

A Comparative Study of Hu Niu's Character in the Novel and the Film of Rickshaw Boy

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Abstract: In the film adaptation of Rickshaw Boy, some of Hu Niu's traits are reserved, while some are adapted or removed. Compared to the original novel by Lao She, the film Rickshaw Boy, directed by Ling Zifeng, shows a more positive and humane side of Hu Niu. In the film, Hu Niu holds a more empathetic attitude towards people at the bottom of society and loves Xiangzi sincerely. However, in the original novel, Hu Niu exhibits a destructive attitude towards people at the bottom of society and only has sexual desires for Xiangzi. In general, though the morality of the lower class is highlighted through the romanticization of Hu Niu, the refinement of characters' moral portrayal in films leads to stereotypical cliché of characters, waning the effect of criticism towards reality as well as the aesthetic values and connotation of typical characters, and even digressing from the theme of original work that shows the dark side and alienation of human nature. By discussing the similarities and differences between Hu Niu's portrayal in the film and the novel, this study explores the gains and losses as well as the appropriate dimensions of film and television adaptation.

1. Introduction

Rickshaw Boy, a fictional novel authored by Lao She, tells the story of rural-born Xiangzi striving for a living as a rickshaw puller at the bottom of society. The story is set against the background of the Warlord Era of China, during which people at the bottom of society were being oppressed and exploited by warlords, comprador capitalists, and rural gentry. The cruel reality overshadowed the once positive and confident Xiangzi. Under the pressure of life, Xiangzi's ideals were crushed, leading him on the path of self-destruction. Except for the sorrowful fate of Xiangzi, the story of Hu Niu, a character built by Lao She is also heart-wrenching. Lao She depicted Hu Niu from multiple angles using a delicate writing style. Behind her blunt and unrestrained demeanor is a complex and vicious personality. Her bold and vulgar language exposes a darker, repressed side of her. Hu Niu is not entirely a victim. To a certain extent, she contributed to Xiangzi's tragic fate. However, the film adaptation simplifies the complexity and depth of this female character.

In 1982, the film *Rickshaw Boy* directed by Ling Zifeng, was released, in which the character of Hu Niu was adapted significantly. Hu Niu, played by the actress Siqin Gaowa was beloved by the audience and the actress was awarded the Best Actress at the 3rd Golden Rooster Awards and the Best Actress at the 6th Hundred Flowers Awards for her performance in this role. However, this study

argues that though the image of Hu Niu in the film has left a deep impression on the public, her character is more "stereotyped" compared to Hu Niu in the novel in terms of connotation and complexity.

Regarding the stereotyped characters in film and television works, Chen pointed out that the creation of stereotyped characters is a methodology for producing different types or styles of films in a standardized, formulaic, and patterned manner [1]. Baker summarized the features of stereotyped characters in *Dramatic Technique* as having distinctly limited and notable traits [2]. Aristotle believed that stereotyped characters focus on the portrayal of common traits shared by a group. He mentioned the importance of maintaining the consistency between the identity and personality traits of characters in *Poetics*. He stated that personality traits must fit their identity. Even if there is some inconsistency in their personality, a sense of consistency should be embedded within that inconsistency [3]. Liu believed that stereotyped characters are characters built based on certain perceptions using a template-based approach. Stereotyped characters in film and television works are more likely to become predictable, presenting a collective similarity and a limited reflection of reality [4]. According to Zhou, in historical novels, female characters portrayed by male narrators can be categorized into positive and negative types. Positive female characters are those who embody chastity and virtue, representing loyalty and righteousness that are typically borne by men. Regarding the negative women characters, they are often depicted as jealous wives or promiscuous women whose moral transgressions inflict significant conflicts in the storyline. This singular portrayal subjects women's image to male perspectives of morality, reducing the authenticity of characters and diminishing the depth of stereotyped characters [5]. There are abundant studies regarding the film adaptations of *Rickshaw Boy*. For instance, Lei analyzed the simplification and generalization of Xiangzi's image [6], and Wang discussed the gains and losses of the film adaptation, referring to Hu Niu's adaptation as lacking highlights [7]. However, there are few studies discussing the reasons of lacking highlights from the perspective of stereotyped characters.

Based on the research above, stereotyped portrayals of characters, especially female characters, in film and television adaptations often lead to a partial portrayal of a character that represents a specific group based on the creator's viewpoint. This approach diminishes not only the complexity and reality but also the depth and image of characters from the original work. Therefore, by comparing the similarities and differences between Hu Niu's character in the film and novel, this study aims to analyze the features of *Rickshaw Boy*, including the novel and the film adaptation, from the perspective of gains and losses in the creation of stereotyped characters.

2. Similarities of Hu Niu's Character in the Novel and the Film

By comparing the original work and the film adaptation, the similarities of Hu Niu's character are summarized in the following:

2.1 Somewhat unattractive and intimidating appearance

In terms of appearance, in the original novel, Hu Niu is described as "tigerish". When in a good mood, she would apply makeup to cover the "fierceness" of her look. It suggests that Hu Niu in the original work, is a physically strong female with a somewhat intimidating look. In the film, Hu Niu is played by Siqin Gaowa. The actress has a pair of slightly upturned eyes, somewhat round and blunt cheeks, and slightly protruded teeth, which fits the description of Hu Niu's stern appearance in the novel.

In terms of dressing, in the novel, Hu Niu wears simple clothes commonly worn by ordinary people. When meeting Xiangzi, she wears "a light green silk short jacket on top and loose blue crepe pants on the bottom, revealing a bit of her white waistband due to the short length" [8]. It suggests her

preference for brightly colored clothes with simple styles. In the film, Hu Niu's clothing is also richly colored, with most in pink and green. She also wears a short jacket on top and long trousers, which fits the description in the novel.

2.2 Vulgar and blunt language

In the novel, Hu Niu's lines often come with curses, showing her attitude of never avoiding the topic of "death." When she saw Xiangzi after he escaped from the military camp, she immediately burst out, "Did the wolves take you away or did you go to Africa for gold?" When calling for Xiangzi to eat, she said, "Come over and have a bowl of rice first! It won't poison you to death. How can two bowls of hardened bean curd possibly fill you up" [8]. This shows that Hu Niu frequently mentions "death", reflecting her blunt and unrestrained personality. In the film, Hu Niu talks in the same way, outspoken and uninhibited. The aforementioned lines of Hu Niu remain unchanged, closely matching those in the novel. In one scene, Hu Niu confronted Xiangzi, faking her pregnancy. She complained, "I know you only take tough treatment instead of soft words. It is useless to reason with you. If you push me too far, I won't care what seedlings you are!" "Not caring about the seedlings" is a Beijing dialect, referring to having no reservations regardless of who the other person is. In another scene, Hu Niu yells at the police on the street, "Hey, if you like listening to a couple's talk that much, come over here! You will hear much more clearly!" This highlights the similarity in Hu Niu's fearless and uninhibited manner between the novel and the film.

In addition, Hu Niu's Beijing dialect in her lines is kept in the film. In the second chapter, "Zhaohu Ba (just do it)", "Jin'er Ge Jiushi Jin'er Ge (Today is just today)", and other expressions with strong Beijing dialect features are preserved. The actress Siqin Gaowa also studied under Ma Zenghui to learn the Beijing accent, highlighting Beijing dialect features in her delivery of lines.

2.3 Shrew and unscrupulous manner

In the novel, Hu Niu is intent on captivating Xiangzi. To achieve her intention, she uses despicable tactics. By getting Xiangzi drunk at first, she managed to have sex with Xiangzi, obtaining him through persuasion and scolding. Later, she heavily publicized her affair with Xiangzi and coerced Xiangzi to marry her during her pregnancy. Undoubtedly, this is a daring and open move for an unmarried woman in the old times of China. In the film, this side of Hu Niu is preserved. After taking a liking to Xiangzi, Hu Niu seduced him with alcohol and charm, forcibly obtaining Xiangzi. After that night, feeling ashamed and regretful, Xiangzi deliberately stayed away from her. Soon, Hu Niu showed up and claimed that she was pregnant, further pestering Xiangzi. Even in the film, Hu Niu's calculation of Xiangzi is evident. Although Hu Niu does have a hint of genuine fondness for Xiangzi in the film, she secures Xiangzi with the same calculated method, which hinders Xiangzi from developing genuine affection for her.

3. Differences of Hu Niu's Character between the Novel and the film

As mentioned above, stereotyped characters are built based on the creator's perceptions, carrying certain intentions during the creation process. The adaptation of Hu Niu reflects the intention in the form of moralizing. Boileau believed that while creating characters, creators should restrain the impulses of characters with moral rationality to reflect the philosophy and persuasiveness of their work. Meanwhile, a strong didactic should be demonstrated to make characters convey the creators' ideas [9]. However, this didactic nature will reduce the complexity and depth of the characters. In the film, Hu Niu's image is stereotyped, turning her into a representative of a kind women at the bottom of society, which neglects the real-world significance and true humanity reflected through the dark

and complicated side of Hu Niu's personality.

3.1 Avoidance on the dark side of Hu Niu's personality

In the novel, Hu Niu has shown a consistent dark side of her personality trait through her manners towards everyone. Similar to Xiangzi, she grew up in an unreasonable society. Then, she intruded into Xiangzi's life, leading to their ultimate descent. Hu Niu resembles her father, Fourth Master Liu. Before opening his car factory, Fourth Master Liu was an old hand of the local underworld. He had worked as a warehouse guard, ran gambling dens, conducted human trafficking, and even practiced usury. Being shrewd and worldly-wise, he is proficient at manipulating the poor. His characteristics can be described as dark and merciless. Hu Niu's demeanor towards Xiangzi and Fuzi reflects her calculation and bullying of the lower-class people. For instance, after learning that Fuzi was forced into prostitution, Hu Niu asked Fuzi for more details with high spirits instead of showing sympathy. Then, she sought an opportunity to drive Fuzi out of her brothel. This aligns with Xiangzi's description of Hu Niu in the novel, where he said "She is not a good person. She is like a garbage heap. Though there are some shiny little items on top, the bad parts far outweigh the good parts [8]."

In the film, Hu Niu exhibits a glimmer of sincerity for Fuzi, when she apologizes to Fuzi after having conflicts with her and gives her a bag of grain. This reflects the director's favoritism towards Hu Niu by romanticizing her dark, jealous, and unpleasant personality. The director focuses on portraying the compassion, sympathy, and kindness of female characters, thereby neglecting the ruthless and dark side of Hu Niu. Hu Niu's image in the film has become more virtuous, obscuring the line between her and Fuzi. Thus, it fails to depict how women of different classes are subjected to the same constraints by a repressive society.

3.2 The Romanticization of Hu Niu's Lust and Sexual Desires

In the novel, Hu Niu never disguises her sexual desire. The reason for Hu Niu's obsession with Xiangzi is clearly shown in the description written by Lao She [10]. According to the novel, Hu Niu wants to marry Xiangzi mainly because she is obsessed with his young and strong body, which is reflected through descriptions such as "She returned to her bygone youthhood" and "The happiness she experienced with Xiangzi is beyond words [8]." This happiness originates from the release of Hu Niu's long-suppressed desires. Her obsession with Xiangzi was not solely motivated by love or there was no love involved at all. Hu Niu simply destroyed Xiangzi's dignity and dreamed out of her personal desires, which also shattered Xiangzi's last bit of affection for her. In the novel, the hatred towards Hu Niu held by Xiangzi reflects Hu Niu's exploitation. Therefore, Xiangzi sees Hu Niu as an old, ugly, formidable and shameless "broken woman", a hag who feasts on his blood and life, a devil who treats him like a mere plaything [11].

In the film, the director depicts Hu Niu's lust and sexual desires in a more restrained manner. To avoid a direct description, the director made some modifications regarding the relationship between Hu Niu and Xiangzi. In one scene, Hu Niu bursts with joy after the unexpected return of Xiangzi. Xiangzi, himself too, also felt her affection. Compared to the novel, Hu Niu's demeanor towards Xiangzi is not merely forceful; it also shows a sense of care. This also normalizes her marriage and relationship with Xiangzi. At the end of the film, Hu Niu was about to pass away, and Xiangzi showed genuine concern and anxiety, which is hardly sensed by readers of the novel [12].

4. Gains and Losses of Film Adaptation

As mentioned, it can be seen that although the movie basically follows the original work, there are some differences from the original, so this article summarizes the above content in Table 1.

Table 1: Similarities and differences of Hu Niu's character in the novel and the film

Numbler	Film	Novel
Character traits	She has a ruthless side that oppresses the lower classes, as well as a compassionate side that shows kindness towards them. Regarding Xiangzi, she feels both love and sexual desires.	She treats the lower-class people with oppression throughout and exhibits merely sexual desires for Xiangzi.
Attitude toward Xiangzi	With both love and sexual desires, she also exhibits compassion and sympathy towards Xiangzi.	Sexual desire and exploitation throughout
Attitude toward Fuzi	Displaying occasional hints of compassion and sympathy, though she remains harsh.	Malice throughout
Similarity: a tigerish appearance; bold and vulgar language; practicing unscrupulously to obtain Xiangzi		

4.1 Commendable aspects of film adaptation in its historical context

The theme of the novel *Rickshaw Boy* demonstrates the struggles and sufferings of China's lower classes. However, the film adaptation conveys the director's other thoughts in addition to those issues. In the 1980s, influenced by the further openness of society and the developing social thoughts, a trend of thought liberation emerged in China's literary and art circles. Films, also known as the seventh art, were propelled and promoted by the trend, incorporating modernized philosophy, values and ideals. The adaptation of Hu Niu by Ling Zifeng exactly embodies the incorporation [13]. Hu Niu, in Lao She's portrayal, is a repelling character both mentally and physically. However, under the director's portrayal, the beauty lies in Hu Niu's humanity stands out. Hu Niu, after adaptation, possesses qualities that can be further explored, demonstrating deep sympathy for the urban poor in old China. This establishes the film as a successful example of literary adaptation and a classic. Hence, the film *Rickshaw Boy* carries the sorrow and sufferings of the past several decades of modern and contemporary Chinese society. Even today, it still explicitly reveals the grief and regrets of that time to the audience.

4.2 Gains and losses of stereotyped characters in film adaptation

Compared to Hu Niu in the film, the character in the novel shows more complexity. It is not a singular image. She dares to admit her lust and desires. With less virtuousness, her character is more of a revealing and critical significance. In the novel, the malice exhibited by Hu Niu is the main thread that establishes the conflicts and contradictions of the story. By imposing her desires and requirements on Xiangzi, she suppressed Xiangzi and gave rise to his resistance. In the process of escaping from Hu Niu, Xiangzi has become increasingly entangled and distressed by life [14]. The suffering inflicted on the poor by the exploiter highlights the alienation of human nature in society. On one hand, Hu Niu's meddling in Xiangzi's life evokes readers' sympathy and regret for Xiangzi. On the other hand, the dislike toward Hu Niu prompts readers to deeply reflect on the fates of women in that era. With a direct influence amidst their feelings of contempt, this strong emotion enables readers to comprehend the brutal reality portrayed in the novel. In the film, Hu Niu is portrayed as a woman who is somewhat kind and compassionate, caring for Xiangzi, who dares to love and hate. Xiangzi's hatred towards Hu Niu is erased. Although Hu Niu's ending is still tragic, it is more fulfilling than that in the novel. The audience is unable to confront the exploitation of Xiangzi by Hu Niu, nor can they contemplate the tragedy of Hu Niu's repression. Consequently, criticism of the reality conveyed by the film is less intense and authentic compared to the novel. The critical significance of characters is waned and even

obscured [6].

5. Conclusion

The film *Rickshaw Boy* preserves some relatively positive traits of Hu Niu's character, portraying a stereotypical "female tragedy" from a less controversial perspective. Personal traits of Hu Niu, including appearance, language, and personality, are retained. Through the adaptation of Hu Niu, the differences in narrative style, character building, and even the themes of the work between the modern literary work and its film adaptation are demonstrated. The screenwriter's interpretation of the original characters influences this secondary creation in visual storytelling, which causes a shift in the work's aesthetic values and critique of the real world. Nevertheless, the creator chooses a work with strong social criticism, adapting it into a film to reflect on real-world issues at that time. This represents the improvement and development of film adaptations. This study discusses the gains and losses of Hu Niu's character in the film adaptation from the perspective of stereotyped characters, providing insights for adapting literary works into films. Meanwhile, it also provides readers and the audience with an approach to compare and evaluate the original work and its film adaptation. The limitation of this study is the lack of consideration for the director's characteristics, leading to a relatively biased analysis of the strengths of Huniu's adaptation. In future studies, the director's overall style should be considered and fully understood for a more objective evaluation of Hu Niu's adaptation.

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