

On the Female Images in Xiao Erhei's Marriage and Their Significance of the Times

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Abstract. This paper takes Zhao Shuli's *Xiao Erhei's Marriage* as the research object, focusing on analysing two types of female images in the work: San Xian'gu is a victim of unhappy arranged marriage, constrained by feudal ethics. She vents her desires by pretending to be a spirit and playing tricks, clinging to outdated views on marriage and love, making hers a tragedy under the feudal system. As a progressive woman in liberated areas, Xiao Qin upholds free marriage, firmly resists arranged marriage and demonstrates women's subjective consciousness awakening. Through comparative analysis, the paper reveals the different life trajectories of women during the transition from the old era to the new, as well as the profound impact of social transformation on women's emancipation. Furthermore, it reflects on literary images' typicality and enlightenment value in the context of cultural transformation. The paper also explores the historical causes behind the formation of these two images, pointing out how the confrontation between the remnants of feudal ideology and the emerging ideas of emancipation during the Land Reform period influenced the characters' fates. It also explains the social functions of such literary writing in criticizing feudal malpractices and advocating free marriage. Finally, the paper reflects on the interactive relationship between institutional guarantees, subjective consciousness, and the transformation of social concepts during women's emancipation, endowing the research object with enduring contemporary value.

Keywords: Xiao Erhei's Marriage, Sanxian' gu, Xiao Qin, Image portrayal

1. Introduction

Zhao Shuli's *Xiao Erhei's Marriage* pioneered the modern novel form of Chinese storytelling (pingshu) style. As a landmark work in the history of contemporary Chinese literature, it has attracted considerable academic attention since its publication due to its distinct characteristics of the times and the vivid portrayal of typical characters. Existing studies mostly approach the work from macro perspectives, such as its anti-feudal theme, folk language art, or narratives of social transformation, and there have also been many discussions on the female images in the novel. However, most studies are limited to isolated analysis of individual images, and in-depth exploration of the complex historical implications and internal connections contained in the two female images in the work is still insufficient. In particular, there is still room for further exploration of how they jointly embody the profound contradictions and complex paths of the women's liberation movement

during the period of social change. Based on this, the paper aims to systematically analyze the two highly representative female images—Sanxian'gu and Xiao Qin—in Xiao Erhei's *Marriage*, with a focus on the duality of Sanxian'gu as both a victim of feudal ethics and a distorted resistor, as well as the typical significance of Xiao Qin as the awakening of subjective consciousness nurtured by the new system. Methodologically, this paper mainly adopts the close reading of the text and historical context analysis.

This study comparatively examines two contrasting images to reveal the complex journey of Chinese women from feudalism to modern emancipation, moving beyond simple binary oppositions. It enhances the understanding of Zhao Shuli's creative ideas and the literary value of Xiao Erhei's *Marriage*. By discussing the interplay between institutional guarantees, subjective awakening, and social transformation, it provides a historical and literary reference for addressing contemporary gender issues, offering insights for promoting gender equality.

2. Female images in Xiao Erhei's *Marriage*

2.1. The backwards traditionalist - Sanxian'gu

Sanxian'gu, depicted by Zhao Shuli, is a dissolute woman who grew up in the old society and was influenced by feudal traditional ethics. Yet, unwilling to be confined by conventional ideas, she embodies a contradictory character. Traditional divine and wizardly practices constrain her stubbornly backward thinking. She firmly believes that a stable marriage must rely on the orders of parents and the words of matchmakers, and always clings to the feudal concept that heaven determines fate. However, she was a victim of arranged marriage, marrying Yu Fu at fifteen. Once admired, she sought attention due to her husband's dullness. Exploiting feudal superstitions, she posed as a deity to mask affairs and gain independence. When her behavior was exposed, she became despondent, suggesting her self-worth depended on fulfilling her desires.

Exploiting religious pretexts, she indulged in licentious behavior, amplified by her husband's acquiescence. This emboldened her vanity, leading to increased ostentation in dress, grooming, and makeup, masking repressed desires under the guise of religious practices.

Sanxian'gu, despite her age, remained preoccupied with her appearance and sought the attention of younger men, even competing with her daughter, Xiao Qin. Her attempts to attract attention through elaborate attire were perceived as clownish, and her heavy makeup only accentuated her age [1]. Initially, she attributed her continued appeal to her own charm, failing to recognize that the attention she received was due to her daughter's beauty. This jealousy fueled her selfish desires [2].

2.2. A progressive who keeps pace with the times - Xiao Qin

The beautiful Xiaoqin and Xiaerhei fell in love and were deeply in love. Xiaoqin was deeply dissatisfied with the widowed military officer her mother, Sanxiangu, had arranged for her to marry. Even though she didn't reject the marriage, her mother used pranks and incantations (a superstitious practice) to evade it. Xiaoqin also couldn't believe that free love would receive so much support. She even arranged to go to the county registrar's office with Xiaerhei to register their marriage. Such behavior—fearless of authority, unyielding to evil forces, and brave enough to break the shackles of feudal marriage—epitomizes the new era of women. Xiao Qin embodies the kindness, simplicity, and purity of character that define the finest traditional Chinese women, while possessing the courage, resolve, and independence that were previously uncommon among women of the past. Her character is vivid and deeply moving. Whether it is the portrayal of a beautiful, lively young girl

filled with love, the implied image of a new-style person who bravely pursues free love with wit and courage, or her perseverance in staying true to herself and resisting evil forces after facing setbacks in love, Xiao Qin reveals to readers the beauty of human nature that Chinese women have embodied for thousands of years.

Xiao Qin gradually awakened self-awareness and showed the courage to resist, meanwhile, as a representative of the new women with progressive ideas in the liberated areas. She did not flinch. She did not retreat just because old forces were all around her. Supported by the democratic government and by pursuing strongly her own freedom and happiness to support her strength to oppose arranged and mercenary marriages also to give her immense courage and spiritual support to raise against evil forces. Sanxian'gu was just like Er Zhuge; she arranged a marriage for Xiao Qin without her daughter's consent. She regarded Xiao Erhei, her prospective son-in-law, as an exceptionally attractive man and saw her daughter Xiao Qin as her biggest rival. She attempted to betroth Xiao Qin to a retired military officer whose wife had just passed away, hoping to win Xiao Erhei's favor and pursue glory and wealth for herself.

As a new generation of rural youth, Xiao Qin was educated on free love and marriage. Unlike their parents, who muddled through life without clear goals, she demanded control of her destiny and pursued marital freedom. Although her rebellious words—I don't care! Whoever accepted their things should go with them!—seemed somewhat weak, her resolve to resist was unshakable. She resolutely fought against the reactionary forces that undermined their marital freedom, even at the risk of disobeying her mother and being labeled "unfilial." She completely broke away from the older generation's feudal traditions and superstitious beliefs. This resistance was thorough and epoch-making.

3. The causes of the formation of female images in Xiao Erhei's Marriage

Farmers' poverty was alleviated to a certain extent in the early stage of the Land Reform. However, the severe feudal ideology still lingered in their minds, which hindered the progress of the peasant masses [3]. Therefore, when creating female characters, Zhao Shuli not only needed to portray a figure like Sanxian'gu — who was feudal and conservative in thinking yet highly susceptible to being shaken and educated—to respond to the times, but also had to include a character like Xiao Qin—whose thinking was free and open yet constrained by the shackles of the old era—to drive changes in the times.

Essentially, Sanxian' gu is a victim of feudal ethics. A confrontation between new ideas and feudal conservative thinking occurs when she learns of her daughter's belief in free love and marriage. She panics and makes the absurd move of forcing her daughter to become a second wife. The traditional family ethical system endowed parents in feudal society with absolute authority. As a representative of women in feudal society, Sanxian' gu is deeply influenced by feudal traditional ideas. These painful experiences clearly show that she cannot control her own destiny, and the invisible shackles of fate bind her soul that longs for freedom. On the one hand, she felt jealous of her daughter, who bravely pursued free love. On the other hand, after being immersed in feudal ethics for a long time, she believed that arranged marriage was an inescapable destiny that women could not resist [4]. Her feudal, superstitious activities and playing tricks were a helpless compromise for her and a way to vent her frustration with a life of suffering. It reflects that the people who were deeply controlled by feudal ideas were in urgent need of redemption through new ideas.

All of Sanxian' gu' s behaviors in the district office provoked ridicule from the crowd, and it was from this point that the changes in her ideological views and behavioral perceptions began. When

the district chief explained the law on free marriage to her, she realized that in the new society, generational ideological differences seemed to be breaking free. In this social atmosphere, she no longer relied on the power of the gods to cope. Shame about her clothing prompted her to reflect on her appearance, ultimately leading to a transformation. She clearly understood that the situation for women had changed, and that social change no longer required the old ways of life [5]. When creating Xiao Qin's character, the author strongly opposed feudal ethics and condemned the vulgar practice of arranged marriages. Yet, he portrayed Sanxian'gu's return to an arranged marriage family as a return to a proper order. When the author allowed Sanxian'gu to revert to the so-called rural order where men and women are distinguished, elders and juniors are orderly—letting her take on the demeanor of an elder and dismantle the incense table used for her superstitious antics—and endorsed this return, Sanxian'gu, in essence, neither belonged to the old order nor fit into the new one [6].

Xiao Qin, by contrast, is an epoch-making pioneer. The drastic transformation of the social structure provided fertile ground for the creation of this character. In the 1940s, the liberated areas stood at a historical juncture where the old order gave way to the new: the traditional patriarchal clan system was gradually collapsing. In contrast, new concepts of marriage and women's emancipation policies were being progressively implemented. The author keenly captured this hallmark of the era and portrayed Xiao Qin as a new type of rural woman who dared to challenge feudal marriage arrangements and pursue marriage autonomy [7]. She refused the marriage arranged by her parents and took the initiative to choose a life with Xiao Erhei—this act embodies the individual rights bestowed by the legal safeguards of the new regime. This image contrasts sharply with the old-style women represented by Sanxian'gu, reflecting how the transformation of the social system awakened women's sense of subjectivity.

While drawing on the narrative pattern of "the lovers finally got married" from folk tales, Zhao Shuli endowed it with new connotations of the era. Xiao Qin's image not only retains the unadorned qualities of a rural girl (such as her inherent simplicity and kindness) but also is infused with the essence of ideological enlightenment (such as her rational pursuit of free marriage). This creative approach not only lends authenticity to the character portrayal but also transcends the superficial narrative of individual fate, turning the character into a symbol of the era's progress. By placing Xiao Qin within a narrative framework of conflict between the old and the new, Zhao Shuli successfully created an image of a female pioneer deeply rooted in rural life yet transcending tradition.

4. The epochal significance of the portrayal of female images in Xiao Erhei's Marriage

The contrast between Sanxian'gu—an elderly female peasant deeply influenced by feudal ideology—and Xiao Qin—a new-type female peasant—embodies two possible paths for women's fates during the transition from the old to the new era. As a female figure alienated by feudal ethics, the superstitious actions of Sanxian'gu support arranged marriages and accurately represent the tragic predicament of rural women under the traditional patriarchal clan system [8]. The author does not simply give her character too many shades of villainy when drawing this particular character, but through describing her fate as pitiable and lamentable, he disclosed the comprehensive suppression of women both physically and spiritually by feudal culture. All that Sanxian'gu's supposed improper behavior was in fact described as little fights and resistance within the limitation of feudalism.

By contrast, Xiao Qin's image embodies a new social ideal. She dares to refuse arranged marriages and pursue free love, which reflects the protection of individual rights under the new policies. The portrayal of Xiao Qin marks the emancipation of rural women from the feudal

marriage system and demonstrates the possibility of women being subjects of rights. On the other hand, her free union with Xiao Erhei symbolizes the establishment of new social relations and serves as a literary testimony to social changes in the liberated areas [9]. Through the striking contrast between these two characters, Zhao Shuli artistically presents the profound impact of social system reform on women's lives, turning the literary work into an effective vehicle for promoting new marriage concepts and criticizing feudal customs.

In the contemporary era, the portrayal of female characters in Xiao Erhei's Marriage still holds significant enlightenment value. The image of Sanxian'gu reminds us to pay attention to the potential constraints that the inertia of traditional culture imposes on women's development. Her tragic fate is particularly worthy of deep reflection. Although the feudal marriage system no longer exists, social concepts that objectify women and restrict their autonomous choices persist in various forms. Simone de Beauvoir put forward the view that one is not born but becomes a woman in *The Second Sex*. Under the traditional male-dominated social construction, women have long been in a subordinate position [10]. In today's society, women have not fully attained the status of subjective agents, as they continue to experience invisible emotional repression and moral constraints. Conversely, the portrayal of Xiao Qin offers spiritual support for the self-identity of contemporary women. Especially against the social backdrop where numerous controversies still exist in the field of marriage and family (such as domestic violence, gender discrimination, and the bad custom of betrothal gifts), her courage to pursue marital autonomy, her spirit of resisting traditional authority, and her rational and clear sense of subjectivity play an inspiring role for contemporary women in striving for their own rights and interests.

5. Conclusion

The narrative framework of numerous female images represented by these two figures provides a model for understanding the course of Chinese women's emancipation. Sanxian'gu stands for a tragic existence struggling within the old system, while Xiao Qin represents an ideal image answering the call of the new system. They demonstrate the arduous journey of women from feudal bondage to modern emancipation. This kind of literary depiction contains profound insights for contemporary gender equality practices: the true emancipation of women requires institutional guarantees and the awakening of women's own sense of subjectivity and a thorough transformation of social and cultural concepts.

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