

An Analytical Review on the Studies of Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility from 1983 to 2020

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Abstract: Since 1983, when Wang Yutang translated and published the first Chinese version of *Sense and Sensibility*, it has attracted numerous readers and received extensive attention from critics in China. This essay chooses 251 articles from the CNKI database (China Knowledge Infrastructure: the largest academic resources digitization and publishing institution) and makes an analytical review on the studies of *Sense and Sensibility*. Based on the analysis of the statistics, this paper attempts to explore how Jane Austen's novels are received in China. This essay finds that articles on *Sense and Sensibility* from 1983 to 2020 indicate the popularity of Jane Austen's novels in China and the prosperity of studies on Austen and the popularity and prosperity are related to the changes in the social environment in China.

1. Introduction

The name of Jane Austen was first mentioned in the *Brief History of British Literature* edited by Ouyang Lan, a literary teacher at Peking University, in 1927[1]. However, she was less known to the public until 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded: no doubt because of the chronic political and social turmoil caused by successive years of war (the Anti-Japanese Invasion War (1931-1945) and the Chinese People's War of Liberation (1945-1949)). In 1937, Yang Bin published 'the Critical Biography of Jane Austen: author of *Pride and Prejudice*' in *Business Publishing Weekly* in order to popularize his translation of *Pride and Prejudice*. In the same year, the *Compendium of English Literature* (by Jin Donglei) published by the Commercial Press also mentioned Austin, although on only half a page. Other authors involved in the writing of Austin were Cheng Yifan, Zhang Luqian, Lin Hai, Chen Xinqian, Qian Gechuan, etc. This period (1927-1949) can be regarded as an introduction period when Jane Austen's novels were mainly targeted to those who understood English or were learning English and the knowledgeable women from relatively rich families.

From 1949 to 1966, there was a relative prosperity in the introduction and commentary of foreign literature. Yet Jane Austen was still marginalized as the mainstream ideology overemphasized the political and social function of literature while the subject of Jane Austen's novels was limited to marriage and family. Consequently, her works failed to be included in the *Foreign Literary Classics Series* co-edited and published by the Institute of Foreign Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the People's Literature Publishing House. *The History of*

European Literature edited by professors of Peking University allocated eight pages to George Gordon Byron but reserved no space for Jane Austen. The only issue related to Austen during this period was the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* translated by Wang Keyi in 1955. Wang's preface briefly introduced Austen's life and writing, and pointed out that her value should not be judged only by the subject. He said that Austen's value lay in her "precise and meticulous" description of the middle class through humorous and satirical narratives, and the expression of "the relationship between people, the real life of people, and the inner world of people". Wang also tried to explain her "progressiveness", saying that she got rid of the romance tradition and criticized the "feudal ideology", etc [2].

The period from 1966 to 1983 was the time when Austen was reassessed. The year of 1978 witnessed the launch of China's economic reform and opening-up and the lift of the chronic literary ban. Jane Austen was gradually known to the common Chinese people. Zhu Hong was one of the early scholars who paid attention to Austen in China. In 1982, she wrote an article *Pride and Prejudice Against Austen* in the *Reading*. She complained about the unfair treatment Austen suffered in China and called on people to abandon their prejudice against Austen. She argued that "it is unconvincing to deny Jane Austen just because of her narrow focus on life" and "the art world of Austen's six novels is worthy of consideration"[3]. In *What are the Merits? Reading Pride and Prejudice*, Yang Jiang said that "you can't judge a novel based on the stories in the novel alone" and that although *Pride and Prejudice* was "unremarkable", it could inspire a "thought-provoking laugh". She also pointed out that *Pride and Prejudice* "has a rigorous layout" and was "very natural". Qian Zhenlai argued in the *On Jane Austen* that Austen's novels had "quite breadth" and what she gave us was "not just a couple of lovers, but the whole society"[4]. Overall, Jane Austen has received unprecedented attention from Chinese scholars during this time.

Since the 1980s, studies on Jane Austen's novels have experienced rapid development. The discussions about Austen have become increasingly professional and academic, and college teachers and professionals have become the main participants.

2. Theme-oriented Articles: Marriage, Feminism, "Battle of Ideology"

2.1 Marriage

All of Austen's novels are about marriage, so Austen's thinking on the relationship between love, marriage, and money has become a classic topic that people discuss. It is generally believed that, in Austen's view, it is both wrong to marry purely for money and to marry without considering it at all. A happy marriage should be based on true love with consideration of the virtues and economic and social status of the lovers. Zhang Qian argued that "this is Jane Austen's view of marriage: money is an indispensable factor in love and marriage, but true love is the foundation of a happy marriage"[5]. Yu Lu also mentioned a similar idea in her *Treating Marriage Rationally- Rereading Sense and Sensibility* published in the *Journal of HuBei TV University*. She believed that "smart modern women should strive to find a balance between money, feelings, and marriage"[6]. Different from Zhang and Yu, Li Liantao explored not only Elinor and Marianne's marriage but also Robert and Willoughby's. He believed Austen did not completely deny the money-driven marriage, but rather attempted to express that "everything real is rational. Even if some marriages are against the morals, they are also the result of their mutual choice"[7]. Fan Xiaohong further explored Jane Austen's different attitude towards love and marriage. She believed that Austen portrayed the heroine's love as a Utopia but treated marriage as a dystopia. Sir John and Mrs. Middleton and Mr. and Mrs. Palmers were "repeatedly emphasizing the secular, indifferent and unbearable marriage"[8].

2.2 Feminism

Feminism has been one of the hottest topics in western Austen studies, and it has also attracted a lot of followers in China. In *Viewing the Development of Feminism from Sense and Sensibility*, Tang Jingchun introduced four stages of feminism: the enlightenment of feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, and post-feminism. Then he pointed out that “the ideology implied in Austen’s novels is close to liberal feminism” but he didn’t provide further explanation. Wang Haihong made a detailed analysis in her *Viewing Sense and Sensibility from the Perspective of Feminist Narratology*. She claimed that Austen’s feminism was implied in her depiction of a patriarchal society in which women must be subordinate to men. Fan Hui chose another perspective to interpret Austen’s feminism in *Sense and Sensibility*. She claimed that the characterization of Elinor reflected Austen’s view of feminism. She wrote that “in her (Austen’s) eyes, women who are self-reliant, like Elinor in the novel, who won’t shrink from difficulties but face it bravely, are her ideal women”.

2.3 Battle of Ideology

It is noteworthy that there is an article which has been cited forty times since its publication in a database where an article cited more than five times can be regarded as a high-quality article. This article is Huang Mei’s *Battle of Ideology in Sense and Sensibility* published in the *Foreign Literature Review*. He argued that “we should not only discuss the ideological differences between Elinor Dashwood and her sister Marianne in Austin’s novel *Sense and Sensibility*, but should pay full attention to the opposition between the two heroines and John Dashwood”. The mercenary John Dashwood, Mrs. Ferras, and others standing in the light, together with the shrewd and cunning Lucy hiding in the dark, represented the reality of the acquisitive society. By contrast, Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters were people of “strong feelings”. They emphasized interpersonal affection, friendship, and the necessary self-control and self-sacrifice. They embodied the persistence of the “feelings” under the profit-oriented society, along with Edward and Colonel Brandon. From Huang’s point of view, the persistence of “feelings” was finally defeated by the reality of society. After the sisters got married, they settled together in the picturesque village of Delaford. But the miniature utopia created and the “happy ending” were not won through the efforts of the heroines and their lovers. They were just by-products of Lucy’s operation[9].

3. Skill-oriented Articles: Narrative Skills, Language Style, Characterization

3.1 Narrative Skills

Apart from theme-oriented topics, Chinese readers and scholars are also interested in the discussion of Jane Austen’s style. The most noticeable narrative skill is Austen’s use of the opposition. Liu Xiamin wrote in the *Opposition and Harmony: The Art of Characterization in Sense and Sensibility* that “in terms of narrative techniques, Austin used the ‘schema of novel plots’ popular in the eighteenth century, which is a method of using opposing creations, such as ‘sense’ and ‘sensibility’ in the title of the book. This creative mode emphasizes that characters (usually women, often sisters) should have completely different temperaments, characters or thoughts from each other”. She also noted that, while Austen adopted the popular mode, she didn’t make her characters restricted by the mode. “With the development of the novel, the characters created began to be round. Elinor’s response to the penitent Willoughby surpassed the representative of sense, while Marianne’s introspection after illness was too rational to be a representative of sensibility”[10]. Yao Dan and Zeng Yang also expressed similar opinions in their *On the Use of Opposition in Sense and Sensibility*. Sun Zhili mentioned a feature which was usually ignored by

critics: the sense of detective fiction. In *Reading Austen's Sense and Sensibility*, he wrote “a strange expression and an accidental act have a certain meaning and arouse the attention of readers” and “the author uses accidental events to create suspense, makes the novel inexplicable and suspicious to the person involved, and also makes readers eager to see the end”[11]. Moreover, Zhao Rong chose to analyse the novel from the perspective of narratology. He argued that Austen adopted an absolutely authoritative third-person omniscient perspective throughout the book, which allowed the narrator to know everything outside of the story. At the same time Austen also changed the third-person perspective to a different character perspective in certain places to make the story more dynamic. Breaking the male-centered narrative tradition, this narrative technique shaped the authority of women and embodied the consciousness of women's independence[12].

3.2 Language Style

Satire is another significant feature of Jane Austen's art of language, and almost all articles discussing Austen's style mention it. One of the representatives is Sun Zhili's *Reading Austen's Sense and Sensibility*. He declared that “Austen never preaches when she writes about comedy. Instead, she resorts to what she is good at: satire. Throughout the whole book of *Sense and Sensibility*, her satire is mainly represented by two artistic techniques: one is mimicking, while the other is irony. The two techniques, complementing each other, create an interesting contrast”. Wang Qiang also mentioned the satire, but he called it “dry humour”. In *A Brief Analysis of Sense and Sensibility and Jane Austen's Writing Style*, he claimed that “dry humour” is another important technique Jane Austen used in the creation of *Sense and Sensibility*. Through this humorous writing skill, Austen displayed things that were glamorous on the surface but ugly in nature, giving readers a sense of cold satire”. Xu Meijuan's *Appreciation of Jane Austen's Narrative Techniques and Language Style in Sense and Sensibility*, Xu Yunqiu's *Brief Discussions about the Language Art in Sense and Sensibility*, and Liu Yuan's *A Brief Analysis of the Language Style of Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility* also stated or implied similar opinions.

3.3 Characterization

Despite the fact that most of the skill-oriented articles concentrate on Jane Austen's use of the techniques of opposition and irony, some are investigating Austen's skills in characterization. Sun Zhili wrote in the article mentioned above that “the creation of characters was perhaps Austen's greatest joy in writing novels. Her characterization is not based on an abstract description of the appearance or a fine inner depiction. She only adopts lively dialogue and interesting plots to make people lifelike”. Speaking of the dialogues in the book, Sun said that “Austen's dialogues are vivid and full of personalities. It seems that the one reading the dialogues was listening to their voices and looking at their appearances. Even nonsense can be used to represent one's personality. No wonder critics often compare her with Shakespeare”.

4. Reception-oriented Articles: Film and TV Adaptation, Translation

Among all the adaptation-related articles, there are only three focusing on the 2008 TV mini series. Except these three, all of the rest concentrate on the 1995 film adaptation directed by Ang Lee. It is generally believed that the adaptation is successful and audiences are satisfied with it. In *Reinvent Classics: Sense and Sensibility from the perspective of film adaptation*, Shen Weiju declared that “the wonderful adaptation, perfect directing, and superb acting skills have made the film successfully perform the original work. *Sense and Sensibility* has undergone a perfect and gorgeous turn from a literary classic to a film classic.” She also pointed out that the success of the

film was also due to the audience's need to escape from the unpleasantness of daily reality[13]. Confronted with the conflicts between the novel and the film caused by different artistic presentation methods, Qiu Jin believed that "with the rapid advancement of film technology and the extremely rich film language, adaptors can make full use of the characteristics of the film to realize a successful conversion" and "at this point, *Sense and Sensibility* (film) is a relatively successful example". Nevertheless, Qiu also criticized the shallowness of the adaptation and the distortion of the original. She claimed that "Austin originally wanted to use Elinor and the transformed Marianne to create a new rational and independent female image to make a contrast to the overly sentimental and delicate heroines in popular literature at that time. However, the film was always swaying between the "new women" and the "old women" and was contradictory"[14].

Different from some early translations of *Sense and Sensibility* in which translators made random additions, omissions, and adaptations of the original, such as the French translation by Isabelle de Montolieu, all Chinese translations hold "truthfulness" as the translation principle and the final goal. Therefore, most of the translation-related articles take the degree of truthfulness to the original as the standard in the evaluation of different versions of translation. Jiang Ru took statistics in her dissertation *On the Fictional Translation of Sense and Sensibility from the Perspective of Literary Stylistics* and pointed out that "around twenty translated versions are in stock currently" and three representative versions were: that of Wang Jiqin and Tang Yinsun, that of Wu Chonghan, and that of Sun Zhili". In fact, most of the articles use these translations as objects of comparison. For example, Jia Juhua made a comparison between Wu's and Sun's translations and asserted that their translations satisfied the needs of different reader groups and were both valuable. Geng Liping, rather than making comparisons like others, took a different approach. In *On a Chinese Translation of Sense and Sensibility*, Geng only analysed Wang Yutang's translation and pointed out the translator's misunderstandings of the novel and errors in the translation.

5. Articles of New Perspectives: Linguistics, Aesthetics, Psychoanalysis, Comparative Literature, Historical and Social Context

5.1. Linguistics

A noticeable trend in recent years' studies on *Sense and Sensibility* is the increase of articles with new perspectives, among which the articles interpreting the novel from the perspective of linguistics account for the largest proportion. For example, Chen Hua made a detailed analysis of the utterances of two heroes and heroines based on the Critical Discourse Analysis Theory and revealed "what linguistic elements realize the characteristics of women's language and how they expose the discrimination and prejudices against women in British society" in *A Critical Discourse Analysis of Women's Language in Sense and Sensibility*. Liu Hongqiang and Zhang Shuhui, in their *An Analysis of the Conversational Implicature of Novels from the Perspective of the Cooperative Principle -Taking Sense and Sensibility as an example*, analysed the conversational meaning of *Sense and Sensibility* in the framework of the Cooperative Principle put forward by Herbert Paul Grice (1913-1988). They discussed the relationship between the language forms and their users and revealed the unique personalities of characters, communicative intensions, and social relations in the novel. Sun Qian is another scholar analyzing the personalities of characters in *Sense and Sensibility*. In *An Analysis of Characters in Sense and Sensibility Based on the Appraisal Theory* she made an analysis of Elinor and Marianne's discourse based on the attitude system of the appraisal theory and found that the share of judgment and appreciation resources in Elinor's discourse accounted for a large proportion, while the share of affect accounted for a large proportion in Marianne's discourse, and the share of three resources changed with the development of the plot. Therefore, she concluded that the two sisters had different personalities and their

personalities changed with the development of the plot.

5.2. Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis

Aesthetics is another discipline newly introduced to analyse *Sense and Sensibility*. The representative article is Cui Ziyun's *The Understanding of Theory of Harmonious Beauty in Sense and Sensibility*. Cui discussed the harmonious beauty of the internality and externality in the novel and analysed Austen's views on the harmonious beauty of material and emotion. What is most important is that she further explored the relationship between sense and sensibility in the novel in three aspects: personal characters, love styles, and ways to cope with setbacks. Yuan Suping resorted to Freud's psychoanalysis theory to interpret characters of *Sense and Sensibility*. In *On the Emotional Changes of the Protagonists in Sense and Sensibility from the Perspective of Personality Analysis*, he contended that Elinor, who followed the social ethical standards at the time, suppressed her true feelings and tried her best to implement the "principle of perfection" to her family, neighbors and friends, was the representative of "supergo" while Marianne, who was arbitrary with her actions, especially in the first half of the novel, not paying attention to other people's thoughts and opinions, was the representative of "id" to a certain extent. However, Yuan also found that the personality of Marianne in the novel was constantly developing when she began to think rationally after Willoughby's betrayal and believed that Marianne at the time was the representative of "self".

5.3. Comparative Literature and Historical and Social Context

There are also articles which interpret *Sense and Sensibility* from the perspective of comparative literature. In *Sense and Sensibility: Comparison between Xue Baochai, Lin Daiyu and Elinor, Marianne - heroines in Dream of the Red Chamber and Sense and Sensibility*, Li Hong compared the heroines of two novels from the perspective of the basic characters, codes of conduct, and attitudes toward love and concluded that Xue Baochai and Elinor were representatives of sense while Lin Daiyu and Marianne were representatives of sensibility. Li also mentioned the difference between the two authors' attitudes towards sense and sensibility: Cao Xueqin, the author of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* appreciated more sensibility while Jane Austen preferred the value of sense[15]. Apart from the perspective of comparative literature, there are also scholars exploring the historical and cultural context of the novel. Yan Jing analysed the system of primogeniture in her *On the Primogeniture of Sense and Sensibility* and believed that the system was the root of gender inequality at the time. In another article *The Social Life Styles and Characteristics Embodied in Sense and Sensibility*, she made a thorough social context analysis of the novel from perspectives of transportation, buildings and furniture, education, and lifestyles. For example, in the subsection of transportation, she compared different types of carriage, such as gigs, curricles, phaetons, landau, barouches, and chaises.

6. Conclusions

Overall, articles on *Sense and Sensibility* from 1983 to 2020 indicate the popularity of Jane Austen's novels in China and the prosperity of studies on Austen. The popularity and prosperity are related to the changes in the social environment in China. After the reform and opening up, China has changed from a semi-closed society to an all-round open society, and people's thinking has become more diversified. People have not only begun to re-understand the long-standing Chinese culture, but have also changed from repelling, denying, and resisting foreign cultures to tolerating and accepting them. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the problems existing in Austen's studies, such as repeated topics, superficial analysis, and similar opinions.

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