Original Paper

The Innovation and Cultural Value of the Rebirth Motif in Network Fantasy Novels

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Abstract

The writing of rebirth motif in network fantasy novels draws on the cultural connotations inherited from ancient times, and links them closely to the reality and culture of the times in which they are written. This article explores the innovation of the rebirth motif in network fantasy novels from two aspects, the trigger mechanism and the mode of rebirth, and clarifies the transformation of contemporary thinking and cultural values reflected behind it.

Keywords

rebirth motif, network fantasy novels, cultural value

1. Introduction

In the 1990s, the translations of Western fantasy novels such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* prompted the sprouting of Chinese network fantasy novels. After decades of development, the creation of Chinese network fantasy novels has evolved from the initial imitation and borrowing to the formation of local characteristics. With a large number of works, a wide range of content topics, a large audience, and hot IP adaptations, network fantasy novels are showing a flourishing scene and are beginning to go beyond the borders of China and spread overseas.

One of the reasons why Chinese network fantasy novels have flourished is that they have absorbed and borrowed the essence of traditional Chinese literature, including the motifs that have been passed down from ancient times to the present. Among these motifs, the rebirth motif has become the most common one because of its surreal and supernatural properties, which are in line with the bizarre and mysterious textual characteristics of network fantasy novels.

2. Origin and Definition of Rebirth Motif

In primitive societies, the early stages of human civilization, our ancestors had not yet developed abstract thinking, so that their understanding of the world and the phenomena of life came from their own direct experience. They used the logic of perceiving phenomena around them, making associations and applying them to themselves as a way of thinking about problems. Phenomena such as the rising and the setting of the sun, the withering of plants, the alternation of four seasons including spring, summer, autumn and winter led the ancestors to develop a traditional philosophical concept—the concept of cycles. Under the influence of this concept, the ancestors equated life and death with the natural law of the cycle, convinced that death was not the end of life, but rather a link in a long life.

However, not all things, phenomena, problems can be found in common in the things around them and can be used as a way of thinking to explain them, and for those which beyond their understanding, the ancestors attributed them to the mysterious forces that exist in nature. Typical of these were the existence of nature gods such as wind, rain, thunder and lightning. On this basis, they developed the idea that everything has a spirit. In their view, everything in the world has a soul, which is rootless and invisible, but is the most crucial component for the survival of all living things. Death does not mean "rigor mortis", but only the displacement of the soul and a change in the form of life (Qu, 2015, p. 170).

The concept of cycles and the view of animism were the foundations of the ancestor's conception of life as well as the creation of the world. Under the influence of both, the archetypes of regeneration began to appear frequently in our earliest mythological stories, such as the youngest daughter of Emperor Yan who died physically due to drowning but whose spirit still existed, Kua Fu, whose walking stick was transformed into a peach forest after his death, and Zhuan Xu, who was resurrected by borrowing the body of a fish named Yu Fu, half of whose body was in human form and half in fish form. And there is something central and essential in the narrative structure of these regenerative myths, which has been reproduced as an independent element in later literature, enabling the regenerative myths to be passed on across millennia. This concept, similar to the genes that carry the genetic code, is what we call the rebirth motif.

The changing and evolving nature of the mythological motifs has allowed for the creative transformation and development of ancient myths in later generations (Wang, 2022, p. 15). As an important branch of the mythological motifs, the rebirth motif has been in a dynamic process of evolution since its emergence from the regenerative myths. In summary, "from the mythological era when people used 'rebirth' to 'explain death and fight against it', to the 'reincarnation of cause and effect' in traditional ancient novels, to 'spiritual renewal' in the tragic destiny of mankind in the modern novels, 'regeneration' has its origin in ancient mythology and continues to absorb Buddhist and Christian elements in the process of development, deeply and continuously influencing the creation of modern and contemporary Chinese novels" (Liang, 2019, p. 4). In contemporary times, when network

fantasy novels are becoming increasingly prosperous, under the joint influence of traditional culture and the characteristics of the new era, the rebirth motif has even taken on a new appearance.

The rebirth motif in network fantasy novels is a plot motif, which originates from the stories of primitive ancestors about the creation of life and the world, and has been reproduced, developed and evolved as an independent element in mythology and later literary works, with its content mostly expressing the continuation and renewal of life in the form of reincarnation or traveling through time and space. It inherits traditional ideas such as the concept of cycles, the view of animism and the belief of immortality of the soul, and at the same time incorporates the cultural concepts of the new era along its own developmental line. It is worth noting that the "rebirth" studied in this paper does not only focus on resurrection of the fictional characters, but also emphasizes the essence of their "emergence from nothing" in the switch between time and space, and specifically speaking, that refers to a character from another world appears in a particular time and space by some chance.

3. The Innovation and Contemporary Value of the Regeneration Trigger Mechanism in Network Fantasy Novels

The regeneration trigger mechanism refers to the direct factors that lead to the regeneration of a character. Influenced by ideology, technology and other conditions, it is presented differently in traditional literature and network fantasy novels.

In traditional literature, the direct factors that bring characters back to life can be summarized into two categories: firstly, the intervention of external forces such as ghosts, gods, other people and medicines, for example, in the chapter *Zhang Cheng* in Volume 2 of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (a classic literature work with a collection of about 500 stories by Pu Songling of the Qing Dynasty), Zhang Ne, who died by suicide, returns to earth because the Bodhisattva enters the Underworld to rescue the ghosts from suffering; secondly, the shock of strong emotions such as affection and love, for example, in *Butterfly Lovers* (a folk tale originating from the Eastern Jin Dynasty and one of the four great folk love stories of ancient China), after their deaths, both Liang and Zhu are revived as butterflies by the power of love.

In the period when network fantasy novels flourished, its powerful inclusiveness gave the authors great creative freedom. In this way, they did not need to consider constraints such as realistic feasibility, but only needed to arrange an opportunity for the rebirth of the novel's characters with their own imagination. Therefore, on the basis of traditional literature, network fantasy novels have combined the characteristics of the times and the features of the text to produce more diverse regeneration triggers, which can be briefly summarized as follows: firstly, the guided intervention of the characters in the text, for example, in Zhi Chu's quick transmigration novel *The BE Maniac Survival System*, Xu Qichen is guided by the system designed by Xia Zhixu and his soul travels through four different worlds; secondly, accidents such as car accidents and sudden deaths, for example, in *The Entertainment*

Industry is Mine by Chun Daohan, 25-year-old Xu Zhaixing is regenerate back to her first year of high school due to a car accident; thirdly, opportunities presented by contact with historical and ancient objects, for example, in *Bringing Space to Farming* by Piao Yixiao, a modern woman, Li Xinran, travels to an ancient time that does not exist in the real world because she mistakenly enters an ancient tomb while on a special mission; fourthly, suddenly awakening to the supernatural ability to travel through time and space, for example, in *The Great Fantasy World Tour* by Chen Yishiyi, Chen Ang suddenly awakens the ability to travel to other dimensions, and from then on he can appear in various original worlds or the worlds of films and anime.

Among the above triggers, the intervention of other characters in the text is the most common factor that leads to the regeneration of fictional characters. In the otherworldly worlds described in network fantasy novels, the arrangement of gods and spirits, the help of worldly beings and other intervention will influence the life trajectory of characters, but the most novel of them is the interference of systems which are images extended based on the concept of modern technology. In many novels, especially in the quick transmigration and unlimited flow genres, the system is an essential role. The main characters and their companions are helped or summoned by the system to enter one alien world after another and achieve the emergence from nothing. For example, Mu Suli's *Global High-risk Examinations* opens the plot that a system pulls You Huo into a high-risk global examination. In this type of novel, the system acts as a "linker" to connect the main characters to one or more alien worlds. Only through the system can the protagonists travel from the real world to a different game dimension or another world, and regenerate in different spaces and times. This plot construction makes the system a necessary element for the character's rebirth, and over time, as network fantasy novels continue to develop, it has become one of the labels of the genre.

There is a reason for the frequent appearance of the role of the system in network fantasy novels, and it can be said that its innovation is the combined result of the author's conscious control and the contemporary influence of science and technology.

Firstly, as the marketization of network literature becomes increasingly apparent, authors need to analyse the needs of the times and the psychology of their readers and consciously adjust the content and structure of their works according to the results of their analysis. The emergence of the role of the system is the result of the author's control in accordance with the trend of fragmented reading in the new era and the actual writing situation, and a balance between the fast pace of society and the integrity of the storyline. This ideal result is made possible by the system's broad inclusiveness—it can be grafted on to a wide range of subjects. And it is this feature that allows the author to save time and effort in conceiving a novel cause of his or her story, while at the same time giving a brief prequel to the story. It can be said that the system meets the needs of contemporary reading while setting up a metaphysical and logical opening for the protagonist to embark on an adventure of escalation and survival.

Secondly, the innovation of this regeneration trigger mechanism is influenced by the rapidly developing science and technology of the new era, specifically by drawing on the concept and characteristics of modern virtual reality technology (hereinafter referred to as VR technology). The system in network fantasy novels has the same bridging role as the VR device in real life, in that the former is a tool to link two alien worlds, while the latter is a device that connects the real world to the virtual world. In other words, the VR device is the prototype of system in the network fantasy novels. In addition to connectivity, the 3I features of VR technology including Immersion, Interaction and Imagination, provide ideas for the system to create an immersive play space. Firstly, the protagonist group is reborn from the real world in which they live into a system-built other dimension, where every instance of the game they play and every existential crisis they experience is immersive and lifelike, in line with one of the VR technology's principle that seeks to fully immerse the player in the virtual 3D environment created by the computer. Secondly, the setting that characters can use their surroundings and non-player characters in game instances to obtain clues and survive is in line with VR technology's focus on user actionability of the simulated environment and the interactivity of getting natural feedback from the environment. Lastly, the unlimited flow novels, with their ever-changing game scenarios, match the claim of VR technology that it has a vast scope for imagination.

In network fantasy novels, the game between the protagonist group and the system is actually a mapping of contemporary people's rebellion against the superior power. Power influences the behaviour of others by controlling the distribution of valuable resources and by enforcing rewards and punishments (Dacher, Deborah, & Cameron, 2003, p. 265). In the novel, the system is a symbol of power standing on high, making rules, decreeing tasks and deciding whether characters live or die. In general, in another world constructed by the imagination, characters are subordinate to the system. In upgrade flow novels, the protagonists have to obtain rewards from the system by completing tasks and in unlimited flow novels, they must successfully pass levels in order to avoid the punishment of injury or even death. In these works, especially the unlimited flow novels, in order to survive, all the players are obeying the rules specified by the system and then trying to pass game instances. But this compromise is only temporary, and as soon as they seize the opportunity, they will rise to the occasion. For example, in *The little zombie lying flat* by Zhiyi, after surviving the game instances of *Ghost Animals*, *Man Man* and *Flower Slave*, the players represented by Ning Su and Zhu Shuangshuang, with the cooperation of Ling Xiao and the various non-player characters, destroyed the system and returned to the real world. The fictional characters' rebellion against the system is actually a projection of the contemporary rebellion against power. Power exists in every aspect of the real society. Depending on the roles that contemporary people play in society, their positions in the social power structure are also different. "Those at the top of the power structure have more means to dominate and influence those at the lower levels and eliminate their free will (Dou, https://daily.zhihu.com/story/8513078)". The oppression of subordinates by superiors at work and the coercive demands of elders on juniors in the

family are typical of the inequality of power. Forced by workplace rules, filial piety and other regulations, there are too few examples of people who choose to resist and succeed in life. But this does not mean that the sense of rebellion dies in the face of power confrontation. Most people place this mentality in their imagination. And as fantasy novels depict imaginary worlds, the villainous bosses represented by the system are the inevitable targets of confrontation. Contemporary people put themselves into the shoes of the protagonists, sharing the sense of achievement of a successful struggle and relieving themselves of the resentment and helplessness of reality.

The psychology of rebellion is deeply rooted in the spirit of our country. In the long history, there are many incidents of rebellion. In the distant past, for example, the ancient people fought against the powerful forces of nature, and the heroic people of various dynasties fought against the imperial power and the class; in the recent past, for example, the modern Chinese people fought for national liberation, and the contemporary ones fought against the Corona Virus Disease 2019. This spirit is engraved in the form of texts from all periods of literature, from traditional literature such as mythology, Yuan opera, Tang and Song poetry, and Ming and Qing novels to network fantasy novels. The many manifestations of the spirit of rebellion in network fantasy novels show the inheritance of the essence of traditional culture at a time when the old and the new are in harmony, and reflect the strong affirmation of this national spirit by contemporary people.

4. The Innovation of Rebirth Mode in Network Fantasy Novels and the Social Psychological Tendency it Reflects

The traditional mode of the rebirth motif is mainly based on the reincarnation of the soul. Regeneration of the soul is the main form used in literature of all periods to depict the rebirth of a character, referring to his or her short or long-term resurrection with the soul leaving the body and attaching itself to a host (person, object, dream and so on).

Throughout the literature before the emergence of network fantasy novels, it can be found that the mode of soul regeneration can be subdivided into four categories: soul resurrection through reincarnation, soul reincarnation by occupying other people's bodies, soul reincarnation by turning into other forms, and resurrection through the help of external forces. For example, in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the Attendant Shen Ying and the Vermilion Pearl Plant are reincarnated as Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu respectively; in *Lotus Fragrance* of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, the ghost of the daughter of the Li family reincarnated by occupying the body of Swallow, a girl in the Zhang family which is a local household of some considerable means; in *Butterfly Lovers*, both Liang and Zhu are transformed into butterflies after their deaths; and in *The Legend of Deification*, Taiyi Zhenren re-casts Nezha's physical body with lotus roots and casts a spell to bring him back to life.

Inheriting the regenerative modes of traditional literature, network fantasy novels have made innovations, most notably by adding the form of time-travel, a new setting with a distinctly

contemporary concept. Time-travel refers to that the characters in a novel are transported from the real world to another time and space because of some coincidence. The real world is about logic, while the alien world is built by imagination, where whatever unthinkable things can happen. Therefore, most of the authors of network fantasy novels like to begin their work with the main characters traveling to another dimension, and setting up new order and rules for the imaginary world. On this basis, according to the different causes and ways in which the novel characters begin their time-travel, network fantasy novels have derived four categories: aerial novel, book-travel novel, quick transmigration novel, and unlimited flow novel, and three forms: time-travel in the form of embryo, time-travel in the form of soul, and time-travel in the form of the original body. Among them, the aerial category can be divided into fully aerial novel and semi-aerial one, referring to novels in which fictional characters travel into completely fictional or semi-fictional alien worlds; the book-travel category refers to texts in which the protagonists of a novel become characters in a certain literary work and live in the world depicted in the book; the quick transmigration category is generally linked to doing tasks, referring to a genre of novels in which the protagonists continue to travel to another world after finishing a task in one world; and unlimited flow category, refers to novels in which the protagonist group is pulled into a game with infinite elements, such as science, movies, anime, mythology, and struggles to survive and pass levels. It can be said that these four novel categories and three forms of time-travel intersect with each other, constituting all the patterns in network fantasy time-travel novels.

Time-travel is a mode of regeneration that emerged in the network fantasy novels. Its innovation lies in the reinterpretation of the traditional reincarnation and the subversion of the single view of space and time.

The rebirth of fictional characters who die (or disappear) in real life across time and space is based on a reinterpretation of Buddhist reincarnation. In the structure of the regeneration plot, network fantasy novels inherit the Buddhist concept of "the three periods", equating the experiences of the novel's characters before, during, and after their time-travels with the past lives, present lives, and future lives in Buddhism. At the same time, however, the causality attached to the traditional concept of reincarnation is greatly reduced in contemporary fantasy texts, as the authors no longer emphasise the connection between the three periods in Buddhism, but rather focus on the present lives of the characters and their actions after they have passed through time and space. In the plot structure of reincarnation in traditional literature, the reincarnated person's past and present lives remain connected in a mysterious way. And this connection is usually manifested as the influence of residual memories of past lives or the search for the identity of past lives by coincidence (Zhang, 2014, p. 14). For example, in Li Bihua's novel *The Reincarnation of Golden Lotus*, the interactions between Shan Yulian and Zhang Zhibin, Wu Ruda, and Wu Long in the novel overlap with the intersections between Pan Jinlian and Zhang Dahu, Wu Dalang and Wu Song in *The Golden Lotus*, and through these overlaps, Shan

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Yulian gradually discovers her past life identity. In either case, it is easy to find that there is a sense of destiny that pervades most of the reincarnations, and the authors of traditional literature use this to set the course of their works and to trace the entanglements of past lives of the characters they created. In contrast, the time-travel plots in network fantasy novels separate the past lives of the characters who has passed through time and space from the present, and the authors use this setting to reflect the characters' pursuit of new life by leaving the past behind. Thus, in the main body of the novels, the authors hardly mention the past lives of the characters who have experienced time-travels; their content centres on the actions of the protagonists in the post-travel worlds. Moreover, although the travellers retain almost complete memories of their past lives, they are only auxiliary to their present lives and rarely involve the main plots of the novels. For example, the noevl *The Prime Minister's Wife is the Richest* by Insert Willow into the Shade focuses on the life of Ji Yunxi in the Great Yu Dynasty after having a book-travel, and the memories of modern-day venture capital that she retains are merely a pretext for her status as the richest person.

The rise of the time-travel plot has led to a more convoluted and diverse in the depiction of time and space in network fantasy novels. In traditional literature, apart from reincarnation, the life trajectories of characters are mostly laid out according to a linear timeline and a fixed location. Simply speaking, the characters are reborn in the same world some time after their own death. Obviously, this fixed plot pattern cannot match the vast imagination of the authors of network fantasy novels. Hence, they recreate a lot of dimensions different from the real world in their texts, so as to break the irreversibility of time and the singularity of place in the regeneration of characters in traditional novels. In addition, they also further expand the time and space of regeneration in the form of time-travel, allowing the characters to be reborn into the past and the future, as well as to travel to different worlds. For example, in *The little zombie lying flat*, 23-year-old Ning Su is sent by Ling Xiao to a game base more than 20 years ago when he is on the verge of death, and later, with Ling Xiao's help, he travels to more than 100 years ago and three years later to witness Ling Xiao's world and his own birth respectively. This variety and interlacing of time and space not only enriches the content and connotation of the novels, but also adds the overall fantasy colour to them, fitting the essential characteristics of network fantasy novels.

Whether it is a return to the past or a journey to the future, the plot construction of the novel in which the protagonist escapes from the fact of death in the real world actually expresses the avoidance of death and the longing for life that is inherent in human beings. When symbols of immortal country, immortal people and immortal medicine first appeared in the oral mythology of our ancestors, the desire for immortality was planted in our genes and continued to develop in later generations. Although, after a high level of education, the present generation recognizes and accepts the idea of materialism, it does not prevent them from placing their hopes for life in their imagination. Thus, as writers of imagination, authors of network fantasy novels prolong mankind's short lives by sending their souls

into other dimensions.

In addition to this, the prevalence of the time-travel mode is also a manifestation of a particular contemporary socio-psychological trend.

Firstly, the recurrence of past-travel in network fantasy novels reflects contemporary people's emotional desire to make up for their regrets. In the new age society, people are faced with many choices. At the fork in the road of life, the right choice will lead them to smooth adventures, while the wrong choice will leave regrets. With the passage of time, the latter will be firmly remembered as a yoke that cannot be broken free for life. Therefore, the popularity of time-travel novels has, to a certain extent, captured the psychology of contemporary people trying to make up for their regrets. Unlike most traditional literature in which the protagonists are reincarnated after drinking five-flavored tea of forgetfulness, time-travel novels preserve the memories of the characters' previous lives and emphasize the avoidance and atonement of regrets. For example, in *The little zombie lying flat*, Ning Su returns to the game base more than twenty years ago to meet his parents and make up for the missing family love; in *Rebirth of the Malicious Empress of Military Lineage*, Shen Miao returns to her teenage years and chooses the right man, avoiding the wrong love she encountered before. In the process of reading, the readers make choice anew in the way of self-replacing fictional characters, fulfilling their own emotional aspirations in disguise.

Secondly, the ending of the novel, in which the time-travellers achieve fame and notoriety, indirectly reflects the psychology of contemporary people who are not willing to be mediocre and want to achieve self-worth. In the construction of the time-travel plots, the protagonists mostly undergo the process of transformation from weakness to strength. Although the narrative mode of network fantasy novels is often outlined as "the flow of losers growing up and becoming stronger", the novel's protagonists themselves possess traits such as perseverance, indomitable spirit, loyalty, righteousness, and keen insight, which indicate that they are not weak in the conventional sense. So once they seize their opportunities, they move forward and eventually realize their ambitions. Contemporary people equate the obscurity of fictional characters in the early days due to the suppression of public opinion, evil forces and so on with the situation that they themselves achieve nothing in the highly competitive society of the new era. They believe that their talents were only suppressed by their environment and that they would have been able to show their worth if they had been given the opportunity. In addition, the modern identity of the time-travellers in their past lives and the success they have achieved by relying on modern thinking can serve as evidence to show that they are not mediocre. In the post-travel plots, the many confessions received by the female protagonists and the prosperity of the male protagonists in their careers are all affirmations of their good looks, charm and ability which are the values that contemporary people aspire to achieve in the real world.

Finally, the network fantasy novels' efforts to exaggerate the glorious life of the characters after their regeneration actually reflect the contemporary people's disorientation in the real society. In the process

of reading, readers tend to immerse themselves in another identity by way of self-representation. The novel's depiction of the protagonists' private existence, their private subjectivity, and their romantic relationships after the time-travel demonstrates their affirmation of "self". However, it is achieved by abandoning their real identities in real life, which is actually a loss of self, a manifestation of the absence of a past, a sense of history, a sense of worthlessness and a sense of meaninglessness (Yang, 2017, pp. 74-75). And this disorientation is closely linked to the pressures of survival in the new age. When wealth, work and appearance replace name, age and personality as factors in the perception of one's identity, people gradually loses themselves. The sharp contrast between imagination and reality, by placing oneself in the bondage of materialistic desires and indulging in the protagonist's successful life while staying stagnant in real life, only serves to further put contemporary people in a state of rambunctiousness and further into hypotheticals.

5. Conclusion

The rebirth motif was conceived in ancient mythology and has recurred in literature at different times from then on. At the time of the rise of network fantasy novels, the manifestations of the rebirth motif, represented by the regeneration trigger mechanism and the mode of regeneration, are different from their presentation in traditional literature. These changes are the result of a combination of traditional and new culture, which include the avoidance of death and the continuation of the spirit of rebellion, as well as the characteristics of the new era, such as the enlightenment of the creators' ideas and the enrichment of their writing materials by the concept of technology. In addition, the cultural values of the new era and the psychological trends of the general public are also reflected in the process of transmutation. In addition, the writing of the rebirth motif in network fantasy novels conveys the emotional aspirations of contemporary people who are trying to make up for their regrets, unwilling to be mediocre and the state of existence of self-lost.

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