

From Vanilla Beauty to Popular Flower—Female Imagery and Social Transformation

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Abstract: This paper tries to examine the relation between female images and social transformation approach from gender studies and women's history. By investigating the real women and fictional images related to Xinju, to explore the change of gender under the surface of entertainment market. Furthermore, women create an influential and emotional community in the mundane life, which shows political power in some special historical context.

Keywords: Female images, Gender, Power relations, Emotion politics

1 Introduction

As early as 1986, Joan · Scott appealed that gender studies should not be limited to domestic sphere, but should involve the political, economic and other areas generally occupied by men. This paper tries to examine the relationship between women image and social transformation approach from gender and class study. We will discuss the control and anti-control omnipresent power from Foucault's perspective in everyday life. Firstly, by comparing female images metaphor as the vanilla in traditional literature, to transitional women images in modern popular culture, to reveal the deep flip of gender relations beneath the surface. Secondly, in the opinion of elite, emotion is generally regarded as private sphere events, which is womanhood in the position of being denounced and despised. This paper argues that emotions created by women in everyday life in the field of popular culture shaping a public space, and to play a political role in some specific historical context.

Approaching from the method of culture and gender studies, this paper takes a case study of a type of performance called Women's Drama which emerged in early twentieth century Shanghai. Originally, elites launched a Civilized Drama Movement to assist revolutionary rhetoric. Ultimately, Civilized Drama became commercial and entered into popular culture. Women's Drama is an example of the fusing of the projects of elite reformers and popular culture together. By focusing on Civilized Drama, we can investigate how elite culture and popular culture interact, creating rivalry and compromise. We can see the rising of women's culture and shifts within social strata. Generally speaking, social and cultural history focused on the lower classes and groups that have been ignored. By looking at these historically marginalized groups, a revealing window emerges in which to explore some issues that have been less researched. However, it does not necessarily mean that we forget traditional historical subjects, which could lead to overdoing the rectification. Culture is created by all strata and the lines between are blurred. The distinction of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow is an artificial clarification to create a cultural hierarchy.

There are three sections of this paper. First, I will discuss the traditional Female Images in the Narrative of Elite, who are usually considered sings of male writes' ideologies. In part two, I will narrate the story of audiences of Women's Drama and the female images construed by it, and explore the transformation of the traditional literati to modern city intellectuals. In the last part, I will attempt to analyze the come into being of emotional community, and the political power of this "public spare" in some special context.

2 Female Images in the Narrative of Elite

Virginia Woolf, the great British artist, pointed out that, “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history.”^[1] If we trace the trail of women in the vast history books, we will find that the Chinese woman’s traditional image just as Woolf described. In the era of the pre-Qin, the great poet Qu Yuan made the frustrated political feeling a metaphor to Vanilla Beauty in the “Lament”. In the Qing Dynasty, Changzhou Scholars advocated “Prop Ambition to Inner Room”, claiming they were the inheritor of “Vanilla Beauty” genre. In addition, the elite literati also accustomed to talk about Vanity Fair in the name of men and women’s love. These hints can be found everywhere in Chinese poets’ works, such as the poems of Song Yu, Cao Zhi, Xin Qiji and other elite’s.

In the early twentieth century, elite intellectuals still ignited their sorrow of nationalism to the female image. In the January of 1903, Liang Qichao made a discussion about the opera “Peach Blossom Fan” in the journey from Japan to the United States. He valued this opera greatly and esteemed that it ranks first among ancient and modern. Liang Qichao praised this play so much was because that had looming “race sorrow” and “sense of nation”. After the failure of the Winxin Reform Movement, Liang Qichao turned to resort to transform the national spirit namely “open their wisdom”. Additionally, he made more efforts to shape national, ethnic, racial consciousness of the people, to promote individual rights and equality, freedom of thought, trying to recycling “China Soul”. The elite intellectuals looked the theater as a classroom for the mass enlightenment. In particular, they believe that it is the weakness of the women that could not cultivate a healthy Chinese teenager, which leads China’s poor and weak, to change China must change women into new “national person”.

As early as 1880, Wang Xiaonong, born to an aristocratic family of Qing Crown, began to reform Jing opera. He dramatized *Participating Poland* and performed in Shanghai, warning Chinese people of the national crisis they confronted. Whether his effort really connected the elite with the masses is still an unknown question. But his performance became a model for other reformers.

In 1904, a famous intellectual Chen Qubin compiled a magazine called *The 20th Century Stage*. In it, he declared that “Our ancestors have known that drama affects people deeply, which can add knowledge, enlighten minds, refine virtue.” Theater was viewed as a school, and drama as the powerful weapon to wake the masses. Chen argued that actors should have patriotic feelings. This sentiment was to be directed not to the Qing Dynasty, but to a future, modern nation. They emphasized that the awakening of “the masses” was the precondition to build a new “nation”. In 1905, this influential magazine published a script “Patriotic Woman”. The play revolves around “race” problem, as a warning to Chinese using the subjugation of Polish. Children could not speak Polish and could not read Polish book after Poland was divided. The show aimed to wake the woman’s patriotism. That nationalist imagination burdened with the responsibility of home and country, and the image of women as previously mentioned that was carrying the concern of intellectuals. In the Chinese modern history, scholars tend to investigate radical ideas from the elite intellectuals to find the origins of social change. However, these elite demands and are very far from the reality of change. Moreover, a concept in a consensus guide to action and before obtaining cultural status, there must be a social communication process, and this process usually takes place in everyday life. The new national image could not come into being suddenly, and it will take a long time for women to obtain independent consciousness and a new national spirit of freedom.

Gender is not a word carrying the essence of the concept of value, which is closely related to historical context. We should analyze gender relations by put it into specific social and historical context. Therefore, how the female image changed? How the gender relation shifted in the background of early Republican?

3 Modern Girl and Popular Culture in Early Republican

There has been significant stratification in early Republic mass entertainment market. Opening the “Business News” or “Shanghai Daily” in 1910s, we will see a variety of performances. There are old-fashioned tea house Girl Opera, there are new theater improved Jingju, there is storytelling, drum, Tanhuang, as well as drama. In generally, Opera theaters stage the traditional to meet the needs of the upper gentry’s class. The drama market mainly stages family and romance drama, and suggests that the main audiences from women.

In traditional society, women are not permitted into public theater. Until the late Qing Dynasty, women are still subject to criticism, and even banned from theater. For example, in February 22, 1909, “Shengjing Daily” No.707 5th edition released the announcement “prohibits women from concept drama”. Until 1914, there was published in “Shanghai Daily”, “(Jiangsu Zhenjiang) Governor Wang specially announced and prohibited women from going the teahouse to virtue improvement.”^[2] However, in the special political environment of Shanghai, in fact, these bans will not achieve the actual effect. In the eve of the Republic of China, women gradually got out of the house into the workplace, emerged in various industries with Shanghai’s industrialization and commercialization. The rise of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly fiction in late Qing fiction, implies the growth and expansion of female readers. Women cannot be ignored as an occupational group in Shanghai urbanization process. With the urbanization and commercial development, the southern town women firstly walked out home and become factory workers. A large number of single women began to flow into Shanghai, therefore, they expanded their social space. The various silk mills in Shanghai mainly hire women workers. In 1888, the number of women workers reached thousands. By the end of 1889 Shanghai Bureau started and hired a couple of thousand female workers. Since then, with the setup of the silk factory, match factory, cigarette factory, and such like light industry, the number of women workers is growing rapidly. According to the 1893 annual report, the number of women in all kinds of plants has reached 15,000 to 20,000.^[3] These women also flocked to the theater. Just as “drama magazine” said, “in Shanghai, regardless of the highbrow or lowbrow all like watch, the woman is even more, so the drama was all the rage.”^[4] And Bao Tianxiao said, “Viewers from many careers different from before, shop girl, waitress, neighborhood sister, the tickets sell well, and drama was flourish again.”^[5] Accordingly, in order to meet the needs of civilians, image of women in performances also have become into common people in order to portray the daily lives of ordinary women, pleasant all sectors of the emerging female audience in the city.

The female image in family and romance drama still is constructed by men, but the core problem is, the power relations has changed under the new conditions. For example, in *Shanghai Love - Courtesan, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*, Catherine Yeh pointed out that although the literati and courtesans often read each other’s poems, and which recorded the literati’s power and glory as a patron in the past time. But in the late Qing Shanghai, their relationships changed. In the past, the literati acted as a courtesan’s protector and benefactor; but now, they played a role as the courtesan image salesman. This is not because that the courtesan needs to protect but because of courtesans’ star power in the public eye.^[6] The change of female image also shows the traditional literati transferred into modern city intellectuals. Previously, scholars bore moral responsibility in traditional society, but then they felt being marginalized, and lost the traditional role. For them, the entertainment market supplied them the source of their life. Many scholars wrote script for the drama theater. According to the “Drama Magazine”, the first-class script three Dayang per three thousand words.^[7] Some of them even directly participated in performances.

Women especially love family and romance drama. A female audience published an article in the “drama Magazine” to explain why they did not like Jingju opera while prefer drama: “Old Opera, such as *Empty City, Hong Yangdong* what all martial arts, what hit shots, all in all, said not hear, will be made a thousand times, the most annoying.”^[8] The drama is, “imitating the latest people, language is easy to understand, having plots.”^[9] We can see the flourish of emotional drama in the memoir of

Ouyang Yuqian, who is a script and actor at the beginning of twentieth century Shanghai. "(Modern Drama) has plots and setting, which is easier to understand than old style opera. There were so many people in the audience when we performed; even the two streets outside the theater were crowded with people. Audiences liked *The Resentment in Family*. Even during the heavy rain, the sedan chairs came in could not get out and the ones out could not get in. Female patrons waited outside under umbrellas. There were lots of people waiting several hours before the performance began."^[10] Compared to male elites tend to emphasize the rational ideal of national strength and prosperity, women artists made use of emotion to achieve refinement purposes.

4 Conclusion

In the historical context of national crisis, the easiest way to achieve legality was to make a connection to nationalism. In Shanghai, most of the theaters established in settlements had more freedom than theaters in other cities, but it became the cradle of nationalism. Something happened in the commercial amusement institutions greatly affected audiences and shifted social values and ideologies. The elite were aware of these changes, including conservationists, reformists, and May Fourth intellectuals. They thought that the popular culture was too vulgar without a high spirit pursuit, and induced moral degeneration among youths. These threats were opposed to the aims of building a strong modern nation. They began to prohibit and restrict new emergent amusement styles in many ways. Women's Drama had been banned at the very beginning of its emergence. And some critics even suggested separating females and males in the theaters. Gender mixture in theaters departed from the aim to forge the ideal of a "Good wife and mother."

When the national crisis still existed and nationalism became the mainstream, Chinese intellectuals still sought for a way to modernity. The New Culture Movement intellectuals insisted strongly on removing tradition completely. Modern Drama was categorized as "traditional" style and was attacked. This was particularly the case in 1919, as the result of Paris Peace Conference disappointed Chinese intellectuals and frustrated their belief in western democracy. They launched the May Fourth Movement. Culture became more and more radical. In this context, the Women's Drama, mandarin-duck and butterfly novel, local opera, magic tricks and so on were labeled as "the popular culture". They debated that such urban amusements were individualistic and forgot about the nation, which departed far from the purpose of nationalism. Elite intellectuals criticized emotions were feminine, and is not rational masculine, and it was feudal, and hinder Chinese modernization.

However, an emotional community came into being in the everyday life. In "The Making of public: Emotions and media Sensation in 1930s China", the author examines a female assassin Shi Jianqiao in 1935 to 1936 as a case study, to explore gender and emotion how to make a collective identity through "public sympathy".^[11] As early as the late Qing Dynasty mass entertainment market, there has been a similar "Emotion" space construction.

In fact, "Emotion" Culture has a long history. From the Ming Dynasty, the emotion began to act as a social force. Elite construct a space of everyday life, this space often demonstrate political strength. In theory excitation of Yangming School, and the development of Wang Left Wing School, "Emotion" cultural trends ensued to oppose Neo dogma. Li Zhi, Tang Xianzu, and Yuan Hongdao that are typical representatives. In "*The Peony Pavilion*", Tang Xianzu constructed a female image Du Liniang who born for love, and died for love. In correcting the concept of Neo, the main cultural trends situation has greatly improved the situation of philosophical position of "Emotion".

Although scholars do not agree that China do not exist a public space as Habermas described, but by the secular forces and the public emotion, still form a community can have political power. The concept of this space is not cured, but the flow, is not long-term stability, which may be temporary. This space, not only present in Sharon, may also appear in the city's theater. Charles Taylor insists that there are two forms of public domain, namely the theme of public space and public spaces across the region. The former refers to the regional assembly, the public had to topics of common interest together, and it is a

physical space, such as salon, bars, squares, streets, schools, associations and so on. The inter-regional public space, which includes newspapers, magazines, books and electronic media, including the public media, they are an invisible, imaginary community of public opinion to common topic will be scattered in the country and even the world of strangers, combined for a modern public. According to Charles Taylor's view, the participants in the public domain is not necessarily bourgeoisie as Habermas said, but a group of strangers groups have a common theme. They formed the imagined community.^[12] Emotions belongs to the daily life category, every day politics occurs everyday life, it seems that no great power, but they are constantly repeated every day. Although they do not loud slogans, but this activity over time provides us a way to observe social, political and cultural evolution. Moreover, this emotions created in everyday life can also affect the local political community, and even national politics in some specific historical context.

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