

On the Influence of the Narrative Structure of Public Case Novels in Ming and Qing Dynasties on Modern Network Literature: With *Shi Gong Case* as the Core

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doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2023.08.12

Abstract

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the peak period of the development of public case novels, a large number of excellent works of public case novels were produced. During this period, public case novels were different in their narrative structure and focus, which had a direct impact on the transformation and evolution of public case novels in various historical periods, providing a structural model and acceptance basis for the networked development of “Chinese detective novels” and “martial arts novels”. The rise of the online novel works in recent years has inherited and innovated various aspects of Ming and Qing court case novels. This article will analyze the critical inheritance relationship between the two based on the current situation of online literary works.

Keywords: public case novel, online novel, narrative

1. Introduction

In traditional Chinese literature, classical literature has achieved the highest achievement. Classical literature still holds a pivotal position in today's society. Almost all excellent Chinese writers have received the baptism and influence of classical literature. In today's rapidly developing internet technology, online literature has become an important component of popular culture. Although online literature is considered by scholars to be a product of postmodern society, it has countless connections with classical literature in terms of content and form.

During the process of reading online literary works, readers can clearly feel that online literature is ultimately a “cross-time and space

regression” of classical literature. In online literary works, it reflects the combination of classical literature and online literature under the “new historical conditions.”

Public case novels, as an important component of classical novels, have been circulating for a long time in mainland China. Public case novels originated from the Song and Yuan dynasties and are a type of novel that depicts the process of government investigation. With the re-integration of the four genres of public case novels during the Song and Yuan dynasties, “public case novels” gradually became an independent literary genre. With the continuous development of literary history, the number of public case novels continues to increase, and the quality of works has also been significantly

improved. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the content coverage of public case novels became increasingly extensive, and the writing technique changed from single narrative to dual narrative. From the perspective of narrative structure, the influence of the narrative structure of classical novels on online literature is extremely profound. This article will take the public case novels in classical novels as an example, mainly discussing the impact of Ming and Qing public case novels on modern online literature from the perspective of narrative structure.

2. The Narrative Structure of Ming and Qing Public Case Novels

As a representative of classical novels, the narrative structure of public case novels has distinct characteristics of the times. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, as the heyday of the development of public case novels, a large number of excellent works were born. Famous representative works include *Shi Gong Case*, *Di Gong Case*, *Peng Gong Case*, and *The Three Heroes and Five Righteousness*. During this period, public case novels were no longer limited to internal descriptions of stories such as “government trial”, “grievances on the execution ground”, “tracing the true culprit”, and “dream-solving cases”. Instead, they added content such as “social hotspots”, “characteristics of the times”, “relationship between officials and the people”, and “spiritual thoughts”. As the content expands, the plot expression of public case novels continues to strengthen. In order to better present the plot of the story, the author no longer adopts a simple narrative technique of single narration.

The narrative content of Ming and Qing public case novels is different from before, and it is no longer limited to praising government officials for their diligence in handling cases and serving the people with righteousness. In the Ming and Qing official case novels, the relationship between monarchs and subjects and the relationship between the military and the people were also reflected in them. In the *Shi Gong Case*, the attitude of officials represented by Shi Shilun towards the emperor represents the unequal relationship between monarchs and subjects under the feudal system. In Ming and Qing court novels, feudal officials, except for the protagonist, rarely possess “populism” and “empathy”. Whether officials choose to help the people at the bottom of the line to seek justice

and cry out should be based on their own political compromise, which is discussed in the *Shi Gong Case*, *Hai Gong Case*, and *The Three Heroes and Five Righteousness*.

Shi Shilun in *Shi Gong Case* lived in a more prosperous era of economic life-the prosperous period of the Kangxi and Qianlong periods, whether compared to the mid-Ming Dynasty official Hai Rui in *Hai Gong Case* or the early Northern Song Dynasty official Bao Gong in *The Three Heroes and Five Righteousness*. Reasonably speaking, the social environment in *Shi Gong Case* is superior to that in works from other periods. Shi Shilun in *Shi Gong Case* lived in a more prosperous era of economic life-the prosperous period of the Kangxi and Qianlong periods, whether compared to the mid Ming Dynasty official Hai Rui in *Hai Gong Case* or the early Northern Song Dynasty official Bao Gong in *The Three Heroes and Five Righteousness*. Reasonably speaking, the social environment in *Shi Gong Case* is superior to that in works from other periods. It is precise because of the strong contrast between this “concept and reality” that a profession specialized in chivalry and justice, besides “honest officials”, has naturally emerged — “Xiake”. In the narrative of *Shi Gong Case*, the combination of honest officials who “understand how to handle cases” and chivalrous individuals who “act on behalf of heaven” often appear together.

The relationship between Shi Shilun and Huang Tianba in the original work. In the same case, it is often the combination of “Xiake Charge” and “Clean Official Closure” that interweave and blend, gradually giving rise to the unique “bilinear” characteristics of this novel’s narrative. In public case novels, the author uses one or two plot changes as the trigger to quickly connect individual cases, and then uses certain specific “coincidences” to explain the general direction of the narrative results, arousing readers’ interest in reading. The two narrative lines of “bilinear”, driven by the narrative arrangement, force each line to connect, thus logically connecting the story. The protagonist team completes the main plot of the case, thereby establishing a model and upright official image of “applying formulas” in the minds of readers. The narrative results have elevated the status of the government in the hearts of the people and elevated it to the theme of the times that “power organs should eliminate violence and ensure good governance”.

The narrative structure and genre of public case novels during the Ming and Qing dynasties gradually transitioned from the narrative mode of "single linear narrative" in short classical Chinese notes to the narrative mode of "segmented" and "bilinear". As a typical representative work of this period, the narrative structure of *Shi Gong Case* has a profound impact. This narrative technique did not disappear completely with the progress of history and the literary revolution. In the mid-20th century, with the development of the times and changes in the aesthetic taste of the people, China's public case novels gradually split into detective novels and martial arts novels. The ideological basis for the audience's acceptance of these emerging detective novels and martial arts novels comes from Chinese classical novels. The cultural traditions promoted in classical novels have laid the ideological foundation for readers in the 20th century and beyond to accept the plot of "suspense", "detective", "chivalry", and "martial arts" in online literature. The chivalrous plot and detective plot in later novels mainly rely on the history and culture in traditional classical novels. The narrative techniques of public case novels provide a reference for the narrative writing of online literature after the emergence of public case novels. The online literature works created using classical literature resources draw inspiration from the unique narrative structure of classical literature, completing the inheritance and innovation of classical literature.

2.1 The Temporal Characteristics of Narration in Ming and Qing Public Case Novels

In the narrative of Ming and Qing public case novels, the description of time and space movement can be transferred based on all time and location conditions. According to Lessing's famous quote, "Painting depicts objects juxtaposed in space, while poetry narrates action plots that continue in time." (Lessing, 1988) The narrative sequence in online novels is also the same. In online literary works, narration starts from a specific plot, undergoes transitions, and ultimately ends in a specific chapter, where it is solved for specific reasons and timing. The narrative plot has a relationship with the reader's thoughts at the moment they pick up the book to read. This correspondence between "Things and Me" can make readers feel as if they are in the midst of something, yet feel powerless and constrained by the heavy reality.

The reader ultimately concludes the journey of 'Things and Me' with the perfect arrangement of the novel's ending.

2.1.1 Sequential

In Ming and Qing Dynasty detective novels, the opening chapter often introduces the personal information of the protagonist. (Chen Pingyuan, 2010) In classical novels such as *Shi Gong Case*, which mainly focus on the genre of public cases, the first chapter generally introduces the personal information of the main officials, such as their "surname and name," "family situation," "living conditions," "geographical location of the government," "years of office," and "administrative duties. In specific narratives, the plot is mostly based on the protagonist's official career as a clue. The protagonist's promotion or demotion brings about a concurrent narrative. The narrator's camera follows the strange stories and cases encountered by the protagonist on his way to promotion. The protagonist needs to be inspired and solve the cases one by one with the assistance of an assistant or after the deity "dreams to dream". In the narrative of *Shi Gong Case*, the prelude revolves around the serial headless murder case discovered by the protagonist Shi Shilun during his tenure as an official in Jiangdu county. Taking Shi Shilun's promotion as a clue, this article narrates the story of county official Shi Shilun capturing the treacherous monk Jiuhuang, the seductive nun Qizhu, and the twelve Japanese pirates. And these "bilinear" narratives in the early stages are actually intended to lead to the appearance of the "Green Forest Hero Huang Tianba". After Huang Tianba was willing to work as an assistant for Shi Shilun, the combination of "Xiake+Qingguan" was able to embark on a detective journey. With Shi Shilun's promotion, he encountered numerous cases along the way, and this narrative structure reflects the sequential characteristics of classical literary narration. (Andy Pu, 1996)

2.1.2 Foresight

In the introduction of *Shi Gong Case* — "Hu Xiucan complained that his skull was lost", the protagonist Shi Shilun saw "seven pigs" and "nine birds" under the leadership of "dream". This prescient foreshadowing adds some metaphysical color to the integrity of the narrative. After Hu Xiucan reported to the official, Shi Shilun a line of people after a series

of verification finally confirmed the name of “nine yellow” and “seven pearls” two people’s unbearable relationship. Hu Xiucui’s parents in the temple gods’ confession, accidentally found two people unbearable adultery and finally killed two people. This kind of prophetic foreshadowing through the “metonymy” of the name gives people enlightenment at the end of the narrative and adds interest to reading. This situation is often reflected in classical literature. For example, the name Jia Yucun in *A Dream of Red Mansions* presciently points out his “false language existence”.

In the case of Peng Gong, “Peng Gong uncovered the murder of Liu Fengqi’s first wife”, foresight is reflected in the repeated appearance of images. Peng Gong dreamed of City God Temple, land father-in-law and female ghost in his dream. Guided by the characters in his dream, he saw a peony that was about to die being washed away by heavy rain. Because of this image, Peng Gong was immediately inspired to find the culprit. It can be seen that in the narrative of the public case novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the dream that occurs before the truth is not unrelated to reality, and has full foresight. This narrative technique belongs to the forethought flashback technique, and this technique is widely used in the narration of case solving in the novels of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. On the surface, the protagonist solves the case by the coincidence of “accidentally bumping into”, “in the dark” or “dream memory”, but in fact, the author uses a large number of predictive flashbacks to narrate.

It can be seen from the above examples that foresight in ancient literary works is not only reflected in the “metaphorical foresight” of character names, but also in the “coincidence foresight” of images. This point is also common in today’s network literature.

2.2 Narrative Perspective and Narrative Mode of the Public Case Novels of Ming and Qing Dynasties

2.2.1 Narrator

The narrative subject of the Ming and Qing public case novels is a person. This person can be the subject of the event or an observer. (Lu Xun, 1998)

In works such as *Shi Gong Case* and *The Three Heroes and Five Righteousness*, the third person narrative is mainly used. The opening of the story in *Shi Gong Case* often quotes the word “and says”, and the ending is “and listens to the

next chapter to decompose”, which means that the third-person narrator is an observer and “omniscient”, looking down on the entire narrative process from the perspective of God. The narrator himself has neither personally participated in the case nor fully understood the various relationships and kinship clues between each specific character. This third person narrator perspective facilitates readers to fully understand the narrative content and comprehend the author’s creative intention. When we read classical literary works, we are accustomed to having a narrator lead us, and this way of thinking is also passed down when reading online literary works.

2.2.2 Narrative Approach

The narrator makes their interpretation and comments when narrating the story plot, and makes corresponding explanations for their value judgments. The narrator uses a certain narrative method to input certain values into the reader, ultimately achieving the narrative purpose. In the *Shi Gong Case*, the narrator discloses his identity as the narrator to the reader as soon as Huang Tianba appears. The narrator makes interpretive judgments about the characters and conveys them to the audience. These interpretations include the characters’ attire, behavioral characteristics, and others’ evaluations. Under this narrative style, readers make judgments and perceptions about the newly appeared characters, and infer about the upcoming storyline. The author uses the phrase ‘listen to the next chapter decomposition’ between chapters to induce the audience to continue to be influenced by the narrator. When new characters appear, the author opens the story with the phrase ‘say, there is one...’ between each event to arouse readers’ interest in reading. First, give someone a concept that this person has nothing to do with the previous text. Insert the phrase ‘mentioned in the previous chapter...’ in its narrative to highlight the overlap between new characters and old events, triggering a spatiotemporal connection between the events. These narrative methods can first establish the character images in the narrative and guide the audience or readers to form conclusions.

3. Inheritance and Innovation of the Narrative Structure of Ming and Qing Public Case Novels in Modern Network Literature

3.1 The Inheritance of Modern Online Novels from

Traditional Public Case Novels

The famous linguist Roman Jakobson once said, "Language and writing cannot provide the full meaning of communication activities, and a large part of the gains from communication comes from your language environment." (Terrence Hawkes, 2008) It is precisely this understanding derived from the cultural context and the unique perception of the Chinese language that brings communication in the context of modern online novels closer to cultural traditions. In real society, developed network communication tends to lead people's communication methods towards a single online communication. With the popularization of electronic readers, online literature has become more popular among readers. In the dissemination of online literature, foreign words, and cultures are prevalent, and the excessive invasion of foreign cultures conflicts with the increasing national confidence, causing domestic readers to awaken their self-awareness towards the "cultural identity" of their nation. Chinese people feel that their traditional culture is being weakened and oppressed, and this phenomenon urgently needs to be changed. By leveraging the speed and timeliness of internet dissemination, online literature authors immediately discovered this pain point and turned one after another to the creation of "quasi-classical literature" novels. In recent years, a large number of "back to the ancient tide" and "classical fever" have emerged in network literature works, which is also a disguised behavior of returning to the cultural matrix. In terms of structure, network literature works largely adopt the narrative structure of classical literature works, and continue the sequential and sequential characteristics of classical novels.

In the creation of fan network novels of the Koan type, network literature works embody the characteristics of combining "historical time and space" with "imaginary time and space". Koan fan fiction is a kind of re-interpretation novel which is imagined and invented by modern network novel authors after reading the classical original works. Up to now, the public case novels and humanistic works of network novels have involved various fields of network literature works, such as the humanistic novel *Continuation of the Gong Case* and the humanistic novel *Shi Lun and Cider*. Most of the humanistic works derived from the theme of public case novels continue the similar plot of "case

handling", and continue the "third person" narrative technique of classical novels in the narrative perspective. But in online literature, the narrative perspective can change. Stories accompanied by "time travel" are often narrated in both the first and third person. Network literature still adopts the sequential method in the narrative order. In the plot of the "martial arts" novels in network literature, the sequential characteristics reflected in Shi Gong Case are inherited. The sequence of the hero's capture of the thief is accompanied by the time sequence of the hero's initial career to promotion. It is similar to the promotion process of Shi Shilun in the Shi Gong Case. Huang Tianba darts Wu Tianqiu, Huang Shi two people repeatedly solved the strange case in Shun Tianfu, promoted to the governor of Tongzhou warehouse factory, was ordered to transfer Shandong relief, Huang, He two people help, and finally captured the thief of grain, Huang Longji, Luo like tiger, Hou Seven, Xie Hu, and other criminals on the way back to Beijing, and finally obtained the emperor's order of promotion. The twists and turns of the story always revolve around the sequence from "past" to "present".

3.2 Innovation and Innovation of Online Public Case Novels

3.2.1 The Value Structure of the Network Case Novel

Since the Opium War in 1840 opened the door to modern China, Western literary works have been widely introduced into the eyes of Chinese people from all directions. The first batch of Western detective novels, led by Edgar Allan POE's. The Golden Beetle, entered the Chinese market. Due to the influx of a large number of foreign novels, Chinese local public case novel readers have gradually been influenced by it and accepted the novel form of "combining detective and investigation". At the same time, the trend introduced also led to the acceptance of the diversified culture of the world by ordinary people, so that their minds were inspired. In the 1930s, Chinese local writers entered the transitional period of self-creation of detective novels. Detective novels in this period did not copy the form and narrative structure of foreign detective novels but mainly continued the episode-like bilinear narrative technique of public case novels in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. There is no blind copy of Western detective novels' "too much involved in criminal psychology and law" content. The literary works

of this period still focus on the mode of handling “official cases” under China’s national conditions. Before the advent of the rule of law society, a series of local “detective” works still adopt the “strange case” model in essence. The appeal of novels in this period to readers stems from readers’ psychological identification with the national spirits of “loyalty to the king” and “An Bang” in Chinese culture.

On the other hand, following the chivalric public case novels, Wuxia novels no longer stick to the main plot description of “solving crimes”, but pay more attention to the description of “chivalric spirit” and “anti-oppression struggle”. The people in the works have changed the image of “pedantic”, “oppressed”, and “dare to anger and dare not speak” in the past. This phenomenon shows that the new martial arts novels have adopted a critical inheritance of the classical novels. In the martial arts novels of the Republic of China, such works as the Legend of XX have obvious traces of inheritance compared with the public case novels of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The plot is still in the “hero revenge”, “all the way to kill the enemy”, “chivalrously”, and “killing the mob and good”, followed the Ming and Qing Dynasty public case novels (such as *Shi Gong Case* in Huang Tianba) characters have a “strong Chinese traditional rivers and lakes” color.

In modern network literature works, both historical detective novels and historical traversal novels adopt the attitude of “taking the essence and discarding the dross” towards the value structure of classical literature. In the *Shi Gong Case*, the protagonists Shi Shilun and Huang Tianba rely entirely on the power of feudal officials in the process of cracking down on evil forces. The author has a clear political stance and vigorously advocates for the sages of the current rulers. The people are generally portrayed as pedantic and ignorant, constantly relying on the government to eradicate evil and violence, completely underestimating the social power and progressive thinking of the working people. In the public case novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties, officials responsible for handling cases often willingly and humbly bowed to the ruling class. The unequal relationship between power institutions is fully reflected here. In the 85th chapter of the *Shi Gong Case*, it is said that “the emperor received Shi Shilun in court”. After the meeting, the emperor saw Shi Shilun kneeling on the ground

and gave him a kneeling pad to sit on. But Shi Shilun panicked and quickly kowtowed, taking the mat with both hands, but didn’t dare to sit down. He sat on his ankle all the way. The protagonist’s “servile mentality” is fully demonstrated in this description. The “detective” works in modern online literature are different. Modern online literature has made a critical inheritance of this feudal psychological phenomenon. The ruling class in modern online literature not only loves the people like children but also has equal personal dignity with superiors, which is demonstrated in the creation of peers.

3.2.2 The Narrative Techniques of Online Crime Novels

In the era of the Internet, the works of online writers have borrowed more or less from the narrative mode of classical literature in terms of narrative techniques. Under the critical inheritance of online novel authors, they have developed a new approach to writing “online new public case novels”, mainly based on travelogues, with diverse narrative perspectives and more frequent changes in time and space.

Among them, these three forms of online literature are particularly common: the first type is “pre-biographical and follow-up online crime novels”. Taking *Shi Gong Case* as an example, readers of the novel have expanded it to include *Shi Gong Pre-Biography*, *Shi Gong Post-Biography*, and *A Pillow Case of Mystery* in the process of re-creation. The narrative in online literature is no longer limited to a historical time and space, it can shuttle freely between the time and space of history and fantasy. In the *Shi Gong Hou Case*, the author brings real-life characters from history into the modern online gaming world, and the full text describes the protagonist’s experience of constantly breaking through levels through game upgrades. This itself is no longer limited to the historical and temporal framework of classical literary narrative. The second form is “online crime novels that travel through time and space”. In such novels, the narrative perspective is no longer a single first person or third person, and the narrative perspective of soul-crossing novels often has the characteristic of fluidity. In this type of work, the soul of modern people passes through ancient people, and “elaboration” from the perspective of modern people is called first-person narrative. When encountering “lightning” or “lightning strike” and then crossing back to modern times,

the narrator often becomes a third-person narrative. The narrative perspective has strong fluidity. The third form is "original character-based online crime novels". In such novels, the narrative is completed by the author's newly created virtual characters. Virtual characters often have the ability to predict the future due to being exposed to "skylight", and can complete case solving in dreams, which draws inspiration from the narrative plot of "dream case solving" in classical literature. In *A Pillow Case of Mystery*, Shi Shilun originally lived during the Kangxi period and suddenly crossed into the clouds in a dream to meet the modern intelligent robot "Pillow Immortal". Complete the narrative with clues prompted by the virtual character "Pillow Immortal". Its narrative technique has not adopted the traditional "episodic style" to spread out. (Chen Pingyuan, 2010) The narrative sequence is no longer coherent, the narrative events are no longer independent, and the mystery ultimately resides in real society. This innovation makes the narrative types of online literature no longer "formulaic".

4. Conclusion

The relationship between classical literature, represented by the Ming and Qing official case novels, and modern online literature is not a "split" relationship, but rather a "fission" and "influence" relationship between the two. The research on "online literature" discussed in this article also emerged in the context of China's local cultural environment. In the study of local literary creation, various forms of literature reflect the overall changes and fluctuations of literature in a specific era. When the Ming and Qing official case novels entered modern and even contemporary society as classical literary styles, the research on the modern fission of classical models in the literary world also began at the same time. The narrative mode, logic, and creative consciousness of classical literature form the cultural foundation of modern Chinese online novels. Series of novels such as "detective writing", "martial arts style", and "crossing the tide" can all find cultural origins and the "roots" of narrative modes in them.

With the rise of the innovative form of traditional detective novels "online detective novels", the relationship between classical detective novels and modern works has been brought closer. The pursuit of "loyalty", "bravery", "righteousness", and "reason" in

traditional literature has been continued in online literary works. Public case novels underwent the baptism of "criticism of old evil" and "reduction of reactionary plot" in the early stage of liberation and ultimately left a contrast and reference for future literature as an independent unit. Multiple genres of novels in modern online literature have inherited and surpassed to varying degrees the narrative mode of the chapter style and the narrative structure of the double line segment, which has had a positive impact on avoiding the "circle like" of public case novels. Modern online literature has modernized and networked classical works with its huge user base and reading rate. The inheritance of online literature from classical literature also provides opportunities and challenges for the re-exploration of traditional literature.

The real historical events and characters in public case novels, as well as cultural factors such as legal systems and folk customs, have been modernized in online literary works, providing readers with reference for understanding the evolution of ancient and modern laws and the replacement of social forms. In the evaluation system of online novels, there is neither suppression of the modern development of public case novels nor rejection of them. History and virtuality are linked together, and online literature uses its popular tone to narrate local characteristic cultures, helping to revive traditional literature. Online literature inherits classical literature without imposing esoteric or ancient customs. This trend not only shed the ideological cloak of "servility" and "feudalism" in classical literature but also made public case works more easily accepted and recognized by readers in modern public ideology, thereby inspiring people to engage in deeper learning and exploration of classical literature.

This article provides a brief review and summary of the inheritance relationship between online literature and the narrative structure of Ming and Qing public case novels. In modern society where online literature is constantly developing, I have also experienced the continuous progress and changes of the times through the evolution of literary carriers. In the continuous changes in literary carriers and modes of dissemination, the role and significance of classical literature are also constantly evolving. The academic community

still has mixed opinions on the popularization and typification of online literature. I believe that the value of online literature is of great significance for the survival of the classical cultural spirit. The inheritance and innovation of classical literature in online literature have promoted the wave of national creation. In fact, the writers of network literature and classical literature have a kind of “emotional common” that spans thousands of years of time and space. This ‘commonality’ is not only a bridge between classical and modern communication but also a practical way of cultural and historical evolution. The changes between ancient and modern times are concentrated here.

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