

A New Narrative of Xianxia Dramas from a Feminist Perspective--Take "Feud" as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Against the context of the increasing demand for TV dramas and films from the current audience, xianxia dramas, as a unique form of drama in China, not only reflect distinctive cultural and religious characteristics but also shows the gender power consciousness of Chinese creators. This article explore deeply into the gender narrative in the recently aired xianxia drama "Feud", and through a systematic analysis of previous research in the fields of xianxia dramas and female narratives, reveals the current narrative predicaments faced by xianxia dramas and the development trends of gender narratives they reflect. By applying the text analysis method and content research method, it is concluded that "contemporary new xianxia represented by 'Feud', while integrating traditional Chinese cultural elements, also attempts to synchronize the gender power structure with contemporary consciousness."

KEYWORDS

Gender narrative; Literary studies; Xianxia dramas

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Topic Selection

1.1.1 The Mismatch Between the Creation and Consumption of Xianxia Dramas

Xianxia dramas are a unique type of film and television in China. Since the release of "Chinese Paladin" in 2005, which sparked a xianxia IP craze in Chinese mainland, TV series related to this theme have gradually become an important part of mass film and television cultural consumption. Early xianxia dramas were adapted from games, and the majority of game players were male. (Ouyang&Liang, 2018) This also led to male characters dominating the world view of xianxia dramas. They often had more complete storylines and distinct character personalities. Although female characters are not oppressed or discriminated against, they face being stared at and even being used as "tools" to promote the growth and progress of male characters. (Wang, 2024) However, according to Wang Yixu, a well-known producer of xianxia dramas, the main audience of such films and TV series nowadays is under 35 years old, among which female viewers account for 60%. This is in line with the proportion of viewers on film and television platforms. (Lin, 2022) With the changing aesthetic standards of female audiences and the rise of female consciousness, audiences are seeking more powerful "Women's stories". (Zhang, 2024) From the perspective of the gender composition of the audience, today's xianxia dramas have differences from the early days. The previous ways of shaping character images and narrative perspectives are no longer suitable for the current market. However, in recent years, xianxia dramas represented by "Till The End of The Moon" still continue the previous gender narrative structure. It can be seen from this that the current female-dominated viewing behavior has formed a subtle contrast with the potential gender power gap in the current narrative of xianxia dramas, making xianxia dramas a condensed presentation of gender issues.

1.1.2 The Disconnection Between the Popularity of Xianxia Dramas and Related Research

The subsequent release of the "Chinese Paladin" series, "Chinese Paladin 3", became a hit across the Internet in the year it was aired. According to the viewership data of CCTV-Research Shandong Network, the show achieved the highest single-episode viewership rating during its broadcast on Qilu TV in Shandong Province. This summer, the xianxia drama "Feud" was aired. Within three hours of its premiere, its popularity quickly surpassed 6,000, and within 24 hours, it soared to 9,000, breaking the record for the peak popularity of a new drama on its first day of broadcast on video platform in the past four years. Data provided by domestic new media testing platforms such as ENTGroup indicates that xianxia dramas like "The Journey of Flower" and "Noble Aspirations" both topped the online play counts of TV series that year. (Wang, 2019) Due to the cultural attributes of the subject matter, researchers in this field are mostly domestic scholars, but most of them focus on the costume art and cultural dissemination of xianxia dramas. A few have pointed out the current predicaments faced by xianxia dramas in terms of narrative perspectives and core structures, while there is a lack of in-depth research that links it with gender narratives from a feminist perspective.

1.2 Significance of the Topic Selection

From a theoretical perspective, in the current cultural structure of China, female images, as a means or carrier of

cultural narrative, are actively or passively fully utilized, demonstrating significant cultural value (Song, 2022). "Feud" tells the story of Bai Jiushi and Hua Ruyue, two gods of the same origin and coexistence but the two of them possess the power of opposing attributes. After becoming a couple, they suffered a series of tragedies due to differences in their ideas. Eventually, they achieved self-redemption through reconciliation of their concepts. This drama starts from a female perspective, subverting its positioning as a passive object. Such research not only offers some viewpoints into more possibilities of the development of gender narratives in xianxia dramas, but also fully reflects the cultural structure of the country and the value of women, providing a case for subsequent research.

From a practical perspective, this article analyzes the female narrative reflected in the summer hit "Feud", aiming to reveal the nascent gender narrative transformation of xianxia dramas, with the expectation of providing references for film and television workers to create works that better meet the needs of the audience.

1.3 Research Status

Centering on the research objects and themes, the author conducted searches with the keywords "xianxia dramas", "female narratives", and "female characters", and obtained dozens of articles published on the Internet and in journals in recent years. The content of the articles includes audience analysis, discourse research, narrative analysis, etc. After summarizing and analyzing, the research contents at home and abroad are sorted out as follows:

1.3.1 The Narrative Structure of Xianxia Dramas is Facing Difficulties

Domestic research on xianxia dramas mainly covers two aspects: narrative and characters. In terms of narrative, the narrative structure of xianxia dramas and the current narrative predicament they are facing are the key points that have led many scholars to analyze. Wang Benzhen pointed out in "Research on the Narrative of Popular Chinese Xianxia Dramas" that the plot themes of xianxia dramas are often multi-threaded, and it is essential to present the growth experiences of the protagonists. As for the narrative thread, Niu Zhiruo emphasized in "A Brief Analysis of the Narrative Art and Aesthetic Shift in TV Dramas and Films - From Martial Arts Dramas to Xianxia Dramas" that in recent years, the narrative thread of xianxia dramas has undergone a thematic shift, turning to "love and romance". In addition, Feng Zhijuan believes in "Xianxia: The Integrated Narrative of Real Life and Imagined Space" that the environment and life created in xianxia dramas, as well as the discourse design of the story texts, have obvious characteristics of The Times, and there is a certain degree of integration between the creation of real life and imagined space. In light of the predicament of gender power in real life, there is a similar statement in "Narrative Innovation of Domestic Xianxia Dramas: The Legend of Chusen 'and' Eternal Love" written by Ouyang Zhao and Liang Ying. They indicate that some xianxia dramas also face narrative predicaments from a gender perspective, that is, the narrative themes and perspectives are overly formulaic and monotonous under the patriarchal system. Wang Benzhen also believes that xianxia dramas are facing narrative predicaments. He starts from the perspective of narrative structure and studies the plot density of each episode of xianxia dramas to confirm that there is a problem of narrative dragging in the current creation of xianxia dramas.

Regarding the character development in xianxia dramas, some existing studies have begun to focus on its connection with social consciousness, and a few of them can involve the association with gender narratives. As Zeng Huan mentioned in "The Construction of Immortal Characters in Xianxia Dramas from the Perspective of Psychological Compensation", the images of immortal characters in xianxia dramas are equivalent to the codes of the ideal world expressed in films and TV series. In "Reflections on the Current Situation and Path Reconstruction of Xianxia Dramas", Xu Ying pointed out that the changes in gender consciousness in xianxia dramas to a certain extent correspond to the development of social gender consciousness. Meanwhile, Ouyang Zhao and others slightly associated the character image Settings with gender power, highlighting that the perspectives and traits of the main characters in xianxia dramas are homogenized and have a patriarchal color. Scholar Huang Xilan, who also made similar discoveries, expressed in "The Creative Issues and Reconstruction Paths of Xianxia Dramas from the Perspective of Mass Culture" that in some current xianxia dramas, female characters are set to serve the male lead and love is the core motivation.

1.3.2 The Depiction of Female Images is Limited and Urgently Needs to be Addressed

There are relatively few studies on gender narratives in Chinese xianxia dramas from abroad, and they tend to focus more on the expression of female images in film and television works. Jaysi Seema and Kurrey U.N. stated in "Similarity and dissimilarity: A study of karnad's female characters in Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala plays" that the female characters presented by the authors are relevant to the contemporary context. N Carroll pointed out in "The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm" that the female image in film is depicted through limited, restrictive and oppressive characteristics. This reflects the connection between film and television works and the gender power structure of the real society. And just as J. Mayne said in "Feminist Film Theory and Women in Film", the true woman and the image of women in film often do not match. The measures taken in this aspect of film and television production are also reflected in M. G. Aune's "Ophelia's Space: Characterizing Shakespeare's Women in Popular Film", where the producers attempt to enhance the character images of female characters and endow them with greater initiative through scene and scene arrangement.

It can be seen from this that the current research results correspond to the background part of the topic selection, that is, there are studies on the keywords respectively, but the comprehensive research of the two is relatively rare.

Therefore, this article closely focuses on the issue of "How the xianxia drama 'Feud' innovates the gender narrative paradigm of xianxia dramas in the three dimensions of 'emotional autonomy', 'body autonomy', and 'narrative discourse' through the shaping of female characters and the narrative of the story, and thereby demonstrates new possibilities for the development of xianxia dramas" for research and discussion. And by analyzing the innovative xianxia drama "Feud", the development trend of gender narrative in xianxia dramas is revealed. Analyze the transformation of gender narrative in this drama and the specific manifestation of female narrative in the plot. Draw a conclusion on whether the three dimensions of female narrative reflected in "Feud" are progressive.

2 Research Content

2.1 Emotional Empowerment of Female Characters

Emotional empowerment mainly refers to granting people the power to self-regulate their emotions.(Guo,2009)In the film, it is mainly reflected in two aspects: the active right to choose emotions and the diverse right to express emotions.

2.1.1 Active Emotional Choice Rights

As one of the main creators, Yu Zheng, said, in this film, female characters no longer follow the stereotypical "balanced literature". "Balanced literature" refers to the situation where creators force characters to be paired in order to add emotional lines rather than based on their natural interpersonal relationships. For instance, in some past TV dramas and films, not only were the love storylines for the male and female leads set up, but also the love storylines of their friends and relatives had to correspond one-to-one, which led to the plots being rigid, dull and overly formulaic.

In "Feud", emotional choices are made based on one's own consciousness. For instance, Fan Ling'er, due to her original family relationship, yearned for love. Although her father arranged a "predestined marriage" for her, she had the awareness to distinguish the emotional components. She realized that her yearning for love was out of envy for the other person's ability to develop the emotion of discarding life and death, thus letting go of her obsession with being loved and achieving a breakthrough in her cultivation. From this, it can be seen that the drama fully grants female characters the right to choose whether to love or not. Therefore, from the perspective of the audience, the direction of this emotional development is in the hands of the female characters, rather than being facilitated by the male characters in the plot, nor is it a forced match from the creator's third-person perspective.

In addition, the emotional choices generated by consciousness also serve as the basis for the characters' actions. In traditional xianxia dramas, it is often the case that the action trajectories of female characters are unpredictably directed by male characters. Women follow men to solve puzzles and cultivate for no reason at all. There is nothing wrong with the behavioral scheduling itself; what is lacking is the behavioral motivation. However, in this drama, the motive is presented straightforwardly. It seems that Bai Jiushi tricked Hua Ruyue into descending to the mortal world to go through a love crisis together, but in fact, it is later revealed that Hua Ruyue took the action because she was clear about her feelings. Fan Ling'er, in order to help Hua Ruyue seize power, went undercover and lay low for a hundred years. She clearly told her father that it was out of gratitude and thus she would not give up the plan just because of his persuasion and restrictions. The behavioral motives of female characters are not empty talk but rather reflect the emotional choices of the characters as logic and cause and effect, fully demonstrating the subjectivity of female characters.

2.1.2 Diverse Rights to Express Emotions

Huang Xilan pointed out that one of the predicaments faced by xianxia dramas is the character setting that prioritizes love. Indeed, the earliest xianxia dramas combined the spirit of chivalry with mythological stories, creating a series of rich characters and diverse emotions. However, in the following decades, it gradually leaned towards depicting the earth-shaking love between immortals. This not only made the xianxia dramas homogenized and formulaic, but also reflected the characters' emotions too superficially. The portrayal of emotions in "Feud" breaks away from the traditional framework of the Xianxia genre that merely focuses on love. On the contrary, as its promotional slogan "Hatred is the ultimate of love" conveys, the male and female leads reflect a variety of complex emotions around "hatred", which is quite diverse and prompts the audience to think deeply. Apart from the main character, the emotional expressions of other female characters in the drama are not flat and monotonous. Besides love, the friendship between Qingyang and Xuanwei as fellow students and the master-apprentice affection between Qingyang and Hua Ruyue are all vividly presented. The portrayal of such female characters, due to their diverse emotional expressions, is closer to human nature rather than flat images, adding a touch of authenticity to film and television creation and becoming an inheritance and innovation of the earliest xianxia dramas.

2.2 Female Body Autonomy Control

2.2.1 The Realization of Body Autonomy

Physical autonomy is an important part of female autonomy. For instance, the scene in the classic xianxia drama "The Legend of Chusen" where the female lead uses her body to shield the male lead from harm, causing his personality to change and grow, and the plot in "Till The End of The Moon" where two women are kidnapped simultaneously and the male lead has to choose, failed to convince the audience. The reason for this is nothing but the instrumentalization of women existing in different worldviews. The female characters created in "Feud" are no longer a touchstone for male growth, nor will the power to deal with female characters be handed over to male characters. For instance, Lu Suguan, who seemed to be indulging in love, was not forced to kill others out of love. The reason why Fan Ling 'er sacrificed herself in the illusory realm was not to protect other male characters, but to pay for her own values and the beliefs she adhered to.

On this basis, it is natural for the female body to become the driving force for one's own target. In the drama, the female characters have the right to control their own bodies. Hua Ruyue and Fan Ling 'er have both seriously injured themselves to achieve the goal of lowering others' vigilance and completing their revenge plans. Even though the plot has not yet escaped the framework where the female body is the bargaining chip, it has already shifted from the male's choice and weighing to the female's autonomous decision. Narrative reconstruction is a gradual process. Although it is not thorough, the attempts made by "Feud" for change are worth learning from.

2.2.2 A depiction of Female Fertility

The most talked-about innovative part of "Feud" is undoubtedly that the love between the male and female leads is no longer the traditional pure love. The source of their hatred is the death of their child. In xianxia themes, children are often regarded as the continuation of the bloodline. The descendants of the strong remain strong, and the descendants of those with special identities remain special. For instance, in "Chinese Paladin", the child of Li Xiaoyao and Zhao Ling 'er inherited the bloodline of goddess, and in "The Legend of the Nine Tails Fox", the child of the nine-tailed fox is also a powerful nine-tailed fox. "Feud" deconstructs the traditional narrative style of bloodline inheritance, that is, after being deprived of her magic power by Bai Jiusi, Hua Ruyue defied the natural way and gave birth to a child who was an ordinary person and died of illness as a result. In the plot, although Bai Jiusi and Hua Ruyue were created by the creator god, their children themselves are not permitted by the Heavenly Dao. Therefore, they do not follow the bloodline but the cause and effect continuation. The death of the child in the play also confirms the absence of characters from a female perspective. The plot focuses on Hua Ruyue giving birth to and raising her child alone until the child falls ill and dies. Naming the child "Shi 'an" also aims to reaffirm her belief that "worlds are peaceful". The role of the father, which has always held a dominant position in traditional narratives, is instead downplayed in the play. This coincides with the absence of the fatherly role in the real society and, through this, re-examines the ethics of the fatherly role from a female perspective.

2.3 Story Construction from a Female Perspective

2.3.1 A Shift in Narrative Perspective

Unlike the previous narrative lines of "male characters' adventures and upgrades" in the xianxia genre, "Feud" uses female characters as the driving force of the narrative. The plot begins with Hua Ruyue disguises herself as an ordinary cultivator to approach Bai Jiusi with the intention of taking revenge. Then, Fan Ling 'er is introduced as an undercover agent to help Hua Ruyue resurrect the spirit snake to complete her revenge plan and search for her in the mortal world. It can be seen from this that the plot development is more driven by the female characters in the play. When the plot is driven by female characters, it is inevitable that the narrative focus will be placed on them, which naturally forms a narrative mode centered on the female narrative perspective. Therefore, in the play, a considerable amount of space will be devoted to depicting Hua Ruyue's experiences in the mortal world. However, it is not an objective narrative from a third-person perspective. The ingenious setting adopted in the play, that is, the illusory realm created by Hua Ruyue, makes all the stories that happened to her unfold in Bai Jiusi's life, allowing Bai Jiusi to truly experience the pain. Only by completely placing male characters from a female perspective can the use of surrealist elements in genres like xianxia dramas be reasonable. Patriarchs can empathize with women's trauma, thereby disintegrating the divine and indifferent third-person perspective and challenging the traditional and rigid male-dominated narrative.

2.3.2 The Highlighting of Women's Capabilities

Under the premise of unfolding the story from a female perspective, male characters no longer play the role of the most powerful in the plot, and the abilities of women are also highlighted. In the drama, the abilities of Hua Ruyue and Bai Jiusi are set to wane and wane respectively. Even the ruling power of the palace is alternately controlled, which indicates that the male and female leads are placed on an equal footing in terms of power and status. This means that for female characters to break away from their status as the rescued in the drama becomes the key to resolving the crisis, especially

in the final step where Fan Ling'er brings the spirit snake to assist Hua Ruyue in her revenge. After Bai Jiusi's death, Hua Ruyue protected the world and fought against the evil forces, eventually turning the tide. The female characters in this drama respectively occupy the key nodes of the plot development, capable of independently handling crises and taking charge of the overall situation. This undoubtedly overturns the "hero saves the beauty" model, and this subversion has been widely praised and represents the direction of shaping female characters in subsequent xianxia dramas.

2.4 Interaction in Three Dimensions

The three dimensions mentioned above are not isolated but are intrinsically connected and mutually reinforcing.

Emotional autonomy triggers physical control. Hua Ruyue's active right to choose her emotions is the direct driving force behind her physical control actions, compelling her to make decisions in terms of behavior and physical dominance. In "Feud", love supports Hua Ruyue in her decision to descend to the mortal world to undergo trials and have a child alone, while hatred supports her in destroying her own body and seeking rebirth for revenge. Hua Ruyue's making of major decisions such as "going down to the mortal world to undergo trials" and "raising children alone" requires an extremely high degree of physical autonomy. These decisions themselves represent and embody her autonomy in physical control.

And her emotions, such as intense hatred, are the internal driving force that supports her to improve herself and control her physical abilities. Body control is an important part of competing for narrative discourse. The powerful abilities brought by body control, such as magic and combat strength, are the key for Hua Ruyue to challenge the traditional narrative perspective and ultimately dominate the narrative discourse power. Because of her superior abilities, Hua Ruyue was able to draw Bai Jiusi into her own illusory world of the human world and narrate her human experiences from her perspective, thus completing the switch of the narrative perspective.

Narrative discourse, however, will have a counter-effect on emotional autonomy and ensure the outcome of physical control. After the painful experiences of the human world unfold, the hatred and love that are as beautiful as the moon are rationalized. It can be seen that when the narrative perspective shifts from male to female, the emotional experiences and choices of female characters can be presented more deeply and three-dimensionally. By telling the story of "ten years of painful experience" from Hua Ruyue's perspective, it not only explains the reason for her deep hatred, but also places all her emotional responses in a complete, reasonable and understandable position. The narrative strategy from a female perspective is a concentrated presentation of the achievements in body control. The plot clearly shows that it was the female characters who resolved the core crisis, rather than the male lead or external forces. Therefore, their control over their own bodies, including their infiltration, combat, reproductive choices, and the power and experiences they gained from it, are no longer meaningless sequels. Their rationality and value can also be confirmed within the entire narrative structure.

3 Conclusion

"Feud" has made an innovative attempt at gender narrative in xianxia dramas through three dimensions, attempting to subvert the traditional gender power structure and connect with the increasingly awakened female consciousness. Although due to its positioning as a commercial genre film, it still retains some silhouettes of traditional xianxia dramas, it still points out the transformation direction for subsequent works of the same type in many aspects such as plot setting and character development, breaking away from the previous framework and perspective. From a feminist perspective, it is innovative and progressive.

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