

Narrative Strategies for Quality Chinese Web Series

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Abstract: Narrative is an important factor of a web drama, and a good narrative strategy can attract audiences and promote web dramas towards excellence. Taking web dramas with a Douban score of 8 or above from 2019 to date as an example. Douban is a community website. It started as a book and video site, providing information about books, films, music and other works, both descriptions and reviews provided by users. This paper explores and deciphers the narrative strategies of quality Chinese web dramas, using the content analysis method and case study method to explore the development background, narrative content and narrative structure of Chinese web dramas in three aspects. The bold innovation in narrative content and structure of quality Chinese web dramas expands the public's vision and enhances the audience's aesthetics, while making the cultural connotation of web dramas richer and more diversified.

Keywords: Quality Chinese web drama, Narrative strategy, Boutique.

1. Background of the Development of Chinese Web Dramas

Looking at the current academic research on the innovative development of current web dramas, we mostly focus on individual subject categories for research, for example, exploring the transformation of online suspense dramas. The second is for targeted research on a specific aspect of web drama narratives, such as youth narratives and suspense narratives. In addition, contemporary research has emerged to explore new perspectives on the narratives of domestic web dramas, but there is less research on the overall innovation and changes in the narratives of domestic web dramas under new perspectives, so research is conducted on this topic.

Web dramas were born out of the development of the Internet and have evolved with it. Since then, with the broadcast of self-produced web dramas, these web dramas have gained the love of many young netizens with their spoof and banter style. The year 2014 was the "blowout" period for Chinese web dramas, with a wide variety of web dramas being broadcast on various platforms, and the total number of web dramas broadcast in this year could exceed 205. As a result, this has led to a great deal of thought and discussion about web dramas, and a variety of definitions of the concept of "web drama". In *"An Analysis of Audiovisual Programme Genres"*, scholar Zhang Jian synthesised the definitions of web dramas given by most scholars and industry professionals, and defined the concept of "web drama" as: independent, co-operative or commissioned production by video websites, using new online media as the main broadcasting platform, using drama as the aesthetic form, showing in-depth historical, social and life aspects, and giving people a general impression of the world[1]. It is a genre of audiovisual programmes that provide a deep and universal experience of life, and whose audience is mainly targeted at young Internet users. This thesis is also based on this concept to further investigate the narrative strategies of Chinese web dramas.

In 2015, domestic web series were developed on a large scale, and the development of film and television adaptations of IP has become the main source of content for web series to

date. The number of IP adaptations in the Top 50 web dramas in 2016 was 21, up 42% compared to 2015, and the total broadcast traffic also increased by 78% compared to 2015. However, with the boom in IP adaptations, the problems of Chinese web dramas have also been gradually exposed, leading people to think about them. "Traffic is king" became the main feature of web dramas at the time. In 2019, with the development of the new media era, Chinese web dramas began to rethink. A number of quality Chinese web dramas emerged. All these web series have scored above 8 on Douban. This shows that audiences' aesthetics have returned to rationality, and that "word-of-mouth" is more important than "flow".

Since 2014, Chinese web series have developed over a period of nine years. Today, Chinese web dramas have become a major genre of audiovisual programming, and the audience base has expanded from point to point. With content as the most important principle and audience preferences as the key to development, web drama production has developed through twists and turns, and has formed a narrative strategy with its own unique characteristics.

2. Narrative Content

2.1. Genre fusion of " +emotional"

Emotion is one of the main themes of web dramas, with a huge audience base. The web drama is mainly about the relationship of the main character, showing the love story of the hero and heroine meeting each other, with "sweetness" as the main feature. The number of web dramas with emotional themes in 2021 was 120, accounting for 60% of all web dramas launched in the year. The number of web dramas with emotional themes will be 120 in 2021, accounting for 60% of all web dramas launched in the year. Because of this, web dramas with such themes will show a certain degree of homogenization and schematization, which will also reduce the creative activity and richness of web dramas.

The web series *"Someday or One day"* and *"The Imperial Coroner"* are a good blend of the genres of "suspense + emotion" and both have a Douban rating of above 8. These two webisodes overlay suspense elements with emotions,

with the main content being a mystery and the emotional threads being supplemented by the emotional threads of the main characters into the mystery story. The web series "*Lovely us*" and "*I Don't Want to Be Friends with You*" fuse the elements of "youth group" with emotions, portraying many vivid, flesh-and-blood characters by showing their changing understanding of family, friendship. The play is a realistic story, not a "landscape youth" suspended on top of the real youth life.

The "+emotional" genre fusion of quality web series is about overlaying different genre elements and trying to avoid a single genre narrative. This can inject some vitality and freshness into Chinese web series, while avoiding the proliferation of homogenised web series episodes. Genre fusion allows for a more diverse narrative content and a stronger social orientation of the web series.

2.2. Bold and innovative original scripts

Since 2015 to the present, direct film and television production of popular IPs that carry their own heat and flow is still the mainstream at present. But by looking at the top 25 Douban-rated Chinese web dramas, we find that 12 of them are original scripts. 110 original scripted web dramas in 2021, accounting for 55% of all works, also shows that the market vitality of original web dramas is on the rise.

Aired on Tencent, "*Delicious Romance*" puts the narrative perspective above the female perspective, focusing on the urban life of a group of adult women, shaping four different female images and showing how women with different personalities solve problems in the face of problems. Focusing on the perspective of civilians, "*Lovely us*" uses fragmented narrative to bring out the story of five teenagers' youthful growth in Shude Family Home.

The original scripted series stands out from the crowd of IP adaptations of web series, which shows that a good series cannot be produced without a good scriptwriter, and that a well-written and logical script is more likely to produce a high quality film or TV work.

2.3. Unusual characterisation

With the spread of the Internet, the 'youth subculture' has gradually come into the limelight. The Birmingham School defines the concept of "subculture" as "a meaningful and distinctive negotiation within a broader cultural species. They correspond to the particular status, ambiguities, and specific contradictions that certain social groups encounter within the larger social and historical structure"[2].

As the young generation, which has grown up with the Internet, has become the main audience of web dramas, the production of Chinese web dramas has focused on the "youth subculture", providing a richer range of material for the creation of web drama content. This group seeks stories with a rebellious spirit, deconstructing the sublime, deconstructing tradition and liberating individuality.

Compared to traditional TV dramas, there are anti-traditional genre characters in web dramas. In traditional dramas, the main character is a man and a woman, with the male character being handsome and wealthy and the female character being gentle and beautiful. With the emergence of web dramas, these stereotypical images of the main characters are gradually being broken down.

In 2016, the web drama "*Addicted*" was broadcast on online platforms, opening up the era of "double male leads" in web

dramas. Since then, with the phenomenal airing of such dramas, double male lead dramas have become one of the highly competitive genres in Chinese web dramas.

Double male dramas have two male protagonists, a break from the usual set-up of one male and one female protagonist. Their characters' personalities are often opposite, so there is a lot of friction and bickering at first. Most of their characters' relationships range from a casual acquaintance at the beginning to a lifelong confidant who understands each other through thick and thin.

Double male dramas subvert the traditional characterisation, and the contrasting characterisation can add a certain amount of drama and tension to the actors' performances. These web dramas can well meet women's aesthetic expectations and psychological needs for perfect men, so the female demographic is the main audience for double male web dramas.

3. Narrative Structure

Narrative structure is one of the most important elements of a screenplay, and its use in a screenplay helps the scriptwriter to better conceptualise and tell the story. Narrative structure is the order in which the narrative elements are presented to the reader or audience. A good narrative structure presents the narrative elements well, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the story and to think about it. The narrative structure of a quality Chinese web series is imaginative and innovative, making it an eye-opener for audiences and the industry alike.

3.1. Multi-linear crossover narrative structure

Unlike the more linear narratives used in traditional dramas, the narrative structure allows for a more three-dimensional and comprehensive story, and a richer characterisation, revealing the complexity of the characters. At the same time, it creates a 'dialogue' between the drama and the audience, with the intertwining of plots and the search for the truth with the characters, increasing the audience's interest[3].

The web series "*The long night*" is a multi-line crossover narrative structure, constructing three narrative time periods, namely Hou Guiping (2000), Jiang Yang (2003-2010) and YAN Liang (2010). The story begins with the accidental death of prosecutor Jiang Yang, whose body is dumped in the underground, creating a flashback of suspense. In the year 2010, Yan Liang begins to investigate the truth of Jiang Yang's death, leading to the investigation of the "suicide" of Hou Guiping, who was closely related to the underground body dumping case, which was carried out by Jiang Yang and Detective Zhu Wei for seven years.

The intersecting narrative structure creates suspense and conflict, and the seemingly disparate threads of mystery enhance the plot of the drama while creating a sense of urgency for the audience to know the truth, bringing the drama closer to the audience and increasing the discussion of the drama, attracting more viewers to watch.

3.2. The "Möbius Ring" of the circular narrative structure

Emerson's interpretation of the Möbius ring is that "cause and effect, means and end, seed and fruit cannot be separated. " The ring narrative structure places the cause of the story within the effect, with the beginning and the end connected to

form a closed loop in time and space[4].

Through the use of a circular narrative structure, the web drama "*Someday or One day*" presents to the audience the amazing love between Huang Yuxuan, who is in 2019, and Li Ziwei, who is in 1998. The film begins with Huang Yuxuan, whose boyfriend Wang Quansheng passed away in 2019. By chance, Huang Yuxuan falls asleep listening to an old Walkman from the past, which becomes an opportunity for her to travel back in time and become Chen Yunru in 1998. In 1998, she falls in love with the lively and cheerful Li Ziwei, and this becomes the reason why Li Ziwei crosses over in order to find Huang Yuxuan and become Wang Quansheng. The crossing of the two becomes a cause and effect for each other, a Möbius ring is thus formed that is difficult to unravel.

This narrative structure has a set narrative space, the story will all take place in this Möbius ring, and the fate of the main character is already predetermined, with a strong sense of fatalism. At the same time, this reflects the proposition of 'self-identity'. As in Lacan's mirror theory, the self is known through the other[5]. The protagonist will gradually strengthen his connection with others in the closed loop, renew his feelings and experiences, and complete the reinvention of himself through one experience after another.

4. Conclusion

Watching web dramas is becoming one of the main ways for people to relax and enjoy themselves. Quality web series that make good use of a blend of different subject genres, resulting in a richer and more diverse narrative with a stronger social point of view. Quality web dramas are taking a different

approach by using original and logical stories as scripts, which not only brings a "fresh stream" to the industry, but also increases the level of creative activity. As the youth generation has become the main audience for web dramas, quality web dramas are good at expanding the scope of material to include "youth subculture" works according to audience preferences, catering to the psychological needs of young netizens. In terms of narrative structure, quality web dramas use exciting narrative structures to carry their storylines with great imagination and innovation. Nowadays, web dramas are becoming more boutique and blockbuster productions, and quality web dramas will continue to emerge, enriching the diversity of subject matter, expanding the horizons of the audience and enhancing their aesthetic abilities

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