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Paper Abstract

“The Human Comedy”: Archetypal Characters and Gendered Representations in Contemporary Chinese Novels and TV dramas

The 19th century French writer Honoré de Balzac produced a series of novels with the intention to brush an image of French society in the period of the Restoration (1815-1830) and the July Monarchy (1830–1848) through a systematic exploration of social groups. In his idea, the 90 novels regrouped under the title « The Human Comedy » would serve as reference to future generations. Although Chinese contemporary popular novels and TV dramas are certainly not the work of a single author, my endeavor in this paper will be to explore the latter as a gallery of characters and to delineate the trends it features in the character’s representations.

Throughout my exploration of Chinese contemporary novels and TV dramas, strong similarities (related to gender and age) have emerged among the various characters featured in the corpus. For reason of space as well as because young adults are the primary targeted public of contemporary popular novels (albeit this is to some extent less true for TV dramas), young characters will be the focus of my paper.

I argue that characters are articulated around gender lines and endowed with particular characteristics related to their gender identity. In novels and dramas that are produced for a young public, male lead characters are almost uniformly good-looking, educated and act according to moral rectitude principles (showcasing of filial piety, sense of honor as well as courage). When narrations are set in the past, male lead characters are also knowledgeable in martial arts. Lead female characters appear as clumsy, consider

themselves as not particularly pretty or intelligent, and present a general lack of self-confidence. In the TV dramas versions, some of them have childlike facial expression and voice tones, making them stand as seemingly fragile and naïve individuals. They tend to be protected by a male character and are universally looking for love or marriage. Yet, this initial situation usually witnesses an evolution towards the end of the narration, with the character reaching a better standing, be it professional, personal or physical. In addition, their transitions are often operated through an increasing consumption (and related acquisition of knowledge) about fashionable clothes and accessories. They come to stand, to some extent, in the continuity of “Chick-lit” heroines such as those of *Sex and the City* or the *Devils Wears Prada*.

Male and female characters are thus built along certain lines that match values traditionally defined as “Confucian”. Characters from both “sets”, male and female, are thus inserted in a system in which each individual, according to its gender, stands at a definite place.

Yet, if these character types stand as the norm, some characters come to situate themselves as counterpoints. It is the case of characters transitioning from a female body to a male and alternatively in narrations belonging to the “chuanyue” (穿越, time and space travel) genre.

It is these “norms” and “counterpoints” that my paper will explore, through examples taken out of contemporary novels as well as TV dramas. This paper will also take into account the differences in content and narratives modes between different versions of a same narration (novel vs TV drama).