

Couple Strength and Gentleness: Female Portrayal in Marriage and love Zaju of the Qing Dynasty

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Abstract: Zaju, an ancient Chinese literary genre that flourished during the Qing dynasty. With the progress of the times, the women in the marriage and love Zaju gradually overflowed with a consciousness different from the traditional norms of women's morality. They are the women who sacrificed themselves for their country, women who are even more talented than men, women who have to be prostitutes but with full of courage and knowledge. Couple Strength and Gentleness, which is an overview of Women in the Qing Dynasty, refers to women's indomitableness and tenderness. They have talents that are not inferior to those of men, at the time of national survival, they stepped forward, carrying the fate of the country, not humble, showing advanced concepts and self-awareness.

Keywords: Chinese zaju; Female image; Marriage and love; Qing dynasty

Introduction

The Qing dynasty feudal monarchy centralised power, the ideological clampdown unprecedentedly strengthened, the literati are fear of violating taboos incurring the scourge of killing the family, so there are few free-thinking works in the zaju. Since ancient times, marriage and love zaju also became the picture of the writers to depict the pain of the heart, part of them, mostly in zaju to celebrate women's talent and knowledge, in order to ironise the male ignorance and uselessness. Against the backdrop of the Qing dynasty's cultural authoritarianism and rationalist indoctrination, women had to cater to the discourse of male power in order to survive, but they also gradually overflowed with a consciousness of female virtue that was different from the traditional norms of women's morality.

Research Method

Literature analysis method, which is the most common research method in ancient Chinese literature. It mainly involves the collection and organisation of materials, and confirms the issues under study based on the information. The method requires scholars to go deep inside the text to discover deeper meanings that cannot be grasped by ordinary reading. This article uses the literature analysis method to analyse 95 marriage and love dramas of the Qing Dynasty, and sums up the representative female images into three categories, and then selects the representative women to be analysed, so as to show the female group portrait of the Qing Dynasty.

1. Great women for her country and for her people

In the Qing Dynasty, this kind of marriage zaju featured beautiful lady such as Wang Zhaojun and CAI Wenji. They loved their country, stood firm on justice, were concerned with the rise and fall of the country.

Wang Zhaojun is one of the four great beauties and has always been favoured by the literati. "Zhaojun zaju" is a female myth under the patriarchal society, carrying the dreams and demands of men for thousands of years.^[1] The women's role in the zaju exposes the weak side of the male's extremely narcissistic cultural personality in a patriarchal society. You Dong's "Diao Pipa" portrayed Wang Zhaojun as a "loyal female" who lived in a social environment shrouded in male stereotypes and carried the fate of the country, eventually became a heroine admired by all generations. In "Diao Pipa", the setting is changed from "The Xiong Nu submitted to the Han Dynasty, and the Han Dynasty asked Wang Zhaojun to make peace with them" to "The Xiong Nu was aggressive, and the Han Dynasty was weak". As a result, Wang Zhaojun stands out against the incompetence of the civil and military authorities, the weakness of the Han Dynasty. The image of Wang Zhaojun was changed under the strong spirit of the Qing Dynasty, and the story of Zhaojun was constantly given new connotations, and the image of this woman was no longer an accessory under the rule of male power, but became a symbol of a nation.

The story of Cai Wenji is similar to Zhaojun's. In the fourth section of You Dong's "Diao Pipa", Cai Wenji mourns Wang Zhaojun, unfolding the feeling of sympathy between the two. Nanshan Yishi's "Zhonglangnv" highlights Cai Wenji's reflection on and criticism of the

“rampant party strife” in the Eastern Han Dynasty, changing Cai Wenji’s image of a gentle lady of the court, and unfolding the angry rebuke to the dimness of current affairs and the inaction of the righteous people. Nanshan Yishi was a victim of the Ming dynasty’s party struggle, and the party struggle was not unique to the Ming dynasty, but the only one whose party struggle was so intense and harsh that it could be compared to the end of the Ming dynasty was the Eastern Han dynasty. [2] In “Zhonglangnu”, Cai Wenji was ordered to compile and repair the history book, but was attacked by Yang Xiu and Liu Zhen, who are “Wenyuan Youth” and “Hanlin Leader”. Since ancient times, the renewal of history has always been a scholar male affair, Cai Wenji with a female’s body to take on this important task, is undoubtedly on the poor and incompetent scholarly irony.

Literary art is a reflection of real life. Realistic tragedy is the inevitable product of tragic times. [3] Throughout the long history of ancient times, it is filled with countless female tragedies. Some scholars believe that the four beauties are the base type of female image created by ancient Chinese patriarchal culture entirely with the semantic system of male manipulation, and coinciding with the patriarchal value system and aesthetic ideals. [4] The Qing dynasty’s marriage zaju reimagined these women, transforming the historical censure of the Four Beauties into women heroes who serve the country and the people, above and beyond men.

2. Women who are even more talented than men

In the marriage and love zaju of the Qing Dynasty, such characters are represented by talented women such as Zhuo Wenjun and Xie Daoxun, who are sincere in their feelings and can bravely break through the heavy constraints for the sake of love.

Zhuo Wenjun, as a representative of talented women, has been praised for her and Sima Xiangru’s sincere relationship through generations of operas. But Shuwei’s “Zhuonv danglu” takes a different approach, starting with the story of Wenjun selling wine. Although Wenjun had no money after her elopement and had to sell wine, Sima Xiangru was ashamed to do so, but Wenjun was generous. Wenjun who has a clean, elegant and charismatic personality that is far superior to Sima Xiangru..

Wen Chaochao in “Gu hong ying” was deeply in love with Su Shi despite the age difference. Su Shi doesn’t love her, her unrequited love was fruitless, and eventually died with regrets. Wen Chaochao sacrificed her life to obtain the ideal love, expressing the concept of consistent love.

The four talented women portrayed in Hong Sheng’s “Si Chan Juan” are Xie Daoxuan, Wei Maoyi, Li Yi’an, and Guan Zhongji, all of whom are progressive women and advocate the equality of men and women. These four women not only did their talents exceed those of ordinary people, but their ideals in life were far higher than those of mediocre men. In Nanshan Yishi’s “Zhang Gong Mei”, Su Xiaomei can not only recite poems with her two talented brothers, Su Shi and Su Zhe, but she also makes difficulties for Qin Shaoyou on his wedding night, showing the image of a talented and clever young woman.

The Qing dynasty playwrights incorporated the depiction of female talent into marketplace life. Shen Meiniang which comes from Yan Tingzhong’s zaju, is extremely talented. she expresses the infinite depression and loneliness of her heart in beautiful language. Another outstanding woman who also come from Yan Tingzhong’s zaju named Hua Guanfang was top in the exams. By portraying Hua Guanfang’s talents, Yan Tingzhong is not only affirming women, but also challenging the traditional rituals of men’s superiority over women. He wants equality between men and women so that people with talents have room to fulfil their ambitions.

3. Women who have to be prostitutes but with full of courage and knowledge

The women of the dusty world are also a group that cannot be ignored in the marriage and love zaju of the Qing Dynasty. They are forced to become prostitutes, with a low status and a difficult life. A part of them were respected and favoured by the literati because of their unique literary cultivation. In all the generations of marriage and love zaju, very few playwrights portrayed these women as heroines who were worried about the country and were not afraid of death. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, in the face of internal and external problems and the internal and external environment of life and death, the playwrights turned their viewpoint to the women at the bottom of the social stratum, and used the expression of their courage and indomitable qualities to warn the world and satirise the base person who were afraid of life and death.

The heroine whose name is of Ge Ruifang created by Wang Yunzhang, is a “woman of talent” who puts life and death at risk in the

face of national tragedy. She persuades Sun Wu to rise up against the enemy. She does not distinguish herself from the rich and famous, and not only ridicules the lowly pawns, she also attacks the general with a sword. Afterwards, Ge Ruifang attacked the general with a sword, and when she missed, she chewed her tongue and spat blood on the general's face to show her contempt for him and her loyalty. she is really a heroine who regards the rise and fall of the world as her own responsibility, and regards death as a homecoming.

The life of Sai Jinhua, the famous Suzhou prostitute in Yuan Zuguang's "Nie Haihua", is quite legendary. She devoted herself to country, but has been criticised by the people for committing herself to the Germans. As the officialdom of the late Qing Dynasty was corrupt, the existence of Sai Jinhua, a progressive woman, not only satirised the officials of all classes, but was also a metaphor for the nation and the times. The late Qing Dynasty, the invasion of the Western powers, the ruler's incompetence, the people suffer, even if the aspiring to serve the country, by their own strength is difficult to save the tide. Against this backdrop, the playwrights gave their passion to the Prostitutes in the zajus. Once women could only depend on men for survival, but now prostitutes are taking on the role of the state, which represents the breaking down of the institutional norms established under the feudal patriarchal background, and the feudal rites that have been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people for thousands of years have finally been buried in history.

Conclusion

The female characters portrayed by the writers of the Qing dynasty's marriage and love zajus have left behind the traditional perspective of focusing on love. If using phrase to summarise the female group in the Qing dynasty's marriage and love zajus, it should be "Couple Strength and Gentleness". The term "Couple Strength and Gentleness" refers to the fact that although a woman is weak, she contains the spirit of flexibility that can't be pressed or bent. Qing dynasty marriage and love zajus, in a certain sense, can not be separated from the limitations of the times and authors, but if you use the perspective of that time, you will see that female have made great progress, they are no longer like flowers, objects like people enjoy, but really into the community, show talent, the pursuit of independent personality and freedom and dignity.

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