

Ideal Women for Who? A Comparative Study on Women in Traditional China and in Victorian Era

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Abstract: Although Gu Hongming is regarded as a master of western culture, he strongly supports traditional culture. And his ideas about Chinese women are surprisingly reminiscent of women in Victorian era. The author attempts to compare traditional Chinese women with those in Victorian period in terms of family life and marriage customs through close reading and literature review. Traditional Chinese women are similar to Victorian women as they preside over the home and assume domestic duties, which reflects that woman alike lived in a patriarchal society. Nevertheless, Chinese women and Victorian women differ in their roles in marriage customs. By making a comparison between traditional Chinese women and those in Victorian era, the readers can understand that women's difficulties are deep-rooted and women today still need to fight hard towards equal rights.

Keywords: Women; Gu Hongming; Victorian Era.

1. Introduction

Gu Hongming, world-known master of western culture from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, but Gu claims himself a strong advocate for traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucian ideas. Gu is not only highly praised by his mastery of various European languages, also his works from the perspective of comparison between Chinese and Western culture invite deep reflection. And one of his essays explicitly expresses his opinion on Chinese women. It is surprising to find that his discussion on Chinese women can draw some parallel to "angel in the house" in Victorian era, roughly the same period as when Gu lived. Firstly, termed by Coventry Patmore in his epic poem, "angel in the house" later has become a catch name in Victorian society. Therefore, the paper intends to explore similarities and differences between traditional Chinese women and women in Victorian era in terms of family and marriage system through textual analysis and literature review. Nowadays the fact that more sexual assault incidents in college were exposed to the public demonstrates that women are still in a disadvantaged place. By comparing Gu's ideas on traditional Chinese women and Victorian women, the author tries to raise people's awareness of women's current situation with a cross-culture perspective.

2. Literature Review

Existing literature tends to discuss women in traditional Chinese culture and Victorian women in a separate manner. Chinese scholar Huang Xingtao has dedicated himself to collecting, editing and translating Gu Hongming's articles and works published in different channels. Among Huang's edited book *The Collected Works of Gu Hongming*, an essay named "The Chinese Woman" elaborates on Chinese women in great length. Focusing on the essay, Wu Zhengchun discusses Gu's views on women from three aspects, women and civilization, women and family, and women and marriage. Throughout the world every time-honored civilization has produced an archetype of excellent women; the Chinese ideal women should meet certain characteristics and requirements like Three Obediences and Four Virtues while taking care of

the whole family; tradition Chinese marriage has its moral basis of the gentleman's doctrine and social implication in maintaining family order and social stability as compared with the western marriage (75-77). Furthermore, Wu points out the reasonable elements and limitation of Gu's ideas on Chinese women. Meanwhile, He Junping explains how ethical codes and feudal laws work to define the social status of Chinese women in feudal China. As for women in Victorian era, one the one hand, scholars focus particularly on the middle-class family for the advent of Industrial Revolution has made the middle class in Britain ascend to the dominant (Sarah Kuhl 172). On the other hand, most scholars analyze family values and moral standards of the middle class through the Victorian novels. Based on literature review, several key features can be summarized for the typical Victorian women. The home is thought to be the sole place for women and their principal tasks are to take charge of the family and to raise children (Li Baofang and Ma Shili 10; Zhang Jia 14; Sarah Kuhl 173); women are subordinate to their husbands because they are financially dependent on their husbands as bread-winner (Li Baofang 88); women's reputation is considered to be of high importance and they are required to be chaste (Li Zeng and Long Ruicui 195; Zhang Jia 13). Chinese women in feudal society and women in Victorian era face the similar situations in terms of family duty, marital status and social expectation. The paper intends to analyze Gu's views on traditional Chinese women through close reading of his article "The Chinese Woman". Then it will compare Chinese women with those in Victorian era according to the characteristics of Victorian women generated from literature review. The comparison between these two kinds of women, hopefully, can help readers develop a deep understanding of women's situation and social context in the 19th century both in China and the west. In the next two sections the author will explore the similarities and differences between traditional Chinese women and Victorian women from the perspectives of family life and marital status.

3. The Feminine Ideal: Women and Family

Towards the end of his essay, Gu concludes that Chinese

ladies harboring the laudable characters of modesty, chastity, cheerfulness and ultimately selflessness have become the guardian of sweet home, the earthly paradise. The Chinese metaphor of women as guardian of sweet home is strongly reminiscent of “angel in the house”, i.e., the women in Victorian England. Thus, the author will elaborate on resemblance of Chinese women and Victorian women from the material and mental aspects.

At the beginning of “The Chinese Woman” Gu Hongming mentions the old Hebrew women as an example of “feminine ideal”. Gu proceeds to portray a harmonious picture of how a Hebrew woman prepares meals for her husband and children, how she makes clothes to keep family members warm and how she takes good care of the whole family. The Chinese feminine ideal, in Gu’s opinion, is similar to the old Hebrew women. The Chinese feminine ideal in essence should be the one who is in charge of the house, “la dame de menage”. Among the Four Virtues that Gu cites to explain the ideal, the last one “womanly work” dictates specifically on what a Chinese woman is required to do in managing her home. She should either in the spinning room to make clothes for her family or in the kitchen to prepare wholesome meals. The other three virtues “womanly character”, “womanly conversation” and “womanly appearance” make clear that her intelligence, eloquence or beauty are not required for these characters are not so important in private sphere as in public sphere. While the private sphere, the home is thought to be dominated by women, the public sphere should be the sole place reserved for men where they can employ intelligence and ability to making a living and support the whole family. And men’s duty as bread-winner can find evidence in the article in which Gu extols it as men’s sacrifice. Based on the representation of the Chinese feminine ideal, there lie the similarities of the traditional Chinese women and the women in Victorian era. Both of them have no other alternatives but rely on their husbands financially; confined in the house, they consider their chief task as managing the house such as house cleaning, food and clothes preparation and child education (Li Baofang and Ma Shili 10; Zhang Jia 14).

Behind the physical images of women as guardian of sweet home or angle in the house there is something spiritual and moral to guide their behaviors as manager of the house. When explicitly explaining the Chinese feminine ideal, Gu also lists Three Obediences from China’s earlier times, the Han Dynasty. He claims that a woman should live for her father before she marries, her husband after she gets married and her children after her partner dies and that she is never expected to live for herself or the society. As a matter of fact, during the life time women have been practicing their beliefs on Three Obediences by fulfilling domestic duties. Later Gu elevates those beliefs to be “the religion of selflessness” so that Chinese women, especially Chinese ladies, should observe it as men should perform the gentleman’s doctrine. Apart from the essential quality of being the house manager, Gu also mentions three characteristics of Chinese women that distinguish themselves from those of other countries. Chinese women are meek and modest in a way that they intuitively realize it inappropriate to showcase themselves in public; Chinese women are pure and chaste in that they ward off other men except for their husbands; Chinese women are cheerful and debonair in that their daily conducts carry the air of elegance and charm. Though Gu holds that the three features of modesty, chastity and cheerfulness are exclusively possessed by Chinese women, women in Victorian era also

share much in common. For instance, given the fact the boundary between the private and the public sphere is pretty clear at that time, women are expected to shy away from the public and the job options available to them are just family tutors or writers (Zhang Jia 20). Besides, a woman’s reputation is regarded as highly important. Once she was found out misconduct of adultery her reputation of chastity would all be ruined and she would be degraded as the “fallen woman” (Li Zeng and Long Ruicui 195; Sarah Kuhl 173). The moral and spiritual standards required by the Chinese and Western culture provide guidance for women to behave like a house manager.

While Gu voices out his views of the Chinese feminine ideal, he also criticizes the “modern” European women at his times. In European countries the Lady of the Camellias, created by the influential French writer Alexandre Dumas (fils), was pursued as the feminine ideal. Actually, the Lady of the Camellias cares nothing but her attire and appearance, which runs opposite to Gu’s ideal women. Since Gu maintains that the women of one nation represent the flower of its civilization, the popularity of the Lady of the Camellias in Europe demonstrates that the Western civilization is hypocritical and superfluous. He also warns that China is distancing itself from the real civilization in that Chinese women at his times have appeared in public in a conspicuous way. It seems that the ideal Chinese women and Victorian women are the symbol of the real civilization by portraying them as house managers who devote themselves to the family. However, the Chinese and Western culture reflecting the ideal women are not so perfect. The facts that women are to take care of the family and that they are restricted in the domestic area and that they are expected to be chaste imply that women are subordinate to men. Though Gu seems to praise Chinese women for their virtues and qualities, his ideas on Chinese women are actually from the viewpoint of men who play the dominant role in the society. From China to the Western countries in the 19th century, it is men who dominate in all aspects of life. In such patriarchal society, women are supposed to be inferior to men. With the mindset of women’s inferiority as well as deeply-rooted moral and spiritual codes, they take care of the family and perform their duties as house managers accordingly. Worse still, these beliefs were handed down from one generation to another and nowadays their influence can still be strongly felt. For example, most women above 25 face tremendous pressure from their family and outside world to find a suitable partner and marry early. And those who haven’t accomplished this goal are likely to be considered as a “queer” although some of them may be quite successful in business world. Nowadays although women’s situation has improved considerably compared with the 19th-century-China and Europe in terms of job opportunities and legal rights, they still face invisible ceilings in achieving equal pay and entering political arena.

4. The Different Customs: Women and Marriage

On the topic of women and family it is inevitable to mention the marriage system. In “The Chinese Woman”, while Gu has explained the Chinese feminine ideal and their characteristics, he also tries to expound the differences between the Chinese and Western marriage and to defend concubinage, unique Chinese phenomenon.

In the last section the author mentions Gu’s explanation of

Three Obediences that are fervently practice by the traditional Chinese women. Gu holds that the life goal of a woman in China is to live as a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother respectively and that she should never think for herself or the society. The state of not thinking for oneself, in Gu's words, means that Chinese women are mostly selfless. He further claims that it is this kind of selflessness that made the concubinage possible and not immoral in China. In Gu's opinion, the reasons why the gentlemen in China were allowed to have concubines are based on two arguments. He first justifies the requirement of women's selflessness by stating that men have also made great sacrifice not only for the family but also for their emperors and the country. Sometimes they make contribution to the country at the expense of their lives. Even the emperors themselves, with such extraordinary power and privilege like Kangxi Emperor, also sacrifice their own happiness for the benefit of the country and its people. The second reason, Gu argues, is that the real Chinese gentleman is adept at dealing with family matters, especially the relation between his wife and concubines. The husband's love for his wife is measured by how he brought another woman into the family without hurting his wife's feelings and by how he deliberately protected his wife from the concubine's possible humiliation. Gu makes it clear that a real gentleman could never have a concubine unless he first had gained permission from his wife. He also concedes that the privilege to keep concubines has been abused when at his times men's morality was at the lowest point. Gu tries to prove the rationality of the concubinage system which is heavily scolded by European people. In Europe monogamy is widely practiced and accepted as a norm. However, while the women in Victorian England are expected to keep chaste as the Chinese women, men in Victorian era and the European countries at large can have some lovers though they have only one wife in marriage. Considering the scenario when a European man chose a woman as his lover but he was not obliged to cover all her expense and he might desert her as easily as he could, Gu thinks that the Chinese concubinage under which the man is responsible for his concubine's expense seems less cowardly and immoral. He also doubts whether a European man is capable of handling the relation between the wife and the concubine without turning the sweet home into an earthly hell. Therefore, in Gu's view, Chinese concubinage is not that terrible compared with the monogamy practiced by the European countries in terms of the duty and morality involved.

To demonstrate the different characteristics of Chinese and Western marriage, Gu mentions some traditional marriage rituals and customs that were still practiced in China at his times. In China a lawful marriage should accomplish six procedures: a man should propose to a woman in a formal way; then the engagement is settled by the man sending gifts; they will select a specific date for getting married; the man as groom should bring his bride into the family; they should make marital promise to each other in a ceremony where they would spill wine before a pair of wild geese as a ritual; finally the newly-wed should pray to the groom's ancestors for their marriage in an ancestral hall. Among the six steps Gu thinks the last two are the most important. During the ceremony whereas the groom promises to be loyal to his wife, the bride should be chaste to her husband at the witness of the wild geese for they are acknowledged as the most loyal animals. After the ceremony is completed the groom and the bride have become a couple based on moral doctrines or the God, which

can be called the moral or religious marriage. But only when they finish the sixth step can their marriage be fully recognized. When the couple kneel and pray to the ancestors, it means that they have become a couple in front of their family and the country. This last step would turn their moral marriage into a civic one. Gu further explains the civic marriage is not only concerned about the couple themselves, it also relates to their family and the country. Once married, the woman plays a vital role in maintaining the family and stabilizing the society. Compared with the Chinese marriage rituals, the Western marriage only completes the first five procedures after which the groom and the bride declare their status as married couple only in front of the God. Thus, their marriage based on the love among individual men and women does not transform into a contract between the individual and the country. While the Chinese marriage is civic in nature, the Western marriage is based on individuals. And this is the big difference between the Chinese and Western marriage according to Gu.

The differences between traditional Chinese women and women in Victorian era are mainly demonstrated through the marriage system. The Chinese marriage has unique concubinage under which Chinese women are required to be selfless. The Chinese marriage is also a civic one in which the wife forms a contract with the husband's family. Though the differences between the Chinese marriage and the Western one is mainly explained in Gu's views with little corresponding evidence citing from Victorian era and European countries, his arguments carry some reasonable elements in that few European people really understand Chinese marriage customs and Chinese culture. However, his ideas in defending the concubinage and explaining the essential character of the Chinese marriage are still biased from the perspective of men. Gu holds that the man would not hurt his wife's feelings when he practices the concubine right because her selflessness could protect her from such bad feelings. Women are required to be selfless, to be responsible for the family. Nevertheless, women should have the very right to think for themselves, to be treated and respected equally.

5. Conclusion

By comparing Gu's views on Chinese women and women in Western countries, the author finds that these two kinds of women carry much resemblance in that they both operate as house managers and they are expected to meet certain requirements designated by men in patriarchal society. As for differences, Chinese women and European women play distinct roles in different marriage systems: while Chinese marriage is more civic in character, western marriage puts more emphasis on individuals. Therefore, people can form a deeper understanding on traditional Chinese and Western women and the Chinese and Western marriage. As for limitation, the paper analyzes Gu's ideas on Chinese women from a translated version of Gu's article and later in explaining the different Chinese and Western marriage it mainly relies on Gu's arguments. For future scholarly study on the topic, more relevant texts on Victorian women still wait to be found in answering their differences and academic efforts can be put into the discussion on the reasons and implications of the similarities and differences between traditional Chinese women and women in Victorian era.

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