

A Study of the Expression of Historical View by means of "Minor Characters " in Historical Dramas: An Example Relating to the CCTV Adaptation of "Romance of the Three Kingdoms"

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Abstract

Among the key media used to form collective memory or to convey historical concepts and the narrative point of view adopted in such dramas it has a direct bearing upon the audience 's ideas of, and attitude toward, history. The present paper deals with the CCTV adaptation of Romance of the Three Kingdoms as an object of investigation, and considers—among other things—the particular historical outlook embodied by this classic historical drama (as seen) through civilian figures, common soldiers, or helpers. It reports on findings that show that with strict regard for the great narrative of the original work, the CCTV the version under consideration gives a " people ' s perspective " not confined to the usual " great man " theory of history—so far as it treats in detail the minor characters. What is achieved artistically with regard to such figures may be taken as an aid, or even as a model, for present-day historical drama.

Keywords

Historical Drama; Historical View; "Romance of the Three Kingdoms"; Characters of Minor Rank; People's Perspective.

1. Beginning (Introduction)

Historical themes have played an important part throughout the development of Chinese television dramas. From the 1980s onward, several serious historical dramas—among them Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Water Margin, or Yongzheng Dynasty—have been extremely popular and have left a deep imprint upon historical thinking and upon aesthetic taste in many eras[1]. Yet one notable phenomenon appears when we consider academic work on such classics: the attention given to the central figures—Cao Cao's boldness, Zhuge Liang's cleverness and sincerity, Guan Yu's virtue—is often very large, while those " minor characters " at the edges of history (fleeting ripples in the long stream) are rarely studied thoroughly[2].

That very narrow research angle brings up an underlying issue: How is history to be understood? Are the great men (or women) the sole actors of history? What part—actually, what role—do common people, unnamed civilians, or low-rankers play with regard to history? Is it possible—useful—to consider their life histories or values when thinking about " historical view "? Such questions are taken as a logical beginning here.

1.1. Defining "Historical View"

(1) proceeding with the argument, one must now clarify the basic idea of this study—" historical view." On the basis of theories of historical materialism, of microhistory, and of subaltern studies[3][4][5], the present paper sets out " historical view " as the central attitude—relative to historical dramas—held by narrative strategies about the subject of history, about causal factors in history, and about its value. By that definition three dimensions are specified: (1)

Historical subject: Are heroic individuals or ordinary people primarily responsible for historical change?

(2) Historical driving forces: Which of these things—great men's wills, economic arrangements, or the general conduct of many individuals—propel history?

(3) With regard to historical value: What is to be made of various actors of history—should only winners and heroes be taken seriously? The present tripartite arrangement will help in analyzing how the CCTV version of Romance of the Three Kingdoms treats, via minor figures, the theme of historical reality.

1.2. Significance of the Topic

Theoretical Significance

The first point is that this work helps to build up a more complete theory of film/television image analysis. At present, most academic writing deals with major figures—heroes or protagonists ("great men")—with little attention given to the supporting roles or "minor characters" which are not very central to either plot or theme [6]. It now proposes an extension of both the scope and the subjects under study, namely the images and functions of minor characters.

The second point is that it enlarges the research horizon with regard to the expression of historical views in historical dramas. Existing work on the relation of history to film/TV tends to consider only such items as themes, characters, visual style, clothing, or factual details—not the expression of views [7]. This article proposes to look at the hitherto neglected "people's perspective" within the cinematic text.

Practical Significance

If one supplements the research concerning the role of "minor characters" and the treatment of history in historical dramas, then the present study may yield useful ideas or models—on thematic or conceptual levels—for today's film/TV industry, and thus help to foster innovation in the film/TV market (in terms of form and content).

1.3. Domestic Research Review

There is now research on the CCTV Romance of the Three Kingdoms; current studies deal with:

- a) Communication channels or modes (e.g., use of Bilibili or of overseas media) [8][9];
- b) Research of a detailed kind (e.g., about armor, dress, pronouns) [10][11];
- c) Analysis of character images (e.g., Cao Cao, Lady Sun, Yuan Shao) [12][13][14].

Research on Historical View

At present, the achievements dealt with are:

- a) Party building and ideological/political guidance, with an eye to the role played by a large-scale historical view in telling Party history stories [15];
- b) To think about consolidation of the sense of community for the Chinese nation, to analyze the meaning of a proper view of Chinese history—taken as a whole—from a historical standpoint [16][17][18].

Research on Film/TV Character Portrayal

Most domestic and foreign studies focus on the depiction of protagonists and of heroism, and on the related cultural, spiritual, and psychological features of such figures, with very limited examination of "minor characters" or mass images [19][20][21].

Brief Commentary on Current Research

With regard to the CCTV Romance of the Three Kingdoms, today's scholarship is mainly oriented toward such traditional matters as communication, textual study, or character work—without enough consideration of its historical outlook with regard to the rather small "minor

characters. " Most research of the historical type is joined to Party development or to ideas of national unity and lacks case studies linked to history as drama .The treatment of character portrayal is largely limited to heroes or main figures , with no real focus on " minor characters .

2. The Presentation of "Minor Characters" in the CCTV Romance of the Three Kingdoms

Of the 84 episodes, nearly a whole century of history and hundreds of people are dealt with .Although heroic persons figure as protagonists,minor characters "-among civilians , among regular soldiers, as supporting characters—serve an essential function in the great historical narrative,and help to tell-within limits—another side of history.

2.1. Defining "Minor Characters"

"Minor characters" refers to common people who live on the fringes of history, without much discursive influence, and who are seldom mentioned in history books or merely in the background .Among such persons are:

Civilian Groups:Peasants, vendors, artisans, displaced persons,etc ., usually called " collective images."

Ordinary Soldiers:Those who actually take part in war-yet seldom become famous in history.

Roles That Are Not Central to the Plot:Characters named in a secondary narrative position , usually connected to the main plot.

2.2. Depiction of Underlying Civilians

The Marketplace Scene in Episode 1:

With regard to the meeting of Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei,the director has already begun-in a highly planned manner-to portray life in the late Eastern Han Dynasty: commoners reading signs , villagers , caravans,and small children-each part of an ancient market .Such treatment of the "life - world" gives the characters a firm social base, and indirectly affirms that history is not merely territory for kings or generals but also room enough for many average persons to live, to earn a living.

Interpretive analysis:Here the director uses long takes and medium shots to show the marketplace not as an unimportant setting but as a bustling,autonomous entity.In contrast with the book by Luo Guanzhong —which starts right away with the Yellow Turban Rebellion and its heroes-this television version gives almost two minutes to ordinary people before any hero is named .That choice (unmade in the source text) is itself a historiographical act:it treats history not only as a sequence of major happenings but also as texture of the everyday .The camera' s lingering to gaze upon anonymous persons , at children or at traders haggling is to make a visual case for the dignity and truth of common life — a real historical subject worth noting.

Refugee Images from Episode 29 (" Carrying the People Across the River "):

The episode now presents civilians as being in a survival crisis .The director employs emotional images-a long line of refugees, of old people,of women with babies-as well as the insert song The People' s Peace Brings Stability to the Land .A subplot of unusual poignancy is the loss of a child by a newly widowed woman .At this point the unnamed civilians briefly come into focus, and figures such as Liu Bei or Zhuge Liang are treated not as outsiders but as allies or guardians , illustrating the drama ' s " people ' s perspective."

Interpretive analysis:This episode shows a substantial widening of the scope originally set by the novel.With regard to Luo Guanzhong ' s version ,the well-known passage about Liu Bei helping people across the river is treated as a strategic - moral fact-his compassion is an example of virtue suitable for a leader later on .The present TV version takes a different

angle. Close-up shots of refugee faces, the long stretch of the widow's grief and the diegetic folk song help to bestow these unnamed individuals with a voice and with a presence not granted by the novel itself. When the camera films the refugees looking up at Liu Bei it uses a low angle; when Liu Bei looks down on them it uses a high angle—an inversion of sorts which for a moment brings the people's suffering above the hero's viewpoint. This directorial choice corresponds to the microhistorical idea of retrieving—without neglecting—their experiences, marginal or not[5].

Impoverished Civilians in Nanzhong, Episode 65 ("Crossing the Lu River"):

With Meng Huo now released by Zhuge Liang, we are shown Shu soldiers giving grain to Nanzhong prisoners of war. Close-ups of those worn but eased faces and of their tattered garments — taken together with the background music — form an agreeable scene, one that enables the spectator to catch quickly the idea of Zhuge Liang's benevolent rule and of his concern for the people, and so to admire the Shu Han he represents.

Interpretive analysis: With regard to the Nanzhong campaign, the novel gives a full treatment of Zhuge Liang's strategy and of the seven captures of Meng Huo. But the version shown on television now adds an episode involving grain distribution not found in the source text. It makes a visual point of the prisoners' extreme thinness and of their slow, careful attempts to reach for something edible — these are a materialist counterpoint to the story of heroic conquest. From the standpoint of history, it seems clear that strategists and generals do not alone make a scene of war but also contribute hunger, relief, or survival. Indeed the scene under discussion implicitly questions the classical "great man" idea by asserting—without fanfare—that Shu Han's legitimacy comes not merely from moral clarity or loyalty but from the welfare of common folk.

2.3. Depiction of Ordinary Soldiers

The Flute - Playing Veteran in Episode 22 ("The Battle of Guandu, Part 2"):

The text now gives an original detail not found in the novel. Following the battle, one sees an aged soldier seated by himself on the battlefield playing a melancholic flute. His form has many possible meanings—both as witness to war's brutality and as symbol of mourning for the dead or for past events. Such treatment seems to follow a historical materialist logic, and it warns against forgetting how many lives lie behind every war.

Interpretive analysis: This new character is an unusual addition to the novel, one that comes quickly after Cao Cao's victory and before the next political act. To stop the narrative for almost a minute here—with no speech, no name, just a melancholy flute note—is a bold and radical move by the director in terms of historiography. The shot is arranged so as to put the veteran in the foreground, the great, corpse-strewn battlefield now lies far behind him. Such a visual hierarchy reverses the usual heroic portrayal: there is no triumph for the victor; instead the defeated or the survivors are central. The flute piece functions as an elegy, and it asks us not to fix upon winners but to consider what has been lost. That approach coincides well with the subaltern studies idea of retrieving — from history's void — the voices of people who left no documentary evidence[4].

The Meal - Delivering Soldier in Episode 75 ("Six Expeditions from Qishan"):

Among the original scenes described here is one in which a soldier (played by an assistant director) brings food to Zhuge Liang — who is still at work. He handles two eggs gently, having kept them warm against his chest, sets them on the tray, and with tears urges Zhuge Liang not to neglect his health for the army's sake. Such sentiment breaks the "fourth wall," corresponding to the crew's and to later generations' tribute to Zhuge Liang, expressed via a minor figure.

Interpretive analysis: Though at first glance this is a simple moment of pathos, it works on many levels. The soldier's anonymity and his role as a proxy for the production team (as interpreted

by an assistant director)establish a metanarrative layer:affection of commoners for a morally right leader need not be entirely fictional, nor is it unconnected to the real -world admiration of Zhuge Liang as a cultural figure .The detail of the eggs kept warm by the chest-introduced by the screenwriters-gives the scene physical,tangible care , in contrast to the novel ' s abstract treatment of loyalty .Such a scene helps clarify how small figures may help articulate a "people' s perspective " that combines emotional truth with historical accuracy

2.4. Portrayal of Supporting Roles with Limited Plot Function

A.Marginalized Female Characters

Diaochan

Converted from a political instrument into a person of dignity .The series allows her an open ending—after Dong Zhuo' s death , she is silent when looking at the celebration is held, and then a carriage departs .An insert song called Diaochan Has Gone with the Gentle Wind — composed on the spot by female singers -"lets Diaochan shed her tears , " brings her character up.

Interpretive analysis:As originally conceived, Diaochan is no longer part of the narrative following Lü Bu' s death - she is merely a discarded tool of the plot .But in the TV version , she is given an ending which brings her subjectivity.The silent carriage going off , the woman - centered song ,and the lyrical words all help to reclaim her from objecthood.The camera now keeps a close focus on her face during the festivities-not with joy, but with melancholy or emotional distance .Such visual treatment proposes that for women the great political triumphs of men do not necessarily hold the same meaning, nor do they register fully in standard historical accounts.Diaochan ' s fate illustrates-historically-how figures outside the mainstream may still have their own interpretations of what happened, possibly subverting the main narrative.

Lady Zou

She uses her screen for less than nine minutes, yet the creators made the song Song of the Yu River for her, which brings out—by means of a female voice—the helplessness and grief of women lost in unsettled conditions,and laments men ' s changeableness .

Interpretive analysis:Lady Zou is mentioned only briefly-once more as a victim of Cao Cao' s desire and of Zhang Xiu' s rebellion .The novel uses her as a kind of catalyst for war, not as a full human being.The TV version ' s choice to write an original song (in a female voice) about her is a planned act of historiographical reparation .Such lyrics bring up—without hesitation—the theme of women ' s exploitation by dominant males, and question patriarchal assumptions found in old history-writing traditions .Even in a nine-minute sequence, the series declares her suffering to be historically meaningful—not only as a fact but as evidence of wartime gender violence.

Lady Sun

With the political marriage already accounted for , the series now brings in a romantic wedding .It goes on to add details and to use dialogue .When pursued, she assumes control , and speaks sharply to her foes .She offers Liu Bei-now downcast-an admonition:" A true man' s ambition should be like the Yangtze River flowing east to the sea;why cling to a land of tenderness?"This new dialogue gives her stature as one wise and generous.

Interpretive analysis:In the novel Lady Sun is mostly shown as a pawn used in Sun Quan ' s political schemes .But in the television version she is given both strategic wit and moral independence.The extra dialogue—particularly her sharp words to those who pursue her-shows her not to be passive but to have real power in influencing events .Her remarks to Liu Bei (all made up by the screenwriters) make her a figure of thought and of drive—one who dares to challenge the stereotype of women as purely emotional or domestic .Such an extended

characterization is helpful for understanding history-namely, that women (even under patriarchal arrangements) acted upon their own initiative and had viewpoints worth recording.

B.Keepers of Loyalty and of Righteousness

Chen Lin

Chen Lin was taken into custody only after having written a denunciation of Cao Cao .Yet he shows no agitation when questioned .His dignity, his wit,appear at once.

Interpretive analysis:Chen Lin' s short appearance fits well with the series' treatment of " losers" historically.As far as the novel is concerned, Chen Lin writes the denunciation , is taken prisoner, and is forgiven by Cao Cao .The TV version pays more attention to his calmness during questioning.Close-ups of his unwavering eye contact and of his controlled speech suggest that moral strength does not depend upon victory .That idea accords with the historical principle that ethics need not coincide with success .Chen Lin' s dignity furnishes an example showing that history ' s"winners " are not the sole source of virtue .

Shen Pei

With Yuan Shao now defeated , he is still loyal .Being held prisoner , he reports to Cao Cao : " My lord is in the north;I cannot die facing south,and shows no loyalty .The present description gives evidence that even on the " losing"side one meets admirables.

Interpretive analysis:Shen Pei ' s refusal to face south during execution is a detail taken over from the novel, yet the television version develops it with help of visual composition .His posture is framed by a low-angle shot as he speaks, which gives him an air of monumentality.The actual execution is not hurried;the director lets silence linger, offering time for the moral weight of his decision to settle.Such treatment calls into question the teleological belief that history necessarily brings about victory for the "right" side (i.e., the eventual victor) .Shen Pei' s loyalty — or Chen Lin' s calm- denies a simple moral geography of history and allows the vanquished to have values no less compelling than those of the victors.

Liu Chen

With Liu Shan about to surrender, Liu Chen protests without success.One of the saddest scenes shows him kneeling at Liu Bei' s portrait, killing his own family, and then committing suicide .Even though he is not a major figure , his act stays with the spectator — it is typical.

Interpretive analysis: Liu Chen ' s suicide is treated only briefly in the novel.The television version enlarges it into a long , almost silent passage .It keeps the camera focused on Liu Chen ' s face-now kneeling near his father' s portrait—and on his family' s expressions as they come to terms with fate.No great speeches are added;the power derives from the visual buildup of ritual and of sacrifice .Such a scene lends itself to the historical idea that even small moral acts— whether or not they alter the fate of things-may be of universal importance .Liu Chen ' s act is not measured by what happens afterward (he cannot avert surrender) but by an internal standard of integrity (i.e., by purity of action).

Each of these supporting roles is not very long on screen but does help to give the series a real spiritual texture- one that is both loyal and whole-and so adds to its history and humanity.

3. A Historical View as Presented by "Minor Characters"

From the standpoint of the analysis given above one may identify a historical view with a " people ' s perspective . " Taking up the tripartite structure laid down in the introduction , it is possible to say:

Start with the historical subject:History must be understood as a joint product of many common people-not just of a small group of famous persons .The frequent appearances of civilians and soldiers (the market-goer , the refugee , the veteran with flute) remind one that history is

shaped by the participation of the whole multitude .That idea coincides with the historical materialist conviction that the masses are the principal agents of history[3].

Now, as for the driving forces of history:This passage gives no full account of history' s causes, but it declares that change has been brought about-not merely by strategic or heroic ambitions but also by such facts as people' s accumulated experience,their sufferings, or hopes .When a widow loses her child, when a soldier is warming eggs for Zhuge Liang, or when prisoners get some grain-this suggests that compassion, loyalty, and material welfare do not just happen to be byproducts but are basic factors in historical progress.

Third, with regard to historical value:Life experiences of common people have their own historical worth, not only instrumental value in connection with a hero's tale .Individuals such as the flute - playing veteran or Lady Zou rise above utilitarian roles, and have independent aesthetic or emotional force .Their fate is part of the real history of the world .Moreover ,decisions of a minor character may bear wide moral significance .The integrity of Chen Lin, of Shen Pei or of Liu Chen — even when localized historically -is of timelessness value : ethics need not be reduced to political victory.

Fourth, about perspective:the viewpoint of minor characters opens up an alternative way of looking at history .What is war like for refugees?What are heroes to soldiers?What does this period mean for women?Such perspectives help form a more fully developed historical account .They chime with the idea embodied in " microhistory, "-that the lives of common individuals may reveal complex historical realities[5]—as well as with " subaltern studies,"— which sets out to restore to history the voices excluded by dominant narratives[4].

That particular statement about historical view singles out the CCTV adaptation among many historical dramas which merely set out to honor great men .At the same time it furnishes a theoretical justification-of sorts—for today' s dramatists who wish to make historical works that combine entertainment with intellectual weight .

4. Conclusion

Among the media that link past with present we find historical dramas .The long-standing classic character of the CCTV Romance of the Three Kingdoms results not just from faithful handling of great historical facts but also from care taken toward minor figures-the common people, the unnamed soldiers , and the marginal persons whose role in history is basic to this tapestry,and which gives it a sense of permanent vitality.

The present analysis ends with:

To begin with, the minor characters of this series are not monotonous but highly suggestive, so that the drama may go beyond a simple " heroic legend." With original touches or added roles , the writers have formed a social texture which nicely supplements the political - military theme. The second point is that such portrayals are based on a " people' s perspective " historical attitude , one which recalls how the history of mankind involves ordinary people's joys and sorrows .That attitude calls for a challenge to traditional " great man" historiography it accords with current developments-both theoretical-in microhistory and in subaltern studies.

(1) the series' success in handling minor characters furnishes useful guidance-especially for present-day historical drama—on how to balance the large and the minute and to reveal history' s emotional warmth in small places .Some of its lessons are:(1) using the camera to draw anonymous figures out of background into prominence;(2) inventing scenes that allow hitherto voiceless people to speak;(3) avoiding reduction of minor characters to plot tools and instead granting them real dignity, individuality, or autonomy.

The present work suffers from certain restrictions — notably partial treatment of minor characters and lack of a fully developed theoretical basis for the " people's perspective " idea .A

comparative approach involving other historical dramas (e.g., the 2010 Romance of the Three Kingdoms or Yongzheng Dynasty) seems promising for the future. In addition, one might consider studies of audience perception to determine whether and how the "people's perspective" is realized in the portrayal of such characters.

"Diaochan has gone with the gentle wind, turned into a white cloud." In the CCTV adaptation the minor figures—such as that drifting cloud—have acquired an eternal mark of fate. They contribute, each in its own fashion, to history: it is not only heroes' history.

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