

A Century of Echoes: Zhang Henshui's Popular Literature Paradigm and the Construction of Popular Literature and Art in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In the history of modern Chinese literature, Zhang Henshui's practice of popular literature was long obscured by the enlightenment narrative of New Literature, yet a century later it has permeated widely through the waves of digital media and AIGC-driven content creation, becoming an integral part of the internal cultural logic of contemporary popular literature and art. This paper argues that Zhang Henshui's "romance-plus-society" mode of affective narration, his path of modernizing the traditional chapter-based novel, together with the media-interactive thinking and affect-driven writing developed over his career in journalism, constitute a popular literature paradigm of complete methodological value. Through cross-media content translation, this paradigm has extended from newspaper serialization to online serialization, algorithmic distribution, and AI-generated content, profoundly shaping the production mechanisms of contemporary popular literature and art. The paper further excavates the practical experience of modernizing this indigenous tradition, explains the internal dynamics of its reactivation in the digital media environment, and rationally analyzes the crisis of spiritual hollowing-out that the paradigm faces under algorithmic logic and AIGC mass production. The paper ultimately contends that for contemporary popular literature and art to achieve refined and deepened development, it must return to the human affect and real-world observation in Zhang Henshui's writing that cannot be quantified by data, and rebuild an indigenous paradigm of popular writing imbued with the warmth of life by balancing technological tools and humanistic expression.

Keywords

Zhang Henshui; digital popular literature and art; popular narrative paradigm; structure of feeling; media-interactive thinking; AIGC; affect-driven writing.

1. Introduction: An Obscured Literary Tradition and Its Cross-Media Echoes Across a Century

Within the mainstream narrative framework of modern Chinese literature, Zhang Henshui has always occupied a liminal position—at once connected and detached. His situation in literary history is marked by both "invisibility" and "visibility." He is "invisible" because the discourse of New Literature studies long excluded him from the core literary genealogy, rendering him an easily overlooked presence in literary history. He is "visible" because he wielded an extensive influence spanning readers of all social strata: in the 1930s, the circulation of his works far exceeded that of most New Literature writers of the same period. This peculiar condition—being "widely circulated yet long marginalized"—epitomizes the historical fate of Zhang Henshui's popular literature paradigm.

A literary tradition shelved by the dominant narrative often returns in new forms as media technologies evolve. Entering the 2020s, digital popular literature and art has become a central direction of China's cultural industry. Online literature, micro-dramas, interactive film-and-

game products, and AIGC-generated content are restructuring the landscape of literary and artistic production and dissemination. The popular narrative paradigm pioneered by Zhang Henshui did not perish with the close of the print era; rather, it has permeated every kind of content carrier in mass culture in multiple forms. From the continuously updated long-form serials on online literature platforms and the viral Republican-era tragic-romance micro-dramas, to the repeatedly adapted *The Story of a Noble Family* that sparks intergenerational discussion, and the interactive games that replicate the polygonal emotional narratives of *Fate in Tears and Laughter*—the creative core of Zhang Henshui's work is found throughout popular cultural products, merely concealed beneath fashionable digital-age concepts such as “gratification narrative” and “viral-hit templates.”

This cross-century reappearance of content is not a simple rereading of classics or a secondary development of intellectual property; it is a media translation of deep cultural memory and a contemporary regeneration of narrative paradigm. Several core questions follow: What is the core creative logic of Zhang Henshui's popular literature paradigm? How has this narrative system sustained its communicative vitality across three generations of media—print, radio and television, and digital algorithms? At a time when AIGC is comprehensively intervening in content production, is the paradigm gaining broader space for practice, or is its spiritual core being stripped away by technological logic? And how should the construction of the contemporary system of popular literature and art, with cultural self-awareness, draw on the creative experience of this indigenous pioneer of popular literature?

Adopting an interdisciplinary analytical perspective, this paper addresses these questions. It distills Zhang Henshui's paradigm of popular writing from a singular case in literary history into an indigenous cultural narrative grammar with general explanatory power. By dissecting its affective narrative structure, media-interactive thinking, and logic of cross-media content translation, it clarifies the paradigm's internal connections with contemporary digital popular literature and art. At the same time, it maintains a critical scrutiny, objectively analyzing the developmental advantages and inherent crises of this traditional paradigm in the digital technological environment, thereby providing a reference from indigenous literary tradition for popular literature and art to move toward refinement and humanistic development.

This study builds on existing scholarship on popular literature. Since the revival of popular literature studies in the 1980s, scholars such as Fan Boqun have completed the literary-historical vindication of modern popular writers including Zhang Henshui [2], establishing them as an indispensable branch of modern Chinese literature. Subsequent research has proceeded along three broad lines: first, the clarification of literary-historical positioning, distinguishing and relating popular literature and May Fourth New Literature; second, textual and aesthetic analysis, focusing on the “romance-plus-society” narrative mode and innovations in the chapter-novel (zhanghui) form; third, media-oriented inquiry, discussing the constraints and guidance that newspaper serialization and the reader market exerted on writers' creative work. Meanwhile, research on online literature has continued to attend to the turn toward “new popular literature”: scholars such as Shao Yanjun have demonstrated, from the perspective of media transformation, the genealogical continuity between online literature and modern popular literature [3]. Yet these two lines of research have long been disconnected: studies of Zhang Henshui tend toward historical retrospection, while studies of digital popular literature and art focus on the present and future, and the complete trajectory of paradigm transmission between them has yet to be systematically traced. The innovation of this paper lies precisely in connecting these two research threads, placing the century-old popular literature paradigm and the contemporary construction of digital popular literature and art within a single analytical framework, and examining the paradigm's contemporary value from the dual dimensions of traditional activation and technological alienation.

2. Reinterpreting the Popular Narrative Paradigm: Zhang Henshui as an Indigenous Creative Method

2.1. The “Romance-Plus-Society” Mode: A Collective Structure of Feeling Rooted in Urban Civic Life

Previous studies have mostly regarded Zhang Henshui’s “romance-plus-society” mode as a mature technique of commercial writing—a judgment that simplifies its deeper cultural value. Borrowing Raymond Williams’s concept of the “structure of feeling” [4]—that is, the collective lived experience and modes of perception of an era that are still in formation and have not yet solidified into institutional norms—allows us to grasp more clearly the core value of this narrative mode. The narrative logic in Zhang Henshui’s writing, in which “romance envelops society and society drives emotion,” is in essence the collective structure of feeling generated in the formation of China’s urban civic classes in the first half of the twentieth century: individual desires for love and the pains of social transformation are mutually entangled, and private family life is interwoven with public issues of the times; the two cannot be considered in isolation.

The marital tragedy of Jin Yanxi and Leng Qingqiu in *The Story of a Noble Family* is not merely a story of shattered love; it is the spiritual trauma of individuals brought about by the disintegration of the traditional system of dependent survival within the great clan. Leng Qingqiu’s cool and self-possessed character cannot be attributed simply to personal disposition; it is a literary projection of the unconscious resistance of a new-educated commoner woman to the parasitic mode of existence of the old-style family. The eventual mental collapse of Shen Fengxi in *Fate in Tears and Laughter* is both the direct consequence of oppression by warlord power and an affective expression of the inevitable breakdown of lower-class women in a social environment devoid of any guarantee of survival or personal dignity. The distinctiveness of Zhang Henshui’s writing lies in the fact that he never discourses on social ills in abstraction from his characters’ emotions; instead, he transforms the contradictions of the times into the core force driving his characters’ joys and sorrows, allowing social issues to merge into their feelings, choices, and destinies. This is a typical expression of what Williams called a structure of feeling: individual emotion is the concrete vehicle of the society of its time, while social reality delimits the boundaries within which ordinary people’s emotions arise and struggle.

This narrative structure possesses an extraordinary capacity for empathy across eras, offering readers of different periods a narrative space in which to project their own predicaments of existence and release collective emotions. A century later, the nationwide resonance provoked by Fan Shengmei’s entanglement with her family of origin in *Ode to Joy*, the audience’s emotional response to the protagonist’s dilemma between law and human feeling in *Dying to Survive*, and the ways in which “involution” and “survival pressure” have become the core emotional undertones of online urban fiction are all, in essence, digital-age variants of Zhang Henshui’s “romance-plus-society” structure of feeling. This mode has already sedimented into a foundational narrative logic common to Chinese popular literature and art, becoming the central narrative vehicle through which the public understands its own conditions of existence and expresses collective emotion.

2.2. Upholding Tradition While Innovating: The Path of Modernizing the Chapter-Novel Form

Throughout his life, Zhang Henshui used the chapter-novel (zhanghui) form for his long-form fiction while continuously modernizing this traditional form—a creative choice whose value has long been underestimated by the historiography of stylistic innovation. In an era when the May Fourth New Literature camp comprehensively criticized traditional old-style forms and advocated thoroughgoing formal revolution, Zhang Henshui’s creative choice appeared

conservative. Yet viewed from the long-term perspective of a century of formal evolution, he in fact completed a mature literary experiment of “using an old form to carry modern content.”

He fully retained the suspense mechanism of the chapter novel—“to hear what happens next, wait for the next chapter”—while proactively incorporating new creative techniques of the modern novel, such as psychological delineation, atmospheric rendering, and open-ended character fates. In this way, the traditional chapter novel was transformed from a simple narrative framework into a literary vessel capable of bearing modern individual emotions and the social contradictions of the times. In *Fate in Tears and Laughter* and *The Story of a Noble Family*, the classical storyteller’s techniques of suspense are fused with the modern novel’s portrayal of interiority, demonstrating that the traditional form is not an obstacle to literary modernization but an indigenous literary resource, suited to the reading habits of local readers, that can be continually remade and innovated.

This path of formal innovation carries significant methodological implications: literary modernization does not entail a complete rupture with tradition or a reconstruction of the narrative system from scratch. Zhang Henshui always faced ordinary readers in the posture of an equal-footed storyteller rather than lecturing the masses from an elite vantage point; the creative principle he upheld was: “If you give readers entertainment laced with some moral exhortation, that makes for good writing” [5]. This gradualist creative approach—improving through inheritance and infusing value expression through mass dissemination—stands in sharp contrast to the rupturist innovation championed by May Fourth New Literature, and it preserves a complete practical model for the creative transformation of traditional literary forms for later generations.

3. Media-Interactive Thinking and Affect-Driven Writing: The Operating Logic of a Cross-Media Paradigm

3.1. “Mutual Communication and Empathy”: From Storyteller Narration to the Interactive Interface of Digital Media

The traditional chapter novel is inherently “communicative”: the suspense of chapter titles and the narrator’s storyteller voice build a channel of direct dialogue between creator and reader, constituting in essence a mature medium of communication. Zhang Henshui’s breakthrough lay in upgrading the communicative logic native to classical fiction into a vehicle of public narrative interaction suited to modern civic society. As a serialized novelist deeply rooted in the newspaper industry, he long relied on readers’ letters to gauge public sentiment, and even adjusted the direction of his stories in response to reader feedback [7], establishing a mode of high-frequency creator-audience interaction in the print era.

The underlying logic of his creation is to reach “transformation” (hua) through “communication” (tong): first building a channel of emotional communication between creator and public, then conveying reflections on the ways of the world and the human heart through narrative. Communication is the means; humanistic concern is the ultimate goal—this is the core of media-interactive thinking. When we discuss the “media interface” of digital popular literature and art today, we should not confine ourselves to mobile phone screens and app-based interactive carriers. Zhang Henshui’s creative practice reveals that any narrative mode capable of connecting creators and audiences and generating spiritual resonance through two-way interaction belongs to the media-interactive interface in a broad sense. Features such as the “chapter comments” of online literature, video bullet comments, and reader votes that rewrite plotlines are all extreme amplifications of this traditional interactive thinking on digital platforms. Yet there is an essential difference between the two: Zhang Henshui’s media interaction was always accompanied by the creator’s real-world observation and humanistic responsibility, whereas the algorithm-dominated digital interface can easily reduce

“communicative empathy” to one-way pandering to audience emotions, distorting humanistic reflection into traffic calculation—a contradiction that will be elaborated below.

3.2. Affect-Driven Writing: From the Anticipation of Newspaper Serialization to Algorithmic Traffic Operations

Examined from the perspective of media archaeology, Zhang Henshui’s core identity was not that of an old-style popular novelist but that of an all-media creator in the age of print capitalism [6], equipped with capacities for both content production and brand operation. Lao She’s contemporary description of Zhang Henshui as “a genuinely professional writer” [1] corroborates this judgment. According to his own account, he could simultaneously write serialized novels on different subjects for six or seven newspapers, producing several thousand characters a day [5]; he built his pen name into a cultural IP with a stable power to attract audiences, and was adept at cross-promotion and traffic channeling among different works and different newspapers. More crucial still was his media-savvy control of “reading anticipation” and “narrative suspense”: the daily rhythm of newspaper publication generated in readers a sustained emotional expectation of following the story, and the carefully designed suspense at the end of each chapter transformed the waiting imposed by the medium into continuous emotional investment. This was an early, mature mode of “affect-driven writing”: relying on the cycle of anticipation, anxiety, and emotional release to build readers’ affective dependence, it converted one-time reading consumption into long-term, stable content followership.

A century later, the digital content industry has fully replicated and digitally upgraded this logic: the daily updates and update suspensions of online literature manufacture the emotions of serial following; long- and short-video platforms bind membership subscriptions through next-episode previews; and AIGC writing tools can calculate, on the basis of user data, the effects of different emotional plot segments on audience dwell time, precisely arranging the pacing of gratification points and heart-wrenching points. The affect-driven writing mode pioneered by Zhang Henshui has thus been realized within algorithmic systems as a fully data-quantified operation.

3.3. The Dual Faces of the Paradigm in the Algorithmic Age: Content Expansion and the Crisis of Spiritual Hollowing-Out

Once the traditional popular narrative paradigm entered digital media, on the one hand it greatly expanded the productive boundaries of popular literature and art; on the other, it bred problems of alienation that are difficult to avoid.

On the positive side, Zhang Henshui’s narrative paradigm has gained unprecedented space for practice on digital platforms: the serialization mechanism has been developed to its utmost in online literature, and “romance fused with real social contradictions” has become a standard creative template for hit works of realist subject matter. In recent years, major online literature platforms have launched AI-assisted writing tools capable of mass-producing romantic passages in imitation of traditional chapter-novel brushwork, while the industrialized production lines of micro-dramas rely on standardized templates to mass-replicate Republican-era romance narratives. These phenomena fully demonstrate that this indigenous narrative paradigm possesses strong cross-media adaptability, able to fit different media carriers and continuously produce content with high public acceptance.

The latent crisis is equally prominent: when affect-driven writing is completely decomposed by algorithms and mass-produced automatically, the most central and irreplicable core of Zhang Henshui’s paradigm—the creator’s sincere observation of the lower classes rooted in lived reality, and the humanistic responsibility of carrying world-awakening reflection within entertaining narration—is being gradually stripped away. Artificial intelligence can replicate Zhang Henshui’s prose style, plot routines, and the rhythm of his suspense design, but it cannot

replicate the indignation at warlord tyranny born of his firsthand experience of turbulent times, nor the heartfelt compassion he felt for the fates of lower-class women such as Leng Qingqiu and Shen Fengxi. Once the “romance-plus-society” mode is left with nothing but standardized emotional segments and traffic-curve design, narrative degenerates into a hollow machine for producing emotion, capable only of generating fleeting emotional fluctuations and unable to convey deep value reflection. This is precisely the core predicament of popular literature and art in the algorithmic age: even as the mode of emotional operation reaches its extreme, the humanistic depth of narrative continues to dissolve. While Zhang Henshui’s paradigm is being widely reused in the digital age, it also faces the risk of hollowing-out—of being reduced to a purely formal routine whose spiritual core drains away.

4. The Humanistic Thread of Popular Narrative: From Urban Citizens to the Digital Mass Audience

4.1. Writing for Ordinary People: From Modern Urban Citizens to the Digital Mass Audience

The connotation of “the masses” in modern literary theory has undergone multiple transformations: from the national subject of narrative in Liang Qichao’s writings, to the proletarian workers and peasants foregrounded by left-wing literature, to the workers, peasants, and soldiers established as the served audience of literature and art in the Yan’an period. The audience to which Zhang Henshui’s writing was directed consisted mainly of the modern urban citizenry, including shop assistants, industrial workers, public employees, young students, small vendors, and ordinary housewives. Within the class-narrative system of early left-wing literature, this group occupied an ambiguous position—neither the core leading force of revolution nor the poorest masses at the very bottom—which caused Zhang Henshui to be long labeled a “petty-bourgeois writer,” with the humanistic value of his works long underestimated.

A re-examination of the expanding trajectory of the concept of “the masses” as audience reveals the evident limitations of such assessments. The revival of the literature of “the human” in the New Era and the rise of mass culture in the 1990s brought civic audiences back into the field of vision of literature and art; contemporary artistic practice has increasingly formed a consensual orientation: literary and artistic creation must fully capture the life landscape of ordinary people and record the authentic conditions of the public’s existence. In the current cultural context, “the masses” is an overarching concept of broad coverage, encompassing not only the traditional worker and peasant groups but also ordinary laborers across all urban occupations, as well as the hundreds of millions of netizens active on digital platforms. The small figures in Zhang Henshui’s writing—who toil for a living and struggle between love and morality—are themselves an inseparable part of the masses. By insisting on writing for ordinary citizens, he never developed a clear class-revolutionary narrative consciousness, yet he plainly practiced the fundamental orientation of literature and art serving the majority of ordinary people.

By the mid-2020s, the role of netizens as audiences of literature and art has further deepened: they are at once content consumers and data producers, and every click, comment, and repost exerts reverse influence on the direction of content creation. This paper designates this group as “the digital mass audience.” Viewed from this perspective, the two-way interactive model by which Zhang Henshui once adjusted his plots in response to readers’ letters shares a single continuous humanistic narrative thread with today’s mechanism in which user data drives creation in reverse: the preferences and real demands of ordinary audiences have always participated, directly or indirectly, in the construction of popular literature and art. The core difference between the two is this: in Zhang Henshui’s time, reader feedback was conveyed through letters, carrying individual independent thought and genuine feeling; in the

algorithmic age, data feedback is automatic and undifferentiated, and may even be used to manufacture fake traffic under the direction of capital. Therefore, the humanistic expression advocated by contemporary popular literature and art must never be equated with merely catering to traffic data. The most important lesson Zhang Henshui's writing leaves for the present is this: literature and art truly rooted in the masses must penetrate the cold surface of data and face, one by one, living individuals with real joys and sorrows and real confusions.

4.2. A Path of Fusing Tradition and Modernity: Zhang Henshui as an Indigenous Model of Creative Reference

Surveying the course of China's literary and artistic modernization, the question of how traditional artistic resources can be fused with modern narrative techniques has always been the core proposition that indigenous creators continually explore. Zhang Henshui's creative practice provides a complete and feasible indigenous solution for fusing traditional cultural lineage with modern narration, and is of significant reference value.

He never severed himself from the classical literary tradition: throughout his life he employed and renovated the chapter-novel form, integrating the suspense techniques of classical fiction and the humanistic ethics of folk storytelling with the issues of modern urban society. At the same time, he proactively absorbed modern creative techniques from Western fiction, such as psychological description and open-ended narration, placing them in the service of writing about the life of the indigenous modern citizenry. More importantly, his approach to balancing popular dissemination with literary quality, market demand with moral reflection, and individual love with responsibility to the times was rooted in the traditional Chinese cultural thinking of the mean: he took neither the extreme path of wholesale restoration of the old nor that of total Westernization, but sought balance amid multiple tensions of contradiction, gently transmitting humanistic reflection in the process of mass dissemination. Compared with the two extreme paths of radical Westernization and one-sided antiquarianism, this indigenous creative approach possesses a more enduring vitality, and it is a classic model on which popular literature and art can rely to establish indigenous cultural distinctiveness in today's globalized environment.

According to an industry report by the China Audio-video and Digital Publishing Association, overseas revenue from Chinese online literature reached 4.815 billion yuan in 2024 [8]; Republican-era micro-dramas, riding the wave of Chinese short dramas going overseas, have also entered mainstream overseas app markets. Overseas market acceptance verifies that the indigenous popular narrative represented by Zhang Henshui possesses the charm of cross-cultural communication. This appeal does not stem from imitating Euro-American popular narratives; it is rooted in Chinese-style emotional logic and traditional moral concern. From this perspective, Zhang Henshui's narrative paradigm has long transcended the category of literary-historical research and become a living resource capable of exporting indigenous cultural connotations and enhancing the power of cultural dissemination.

5. Narrative Echoes Across a Century: Activating Traditional Resources and Constructing the System of Digital Popular Literature and Art

"A century of echoes" refers not only to narrative influence spanning a hundred years but also to a reconstruction of cultural tradition with a clear orientation toward the times. According to Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory [9], cultural memory is not the passive retention of historical content; rather, a society, in accordance with its present developmental needs, actively selects and reconstructs cultural resources of the past by means of texts and media, and the direction of this reconstruction is always determined by the needs of contemporary society. The reason Zhang Henshui's narrative paradigm could be reused on a large scale by the

digital cultural industry a century later lies in the demand for indigenous narrative roots that has arisen amid the rapid development of contemporary popular literature and art and the impact of imported popular narratives.

Since the 1990s, the rapid development of domestic popular literature and art has successively relied on market-oriented publishing, film and television dissemination, and the internet technologies of the turn of the century, accompanied by the influx of global popular culture. Although genres such as fantasy, time-travel, and urban romance have reaped considerable market returns, the industry has long suffered from a scarcity of high-quality works and severe homogenization. In recent years, in step with the orientation toward refined development of popular literature and art, both academia and the creative community have reached a consensus: if popular literature and art is to achieve a qualitative leap, it must dig deep into the foundations of the indigenous literary tradition. The reactivation of indigenous traditional narrative resources has not arisen spontaneously; it is the result of three forces acting together: the industry's orientation toward humanistic creation, the academic community's re-sorting of modern popular literature, and platform markets' proactive excavation of indigenous narrative templates after long-term commercial validation. Against this background, Zhang Henshui—long marginalized yet possessing an enormous audience base—has been rediscovered. This is not a simple wave of nostalgia but the industry's deliberate choice to seek indigenous narrative methodology in order to resolve its present creative predicament.

The repeated film and television adaptations of *The Story of a Noble Family* have sparked heated online discussion whose core has long gone beyond the merits of the adaptations themselves: audiences of different generations use the figure of Leng Qingqiu to discuss real issues such as women's independence and social mobility. The mass production of Republican-era romance templates by micro-dramas, however crude in execution, marks the fact that Zhang Henshui-style narrative logic has already sunk to the level of a foundational consensus in the industrialized production of popular culture. Even more noteworthy is that a growing number of creators of realist subject matter are proactively treating the rereading of Zhang Henshui as a methodological reference for creation: seeking, under the pressure of algorithmic traffic, to re-establish close observation of the realities of the world and empathy for the fates of ordinary people, and learning the narrative technique of embedding individual love stories within the texture of the changes of the times. This means that the cross-century echo of Zhang Henshui's narrative paradigm has already shifted from unconscious template replication to conscious absorption and transformation by creators—from the mere replication of narrative elements to the active inheritance of creative spirit.

The core insight of this cross-century narrative transmission is this: the deep construction of the system of digital popular literature and art cannot rely solely on external drivers such as technological iteration and capital investment; it must accomplish an inward tracing of the indigenous narrative tradition. The industry needs more creators who, like Zhang Henshui, are familiar with mass psychology while retaining real humanistic concern—creators who can produce works that attend to reality within popular conventions and carry value reflection within affective narration. This does not require contemporary creators to copy the chapter-novel form wholesale or mechanically reproduce the “romance-plus-society” writing template; rather, it advocates inheriting the creative spirit behind the paradigm: treating the joys and sorrows of ordinary people as the core of creation, and honing the craft of popular narration to build bridges of spiritual communication as a creative ethic.

6. Conclusion: Rebuilding a Warm Indigenous Paradigm of Popular Narration Against the Background of AIGC Popularization

At present, AIGC has transformed from an emerging creative tool into the infrastructure of the industrialized production of popular literature and art. On the surface, this newspaper novelist of a century ago has ushered in the most flourishing era of creation and dissemination; yet behind the flourishing lies the continuous draining of narrative's spiritual core. When artificial intelligence can mass-generate thousands of Jin Yanxi-and-Leng Qingqiu-style love stories, can the weakness, struggle, and spiritual predicament of these characters still move readers? When "romance fused with social contradictions" is reduced to freely combinable traffic labels, is there still room to retain the understanding of the times that creators form through real life experience?

Zhang Henshui produced a vast body of writing in his lifetime, including no shortage of perfunctory works catering to the market; yet his classic texts always preserve a warm concern for the fates of concrete ordinary people. His portrayal of Shen Fengxi's madness is not merely a device for advancing the plot but stems from deep compassion for the survival predicament of lower-class women; his portrayal of Leng Qingqiu's desolation as she keeps solitary watch in the empty tower is not a formulaic scene of boudoir lament but a true depiction of the spiritual withering of a new-style woman trapped within an old-style family system. This human feeling and real-world observation—rooted in the creator's lived experience and impossible for algorithms to replicate—is the true core soul of Zhang Henshui's narrative paradigm.

The systematic and refined construction of digital popular literature and art needs to draw creative strength from this indigenous narrative core. The development of the industry should give due weight to both technological tools and humanistic expression: embracing the productive efficiency brought by AI creation while upholding a human-centered creative stance. Humanistic expression cannot be simplified into the pursuit of traffic data, and respect for the emotions of the public must not degenerate into mere traffic calculation. We can employ cutting-edge digital creative technologies, but we must hold fast to the underlying logic of literary and artistic creation: literature is written for human beings, and must ultimately reach the human inner world. At a time when AIGC is comprehensively popularized and algorithms dominate content distribution, Zhang Henshui's creative practice, spanning a century, offers a clear reminder: all literature and art sincerely written toward ordinary people will ultimately be remembered by the public for a long time, while every narrative that strips away humanistic warmth and retains only formulaic templates—however spectacular its short-term traffic—is nothing but a transient emotional bubble without a soul. The long-term development of digital popular literature and art depends on whether we can, in the balance between technology and humanism, re-excavate, transform, and reshape this indigenous paradigm of popular narration imbued with the warmth of human feeling.

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