



The Entrepreneurial Scholar: Transformations of Masculinity in Contemporary Chinese Digital Media

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of the prosperity of Chinese online literature and its film and television adaptations, this study explores the transformations of the scholar image in contemporary Chinese popular culture and embeds the image in the context of the landscape of digital media. It compares the image of the scholar in traditional literature with the new scholar in contemporary works, taking *Joy of Life* and *Nirvana in Fire* as core cases. Adopting textual analysis, it constructs a comparative benchmark of traditional scholars from classic literary works and focuses on three aspects of the construction of the new scholar image, namely, talent manifestation, life values and physical characteristics. The research finds that, while retaining the frail physical trait of old scholar, the new scholar possesses modern management wisdom, strategic acumen and characteristics of entrepreneurial self, redefining frailty as an intellectual resource and reconstructing the traditional “wen-wu” masculinity framework. This transformation is attributable to contemporary audiences’ emotional needs amid social uncertainty, the diversification of masculinity perceptions, as well as the algorithm-driven digital cultural production model. This study enriches the theoretical exploration of masculinity in contemporary Chinese popular culture, and sheds light on the research on the modern revival of traditional gender tropes.

Keywords: New Scholar Image, Masculinity, Chinese Online Literature, Entrepreneurial Self, Wen-Wu Framework.

1 Introduction

As an increasing number of non-professional writers engage in literary creation, online literature is flourishing in contemporary China. Literary production has thus become more democratized, allowing the daily experiences and individual desires of the grassroots to be projected into texts. The algorithmic mechanisms of digital media precisely capture this content. The algorithmic push it to audiences with similar aspirations, so a continuously interactive literary production field is formed in digital media. In this process, imagery and motifs from traditional Chinese literature are repeatedly activated and infused with contemporary values, leading to a transformation of images rooted in traditional Chinese culture [1]. Film and television adaptations of online literature have further amplified the influence of these images; they transcend textual media and reach

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a wider audience. Notably, the transformation of the scholar image is particularly intriguing and may offer new insights into the construction of Chinese masculinity.

Existing research on Chinese masculinity has primarily concentrated on the scholars in traditional literature, who are frequently depicted as physically frail, emotionally vulnerable, and endowed with poetic talent. In contrast, the image of new scholars in contemporary Chinese online literature and its adaptations in film and television has received scant attention. This study seeks to address this gap by a comparing the image of the new scholars in contemporary popular culture with their archetypes in traditional literature. Specifically, it explores how the image of scholar is reshaped, the underlying factors, and the market logic giving rise to these changes. The critical readings of the new scholar image will enrich the study of masculinities in modern literature, film and television and shed light on the revival of traditional cultural tropes in the contemporary era.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Research on the Online Literature and Its Adaptations in Film and Television

Significant progress has been achieved in the activation of traditional Chinese culture through online literature and its adaptations in film and television. Ni (2025) noted that fantasy online literature excels in constructing worldviews that transcend reality, utilizing settings such as “time travel” and “infinite flow” to enable characters to navigate between different temporal and spatial realms [1]. This narrative characteristic not only facilitates the adaptation of online literature into film and television but also reshapes the presentation of different images on screen. Wu (2023) explained that costume dramas derived from online literature employ atypical characters [2]. Their personalities, behavioral logic, and value orientations carry both traditional and modern cultures and are widely embraced by audiences. These studies illustrate that the adaptation of online literature into film and television has emerged as a central arena in the digital age for the transformation of images rooted in traditional Chinese culture.

2.2 Research on Chinese Masculinity

Masculinity studies have emerged as a flourishing field in gender studies. Cornell’s theory of multiple masculinities interprets masculinity as a dynamic construct and practice shaped by specific power relations and historical contexts [3]. This provides a theoretical framework for analyzing traditional Chinese masculinity in diverse socio-cultural settings. In recent decades, there has also emerged a body of work on Chinese masculinity. Louie’s dual framework of “wen-wu” (“wen” means literary and “wu” means martial) encapsulates the two foundational dimensions of ideal masculinity in Chinese tradition [4]. Known as a classic paradigm for interpreting gender representations in historical and literary characters. Song’s study of the masculinity in the “fragile scholar” archetype transcends the view of “fragile” as mere physical weakness or negative labeling [5]. It reveals that the masculinity of scholars is formed through contrast

and negotiation with “wu” traits, as well as internal moral, emotional, and physical disciplinarity.

2.3 Definition of the New Scholar Image

In the context of this study, the new scholar refers to a transformed masculine archetype emerging from contemporary Chinese online literature and its film and television adaptations. Influenced by the application of intelligent technology, the new scholar is often distinguished by modern management wisdom, strategic planning and characteristics of entrepreneurial self, however, they also inherit some characteristics of traditional scholars, such as physically weak and poetic talent.

3 Research Design

3.1 Case Selection

To examine the representation and transformation mechanisms of the new scholar in digital media, this study selects *Joy of Life* and *Nirvana in Fire* as core cases, which typify these works in three aspects. Firstly, according to the analysis of online literature and its film and television adaptation by the *Chinese Writers Association* in recent years, both works are widely recognized as exemplary adaptations of online literature into television, with broad social influence and popularity among Chinese audiences [6]. Secondly, the protagonists of both works belong to the scholar image, while also highlighting two key and complementary facets of the new scholar image. The two protagonists represent two different modes of power operation: Fan Xian (male lead in *Joy of Life*) uses modern management knowledge to transform traditional systems. He shows the ability of entrepreneurial innovation and resource integration within the system. Mei Changsu (male lead in *Nirvana in Fire*) keeps resisting imperial violence, reflecting extreme political acumen and resilience. Thirdly, according to the rating of *Douban* app, both works boast high-quality original novels and successful television adaptations [7-8]. Hence, this study can have detailed analysis of the transformation mechanisms through which the new scholar image is constructed.

Joy of Life tells the story of Fan, a young man carrying modern advanced memories, growing up in Qing Kingdom in a next cycle of ancient human civilization. The story unfolds in a distant future, set in the ancient world of the next human civilization following the destruction of our present-day civilization, which happens to resemble pre-modern Chinese society. In the world, Fan lives in this ancient society yet possesses the memories and knowledge of today's highly advanced modern civilization. Thus, he can be described as an “ancient man” endowed with the advanced memories of the modern era. Fan relies on the Supervisory Bureau established by his mother to engage in complex relationships between the southern Qing and northern Qi Kingdoms. Fan's image embodies the ability to integrate modern management knowledge and innovative consciousness into the society.

On the other hand, the story of *Nirvana in Fire* is set in the fictional Liang Dynasty. Though Mei narrowly escaped with his life, he was poisoned. Twelve years later, Mei returns to the court to assist Prince Jing to become the king, because Jing believes in the Chiyan Army's innocence. Under the help of Mei, the wrongful conviction in the Chiyan is ultimately vindicated. Mei's image is characterized by strategic planning and emotional control, highlighting his wisdom in operating in a complex political ecology.

By comparing and analyzing these two works and their protagonists, this study explores how the image of the new scholar is transformed in contemporary popular culture, and thus reveal the value orientation and cultural logic carried therein.

3.2 Research Method

This study employs textual analysis as its primary methodology, structured into three steps. The first step involves reconstructing the traditional scholar image as a benchmark. The analysis selects representations of traditional scholars from classic texts, including *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (A story tells that the scholar Zhang Sheng and the daughter of the prime minister, Cui Yingying, who, with the help of the maid Hongniang, break through numerous obstacles from others and finally got married), *The Peony Pavilion* (A fictional legend created by a playwright of the Ming Dynasty Tang Xianzu, which tells the story of Du Linian, a daughter of an official family, who falls in love with the scholar Liu Mengmei and experiences the death and comes back to life to reunite with Liu), and *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (A collection of classical Chinese short stories including depictions of love, ghosts and gods, and critiques of feudal ethics). The paper extracts their typical characteristics from the dimensions of intelligence, actions and physique so as to establish a comparative benchmark.

The second step entails analyzing the new scholar image in digital media, specifically focusing on the television adaptations of two online novels, namely, *Joy of Life* and *Nirvana in Fire*. The paper samples influential segments from each series as analysis units, prioritizing scenes that depict the protagonists' decision-making, institutional operations, and emotional conflicts. Coding follows a three-category framework (talent-value-physicality). Each segment should be independently coded by two coders using a predefined codebook; coding discrepancies would be resolved through discussion to ensure reproducibility and interrater reliability.

The third step consists of cross-text comparison and mechanism explanation. This phase compares the differences between traditional and new scholars across the three dimensions and integrates theoretical resources from literature reviews to elucidate the cultural and market logic underlying this transformation.

4 The Contemporary Transformations of Scholar Images

4.1 Different Manifestations of Talent and Mindset

The traditional scholar is often characterized by poetic talent. In *The Romance of the*

Western Chamber, the scholar Zhang (the male lead) possesses remarkable poetic talent, yet upon meeting Cui, daughter of the late Prime Minister, at a temple, he channels this talent entirely toward courtship. When their premarital affair is discovered by Cui's mother, Zhang is compelled to leave for the capital to attend the imperial examination, only then will he be permitted to be with his beloved Cui. Such expressions of talent only focus on poetry composition, emotional expression, and success in the imperial examinations. Few traditional scholars possess management or strategic thinking, nor do they concern themselves with matters beyond personal achievements.

The mindset of the new scholar has undergone a fundamental transformation in contemporary online literature and exhibited two distinct modes of intelligence. Firstly, modern management wisdom has become an integral component of the scholar masculinity, as exemplified by Fan in *Joy of Life*. He possesses talents that extend well beyond poetry composition. Utilizing modern memory to vividly express his abilities through the recitation of poetic lines, he earns the title of "God of Poetry in Qing." However, his skills are not confined to poetry. He also demonstrates acumen in business management and institutional innovation. By founding a press and integrating resources from the Supervisory Bureau, he influences the power structure on exploiting institutional loopholes and resource integration. Secondly, political acumen represented by Mei in *Nirvana in Fire* is also a crucial component of scholar masculinity, complementing modern management wisdom. He embodies a different form of intellectual wisdom, characterized by power calculation and strategic planning. Despite his frail body, he orchestrates strategies and assist Prince Jing from behind various cases. Finally, Mei successfully overturns the wrongful conviction in the Chiyan case from twelve years ago. Thus, it is evident that the talents of the new scholar are more strategic and systematic, replacing traditional scholars' pure poetic talent.

4.2 Transformation of Life Value, Pursuits and Trajectories

The life trajectory of a traditional scholar typically centers on personal destiny. Their primary pursuits are the successful completion of imperial examinations and the attainment of official positions. For instance, in the traditional fictional drama *The Peony Pavilion*, the scholar Liu falls in love with a maiden he encounters in a dream. He later discovers a portrait of this maiden Du but finds she has already passed away. Driven by love, he opens her coffin and brings her back to life. Then he takes the imperial examination, earns the first place, and ultimately marries Du. These traditional scholars often conclude with a favorable resolution, either achieve fame and titles or retreat to home to uphold their integrity [5]. This reflects a logic of action aimed at fulfilling personal values.

The new scholar exemplifies a distinctly different value orientation. As a diplomatic envoy from Qing to Qi kingdom, Fan uses his wisdom and high emotional intelligence to adeptly navigates life-threatening situations and promote peace negotiations between the two countries. Fan's life trajectory is not obtaining fame and power or pursuing love but to engage in power system and fulfill his mother's wish to "make this world a little different." His life goal transcends concerns for personal safety and fame, prompting a critical reflection on the society and system itself. Mei's ethical values are even more

pronounced. He bears the unjust grievances of Chiyan Army twelve years ago, dedicating over a decade to “let the deceased rest in peace.” Despite facing imperial violence, he chooses to intervene in the power center as a strategist. This decision is not driven by personal glory but by a commitment to social justice. Therefore, the life purpose of the new scholar is no longer defined by personal success but by their contribution to society and their engagement with the fundamental structures of their world.

4.3 Reinterpreted Physical Traits

Traditional scholars were often depicted as possessing a fragile body, a trait typically linked to incompetence. Louie (2012) pointed out that “wen” and “wu” are the basic frameworks that constitute Chinese masculinity, and the fragile body is the embodiment of the masculine temperament of “wen” [4]. However, this fragility is not simply a physiological defect. Song (2004) found that fragility of traditional scholars is often linked to emotions [5]. For instance, in *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, the scholar Zhang becomes instantly enamored and mentally disoriented upon first meeting Cui. Subsequently, he falls ill from longing, loses his appetite, and requires medicine to sustain life. This emotional turmoil renders his physical fragility a reflection of romantic frustration. Similarly, the scholars in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* exhibit comparable traits. For example, Huang Sheng in “Xiangyu” completely abandons his studies after encountering a peony fairy named Xiangyu, and even the slightest emotional disturbance leaves him both physically and mentally exhausted. The scholar from classic literary works encapsulates a profound state of inner and outer weakness, creating an image particularly susceptible to external disruption.

However, new scholars use their own wisdom to compensate for physical fragility. Although their bodies are fragile, their intelligence is powerful. On the one hand, they inherit the fragile body of the old scholar. Although Fan doesn’t have any physical deficiencies, his martial arts skills are not particularly strong either. He often presented himself as a literary figure known as the “God of Poetry in Qing.” Mei’s sickly appearance is a visual symbol of his identity as a “Talented Qilin Scholar.” This fragile physical characteristic continues the traditional characteristic of talented scholars suppressing “wen” with “wu.” On the other hand, they redefine the meaning of fragility, preserving fragility as a resource. When facing an emotional crisis with Lin Wan’er (Fan’s lover), he remains composed and solves the problem with his actions afterwards. His body is no longer a passive vessel for emotions but rather a force that can be strategically utilized. Similarly, Mei, despite being plagued by poison and chronic illness, remains steadfast in participating in the planning of various cases and power struggles in the face of physical pain. He transforms his fragile body into an instrument for revenge retribution and upholding justice.

This transformation can be understood as a modern reconstruction of the “wen-wu” framework. On the one hand, new scholars retain the characteristic capital of “wen” to distinguish it from pure military force, while also obtaining the effect of “wu,” that is, to operate in the field of power. On the other hand, scholars in contemporary works no longer perceives emotional fulfillment as the singular purpose of life, but exhibit

heightened self-awareness of both body and mind, showcasing resilience and strength that are atypical of the traditional scholar.

5 The Social Factors and Market Logic for the Transformations of the New Scholar Images

5.1 The Emotional Needs of the Audience

The transformation and widespread acceptance of the scholar image primarily arise from the profound emotional needs of contemporary audiences. Today, a time characterized by significant uncertainty in professional and living environments, young individuals often grapple with different kinds of pressures, such as employment anxiety and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness [9]. As indicated by Yang's research, the activation of cultural memory in the digital age frequently entails individuals' imaginative projection of an ideal self [10]. When engaging with cultural products, audiences seek a recognizable connection and project their identities onto these offerings.

Under this background, the new scholar presents two differentiated models of ideal self-projection. Fan's model can be summarized as a sense of control and the imagination of social mobility. Fan achieves a huge advantage in the next cycle of ancient society through modern advanced knowledge. He successfully anticipates the actions of the commander of Qi Kingdom, recruits multiple experts, ensures that events unfold as planned. So, Fan makes great contribution in the Qing Kingdom in its confrontation with Qi. These plot lines satisfy audiences' yearning for control while also reflecting their aspirations for upward mobility. Mei's model, on the other hand, revolves around strategy and revenge. He meticulously orchestrates the "Lan Garden" incident, resulting in the imprisonment of the minister of Revenue and assistant to Prince Jing to become the king. This narrative of justice and revenge responds to audiences' pursuit of life's meaning amid societal uncertainty. The two models together constitute the new scholar's appeal to audiences: they crave the proactive shaping of destiny like Fan and the intellectual quest for life's meaning akin to Mei.

5.2 The Shift in Perceptions of Masculinity and the Value of Labor

The transformation of the scholar image is closely linked to the evolution of contemporary gender and labor force perceptions. Within the "wen-wu" framework, the "wen" masculinity, which was regarded as the ideal masculine in premodern China, was relegated to a marginal and vulnerable position amidst rapid Westernization and modernization during the twentieth century [5].

However, contemporary society has witnessed a diversification of masculinity and changing perceptions of labor force. Firstly, the pervasive influence of feminist discourse has compelled cultural production to cater women's aesthetic expectations regarding male roles. Women no longer expect the masculine temperament of the traditional "talented scholar and beauty" model, but rather expect gender equality and value men's loyalty towards women [11]. For instance, the patient devotion of Mei to

Princess Nihuang (Me's lover) and Fan's steadfast guardianship of Lin (Fan's lover) both infuse emotional tenderness and compliance, catering to female audiences' demands for masculinity. Besides, the relative decline in the value of physical labor in post-industrial society, there is a shift in the societal perception of elites from poetic talent to professional competence [12]. Thus, what new scholars own such as Fan's management wisdom and Mei's strategy skills has unprecedented social recognition. Consequently, the traditional scholar's frailty has been redefined in modern times as new scholar's intellectual strength.

5.3 The Impact of Contemporary Cultural Production Models

The transformation of the scholar image in contemporary society is closely linked to the evolution of digital media. In the context of rapid globalization and advancements in intelligent technology, algorithms and big data applications have altered the models of cultural production and dissemination [13]. When creators share content online, audiences can express their preferences and engage in secondary creation through comment sections. Algorithms subsequently translate this interactive data into guiding principles for content production [14].

Consequently, amid the democratization of narration, the image of scholar is no longer restricted to the traditional narrative of the "talented scholar and beauty." Instead, the image reflects modern discourses on masculinity and the cult of the entrepreneurial self. Entrepreneurial self is embodied by individuals who proactively shape their lives, plan for their futures, and seek breakthroughs within existing systems [15]. Fan for instance, successfully manage a press, rally numerous experts and prominent figures to his side, which is crucial to his success in the future. His image exemplifies a life trajectory of proactive planning and seeking breakthroughs within an uncertain society. Mei, through strategic planning, navigates power struggles, pretending to help Prince Jing's competitors. In reality, he supports the Prince Jing for the legitimate heir's position. His image bespeaks the ideal paradigm of forward-looking planning in the knowledge economy era. Evidently, under the evolution of digital media and contemporary cultural production models, these new scholar groups align more closely with modern approaches to handling matters, traits emerging from the ongoing interaction and collaborative creation between writers and audiences within algorithm systems.

In conclusion, the transformations of the image of new scholars can be traced to the deep coupling of social mentality, cultural context of the digital age, and media production mechanism. It reflects the collective expectations of contemporary society for professional abilities and talents, and also indicates the path for traditional cultural to be activated in the context of modernity.

6 Conclusion

This study reveals the transformation mechanism of masculinity in contemporary online literature and its film and television adaptations through a comparative analysis of the new scholar images in *Joy of Life* and *Nirvana in Fire*. Cognitively, new scholars

possess modern management and strategic planning wisdom instead of pure poetic talent. In terms of values, they pursue social justice rather than personal fame. Physically, they retain fragile bodies but redefine frailty as intellectual resource. This transformation is attributable to multiple factors from audiences' emotional need, gender and labor force perceptions and media production logic. Rooted in the structural changes of the knowledge economy and digital media, this transformation forms a unique cultural negotiation between traditional cultural and modern social expectations.

The image of scholar has experienced a revival and transformation in contemporary Chinese online literature and its film and television adaptations. This transformation reflects the global shift in masculinity in the knowledge economy era. In this era, intellect replaces physical strength as a new power symbol, with geek-like intellectual heroes taking center stage in cultural narratives [14]. The revival of the new scholar image is thus a outcome of this global trend intersecting with the digital revival of traditional Chinese culture [13]. The new scholar image retains some core traits of the traditional one, such as the fragile physique and romantic narrative elements rooted in "male fantasy," while undergoing profound transformations. This transformation is in line with contemporary Chinese society's rethinking of strength and success, and provides a valuable cultural reference for the reconstruction of masculinity in the knowledge economy era.

However, this study has some limitations. Firstly, it is limited to textual analysis of two classic works, lacking the empirical investigation of different audiences' reception. Secondly, the research on masculinity construction of the new scholar is relatively single, without comparing it with other male images in contemporary popular culture. Future research can adopt mixed research methods combining quantitative investigation and qualitative interview to track the meaning variation of the new scholar image in other media. It can also expand the research scope to explore the communication effect and cultural adaptation of the new scholar image in the global context. Such research can elevate the study of the new scholar from the description of local phenomena to the theoretical construction of gender politics in the global knowledge economy era.

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