生婚恋观的关系研究)* is a good example. The authors of this study employ a questionnaire to study and discuss the correlation between female-oriented popular literature and young females' views on marriage in mainland China. In the study, it is noted that there is a

correlation between the preference of young female audiences for popular literature and their ideas on marriage, and that these cultural products have a negative impact on young women's views. Even some radical scholars believe that such an "induced" perspective of love and marriage from cultural products should be challenged. For instance, in *Mate selection of young female players of AI virtual boyfriends: Aberrations, Causes and Corrections (AI 虚拟男友青年女性玩家的择偶观：畸变、症因与矫治)*, the author's point of view is that these cultural products with young women as the core audience not only express a "pathological" mate selection standard, but also that the opinions of those affected by cultural products should be "corrected". Such views abound in current cultural and communication studies in mainland China.

Such scholars' research perspectives generally focus on the adverse effects of romantic novels on young female groups. However, it should be noted that their research ignores or misses the point that these popular cultural products do not just influence their audiences; they are also influenced by or reflect the perceptions of their audiences. Therefore, it can be assumed that in the production of these cultural products, the audience's perception shapes the author's construction of characters and narratives. This is precisely because romantic novels have a broader readership and are more responsive to market tastes, so that the development of these subcultural products provides a research perspective on the transformation of ordinary women's consciousness. Moreover, many of such studies simply generalize contemporary Chinese romantic novels as love stories between beautiful women and elite men, which is too simplistic. Meanwhile, the contemporary Chinese romantic novel is a form of

cultural product that combines traditional romance narratives with contemporary social media. Compared with traditional romance narratives, contemporary examples are more diverse, are more closely related to reality, and more closely reflect the complexity of social experience. New media has transformed the entire process of production of popular literature. Additionally, it has altered the traditional model of novel writing from one where the author conveys ideas to the reader, into a new model where the author and reader jointly construct characters and the direction of the story.

In fact, these romance novels do have a negative impact on the values of the audience. But it is not, as suggested in the above studies, that these novels have caused Chinese young women to become gold-digging in their choice of spouses. To some extent, these works conceal the risks that Chinese women face in current marriage and glorify those unhealthy intimate relationships. This is reflected in *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows* where the heroine falls into the trap of the hero in order to repay her uncle. When confronted with the brutality of the hero and his wife, she does not resist and indulges in fantasies about her ex-boyfriend. Although the author provides readers with an open ending, the author's position in the novel is also prejudiced, even using love as an excuse to "defend" the hero. The values conveyed in such works are concerning. Whether they allow readers to mentally exonerate the perpetrator of sexual violence in the real world or allow the perpetrator to escape justice, it is gratifying to note that the TV drama series adaptation of this novel has been modified in its plot. The screenwriter changed the ending of the story to have the hero turn himself into the police and be sentenced. Such adaptation is not because the screenwriter and the author of the

novel have different values. Rather, it is because the TV drama series has a more stringent and standardized review system in mainland China compared to the novel. Some works that have a potentially negative impact on the audience's values will not be approved. Therefore, to successfully broadcast the TV drama series, the screenwriters have to make changes to the ending of the novel.

In contrast to the above views, a minority of scholars have expressed their recognition of the social and cultural value of contemporary romance novels. These scholars believe that contemporary literary works promote the transformation of relationships or the social concept of marriage by shaping and spreading the views of current female groups on marriage and love. Meanwhile, they also believe that we need to re-examine the perspectives on love and marriage expressed in these popular works to better understand some of the problems that current Chinese youth face.

We return to the title of this section. Are contemporary Chinese romantic novels an anesthetic given by patriarchal society? My answer to this is that, yes, contemporary Chinese romantic novels are "anesthetics" offered by the patriarchal society, but not entirely so. To some extent, these works disguise or glorify the harm caused to women by bad intimate relationships (specifically between men and women) or disastrous marriages in the patriarchal society. A good example is *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snow* which I have discussed in the thesis. However, when young women are generally highly educated and involved in social production, it is prejudicial to regard contemporary romance novels as merely women's fantasies about romantic relationships. In the first two decades of the 21st century, heroines in Chinese romance novels have evolved from

"the chosen" to "the chooser". This also demonstrates a change in the readership's perception of women's societal roles.

In this chapter, I have discussed the social and cultural issues reflected in contemporary Chinese romantic novels. From a unique perspective, these popular texts showcase contemporary Chinese society's evolution of values regarding love, family, and relationships among the female population. In the process of evolution, Chinese romantic novels with traditional story patterns or character relationships, such as the Cinderella genre as discussed previously exemplified by *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows (千山暮雪)* and *Shan Shan Comes to Eat (杉杉来吃)*, were gradually being rejected. Meanwhile, the rise of short video platforms such as TikTok have made it less necessary to concentrate on one thing for long periods of time. As a result, demand for entertainment formats that require more attention such as novels is declining. These factors have resulted in Chinese mainland romantic novel or narratives developing in three directions: 1. The romantic novel or narrative has merged with other types of popular literature, such as workplace novels, detective stories, etc. 2. The romantic narrative is no longer limited to the novel as a form of expression: since 2017, games, especially *Otome* games (乙女游戏), have steadily become a new vehicle for romantic narratives in China. 3. Short romance novels are becoming mainstream.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary of the Study

As a representative form of contemporary popular literature in China, romantic novels have flourished against the background of popular internet culture. Today, romantic fiction has developed a mature cultural industry production model that is not only a literary phenomenon, but also a social and cultural phenomenon that deserves attention and in-depth research. I want to argue that the popular novels that are initially released on literary websites as their publishing platform are unique to China. I would like to refer to the viewpoint of Michel Hockx, the author of *Internet Literature in China*, to explain why I describe such texts as a contemporary popular culture products unique to China. In an interview with Guangdong Writer's Network (广东作家网), the portal website of Guangdong Province Writers' Association, Hockx (2018) stated that "popular literature" has represented a challenge in China ever since 1949. The ideology of the governing Communist Party of China (CPC) suggests that it can represent the literary preferences of the general public. Unfortunately, what the general public in China has shown a preference for is often novels with violent and pornographic content. The prevailing ideology of the CPC government considers such preferences to be unhealthy and seeks ways to restrict them. As a result, these types of works are abundant on internet literature platforms, bringing significant commercial profits to the releasing platforms and their authors. The reason for this is that offline publishing platforms (print publications) operate under stringent restrictions, making it difficult to release truly "popular" works. In contrast, the popular literature industry in Western countries does

not need to resort to such methods to release its products.

Thus, I agree with Michel Hockx's views in the interview. In mainland China, the rise of a truly popular literature (including contemporary romantic novels) is closely associated with the development of the Internet. In other words, it was not until the Internet era that influential domestic popular literature emerged in mainland China in the true sense. Prior to that, the popular literature market in mainland China was dominated by works from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Even earlier, popular literature existed in the form of hand-copied manuscripts in mainland China. Therefore, unlike other countries and regions, popular literature and even popular culture products in mainland China bear the distinct characteristics of the Internet era. For example, they are often filled with "vulgar" gimmicks that attract readers, and new works are quickly released, constantly chasing after topics popular in society. Additionally, as described by Hockx in the interview, popular novels in early 21st-century China, with literature websites as the core releasing platform, including contemporary romantic novels, were filled with elements of violence and pornography. Due to increased government control over internet platforms in later years, these elements have gradually been deleted or modified by authors or platforms. However, it is undeniable these works published on internet platforms largely reflected popular tastes for a certain period of time. Furthermore, although these elements have been "purified" by publishers and authors when published in print form, they still retain traces of their original content. For example, in my research, I discussed the case of *Twilight Upon a Thousand Snows (千山暮雪)* as an example. Despite the fact that the author has deleted numerous explicit

scenes from the printed book, implicit expressions of sexual activity can still be seen. Although some people from mainstream society or even those from the academic realm may view these works as unhealthy, shallow, and lacking in research value, they should not be arrogantly dismissed just because they may not conform to mainstream standards. These works, to some extent, still represent genuine popular cultural tastes.

From a positive perspective, as a growing cultural product, contemporary Chinese romantic novels have gradually moved away from the traditional romantic story pattern of "strong male and weak female" towards more diversified narratives in parallel with the progress and development of the times. However, these works still may exhibit typical characteristics of popular culture, such as formulaic story patterns, flat characterizations, and rough writing techniques. Despite the trend towards diversification in storytelling, typical elements of popular culture can still be identified in some works. This may result in some works appearing relatively simple and lacking in depth in terms of plot and character development.

When discussing contemporary Chinese romantic novels from the perspectives of narrative, creation, or readership, female characters or women's outlooks are inevitable topics. In her seminal work *The Second Sex,* Simon de Beauvoir stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (Beauvoir, 1989), a statement that is very relevant in the analysis of female characters. Whether in serious literature or popular literature represented by romantic novels, female characters have never been "free" or "objective". They are constructed by the cultural perceptions of female images within a patriarchal society. The contemporary Chinese romantic novelists are attempting to

break away from the stereotypes that have long been associated with female characters, these "new images" appear more independent and capable than past female images. However, we cannot rashly conclude that these "new images" have completely broken away from the framework of the patriarchal society. In the story, these independent and capable women still persist in pursuing "romantic love and marriage". Such narratives themself are constructed based on the patriarchal society, regardless of whether the heroines are independent and capable.

However, can we simply conclude that the female images in contemporary Chinese romantic novels are all "lies" constructed by patriarchal society and devoid of social value? The answer must be "no". Examining the portrayal of Chinese women under the patriarchal system in contemporary popular culture products, such as romantic novels, offers an interesting perspective on contemporary Chinese society. This has motivated me to choose female characters in contemporary Chinese romantic novels as my research topic. Therefore, my research has focused on the following three questions:

1. How can the pattern of female images and sub-genres in contemporary Chinese romantic novel 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 questions may not cover every aspect of the female

image in contemporary Chinese romantic novels they do give a good indication of the status of the female characters encountered there. In the course of my research, I have categorized these fictional romantic stories into four categories based on the image of the female protagonist and the story pattern: the "Cinderella", "The New Gifted Youth and The Beauty" (New GY&B), "Female Young Werther and Male Charlotte" (FYW&MC), and "The New Female Consort Prince" (NFCP) genres.

In the narrative of the Cinderella genre, the heroines are usually depicted with the traditional feminine virtues of gentleness, modesty, and non-aggressiveness, which is in line with the societal norms of a patriarchal society. Although in some works, the heroines may be portrayed as strong or brave, their core nature is still non-aggressive. In other words, by the end of the story, they usually return to a state that does not pose a threat to the patriarchal society. The Cinderella genre of romantic novels largely caters to mainstream societal values in defining femininity because all the traits female characters possess are meant to serve in the societal roles of being a wife and mother.

The New GY&B genre of romantic novels inherits the most traditional romantic novel pattern in terms of character structure and narrative. It does not overly emphasize the social class differences between the male and female protagonists; the heroines in these stories have more agency and are the true drivers of the plot. However, it must be noted that in contemporary Chinese romantic novels of the new GY&B genre, the heroes are still portrayed as flawless. Although different from the character design of Cinderella genre works for the heroines, there are similarities in the portrayal of the ideal partner.

The storylines of the works of the FYW&MC genre are not clear, and the narrative is presented in a fragmented manner. These novels piece together scattered story fragments to depict the heroines' campus life. Although this narrative style may result in structural confusion in the novels, it resembles the thought patterns of people reminiscing about the past. This narrative style also makes these novels more likely to evoke readers' memories of campus life and adolescence, and elicit emotional resonance. In addition to love stories, this genre of contemporary Chinese romantic novels also reflects the confusion of Chinese teenagers in their daily lives and future prospects.

Compared to other genres of contemporary Chinese romantic novels, the popularity of the NFCP genre began relatively late. However, interestingly, female characters with similar traits to the heroines in the NFCP genre were very common in classical Chinese legends or literary works. Compared to other genres, the heroines in the NFCP genre are more assertive and play the role of absolute protagonists in the story. They are not passive, but rather take on the roles of saviors, avengers, or rebels in the story. With the changes of social and gender view, the heroines in the NFCP genre have gradually emerged in contemporary Chinese romantic novels and have become popular character types. These heroines often have their own careers, independent lives, and strong inner worlds. They are not mere foils for the heroes, but truly stand at the center of the story.

The above four categories constitute the main patterns of contemporary Chinese romantic novels in the 21st century. In my research, these four patterns were analyzed

using specific cases to explore the characterizations of the main characters and narrative modes. Although not exhaustive, this discussion and analysis does shed light on contemporary Chinese romantic novels as a popular cultural product with Chinese characteristics. Due to the controversial nature of the heroine's images in the FYW&MC and new GY&B genres among the reader community, I collected high-frequency evaluative words targeting the heroines in the short comments on Douban and conducted sentiment analysis. These high-frequency evaluative words reflect that readers generally believe that the heroines in these novels are overly exaggerated and dramatic in their literary expressions. Additionally, due to the exaggerated literary portrayals, these female images appear overly artificial and not intelligent enough in the works. These findings also suggest that, despite the decent market performance of these romantic novels, audiences are not fully satisfied with the portrayal of the heroine's images. In other words, although these readers read and purchase these works, it does not necessarily indicate that they accept them uncritically. Furthermore, this finding also proves that readers have their own clear awareness and judgment criteria for these novels. This also indirectly refutes the notion held by some scholars that popular culture products with romantic themes would have a negative influence on readers' values.

Additionally, some social issues related to contemporary Chinese youth are reflected in these popular culture products. These contemporary Chinese romantic novels not only depict romantic relationships between heroes and heroines, but also discuss other topics, such as the portrayal of marginalized groups and campus violence

in *Cry Me A Sad River (悲伤逆流成河)*, and the discussion of female growth in *Bandits (有匪)*. Even the depiction and construction of romantic love in these novels is not entirely positive. For example, in *Too Late to Say I Love You (来不及说我爱你)*, the tragic fate of the heroine is rooted in her relationship with the hero. As discussed in previous chapters, although contemporary Chinese romantic novels may not provide profound insights or portrayals of social issues like serious literature, they are not completely oblivious to social topics, nor do they solely focus on pleasing readers.

Contemporary romantic novels in China present a rich and diverse subculture. However, similar to the stereotypes imposed on women in society, contemporary Chinese romantic novels are often judged as being vulgar and superficial. The literary and cultural value of these novels has also been a subject of controversy. They are indeed, to some extent, perceived as clichéd and exaggerated in plot and presentation, and even overly focused on following popular topics to better serve commercial interests. These works have also been criticized for lacking innovation and depth of expression as they solely focus on surface-level emotions, without exploring social phenomena and deeper human nature. However, they undeniably exhibit a strong vitality and capture the attention of a large number of readers. The language and storylines of these works are simple and easy to read. Moreover, in depicting female characters, they gradually demonstrate a trend towards diversity. These types of novels are transitioning from stories where women need marriage to change their social status to stories where women can take charge of their own destiny through their own efforts. Despite their simplistic plots, these novels are also attempting to explore and consider

the challenges and difficulties that women face in society. Based on the points expressed by Janice Radway (1991) in her *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature,* it can be seen that these "vulgar" popular literature works provide immense spiritual support to their readership.

Despite the prevalence of these contemporary Chinese romantic novels and their adaptations in the current cultural products market in China, we cannot simply assume that they have achieved literary status. In terms of literary value, they may not be comparable to serious literature. These works focus more on the emotions and plots of the stories, and less on profound literary exploration and innovative forms of expression. However, this does not mean that the existence and influence of contemporary Chinese romantic novels should be ignored. These so-called "vulgar" novels actually provide an enjoyable reading experience for numerous groups, allowing them to experience the pleasure of reading without requiring a high level of education. These novels often make use od vivid storylines and captivating character relationships to evoke emotional resonance among readers. This emotion-oriented literary creation satisfies people's inner longing for happiness, and grants a sense of spiritual joy and comfort. In this regard, serious literature may never be able to reach the same level.

8.2 Significance of the Study

Contemporary Chinese romantic novels are a vital component of popular culture in mainland China. However, there has been no systematic analysis of or research on the characterization and audience attitudes towards characters in such fiction published

in the first two decades of the 21st century. In this study, I classify and analyze the main female characters in works published during this period. To thoroughly understand audience response, I examine and analyze audience feedback on these characters based on the short comments from Douban, a popular Chinese review website for cultural products. This research aims to explore both the portrayal of female characters in contemporary Chinese romantic novels and their reception among the audience. To some extent, this study addresses the lack of audience analysis in similar previous studies. By combining audience feedback and textual analysis, we can better understand the social and cultural significance of these characters and their acceptance by the readership. This research approach offers significant theoretical and practical value for uncovering and interpreting the status and changes of female images in contemporary Chinese cultural products.

In previous similar studies, scholars often treated the characters, narratives, and audience of Chinese romantic novels as independent research subjects, neglecting the interconnections and interactions among these elements. However, the unique characteristics of the creative process of contemporary Chinese romantic novels and their status as "cultural commodities" make a uni-dimensional approach insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. My intention is that this study should integrate research on characters, narratives, and audience. The existing literature on contemporary Chinese romantic novels also reveals this deficiency. There is a close interactive relationship among the characters, narratives, and audience in contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Character images form the core of narratives and determine

their development. Meanwhile, audiences, as both consumers of and participants in the works, bring their aesthetic preferences, cultural identities, and social backgrounds, which can influence their understanding and acceptance of character images and narratives. Therefore, examining these three elements as interconnected factors can better help us understand and interpret the phenomenon of the romantic novel and the factor underlying it.

In addition, contemporary Chinese romantic novels possess significant attributes as "cultural commodities". These novels are not only literary works but also commercial products, and their creation and dissemination processes are influenced by various factors such as market forces and reader demands. The development of character images, narratives, and audience is often constrained and guided by multiple factors, including marketing, reader feedback, and social trends. Therefore, I argue that the study of contemporary Chinese romantic novels should incorporate research on character images, narratives, and audience. By analyzing the methods and roles of character image development in narratives, as well as the acceptance and evaluation of character images and narratives by the audience, we can gain a deeper understanding of the creative mechanism, dissemination mechanism, and audience feedback of romantic novels.

In past studies on novel texts, researchers often focused on older works, with little discussion on works published after the turn of the 21st century. However, as society and culture have evolved, contemporary Chinese romantic novels from the 21st century have exhibited new characteristics and trends in both form and content. Therefore, it is

particularly important to research and explore these emerging works. Contemporary Chinese romantic novels published after the turn of the 21st century display more diversified and modernized characteristics in terms of content. Set against the backdrop of social transformation, the themes, emotions, and character images portrayed in these novels reflect new characteristics and values. For instance, issues related to gender, identity, family, and profession are more prominently highlighted in contemporary Chinese romantic novels compared to the past. As a result, the narrative plots and emotional expressions in these works demonstrate a greater diversity and complexity in writing.

In previous studies on the audience of contemporary Chinese romantic novels, researchers typically used questionnaires and interviews as their primary research methods. This approach provided researchers with a high degree of flexibility, allowing them to edit and modify questionnaires based on their research needs or goals. These past studies on the audience of Chinese romantic novels have broadened the perspectives in this field and provided references and inspirations for subsequent research. However, this research method also has some limitations, one of which is that respondents may exhibit avoidance or provide inaccurate answers during the questionnaire or interview, thereby affecting the objectivity of the data or materials. Some respondents may choose to avoid or conceal their true opinions or experiences due to social expectations, moral considerations, or self-protection, among other reasons. For example, when it comes to personal privacy, socially sensitive topics, or personal preferences, respondents may choose to avoid or conceal the truth, resulting

in inaccurate or incomplete data or materials. Additionally, some respondents may be influenced by their expectations, attitudes, or relationship with the researchers, which may affect the authenticity of their answers. For example, during interviews, respondents may be influenced by factors such as the authority, social status, or gender of the researchers, leading to avoidance or reluctance in answering certain questions. This could result in data or materials being influenced by the relationship between the researchers and the respondents, leading to biases in research conclusions. Simultaneously, questionnaires and interviews may also be biased in terms of questioning style, question design, or language expression, which could impact the respondents' answers.

In my research, I have employed various research methods, including comprehensive analysis of character portrayal, narrative, and audience reception. To gather data and materials on audience attitudes, I have chosen to use Douban short comments as my research materials. Compared to traditional methods such as questionnaires and interviews, this data collection approach minimizes the potential issues of subjectivity in audience research. Douban, as a social media platform, hosts user-generated content in the form of comments. These comments often reflect the most authentic reading experiences and emotional attitudes of the audience. Since they are not guided or restricted by researchers, they are more genuine and objective. Furthermore, Douban, as an online data source, provides researchers with the advantage of collecting and analyzing large-scale data. Researchers can conduct text and sentiment analysis on a vast number of short reviews, allowing the extraction of data

and materials on audience attitudes to obtain comprehensive and in-depth research findings. This effort fills the gap in current research on contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Additionally, we need to revisit the interview with Michel Hockx mentioned at the beginning of this chapter on the Guangdong Writer's Network (广东作家网). Hockx candidly admitted in the interview that he has not conducted detailed research on the texts of contemporary Chinese internet novels. At the same time, he admitted to the interviewer that textual analysis is indeed necessary for the analysis of contemporary Chinese internet novels, including the research field of Chinese contemporary romantic novels (Hockx, 2018). The neglect of textual analysis is a common issue in Western academic literature written in English, including the field of research on contemporary Chinese romantic novels. However, the situation is quite the opposite in mainland China. Scholars tend to prefer conducting textual analysis in the research of contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Although my research is preliminary and incomplete, using English for textual analysis in the field of contemporary Chinese romantic novels represents a new attempt.

8.3 Limitations to the Research and Suggestions for Future Study

As a popular cultural phenomenon, contemporary romantic novels in China are influenced by multiple factors, including government cultural policies, feminist ideas, cultural aesthetics, and consumer behavior habits. The narrative and character development in contemporary Chinese romantic novels are undoubtedly shaped by these influences. With the development and changes in society, Chinese social values

are constantly evolving and traditional concepts of family and gender are being challenged. Particularly, topics related to women's rights are gradually gaining attention on social media in mainland China. All such factors influence the creation of contemporary romantic novels in China. Notably, authors are focusing more on self-awareness, self-realization, and the emotional expression of female characters in their writing and this trend is already evident in the analysis of the NFCP genre mentioned earlier. Therefore, in future research, the impact of social factors on contemporary Chinese romantic novels deserves further in-depth analysis and discussion. This research has classified and analyzed female characters in contemporary Chinese romantic novels using a case case-study approach. Further, an in-depth examination explored the attitudes of the audience by analyzing frequently used words in the users' short comments on Douban. Since the combination of a text-based analysis and audience attitude research is a new method to explore the field of contemporary Chinese romantic novels, this study has filled a gap in this unique research area. However, there are still some limitations to the research.

Firstly, due to limitations to the length of the thesis, the case study portion of this research only covers the analyses of typical works, which do not fully represent the overall landscape of contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Therefore, some pertinent works were not included in the scope of the study, which may have affected the comprehensiveness of the research findings. Hybrid or transitional works that were not included in the text and character analysis, includes works similar to Miu Juan's *The Interpreter* (the Chinese title is *翻译官,* it is a mixture of Cinderella and NFCP genre).

Additionally, this research only focused on works that had been published, with other works that were not published, not included in the scope of the study. Broadly speaking, contemporary Chinese romantic novels are not limited to novels with romantic relationships between men and women as the main storyline. The Girl's Love novels and Boy's Love novels are also important components of this literature genre. This research does not cover those Girl's Love, Boy's Love, and mixed-genre contemporary romantic novels in China. In fact, these works largely reflect the development trajectory of contemporary Chinese romantic novels. Girl's Love and Boy's Love novels, which depict homoerotic love stories between homosexual characters, are subjected to certain restrictions in China, but they do have a certain audience group and circulation on internet literature platforms and social media. These works constitute a unique narrative in contemporary Chinese romantic novels, reflecting the diverse cognition and expression of gender, sexual orientation, and romantic relationships in contemporary Chinese society at the subcultural level. Therefore, in future research, these types of works should also be included in the scope of study to explore the characters, romantic narratives, and cultural significance from different perspectives. This will be especially helpful in gaining a comprehensive understanding of and interpreting contemporary Chinese romantic novels as a popular cultural phenomenon. Meanwhile, research on Boy's Love, Girl's Love, and mixed-genre contemporary romantic novels in China will help reveal the diversity and complexity of contemporary Chinese popular cultural products, which further enriches the research perspectives and depth of popular cultural product studies.

As a cultural product, contemporary romantic novels in China possess clear commercial attributes, and their unique market-oriented characteristics deserve continuing research. With the rapid development of China's economy and progressive social changes, romance novels have gradually gained a higher status as an entertainment cultural product, becoming an important part of the best-selling literary market. Therefore, exploring the performance of romantic novels as commodities in the market, while seeking to understand consumers' demand for and acceptance of them, is important when exploring and comprehending the commercialization of romantic novels as a phenomenon. As a commodity, romantic novels are influenced by market competition and commercial strategies. In the romantic novel market, there is fierce competition among writers, publishers, and platforms, and commercial strategies such as packaging, promotion, and marketing have significant effects on the creation, dissemination, and success of romance novels. Studying the impact of commercial strategies on romantic novels helps to understand the competitive phenomenon and market operation rules of romantic novels as a unique commodity. However, the study of the commercial attributes of contemporary Chinese romantic novels was not included in this research. This is also one of the key limitations of this research. Therefore, in the study of Chinese contemporary romantic novels, it is important to not only focus on the literary attributes of the works, but also the commercial attributes and the impacts of the commercial chain on the creation, dissemination, and audience formation of the works. Incorporating such areas will help to paint a more comprehensive picture of the characteristics of romantic novels as a cultural product, while also exploring the impacts

and development trends of this commercial chain in contemporary Chinese society. In future research, discussions on the commercial network and business model of Chinese contemporary romantic novels should also be included in the research scope in order to fully grasp and understand this popular cultural phenomenon.

All of the high-frequency word data in this study was derived from Douban short comments. It was determined that these short reviews provide a genuine, reliable, and objective source of data for research into Chinese contemporary romantic novels. However, this data also has its limitations. The data obtained from Douban short comments reflects the opinions of a fixed reading group or users with a high interest in romantic novels. It is not possible to have access to the attitudes of groups with low interest in romance novels, through analyzing Douban short comments. Some readers that rarely comment on the Douban community, will not have had their viewpoints and attitudes fully considered. Therefore, although Douban short comments provided valuable information as a data source for this study, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations when analyzing and interpreting the results. Therefore, in future research, a combination of Douban data with methods such as questionnaire surveys, can be considered in order to obtain more comprehensive and accurate data on audience attitudes. Questionnaire surveys can help researchers gain in-depth understanding of audience opinions, attitudes, and perspectives through open-ended and closed-ended questions, among other approaches. Meanwhile, diverse sample selection, including different age groups, genders, regions, reading habits, etc., can be also employed to obtain more comprehensive audience feedback.

In summary, although this study has made new attempts in the field of contemporary Chinese romantic novel, it still has several limitations. Future research should conduct more studies and explorations that can confirm the findings from this study, seek out alternative opinions and attitudes.

8.4 The Future of Chinese Romantic Fiction

As previously stated, the model of long Chinese romantic fiction is being replaced by that of shorter works. Additionally, the form of Chinese contemporary romantic narratives is evolving. In 2017, Papergames[54] developed a groundbreaking *otome* game called *Mr Love: Queen's Choice (恋与制作人,* literal translation: *Love and Producer)* which was released in mainland China. Although other game developers in mainland China had previously attempted to create and publish *otome* games, *Mr Love: Queen's Choice* was the first production by a major Internet company to gain public attention. It can be said that *Mr Love: Queen's Choice* has marked a new model of romantic narrative cultural products in mainland China. Since then, Tencent[55], NetEase[56], miHoYo[57] and other Internet companies in mainland China have also released their own *otome* game products. These games incorporate elements of contemporary Chinese romantic novels in terms of narrative and characterization, but do not rely solely on textual description for storytelling. Furthermore, these *otome* games are distinct from

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[54]Suzhou Nikki Co Ltd, better known as Papergames, is a Chinese internet giant focused on female-oriented mobile games.

[55]Tencent Holdings Limited is currently the largest Internet company in mainland China.

[56]NetEase, Inc. is a large Internet technology company in mainland China.

[57]miHoYo Co., Ltd. is a Chinese video game development and publishing company.

the romantic narrative culture industry centered around romance novels.

The *otome* game genre originated in Japan and has since established itself as a well-developed cultural industry. These games typically feature the player as the heroine and involve developing romantic relationships with various male characters. For a long period, *otome* games in mainland China were imported from Japan. However, mainland Chinese game developers did not follow the traditional model of Japanese *otome* games, which were primarily computer or console games. Instead, they opted for smartphones as their primary gaming platform to increase accessibility for their audience. Additionally, compared to novels, TV drama series, and movies that require significant time and attention, *otome* games offer a more convenient form of entertainment that aligns with the trend of fragmented attention in contemporary media consumption.

While the character design of Chinese *otome* games is influenced by romance novels, there are still differences between the two. To enhance player immersion, the game makers have designed the heroines of Chinese *otome* games to embody not only the independence and beauty commonly seen in romantic fiction heroines, but also a weakened "personality" to allow for player agency. This is because, while both cultural products revolve around romantic narratives, romance novels present a complete story for the reader, while *otome* games require the player to take on the role of the heroine and drive the story forward. The story of the *otome* game is revealed gradually with each game update, rather than being presented all at once like a romance novel. This allows the game makers to create or adjust the story based on audience feedback or

current social issues. For example, some cases in the detective *otome* game, *Tears of Themis (未定事件簿,* literal translation: *Undecided Event Book*), developed by miHoYo, are based on real-life events.

As discussed in the previous section, romantic narratives have become more diverse and personalized over the past two decades. The traditional love stories are no longer the dominant genre, but instead, there is a growing number of works that reflect modern views of love and lifestyles. People's needs for romantic narratives have also become more diverse, with a greater demand for works that integrate elements of science fiction, fantasy, history and other elements in the contemporary Chinese romantic fiction to meet the needs of readers. Advances in technology have enabled the representation of romantic narratives beyond the traditional format of romance novels. These changes and advancements can be attributed to the economic and technological growth in mainland China over the past two decades, as well as the government's relatively liberal cultural policies. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and changes in government policies, such as the abolition of the one-child policy, make it difficult to predict the future direction romantic narrative will take in mainland China.

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