

On the Characterization of Li Xiangjun in The Peach Blossom Fan

Jiatong Li^{1,a,†}, Ziyang Liu^{2,b,†}, and Runfei Zhou^{3,c,*}

¹School of Economics and Management, Northwest University, Shaanxi, 710000, China

²College of Arts, Soochow University, Hunan, 410000, China

³College of Arts, Xiamen University Malaysia, Henan, 451100, China

a. ljt1234560922@163.com, b. 18570376167@163.com, c. ege1709541@xmu.edu.my

*corresponding author

[†]These authors contributed equally.

Abstract: The Peach Blossom Fans is a significant literary work of the Ming and Qing dynasties in China, and there are numerous studies of its plot, characters and main themes, as well as a large number of studies surrounding the heroine Li Xiangjun. This study discusses the characteristics of the character Li Xiangjun and the way she is portrayed through the analysis of the text of The Peach Blossom Fans. The study concluded the following main features characterize Li Xiangjun: Firstly, it is distinguished from the specificity of the female figure in ancient literature, especially in the literature of the Ming and Qing dynasties; secondly, it is constrained by the limitations of traditional Chinese culture, especially the traditional Confucian culture; and finally, it is based on the complexity of the first two characteristics. The characterization of Li Xiangjun is both progressive and fails to transcend the limitations of the time.

Keywords: Li Xiangjun, characteristics, female figure

1. Introduction

The legendary play The Peach Blossom Fan, written by the Qing Dynasty literary scholar Kong Shangren, focuses on the love tragedy between Hou Fangyu and Li Xiangjun. This play profoundly reflects the social situation in Nanjing at the end of the Ming Dynasty and expresses the pain of the fall of the Ming Dynasty's legacy. The play is a profound reflection of the social situation in Nanjing at the end of the Ming Dynasty and expresses the pain of the fall of the Ming Dynasty. The characterization of Li Xiangjun is of profound research value, and there are many studies on the characterization of Li Xiangjun in academic circles; for example, Li Xiaojuan's "Interpretation of Li Xiangjun's image in The Peach Blossom Fan" suggests that Li Xiangjun has an image of a lady who does not match her identity as a prostitute. However, most of the studies have a single perspective and tend to evaluate the correctness of her political stance, such as Zhou Yiqun's "On the Artistic Image in The Peach Blossom Fans", which also has certain limitations. This paper examines Li Xiangjun through typical texts, such as Dowry Rejected and The Banquet, with the goal of providing a comprehensive analysis of her image. This paper analyzes Li Xiangjun's love concept, political wisdom and artistic image from the perspectives of her love tragedy, her political stance against

Eunuch Wei's party and the limitations of traditional culture, hoping to achieve a profound analysis of her character image from multiple perspectives.

2. Li Xiangjun's Conception of Love

According to the author Kong Shangren's self-evaluation in the original text, *The Peach Blossom Fans*, recounting the love story of Li Xiangjun and Hou Fangyu, actually reflects the social situation, the political turmoil of the time and the prosperity and decline of a dynasty. The love story of Li Xiangjun and Hou Fangyu, full of hardship and a tragic ending, is an important thread in the story. The words and actions in this relationship spotlight Li Xiangjun's character and perceptions.

2.1. The Beginning of Love: The Dual Outcome of Matchmaking and Independent Choice

The love affair between Li and Hou began when Li Xiangjun, a courtesan, was all grown up and able to attract clients, and Hou Fangyu was looking for a suitable match. This is a relationship that, at first glance, appears to have been the result of a deliberate match made by Hou's friend Yang Longyou and Li's adoptive mother, Li Zhenli. However, Li Xiangjun was indeed in love with Hou Fangyu because she admired his tempera and talent, sharing similar interests with him. Moreover, in the context of the character of Li Xiangjun, there seems to be a deeper reason for their spiritual compatibility. In history, Li Xiangjun's family suffered from the persecution of her father, who was a member of the Donglin Party, and their greatest enemy was the Eunuch Wei Party. This makes it all the more reasonable that Li Xiangjun is naturally linked to Hou Fangyu in terms of her political position, that they fall in love with each other after only a few meetings, and that Li is particularly attached to Hou's status as a literary member of the Fu She, which is a political and literary group with scholars as its core in the late Ming Dynasty. By this point, their union has deviated from the original intention, and Li Xiangjun has moved from passive acceptance to seeking love in this relationship actively.

The young Li Xiangjun shows the shyness that is often found in young girls after meeting Hou Fangyu. For example, when the two first met, Liu Jingting suggested they drink together, and Li left sheepishly straight away, covering her face with the sleeve. However, she is not afraid to be honest in the face of love. In response to Hou Fangyu, she throws the cherry down the stairs, and when she decides that Hou is her beloved, she often expresses her delight and admiration to him in a straightforward. All these details make Li Xiangjun seem vibrant and lovable.

2.2. The Difficulties of Love: Holding on to the Ideal Love

The love between Li and Hou arose in the midst of chaos and was also clearly influenced by the times, often suffering from setbacks. Soon after their marriage, Hou Fangyu went away to escape from a political catastrophe, and Li Xiangjun, who was left behind, refused to marry anyone else, saying she would always wait for Hou's return. Yang Longyou initially thought she would easily fall in love with others, but she was so determined that when they failed to persuade her, they turned to coercion, but Li Xiangjun said she was not afraid of intimidation. Afterwards, Tian Yang attempted to steal Li's hand in marriage because he coveted Xiangjun's beauty, and Li swore that she would not go with him. When Yang Longyou forcibly carried her downstairs, she finally realized that her so-called friends had long ceased to exist [1]. In desperation, she not only defended herself with the fan given by Hou Fangyu but even fell to the ground and hit her head, attempting suicide. Li Xiangjun never let go of her love for Hou Fangyu, whether she lived alone to recuperate from her injuries or was sent to the palace with motives.

Li Xiangjun's insistence on her ideal love, her fierce and desperate struggle and her uncomplaining waiting, on the one hand, are reflections of moral precepts like virginity, but on the other hand, they

also reflect her heart and true feelings, directly proving her passionate and sincere feelings for Hou Fangyu and her desire and pursuit of true love.

2.3. Beyond Love: Giving Way to Political Considerations

Li Xiangjun places great value on the freedom of love, but when the pursuit of love conflicts with the pursuit of politics, she clearly shows an awareness of the importance of political stands over love. When faced with Yang Longyou and others close to the Wei Party, Li Xiangjun was always reluctant to get too close to them, even taking a firmer stand than Hou Fangyu. Hou was vilified by the Wei Party but was unwilling to leave Li Xiangjun. Li Xiangjun advised him not to care only about their love but to leave immediately. At this time, Li Xiangjun was honestly thinking politically for Hou Fangyu. Her clear political mind made her realize that the most important thing was to preserve the backbone of the Fu She and to prepare for the future [2].

Whether it was the intentional gesture of affection towards the Wei party after they first met or the political crisis they encountered after their marriage, Li Xiangjun's choices were more sensible than Hou Fangyu's. In this story, Hou Fangyu is instead portrayed as easily swayed by the advances of his enemies or love. Though talented and idealistic, and aspiring to love, he was ultimately incapable of either saving his country or preserving his love with Li Xiangjun [3]. It is clear that Li Xiangjun was never concerned only about personal love. Although she is at the very bottom of the social ladder, she has an astonishing sense of perspective and foresight regarding important issues. She pursued love almost throughout the story, but in the end, she not only gave up her love for her political ideals but also transcended it to gain a higher level of understanding of life.

2.4. Summary: Li Xiangjun in Love

Reviewing the love story of Li Xiangjun, the relationship between her and Hou Fangyu was birthed by matchmaking, determined by her own choice, not giving up even though there were so many difficulties against it, and finally ended in the political tragedy of a broken country and the spiritual quest for relief.

Although Li Xiangjun's words, actions and thoughts are partly limited by her time and social class, and she is also marked by certain traditional values, the author has also given the various character features that distinguish her from the common image of women and courtesans. In most ancient literature, courtesans are often synonymous with being unfeeling and insensitive, while women are often presented as gentle and submissive, timid and useless. Li Xiangjun's courage to pursue and protect love and willingness to give up her love when it conflicts with the pursuit of politics is certainly a subversion of these two preconceived notions. Li Xiangjun is presented to readers and audiences as an independent individual with a sense of self-awareness, no longer a mere object to please others or a follower of men.

3. Li Xiangjun's Views of the Philosophy of Politics

With the help of a peach blossom fan, Kong Shangren connects the love vein between Hou and Li and, even more so, the political fog of the Southern Ming, which deeply reflects Li Xiangjun's distinguished and profound political position. Although there are many disputes in academic circles about whether Li Xiangjun's political stand belongs to the apparent plot line or the foreshadowing, this article just considers it as the foreshadowing temporarily.

According to historical evidence, the characterization of Li Xiangjun in history is not entirely consistent with that in *The Peach Blossom Fan*, especially in the chapters "Refusal", "The Banquet", and "Entering the Way", which focus on Li Xiangjun's political ideas. However, it is because of the author's artistic processing that shows the vivid and full characterization of Li Xiangjun.

3.1. Loyal Political Virtues

As mentioned preceding part of the text, in the beginning, the union between Li Xiangjun and Hou Fangyu was "a marriage between a rich son and a barman, with no emotional basis at all" [4]. As a consequence, Li Xiangjun's acceptance of Hou Fangyu was more based on her loyalty to her political position: Hou Fangyu, as a core member of Fu She, opposed Eunuch Wei's party and was consistent with her own political positions. From a certain perspective, it is a typical "marriage before love" type of relationship.

In the play "Dowry Rejected", Li Xiangjun's loyalty to her political position is very obvious, which is also the first manifestation and clarification of her political position. She categorically refused the trousseau which Ruan Dacheng used to "comb together"; in contrast, Hou Fangyu, even in a moment of confusion, regards Ruan Dacheng as "pitiable and might win over our sympathy"; only in Li Xiangjun's righteous criticism did he come down to earth. Feeling ashamed, he called her "incomparable to me". This plot is designed skillfully to reflect Li Xiangjun's strong opposition to the Wei Party led by Ruan Dacheng and let Hou Fangyu awaken and maintain his political image as a core member of Fu She.

Besides, without the rich attire, Li Xiangjun looked "all the more beautiful and lovely", which side reflects the beauty of Li Xiangjun. Such a two-for-one plot arrangement is also reflected in the next few plays, for instance, the play "Fragrant in Her Bower", in which Li Xiangjun vowed not to go down from the building. This plot reflects both Li Xiangjun's loyalty to love and profoundly illustrates her loyalty to the political position, "Both Yuan and Tian belong to Eunuch Wei's party. How can I accept Tian's gold?" This farce ends with Li Zhenli marrying Tian Yang instead of Li Xiangjun, which is even more absurd.

Li Xiangjun's loyalty to her political position is best reflected in the play "the Banquet". In this play, Li Xiangjun was designed to be sent into the palace and face Tian and Ruan at the same time. However, she disregarded her own safety and used the occasion of the new dynasty's dignitaries listening to the music to indulge in pleasure to scold the dignitaries. She has a fierce character and is prepared to face the insults that the furious traitors will inflict on her, showing the chivalry that even Hou Fangyu and other literary figures of Fu She would feel ashamed of themselves after seeing her. She is no longer the opinionless woman she used to be in poetry. She has her own independent personality and is ready to do her part to help the country eradicate the traitors - even though she has already experienced thousands of persecutions.

Li Xiangjun has a very clear political choice: opposite the Eunuch Wei Party, and she is always loyal to her political choice. Here, regardless of whether her political choice is right or wrong, it is clear that she is always loyal to her chosen political position. At the same time, this is also a kind of moral adherence to a certain extent. In this respect, it is the same as her insistence on love. Besides, the author, Kong Shangren, is the 64th-generation grandson of Confucius, and he has received traditional Confucianism from a young age, which is different from Cheng-zhu School, so it can be seen in Li Xiangjun's character that the basic virtue of loyalty, which is deeply influenced by the traditional Confucianism. By this time, her image had already accumulated through the previous plays, such as "Dowry Rejected" and "Refusal", and finally reached its peak when the conflict broke out. Since then, she has left an incomparably new character in the history of Chinese opera, truly possessing her own independent political personality [5].

3.2. The Image of Women Independent from the Cheng-zhu School

There is no doubt that in the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the Ching-zhu School was prevalent and under the long-term influence of the ideology of "men are superior to women", women were extremely inferior in literature and were the "appendages of men". They basically played the role of

"virtuous wife and mother"; without their own independent personality, they could not resist but accepted fate. For example, Zhao Wuniang in "The Tale of Pipa", a classic work of Chinese opera, was a typical character created by the author under the profound influence of Cheng-zhu School philosophy, who when her husband went to the capital to take the exams and needed to take care of the family alone, realized that she was completely ignorant of the outside world and had no way to survive on her own. She was humiliated and butchered, even though she wanted to die several times to free herself, but she had to survive in order to obey her parents-in-law. The choice of life and death was not even in her own hands.

However, with the gradual awakening of women's consciousness, more and more literati with advanced ideas had noticed the persecution of women brought about by the Cheng-zhu School, and more and more literati had started to portray women with independent personalities in order to promote feminism. So it can be seen that Li Xiangjun in "the Peach Blossom Fan" had a distinct political outlook; she could choose to marry Hou Fangyu because their political philosophy was compatible, and she dared to fight against the treacherous sycophants, even if she sacrificed her life. Besides, when her husband's political position was opposite to her own, she did not care about her marriage. She had her own distinctive independent personality and political stance, breaking the male-dominated trend in previous literary works. Furthermore, in "the Peach Blossom Fan", Li Xiangjun's characterization outperforms that of Fu She's other literary figures, profoundly reflecting that "women are not inferior to men", indicating the emergence of women's sense of independence and also reflecting Kong Shangren's absorption of various advanced ideas and the breakthrough of the Cheng-zhu School in the early Qing Dynasty.

4. The Artistic Image of Li Xiangjun

As one of the most special women in the novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties, Li Xiangjun's artistic image is not only different from the breakthrough of the general female love description but also limited by the influence of traditional culture. Li Xiangjun's breakthrough in Cheng-zhu School and compliance with traditional culture not only reflect the change of Cheng-zhu School from Yangming's Neo-Confucianism at the turn of the Ming and Qing dynasties but also lay the foundation for women's awakening and became a contradictory but typical female symbol.

4.1. The Breakthrough of National Integrity Over Love

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, many typical female images were born, among which Cui Yingying, Du Liniang and Li Xiangjun were very representative. Their image creation had the pursuit of love as the main line, but Li Xiangjun showed a new image different from the past, which was mainly reflected in her emphasis on ethnic integrity, and therefore she showed a strong political position. Before Li Xiangjun, there were many female images who understood the importance of etiquette and justice. Most of them were women in the boudoir. They received family education from childhood and were not disturbed by money [5]. However, similar women appeared in the image of famous prostitutes who were famous and had actual social status. In the pursuit of love and the implementation of his own concept of love, Li Xiangjun's national integrity, which is deliberately described and emphasized, actually overshadows the impression left by the readers by love as the main line, breaks through the characteristics of women, especially the female image of "prostitute" origin, who is the supremacy of love, and endows them with a temperament not inferior to "Heroine".

This description is not unintentional. Li Xiangjun still has a similar desire for love and loyalty to other female images. This desire urges her to achieve her marriage and also leads her to face the dilemma of lack of money. Under this contradiction, the rejection of Ruan Dacheng became a bridge to highlight his national integrity. Kong Shangren compared Hou Fangyu's vacillation with Li

Xiangjun, magnifying this trait in their love to the extent that it cannot be ignored. There is more than one similar plot, and this national integrity is also gradually changing into a political position consistent with Hou Fangyu. In this transformation, Li Xiangjun retained the image of a "loyal martyr" and shared "political insight" with the male image, which is a breakthrough in the female image and one of the manifestations of Li Xiangjun's freedom from male dependency.

At the same time, Li Xiangjun is portrayed with significantly more depth than Cui Yingying and Du Liniang, who merely seek the freedom of love. Her pursuit of love was not only closely linked to various political events, but at the end of the story she was directly confronted with the conflict and choice between her ideals of love and her political ideals. While all three women turned their thoughts into actions in the form of resistance, Li Xiangjun is more determined than Cui Yingying and Du Liniang in her quest for love and political stance, even going so far as to commit suicide [6-8].

Due to the breakthrough brought by national integrity, Li Xiangjun's character image has a political position beyond the concept of love, and after leaving Hou Fangyu, it also has a symbolic feature that can be said. The female image is separated from the love bound to the male and becomes the bud of female awakening.

4.2. Restricted by the Limitations of Traditional Culture

At the turn of the Ming and Qing dynasties, Yangming Xinxue gradually replaced Cheng-zhu School as a theory that was accepted and learned by more people. Its core idea of "conscience" made people's subjectivity begin to highlight. Li Xiangjun also had a related performance. Her pursuit of love ideals and adherence to national integrity showed a certain degree of autonomy, which also separated her from the female image of Cheng-zhu School with only the characteristics of chaste martyrs. This difference is particularly obvious compared with other female images, but the limitations of traditional culture are also revealed when comparing the blurred female identity with Hou Fangyu in the same political position.

At present, when academic circles discuss the ending of their marriage, they usually summarize it with "love tragedy", which focuses on the fact that the love ideal pursued by Li Xiangjun has not been realized. When analyzing the reasons for their failure, the political position has become the biggest obstacle in this tragedy, because the tragic subject of the whole story is not actually a single character, but the whole society [9]. In retrospect, the reason why the two people entered the Taoism is nothing more than "the family is not determined to talk about the love between children and girls". This traditional concept of the family made Li Xiangjun give up the love she has been pursuing. The outcome of her birth also made the political position that can show her independent consciousness become useless empty talk. The choice made in this situation reflects both their political standing and their love of their country, and demonstrates that their love is indeed as significant as their political pursuits [10]. In this ending, her female identity is no longer important. Like Hou Fangyu and other scholars, she has become the "national hero" of the next standard required by tradition and has consumed the personal subject on the road of love with the same "feelings of family and country", which shows the convergence of aesthetic self-consciousness and historical reflection [11]. There is no doubt that this is a historical drama; by projecting past actually into an imaginary theatrical world, historical drama can excite a sense of immediate and personal participation with greater power than art forms that do not draw on historicity [12]. No wonder the character of Li Xiangjun was still restricted by the traditional culture and history.

5. Conclusion

When studying the typical female image of Li Xiangjun, On the whole, the image of Li Xiangjun's love view conforms to the requirements of traditional culture for chaste martyrs, and it does not lack

the unique national integrity of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, but it is not completely subject to traditional culture. In this contradiction, Li Xiangjun became a complex but typical female image in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The study does not analyze in detail the reasons behind the creation of the character of Li Xiangjun in terms of the author's own background and changes in social thinking. However, this study has collated the text of *The Peach Blossom Fan* in detail, distilling the main features and ways of portraying Li Xiangjun according to the plot. At the same time, this study compares the character of Li Xiangjun with common images of women in ancient Chinese literature, focusing on its transgression, conservation and complexity.

References

- [1] Li Xiaojuan. (2021). *Interpretation of Li Xiangjun's image in The Peach Blossom Fan*. *Masterpiece Appreciation* (20), 136-137.
- [2] Zhou, Yiqun & Wang, Fangling. (2010). *On the artistic image of Li Xiangjun in The Peach Blossom Fans*. *New West* (08), 127-128.
- [3] Kong, Jin. (1991). *Hou Fangyu in The Peach Blossom Fan: A scholar with no ability to save his country*. *Knowledge of Literature and History* (07), 94-98.
- [4] Yan Jian. (2008). *Li Xiangjun's "love" and "integrity"*. *Journal of Taishan College* (04), 52-54.
- [5] Fang Yahong. (2011). *The artistic portrayal of Li Xiangjun in The Peach Blossom Fan*. *Art 100* (06), 251-254.
- [6] Zhao Wenning. (2020). *The interpretation of female self-consciousness: An example of female images in the plays The West Wing, The Peony Pavilion, and The Peach Blossom Fan*. *Popular Literature and Art* (09), 27-28.
- [7] Yu He. (2018). *The growth of female self-awareness in The West Wing, The Peony Pavilion, and The Peach Blossom Fan*. *Sichuan Drama* (02), 109-113.
- [8] Nie Wei. (2008). *The awakening of women in Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties literature from Cui Yingying, Du Linian, and Li Xiangjun*. *Journal of Theory* (11), 125-126.
- [9] Gao Xiaokang. (1999). *The Peach Blossom Fans and the Evolution of the Spirit of Classical Chinese Tragedy*. *Literary Heritage* (04), 68-78.
- [10] Zhang Zhenlong & Hu Shangquan. (2022). *An examination of the meaning of Zen writing as seen in The Peach Blossom Fan - Entering the Tao*. *Jianghuai Forum* (05), 172-177.
- [11] Wai-yee Li. (1995). *The Representation of History in the Peach Blossom Fan*. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol.115, No.3(Jul.-Sep.), 421-433.
- [12] Lynn A. Struve. (1980). *History and The Peach Blossom Fan*. *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol.2, No.1(Jan), 55-72.