A REVIEW OF CHINA RESEARCH ON FEMALE CHARACTERS

UMA REVISÃO DA PESQUISA CHINESA SOBRE PERSONAGENS FEMININAS

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Abstract
This study utilizes the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database as the data source and employs VOSviewer visualization software to conduct a co-occurrence analysis of keywords and an author collaboration analysis regarding research on "female characters" in China. By analyzing the annual publication volume of research on female characters in China, the co-occurrence network of keywords, the co-authorship network of authors, and the publication volume of institutions, this study identifies the development trends, research hotspots, key authors, and important research institutions in this field, aiming to provide valuable insights for future research.

Keywords: Female Characters. VOSviewer. Dynamic Visualization. Scientific Knowledge Graphs.

Resumo
Este estudo utiliza a base de dados China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) como fonte de dados e emprega o software de visualização VOSviewer para realizar uma análise de coocorrência de palavras-chave e uma análise de colaboração de autores em relação à pesquisa sobre "personagens femininas" na China.
Ao analisar o volume anual de publicações de pesquisas sobre personagens femininas na China, a rede de coocorrência de palavras-chave, a rede de coautoria de autores e o volume de publicações de instituições, este estudo identifica as tendências de desenvolvimento, os pontos de interesse da pesquisa, os principais autores e as instituições de pesquisa importantes neste campo, com o objetivo de fornecer insights valiosos para pesquisas futuras.

Palavras-chave: Personagens femininas. VOSviewer. Visualização dinâmica. Gráficos de conhecimento científico.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, the examination of female characters has emerged as a significant subject across multiple disciplines, including literature, film and television, sociology, and cultural studies. As feminist theory has evolved, researchers have moved beyond mere surface-level role analysis to engage in comprehensive interpretations that consider cultural, social, and historical dimensions. This study aims to present an

overview of research on female characters in China, highlighting its developmental path, key research areas, and anticipated future trends.

2 RESEARCH TOOLS AND DATA COLLECTION

To enhance the accuracy and objectivity of the research, this study utilizes the visualization analysis tool VOSviewer 1.6.20 to perform a visual analysis of data concerning "female characters" of the CNKI database from 1992 to 2025. VOSviewer is a software application designed for the visualization and analysis of scientific literature, allowing researchers to effectively manage extensive bibliographic data and generate intuitive and visually appealing scientific knowledge maps. This facilitates a quick understanding of the overall landscape of a specific research field. It not only assists researchers in identifying research hotspots but also helps in recognizing significant literature and key authors.

3 RESULT ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This study conducts an in-depth exploration of China research on "female characters" from four aspects: analysis of annual publication volume, co-occurrence network analysis of keywords, co-authorship network analysis and important institutions analysis.

3.1 Annual distribution of publication volume

The annual publication volume serves as the "pulse" of a research field. By analyzing the annual publication volume, one can quickly assess the developmental stage and activity level of that field.

Data collection steps: Enter the CNKI database for subject search, enter "女性人物形象" in the search box, and limited the document type to "article", and a total of 854 records are collected. The download steps are as follows: click the "Export and Analysis"

drop-down menu, select "Export Reference", and select "Refworks" in the format option, then click the "Save" button in the jump interface to complete the operation.

Figure 1

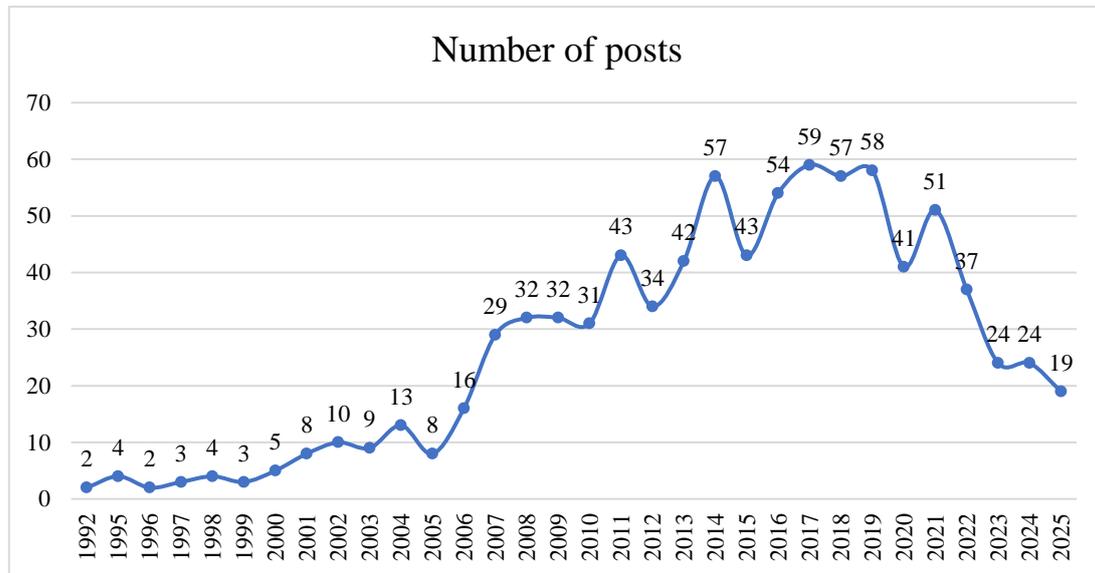*Annual Distribution of Publication Volume on Female Characters in China*

Figure 3.1 shows that prior to 2005, research on female characters in China was still in its infancy, with relatively few studies conducted. Starting in 2006, the volume of related research began to rise steadily, indicating that an increasing number of scholars were engaging in the study of "female characters." Between 2014 and 2021, the number of studies remained high; however, in recent years, there has been a significant decline in research output. This trend suggests that the field urgently requires the introduction of new research perspectives or methodologies to reinvigorate scholarly activity in this area.

Early studies on female characters in China were conducted by Zou Xin in early 1992, who explored the issue of female characters creation in the new era of literary creation (Zou, 1992), and Ma Yan in late 1992, who analyzed female images in Hui literature (Ma, 1992). Before 2000, research in this field was still in its infancy, with a limited number of studies. But the research topic covered a wide range of fields, including literature, film and television, traditional Chinese opera, and novels. It not only included the study of female characters in specific authors or literary works (Zhang, 1997; Wu, 2000), but also involved comparative research on female characters in different authors'

works (Shi, 1998), as well as comparative research on female character images in the works of authors from different eras (Hou, 1999). Notably, Xia Qiu-quan's research on the types and significance of female characters in Tang Dynasty love novels revealed a longing for pure love during this period, showcasing a tendency to transcend the mundane and pursue spiritual ideals (Xia, 1999).

The study of female characters in China can be traced back to the early 20th century. During this period, with the rise of the New Culture Movement, women's consciousness gradually awakened, leading to the emergence of female characters in literary works who exhibited independent thoughts and personalities. For instance, the character Zi Jun in Lu Xun's *The Regret for the Past* embodies a woman's yearning for love and freedom, reflecting a reevaluation of women's roles in society at that time (Lu, 1926). Research during this period primarily focused on analyzing female representations in literary works, exploring the social and cultural contexts they represent and their impact on women's liberation.

As we entered the 1980s, with the deepening of reform and opening-up policies, societal attention towards women gradually increased, leading to a diversification in the study of female representations. During this period, scholars not only focused on female characters in literary works but also expanded their research to include portrayals of women in various media such as film and television, advertising, and news reporting. Through the analysis of female images in these media, researchers have revealed societal stereotypes and gender discrimination against women. For instance, female characters in film and television are often depicted as dependent on men, reflecting the constraints imposed on women by traditional culture.

At the beginning of the 21st century, with the rise of gender studies, the research on female characters gradually progressed to a deeper level. Scholars began to focus on the diversity and complexity of female images, emphasizing the multiple identities of women within different historical and cultural contexts. During this period, researchers not only examined women's external portrayals but also delved into their inner worlds and psychological states. For instance, many studies started to analyze the psychological struggles of female characters when confronted with social pressures, familial responsibilities, and personal aspirations, revealing the challenges and dilemmas that women face in modern society.

In recent years, with the acceleration of globalization and informatization, the study of female characters has exhibited new trends. On one hand, scholars have begun to focus on female images from a cross-cultural perspective, exploring the similarities and differences of female roles across various cultural backgrounds (Liu, 2009; Jiang, 2024). On the other hand, the rise of internet culture has diversified the forms in which female images are presented, prompting researchers to analyze the construction and dissemination of female characters in emerging media such as social media and online novels (Gu, 2020). These studies not only enrich the content of research on female characters but also provide new perspectives for understanding the contemporary lives and psychological characteristics of women.

In specific research directions, the study of female characters in China primarily focuses on the following aspects:

First, the study of female images in literary works. Many scholars have conducted in-depth analyses of female roles in literature, exploring the social changes and cultural identities they reflect (Sui, 2014; Tan, 2016). These studies not only examined the portrayal of female characters but also analyzed how the authors' gender consciousness and social backgrounds influenced these representations.

Second, the study of female images in film and television works. With the booming development of the film and television industry, the portrayal of female characters in movies and TV dramas has garnered widespread attention. Wu Jin-yuan's study on the relationship between the portrayal of female characters in film art and the status and public perception of women in social contexts, exploring the gender concepts and social values they convey, revealing the role of film and television in shaping public perceptions of women (Wu, 2021). Liu Yi-xuan (2021) examined the portrayal of female characters in the television series "Nothing But Thirty" and its impact on the construction of contemporary urban women's identities. The study analyzed the subjectivity and independence of female images in the series, as well as the aesthetic value orientations of the audience. Sun Li (2025) conducted a comparative study of female characters in two inspirational sports films focusing on women's growth from China and the United States, exploring the narratives of women's development in society.

Third, the study of female images in advertising and media. As an important medium for cultural dissemination, advertising has a profound impact on the construction

and dissemination of female images. Xia Bin-wen (2010) analyzed the female characters in advertisements to uncover how consumer culture shaped and influenced female identities, as well as to discuss the manifestation of gender stereotypes in advertising and their impact on societal perceptions. Hao Yue (2019) conducted a study on the portrayal of female award winners in "Touching China" from three dimensions: social roles, character representation, and discourse expression. The research analyzed the reasons behind the formation of these images, aiming to explore how mainstream media constructs female identities.

Last, the study of female images in online culture. With the rise of online literature and social media, the images of women have become increasingly diverse. Researchers have begun to focus on the construction of female roles in cyberspace, analyzing their challenges to and redefinitions of traditional gender concepts. Gu Ya-qi (2020) analyzed the changes in the portrayal of male and female characters in online film and television spaces from a gender perspective, elucidating the complex and diverse understandings of online gender culture. This not only reflected the current state of online gender culture but also revealed the shifts in implicit gender discourse power in real life.

3.2 Analysis of the co-occurrence network of keywords

This article used the big data visualization analysis tool VOSviewer to construct a keyword co-occurrence network map of China research on female character images, aiming to fully grasp the overall situation of research in this field. Keyword co-occurrence analysis studies the co-occurrence of keywords in the literature, enabling researchers to quickly identify the core themes, development trends, and potential research gaps within a specific field. This method not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the research dynamics in a particular area but also opens up new ideas and directions for future research.

The steps for drawing the CNKI data keyword co-occurrence network map are as follows: Start the VOSviewer software, click "Create" to create a new project, select "Create a map based on bibliographic data", and then click "Next". In the next interface, select "Read data from reference manager files" and click "Next" again. Under the "RefWorks" tab, select and open the collected data folder, select all data and click "OK".

Continue to click "Next", select "Co-occurrence" in the "Type of analysis" option, and keep the "Unit of analysis" unit as the default "keywords", and the "Counting method" unit as the default "Full counting", and click "Next". Set the "Minimum number of occurrences of a keyword" to "5", click "Next" continuously until the end, click "Finish", and click "Yes" in the pop-up "Unconnected Items" dialog box to generate the keyword co-occurrence network map of China female characters research.

Figure 2

The Keyword Co-occurrence Network Map of China Female Characters

This article exports high-frequency nodes to Excel and plots them into line graphs to more accurately understand the distribution of keywords in China research on "female characters". The line graph with keyword frequencies exceeding 10 times is shown in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3

Frequency Chart of Keywords in China Research on Female Characters
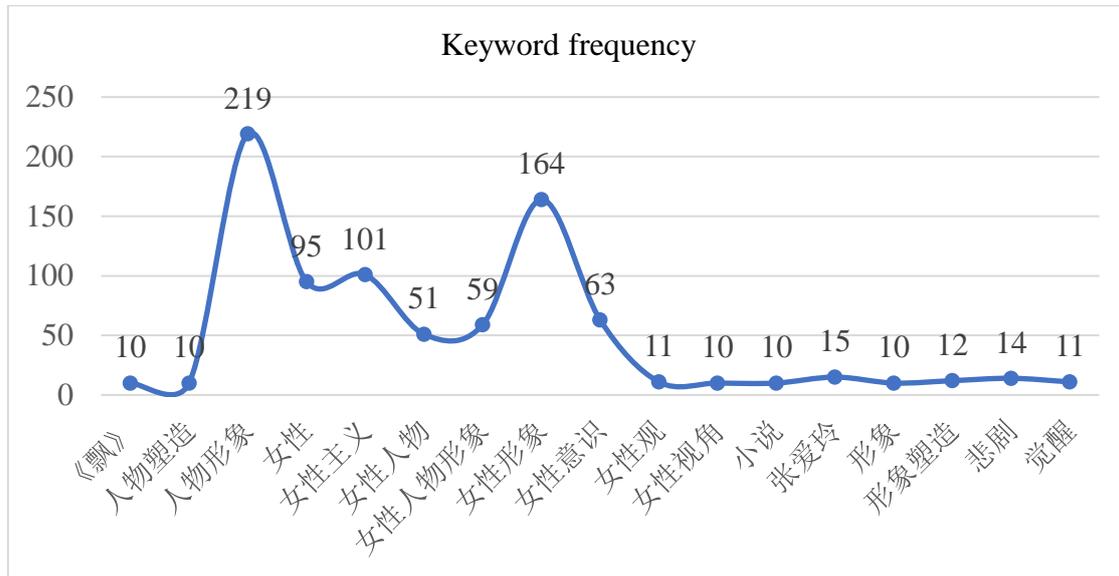
Combining Figures 2 and 3, it is evident that the research on female characters in China spans a wide range of fields, including literature, drama, opera, TV series and films. The studies encompass tragic figures such as Cao Qi-qiao, a character from Eileen Chang's works, who is oppresses by the feudal family, transforming from a victim to an abuser, as well as the resilient protagonist Scarlett O'Hara from the world-renowned novel *Gone with the Wind*, who fiercely battles against her fate. Furthermore, the research also delves into the works of female authors such as Ding Ling, Xiao Hong, and Yan Ge-ling, as well as the depictions of tragic female characters by male authors like Cao Yu and Chen Zhong-shi. These works reflect the oppression and constraints imposed by a patriarchal society, as well as the awakening of female self-awareness.

In summary, the study of female characters in China has evolved from a singular perspective to a more diverse and nuanced approach, encompassing various fields such as literature, film and television, opera, and so on. As society continues to change and academic research deepens, the exploration of female characters will continue to provide important theoretical support and practical guidance for understanding the contemporary lives, psychological traits, and social status of contemporary women.
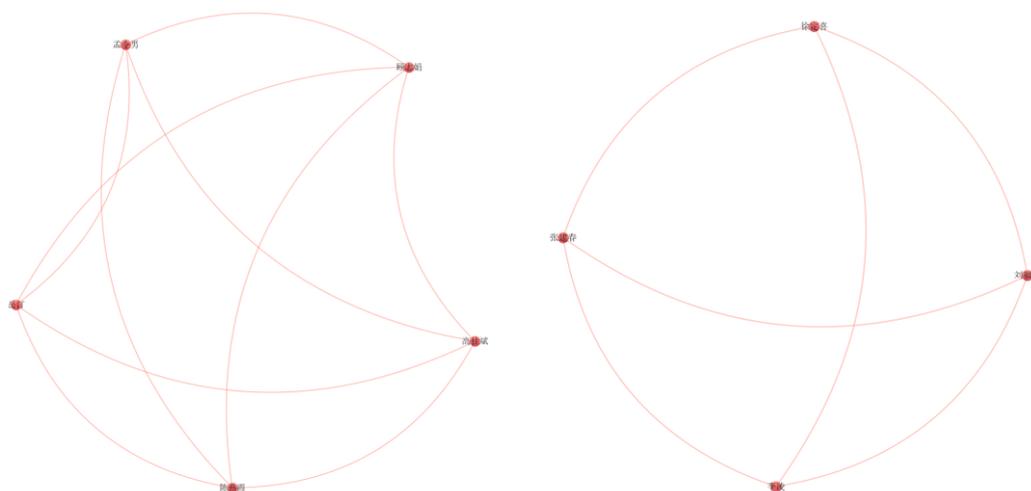
3.3 The co-authorship network analysis

Co-authorship network analysis can quickly identify the most active and contributing scholars within a specific research field. This analysis not only illustrates the collaborative relationships among scholars but also facilitates the rapid identification of leading figures or core teams in the field, making it easier to find potential academic partners.

The steps for drawing the CNKI data co-authorship network map are as follows: Start the VOSviewer software, click "Create" to create a new project, select "Create a map based on bibliographic data", and then click "Next". In the next interface, select "Read data from reference manager files" and click "Next" again. Under the "RefWorks" tab, select and open the collected data folder, select all data and click "OK". Continue to click "Next", select "Co- authorship" in the "Type of analysis" option, and keep the "Unit of analysis" unit as the default "Authors", and the "Counting method" unit as the default "Full counting", and click "Next". Set the "Minimum number of documents of an author" to "2", click "Next" continuously until the end, click "Finish", and click "Yes" in the pop-up "Unconnected Items" dialog box to generate the co-authorship network map of China female characters research.

Figure 4

Co-authorship Network Graph for China Research on Female Characters

In the Co-authorship network diagram, a larger node size indicates a higher number of publications or greater influence of the author in the field. The lines connecting the nodes signify the existence of collaborative relationships between them.

Figure 4 presents two research groups focused on the study of female characters in China literature. The first group, from Peking University, consists of Gu Zhijuan, Chen Yanxia, Meng Lingnan, Gao Jiabin, and Yue Ting, who collaboratively authored a research paper exploring the dissolution and reconstruction of original character images in literary classics during their adaptation into television dramas from cultural and feminist perspectives (Gu et al., 2016). The second group, from Hong-he College, includes Xu Dingxi, Zhang Jianchun, Liu Fuqin, and Li Ling, who co-authored two research papers analyzing the female characters in Conrad's short stories (Xu et al., 2010; 2011).

Scholars with significant publication output include Wang Junhu, Lei Yanyan, and Wu Yanhong. Wang Jun-hu (2008) conducted an in-depth analysis of the female characters in Cao Yu's dramas, drawing on Cao Yu's personal growth experiences. The author portrayed various types of female characters whose fates diverge, reflecting the male author's sympathy and concern for women's tragic circumstances while also providing pathways for resisting fate from a male perspective. In a subsequent study, Wang Jun-hu (2009) analyzed the modern, traditional, and fierce female characters depicted by Lao She, exploring how Lao She's personal growth experiences influenced his preference for traditional female roles. Wang not only redefined the female characters in the plays from the perspectives of feudalism, patriarchal consciousness, tragic marriages, and character alienation (Wang, 2013a), but also compared female characters with similar life circumstances yet vastly different destinies from the angles of life experiences, authorial stance, historical context, and social change (Wang, 2013b). Lei Yanyan interpreted the female characters in *The Thorn Birds*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Gone with the Wind* from a feminist perspective (Lei, 2015; 2016; 2017). Wu Yanhong analyzed the first, second, and third generations of female characters in *The Human Tree* (Wu, 2018a; 2018b; 2019).

Research indicates that the majority of authors studying female characters in China contexts are isolated individuals, suggesting that collaboration among them has not yet fully developed. Scholars with collaborative relationships are primarily teacher-

student pairs or colleagues within the same department. Future research should encourage and strengthen connections and cooperation between different institutions.

3.4 Analysis of the publication by research institutions

The top ten institutions ranked by the number of publications are shown in the table below, with Bohai University, Shenyang Normal University, and Shandong Normal University tied for the tenth position.

Table 1

Research Institutions in Terms of Publication Volume

Number	Publication	Research institutions	Location
1	23	Shaanxi Normal University	Xi'an, Shaanxi
2	19	Nanjing Normal University	Nanjing, Jiangsu
2	19	Huazhong Normal University	Wuhan, Hubei
4	18	Henan University	Kaifeng & Zhengzhou, Henan
5	15	Hunan Normal University	Changsha, Hunan
5	15	Qufu normal university	Qufu, Shandong
7	14	Liaoning Normal University	Dalian, Liaoning
7	14	Fujian Normal University	Fuzhou, Fujian
9	13	Shanxi Normal University	Taiyuan, Shanxi
10	12	Bohai University	Jinzhou, Liaoning
10	12	Shenyang Normal University	Shenyang, Liaoning
10	12	Shandong Normal University	Jinan, Shandong

Overall, among the research institutions with a high volume of publications, Henan University and Bohai University are comprehensive universities, while the others are normal universities. An analysis of geographical locations reveals that Liaoning Normal University, Bohai University, and Shenyang Normal University are all situated in Liaoning Province; Qufu Normal University and Shandong Normal University are located in Shandong Province, indicating a need to strengthen inter-regional collaboration. The universities in central China, including Shaanxi Normal University, Central China Normal University, Henan University, Hunan Normal University, and Shanxi Normal University, should enhance cross-regional cooperation. Additionally, Nanjing Normal University and Fujian Normal University, located in the economically and culturally significant southeastern coastal region, can engage in more in-depth academic dialogue.

4 CONCLUSION

In summary, the China study of "female characters" has transitioned from early critical analyses to multidimensional comprehensive research. Scholars not only focus on the portrayal of "female characters" in literature and film but also delve deeper into the cultural, social, and historical factors underlying these characters.

Looking ahead, there remains vast potential for the study of female characters in domestic contexts. Firstly, with the deepening of gender studies, scholars can further explore the diversity of female images across different social classes, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds, revealing the complexities of female identity. Secondly, interdisciplinary research methods will provide new perspectives for the study of female characters, integrating theories and methodologies from sociology, psychology, communication studies, and other fields to conduct an in-depth analysis of the construction and dissemination mechanisms of female images.

Furthermore, with the ongoing developments in globalization and digitalization, research on "female characters" will continue to evolve, showcasing a richer and more complex landscape. Future studies could further explore the portrayal of "female characters" in different cultural contexts, as well as the impact of emerging media on the shaping of female images, aiming to provide a more comprehensive perspective on contemporary female identities.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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