

Status Quo and Prospect of the Brontë Sisters Studies in China for Recent Thirty Years: A Bibliometric Analysis Based on CNKI Core Journals (1994-2023)

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Keywords: The Brontë Sisters Studies; CNKI Core Journals (1994-2023); Bibliometrics Analysis

Abstract: The Brontë sisters—Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë—are outstanding writers in the history of English literature, known both as a collective group and as individual luminaries. Although Brontë research in China has made some progress, there are still many problems and challenges in the current publication of journals. Based on quantitative statistics and analysis of Brontë research in CNKI's core journals over the past 30 years (1994-2023), this article summarizes the current status of research on the three Brontë sisters in China to provide a new reference point for future research and gradually build a unique research system in China.

1. Introduction

The systematic study of the three Brontë sisters in China began in the 1980s, and researchers have mostly adopted theories of literary criticism such as structuralism, deconstructionism, feminism, etc., and put forward many novel and valuable insights. One of the most far-reaching works is Yang Jingyuan's *A Study of the Brontë Sisters*, which laid a solid foundation for domestic scholars to study the Brontës. Since the beginning of the new century, domestic research on Brontë has reached a climax, and the angles of research have become increasingly diverse. Using bibliometric methods, this paper systematically reviews the state of research on the Brontë sisters in China over the past 30 years, aiming to comprehensively summarize the characteristics of domestic research and provide innovative directions for studies.

Based on the database of "China National Knowledge Infrastructure", this paper conducts an advanced search with the keyword "Brontë". In the three decades from 1994 to 2023, a total of 151 papers on Brontë studies were published in the core journals. After screening, there are 126 studies that show a high degree of relevance to the three Brontë sisters. The distribution of numbers is shown in Table 1 and the general trend is shown in Figure 1. Below is a detailed analysis of the distribution of numbers in these three phases: (1) The Initial Exploration Phase (1994-2006): the number of publications in core journals remains limited, yet it demonstrates a trend of steady development overall. This phenomenon reflects the fact that Brontë research is currently in a phase of exploration and initial accumulation. Academic attention to the field is still limited, and the research direction is

gradually being formed and clarified. (2) The Rapid Development Phase (2007-2011): According to the statistical data, the number of studies in this field increased rapidly. A total of 53 papers were published, accounting for 42% of the total research literature. This significant increase not only reflects the growing interest of the academic community in this field, but also shows that Brontë research has entered a new phase of rapid development. (3) The Critical Growth Phase (2012-2023): from 2012 to 2019, the number of academic publications remained stable in the field of Brontë studies. The number of articles in core journals remains at around five per year, which demonstrates the research activity and continuity of academic output in this field. However, the situation will change from 2020 onwards. Especially in 2020 and 2022, the number of articles published in core journals drops to zero, which undoubtedly shows that the field is currently facing new challenges and difficulties. This phenomenon is a sign that Brontë research in China has temporarily stagnated and may even have reached a development bottleneck. Faced with this status quo, scholars need to actively seek new research prospects and growth points to break through the existing limitations and inject new vitality and impetus into Brontë research.

Table 1: Overview of Core Journal Publications on the Brontë Sisters Studies in CNKI (1994-2023)

Year	Number	Year	Number	Year	Number
1994	1	2004	3	2014	6
1995	2	2005	4	2015	5
1996	1	2006	3	2016	8
1997	3	2007	10	2017	2
1998	1	2008	10	2018	7
1999	1	2009	9	2019	6
2000	2	2010	13	2020	0
2001	1	2011	11	2021	1
2002	1	2012	4	2022	0
2003	4	2013	5	2023	2
Total					126

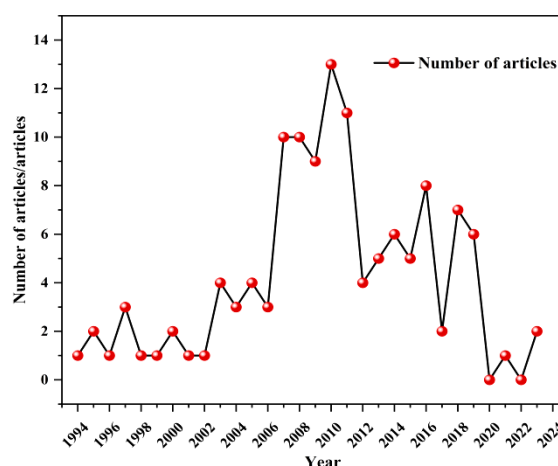


Figure 1: Line Chart of the Number of Core Journal Publications on the Brontë Sisters Studies in CNKI in China (1994-2023)

Through comprehensive analysis, we can see that the number of studies on the Brontë sisters has increased significantly in the past thirty years, which not only reflects the high enthusiasm of domestic

academics for the study of the Brontë sisters, but also marks the great strides made in the field of Brontë studies. The growth in the number of studies and the fluctuating changes during the period clearly outline the stage-by-stage development of Brontë studies. In the 20th century, with the introduction of various Western theories of literary criticism, Chinese scholars began to apply them more and more to the in-depth study of the works of the Brontë sisters. In the first decade of the 21st century, the study of the Brontë sisters reached unprecedentedly rapid development, in which both the quality and quantity of scholarly papers increased significantly. However, given the current trend in research, we recognize the need to explore new directions, introduce new research methods or expand the scope of research.

2. Trends and Features of the Brontë Sisters Studies in CNKI Core Journals over the Past Three Decades

2.1. 1994-2006: The Initial Exploration Phase

During this period, scholars not only explored in depth the life of the three Brontë sisters and their literary achievements, but also studied their novel texts in detail. As the most outstanding masterpieces of the Brontë sisters, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* have attracted great attention and been widely discussed in foreign literary circles in China. These two works are not only highly esteemed for their profound literary value and unique artistic charm, but have also become a focus of academic study due to their rich research content. Therefore, this section will focus on analyzing the research status of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

In the course of research into the literary achievements of the three Brontë sisters, Professor Zhang Zuwu published an essay entitled "Why Could Emily Brontë Write *Wuthering Heights* — An Initial Inquiry into Emily Brontë's Path to Prominence," in the fourth issue of *Foreign Literature Studies* in 1994. Professor Zhang believes that Emily Brontë's literary success is by no means accidental, but the result of a combination of internal and external factors. He breaks down Emily's success into several dimensions: Her father's profound knowledge guided her literary path; the solitude of Howorth provided her with ample time to read and write; literary exchanges with her sisters built her rich literary network; and the tragic fall of her brother Branwell became an important factor inspiring her creative work.^[1] In 1997, Professor Song Zhaolin published "Two Rare Flowers on the Heather Moorland" in the first issue of *Foreign Literature Studies*, where he meticulously reviewed and summarized the works of Charlotte and Emily Brontë. Professor Song not only examined their individual literary creations but also delved into the commonalities and differences in their personalities, exploring how these traits influenced their creative thoughts and artistic techniques. In the same year, *New Perspectives on World Literature* published an article by Zhang Shuyu titled "New Developments in Brontë Studies Worldwide" in its fourth issue, which reviewed the latest advancements in Brontë research within the international academic community. These papers not only provided new interpretive and critical perspectives for domestic scholars but also broadened the research horizon, enriched research methodologies, and infused new vitality into the field of Brontë studies.

In researching on the texts of the Brontë sisters' works, domestic scholars have focused primarily on Charlotte Brontë's classic work *Jane Eyre*. However, for her other works, such as *Villette*, *Shirley* and *The Professor*, there are relatively few research articles in the core journals of the CNKI, and only a single essay has been published for each work, which undoubtedly demonstrates the limitations of current research. The study of *Jane Eyre* is mostly from the perspective of the characters' identity, but some of the articles also deal with the issue of colonialism. It is noteworthy that the papers of higher academic value do not focus on the heroine, Jane, but turn to the marginalized role of Rochester's mad wife, Bertha Mason. By focusing on this character, researchers reveal more subtle

and complex social issues in the novel, exploring how Bertha Mason reflects the class and gender ideas of society at the time, and what racial elements she may have. As for the character of Bertha Mason, some argue that her presence serves to advance the plot, heighten suspense and cater to audience tastes. However, other scholars take a different view and believe that Rochester's prototype was in fact Charlotte Brontë's real-life love. They argue that Bertha's portrayal of madness and ugliness reflects the author's complex feelings towards her lover. Virginia Woolf once summarized Charlotte Brontë's feelings as "I love, I hate, I suffer."^[2] As a "text of feminist fanaticism"^[3], the colonialist discourse it contains has long been underappreciated. Scholar Gu Hongli's "The Colonialist Discourse in *Jane Eyre* and *The Wide Sargasso Sea*" (Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages, Issue 1, 2003) offers a penetrating analysis of colonial discourse within these works. Her comparative research perspective offers new insights into the colonial aspects of *Jane Eyre*.

In the current research phase, Emily Brontë's masterpiece *Wuthering Heights* has received extensive academic attention. Scholars have explored the author's subjective sphere from multiple angles, i.e., how Emily's life experience, environment and character profoundly influenced her literary creation. They are committed to digging into Emily's creative motives and the success behind them, and scrutinize her works in a broader cultural and historical context. Professor Zhang Zuwu's article, "Why Could Emily Brontë Write *Wuthering Heights* — An Initial Inquiry into Emily Brontë's Path to Prominence," published in *Foreign Literature Studies*, Issue 4, 1994, and Professor Shao Xudong's article "How Was *Wuthering Heights* Written?—Discussing the Sources of Emily Brontë's Creativity," both exemplify this research orientation. In examining the textual content of the novel, scholars have explored the surreal features of *Wuthering Heights*, such as Xiang Xiaohong's "A Surreal Text: The Modern Interpretation of *Wuthering Heights*". Other scholars have analyzed the characters in the novel and compared them with those in other works, such as Cheng Wei's "The London Butterfly and the Imperial Eagle: From Darcy to Rochester" (Foreign Literature Review, Issue 1, 2001). In addition, some scholars pay attention to the vivid depiction of nature in the work, such as Zhou Xiyu's "*Wuthering Heights*: A Masterpiece in Harmony with Nature" (Journal of Xiangtan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences) Issue 2, 2005). The studies at this stage are not only diverse in perspective and rich in content, but also further demonstrate the great tension within the text of *Wuthering Heights*. These studies not only provide us with a new interpretation of the classic text, but also offer a wealth of innovative points for academic exploration in the future.

2.2. 2007-2011: The Rapid Development Phase

Based on the data presented in Table 1, we can see that the publication volume of core journals in the field of Brontë sisters research reached a remarkable peak in the period from 2007 to 2011. During this period, the scope of research expanded beyond the classic works of the authors, with scholars also engaging with some of the less researched and less known works.

In the current research stage, multiple perspectives and multiple critical approaches to classical works have been widely applied. A notable contribution in this area is Liu Xiaomin's exploration of "Ecofeminist Consciousness in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*" published in the 23rd issue of *Masterpieces Review* in 2011. Professor Liu Xiaomin's study not only brings a new perspective to the textual analysis of *Jane Eyre*, but also resonates subtly with the current social concern for ecological civilization and the advancement of women's social status. This perspective, which considers nature, women, and human society, offers a broad scope for reflection on ecological development and gender equality in human society. Narratology, as a science that studies narrative works on the two major levels of "story" and "discourse" within a text, plays an indispensable role in textual interpretation.^[4] Chinese scholars have also applied narratological theories to the study of the

Brontë sisters and achieved considerable success. For example, Gao Wanlong's "On the Compound Narrative Mode of *Wuthering Heights*" (Journal of Jinan University, Issue 6, 2008) and Jin Qiong's "A Preliminary Discussion on the Narrative Perspective and 'Emotional Structure' of the Brontë Sisters' Novels", in which he pointed out that the main form of narrative perspective is the limited first-person narrative. The author's choice of narrative perspective is closely related to the "emotional structure" that represents the shared values and social psychology of her time. ^[5] In this research phase, scholars have not only explored in depth the multiple perspectives and critical approaches of the classics, but also conducted more detailed excavations of some themes that have received less attention in earlier studies. These new themes include unique reconstruction of the specter theme, the writing of traumatic memories embodied in the work, and an innovative reading of *Wuthering Heights* from a child's perspective.

During this phase, comparative studies emerged as an important focus. Professor Zhuang Dongwen conducted an in-depth comparative analysis of the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen in 2010, examining three main aspects: creative purposes, female consciousness and views on marriage. This comparative study highlighted the differences between the two authors and helped to show the evolution and variation of feminist themes in the works of the different writers. Additionally, it provided a deeper understanding of the development of feminist thought in British literature and expanded our appreciation of the diverse expressions of feminism in literature. With the further enhancement of domestic scholars' local consciousness, more and more scholars have begun to conduct comparative studies between local works and those of the Brontë sisters, and actively participate in the construction of a literary discourse system with Chinese characteristics. Prof. Feng Xi's "Intertextuality and Cultural Assimilation—Studies of Zhang Ai-ling's *Hun Gui Li Hen Tian* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*" (Journal of Xuzhou Normal University, Issue 3, 2009), is one of the most outstanding representatives of this trend. By examining the intertextuality of two very different genres of works, *Hun Gui Li Hen Tian* and *Wuthering Heights*, Prof. Feng has thoroughly explored various dimensions such as title, narrative technique, narration, imagery, language style, etc., and elaborated the literary connection spiritual resonances between Eileen Chang and Emily Brontë ^[6] In comparative studies of Chinese works, some scholars have gone beyond traditional textual comparisons. They have begun to consciously elevate such comparisons to a theoretical level, exploring the differences between Eastern and Western literary and cultural traditions as well as the differences in aesthetic characteristics. For example, Yi Zhaozi's article "The Fragrance of Chinese Tea in *Wuthering Heights*" discusses how Chinese tea serves as a symbolic adornment for Emily Brontë's novel. ^[7] From the seventeenth century until the time of Emily's life, the Orient had been regarded as a Mecca to which Europeans aspired, and China was idealized as a representative of reason and virtue. In *Wuthering Heights*, the symbolism of tea reflects the author's yearning and pursuit of this ideal state. This reference to Eastern culture not only enriches the cultural connotation of the novel, but also provides us with a unique perspective to understand the exchange and fusion of Eastern and Western cultures in literature.

Some of the lesser-known works by the Brontë sisters have gradually gained attention from Chinese scholars. Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, *Villette*, and *The Professor* are now being included in academic discussions. Prof. Shi Rupo (2007) explored the themes of gender confrontation and bisexual homonormativity in *Shelly* in his study, which provides a new perspective for us to understand the gender issues in the work. Prof. Zhou Xiaojuan (2011), on the other hand, adopted a three-dimensional analysis of narrator, text and reader, combining rhetoric and cognitive science to explore the concept of "unreliable narration" in *Villette*. Meanwhile, Emily Brontë's poetic works have also attracted attention from scholars. In the article "The Free Nature and Feminist Consciousness of Emily's Poetry" published in *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, Ou Huaen and Pan Lifeng (2008) believe that Emily's poetry shows the unique power and passion of women,

and her spirit of independence and freedom embodies her challenge and resistance to the feudal ethics. Qin Zhifeng (2009) comprehensively analyzes the artistic achievements of Emily's poetry and its innovativeness in his article "Inheritance and Innovation in Emily Brontë's Poetry." (Guangxi Social Sciences, Issue 4, 2009).

2.3. 2012-2023: The Critical Growth Phase

Figure 1 shows that the number of publications in core journals remained at a stable and considerable level in the early phase. In the later phase, however, there is a clear decline in the volume of publications, especially in recent years, when the volume of publications has fallen to almost the lowest level in history. This phenomenon indicates that the current domestic research urgently needs to introduce more mature original theories to produce more high-quality scholarly works. At this stage, the study of the Brontë sisters has two significant features: first, the heat of interdisciplinary and cross-media research is becoming more and more prominent. Scholars scrutinize the works of the Brontë sisters from the perspectives of different disciplines, exploring the interaction between the texts and different media; second, the choice of research questions is closer to reality. Scholars try to connect the literary works of the Brontë sisters with the current social reality, exploring the real problems and the spirit of the times reflected in the works.

Interdisciplinary research emphasises the overlapping and merging of different academic fields, which is often visible in literary criticism through the combined use of several critical perspectives.^[8] In "Travel and Literary "Pilgrimage": Literary Heritage and the Creation of Urban Space and the State Image" (Journal of East China Normal University (Philosophy and Social Science), Issue 5, 2019), Chen Xiaolan integrates literature with tourism. She focuses on analyzing numerous literary pilgrimage sites, including the Brontë sisters' home. Their lives become "public heritage", and the physical and cultural spaces of the towns constructed in the work take readers into the world of imagination and reality.^[9] Additionally, the works of the Brontë sisters have not only been emphasized in the field of literature, but their film and musical adaptations have also become a major focus for academic research. In the article "Rooted in 'German-Austrian Genes', Manifested in 'Poetry-Philosophy Integration'—On the Influence of German-Austrian Musicals on the Creation of the Chinese Original Musical *Jane Eyre*" (Drama Literature, Issue 6, 2019), Liang Qing examines how the Chinese musical *Jane Eyre* draws inspiration from German-Austrian musicals in terms of creative experience and artistic style. Prof. Liang Qing explores not only the philosophical connotation of the original, but also the artistic demands on the creative ontology of Chinese original musicals. The research of these scholars is not limited to the text itself, but integrates Brontë's works with other disciplines and media. In this way, they respond to the demands of the current innovative new mode of "culture +" and actively promote the development of China's cultural industry and cultural endeavors to achieve a higher quality of prosperity.

At this phase in the study, another significant feature of studies on the Brontë sisters' works has emerged: the research perspectives are closely connected to contemporary issues. In the face of increasingly serious ecological and spiritual problems, people have begun to re-examine the relationship between nature and human beings. It is noteworthy that the article "The Dual Variations of the Natural Ecology and Spiritual Ecology: On the Ecological Implication of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*" by Zhang Yan and Wang Shuang (Journal of Tongji University, Issue 5, 2018), is of great practical significance. The article discusses in depth the nature writing in *Wuthering Heights*, the confrontation between nature and civilization, and the criticism of industrial civilization. It also analyzes the dual construction of natural ecology and spiritual ecology in the work.^[10] These discussions not only provide new perspectives for understanding the novel but also offer important inspiration and influence for contemporary society in exploring the dual salvation of personal spirit

and natural environment, as well as in building a harmonious society.

3. Conclusions

By comprehensively analyzing the quantitative data and research characteristics, it can be concluded that although the country has achieved remarkable results in the field of the study of the Brontë sisters, it still faces some challenges and problems. These problems are mainly manifested in the following three aspects: Firstly, there is a high degree of repetitiveness in research angles and topics, lacking innovation and originality. Currently, many cutting-edge research perspectives and theories are proposed by international scholars, and domestic scholars often experience a certain lag in introducing these new perspectives and theories. Secondly, the comprehensiveness of the research content needs to be strengthened, and there is an imbalance in the research focus. Among the 126 core journal papers published in the past three decades, there are only five studies focusing on Anne Brontë's works, accounting for 3%. For Emily Brontë, the studies focus on *Wuthering Heights*, while there are only 10 studies of her poetic works, accounting for 7%. Thirdly, the study of the Brontës has not yet been fully "localization", and there is a phenomenon of "aphasia" in Chinese theoretical discourse. Although some scholars have tried to compare the works of the Brontë sisters with famous local works, the number of such studies is limited. Moreover, there is a lack of further refinement and in-depth investigation of cultural "differences". These problems also reveal the immense potential for further development in the field of Brontë studies in China. In order to enrich and promote the in-depth development of Brontë studies, we need to adopt a more comprehensive and localized research orientation.

To achieve this goal, future Chinese scholars can adopt the following strategies in Brontë research: Firstly, it is essential to intensify research on the less-studied works of the Brontë sisters. Currently, there is a high concentration of research on certain areas, particularly on Anne Brontë and Emily Brontë's poetry, which still have significant room for expansion. Secondly, domestic scholars should actively participate in international academic dialogues. Through exchanges and cooperation with international scholars, our scholars can not only learn from and introduce international cutting-edge research concepts and methods, but also promote the overall improvement of the research level. Thirdly, approaches from non-literary fields can be adopted by utilizing interdisciplinary research methods. With the advancement of digital technology, digital humanities and big data analysis will become powerful tools for literary research. By utilizing these new technologies, researchers can analyze vast amounts of textual data, thereby discovering new research questions and perspectives. Finally, the research of domestic scholars should really emphasize the Chinese position and make clear the guiding significance to China's current reality. By combining Brontë's works with Chinese literature and culture, not only can they better reflect the aesthetics and values of Chinese readers, but also help to make the research closer to the national situation, thereby promoting the healthy development of Brontë studies in China.

Acknowledgements

This paper is supported by the project "Research on Ideological and Political Teaching of English Poetry Courses from a Multimodal Discourse Perspective" (Project No. 2023WYJG04) from the School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology.

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