

DOI: 10.46340/ephd.2021.7.3.13

Zhan NaORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4791-5913>*National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute", Kyiv, Ukraine*

THE CHANGING PROCESS OF WOMEN'S SOCIAL STATUS IN CHINESE HISTORY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON LITERARY WORKS

This paper calls into question the investigation of the changing process of women's social status that can be seen as the development process of Chinese civilization and the ideological change of Chinese society. In Chinese history, women's status has roughly experienced three stages of development: first, women are relatively respected by men, that is, in the early primitive society, people were mainly engaged in collecting fruits and making simple life tools. Women are outstanding in social life and become the protagonist of social activities; Second, men are supreme and women have no right, that is, the traditional society. With the emergence of private ownership in this period, men have become the main force in social life and entered the patriarchal period. In order to consolidate and strengthen men's dominant position, they have formulated a series of creeds of patriarchal ethics, and women and sons have become men's vassals; Third, men and women are relatively equal, that is, the present and future society. With the socialization of economic activities beyond the family, women's daily life and work are more connected with the market, so they go out of the family, enter the society, participate in the market and social life, gradually have the right to speak in the society, and begin to pursue the idea of equality between men and women. In China's history, the three development stages of women's status make us realize the importance of gender equality. The study of female images in literary works also directly reflects the role of women in society and the social attitude towards women at various times. In the literary works of the first stage, women are the leaders of the times. People only know their mother and their father. Their children also follow their mother's surname. Women's status is much higher than that of men and is respected. In the feudal society, the abstinence thought of literary works at this stage became the mainstream, making women gradually become male vassals and low living status. In modern times, with the spread of new ideas, equality between men and women in literary works has increasingly become mainstream thought, and women have begun to play a unique role in social life. Therefore, the investigation of women's status is of great significance.

Keywords: Women's social status, literary works, gender equality, Chinese history, Change of mind.

Introduction

The changing process of women's social status could be seen as the development process of Chinese civilization and the ideological change of Chinese society. Women's status means prestige, the respect that women enjoy in the family and society, and the right to own and control family or social resources. In the history of China, the status of women has gone through three stages: the first is that women are relatively respected by men in early primitive society; the second is that men have supreme power and women have no rights, as in feudal society; the third is the relative equality between men and women in modern society.

During the period of primitive society in China, there was a matrilineal clan system. Pairing marriage was the foundation of a way of life. People only knew their mother but did not know their father. The status of women was much higher than that of men. In feudal society, especially with the spread of neo-Confucian thought in the Song era, asceticism became mainstream, emphasizing the "Three cardinal principles and five constant principles" (three cardinal principles: the absolute power of the sovereign over the subject, the father over the son, the husband over the wife – the ethical norms of old China; five constant principles: philanthropy and justice, ritual, knowledge, and loyalty). This order suppressed women's status, forcing

women to gradually become vassals of men. In our time, with the spread of new ideas and social relations, gender equality is increasingly becoming a priority, and women have again begun to play a unique role in public life. Therefore, the study of changes in women's status is of great importance for countering gender inequality and is a scientific and theoretical prerequisite for creating the necessary conditions for building a sustainable future for all people. "UNESCO believes that all forms of gender-based discrimination are violations of human rights, as well as a major obstacle to the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹." The UN classifies gender equality as a global issue on the agenda and an essential human rights, which "plays a key role in ensuring peace and harmony in society and the full realization of human potential based on sustainable development²."

Tan Yong (2011) described the changing process of women's status from the perspective of sexual morality in China. He believed that in today's China, although women have obtained equal status with men in law, they still can't obtain equal rights and status with men in morality in real life³. Ling Ge and Li Xiaoling (2010) mentioned the changes in women's status in China's four major periods and briefly described the reasons for the low social status of Chinese women⁴. Li Ruiyan (2016) studied the development and reasons of women's family status in contemporary China. These studies have different perspectives, but the purpose is to reflect the development of society and the degree of social civilization by studying the changes in women's status⁵.

Pre Qin Period.

During the period of the matrilineal tribal system, people were mainly engaged in picking fruits and making simple working tools. The natural virtues of women are fully exploited. Thanks to her outstanding indicators, a woman in this social activity has become a protagonist. People only know their mother, but they do not know their father. In the eyes of the ancients, the blood of a child is preserved only through the mother. In the ancient classics, it is often said that the saint was born with a sense of God from his mother. For example, in "ShangShu" (Section Yao) it is said when Yao was born with dragon feelings from his mother Qingdu⁶. It seems that the reproduction of races and the maintenance of clans are mainly owned by women, which gives women a higher status. During this period, women did not oppress men but had a certain degree of equality in status. For example, this is recorded in the "Historical Records" (by the historiographer Sima Qian): When a festival is held in the countryside, men and women sit together and stop to play games when they are half drunk. They are not punished for holding the opposite sex's hand and are not forbidden to stare at others. Men and women can fall in love freely and pass on their Keepsake privately⁷.

At the end of primitive society, with the emergence of private ownership, men's innate advantages appeared. Men became the main force in the war. Captives taken by men in war became slaves, men themselves became slave owners and society entered a patriarchal period. At a later stage of the slave society, in order to consolidate and strengthen the dominant position of men, a number of patriarchal ethical convictions were formulated, and women's status declined more comprehensively. Become the vassal of men. For example, in the "Book of Songs," there are many works in which women are presented senselessly awaiting marriage⁸. These poems show that women have ceased to play the role of a social center, that a woman without a man is a failure in society (especially the sixty-ninth, seventy-second, one hundred twenty-fifth, and two hundred twenty-sixth from the Book of Songs)⁹. The low status of women was formed with the advent of Confucianism. During the Zhou Dynasty, married women had a modest status, and the ability to maintain a marriage relationship depended on the likes and dislikes of the husband. If the husband wants to support his wife, then she is his vassal; if not, then the wife will be thrown out.

¹ UNESCO (2021). *Priority – gender equality* <<https://ru.unesco.org/genderequality>> (2021, April, 01).

² United Nations (2021). *Global agenda issues. Gender equality* <<https://www.un.org/ru/sections/issues-depth/gender-equality/>> (2021, April, 01).

³ 谭永 (2011). 论我国传统性道德中女性的地位. *佳木斯教育学院学报*, 38 (4), 377-380.

⁴ 凌革, 李潇玲 (2010). 浅析中国女性历史地位的变革. *学理论*, 77-78.

⁵ 李瑞艳 (2016). 当代中国女性家庭地位的发展. *安阳工程学院学报*, 83 (5), 38-30, 83.

⁶ 邓启铜 (2015). *尚书*. 广东: 东南大学出版社.

⁷ 王长顺 (2009). 论司马迁《史记》文史张力的审美价值. *西北大学学报: 哲学社会科学版*, 3, 99-102.

⁸ 赵宏 (2006). 论《诗经》女性形象的审美价值. *沈阳农业大学学报: 社会科学版*, 8 (2), 386-389.

⁹ 李晓筠 (2010). 从《诗经》看周代女性的社会生活[J]. *泰安教育学院学报岱宗学刊*, 4, 9-11.

Qin and Han dynasties.

After the reform of Shang Yang, the ideology of legists prevailed in the Qin state, the supremacy of national interests was emphasized, and the traditions of etiquette and morality were relatively ignored. According to the Qin Dynasty family law, women can have equal status with their husbands in certain aspects. For example, a woman may kill an unfaithful husband, and a husband may be punished in the same way as a wife who beats her husband.

The analysis of the studies (Xiang, 2003; Zhao 1996) shows that women in the Han Dynasty were relatively open-minded. The Confucian ethical doctrine of closing women was still in its infancy, and regardless of their superiority and inferiority by birth, the assigned talents during the reign of Wu were also an important feature of the ruling power. During the Han Dynasty, women could divorce by agreement, widows could remarry, and lovers could run away with their beloved. In Biography for Chaste women¹, the status of women has improved, and they are considered intelligent, sophisticated, wise, chaste, and rational, well-versed in speech and ancient rhetoric. A biography is basically long and coherent rhetoric of women's arguments and opinions. In the Eastern Han Dynasty and later, the issue of the lower social status of women emerged in the literary controversy of the time. Scholar Ban Zhao from the Eastern Han Dynasty wrote "Instructions for Women,"² which lays down clearer requirements for women and their position in the family and society. Ban Zhao believes that women should prioritize helping their husbands and also formulates a set of codes of conduct that requires women to serve their husbands "carefully" and "submissively."

It can be seen that in the first period of the heyday of feudal society – the Han dynasty, women had a certain social status, and love between men and women was relatively free, but in the end, it was a feudal society, and male power was absolute mainstream, and Confucianism was also repeatedly suppressed the status of women.

Tang and Song dynasties.

The Tang and Song dynasties were the most prosperous and open dynasties in the feudal dynasty of China and the highest peak of Chinese feudal society. Women in the Tang and Song dynasties had certain legal inheritance rights in family life. Women can be the head of the family, have a relatively independent economic status, and play a role in many areas of public life. From the female emperors who ascended the throne and ordered all over the world, to the female dignitaries who set up the shogunate and decided the prison, from the female talented men who wrote poems to the female artists who were good at orchestrating, singing, and dancing, and color arts, all showed the improvement of the dignity of women's status. Women can not only ride horses in public places but also have more autonomy in marriage and divorce.

During this period, a large number of literary works appeared with the participation of women as the main character. For example, "The Tale of Ying-Ying" (Yuan Zhen (779-831, Chinese Jedushi, writer and poet of the Tang era))³, "The Tale of the Beauty Li" (a work of the Tang Dynasty, by Bai Xingjian)⁴, "Biography of Ren "(Short story by Shen Jiji)⁵ and so on. In them, the female image is endowed with excellent qualities and rich female beauty. In the excellent chapters of the Tang Dynasty of this period, most female characters possess the following two characteristics: good looks and talent. In addition, they can also be an important driving force behind male success. For example, Ren seeks benefits for her husband Zheng Liu in Biography of Ren, and the heroine in The Tale of the Beauty Li helps her husband Zheng Sheng win the imperial exams. Since the beginning of the Mid-Tang Dynasty, female images in large numbers have transformed from negative to positive. It is also a literary reflection of the public acceptance of female images.

In previous dynasties, the status of women in the Song dynasty was the highest. We can list some indicators that need to be measured and assessed, for example, women's property rights, the right to divorce, the right to remarry, and so on. During the Song dynasty, the family was divided according to the customs and laws of that time, part of the property was given to the daughter. Pang Yuanying's Tan Sou⁶ notes: Li originally married Cao xiucui ("xiucui" means degree in feudal China), but since the couple's feelings were not in harmony, they divorced and Li remarried with a shilang named Cao ("shilang" means an official

¹刘向 (2003). *列女传*. 江苏: 江苏古籍出版社.

²沈时蓉, 刘莹. (2001). 中国传统女训的当代审视--以班昭《女诫》为例. *四川师范学院学报: 哲学社会科学版*, 5.

³胡激 (2005). 《莺莺传》中莺莺形象的时代性. *河海大学学报: 哲学社会科学版*, 7 (3), 68-70.

⁴唐桃 (2012). 阴差阳错造就的喜剧—白行简《李娃传》的女权主义批评. *曲靖师范学院学报*, 31 (1), 53-56.

⁵余芳, & 黄秋生 (2006). 《任氏传》的女性主义解读. *南昌大学学报: 人文社会科学版*, 37 (2), 124-127.

⁶庞元英 (1991). *谈薏*. 北京: 中华书局.

from personal protection of the emperor). Obviously, women at that time were not discriminated against due to divorce. Song Dynasty laws also protected the right of women to file for divorce.

The Ming and Qing dynasties.

The social customs of the Ming and Qing dynasties were the dirtiest and most obscene historical periods in Chinese feudal society. On the one hand, the ruling class vigorously advocated Cheng Zhu's theory, even distorted it, which eventually led to disastrous consequences. Women's foot binding began in the Southern Tang Dynasty when Li Yu was in power. After the middle of the Northern Song Dynasty, the worship of the "three-inch Golden Lotus" came into being. In the late Qing Dynasty, the idea of deformed women's beauty with women's small feet spread throughout the whole society. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the idea of chastity was highly advocated. Men could divorce their wives at will, but women could only endure it. At the same time, it is considered a great shame for women to be "divorced" and "out", and remarriage is "loss of chastity". Especially after entering the Qing Dynasty, the meaning of chastity became very narrow, and it seemed to become a religion. Not only the husband died and kept chastity, but also the woman had to be chaste if she didn't marry him. Even if a woman was molested by a man, she wanted to die. In a word, a woman's life is closely linked to chastity. If there is a slight change, she must die to fulfill her chastity. As a result, the worship of chaste women and martyrs is pushed to the extreme.

During this period, "Dream in the Red Chamber", created by Cao Xueqin¹, takes the initiative to break the traditional script, taking patriarchal culture as an object of criticism and returns the female image, female consciousness, and even the entire life of women who were "alienated" under the yoke of patriarchy, to the female standard, in order to unleash an innovative consciousness of a relatively independent category of women. Although the third girl, Tanchun, is the child of a concubine, she never despises herself. She has managerial skills and a keen understanding of social issues that are inferior to men. During the period that she took over from Wang Xifeng in running Jia's mansion, she delved deeply into its shortcomings and formed a series of policy measures to promote the advantages and eliminate the shortcomings. The unique charm of the woman is also shown. Qingwen is a very unique maid who serves at Jia's mansion. Although she was born a slave, she was never subservient; she is assertive, arrogant, and free from slavery; she strives for the truth, firmly believes in human equality, and preserves the dignity of the individual.

Modern period.

As economic activity expands beyond the family and becomes socialized, the hallmark of changing women's lifestyles is that it no longer resembles traditional rural life, where work and activities are mainly limited to the family, but is driven by changes in daily life and labor. As a result, a woman's life extends beyond the family, expanding to the entire society, to participation in economics and politics. Thus, a woman enters the social field, where men dominated in the past, and also breaks with the traditional role of the past, when women were isolated only in the family. Secondly, the sphere of women's activities has expanded to a social scale, and they are no longer at home, they go beyond it and the concept of gender equality appears. Free interaction between men and women has also increased. The result is a model of the relationship between men and women and the concept of work roles, according to which men and women share participation in production, cooperate and complement each other. Their interdependence increases, arising from the joint maintenance of family life, and relationships in couples are built on the basis of mutual love and emotional comfort of both sexes, etc.

Over the past decades, the status of women in the development of society has become significantly higher. Nevertheless, in modern China, the birth of a son is still considered more preferable to the birth of a daughter, and families usually want a boy. Especially in rural areas, it is believed that if a wife has given birth to a daughter, she should give birth until she gives birth to a boy. Many couples even have an abortion knowing that the wife is pregnant with a girl, or decide to ditch the girl at birth. Because many people think that boys are working hands, working members of their family. There is a saying among the people: "A married daughter is like splashed water." Unfortunately, this one still sounds like a verdict.

However, Mo Yan, a contemporary writer, has many female images in his works to resist the harsh feudal ethics with his exaggerated behavior. For example, the female images described in his work "Big Breasts Wide Hips fat"² are incompatible with three obediences and four virtues, feudal ethics, and so on. The eight children of Lu, the Shangguan in this article, were born to her uncle, a stranger, a quack, a bachelor,

¹ 曹雪芹, 高鹗 (1996). *红楼梦*. 北京: 人民文学出版社.

² 莫言 (2010). *丰乳肥臀*. 北京: 北京十月文艺出版社.

a monk, four defeated soldiers, and a Swedish foreign minister. All her life, plus her husband, Shangguan Lu had a total of 11 men, all the children are in the affair. Many people think that Mo Yan's work is a smear of the image of Chinese women, but Mo Yan thinks that the content of its description is to expose the feudal ethics, patriarchal society under the persecution of Chinese women's personalized, intense reaction, they hate the feudal ethics, the pursuit of self-resistance.

Dai Fenglian is a female figure depicted in Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*¹. She is a typical old boudoir woman. At the age of sixteen, by order of her parents and through the mediation of a matchmaker, she must marry the only beloved son of a rich man suffering from leprosy. Not wanting to succumb to fate, Dai Fenglian was going to either kill her future husband or commit suicide. But on the way to the wedding, she fell in love with the bearer of the palanquin. Finally, Dai Fenglian approached the palanquin bearer in the sorghum field and ended her resistance to the feudal tradition. She said, "What is chastity? What is Integrity? What is good? What is evil? You never told me, I can only do this in accordance with my own ideas ... My body belongs to me, I am the mistress of myself, I am not afraid of sin, I am not afraid of punishment, I am not afraid to enter your eighteen steps of hell, I did everything I had to, and I am not afraid of anything.

Conclusion.

Our work has led us to conclude that all the events in the works of Mo Yan take place in our era, not far from the time in which we live. Although China has not yet fully achieved gender equality, more and more voices are being heard in support of it. Due to the change in the social structure, the division of labor, nowadays more than physical effort is required for the survival of people. The benefits of the physiological organization of men are getting weaker and weaker. In the family and even in society as a whole, strength now depends not only on gender. More and more girls are beginning to take responsibility for the main source of family income, which means that they have more opportunities to have a voice. The present study has only examined the changes in the process of women's social status in Chinese history and its influence on literary works. Future studies on the current topic have therefore required the investigation of the advancement of science and technology when the physiology of men no longer offers advantages in production, social life, productivity, and look forward to achieving social equality between men and women.

References:

1. Cao, X., Gao, E. (1996). *Dream in the Red Chamber*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House [in Chinese].
2. Deng, Q. (2015). *Shangshu*. Guangdong: Southeast University Press. [in Chinese].
3. United Nations (2021). *Global agenda issues. Gender equality* <<https://www.un.org/ru/sections/issues-depth/gender-equality/>> (2021, April, 01). [in English].
4. Ji, H. (2005). "Ying ying zhuan" zhong ying ying xing xiang de shi dai xing [The contemporary character of Yingying's image in "The Tale of Ying-Ying"]. *Journal of Hohai University: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition*, 7 (3), 68-70. [in Chinese].
5. Ge, L., Xiaoling, L. (2010). Qian xi zhong guo nv xing li shi di wei de bian ge [On the change of Chinese women's historical status]. *Academic theory*, 77-78. [in Chinese].
6. Ruiyan, L. (2016). Dang dai zhong guo nv xing jia ting di wei de bian hua [The development of women's family status in contemporary China]. *Journal of Anyang Institute of technology*, 83 (5), 38-30, 83. [in Chinese].
7. Xiaoyun, L. (2010). Cong shi jin kan zhou dai nv xing de she hui sheng huo. [The social life of women in Zhou Dynasty from the "Book of Songs"]. *Journal of Tai'an College of Education Daizong Journal*, 4, 9-11. [in Chinese].
8. Xiang, L. (2003). *Lie nv zhuan* [Biography for Chaste women]. Jiangsu: Jiangsu Ancient Books Publishing House. [in Chinese].
9. Yan, M. (2010). *Fen ru fei dong* [Big Breasts Wide Hips]. Beijing: Beijing October literature and Art Publishing House. [in Chinese].
10. Yan, M. (2007). *Hong gao liang* [Red Sorghum]. Beijing: Beijing October literature and Art Publishing House. [in Chinese].
11. Yuanying, P. (1991). *Tan Sou* [Tan Sou]. Beijing: Zhong hua shu ju. [in Chinese].
12. UNESCO (2021). *Priority – gender equality* <<https://ru.unesco.org/genderequality>> (2021, April, 01). [in English].
13. Shirong, S., Ying, L. (2001). Zhong guo chuan tong nv xun de dang dai shen shi–yi ban zhao “nv jie” wei li [A Contemporary Review of Traditional Chinese Women's Training – Taking Ban Zhao's" Instructions for Women" as an example]. *Journal of Sichuan Normal University: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition*, 5. [in Chinese].
14. Yong, T. (2011). Lun wo guo chuan tong xing dao de zhong nv xing de di wei [On the status of women in traditional sexual morality in China]. *Journal of Jiamusi Institute of education*, 38 (4), 377-380. [in Chinese].

¹ 莫言 (2007). *红高粱*. 北京: 北京十月文艺出版社.

15. Tao, T. (2012). Yin cha yang cuo cao jiu de xi ju – bai xing jian li wa zhuan de nv quan zhu yi pi ping [Comedy created by mistakes: Feminist criticism of Bai Xingjian's "The Tale of the Beauty Li"]. *Journal of Qujing Normal University*, 31 (1), 53-56. [in Chinese].
16. Changshun, W. (2009). Lun si ma qian "shi ji" wen shi zhang li de shen mei jia zhi [On the aesthetic value of cultural and historical tension in Sima Qian's "Shi Ji"]. *Journal of Northwest University: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition*, 3, 99-102. [in Chinese].
17. Fang, Y., Qiusheng, H. (2006). Ren shi zhuan de nv xing zhu yi jie du. [A Feminist Interpretation of "The Biography of Ren"]. *Journal of Nanchang University: Humanities and Social Sciences Edition*, 37 (2), 124-127. [in Chinese].
18. Hong, Z. (2006). Lun "shi jin" nv xing xin xiang de shen mei jia zhi [On the aesthetic value of female images in The Book of Songs]. *Journal of Shenyang Agricultural University: Social Science Edition*, 8 (2), 386-389. [in Chinese].