

Female-Oriented Online Literature in China: Gender Reconstruction, the Internet and Consumption

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Abstract: With elements of romance and entertainment, Chinese female-oriented online literature has a considerable readership and has attracted substantial social attention in recent years through film and television adaptations. Taking female-oriented original online literature as the study object, this paper analyses the gender reconstruction and the influence of the internet and commercialization therein. Foucault's theory of power is cited and the analysis is multidimensional and incorporates a specific social context. This paper finds that the awakening of female consciousness is accompanied by a gradual dismantling of gender stereotypes, but that the internet and commercialization hinders gender reconfiguration and placed female subjectivity in imperceptible danger.

Keywords: Female-oriented online literature, Gender images, Discourse, The Internet, Commercialization

1. Introduction

Online literature, refers to literature that is distributed by the Internet. According to Yang Xinmin, it is divided into the online version of print literature and original online literature [1]. The term 'female-oriented' originates from Japanese ACGN (animation, game, comic and novel) culture and means entertainment works dedicated to female audiences, whose authors are basically women [2]. China established the internet system in 1996, and two years later Cai Zhiheng's *First Close Encounter* can be considered the beginning of online literature on the mainland. The China Writers Association claims that the number of original literary works published online in the past 10 years has exceeded the total number of contemporary literature in the past 60 years, with over 430 million active users. The rapid development of the online literature market has brought about a continuous segmentation of audience groups and products, and female-oriented online literature highlights elements of romance and entertainment. With numerous readers, main female literature websites such as Jinjiang, Hongxiu and Xiaoxiang have attracted huge social attention through film and television adaptations. However, the popularity of this socio-cultural phenomenon is not matched by the number of academic studies on it. Most studies focus on general online literature, such as comparison with traditional literature, production and consumption, and overseas dissemination [3-5]. There are only a few pieces of research on female-oriented online literature. Zuo Xiaoqing discusses the opportunities and dilemmas brought by the Internet to women's writing [6]; Zhao Shuping analyzes the new female image in network literature [7]; Jiang Tao concentrates on the relationship between online feminism and consumerism [8]. Other key terms include BL literature,

'the online only-girl generation', and romance narratives. In short, scholars have attempted to unpack the evolution of gender power, consciousness and ethics embedded in female-oriented online literature from cultural, economic and media perspectives. As a grassroots, spontaneous popular culture for two decades, the study of female-oriented online literature contributes to the understanding of rapidly developing China, as well as to the topic of new media and gender equality worldwide. Taking female-oriented original online literary works as the study object, this paper focuses on the gender reconstruction therein, as well as the influence of the internet and commercialization. Foucault's theory of power is cited and the analysis is multidimensional and incorporates a specific social context in an attempt to fill the academic gap.

2. Gender Power and Female-Oriented Cyberspace

In *The Politics of Sexuality*, Millett mentions that gender relations in social situations are based on power [9]. Michel Foucault also believes power, discourse and sexuality are closely intertwined. Whereas the old view of power sees it as an object, Foucault sees power more as an integration of relations. It does not emanate from the top down or from the central sphere but is internalized. And instead of directly on the physical body, modern power acts on consciousness. Foucault proposes several ways in which it operates, such as the gaze, discipline and discourse. Feminists have adopted Foucault's theories to interpret the power order of gender. They think that under the influence of male power, females are objectified and otherized. The way in which gender power operates can be concretely skewed provisions on the right to access education, to participate in politics and to inherit property, or it can be understood in more abstract and macro terms such as aesthetics, public opinion and ethics. For example, the gaze, the key of which is the unknowability of power, where women are in a state of permanent insecurity, or a state of being permanently observed. It suggests a psychological power relationship in which the gazer is superior to the gazed upon [10]. Forced to exist through the gaze of others, women's actions are driven by others and thus transformed into an object form. Women are constantly internalizing standards as they are viewed and evaluated, and consciously moving towards normative behaviour [11]. Another form of male power is discipline. In feudal China, there are rigorous 'textbooks' for females such as *The Female Commandment*, *The Inner Discipline*, *The Female Analects*, and *The Female Filial Scriptures*, where the patriarchal society denies their rights to education or the public domain and admonishes them to obey and serve their husbands and families. Those who violate discipline will be punished both legally and morally. In other words, the social othering of women is forcibly determined in the process of establishing male subjectivity. The role of discourse is also illustrated in this example. Men monopolized the right to speak and write then, making their will the mainstream in the court of public opinion and thus exerting pressure on the others. Therefore, under the influence of power, women are no longer a subject with an independent will, but an object and an other. Her mind and body are manipulated, constructed, interfered with and developed according to the standard model given by men.

It follows that for women to break out of this gender power order, they need what the British writer Virginia Woolf called 'a room of one's own' - a separate space free from male interference. After World War II, Japanese women were hampered in the workplace and mostly returned to being housewives. The gender segregation gave them a relatively independent space to develop cultural entertainment exclusively for women, as men were absent for the majority of their daily lives [12]. For example, the Takarazuka Opera Company organized cabaret performances with an all-female cast. Male characters, who are portrayed as elegant and handsome, are played by actresses and designed to please the female audience. The women's subculture had grown, and with it the label 'female-oriented', which was introduced into China. Unlike Japan's rigid gender segregation, in the early years of New China, a women's liberation movement encouraged female employment, and

thus they assumed the dual role of 'iron girl' in society and 'virtuous helper' in the family. The socialist workplace system made Chinese women lead a relatively public life, which meant ubiquitous 'male judges'. In the 1980s, romance novels from Hong Kong and Taiwan, represented by Qiong Yao, swept the mainland. Despite the loosening discourses of class and gender and the emergence of female narratives of gender relations after the reform and opening up, the whole process of their publication, introduction and adaption was under male-dominated censorship. However, the advent of the internet brought huge changes. Compared to reality, the Internet is easy to access and difficult to regulate, with unprecedented ability to disseminate information, which gives users greater freedom of expression and possibly more influence over their words. Therefore, although the Internet is affected by reality, it also opens up a room for new or non-mainstream cultures. Online communities with anonymity, exclusivity and high interaction are built up by like-minded users. In the cyberspace of female-oriented entertainment cultures, patriarchy is progressively questioned and subverted. For instance, traditional female protagonists in Qiong Yao's novels, who are vulnerable, kind, submissive and catering to men, are called 'white lotuses', which is now ironic and demeaning. Women please themselves by becoming subjects of desire, while thinking about how women can establish subjectivity in society and a new ethic of gender relations. Additionally, the Internet has, to some extent, expanded women's discourse in the public sphere. A growing number of female users are quick to voice their opinions on high-profile gender or family ethics issues (e.g. sexual harassment, marriage, maternity leave, etc.) and create a sizeable influence on public opinion. Inspired by female-oriented online literature, they reflect on the mainstream world beyond the text, engage in heated debates with men in public online spaces, and then return to female-oriented spaces to heal and encourage each other before next battle [13].

3. The Evolution of Gender Images

Female-oriented online literature is a grassroots, spontaneous socio-cultural phenomenon in a period of rapid development in China, and the gender images, ethics and perceptions of money it contains deserve careful interpretation [14]. Its evolution is roughly divided into three stages:

The most prevalent at the beginning and still existing mode of romance in female-oriented online literature is 'The President Loves Me'. The main plot of this genre is that of a rich, bossy man who falls in love with an ordinary, naive woman. The gender images in these emerging literary works use stale romance codes. One of the codes is the domineering, cold but affectionate male protagonist, like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* and Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. The female figure is portrayed as kind, innocent and docile, who undergoes many tribulations in the pursuit of happiness. Notably, in these love-oriented novels, money is paradoxically elevated to an unprecedented position. Wealth can be considered as one of the biggest sources of the hero's charisma. As money is a substitute for time, knowledge and labour, the hero is almost omnipotent. Jayashree Kamblé argues that the wealthy protagonists of popular romances symbolise capitalism [15]. And the plot in which the heroine is possessed, judged and violated replicates the reality of patriarchal dominance. Nevertheless, through the hero's relentless pursuit of the heroine, this type of literature expresses the idea that the arrogance of capitalism and patriarchy can be conquered by love. But being loved presupposes the qualities of meekness, endurance and not being tempted by money. Therefore, despite the high demands placed on men in terms of appearance, possessions and fidelity, this model is a fantasy of women who have not escaped their disadvantaged position.

The second model is 'I Am The President'. There are two stages of development in this genre: 'Femdom' and 'Heroine oriented'. The former reverses gender roles by resetting virtual worlds, where the female as the first gender dominates the male destiny. However, this genre is not widely recognized. Because it is too detached from reality, without offering any methods to achieve gender equality but simply repeats gender oppression. The latter focuses on the heroine's journey to success.

The female protagonist is independent, opinionated and intelligent, realizing her ambitions in male-dominated fields such as politics, economics and the military. She also remains sensible in love, with the fulfillment of her own ideals as the first goal. Such literary works and their derivative film and television productions have achieved great commercial success and social attention, such as *Empresses in the palace* (2012), *Legend of Miyue* (2015) and *Ode to Joy* (2016). Some scholars state that the genre breaks the stereotype of a single image of women, challenges the stranglehold of patriarchy and fits the vision of modern young women [16]. Yet, critics believe that the pseudo-masculinity of women instead prevents them from thinking constructively about their existential dilemmas and self-worth [17]. For example, the image of the powerful professional woman, does represent a shift from domestic dependence to social self-actualization. Yet, it seems merely an excellent imitation of male authority; the female perspective, experience and idiosyncrasies are not proved to be an effective means of gaining subjectivity.

The last model is pluralistic coexistence. While the models above persist, two other types are noteworthy. The first type is a response to the predicament of women who can only achieve self-worth outside of marriage by playing men, exemplified by *Mulan Without Elder Brother*. Hua Mulan, a famous woman in feudal China, disguised herself as a man to replace her father and brother who were unable to answer the call for compulsory conscription, and returned home with military success. Nevertheless, the novel explores the untold follow-up: Mulan's plight after returning to family, which is also the plight of young Chinese women, especially the only-girl generation, who are groomed as competitors for social resources but ultimately evaluated by marriage. In the new story, rejected by the marriage market, Mulan decides not to pander to patriarchal rules and continue her career. Through 'the weak perspective' of females, she finds the hidden crisis in a male-determined military system and reforms it to save the country. However, another genre questions the so-called gender nature, represented by BL (Boy's Love) literature. The mainland adopted the Japanese BL culture of "seme (top) x uke (bottom)" at first, a gender power structure similar to "male x female". But this dichotomous characterization is broken now. The seme is given beautiful looks, while the uke has a strong physique and masculinity. Gender no longer constrains an individual's appearance, behaviour, character or responsibilities. In other words, BL literature "experiment with marginalized gender and sexual practices and has played a role in identity formation" [18], and in these experiments female authors express a desire for romantic relationships that are not bound by gender stereotypes [19].

4. The Influence of Commercialization and the Internet

Although the development of female-oriented online literature in China in the last two decades has seen diverse interpretations and imaginations of gender, the feminine consciousness contained therein is not flawless or unhindered. The reconstruction of gender consciousness is slower than expected, with characters or plots that do not conform to notions of gender equality still popular. For example, in the "The President Loves Me" mode, the male protagonist may insult or even violates the female protagonist, or treat her like a pet. The narrative of the female body and image perpetuates the traditionally male-dominated gender order, and as such they have not yet escaped objecthood. For instance, the heroines of romance novels basically have pale skin and slim figures but sexually attractive breasts and hips [20].

In addition, the over-idealization of the heroine seems to make the female return to the object identity. For example, in texts set in a metropolis, the heroine often maintains the perfect balance between a beautiful appearance, a successful career, and a romantic relationship. On the one hand, this fantasy gives the reader a sense of immersion and the pleasure of having their desires fulfilled. On the other hand, the propaganda of this image of modern independent women can be toxic. Because this, like the issue of appearance mentioned above, is an unreasonable or almost impossible

requirement for women to meet. However, the happy ending of the heroine is like saying: If you are like me, you can be happy too. Or more seriously: you should be like me, otherwise you will become unhappy. When captivated by the story, the audience may not be aware of these sinister traps and be subliminally influenced. The same trick is deliberately employed in the advertising of feminine products, such as antiperspirants, cosmetics and luxury goods. The hegemony of mainstream culture is combined with consumerism, and the overly idealistic image of women unifies and raises the aesthetic and self-referential standard of the female audiences, creating their anxiety and insecurity [21]. In this case, even though this is a female-dominated space, the male gaze is still present in their subconscious.

Consumption and the Internet are two important factors that incur the sickness of female-oriented online literature. Literary websites, thanks to the involvement of commercial capital, have transformed from a non-profit communication platforms into a system that integrates authors, sellers and consumers. Operators of literary websites sign up a large number of authors and sell their works to readers in electronic form. Authors are confronted with a factory environment for creation, quantitative evaluation criteria and irresistible incentives [22]. There are mandatory requirements for writing and publishing: new works must define their genre, e.g. urban, time-travel, fantasy etc. Depending on the elements of the work, there are often more than a dozen detailed categories, and those that go beyond the categories are not accepted. The mainstream profitable networking platforms 'internalise the forms of violence and alienation' [23], where writers go from pure hobby to selling their labour power. Like formats in television production, they arguably reduce autonomous creativity [24], and specialized assembly lines produced large-scale, standardized literary works. Moreover, the evaluation criteria have changed from nebulous artistic value to concrete numbers of reader clicks, subscriptions and rewards, which can be converted directly into income for the author. Literary websites also improve incentives by classifying authors into different levels and granting stipends for popularity rankings. Hence, the industrialization of online literature has made creative autonomy undermined by the logic of capital [25].

The Internet as a medium and its communication characteristics also have a profound impact on female-oriented online literature. Firstly, the high interactivity of cyberspace allows literary websites to adapt their products in a timely manner. Literary websites give readers the power to read, comment, favorite, reward and recommend texts. For the author, readers' feedback may influence her future writing; For the operator, data on reader behavior will be monitored and used to predict the direction of the market. Secondly, the accessibility of the Internet has broadened the scope of the audience. The major literary platforms adopt a 'sinking user' strategy, focusing on users with relatively low literacy levels in undeveloped cities [26]. These potential consumers are numerous and tend to be more attracted to the Cinderella-style fantasy of love. With the choice in the hands of readers and operators seeking to maximize profit, it is difficult for female authors to maintain a passion for deeper thinking and innovation. The space for innovative or non-mainstream works is compressed. Online literature becomes thus standardized and homogenized, which may explain the stagnation of gender reconstruction.

5. Conclusion

This paper begins with an analysis of the traditional gender power order, drawing on Foucault's theory of power. It then explains the origins of the "female-oriented" culture and how Chinese women use the internet to create independent spaces and expand their discourse. The evolution of gender images and ethics in online female-oriented literature is divided into three stages. The female characters portrayed therein are increasingly independent, intelligent, calm and socially competitive, with gender stereotypes gradually disintegrating. Despite the awakening of female consciousness, the objectification of women and the homogenization of literary works due to the

influence of the internet and consumerism hinder the process of gender reconstruction. This paper analyses the issue mainly from the perspective of authors and literary website operators, but not from the perspective of readers. Hence, future research could further address the identity and experiences of the readers, their reading experience and the impact of the text on them. For example, the link between modern Chinese women with the conflicting feelings between family and career, especially the first heiresses under the family planning policy, and female-oriented online literature.

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