

# *How Medieval Lifestyle in Fantasy Literature Attracts Chinese*

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**Abstract:** The medieval lifestyle has been realized as an element in fantasy literature, which can create an imaginary world and attract readers with historical features. The aim of the present research was to explore the effects of medievalism in fantasy works and analyze its influence on Chinese readers. *The Lord of the Rings* was chosen to be the example, and a qualitative method was executed to categorize and analyze Chinese readers' reactions to the example. Tables and word clouds illustrated the popularity of *the Lord of the Rings* in China and the reasons why Chinese readers were attracted by the story. Results showed that medievalism as symbols in the fantasy works provided the story with exoticism and pastoralism. And Chinese readers can be attracted by symbols and the values behind them. In view of these findings, this research revealed the possibility that masterpieces with general values can be admired by readers from other parts of the world.

**Keywords:** Medieval Lifestyle, Fantasy Literature, Public Review

## 1. Introduction

In the realm of Western fantasy narratives, authors meticulously craft fictional universes that serve as the backdrop for their narratives and the development of their characters. Within these meticulously constructed fictional realms, discernible are the omnipresent vestiges of medieval symbolism. Notably, these literary landscapes are often inhabited by knights, monarchs, and clerics, thus mirroring the hierarchical feudal structure that permeated the Middle Ages. Even the common denizens of these fantastical domains are depicted as adhering to a lifestyle reminiscent of the historical Middle Ages.

An illustrative example of this phenomenon can be observed in J.R.R. Tolkien's magnum opus, *The Lord of the Rings*. Within Tolkien's narrative tapestry, Hobbits inhabit tranquil villages and lead agrarian lives akin to those of pre-industrial revolution farmers. Similarly, the people of Rohan, as depicted in the text, emulate the nomadic existence of medieval Magyars in Europe. Notably, it is worth acknowledging the widespread acclaim and popularity that *The Lord of the Rings* has garnered within the Chinese literary milieu. It is conceivable that the portrayal of a medieval way of life within the narrative plays a pivotal role in the resounding success of this work among Chinese readers.

The principal objective of this scholarly inquiry is to elucidate the multifaceted role played by historically authentic elements in Western fantasy literature, with a specific focus on discerning the responses elicited from Chinese readers. This research endeavor seeks to uncover empirical evidence

indicative of the proclivity of Chinese readers towards Tolkien's celebrated fantasy narrative, and to ascertain whether the presence of a medieval way of life within the story exerts a discernible influence on their predilection for this literary masterpiece.

## 2. Literature Review

Fantasy literature serves as a conduit for the portrayal of parallel realities and alternative realms of consciousness. The symbols embedded within this genre have origins in ancient mythology, as exemplified in the book "Ancient Symbolology in Fantasy Literature: A Psychological Study." For instance, the creation of Middle Earth in J.R.R. Tolkien's narratives drew inspiration from ancient Norse, Celtic, Finnish, and German mythologies [1]. Tolkien advocated the concept of crafting a "secondary world" that readers could immerse themselves in, characterized by an "inner consistency of reality" [2].

While fantasy authors have the liberty to select any historical period as their backdrop, the Medieval Age stands out as a perennial favorite. The peculiarity of medieval life, typified by a feudal system rooted in loyalty, a rigid class hierarchy, simplified gender roles, and castellated architecture, offers a profound sense of otherness when juxtaposed against contemporary norms. These "images of strangers" [3] act as a magnetic force, attracting readers into Utopian or alternative existence.

Yet, it is noteworthy that medieval society, with its absence of consumerism and reliance on manual labor, retains a degree of familiarity in certain contemporary contexts, particularly in Third World countries [4].

The depiction of the medieval way of life in fantasy literature transcends the realm of conventional historical representation; it embodies a concept known as "Medievalism." The term was first documented by John Ruskin in 1853 to encapsulate the fascination with the Middle Ages in his era. Clare Simmons interprets medievalism as a reaction against the encroachment of technology and mass production, seeking to preserve traditional values and solidify national identity within the framework of medieval history [5].

Today, medievalism continues to serve as a guardian of endangered positive values in the contemporary world [6]. Notably, it is not merely a nostalgic return to the Middle Ages; Leslie Workman characterizes it as an ongoing process of reinventing the Middle Ages, with a primary focus on contemporary concerns [7].

In this regard, fantasy literature emerges as a deliberate choice to convey the ideology of medievalism. Drawing from a psychological perspective presented by Marie von Franz, fantasy is perceived not as frivolous ego-driven whimsy, but as an expression rooted in the depths of the human psyche, forming symbolic scenarios that imbue life with deeper meaning and realization. Moreover, Tolkien's works have wielded significant influence over Chinese readers, as evidenced by the four translation editions of *The Lord of the Rings* published in China since 1997 [8]. The foundation of these imaginary worlds in historical contexts plays a pivotal role in captivating Chinese readers.

Medievalism finds extensive utilization within the realm of fantasy literature. Works tethered to actual historical events endeavor to recreate a parallel world mirroring reality. For instance, Tolkien's narratives incorporated elements like Saruman's destruction of the forest to serve as commentary on World War and modern industrialization [9].

Despite the conspicuous popularity of classical fantasy works in China, a comprehensive analysis of the impact of medievalism on Chinese readers and audiences has been conspicuously absent. While the allure of these works in the Chinese context is evident, the precise reasons behind their appeal remain somewhat nebulous. It is plausible that Chinese readers are drawn to the exoticism embedded within these narratives. As articulated by Steve William Foster, the exotic possesses the innate capacity to evoke a symbolic world teeming with complexity, surprise, color, manifold variety, and richness. This exotic world, in essence, offers a counterbalance to the increasingly schematic patterns

of everyday life in industrial society, functioning as a repository of recollections about primitive eras in the past [10].

In summation, medievalism serves as a pervasive motif in fantasy literature, enabling authors to construct imaginary realms deeply rooted in historical reality. Within these realms, values and ideologies can be transmitted as reactions to the modern world, and the exotic symbols present in fantasy works may be especially resonant with Chinese readers.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data Collection

This research attempted to figure out the effect of medievalism in *the Lord of the Rings* on Chinese readers and audiences.

For these two purposes, there are two representative Chinese internet platforms that can be used.

Douban is a Chinese online database and social networking service that allows registered users to record information and create content related to film, books, music, recent events, and activities in Chinese cities. And on Douban, both the books and the movie trilogy of *the Lord of the Rings* are in the list of top 250 movies and books.

Bilibili is a video sharing website, which hosts various themes. Bilibili has the feature to show the watching times of every video and movie, and this platform also allow users to mark every video. As a result, bilibili is a straight resource to reflect the influence and popularity of *the Lord of the Kings* in China.

This research focuses on the number of reviewers and the bands of *the Lord of the Rings*. Considering the films of *the Lord of the Rings* have more followers in China, and the series of films is widely accepted. This research analyzed the data from movies and books equally.

On Douban, there are amounts of discussion groups which people can share personal feelings and understanding about films and books. Douban has three main groups gathering fans of *the Lord of the Rings*, and they share their comments about *the Lord of the Rings* in groups.

#### 3.2. Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study utilizes MAXQDA as the primary analytical tool. Commencing the analytical process, the data undergoes an initial categorization. Both textual and visual content from various platforms encompassing books and movie excerpts are collected for examination. Subsequently, tabulated representations are employed to delineate disparities among the three movies and books, each of which has been made available in both the Chinese and English languages.

In the subsequent phases of analysis, more intricate insights are gleaned through an exploration of discussion groups. These forums facilitate the exchange of perspectives among ardent fans, who expound upon the captivating and appealing facets of *The Lord of the Rings*. Such insights prove invaluable for the overarching research endeavor, enabling a deeper comprehension of the factors contributing to the popularity of Western fantasy narratives within the Chinese context.

The final stage of analysis entails a comprehensive examination of user-generated scores, comments, and the substantive content of the discussion groups. Through a meticulous examination of these elements, two hypothetical conjectures emerge. Firstly, *The Lord of the Rings* emerges as a paradigmatic exemplar of the fantasy genre that has garnered a substantial following in China. Secondly, the depiction of a Medieval way of life within the narrative emerges as a pivotal factor in endearing the narrative to Chinese audiences, thus elucidating one of the key drivers of its appeal within the Chinese milieu.

## 4. Results

The popularity of *the Lord of the Rings* in China can be reflected in the ratings of the two major social websites (Douban and Bilibili), as shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: Douban Users Rating on Lord of the Rings (movies)

The name of movie	Number of reviewers	Rating	Advantages
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring</i> (2001)	849433	9.1/10	excel 98% of fantasy
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers</i> (2002)	755343	9.2/10	excel 99% of fantasy
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i> (2003)	805566	9.3/10	excel 99% of fantasy

Table 2: Bilibili Users Rating on *the Lord of the Rings*

The name of movie	Number of reviewers	Points
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring</i> (2001)	6487	9.8/10
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers</i> (2002)	4525	9.9/10
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i> (2003)	3519	9.9/10

Users have rated unanimous high ratings of *the Lord of the Rings* on both Douban and Bilibili, two of the major movie rating SNS in China, which suggest strong evidence for the fan base. Similarly, Despite the formidable length of the novels, Chinese readers have expressed their appreciation through commendable ratings (see Table 3). This dual endorsement, spanning both the cinematic and literary realms, underscores the enduring appeal and widespread acclaim enjoyed by *the Lord of the Rings* among Chinese audiences.

Table 3: Douban Users Rating on *the Lord of the Rings*

The name of book	Number of reviewers	Points
<i>The Lord of the Rings</i> (Chinese translation)	1640	9.3/10
<i>The Lord of the Rings</i> (English)	484	9.7/10

These three tables, however, simply show the general appreciation for *the Lord of the Rings*, and the reasons why people enjoy this story of a fantasy world are impossible to answer. Accordingly, some details can be found from three Douban discussion groups.

To understand why *the Lord of the Rings* attracted so many Chinese readers, this study looked into specific Douban Discussion groups established based on the fantasy work, as shown in table 4.

Table 4: Data of Douban Discussion Groups

The name of Groups	Followers	Founding Day
Pretend to live in the Middle Earth	2915	5/7/2021
Tolkien's Middle Earth	575	1/25/2006
<i>The Lord of the Rings</i> , and Everything about Tolkien	5808	1/4/2006

To look closely into users' interpretation of *the Lord of the Rings*, this study investigated closely into one of the three groups called "Pretend to live in the Middle Earth". Users in this group pretend they are living in the Middle Earth, the imaginary continent with an inner connection with the reality.

In this group, members constantly expressed their interests in daily lives in Middle Earth, with topics about cuisine, accommodation and travel. Figure 1 shows the number of three topics discussed in the groups.

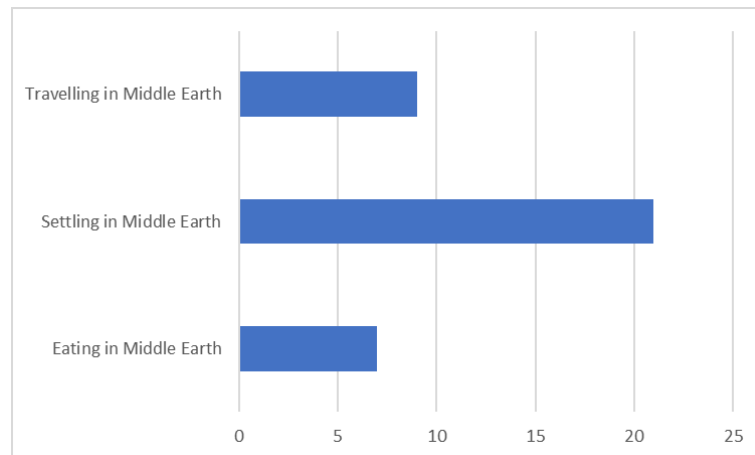


Figure 1: The Number of Three Topics Discussed in the Groups

The lifestyle in *the Lord of the Rings* is attractive and exotic for some Chinese fans. Chinese readers and films watchers are curious about the food and the accommodation in that imaginary continent, where people enjoy pre-modern lifestyle in medieval countryside and city.

More details could be found from communication in the groups. In the words cloud basing on the information of four different Douban discussion groups, the enthusiasm of Chinese fans for *the Lord of the Rings* are reflected by these words (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Words Appear in the Discussion Groups

In groups, Chinese fans image they are living in the Middle Earth, and they try to follow the medieval ways on the Middle Earth. They talked about the famous bars and hotels in Tolkien's story, and tirelessly learn to remake the interesting dishes such as Elf's biscuit in real world. They are also curious about the lifestyle of normal people in the fairy story, especially the ways of the Hobbit. The hobbit live in the way just like the English farmers before industry revolution. Their agriculture is self-sufficient and rely on traditional method. The hobbit enjoy their peaceful life and do not want to communicate with outside world. The Pastoralism as a common symbol of medievalism attract

readers of fantasy literature, including readers from China, to face the Middle Age with more positive altitude. People who love fantasy literature treat the medieval style world as a Utopia, and they criticize the dehumanization because of industrialism. With the development of Chinese society, Chinese readers can find the damage causing by modernization, which motivate them to find the simple and carefree medieval lifestyle, which always appears in fantasy stories such as *the Lord of the Rings*.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the empirical findings drawn from internet platforms, this study ascertains two salient conclusions. Firstly, it is discerned that *The Lord of the Rings*, spanning both its cinematic and literary manifestations, enjoys significant popularity and garners favorable feedback within the Chinese context. Secondly, it is evident that the medieval way of life depicted within the narrative construct of "Middle Earth" exerts a discernible appeal upon a segment of Chinese readers and audiences. These conclusions are underpinned by an analysis of pertinent scholarly literature.

To elaborate on the first point, the allure of medievalism within the fantasy genre, as encountered by Chinese audiences, can be attributed to its status as an exotic cultural phenomenon. It embodies a symbolic system that, while unfamiliar, exerts a captivating charm. Within the context of fantasy literature, the portrayal of medieval lifestyles effectively fabricates a "parallel world" that beckons readers, presenting a stark departure from contemporary societal norms and the prevailing understanding of human existence, external realities, and their governing principles, as elucidated by Landow [11].

Secondly, the appeal of medievalism in fantasy narratives transcends the aesthetic and serves as a conduit for conveying broader societal values. *The Lord of the Rings* extols virtues such as friendship, loyalty, and sacrifice, lauding the triumph of benevolent entities over malevolent forces through collective unity. It is worth noting that these values resonate with Chinese readers, thereby elevating the medieval frugal lifestyle to the status of a vehicle for the transmission of moral principles, as posited by Simmons [5]. Such depictions of rural existence and ethically-grounded relationships are construed as reactions against the increasingly regimented patterns of contemporary life, mirroring a broader global appreciation for humanitarian values.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge that this research is delimited by its absence of a psychological dimension, which could offer deeper insights into the underlying motivations of Chinese readers and audiences drawn to Western fantasy literature. The present study confines its analysis to the realm of literary theory, thus rendering an avenue for future research that delves into psychological theories and methodologies to illuminate the fundamental underpinnings of medievalism and the unique allure of the medieval way of life.

Furthermore, this study underscores a prospective trajectory for future research. The inclusion of factual elements and materials within fictional literature constitutes an unexplored domain with considerable potential. The infusion of actual historical events into historical fiction or fantasy narratives, as well as the incorporation of scientifically-grounded theories within science fiction, holds the promise of enriching narrative depth and enhancing plot veracity. These considerations present promising avenues for future research endeavors within the realm of literature, offering potential benefits to authors and scholars alike.

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