

Current Narrative Research on Historical TV Dramas from a Bottom-Up Perspective

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Abstract

Chinese history is long and dates back to ancient times, leaving behind a wealth of cultural heritage. On this foundation, historical dramas have flourished and achieved remarkable success. However, following this period, the narrative methods and subject matter of Chinese historical dramas have become rigid, severely limiting the development of such dramas. To address this challenge, historical dramas have undergone innovative interpretations on multiple levels, with research into this new interpretation utilizing a Bottom-Up Perspective. In terms of subject matter, historical dramas have gradually moved beyond the traditional focus on “heroes”, instead turning their attention to the lesser-known individuals swept up in historical currents. Within the narrative logic, the Youth Narrative is thriving. Even though the traditional theme of heroic figures, the dramas tend to show their ordinary and life-like aspects; and family narratives have replaced political power struggle narratives, forming a narrative structure of “light comedy + ancient costume history.” This change has brought new developments to historical dramas, but there are still many shortcomings, such as logical gaps and the deconstruction of heroes.

Keywords

Historical Dramas, Botton-Up Perspective, Material Selection, Narrative Logic

1. Background and Introduction

Since the 1990s, historical dramas have seen a boom. However, since then, the range of topics available for historical dramas has become increasingly limited, with a tendency towards palace intrigue or power struggles. The narrative has developed towards formulaic patterns, severely limiting the development space of historical dramas. The creation of original serious dramas is not optimistic, with

only two historical dramas involving ancient costumes in 2022: “The Long River of the World” and “Moonlight over Mountains and Rivers”. Moreover, there are few major historical projects, with only four approved in 2018, and none or one approved in subsequent years.

Therefore, historical dramas have had to change their traditional selection of materials and narrative perspectives, innovating the interpretation of historical stories. In 2017, Director Zhang Lixin’s “The Generalissimo Sima Yi’s Military Alliance” innovatively changed the narrative perspective of historical dramas, interpreting well-known historical stories from personal emotions and family ethics perspectives, achieving high ratings and sparking widespread discussion. The creative model of “light comedy + ancient costume history” is becoming increasingly optimistic. TV dramas that interpret history in a lifelike manner and portray historical characters’ youth narratives in a civilian way are also emerging continuously (Yang, 2012), such as “The Grand Ming Dynasty”, “Moonlight over Mountains and Rivers”, “Awakening Era”, “Zhi Fou Zhi Fou Ying Shi Lv Fei Hong Shou”, etc. The selection of TV drama materials has gradually expanded from kings and generals to marginal figures in history books, such as “Longest Day in Chang’an”, “Joy of Life”, “Wind Rises in Longxi”, etc. The downward shift in material selection and narrative perspective has become a new approach to creating historical dramas.

The “Bottom-Up Perspective” is a research approach that focuses on the lower or marginalized social groups, emphasizing the analysis of issues from the standpoint and experiences of these less privileged groups. It evolved from the “history from below” viewpoint in India’s intellectual community in the 1970s. Currently, historical TV dramas are paying more attention to the feelings and thoughts of ordinary people in terms of both material selection and narrative methods, indicating a shift towards a more inclusive perspective. Therefore, this article will analyze its narrative characteristics from the Bottom-Up Perspective.

2. Current Historical TV Drama Material Selection from a Bottom-Up Perspective: “Grand Era, Small People”

The so-called “Bottom-Up Perspective” in artistic works refers to the focus on the life trajectories, survival status, and life experiences of ordinary people. This allows the audience to connect with the characters in the work and find their own parallels in these characters (Wu, 2021). There is a growing tendency to depict the life conditions of ordinary individuals, showcasing the main themes of the drama through portrayals of their lives (Ji, 2024).

The significant shift in the creation of historical TV drama not only represents an innovation in traditional narrative perspectives but also reflects the interaction between the deep exploration of film and television artistic theories and the changing social and cultural contexts. From a theoretical perspective, the prevalence of this bottom-up perspective in historical TV series demonstrates the core ideas of “decentralization” and “diversity” in postmodernist theory. In the realm

of film and television art, this means a transition from grand narratives to micro-narratives, emphasizing individual experiences and values, especially the voices and stories of the marginalized groups often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives.

“Decentralization” refers to the abolition of the domination of any central entities or overwhelming truths over people’s thoughts and behaviors, the disruption of modern hierarchical systems, and the redirection of attention toward marginal phenomena. Traditional historical dramas often focus on societal central figures such as emperors, generals, heroes, and outstanding individuals, constructing a narrative structure centered on these prominent figures. However, when the subject matter of historical dramas shifts to ordinary people and commoners, it begins to break this centralized narrative mode, transferring attention to groups often overlooked or marginalized in the long river of history. This, to a certain extent, challenges the authoritative position in traditional historical narratives, allowing the lives and experiences of underlying groups once concealed by mainstream historical narratives to be seen and heard.

“Diversification” is another core concept in postmodernist theory, emphasizing that the emergence and development of things in the world are determined by multiple different origins and factors. It advocates for differences among individuals and opposes monolithic thinking and values. Traditional historical dramas tend to present a unified, linear trajectory of historical development, neglecting the various possibilities and complexities that exist within historical processes. When historical dramas start to focus on common people, they begin to explore and reveal the diverse cultures and individual experiences overlooked by mainstream historical narratives, offering different narrative perspectives on the same historical events. As a result, history is no longer a mere accumulation of heroic historical viewpoints but a complex tapestry woven from the life fragments of countless ordinary individuals, each with their unique life value and emotional world.

As exemplary contemporary historical dramas, “Longest Day in Chang’an” and “Joy of Life” have achieved exceptionally high viewer ratings and acclaim. They not only embody the postmodernist ideas of “decentralization” and “diversification” in their themes but also demonstrate profound innovation in dialogue, scene construction, and narrative structure.

Firstly, taking “Longest Day in Chang’an” as an example, the series showcases the complex social ecology and the brilliance of humanity in Tang Dynasty’s Chang’an City through dense and tense dialogues, particularly the interactions between the protagonist Zhang Xiaojing and characters from different social strata. In the first episode, Zhang Xiaojing says, “Anything that comes is a surprise,” reflecting his optimistic attitude as a commoner facing life’s challenges and hinting at the numerous unknown challenges and turns in the plot. A supporting character says of Li Bi, “The commander of the Bu Liangren (a military or police organization in ancient China) can protect the people of Chang’an, while the prime

minister can protect the people of the whole country. I was born to shoulder great responsibilities and bless the people of the Tang Dynasty with my wisdom.” This statement expresses a firm belief in protecting the people, rooted not in personal status but in a sense of responsibility toward all living beings, echoing the concept of “decentralization.”

In terms of scene design, the production team meticulously recreated the architectural style and living details of the Tang Dynasty. Each scene transition not only advances the plot but also subtly embeds profound meanings related to history, culture, and even philosophy. For instance, the series depicts in detail the grandeur of the Lantern Festival in Chang’an City, referencing extensive historical materials for accuracy, and vividly showcasing the festive joy of commoners. This scene not only enriches the visual experience of the plot but also emphasizes the importance of civilian life in historical dramas, breaking the limitation of traditional dramas that focus solely on emperors, generals, and heroes.

Regarding narrative structure, the series disrupts the single, linear progression of traditional historical dramas by employing a multi-threaded approach, linking the fate of the entire Chang’an City through Zhang Xiaojing’s personal experiences. This achieves a delicate shift from macro-historical narration to micro-individual destinies, embodying a “decentralized” narrative strategy.

“Joy of Life,” on the other hand, subversively reconstructs traditional historical narratives through the perspective of Fan Xian, a time traveler with modern thinking. The dialogues in the series are filled with philosophical reflections, and the collision between Fan Xian’s modern ideas and ancient contexts injects fresh perspectives into the age-old story, showcasing the charm of “diversification.” For instance, Fan Xian repeatedly mentions the line, “In this life, if you have no one to rely on, you can only drift along with the current like duckweed,” reflecting his profound thoughts on life’s circumstances and echoing the helplessness and resistance of commoners facing their destinies in the series, adding depth and breadth to the plot. The supporting character Teng Zijing also says, “My wife and children are waiting for me; I cannot die.” This simple yet heart-striking line showcases a small character’s attachment to and responsibility for his family, evoking emotional resonance that enables viewers to pay more attention to and understand the lives and destinies of underlying figures.

In terms of scene construction, the series spans both the imperial court and civilian life, presenting the majesty of royal power, such as the splendid palaces, while also delicately depicting the down-to-earth aspects of daily life, like the scenes of Fan Xian and Teng Zijing living among the common people, allowing viewers to feel the human warmth and liveliness in historical dramas. The differing styles within the same historical context further embody the narrative concept of “diversification.”

In terms of narrative structure, “Joy of Life” employs a combination of flashbacks and interpolated narratives, gradually unveiling the mystery of Fan Xian’s identity while also presenting historical truths from different characters’ pers-

pectives. Each character's storyline is a vivid interpretation of historical diversity.

It is also a return and deepening of the realist aesthetic tradition. With this perspective, history is no longer a compilation of heroic historical views, but a complex picture woven together by the life fragments of countless ordinary people, each character having their unique life value and emotional world. Realism emphasizes the true reflection of social life, especially the living conditions and psychological world of marginalized people. In historical TV dramas, it is reflected in emphasizing the true reflection of social life in a certain historical period, thus paying special attention to depicting the living conditions and psychological world of the social subjects at that time, namely the public. In the historical process, the lives of ordinary people constitute the cornerstone of social life. Their emotions, living conditions, and psychological world are mirrors that reflect the essence of society and the changes of the times. Realism emphasizes the authenticity of details and the objectivity of description, and the details of the lives of ordinary people at the bottom are the most authentic and vivid social materials. At the same time, the emotional entanglements and struggles of the common people often contain rich humanistic connotations. Historical TV series, through delicate descriptions of the daily lives, emotional tangles, and struggles of the common people, not only showcase the micro-level aspects of social change but also reveal the humanistic brilliance and suffering in the historical process, triggering profound reflections on history (Mao, 2020), reality, and human nature from the audience.

As highly anticipated historical works in recent years, "Litchi in Chang'an" and "Wind Rises in Longxi" have successfully demonstrated the living conditions and psychological world of ordinary people in the context of a great era through their unique dialogue structure, rich scene depiction, and exquisite narrative structure. Therefore, they become the focus of this analysis.

"Litchi in Chang'an" is set in the Tang Dynasty and tells a story about workplace struggles, human nature choices, and survival wisdom through the perspective of the petty official Li Shande. In the play, the dialogues between Li Shande and his colleagues and superiors are full of wit and irony, such as his helplessness and self-deprecation when faced with a difficult task: "I'm not just sending Litchi, I'm sending my life!" This sentence not only reveals the inner struggle of the characters but also reflects the complexity and cruelty of the officialdom culture at that time. In terms of scene composition, the drama vividly depicts the prosperity of Chang'an City, the solemnity of officialdom, and the difficulties and dangers of transporting lychees, such as through busy markets, gloomy official offices, and steep mountain roads, creating an immersive historical atmosphere.

In terms of narrative structure, the drama adopts a linear narrative and interspersed flashbacks to gradually reveal Li Shande's life trajectory and inner changes, making the entire story both compact and layered.

"Wind Rises in Longxi" has won wide acclaim for its in-depth analysis of the intelligence struggle during the Three Kingdoms period and the clever construction of complex character relationships. In the play, the dialogue between Chen

Gong and Xun Xu is full of wisdom and strategy. For example, when the intelligence is leaked and the two are in trouble, Chen Gong calmly analyzes, “This situation has been broken, but the person who broke it may not be us. Xun Xu, you and I need to calm down and find out the real enemy.” This sentence shows Chen Gong’s calmness and wisdom, as well as the deep friendship and trust between the two.

In terms of scene design, the drama meticulously crafted the border between Shu Han and Cao Wei, the secret strongholds of intelligence agencies, and the smoke-filled battlefields. For example, through dark secret chambers, desolate border areas, and intense battle scenes, these scenes not only have realistic visual effects but also deeply convey the turmoil and anxiety in the border areas at that time, creating a tense and exciting historical experience.

In terms of narrative structure, the drama adopts a multi-threaded approach, closely connecting different intelligence clues with the fate of the characters, forming an intricate intelligence network that allows the audience to deeply feel the vicissitudes of the times and the entanglements of human nature while following the plot development.

In addition, this phenomenon also reflects the function and value of film and television art as a social mirror. By truly recreating and deeply analyzing the lives of the marginalized, it provides the public with a window to observe society, think about problems, and promote social progress and civilization development (Zhou & Ma, 2013).

3. The Narrative Logic of Current Historical TV Dramas from a Bottom-Up Perspective: The Booming Development of Youth Narrative

Surveys have shown that “the primary factor influencing audiences’ decision to watch TV dramas is whether the story is interesting, and the main reason for watching is for entertainment and leisure (Wang, 2021).” Before this, historical TV dramas emerged with two narrative styles to meet this demand of the audience: “bringing emperors down to the people” and “introducing commoners into royalty”, aiming to add a sense of life and a relaxed atmosphere (Fan & Chen, 2018). Currently, there has been a breakthrough in the narrative style of historical TV dramas, the comedic elements of the plots are becoming increasingly prominent. The creative model of “comedy + ancient costume history” has become a favorite in the market.

3.1. Historical Dramas Portray Historical Figures from a Daily Perspective

Currently, historical dramas tend to portray historical figures from the perspective of everyday life narratives that are more familiar to ordinary people. This approach reveals the daily living conditions of these historical figures, reflecting their commonalities with ordinary individuals and presenting them realistically

and vividly. As a result, it enables audiences to empathize with various historical figures, bridging the gap between them and the viewers, and enhancing the emotional impact of television dramas.

In terms of narrative perspective, the adoption of everyday life narrative vision in historical tragedies actually represents an important shift in narrative perspective. Traditional historical dramas often focus on the great achievements of statesmen and generals, employing a grand narrative approach (Shan, 2015). However, the current shift reflects a transition from a “God’s perspective” to a “commoner’s perspective.” This shift not only brings historical narratives closer to the life experiences of ordinary audiences but also enhances the sense of realism and intimacy in the storytelling. It uses detailed descriptions and everyday trivia to construct character personalities, making historical figures more vivid and three-dimensional, avoiding the tendency for flattening and stereotyping. It allows audiences to find cultural resonance in familiar life scenarios, promoting communication and understanding between different social classes, and fostering the diversity and inclusivity of social culture. In this process, the audience is no longer just a bystander to history but becomes a participant in the historical process, forming new cognitions of self-identity and social roles through empathy and reflection (Li, 2023). Furthermore, this narrative approach enables the audience to see shadows of real life in historical stories, feeling the warmth of history and the brilliance of human nature.

The three dramas, “Awakening Era”, “Moonlight over Mountains and Rivers” and “The Generalissimo Sima Yi’s Military Alliance”, are not limited to the traditional historical narrative framework, but instead show history from a more humanized and life-like perspective through deeply exploring the humanistic brilliance and daily life of historical figures.

In “The Generalissimo Sima Yi’s Military Alliance”, the protagonist Sima Yi’s motivations diverge from the traditional ambitious person’s mindset of “establishing achievements and careers,” shifting to a more ordinary desire to preserve his life and family in times of chaos. Throughout the story, Sima Yi’s life is like that of countless ordinary people; he wants to live a self-sufficient life but cannot achieve it. He is repeatedly dominated by fate, drawn into the maelstrom of power struggles. From entering officialdom, becoming an advisor to Cao Pi, to assisting Cao Rui, every one of his schemes and choices reveals the helplessness and calculation of ordinary people facing fate, circumstances, and power suppression. His various conspiratorial calculations emphasize his personal desires to “preserve himself,” “obtain a better life,” and “strive for glory.” These personal desires, which arise from his daily living conditions, are also closer to the thinking characteristics of ordinary people. To match this character setup, “The Generalissimo Sima Yi’s Military Alliance” also depicts a large number of details about everyday life, such as Sima Yi cooking with his wife, discussing what side dishes to add to new dishes, etc., further narrowing the distance between Sima Yi and the audience.

When portraying the inaugural ruling class of the Ming Dynasty centered on

Zhu Yuanzhang in the TV series “Moonlight over Mountains and Rivers”, the series breaks the stereotype of the “solemn and decisive” ruler in traditional historical dramas and instead delicately depicts Zhu Yuanzhang’s multi-dimensional character relationships. For example, the daily interaction between Zhu Yuanzhang and Empress Ma in the play is full of warmth and sweetness. At a court banquet, Zhu Yuanzhang whispered to Empress Ma, “The delicacies in this palace are beautiful, but they can’t compare to a bowl of Congee you made yourself.” This sentence not only shows the deep affection between the two but also allows the audience to feel their loving life as a common couple. Their interactions with Xu Da were characterized by a familiar and casual demeanor. On the battlefield, they were comrades-in-arms, and in private, they were close friends who shared every detail. One day after the war, Zhu Yuanzhang and Xu Da played chess in the imperial garden. Zhu Yuanzhang laughed and said, “Xu Da, your chess skills are probably not even as good as my royal chef’s!” This conversation made people feel like seeing the relaxation and joy of two entrepreneurial partners in their spare time.

Meanwhile, the portrayal of the supporting role of the King of Yan in the play is also quite ingenious. The marital life of the King of Yan and Xu Miaoyun is given more life-like details, such as the two planting flowers and trees together in the mansion, and the King of Yan personally painting fan covers for Xu Miaoyun. These scenes not only enrich the character layers of the King of Yan but also make the entire drama present a relaxed and humorous daily tone. This approach brings history and reality closer together, allowing audiences to appreciate historical dramas while also feeling the human touch and warmth contained within them.

In depicting the pioneers of modern China, “Awakening Era” abandoned the single praise mode and instead brought the martyrs, thinkers, and revolutionaries back to the scenes of daily life. The play not only shows the objective contributions of these characters in history but also digs deeper into their other side as ordinary people. For example, Chen Duxiu, despite his busy revolutionary work, would also be troubled by trivial matters at home and would argue with his wife due to different views; Li Dazhao was a loving father who often took time out of his busy work to accompany his children and teach them to read and write. These trivial daily life details allow the audience to see a more authentic and three-dimensional side of these great figures. Through this portrayal, “Awakening Era” successfully transformed the audience’s emotions towards the characters in the play from simple praise for greatness to a sense of empathy and blessing between ordinary people. This approach not only enhances the appeal of the drama but also enables the audience to have a stronger emotional resonance during the viewing process.

3.2. Family Narratives Replace Political Power-Struggle Narratives, Forming a “Light Comedy + Ancient Costume History” Narrative Structure

Family life is a part that individuals universally experience and deeply feel throughout their life journey. Therefore, when scriptwriters realistically portray historical figures, they most commonly use family narrative as the mode of

storytelling for television dramas. The aforementioned “Moonlight over Mountains and Rivers” and “The Generalissimo Sima Yi’s Military Alliance” have extensively utilized this mode of storytelling, with family narrative even temporarily replacing traditional power-struggle narratives.

If we want to adopt family narratives, we have to depict the picture of daily life. As a form of comedy based on daily life, light comedy naturally becomes a popular choice for playwrights to add a sense of relaxation to historical dramas and narrow the distance between history and the audience (Shen, 2019). The writing about family is nearly constitute an important motif in world literature. In Chinese works, the family is the main narrative unit (Wang, 2018). As an important narrative pattern in literature film and television creation, its core lies in mapping out the microcosm of society and the brilliance of humanity through the portrayal of relationships, conflicts, reconciliation, and growth among family members. Family narrative not only focuses on the emotional tangles and daily details within the family but often indirectly reflects the changes in the external world. As the basic unit of society, the complexity of the family structure, the subtlety of emotional communication, and the continuity of intergenerational heritage provide creators with rich narrative material and profound thematic exploration space. Family narrative can arouse widespread resonance among audiences because it touches on the universal emotional experiences of humanity—love, responsibility, sacrifice, growth, and reconciliation, which transcend cultural, regional, and temporal boundaries.

The light comedy, as a variant of the comedy genre, is unique in that it handles the trivialities and dilemmas of daily life in a light and humorous way, resolving the heaviness of reality with a witty touch, and thus initiating audience reflection and enlightenment through laughter. It often sets the story in a familiar daily life environment, such as family, workplace, and community, and closes the psychological distance with the audience through detailed descriptions of ordinary life. It also employs rhetorical techniques such as exaggeration, irony, puns, and witty dialogues and behaviors between characters to create a relaxed and pleasant viewing atmosphere, allowing the audience to release stress and enjoy the fun of life through laughter.

When family narrative and light comedy are combined in drama, film, and television works, they form a unique narrative style that can delve into the emotional tangles and brilliance of humanity within the family while also presenting the weight of history and the diversity of reality in a light and humorous way. This narrative strategy not only provides a rich expressive power for the life-like portrayal of historical figures but also makes historical dramas more than just heavy historical recreations, becoming artworks that are easily accepted and resonate with the audience. Through the delicate portrayal of the family narrative and the humorous adjustment of light comedy, the work can build a bridge between history and reality, allowing the audience to enjoy the pleasure of watching while also feeling the warmth of history and the beauty of life.

Taking “The Grand Ming Dynasty” as an example, during the adaptation process, the drama skillfully abandoned the overly bloody and heavy political struggle depiction in the original work and instead used the changes in family relationships as the core clue to drive the plot forward. In the play, the vicissitudes of the court are skillfully integrated into the daily lives of the emperor Zhu Di’s family. Through the “social customs” within the family, such as quarrels, reconciliations, care, and sacrifices among family members, the strict boundaries between the emperor and his princes are weakened, and their emotional connections as ordinary people are strengthened. Specifically, the play includes many vivid scenes of family life, such as the details of children peeping outside the door and winking and giggling at each other when the emperor is angry about something, as well as the playful bickering between brothers in daily life. These plots not only make the image of the emperor and the five sons of Zhu more vivid and close to the public but also show their warmth and helplessness as ordinary people behind the power.

When portraying the image of the emperor, the screenwriter paid particular attention to showing his fatherly side. Against the cruel background of a power struggle, the emperor’s deep affection and helplessness towards his children are delicately portrayed. For example, when deciding the successor to the throne, the emperor’s inner struggle and pain, as well as his worries about the future fate of each son, are all displayed through subtle facial expressions and inner monologues, allowing the audience to feel the emperor’s difficult choice between power and affection as a father.

Another typical case, “Zhi Fou Zhi Fou Ying Shi Lv Fei Hong Shou”, uses a carefully constructed complex family relationship network to make the line “Parents love their children, and their plans are far-reaching” spoken by Sheng Hong, the father of the protagonist, as the internal driving force for the actions of all the characters in the play.

All parents in the play, whether they are positive roles or not, show deep love and planning when dealing with their children and grandchildren. Positive roles plan righteously and legally, such as acting cautiously and showing weakness for their families; The villain plans by unscrupulous means and harming others, such as murdering people and embezzling others’ property. The two ways of planning conflict, drive the plot forward and even drive the political struggle in the entire court. The story begins with Lin Yushuang, a concubine of Shenghong, scheming to kill another concubine of Shenghong, the mother of Sheng Minglan, to gain favor for her daughter. Sheng Minglan’s revenge for her mother against Lin Yushuang forms the main plot of the story, and the grand royal and political struggles revolve around this main storyline.

In addition, “Zhi Fou Zhi Fou Ying Shi Lv Fei Hong Shou” also cleverly intersperses many light-hearted and humorous plots, adding a relaxed and humorous atmosphere to the series. For example, Wang Ruofu, the wife of Shenghong, is straightforward and naive when facing household chores. When she imitates Lin Yushuang’s charm and coquetry to win Shenghong’s favor, she is instead rejected

by Shenghong. While eating, she angrily remarks, “It turns out that foxy charm also requires aptitude,” which not only makes people laugh but also reveals her lovely and simple character. As the eldest son in the family, Sheng Changbai’s serious and upright image is broken when he sees his sister flirting with a strange man and falls comically. This contrast not only adds a sense of three-dimensionality to the character but also allows the audience to find a sense of relief and joy amidst the intense family struggles.

4. Current Shortcomings in the Underlying Narrative of Historical TV Dramas: Imbalance and Deconstruction

Although the “shift in perspective” in material selection and narrative logic has become a current trend in historical TV drama creation, this trend still has certain flaws and shortcomings.

4.1. Lack of Logical Sequence in the Storyline

Sometimes, the blind pursuit of “protagonists as ordinary people” may lead to a lack of logical coherence in the drama’s storyline. The absence of such logic is often closely related to the director’s choice of material. In the process of filming TV dramas, there is often a situation where directors and writers want to select a historical event as the theme of the drama, yet the majority of participants and related individuals in this event come from the ruling class—making it so that there are no “ordinary people” or “small characters” in line with the public’s perception in this event.

The TV drama “Zhi Fou Zhi Fou Ying Shi Lv Fei Hong Shou” encountered this situation. The directors and writers wanted to choose a political struggle during the Northern Song Dynasty as the story’s background and narrate this political struggle through the lens of family women’s mutual struggles. The protagonist, Sheng Minglan, is an absolute ruler figure: her father is a high-ranking official at the national level, her grandmother is related to the Empress, her maternal grandfather enjoys royal ancestral temple sacrifices, and **Figure 1** can support that her life scenes are all set in aristocratic gatherings, royal palaces, and other venues. Therefore, Sheng Minglan herself is a noblewoman, rather than an “ordinary person” in the public’s perception. However, due to the popularity of grassroots narratives, the directors, eager to obtain higher ratings, desperately wanted to adopt the technique of grassroots narratives for filming. A contradiction arose between the “desire to film the growth story of a small character” and the “absence of true small characters in the historical event they wanted to film.”

Faced with this contradiction, some directors mistakenly chose to invent a new, unrealistic standard to measure “aristocrats” and “small characters,” to fulfill their filming goal of making the “protagonist an ordinary person.” However, it is evident that audiences do not recognize the standards forcibly invented by the directors, and due to the unrealistic nature of this new standard, the directors cannot justify it within the drama. As a result, audiences feel confused about the sudden



Figure 1. One of the grandest aristocratic gatherings in the capital city that Sheng Minglan attended. (Source: The 15th episode of the TV series “Zhi Fou Zhi Fou Ying Shi Lv Fei Hong Shou”).

transformation of “big characters” into “small characters” and cannot find a reasonable explanation in the drama, leading to a viewing experience where the “drama’s logic doesn’t hold.”

For example, in “Zhi Fou Zhi Fou Ying Shi Lv Fei Hong Shou”, the writers invented a new standard through Sheng Minglan’s father, Sheng Hong’s line: “Children born to concubines are lowly. Not only are they despised by their family members, but even slaves and commoners can freely bully the ruling class’s concubine-born children.” This new standard is used to make the protagonist Sheng Minglan into a bullied “small character.” The drama designed numerous plots to reinforce this standard. For instance, Sheng Minglan’s grandmother’s friend poisoned all the concubine-born children to death but was praised by others for being “skillful in managing the household.” Sheng Hong’s concubine, Lin Qinshuang, wanted her daughter to receive an education but was labeled as an “unscrupulous social climber” in the drama. Even more, the drama directly arranged for a concubine-born child of a top-level official to marry a slave and praised it as a “suitable marriage.” In common sense, the ruling class is always above the ruled class, and slave owners can never be on equal footing with slaves. Yet, in the drama’s standard, a portion of the ruling class is dominated and enslaved by the ruled class. Therefore, this drama has also been criticized by audiences for being logically unrealistic.

4.2. The Disbalance of Story Tone and the Deconstruction of Heroism

Using a daily approach to portray historical dramas and heroic figures is indeed a valuable attempt. However, it can also lead to an imbalance in the story’s tone and a deconstruction of the hero’s character. The causes of these two mistakes stem from the director’s misinterpretation of the approach of “portraying historical

figures in a way that is lifelike”. Some directors mistakenly equate “depicting the daily life of historical figures” with “making the professional abilities, willpower, and other qualities of historical figures as mediocre as ordinary people, or even worse than ordinary people”.

This will firstly cause the imbalance of the story tone. The portrayal of Zhuge Liang in “Wind Rises in Longxi” reflects this problem. Zhuge Liang, a prominent figure in Chinese history, served as prime minister around 200 AD. In the drama, director Lu Yang said he wanted to show a different Zhuge Liang, “He is not a god-like Zhuge Liang, but a stranded, mortal, tired Zhuge Liang.” Therefore, in the drama, Zhuge Liang shows a kind of exhaustion and incompetence in solving problems when facing issues such as defeat and spy exposure. He even has to rely on the microscopic activities of ordinary people to passively wait for the problem to be solved.

However, it is generally believed that historical development is the result of the combined effects of macro and micro factors. In the original novel of “Wind Rises in Longxi”, it is Zhuge Liang plays an extremely important role in macro-control as the leader of the country. However, due to the erroneous “life-like interpretation” of Zhuge Liang in the TV series, his professional competence and willpower are low, and it seems that he is completely unable to play the role of leading the masses and macro-control. In other words, the advancement of historical events in TV dramas is almost completed in a state of “anarchy” without macroeconomic regulation, which makes the audience feel confused and bored. **Figure 2** can support this point.

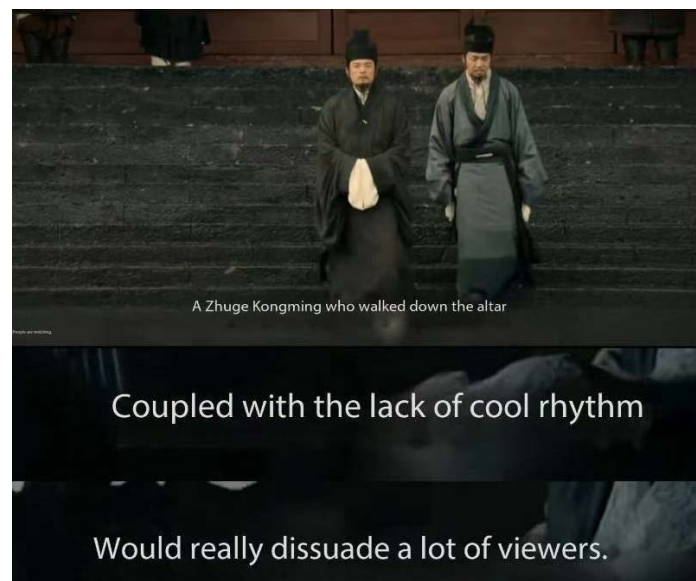


Figure 2. A film and television review blogger’s commentary on the story tone of the film in his video. (Source: Bilibili video: “Help! Why is this drama so unnoticed? [Wind Rises in Longxi]” by blogger Sanda Luren.)

At the same time, this improper shaping will also lead to the deconstruction of the heroic image. As Joseph Campbell said, “A hero is someone who has given his

or her life to something bigger than oneself.” The reason why a hero is a hero is that he or she is willing to sacrifice for a greater cause, and thus can win the praise and admiration of the people. However, if heroes become selfish and even despicable like ordinary people, and their willpower becomes weak like everyone else, then what is the reason for calling them heroes? Take the film and television image of Zhuge Liang as an example again, the portrayal of Zhuge Liang in “Tiger Roars and Dragon Swoops” has such problems, and as shown in **Figure 3**, the drama has also been boycotted by Zhuge Liang fans. The most criticized aspect is Zhuge Liang’s monologue describing his decision-making motivation. In the play, he said, “I started the war for the sake of my feelings towards my dead friend because expanding the territory was my friend’s ideal. For my friend, I would not hesitate to risk the starvation of the people of the country.” In other words, personal desires replaced the heroic ideals of Zhuge Liang as the driving force behind his decisions, even if they would result in the infringement of the rights of the vast majority of citizens.

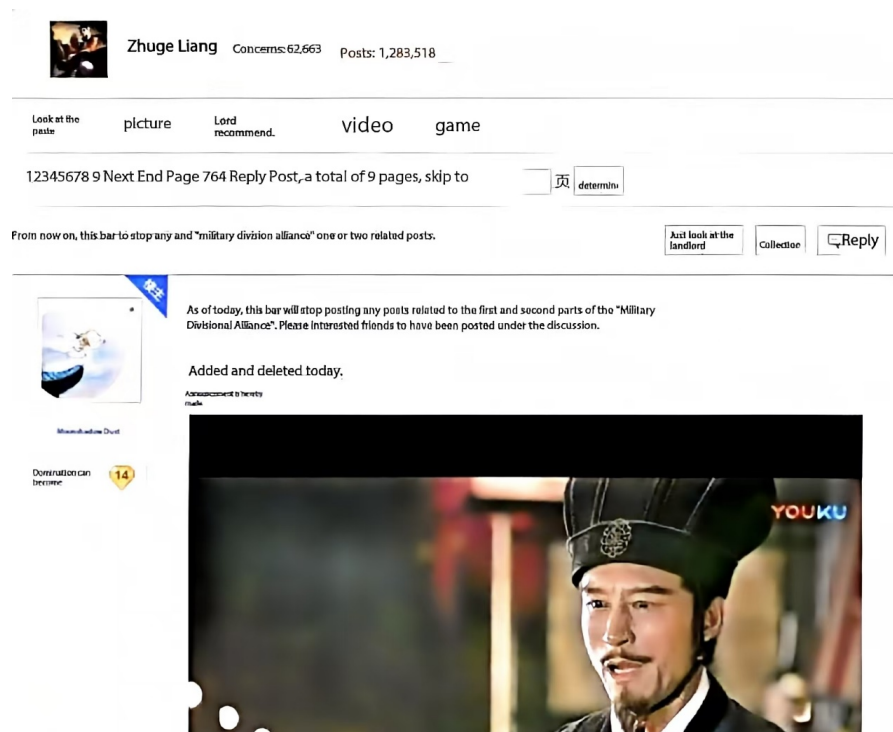


Figure 3. A post in the Zhuge Liang fan forum about boycotting the TV series “Tiger Roars and Dragon Swoops”. (Source: Zhuge Liang fan forum on Baidu website).

However, in mass communication, Zhuge Liang has always been a symbol of “loyalty,” “wisdom,” and “love for the people,” playing the role of a “savior” in countless legends, representing a selfless and noble heroic image in Chinese culture. In dramas, due to personal desires becoming the core logic of character actions, Zhuge Liang’s original motivations are deconstructed. This deconstruction requires reflection and avoidance. As Anouilh said in “Antigone,” “Those who

have certain beliefs, those who have opposite beliefs, those who have no beliefs at all—no one has an answer. The dead stiffen, become useless, and rot. The living silently forgets the dead.” If heroes come down from their pedestals, and all lofty ideals are reduced to mundane life itself, it could potentially lead to confusion in values and distortion in historical cognition.

5. Conclusion

In summary, at present, historical TV dramas have seen innovations in both material selection and narrative. The underlying narrative logic of shifting creative perspectives has become a trend in creation. They either choose materials from ordinary people or endow historical figures with lifelike qualities, translating historical events into everyday life and family relationships, and adding elements of light comedy, thus injecting new vitality into the creation of historical dramas. However, in the face of these creative flaws such as blindly pursuing trends and rigidly applying them that emerge from this underlying narrative, we should adhere to the principle of “no falsification in major events, no restrictions in minor ones” in creation, follow historical perspectives and character personalities, be close to the youth, inherit spirit, resonate, lead the times, and further promote the development of historical TV drama creation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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