

Different Literary Modes and Corresponding Representations of Women in Europe and China

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Abstract: It is a classic problem about the women's status. Many people, especially people in China, where people prefer boys to girls with long tradition, would have different stereotypes toward the status of women in ancient western world and China and believe that the status of women in ancient Greek would be prior to that in ancient China. Even in some serious researches about women's status, the opinion is overwhelming. However, this opinion is derived from the literary works mainly, and such opinion is not correct with regard to the investigation to the historical realities. Previous studies of women status were confined in the content literary works, but not noticed the different literary modes between the western and China literatures. The aim of the article was to analyze the origin of the opinion in the perspective of investigation to the different literary modes. The article concluded that such opinion was influenced by the different representations of women in ancient Greek and China critically and that caused the incorrect stereotypes about women in the western world and China.

Keywords: literary modes; women status; stereotype; lyric literature; narrative literature

INTRODUCTION

The sex ratio imbalance of China attracts much notice in recent year. The population of the male was 337.6 million more than that of the female until the end of 2014 according to the statistic released by the State Statistics Bureau of China. The imbalance is the result of the preferring boys to girls in the folk. Lots of people believe that the female had very low status in ancient China, and the western female had higher status and dared to resist the oppression of the male. They often mention the literary female images in the ancient literature histories of China and Europe as the examples, and that seems convincing. In the early literature works about the female of ancient times in China and Europe, the most famous works were poem *Meng* in *Book of Songs* and the tragedy *Medea* created by Euripides. The former represented a deserted woman who submitted to the life, and the latter was a woman who resisted the oppression and betrayal of the husband violently. The two literature works were the representatives of Chinese and European literature works respectively in ancient times. There were still more such works that described the different fates of the female in ancient China and Europe. The opinion would also be reinforced by the autocracy of the ancient China.

So the stereotype is formed that the female of ancient China had the lowest status in the world. For example, "The female in ancient belonged to the lowest class of submission and compliance in the long ancient history of China from beginning to the end, being

dominated, bullied, and at the service of the male" [1]. "Chinese women had the lower status the more miserable life compared to the women of Europe in the corresponding historic periods" [2].

However, there is also some different voice about the status of Chinese and European ancient female. "The aristocratic women in Yin and Shang periods had important status in the politic and military domains and the requirement on the virginity of women was relatively loose" [3]. Some scholars believe that the ancient Greek female had very low social status. "The female in the ancient Greek, which had the high democratic atmosphere, had very low status. The female in the ancient Rome, which had much militarism, had relative high status. However, in the ancient Egypt, where was dominated by the autocracy for more than three thousand years, the female had the highest status in the three areas" [4].

So it seems that the opinions about the status in ancient China and Europe are controversial. The paper will exam the opinions in the field of ancient literatures of China and Europe in the following sections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers believe that the female in ancient China lacked of the resisting consciousness when they compare the Chinese female with the western female. "Refrained by the Chinese unique feudal patriarchal system, Chinese female in ancient times rarely had the resisting consciousness. So the

women who revenged in the literature works were really few ” [5]. “Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* expresses the feminism thought of resisting male-dominated culture, insisting the equality of men and women by the women’s self-reliance and self-dependency.....In Cao Xueqin’s *A Dream of the Red Chamber*, Lin Daiyu represents the most advanced women who has the feminism thought in that times. But Cao Xueqin totally did not think about the self-reliance and self-dependency, although he praises the noble and unsullied character of women and is sympathetic with the tragic fate of women. He focuses on the beauty of women, complying with the literary creating mode of the previous intellectuals and expressing the miserable life of women ” [6].

However, when researchers discuss the feminism consciousness or the female status in Chinese ancient times without comparing with the corresponding matters in the western world, the feminism consciousness or the female status would be deemed higher. “In the pre-Qin period, the social status of women was relatively high, because the matriarchy culture had not disappeared ” [7]. “Men enjoy higher status than women was the rule that could not change in the long Chinese ancient history. Women as the mothers was unique, although the women had low legal status generally in ancient Chinese history. Firstly, Chinese ancient legality never contemplate mothers....Secondly, ancient Chinese legality never deprived the rights of mothers in the family after the patriarchal men died” [8]. The social Status of women actually was high. They could take part in the social communication, enjoying the banquet just as men did or sitting together with men. They had the power of self-deciding in the marriage, and even some children took their mothers’ names in family. In legality, the benefits of women were protected. The women were well educated generally, even some women obtained the title of nobility [9].

From the literature review, we would find that some researching results are contradictory. The status of Chinese female in ancient times were regarded as very low in general, especially when it was compared with that of the western female, but when one analyses the concrete condition of female status in the ancient times, he or she would find that it would not be as low as being regarded in general.

CHINESE TRADITIONAL LITERATURE IS LYRIC

The earliest literature works of China and the forming of traditional lyric literature

The image of Chinese and the western women was formed in the literature works mainly, so it is important to investigate the question in the perspective of

literature history, especially the pattern of how the different literatures represented the women.

The origin of the one kind of literature would decide the pattern of representation, with some literary archetypes formed during the course. It is necessary to investigate the origin of one kind of literature for understanding such literature. The earliest literature works in China and Europe are *Book of Songs* and *Homer Epic* respectively. Broadly, the ancient Greek mythology also belonged to the earliest literature works in Europe.

As the earliest literature works in China, *Book of Songs* decides the archetype of Chinese literature and the pattern of representation. *Book of Songs* belongs to the lyric literature, which is called lyric poem.

The lyric poem reflects the reality by the artistic image. Generally, it does not have the complete plot and describe concretely the character and scene. On the contrary, it focuses on expressing the feeling, sometimes takes advantage of a scenery to express the poet’s feeling. The emotion is critical for lyric, just as many China ancient poets believed that the poem was derived from emotion. Compared to the narrative literature, the lyric literature has the features of subjectivity, individuality and poeticizing, and that compose the main difference from the narrative literature. The narrative literature generally requires the definitive and concrete meaning or the imitation of the reality. However, the lyric just tries to express the feeling or emotion, or in the other words, it tries to imitate the inner activities of human being. It emphasizes the spirituality of the social life, transforming aesthetically such spirituality in consciousness to reach the spiritual freedom. Above all, we can find that the lyric poem represents the emotion and feeling of human being, but not the complete plot.

Book of Songs can be divided according to the content into several kinds: the poems about the love and marriage, the poems about the soldiers on expedition missing their wives, poems about the agriculture, the poems about the feast, the poems about satiring the politics etc. The poems about the soldiers missing their wives and the poems about love and marriage occupies the most part of such poetry, because love is the permanent topic of literature. Since the poems are involve in such topic, there would be the representation of women in the poems.

The portrait about women in *Book of Songs* is very beautiful, which is mainly divided into the beauty of the appearance and the charm of the personality. The beauty and charm would be represented through the brief slice of life, or combining the emotion and scene

especially, which is the unique expression pattern of *Book of Songs*. For example, the poem *Plop Fall the Plums* uses such pattern:

*Plop fall the plums,
Seven yet to pluck.
You who court me,
Get ready for your luck.*

*Plop fall the plums,
Three still on the bough,
You who court me,
It is time now.*

*Plop fall the plums,
All gathered in.
You who court me,
Just a word to win.*

Combining emotion and scene is very common in *Book of Songs*, which is effective in the literary expression. In this poem, we would find that the expression of feeling is the most important goal, and the narrative is secondary.

THE NARRATIVE LITERATURE IN THE WESTERN WORLD AND ITS CORRESPONDING REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

Different from Chinese literature tradition, the European ancient tradition literature was narrative. The earliest literature works in Europe is the famous Homer Epic, the ancient Greek mythology and the dramas, which are all narrative. The plot is necessary for the narrative, and the conflict is necessary for the plot. That is to say without the conflict, there would be no narrative. In the ancient literature works, there were lots of violent conflicts, which left the deep impression for the readers.

The representation of women in the ancient literature of Greece was through the conflicts. The women became the main characters in the narrative literature could be traced to the period of Euripides, whose representative works was *Medea*. In the period before him, there was no women became the main characters in the narrative literature works, because that women had low social status.

In order to represent the image of Medea, the drama put Medea in the center of the conflicts. The disloyal husband wants to marry another woman, and Medea murders the woman and their two children. In the ancient Greek tragic dramas, the violent conflict would be the revenge murder in the family. *Medea* was not the exception.

In Zhang Shijun's *Foreign Literature History*, *Medea* is regarded as the representative works of conflict between men and women, which is the literature archetype in the European literature history. "The developing clue could be described as following: the conflict between the two mythology systems in ancient Greece, for example, Euripides's *Medea*; the stories about the wisdom of women, for example, *Decameron* (1353) by Italian writer Boccaccio; British writer Defoe's *Moll Flanders* in 18th century; British writer Sustin's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in 19th century, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), French writer Zola's *Nana* (1880), Russian writer Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, *A Doll's House* (1879) by Henrik Ibsen of Norway; British writer Lawrence's works in 20th century" [10] In the European literature history, conflict was the important archetype, including the conflicts between the fathers and sons, the conflicts between mothers and sons etc., except the conflicts between women and men [10].

Women could not become the characters who resign themselves to the adversity. If women did that, there would no conflicts, so there would know the plots and narratives. Traditionally, the narrative works, whose main characters are women, in the western world are always full of conflicts activated by women as the main characters, no matter the narrative works is dramas or novels. Of course, there is no conflict in the post-modern literature such as absurd theatre, but such literature works is rare and the reverse of the traditional literature form.

Most of the image and the personality of women in *Book of Songs* are positive and charming, because the image of women in poems would easily become the subject of aesthete. As the first realism poetry, *Book of Songs* represents the women with vivid authenticity.

It is obvious that the difference between the lyric and narrative literatures is huge. The lyric literature focuses on the emotions and feelings, but the narrative literature emphasizes the plots. The most important difference between the two kinds of genres remains in the conflicts. The narrative literature has lots of conflicts, while the lyric literature has few conflicts or has no.

THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FEMALE IN CHINESE LITERATURE AND THE WESTERN LITERATURE

The representations of women in Chinese literature and the western literature are different. The Chinese ancient literature was mainly the lyric, so the representation of women would focuses on the emotions and feelings. The representation of women in the western literature is mainly focuses on the conflicts,

so the women in such western literature would be involved in the actions about the conflicts, sometimes opposing the conflicts and sometimes accelerating the conflicts.

The representation of women in Chinese literature history was mainly in the lyric form. The earliest literature in China is *Book of Songs*, which shaped many famous women image, reflecting the situation of the period of early Western Zhou dynasty to the Spring and Autumn. The women in the poetry were often emotional, and the poems always describe the image and the moral of the women, sometimes telling the stories about the misfortune of passive women for they had no intention to change the situation.

In the period after the Spring and Autumn period, the representation of women remained the form in *Book of Songs*. Especially after Tang dynasty, women were described as the beauties or the ones who had good morals. The poem was the main literary form in Tang and Song dynasties, so the literature about women would not focused on conflicts. The narrative literature became more in Late Ming and Qing dynasties, but the representation of women in literature of that times was influenced by the previous literary forms and contents. Only in the contemporary literature were women represented in the mature narrative literature, with the phenomenon that women were involved in the conflicts. In China, “the contemporary literature and literary theory focus on the novel study, while the ancient literature about women focused on the poem” [11].

While the representation of women in the western literature is totally another portrait. In western narrative literature, women would be involved in the conflicts and the propellant of the plots. In the ancient literature, whose mainly literary genres were the dramas, Homer epic and mythology, the women were often the characters of the narrative literature, so they were active and took part in the conflicts of the plots. Ancient Rome literature almost copied Greek literature, so the representation would not be changed. In the next period, Medieval Times, literature were mainly the religious literature, with the existence of chivalric literature, heroic epic and citizen literature as supplementary. The mainly literature form was narrative, so the women were the involved in the conflicts if they were the main characters of it. In the Renaissance and enlightenment times, 19th and 20th centuries, the literature genre was still the narrative literature. So the representation of women in such kind literature would not be changed.

THE FORMING OF STEREOTYPED MODE OF CHINESE WOMEN IN THE LITERATURE WORKS AND CHINESE CULTURE

There are many factors that promoted the forming of the stereotype of women in Chinese literature and culture, while the most important factor is the reference books with material taken from various sources in ancient China in the perspective of literature communication.

The reference books with material taken from various sources emerged in Three Kingdoms period. It provided the reference for the study on the ancient Chinese society and natural environment. Ever since Three Kingdoms period, “the edition of such reference books were successive. Especially after Tang and Song dynasties, the content of the reference books became richer and the forms of it become improved more. The volume of the reference books became huger. Such books became the summary of the general picture of ancient Chinese feudal times. According to the estimation, such books in Chinese history were about 500 to 600, in which still existing in contemporary times are about more than 200” [12].

The function of such reference books was for learning and study. Ancient Chinese intellectuals would learn the previous classic works, so they needed remember much literature material. In order to promote the effect of learning, some scholar edited such reference books, which contained much the essence of the previous class works. From Sui and Tang dynasties, the imperial competitive examination became the main way to the official career, and the examination was most about investigating the remembering of the previous classic works, so the reference books became the favorite books for the intellectuals who wanted to succeed. Additionally, the official career was full of temptation, which provided much benefit, no matter in the form of power or wealth and social status. So taking part in the examination for the official career was the best choice if one wanted to changed his situation.

In the condition, there was huge need of the books for the examination. The reference book was one necessary for the examinees. In Song dynasty, the publishing technology developed fast, and the publishers published enormous reference books with the pursuit for profit, because the need of reference was much.

The different reference books appeared in enormous number in Song dynasty, because the emperors of Song dynasty wanted to reinforce their power. It was interesting that the emperors who got their thrones through the abnormal way, such as coup or cheating, would be high on the editing reference books. Reference books were the summary of the ancient feudal culture and knowledge, so through editing the reference books, the emperors could delete the negative

factors of knowledge for him. On the other hand, editing reference books would manifest the emperors' interest in the knowledge, so as to cover the notorious way to get the thrones. Besides, editing reference books could control the intellectuals, because such editing needed many intellectuals and literature materials, which were collected in the whole country. The emperors promised the generous treatment for the intellectuals who took part in the editing, so the intellectuals would be loyal to the emperors in order to get better treatment. For example, the second emperor of Song dynasty, Song Tai Zong got his throne with the identity of the former emperor's brother. The process of inheriting the throne was not clear, so he organized the intellectuals all over the country to edit the reference books in order to reinforce his power.

So many reference books resulted in that the mode of Chinese literature was stereotyped. There were great number of intellectuals took part in the examination for the official career, and they would bought the reference books for the examination, so the reference books influenced them greatly. When they created the poems or essays, they would refer to the literature materials in the reference books. The stuff, modes or styles of their works were influenced by the reference books. Some famous poets such as Li Shangyin would also create the poems according to the reference books, so although he had no the real experience that his works, he could create the poems with the materials that provided by the reference books. In the literature history, some literary images or styles would be stereotyped in the process, especially the literary imagination of women would be formed. In the end, the literary imagination of women became the cultural imagination.

There would be other factors that influenced the stereotyping process of women images in the literary world of China, but the reference books played the most important role in the literature communication. Chinese ancient literature was mainly created and spreaded by the intellectuals, most of whom were the officials because of the examination for official career or had privileges. On the other hand, the most important literary genre for the intellectuals was the lyric literature, but not the narrative literature. As the reading materials for thousands of intellectuals, the reference books not only provided the shortcut for the them, but also made the literary images and styles etc. stereotyped.

The women image of in *Book of Songs* was kept in the reference books, because *Book of Songs* is the most classic poetry works in ancient literature history. In addition, the Buddhism, which is a religion that promotes the morals of human being and calls on people to accept the condition no matter how hard it is,

reinforced the stereotyped image of women. Buddhism began to be prosperous in Three Kingdoms period, and from that times on, it was very popular in China in general. In Tang and Song dynasties, the Buddhism was also developed fast. The publishing business was very prosperous in Song dynasty, so the reference books were spreaded widely. The stereotyping process was accelerated.

THE HISTORIC RECORDINGS OF THE FACTS OF THE WOMEN IN CHINA AND THE WESTERN WORLD

There were many serious records about the real conditions of the western and Chinese women in history. In Tang dynasty, the marital autonomy was common for women. Tang dynasty was the typical dynasty that reflected women's high status in Chinese history. The *Book of Tang* recorded that the 212 princesses, 123 of which got married and 23 of which got remarried. The princesses got married for three times were 4 [13]. In the marriage, the women's rights were protected by law in Tang dynasty. The wives had the sovereign right on the wealth [14]. The period between 674 and 713 was the critical phrase of transition to the prosperity in Tang dynasty, which was also the time that the empress Wu Zetian and the emperor Tang Gaozong administered China cooperatively. The period occupied one third time of the most prosperous feudal time in China [15]. In Tang dynasty, there were many poetesses. "The educated women in Tang dynasty were very common, which not only represented the social civilization in Tang dynasty, but also embodied the education right of women in Tang dynasty" [16].

In ancient Greece, when the tragedy *Medea* was created, the women's status was very low, which was contrary to the condition described by the famous tragedy. "The most important defect of the ancient Greek civilization was that the women's activity was limited very much. Because that the women had no educational right, so they had no right to join in various social activities" [17]. No mention that the women could not joined into the political activities, the common social activities were forbidden from the women. The Olympic sports meets and the theatres were prepared for men but not women. The ancient Greek men got married in the age of 30 or so, and the wives' ages were half of that. If the husbands wanted to divorce, they only needed declare that he wanted divorce. But if the wives wanted to divorce, they should experience the complex legal procedure. Although ancient Greece gave birth to the well-developed democracy, the women in that period had very low social status [4]. The women status in ancient Greece was so low that *Medea* said in the tragedy the they

women's fate was the most unfortunate among all the living creatures which had thought.

In ancient Rome, the women status was improved to some extent. But as a times that achieved by force of arms. The soldiers got the sudden wealth by the award because of military exploit. The politicians also got very rich by the corruption. As a result, the moral declination and the marriage failure were popular in Rome with the prosperity of prostitution. The rich woman in Rome would divorce at least one time. According to some philosophers in ancient Rome, the phenomenon that one woman circled around two lovers was very popular in that time [4]. Such women disloyal adultery was limited in the rich class, on the contrary, the common women lived in the stable and responsible marriage [4]. Although ancient Rome was immoral, it is Rome, but not Greece, improved the family standard [18].

In the earlier and middle stages of medieval times, the status of women still very low. For example, the inheritance of land by daughters was rare in the earlier stage of medieval times, because the primogeniture appeared in 11th century refrained the daughters' inheritance. The situation changed until the late medieval times. In the 13th century, the daughters could got the chance of inheritance, and the more important was that the wives could be one of the family inheritors. Until that time, the economic benefit of widows got the guaranteed [19].

In summary, the serious history records about the women status shows that the women status in ancient Greece was not as high as the literary works showed. On the contrary, the women in ancient China had the higher social status.

The tragedy *Medea* told the story about a dangerous mother, a vindictive woman. Some people believe that the tragedy showed the high social status of ancient Greek women compared with that of Chinese women, who were often represented in the lyric works. In the lyric works, Chinese women were often represented as the suffering, sorrowful and the one resigned to the fate. But in fact, there were too many "Medeas" in China.

The academic book *Suicidal Violence Crime* [20] described many kinds of suicidal violence, among which there were many such crimes committed by women. Those women were most the ones who had unfortunate marriage in the family. They would kill their children and then committed suicide. Their experience was similar with the story narrated by the tragedy *Medea*.

So it is clear that the historic records about the real situation of women in Europe and China are different from the literary description. The social status of women in China seems higher than that in Europe.

CONCLUSIONS

In the long time, it is regarded that Chinese women status was lower than that of women in Europe. But it is because of the literary description of women in China and Europe. The real historical records of women in China and Europe are totally on the contrary.

Chinese and European literature traditions are different with each other. Chinese literature tradition is lyric and the European literature tradition is narrative. The lyric literature emphasizes the expression of emotion and the narrative literature tradition focuses on the plot. The plot need the conflicts, because if there is no conflict, there would be no plot. So conflicts are critical to the narrative literature. The European literature tradition is narrative, so the conflicts are central for the literature tradition. The women in the narrative literature are involved in the conflicts inevitable. The heroine in the works would be the promoters of the conflicts. So it would bring such impression that the women in European literature works would be active and tend to rebelling against the male-dominant culture.

Things are different in Chinese ancient literature works. The lyric literature works focuses on emotion, and the plot is not necessary for it. So there would know so much conflicts as in the narrative literature works. The women in the lyric literature works would express the emotions and feelings. Among the emotions and feelings, the sentimental mood is more aesthetic. The women in the lyric works would be passive. That makes people have the impression that the women in ancient China had very low social status.

In Song dynasty, the Chinese literature archetypes are fixed. In history, the European literature tradition was also fixed. It is interesting that the literature archetypes of China became the cultural phenomenon gradually. In China, the women were required to act according to the three obedience and four virtues, which was formed in the male-dominant culture, consciously or unconsciously. But in fact, there are still many "Medeas" in China, just as the records in *Suicidal Violence Crime*. That shows the literary archetypes and the feudal requirements for women were different from the real situation of women in China.

It is because of the different literature tradition of China and Europe that the women were depicted differently. Such different literature traditions covered or distorted the fact.

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