



Looking in the Mirror - On the Social Expectations of Women in the *Flowers in the Mirror*

Weiyi Zhang*

School of Zhengzhou Normal University, Zhengzhou, China

*Corresponding author email: 2902831440@qq.com

Abstract. *Flowers in the Mirror* is a novel written during the Jiaqing period of the Qing Dynasty in China. The author Li Ruzhen, through describing some positive female images with transcendental significance, such as Tang Guichen, Lin Shuxiang, and Yan Ziqiong, abandoned the concept and narrative method of despising or even vilifying women in the novels of the previous dynasties to a certain extent and conveyed the social expectations of female roles. However, it was also limited by the times and had certain limitations.

Keywords: Female image; *Flowers in the Mirror*; Social expectations.

1 Introduction

Flowers in the Mirror is a masterpiece that Li Ruzhen spent more than 30 years to create. In the early 20th century, Hu Shi pointed out *Flowers in the Mirror* "is a novel discussing women's issues".[1] This paper is also based on this background, focusing on the portrayal of female images, exploring the author's social expectations of women, and at the same time exploring the limitations of this concept in the context of patriarchy from a critical perspective.

The most direct and typical thing that the novel "Flowers in the Mirror" conveys to readers is the discussion of women's issues in the book. During the Jiaqing period of the Qing Dynasty (1796-1820), traditional feudal ethics still imprisoned women's independence and awakening.[2]Improving women's social consciousness is an undercurrent in social thought. By studying the author's social expectations for women in the book, we can deepen our understanding of women's culture in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. At the same time, from a critical perspective, the author's expectations are placed in the social context, and its limitations are explored, which is more valuable for literary criticism. From a realistic perspective, it is also hoped that by studying the advanced female images and social expectations in the work "Flowers in the Mirror", more attention can be paid to the status of women in society and the advanced values of gender equality can be promoted.

2 The Unique and Advanced Nature of Female Images in "*Flowers in the Mirror*"

The author depicts rich and colorful female images in the book, showing various personality characteristics. The following are three types of the most representative female images for analysis.

2.1 Talent and Beauty: Combining Talent and Beauty

In the book, the definition of "talented women" goes beyond the traditional scope of talent and knowledge, and is given a richer and more diverse "symbol". These talented women are not only knowledgeable but also show extraordinary skills and talents, which greatly demonstrates their unique personality and charm.

During the adventure journey of Tang Ao and his three companions traveling overseas, they met all kinds of talented women. As one of the heroines in the book, Tang Guichen is not only outstanding in appearance, but also loves literature, likes to recite poems and compose essays, and has outstanding riding and shooting skills, showing a spirit of both civil and military skills, which also directly reflects the author's portrayal of the heroine's comprehensive pursuit of "talent".

For example, Tingting and Honghong of the Black Tooth Kingdom, although they are still young, ask Duo Jiugong, a great sage of the Heavenly Dynasty and full of talent, so much that he "scratched his ears and cheeks" and "his face was blue and red, and he hated that there was no crack in the ground to hide"; Yan Zixiao is famous for her outstanding martial arts and is full of chivalry. In the book: Yan Zixiao is a female swordsman who can fly over eaves and walls and appear and disappear like a ghost.[3]

2.2 Independent and Autonomous Type: Integrating Thought and Independence

Ban Zhao once said that ancient women had four virtues. Among them, the explanation of "women's virtues" emphasized that women did not need to have outstanding talents, and as for "women's speech", it required women not to be eloquent and eloquent. It can be seen that the ancient Chinese attached little importance to the value of women.[4]

However, Li Ruzhen held a negative attitude towards the so-called traditional view of women. Instead, he praised the new type of women who were courageous, knowledgeable and had their unique insights and thinking. This point is also frequently reflected in "*Flowers in the Mirror*".

For example, in the seventh chapter of the book, Tang Xiaoshan has his unique insights on women's science. When Tang Xiaoshan talked about women's studies with her uncle, she mentioned that she did not want to be an official. She just thought that since there was a female emperor in power, there should be female scholars and female prime ministers to assist the female monarch in maintaining a clear distinction between male and female officials. But at that time, the female emperor used male prime ministers to help her. She thought that if that was the case, what was the point of studying?

Wouldn't it be better to learn needlework from her aunt and mother? It can be seen that Tang Xiaoshan has the tenacity to break the traditional conventions in her heart. She makes decisive decisions and has her unique insights, not just following others.

2.3 Daring and Tenacious Type: Gathering Courage and Perseverance

Most of the twelve overseas women described in the first half of the book are descendants of loyal officials of the Tang Dynasty who were hunted down after Xu Jingye failed to conquer Wu Zetian. These women show the will to rise even in difficult situations. Luo Hongju, Wei Ziyang, Xu Lirong, and other daughters of noble families were able to survive when faced with family disasters and national disasters. They were not only able to save themselves but also benefit the people. For example, Tang Xiaoshan was on her way to find her father at sea. She faced rough seas and acclimatization and even encountered a water monster. These hardships did not reduce her determination to find her father and her strong character became more prominent in adversity. At the end of the novel, Xu Chengzhi and others raised troops to resist Wu Zetian, and 35 talented women bravely joined them. They formed their own female camp, showing superb wisdom and fearlessness on the battlefield. These new women lived bravely and open-mindedly, showing the powerful power of women's lives and will. They used practical actions to interpret the courage and tenacity of "women are not inferior to men", becoming a model of the times.

3 Deep Expectations for Women in "Flowers in the Mirror"

3.1 Expectations for Women's "Talent": Full Affirmation of Women's Talent

In the book, Li Ruzhen emphasized the importance of "talent" to women. The traditional Chinese view of marriage and love believes that "a man with talent and a woman with beauty" is the primary criterion for many writers to describe the image of women. [5] Even in novels about talented men and beautiful women, women are labeled as "beautiful as flowers and moons". Li Ruzhen boldly broke through this traditional concept and placed women's "talent" in the most important position.

For example, in the Black Tooth Country in the text, women are proud of reading and value talent and knowledge. They even regard putting on powder and rouge as ugly. Arming oneself with knowledge is the most precious thing. When Tang Ao and others discussed the phonology and exegesis with the two girls Honghong and Tingting, they made a fool of themselves and said that they "have lived for more than eighty years, but today is the first time I am so upset!". [6] The author's direct praise of women's talents affirms the significance of "talent" itself to the general public of women, criticizes the fallacy of "women without talent are virtuous" from the side, and reflects the expectation of women's "talent".

3.2 Expectation of Women's "Position": Satire on Women's Fate and Power Status

For thousands of years, in the traditional patriarchal society, women have been subjected to all kinds of oppression in etiquette and spirit, and also have to suffer physical torture. For foot binding, another "elegant" name is called Jinlian.[7] Literati and poets often use many gorgeous words to warmly praise women's "three-inch golden lotus", especially in the Ming and Qing dynasties, men's pursuit of women with bound feet is almost crazy. For example, in the sixth chapter of "Jin Ping Mei Ci Hua":

After a while, Ximen Qing took off one of his (Pan Jinlian's) embroidered shoes, held it in his hand, and played with the shoe and cup. The woman said, "My feet are so small, please don't laugh at me, sir." [8] There are different views on foot binding in "Flowers in the Mirror". The description of the pain of foot binding in the Kingdom of Women and the use of men as the subject of foot binding not only has a horrible and funny incongruous color but also fully shows the tragedy of traditional female foot binding. Li Ruzhen is deeply aware of the miserable situation of women in feudal society and is disgusted with the old customs and practices that harm women's physical and mental health, such as ear piercing and foot binding.

Similarly, the author not only pays attention to the survival status of women but also to their power status. After entering the patriarchal society, "maintaining the home" became the only fixed family role positioning for women, which greatly restricted their participation and development in a wider range of fields.[9] Li Ruzhen boldly opposed it, allowing women to obtain unprecedented political rights. Using the reign of Wu Zetian, the first female emperor in Chinese history, as the background of the creation, the author depicts the diverse social activities of hundreds of talented women. Moreover, Wu Zetian attached great importance to talents and set up a special department for women. This initiative provided women with a golden opportunity to show their talents to society and awakened women's gender consciousness. The novel also fictionalized a "daughter country", but unlike the "daughter country" in "Journey to the West", the country was dominated by women. The emperor, ministers, and other positions were all held by women. They were given all the rights of ancient men, and their power and influence were everywhere. It is reflected in the text: "Men wear skirts backward, as women, to manage domestic affairs; women wear boots and hats backwards, as men, to manage foreign affairs." [10]

3.3 Expectation of Women's "Toughness": Reflecting the Perseverance of Women's Individual Will and the Awakening of Women's Consciousness

In the social structure strictly defined by feudal ethics, the roles of men and women were solidified within a specific framework. Traits such as "fortitude" and "courage" are often regarded as typical symbols of men.[11] In contrast, *Flowers in the Mirror* endows women with these character traits, showing that the author's gender concept transcends the times.

In *Flowers in the Mirror*, these well-read and talented young women consciously abandon the weak status imposed on women by traditional society in their hearts. They

rely on their talents and wisdom to bravely pursue knowledge, dreams, and fame, showing a spirit of perseverance and self-improvement. They are not afraid of difficulties and pain and survive in the hard life. They use their courage to fight a desperate battle with the cruel external environment, which also reflects the author's expectation of women's "resilience". For example, the plot in the tenth chapter of the novel describes Luo Hongqiu wearing a tiger skin, pretending to be a human-shaped tiger, and shooting a tiger that Tang Ao and other men are afraid of with a homemade poison arrow. It is quite similar to the plot of "Wu Song Fighting the Tiger" in "Water Margin". It is worth noting that the target of fighting the tiger here has changed from a strong man to a girl with a unique and resolute character. The author deliberately adds this kind of strong character and tenacious will to the shaping of the female image, which greatly reflects the author's expectation of the "resilience" of women at that time.

4 The Limitations of the Male Perspective in a Patriarchal Society

While paying attention to Li Ruzhen's expectations, praise and praise for women, we must also clearly realize that women were not liberated during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This kind of praise and praise for women is the author's use of male values as a reference standard, using the writing method of changing the roles of men and women to write the male world as the female world. From the perspective of the female image created by the text, it shows the negation of the traditional view of women, but from the implicit basis of value judgment, it also shows the affirmation of male values, which is both negation and affirmation, reflecting the limitations of the male perspective.

4.1 The Patriarchal Social Background that is Difficult to Get Rid of

He affirmed that Wu Zetian valued talents, had strong political ability, and gave women opportunities and rights, which was something that no male emperor had done for thousands of years. Therefore, he generally had an admiring attitude towards Wu Zetian in the novel. However, Li Ruzhen was still bound by the patriarchal culture and still had doubts about Wu Zetian's rule. The third chapter of the novel wrote: "It is better to let a demon descend to the world and disturb the Tang Dynasty." [3] Wu Zetian was demonized and considered a fox demon who disturbed the foundation of the Tang Dynasty. Sooner or later, her fox tail would be exposed. The demonization of female rulers here reflects the author's deep thoughts on the maintenance of male society and feudal orthodox dynasties. Therefore, at the end of the novel, the army of justice overthrew the Wu regime and welcomed Zhongzong to the throne.

4.2 Simple Imitation of Men

The feudal ethics with patriarchy as the core, starting from its own interests, set completely different ethics for men and women.[12] Take the daughter country, which best represents feminist ideas in the novel, as an example. Here, women are the masters,

women are in the position of rulers, and look down on men. But what is special is that those of low status in the daughter country is still called "women". Similarly, in terms of dressing, the noble ones still wear men's clothes, have men's manners and behaviors, and regard themselves as men, while the low-ranking ones are no different from the women of the Celestial Empire. They do everything that men do in feudal society and exercise All the privileges of men in a patriarchal society, and for men, let them endure all the sufferings that women have to endure in real society. This idealized social form only makes women see that they are not so shrunk and short. Here it is just women who see themselves as men and men who see themselves as women, not a rational egalitarianism.

4.3 Unreasonable Description of Women Left Under Feudal Ethics

He made a profound reflection on the situation and unfair treatment of women in Chinese society, which had been ruled by feudal autocracy for more than two thousand years. However, since the unreasonable status of women in ancient times was largely formed by the influence of the long-term patriarchal system in Chinese feudal society, he could not get rid of the current situation, so the unfair treatment of women in real society remained in his description. For example, in the 25th chapter, when talking about Xu Chengzhi's wife, he introduces the suspicious son-in-law and writes, "Unexpectedly, after the report, the son-in-law beat Wuer severely and sold her through a matchmaker. "[3]The irrational and unfair treatment of women in feudal society mentioned here is undoubtedly contrary to the author's desired image of advanced women, reflecting the limitations of men in patriarchal society in praising women.

5 Literature References

Most of the predecessors have studied its theme, female image, and narrative method, and explored its irony and the advancement of women's views. Based on the study of advanced female images in the novel, this paper explores the author's social expectations for women, and at the same time explores the limitations of expressing women's views from a male perspective from the background of the times.

6 Conclusion

In general, Li Ruzhen has a female consciousness that goes beyond the limitations of the times. In an era when feudal patriarchal culture occupies a mainstream position, it is already precious that he can pay great attention to women. Although Li Ruzhen cannot completely break away from the background of the time and present a living world of absolute equality between men and women to readers, the description in the novel is also higher than reality, which is very worthy of our study and thinking.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support from xxx funds.

References

1. Lu Xun. A Brief History of Chinese Fiction [M]. Lu Xun Complete Works Volume 9. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1982.2.
2. Tahir Zeena Mohammad; Abu Jweid Abdalhadi Nimer Abdalqader; Aldhafeeri Hilalah Dughayyim; Al-Khamisi Fatima A. Gender Autonomy as a Feminist Premise of Identity and its Impact upon Female Protagonists in Fictional Narratives.[J] Canadian Social Science. Volume 20 , Issue 2 . 2024. PP 75-81
3. Li Ruzhen. Flowers in the Mirror [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2006.
4. Ding Chenxue, Yang Ning. Exploring the Female Group Portraits in Mirror Flower [J]. Masterpiece Review, 2023(17).1.
5. Bao Lingxiao. Aesthetic Study of Female Image in Yuan Zaju [D]. Shaanxi Normal University, 2022.3.
6. Song Haige. On the female image in Flowers in the Mirror [D]. Shandong. Shandong Normal University, 2009.12-15.
7. Li Li. The Awakening and Resistance of "Female Consciousness" in Ming and Qing Traditional Operas [J]. Drama Literature, 2021(03).2.
8. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng. Jin Ping Mei Ci Hua [M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2008.
9. Balbasatu Ibrahim. Women Writers and the Images of Women Representation in the Post-Colonial Literature. Case Study of Zuwaira Isa Jos and Her Struggles. [J] Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal. Volume 7 , Issue 7 . 2020. PP 52-57
10. Zhang Xiaoqin, Lv Qingyang. Comparative study on the female characterization in Flowers in the Mirror and A Dream of Red Mansions. [J]. Shandong Social Sciences, 2016(51).2-3
11. Tang Yan. On the changes in the imagination of the female group from Flowers in the Mirror to Flowers in the Mirror Sequel. [J]. Journal of Ming-Qing Fiction Studies, 2014(04).2.
12. Chen Qingji. Exploring the Deep Connotation of the Female Image in Xu Wei's Zaju [J]. Sichuan Drama, 2022(03).1-2.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

