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Analysis of Female Images and Gender Narrative Innovation in "What a Mess"

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ABSTRACT
The domestic time travel book genre web series "What a Mess" uses a double time travel framework to break away from the stereotypical female roles and the female rivalry narrative common in traditional period dramas. It creates a diverse group of complex and modern female characters such as Yu Wanyin, Xie Yong'er, the Empress Dowager, and Er Lan. It builds a female alliance that opposes female rivalry and values mutual support. Using the phrase "What a Mess" as a key symbol, it deconstructs the feudal rules that suppressed women. This paper analyzes the shaping features of the main and supporting female characters, as well as the innovative breakthroughs in female relationship patterns. It explores how the story deconstructs feudal female virtues and the modern values carried by these female images. It aims to uncover the work's innovation in gender narratives and provide a reference for the study of female narratives in time travel book web series and the creation of domestic period dramas.

KEYWORDS
"What a Mess"; Female images; Female alliance; Feudal female virtues; Gender narrative

1 Introduction

In recent years, the time travel book genre has become an important direction for innovation in domestic web series. "What a Mess" uses a double time travel setting to reshape female narratives in period dramas, making it a representative work in this field.

Looking at the data, the series has a stable Douban score of 7.2, with over 50,000 ratings and a five star of more than 40%. During its release, its total views exceeded 1.5 billion, and related topics appeared on trending lists many times. It achieved both critical praise and popularity. The high ratings and high level of attention confirm that its female mutual support narrative and updated gender are well received by the audience. This makes it a typical sample for studying female images in period dramas in the new era.

This paper takes the female characters in this series as its research object. It analyzes their character building, relationship patterns, and value expression, and discusses the work's innovation in gender narrative and its real world meaning.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Current Research at Home and Abroad

Academic research on the change of female images is quite rich. Liu Ying and Fu Tianhai (2013) pointed out that female images in traditional literature are rigid and lack agency. Du Ruosong (2015) and Yang Lu (2024) also confirmed the limits of traditional female images. Studies by Cheng Qiang (2024), Wu Wenying and Wu Jiaqi (2025), and Qi Yanan (2025) show that in modern works about women, female images are changing from dependent to independent and free, showing diverse features.

In gender narrative research, Liu Ying and Fu Tianhai (2013) built a theoretical framework for gender narrative, which laid a key foundation for analyzing gender narratives in texts. Regarding "What a Mess", Liu Liwen (2022) only analyzed its narrative structure and plot innovation, without touching the core of female images and gender narrative. Research by Yang Lu (2024) and Qi Yanan (2025) on women oriented dramas and web novels provides important references for analyzing this work.

2.2 Summary of the Literature

Existing research has already traced the historical change of female images. The gender narrative theory of Liu Ying and Fu Tianhai (2013), and the studies on women oriented works by Yang Lu (2024) and Qi Yanan (2025) provide theoretical and practical support for analyzing "What a Mess". Liu Liwen's (2022) research on the narrative features of this work is an important starting point. However, existing research mostly focuses on its narrative form. There is little deep analysis of female images, the narrative breakthrough in female relationship patterns, the deconstruction of feudal female virtues, and the expression of modern female values combined together. This study will focus on these gaps and explore the work's innovative value in gender narrative.

3 Research Content

3.1 Creation of Diverse Female Images

"What a Mess" uses a double time travel setting to break the single narrative of "fighting for male favor" common in traditional period dramas. It creates a diverse and coexisting group of female characters such as Yu Wanyin, the Empress Dowager, and Er Lan. They use their own will to help each other, highlighting female agency and expressing clear female awareness and gender equality. This makes the series an important sample of modern gender narrative innovation.

Yu Wanyin is a very representative projection of a modern woman in "What a Mess". She enters the palace as an office worker soul who has "time traveled twice". On the surface, she is a favored consort called a "troublemaker", but in truth she is clear headed, practical, has principles, and knows how to work with others. With the "god view" of knowing the story, she only wants to survive at first. But after seeing the real and cruel world inside the book, she changes from an "outsider" to a "citizen of Daxia" and takes on the responsibility of solving the problems. She refuses to take part in female rivalry and says, "fighting each other is not as good as building a strong body." When pushed to the limit, she takes action to promote policies that benefit the people and rejects the old rule that "women are useless." She does not treat others as NPCs. She says to Xie Yong'er, "Women here are all chess pieces, we need to look out for each other." She feels pain when she sees suffering and always keeps her warmth and empathy. This character steps away from the "sweet and innocent" or "dark and scheming" tropes. She uses "what a mess" to break the feudal chains of "what a mess." She represents resistance to oppression and fixed rules. She is a clear expression of modern female agency and equal rights in a period drama setting.

Xie Yong'er is a tragic "paper person" female character in "What a Mess". As a "first time traveler", she first believes she is the chosen female lead. She relies on Prince Duan and actively takes part in palace rivalry, treating other people as NPCs to move the plot forward. She is stuck in the "fight for male favor and rise in status" script. During her pregnancy, the forced abortion by Prince Duan makes her fully realize that she is just a tool. After forming an alliance with Yu Wanyin, she gives up female rivalry and turns to female mutual support and self realization. She plans a food delivery business and a commercial empire, completing her change from relying on a man to becoming independent. In the end, she dies while leading away pursuers to protect Yu Wanyin. Her last words, "I am free," express her release from fate. The core of Xie Yong'er's tragedy is that she is robbed of her own self. Her "ambition" and "desire for palace rivalry" are programmed into her. Her rebirth and resistance are about breaking free from the scripted fate. She is a tragic example of a suppressed woman defending her dignity in a hopeless situation.

The Empress Dowager is a complex female character in "What a Mess" who is completely twisted by power and the deep palace. In her early years, she was tricked by the late emperor, lost a child, and her family was suppressed. She was forced to change from a "gentle girl" into a "fierce fighter." She decides that only power will let her survive. In the end, she turns from a victim into a perpetrator. She poisons Xiahou Dan slowly over a long time, treating him as a puppet. She poisons the former empress to clear her way to the top. On the outside she seems kind, but inside she is cruel. She uses a soft voice to do evil things. Her cruelty comes not only from surviving the palace but also from carrying the mission of her lost homeland. It is a tragedy of family and personal fate combined. Unlike traditional "all good or all bad" villains, the Empress Dowager hides sadness inside her cruelty. The audience can see how power twists a person. She is not purely evil. She is a complex palace woman who is forced by the deep palace, power, and her homeland's mission to become a perpetrator. She is deeply evil, but also shockingly pitiful.

Er Lan is a symbol of female awakening and the ideal of equality in "What a Mess". As a talented woman from a poor family, she uses male disguise as her armor to make a place for herself in a male dominated court. She puts her career first, controls her feelings, and is a solid character with strength and warmth. She is a core civil official among the student group. She is the first to be promoted after entering government. She proposes good policies like introducing new crops and filling the national treasury. She does not take all the credit and knows how to work with others. Even as a civil official, she stays calm in a crisis and can give smart advice on the battlefield. She is a reliable thinker. In an era when women cannot become officials, she takes the imperial exams dressed as a man and risks her life to achieve her goals. She always speaks for women. When the court officials ask to remove the "troublemaker" Yu Wanyin, she strongly defends Yu Wanyin, breaking the stereotype that "women bring disaster." She has independent and clear values. Er Lan uses male disguise as a weapon against gender oppression. She pursues equality and self realization, showing knowledge and courage that matches any man. She is the most touching idealist in the series.

3.2 Breakthrough and Innovation in Female Relationship Patterns

The series uses Yu Wanyin as the center to build a network of female relationships. It brings the idea of "girls help girls" into the ancient palace setting. In the series, women go from "enemies" to "life and death companions", from a "survival alliance" to "ideal comrades". Yu Wanyin and Xie Yong'er start with conflicts due to different information and their roles in the story. Then they recognize their shared situation, give up palace rivalry, and form an alliance. With Er Lan, they connect through shared ideals and positions. They build trust and support each other while opposing Prince Duan and pushing for

reforms.

The series greatly weakens the main plot of "fighting over a man." Female conflicts mostly come from different positions and information gaps, not from natural hostility. It gives up the simple "pure and innocent vs. evil woman" opposition. It accepts that women are complex and have their own dignity. The series breaks the old palace drama pattern of "women hurting women." It rebuilds the survival logic that "female unity equals safety and a stronger voice." It makes female support a key force for characters to overcome challenges. With understanding, empathy, and cooperation as its base, it shows the possibility of women helping each other in a system of oppression.

3.3 Deconstruction of Feudal Female Virtues and Expression of Modern Female Values Under the Symbol "What a Mess"

"What a Mess" uses its title as a symbol of rebellion. It directly targets the feudal rules that controlled women and deconstructs traditional female virtues while clearly expressing modern female values.

The women in the series refuse to depend on royal or husbandly power. They put survival, ideals, and dignity above romantic love. They break the chains of "taking the husband as the master" and "making the goal of life to compete for favor." Er Lan dresses as a man to enter government and fights for women's education and equal chances to be officials. This directly denies the old rule that "a woman's lack of talent is a virtue." Yu Wanyin uses modern thinking to take part in state affairs and promote system improvements. The Empress Dowager has top level political skills and vision. Women are no longer symbols of softness, ignorance, or passivity. Instead, they are subjects with thoughts, talents, and responsibility.

The series rejects the single standard of "chastity, kindness, and gentleness." It accepts and respects the complexity and agency of women. There is no perfect saint or purely evil woman. The Empress Dowager is both evil and pitiful. Xie Yong'er is both foolish and brave. Er Lan has ideals but also weaknesses. Women no longer live for a man, a title, or a script. They pursue self realization, control over their own lives, and spiritual independence. They establish the modern value of "I am the subject, not an accessory." The series spreads the equal rights idea that "ability does not depend on gender," showing the innovation of modern gender concepts.

4 Research Significance

4.1 Enriching Theoretical Research on Female Narratives in Time Travel Book Genre and Period Dramas

Current domestic film and television gender narratives are often trapped in the female rivalry framework. This study uses the double time travel setting of "What a Mess" as an entry point. It analyzes its diverse female group, anti rivalry alliance, and method of deconstructing female virtues. It fills a research gap in female narratives of time travel book web series. It provides a new theoretical perspective and research model for analyzing similar film and television texts.

4.2 Providing Practical Reference and Innovation Inspiration for Creating Domestic Period Dramas

Aiming at problems like rigid female images and hostile female relationships in period dramas, this study summarizes the innovative strategies of "What a Mess" in shaping female characters, building relationships, and expressing values. It gives creators practical ideas. It suggests that they should give up the "women hurting women" pattern and explore ways to combine modern gender concepts with ancient settings. This can improve the realism and artistic value of their work.

4.3 Responding to the Growth of Modern Female Awareness and Spreading Positive Gender Ideas

This study explores the modern values carried by the female characters in the series, such as agency, gender equality, and mutual support. It explains how the series deconstructs and rebels against the rules of feudal female virtues. It responds to the needs of modern female awareness. It provides a typical case for film and television culture to spread modern feminist ideas, playing a role in cultural communication and value guidance.

5 Research Methods

5.1 Text Analysis Method

The series "What a Mess" is the main text for this study. It carefully examines the personality traits, actions, dialogue details, and plot developments of key female characters like Yu Wanyin and Xie Yong'er. It also analyzes key narrative elements such as the core symbol "What a Mess" and scenes of female alliance interaction. From inside the text, it uncovers the logic of building female images and the strategies of gender narrative expression, laying a factual foundation for further analysis.

5.2 Interdisciplinary Research Method

This study combines multiple theoretical perspectives, including gender narrative studies, feminist theory, and cultural studies. Using the gender narrative theory of Liu Ying and Fu Tianhai (2013) as the main framework, together with the feminist focus on gender equality and female agency, it interprets the rebellion against feudal female virtues expressed by the symbol "What a Mess" from a cultural deconstruction viewpoint. This breaks the limits of a single discipline. It

explains the narrative logic and cultural meaning of the female character building and female alliance construction from multiple angles. It provides diverse theoretical support for analyzing the work's gender narrative innovation and expression of modern female values, making the research deeper and more systematic.

5.3 Comparative Study Method

This study compares "What a Mess" with traditional period palace dramas. It looks at differences in female character building (such as rigid binary opposition versus diverse and three dimensional), female relationship patterns (such as rivalry and mutual harm versus mutual support and alliance), and gender narrative logic (such as dependence on male power versus expression of female agency). It highlights the innovations of "What a Mess" in breaking away from the limits of traditional period drama gender narratives. It also confirms its typicality in the female narrative of time travel book web series.

6 Innovation Points

(1) This study chooses "What a Mess," which was released in 2026, as its sample. It focuses on the female group in a double time travel setting, filling a research gap in recent time travel book web series female narratives.

(2) It uses the series title "What a Mess" as the key symbol for deconstruction, linking it to feudal female virtue rules. It connects the study of a text symbol with gender narrative innovation. It proposes the development path of female alliance from "survival alliance" to "ideal comrades," sorting out the logic of relationship change and improving the research system for anti rivalry narratives.

(3) The research conclusions focus on time travel book web series, not period dramas in general. This provides more precise practical reference for creating female narratives in the same type of series.

7 Conclusion

"What a Mess," as an innovative work in the time travel book web series of the new era, uses the double time travel setting to successfully create a diverse and three dimensional group of female characters including Yu Wanyin, Xie Yong'er, the Empress Dowager, and Er Lan. It breaks the rigid patterns of female images and the trap of female rivalry narratives in traditional period dramas. It builds a female alliance that opposes rivalry and values mutual support. Using the core symbol "What a Mess," the series deeply deconstructs the feudal rules that suppressed women. Through the words, actions, and choices of its female characters, it expresses modern female values such as agency, gender equality, female mutual support, and diversity. It achieves a deep integration of feudal narrative context and modern female awareness.

The series' innovation in gender narrative not only provides a typical text for studying female narratives in time travel book web series, but also offers important lessons for creating domestic period dramas. The female narrative in period dramas should give up stereotypical character building and pay attention to the complexity and diversity of female images. It should move away from the female rivalry framework and explore mutual support and alliance among women. It should naturally blend modern values with ancient settings, allowing film and television works to have both artistic value and real world meaning. The female narrative of future domestic period dramas still needs to keep breaking traditional limits. Based on the value pursuits of modern women, it should create more flesh and blood female characters with thoughts and responsibility, spread positive gender ideas, and make gender narrative an important dimension of innovation in film and television creation.

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