

Urban Life and Character Portrayal in Ming and Qing Novels

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Abstract: *Ming and Qing novels vividly depict urban life, deeply reflecting the living conditions of the lower social classes and their complex social relationships. Urban life, as an essential part of urbanization during this period, showcases the diversity of commerce, labor, and cultural customs. Urban characters in these novels are often marginalized figures whose personalities are shaped not only by their social status but also by interpersonal interactions, power dynamics, and emotional entanglements. This study explores how urban life influences character formation, analyzing the relationships between urban spaces, behavioral patterns, and personality traits. It aims to reveal how meticulous language styles and narrative techniques portray character destinies and social values. By examining these elements, this paper reflects the interplay between social mobility and the inner world of characters in Ming and Qing novels and provides new perspectives for understanding the literary techniques of this historical period.*

Keywords: *Ming and Qing novels; urban life; character portrayal; social class; language style*

Introduction

As the pinnacle of ancient Chinese novel development, Ming and Qing novels encompass rich depictions of social life, particularly urban life. These depictions not only constitute significant parts of the novels but also provide profound social contexts for character formation. The portrayal of urban life often intertwines with the economic structure, class divisions, and cultural transitions of the era. Therefore, studying the relationship between urban life and character portrayal in Ming and Qing novels not only helps understand the uniqueness of the literature from this period but also reveals how lower-class individuals navigate daily life through interaction, wit, and emotional complexity, thereby shaping vivid personalities.

The depiction of urban life is closely tied to character development, particularly in expressing social status, moral values, and survival intelligence. Urban spaces and behavioral patterns play crucial roles in this context. A thorough exploration of this theme offers valuable academic insights into the social function and literary techniques of Ming and Qing novels.

1. Depiction of Urban Life in Ming and Qing Novels

1.1 Social Context and Cultural Connotations of Urban Life

The depiction of urban life in Ming and Qing novels is deeply connected to the social context of the time, reflecting the unique features of urban economies, social structures, and cultural development. Urban life, as part of societal existence, encompasses not only daily commerce and labor activities but also rich cultural connotations and social dynamics. During the accelerated urbanization of the Ming and Qing periods, urban spaces such as markets, shops, teahouses, and inns became central to social mobility, with interactions among residents and merchants forming the basis of social life.^[1]

These depictions provide detailed spatial contexts for novels, highlighting interactions, interest relationships, and moral values across different social strata. Urban characters' lifestyles often correlate with the economic activities and survival struggles of lower social classes. The cultural aspects of urban life include commercial culture, folk beliefs, and recreational customs, vividly expressed through the urban scenes in the novels. For example, the portrayals of teahouses, street vendors, and wandering

swindlers showcase the living conditions of urban characters and their multifaceted roles within urban culture. These roles—representatives of ordinary citizens and transmitters of folk wisdom—add depth to the cultural essence of the novels. Such intricate depictions of urban life underpin the narrative, portraying the existence and emotional struggles of the populace while supporting the cultural connotations of the works.

1.2 Daily Life and Behavioral Patterns of Urban Characters

Urban characters in Ming and Qing novels are depicted with rich details of their daily lives, revealing not only the diversity of urban life but also the survival intelligence, adaptability, and complex social relationships of individuals from the lower social classes. These behavioral patterns are often closely linked to the characters' social identities, economic circumstances, and cultural backgrounds.

Most urban characters in these novels occupy marginal or lower positions in society. Their behavioral patterns, marked by flexibility and improvisation, reflect survival strategies and responses to social realities. Their daily activities—market transactions, labor, interactions, and emotional expressions—are essential elements in the narrative. Ming and Qing novels use meticulous descriptions to illustrate how these characters maintain livelihoods and social standings within confined social circles.

Although their actions center around material exchanges, they also involve subtle changes in interpersonal relationships. Within urban settings, characters engage in interactions marked by conflicts and contradictions, revealing the emotional worlds and moral dilemmas of lower-class individuals. Their behavior often reflects freedom and rebellion but also showcases complex adaptability within societal constraints. This diversity in behavioral patterns not only enriches character portrayals but also presents a vivid picture of society for the reader.

1.3 The Symbolism and Function of Urban Spaces

Urban spaces in Ming and Qing novels are not merely stages for character activities but also serve as drivers of the plot and carriers of symbolic meaning. Urban spaces—streets, markets, teahouses, inns, and gambling dens—form integral parts of the narrative and fulfill multiple functions.

Firstly, urban spaces act as venues for interactions and conflicts, bringing together various urban characters and forming complex social networks. These spaces reveal social dynamics, including power struggles, contractual exchanges of interests, and the tensions in interpersonal relationships.

Secondly, as symbolic carriers, urban spaces often embody deeper socio-cultural meanings. For example:

Teahouses often serve as centers for information exchange and sites for discourse competition.

Markets represent commercial culture and social mobility between classes.

Taverns and gambling dens symbolize the survival intelligence and moral ambiguity of the lower classes.^[2]

These symbolic traits highlight the class stratification, wealth circulation, and complexity of interpersonal interactions during the Ming and Qing periods. Through depictions of urban spaces, the novels present specific life scenes while reflecting the diversity of socio-cultural phenomena and profound historical transitions.

In summary, the depictions of urban spaces in Ming and Qing novels are multidimensional. They serve not only as backdrops for characters' actions but also as tangible manifestations of socio-cultural dynamics. By artistically representing urban spaces, the novels deepen explorations of the survival states and psychological activities of lower-class individuals, providing rich external environments and cultural contexts for character formation.

2. The Influence of Urban Life on Character Formation

2.1 Character Traits and Social Status of Urban Figures

2.1.1 Realistic Traits of Urban Figures

The characters of urban figures often exhibit strong realistic traits, rooted in their social environment and the pressures of daily life. Positioned in the lower social strata, their survival is constrained by material scarcity and social discrimination. Consequently, their personalities display a pragmatic and adaptive nature. These individuals focus heavily on immediate benefits to ensure their survival and development.

In social interactions, urban figures often exhibit shrewdness, tact, and sophistication, particularly in contexts such as market transactions and business rivalries. For instance, merchants in novels employ clever trading tactics and flexible business strategies to carve out their place in a complex social network. These traits reflect their acute awareness of their environment and their ability to respond swiftly to challenges, highlighting the dependence of lower-class society on survival intelligence.

2.1.2 Awareness of Social Class Among Urban Figures

The personalities of urban figures are also deeply influenced by their social status. Lower-class urban figures often display a sense of alienation or resistance toward the upper classes while harboring aspirations for upward social mobility. Many urban characters in Ming and Qing novels seek to elevate their social status through adventurous behavior, strategic interpersonal relationships, and even unscrupulous means.

For example, characters like street vendors and wandering performers often rely on social acumen and cleverness to achieve higher social standing, demonstrating a strong awareness of class dynamics. This pursuit of social advancement shapes their resourcefulness and courage while also fostering skepticism and rebellion against societal norms and moral expectations.

2.2 Interpersonal Interactions and Character Formation in Urban Life

2.2.1 Power Dynamics and Relationship Networks in Urban Society

Interactions among urban figures are often characterized by power struggles and the negotiation of social status. Urban figures secure their survival through intricate relationship networks, establishing a pattern of interpersonal relationships based on mutual benefit and reciprocity.

These individuals often demonstrate exceptional social skills, excelling in forging connections through etiquette, language, and economic transactions. Over time, these interactions shape their personalities, revealing traits such as caution, tact, and even cunning. These characteristics emerge as a response to the competition for resources and status within the societal framework.^[3]

2.2.2 Emotional Interactions and the Shaping of Urban Characters

Beyond interests and benefits, emotional interactions also play a significant role in shaping the personalities of urban figures. While their survival is closely tied to practical concerns, their emotional expressions and relationships contribute to their character depth.

Through interactions with friends, family, and lovers, urban figures reveal not only cunning and wit but also emotional traits such as loyalty, tolerance, and integrity. By portraying these emotional interactions in detail, novels present the multifaceted identities and inner lives of urban figures within the context of social dynamics.

2.3 Character Destinies and Social Values in Urban Environments

2.3.1 Social Values and Moral Choices in Urban Life

Urban life is imbued with secular values and moral dilemmas. In market transactions, loyalty-driven conflicts, and even family disputes, urban figures often face tensions between morality and practical realities.

To survive, they may make choices that conflict with traditional moral standards, such as engaging in deception, theft, or opportunism. However, such behaviors are not merely signs of moral deficiency;

they are responses to societal injustices and class rigidity.

In novels, many urban characters demonstrate remarkable adaptability through these behaviors, embodying a form of “survival intelligence” that contradicts traditional Confucian moral codes. These portrayals offer a nuanced exploration of how urban figures navigate the moral complexities of their environment.

2.3.2 Fluidity of Fate and Potential for Social Mobility

The destinies of urban figures are often marked by fluidity, reflecting changes not only in their social status but also in the diversity and complexity of their personal choices. The dynamic nature of urban life imbues their fates with uncertainty.

On one hand, urban figures face entrenched social hierarchies and limited opportunities. On the other hand, the openness of urban environments provides them with chances to change their fates through individual effort.

By depicting the fluctuations in these characters’ lives, novels highlight the struggles and resilience of lower-class individuals in their pursuit of social mobility. These narratives emphasize the potential for individuals to overcome societal constraints through determination and perseverance. ^[4]

3. Literary Techniques for Depicting Urban Life and Character Portrayal

3.1 The Interaction Between Narrative Perspective and Character Portrayal

3.1.1 Omniscient Perspective: Revealing Character Complexity and Social Context

The omniscient perspective surpasses the perceptual limitations of individual characters, offering a comprehensive display of the inner thoughts of various urban figures and their interactions with the social environment. This narrative approach provides extensive coverage, unveiling the complexity of urban characters and their survival conditions within urban life. By employing an omniscient narrative, novels delve beyond surface-level events to explore the social background, historical conflicts, and class relationships underlying the characters, enriching the depth and dimensionality of character portrayal.

3.1.2 Limited Perspective: Detailed Representation of Individuality

A limited perspective focuses on the thoughts, emotions, and behavioral details of a specific character, enhancing their individualized traits. Urban figures, due to their constrained living environments, often reveal personality-related details through minor actions. The limited perspective, with its meticulous descriptions, makes these characters more vivid and lifelike. Particularly in urban social interactions, this perspective highlights characters' subtle reactions and internal monologues, emphasizing their struggles and survival intelligence under social pressures.

3.1.3 Character Perspective: Inner Exploration and Conflict

The character perspective emphasizes the expression of subjective experiences, playing a significant role in portraying the inner worlds of urban figures. Through first-person narratives or in-depth psychological depictions, readers can directly access the thoughts and emotions of urban figures, experiencing their emotional fluctuations and inner conflicts. Urban characters often find themselves entangled in complex social relationships. Using this perspective, novels vividly depict their struggles for survival, value pursuits, and conflicts with society, revealing their continuous self-examination and internal battles in daily life. ^[5]

3.2 Language Style and Its Alignment with Urban Characters’ Personalities

3.2.1 Colloquialism and Vividness: Markers of Social Identity

The language of urban figures often features pronounced colloquial characteristics, with straightforward and concise expressions imbued with the flavor of everyday life. This colloquial style reflects the social identities of urban characters and aligns with their survival strategies and life wisdom. By incorporating language infused with regional and social-class markers, novels effectively convey the social status, living conditions, and personality traits of these characters. Especially when depicting merchants, commoners, and artisans, this succinct and direct linguistic style enhances the realism and relatability of the characters, making them more dynamic and multidimensional.

3.2.2 Slang and Proverbs: Regional and Individualized Linguistic Symbols

Slang and proverbs are essential components of the linguistic style of urban figures. These authentic oral expressions not only symbolize local culture but also manifest individual character traits. By employing slang and proverbs, novels vividly illustrate characters' cultural identities and social contexts, highlighting their survival strategies within urban society. The use of slang not only conveys characters' social skills and life wisdom but also underscores their close relationship with their environment. For instance, urban figures often use humorous slang to express dissatisfaction or resistance, making language a tool for resisting external pressures in the urban setting.

3.2.3 Metaphors and Symbolism in Language: Inner Depth and Social Critique

The language of urban figures is enriched by the use of metaphors and symbols, which deepen their character portrayal. These linguistic elements not only reveal the complex emotions of characters but also serve as critiques of social realities. For example, urban figures may express rebellion against the upper class through suggestive remarks or use metaphorical descriptions of objects and events to indirectly convey approval or dissent regarding societal conditions. This symbolic expression in language enhances the multidimensionality of characters and provides a broader platform for societal and cultural critique within novels. ^[6]

3.3 Symbolism and Metaphors in Urban Life

3.3.1 Symbolic Significance of Urban Spaces: Metaphors for Social Hierarchy and Relationships

Urban spaces in Ming and Qing novels are not merely venues for character activity but often carry profound symbolic significance. Locations such as marketplaces, streets, and teahouses symbolize social mobility, information exchange, and class rigidity.

In these spaces, urban characters' interactions reveal the complexities of social relationships and metaphorically represent the dynamics of class movement and stagnation. For instance, markets symbolize commerce and power exchange, while streets reflect the conflict between individual fate and societal forces. Through symbolic descriptions of these spaces, novels not only depict the interactions between characters and society but also highlight the deeper contradictions within social structures.

3.3.2 Objects and Daily Actions as Metaphors: Representations of Character Traits and Fate

In depictions of urban life, everyday objects and actions often hold metaphorical meanings. For instance, characters' interactions with items like knives, coins, or wine cups can suggest their personality traits, inner conflicts, and social status. These objects, while part of daily life, carry symbolic significance tied to characters' psychological activities and motivations. Through metaphorical expressions involving these items, novels profoundly reveal characters' personalities and their relationships with society.

3.3.3 Metaphorical Development of Plot: Reflections of Social Systems and Individual Fate

The plotlines of urban characters often transcend the mere depiction of individual destinies, serving as metaphorical reflections of social systems and historical contexts. Through carefully designed plot developments and symbolic events, novels implicitly critique societal realities.

For example, the roles urban characters play in social conflicts or their responses to societal changes often serve as metaphors for contemporary social issues. These metaphorical plotlines illustrate the complex relationship between individual fate and social structure, enhancing the depth of social critique and historical reflection.

Conclusion

By exploring the relationship between urban life and character portrayal in Ming and Qing novels, it is evident that urban life serves not only as a narrative backdrop but also as a pivotal element in shaping character personalities and destinies. The personalities of urban figures are intricately connected to their social status, living environments, and cultural backgrounds. Urban spaces and interpersonal interactions provide a rich platform for the multidimensional portrayal of characters.

Through detailed descriptions and unique narrative techniques, Ming and Qing novels capture the emotional worlds and survival wisdom of lower-class individuals. Future studies can further investigate the evolution of urban life depictions in novels from different historical periods, particularly through

cross-cultural comparisons to reveal the diversity and universality of urban culture in global literature. Additionally, with the development of modern literary criticism methods, there remains vast potential for analyzing the symbolism and metaphors of urban life, warranting deeper exploration.

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