SYNOPSIS


The success of a novel depends, to a large extent, on the novelist’s skills in creating “typical characters”. For a long time, in the history of classic Chinese novels, the creation of typical characters is a slow and gradual process. It was during the Ming and Qing dynasties that the creation of typical characters attained a high level of artistry. However, there are academics who think that this is overevaluated. This thesis aims to conduct a critical review of the evolution of literary theory on “typical characters” and to make a comparative study of some of the most important characters of these five landmarks of Chinese fiction in order to assess the historical development of the typical characters and the different methods used by various novelists in creating them.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, before Chinese novelists and critics were acquainted with western fiction and its high literary standing, they had through practical writing and commenting, formed distinctive ways of portraying different characters in relation to the moral or philosophical themes of their novels. Hence, an attempt is made in this thesis to examine different sources of aesthetic theories such as art, drama and literature which have more or less influenced the novelists’ unique way of characterisation and the commentators in the formation of their own concept of “typical characters”.

The earliest novels are mainly dynastic chronicles, supernatural and prose romances, and the portrayal of characters are not so refined and complex. But in the course of time, novelists came to write about all sorts of characters in quest of their romantic or religious destiny. The major part of this study is therefore dedicated to the analysis and evaluation of the twenty-four principal characters from the historical romances and novels of manners. As the Chinese have always been practical and sensibly abiding by the Confucian doctrine, the Confucian virtues most frequently advocated in the historical romances (for example, The Romance of the Three Kingdoms and The Water Margin) are loyalty, filial piety, chastity and selfless friendship. This has caused the authors to create the kinds of heroes that exemplify praiseworthy Confucian conduct. An in-depth study of the twelve characters shows that they are well-developed with distinctive personalities that speak with individual voices. They have become well-known personality types which are easily identified by the readers.

The late Ming period saw an increase in economic activities and the prosperity of cities. This resulted in a change in the social environment and the value judgment of the Chinese people. All these are reflected in the novels of manners (for example, The
Golden Lotus, The Scholars and A Dream of Red Mansions). It was at this time that there was a breakthrough on the level of artistry in characterisation. This is due to not only the novelists' great familiarity with the scene about the life and people, but also due to the kind of people they described. The twelve characters are all ordinary people and the novels are written with great attention to the darker aspects of their souls and the weaknesses of their personalities. It is not common to find in their lives the heroism and supernatural phenomena which are so obvious in the novels from the past. This has made the characters even more life-like. Almost any Chinese might identify a part of himself or of someone he knows well in the gallery of typical characters.

The findings of this research show that some literary critics have underrated the aesthetic value of "typical characters" in classic Chinese novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties. In fact, through accurate and lavish description of the characters' appearances, conversations, thoughts, actions, behaviours, mannerisms, psychological activities and the environment they dwell in, the authors have successfully enlivened their characterisation. It also proves that an extensive study of the critiques on characterisation and comparison of the most fascinating characters also provide us with a clearer understanding and a more complete picture of the steady development and brilliant achievement of "typical characters" in classic Chinese novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Indeed, each character has had its enormous appeal in the Chinese tradition as it is able to capture and reflect human aspirations and ideals.