

Analysis of the Phenomenon and Causes of Stepmother Culture

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Abstract: Stepmother culture is a classic theme culture in the narrative of Eastern and Western ethnic groups. As a female image that differs from biological mothers, "stepmother" is often portrayed as a negative and malicious image in cultural narratives of different countries and regions. However, the "stepmother culture" in China or European and American countries did not initially portray stepmother as a domineering, malicious, or incompetent mother, but rather continuously adjusted the image of stepmother according to the cultural concepts, politics, or social needs of the country. For example, in the Han Dynasty of China, the concept of human relations and filial piety culture were advocated, and stepmother played an important role in maintaining the relationship between father and son in social production, life, and marriage structure, thus creating the stepmother culture. The image of a stepmother is more positive, just like the image of an angel suffering and suffering. Starting from the perspectives of Eastern and Western stepmother cultural concepts and phenomena, this paper explores the reasons for the formation and development of different stepmother cultures, sorts out the evolution and development of stepmother cultures in the context of the present era, and demonstrates the unity and diversity of stepmother cultures in different countries.

Keywords: Stepmother Culture; Phenomena; Cultural Concepts; Cause Analysis.

1. Introduction

There are characters similar to "stepmothers" in ethnic cultures and literary works of all ages, including the malicious stepmother in the European fairy tale "Cinderella", the malicious stepmother empress in "Snow White", the terrifying and hateful stepmother in "Jane Eyre", and the stepmother of the filial son Wang Xiang in "Twenty Four Filial Pieties". At the same time, it should also be noted that alongside stepmothers, there are stepsons and stepdaughters. The characters such as Cinderella, Snow White, orphan Jane Eyre, and filial son Wang Xiang are all positive images. These stepsons and stepdaughters have a clever and kind nature, which is in stark contrast to the malicious image of stepmothers. Therefore, from another perspective, the formation and development of stepmother culture is more about praising sincerity, kindness, and loyalty, and criticizing malice. The insidious and cunning reflect the values, morality, and behavioral needs of human society to abandon evil and promote good, and are more in line with the moral principles of traditional Chinese culture such as "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust".

2. The Phenomenon of Stepmother Culture with Binary Opposition in Traditional Chinese Culture

Since the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, Confucian culture has held a dominant position in the cultural form of Chinese society. Traditional cultural concepts such as filial piety, integrity, loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness have been highly respected by the world, reflecting a greater adherence to the cultural concept of "abandoning evil and promoting good" in literary creation. However, from the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties until now, stepmothers have been portrayed as insidious and malicious negative images, while stepsons and stepdaughters have become positive images pursuing the concept of filial

piety. This binary cultural phenomenon of stepmothers is actually an inevitable trend for the diversified development of social ideological values.

1. Positive and positive stepmother culture represented by Han Dynasty literature

In the literature of the Han Dynasty, the stepmother was referred to as a "false mother", "stepmother", "kind mother", as described in the "Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of Hengshan in Huainan" about the death of the queen by Cheng Shu: "In the fourth year of the Yuanshuo reign, there were thieves who injured the queen's false mother", where "false mother" refers to the queen's stepmother; In the "Biography of Feng Yan in the Book of Later Han", it is said that the stepmother is evil because the leopard sleeps at night and desires to commit poisoning. Here, "stepmother" refers to the woman whose father remarries. At the same time, in literary works such as "Biography of Jiang Shen Tu in the Book of Later Han", words such as "stepmother" and "kind-hearted mother" also appear to refer to the stepmother of the protagonist. [1]

The culture of stepmothers in the Han Dynasty is more portrayed through the portrayal of character images in literary works. The common cultural expressions are "kind mother, filial child" and "kind mother, bad child", which means that stepmothers are basically kind, kind, and beautiful images, while stepsons and stepdaughters are sometimes positive images of loyalty and filial piety, and sometimes negative images of stubbornness. As recorded in the "Biography of Legends, Volume 5, Section 1, Biography of Righteousness", "Lady Zhuya had a great mother's kindness. She pretended to be a stepmother and gave way to her daughter, who was also virtuous. She received pearls at the pass, and each of them had their own thoughts. This is how the two meanings were passed down in the world." Here is the story of Zhuya ordering her stepwife to be a "fake mother" and the daughter of her ex-wife to help and love each other. Her stepmother was responsible for the crime of stealing pearls to protect her "fake son", and her stepdaughter was buried in tears after her stepmother was

killed. Both of them were loyal and righteous people. Therefore, it is widely praised by the world. According to the "Biography of the Two Kings of Zhao, Yin, Han, and Zhang" in the Book of Han, "In the first month of spring, a woman in Meiyang reported her unfilial son and said, 'My son often takes me as his wife and is jealous of me.' Zun then went out to sit at the court and took the unfilial son to hang a dish on a tree, causing five officials to shoot him with bows. The officials and the people were shocked." It is said that in early spring, a woman in Meiyang came to report to the county magistrate Wang Zun, saying, 'His adopted son is unfilial, and he beats and scolds her like a wife.', Wang Zun said that although there were no laws and regulations regarding mothers and stepsons in the laws and regulations of the Han Dynasty, it was because the sages couldn't bear to write, so they asked the officials and soldiers on horseback to shoot their unfilial sons with a bow. [2] In both of the above stories, the stepmother plays the role of kindness and righteousness. On the one hand, it indicates that it was legal for men to remarry their wives during the Han Dynasty, and it is also a normal phenomenon for women to remarry. On the other hand, it also implies that the court culture and common culture of the Han Dynasty highly promoted the chastity and morality of the stepmother, emphasizing loyalty, filial piety, and family ethics, and respecting her noble mother, which is widely recognized by the world.

2. Negative stepmother culture represented by "Twenty Four Filial Pieties"

The earliest appearance of "Twenty Four Filial Pieties" was during the reign of Emperor Shenzong of the Northern Song Dynasty. A series of "Twenty Four Filial Pieties" portrait bricks were unearthed from the brick tomb in Wuma Village, Changzhi City, Shanxi Province. There are 15 brick carving filial piety portraits painted on them, including Dong Yong, Wang Xiang, Tian Zhen, Guo Ju, and others. The written record of the story of "Twenty Four Filial Pieties" originated from the "Biography of Volume 33 of the Book of Jin". [3] The Twenty Four Filial Pieties "is more used to depict China's reverence for traditional" filial piety culture "since the Pre Qin period. After the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, there have been increasing stories about" filial piety culture ". However, compared to the narrative of Han Dynasty literature, stepmothers have become the negative image in the expression of filial piety culture, meaning that most stepsons have the qualities of filial piety, honesty, kindness, and tolerance, and stepmothers play more roles of tyranny, malice, and abuse, Gradually leading to negative external manifestations of stepmother culture.

The "Biography of Wang Xiang in the Book of Jin" records stories about the filial son Wang Xiang lying on the ice seeking carp, guarding the Nai tree, and the net sparrow, all of which are related to Wang Xiang's stepmother. The Book of Jin, Volume 33: Biography of Wang Xiang "mentions that" the stepmother Zhu was not kind, and several times she took it with her, it was because she lost love to her father. Every time she swept away the cow, Xiang became more respectful. "Wang Xiang's biological mother passed away early in the Jin Dynasty, and the stepmother Zhu was not kind to him. Instead, she let him guard the Nai tree in stormy nights, untie his shirt and lie on the ice in the cold winter to seek carp, and repeatedly slandered and badmouthed him to his biological father, causing him to lose his father's love. The Dunhuang Bianwen: Biography of Filial Piety portrays Wang Xiang's stepmother, Zhu, as a murderous demon. Zhu attempted to

assassinate Wang Xiang multiple times, but failed. Upon learning of this, Wang Xiang knelt down in front of his stepmother and begged for death, hoping to comply with her wishes and become a loyal and filial person.

The stories of benevolence and filial piety of Emperor Shun in ancient times are also recorded in works such as "Dunhuang Bianwen Biography of Filial Piety" and "Complete Book of Lv Zu (Qing Dynasty)". However, there are no exceptions, and Shun's stepmother is also portrayed as vicious and abusive towards her stepson. Even Shun's father, who is blind, has become an accomplice in harming Shun. [4] After Shun's father returned home alone, Shun's stepmother stabbed herself in the foot with a golden hairpin and falsely accused Shun of burying a long evil thorn under a peach tree. In order to stir up the hatred of the blind towards his son Shun, Shun's stepmother falsely accused Shun of "seeing a concubine with a black face, Shun hopes to have a heart of a pig and a dog." This means that Shun attempted to rape himself and was furious on the spot, picking up a branch and starting to beat Shun. However, at this time, the emperor appeared to protect Shun's body from damage. When the stepmother saw that the plan had not been successful, she came up with strategies such as "completing the report" and "washing out the well". Firstly, she allowed Shun to build the granary without bias, and attempted to burn him to death during the fire prevention process during Shun's construction. Secondly, she asked Shun to build a water storage well and irrigate him during Shun's construction process, attempting to drown him. However, she was twice rescued from a dangerous environment by the emperor.

3. The Phenomenon of Stepmother Culture in the Cultural Environment of European and American Countries

Since the 17th period, a group of literary creators have emerged in countries such as France, Germany, and Denmark in the European region. They have collected folk literary stories, mythological and legendary stories from various parts of the European continent and compiled them into classic literary works that can be justified. Stepmother culture has also repeatedly appeared in such literary works. The vicious stepmother empress in the story of Snow White, the vicious stepmother in Cinderella, the terrifying and hateful stepmother in Jane Eyre, and the vicious stepmother in Three Dwarfs in the Forest mainly play the roles of witches and demons, who are always in trouble, abuse, and maim the protagonist in the story, making their demonic appearance more prominent.

The main characters in "Grimm's Fairy Tales: Snow White" are the Queen of Alexander and Snow White. Snow White is kind, beautiful, and strong and brave. After questioning the Mirror, the cruel stepmother empress learns that "Snow White is the most beautiful woman in the world". She becomes angry and ashamed, and wants to harm Snow White, allowing hunters to hunt him and deceive her into eating poisonous apples. However, in the end, the malicious stepmother empress is punished. The story of "Cinderella" was first seen in the book "Five Days of Tales" written by 15th century Italian literary author Jim Badista Basil, and later compiled into a complete fairy tale by German writers, the Grimm brothers, Cinderella has a malicious stepmother, stepmother, and two daughters. She is bullied by her stepmother and her

two daughters all day long, forcing her to do the heaviest agricultural work, forcing her to carry water, make a fire, cook, and wash clothes in the kitchen. She mocks the dust and dirt on her body like a prank, until Cinderella falls asleep exhausted. At the same time, a large amount of space is devoted to describing Cinderella's stepmother's philistinism and greed when facing wealth, and the various difficulties that Cinderella wants to attend the ball, using Cinderella's elegance and beauty to highlight her stepmother's malice and ugliness. The novel "Jane Eyre" written by British female writer Charlotte Bronte also portrays "stepmother" as a vulgar and vicious female image. In "Jane Eyre", the "stepmother" who takes care of her is her aunt. After the death of Uncle Reed, Mrs. Reed asked her son John to take a book and hit Jane Eyre, and locked Jane Eyre in the room where her uncle died. Later, her aunt sent Jane Eyre to a harsh living environment. The strict rules of the Lowood Home made it suffer from both mental and physical torment, and almost died after being ravaged by the plague.

Therefore, from the traditional perspective of Western literary creation, stepmothers are the embodiment of evil and demons, and stepmother culture is essentially an abnormal cultural form that destroys social relationships and family structures. As the dominant figure in the family environment, stepmother has a series of negative thoughts such as selfishness, favoritism, arrogance, malice, ignorance, vanity, harshness, and jealousy, which leads to her cold-blooded, ruthless, and inhumane behavior towards her stepchildren, which in turn leads to moral condemnation and criticism from the social group.

4. Analysis of the Reasons for the Formation of Eastern and Western Stepmother Culture Phenomenon

1. The reasons for the formation of the phenomenon of Eastern stepmother culture

The phenomenon of stepmother culture in traditional Chinese society is not static, but constantly changes with the cultural concepts, politics, or social management needs of the times, which means that the emergence, development, and changes of stepmother culture have obvious political selectivity. In the family and marriage structure of the Han Dynasty, the "stepmother" played the role of maintaining the family. The "Etiquette and Funeral Clothes" stated that "stepmother is like mother", and the "Customs and Justice - Misconduct Rites" stated that "stepmother is like mother, and kind-hearted mother is like mother". [5] The statement in "The Book of Han" about the stepmother, Lady Zhuya, and her stepdaughter "pushing and fighting for death" truly reproduces the cultural trend of respecting the mother and noble mother in Han Dynasty society. They value the chastity of their "mother" and "stepmother" extremely high. At the same time, after marrying into a man's family, the "stepmother" also adheres to the ideological concept of "three obediences and four virtues" and regards the stepson as if she had given birth. They wholeheartedly serve their husband and take care of their children, which can be said that the Han Dynasty was positive and upward. The positive phenomenon of stepmother culture reflects the rulers' emphasis on human ethics, filial piety, maternal status, and rights during this period.

However, since the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, the increasingly inferior and negative phenomenon

of stepmother culture has to some extent represented the value orientation and cultural needs of a patriarchal society. The stepmother of Emperor Shun, the stepmother of filial son Wang Xiang, and the stepmother of filial son Min Ziqian in "Twenty Four Filial Pieties" all belong to typical "wicked women" images, with unified characteristics of selfishness, favoritism, malice, and love for vanity. Moreover, the malice of the stepmother will be in stark contrast to the loving mother and loyal stepson. [6] Therefore, it can be found that after the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, the image of the "evil mother" of the stepmother culture has been fixed, and the negative effects of the stepmother culture have become increasingly prominent. The negative stepmother culture is largely a product of the patriarchal society, which requires the malicious stepmother image as a symbol to display a type of suppressed and abnormal psychological state of women. At the same time, through a series of specific examples, the comparison and reflection of the biological mother. The nobility and greatness of stepsons.

2. Reasons for the Formation of Western Stepmother Culture Phenomenon

For a long time, the creation of folk literature and fairy tales in mainland Europe has often portrayed stepmothers and stepmothers as negative characters who abuse the protagonist. Fairy tale works such as "Snow White," "Cinderella," "Candy House," "Eleven Swans," and "Three Dwarfs in the Forest," have portrayed stepmothers as venomous and malicious women, setting even the children born to stepmothers to be cruel. A malicious nature.

This completely negative phenomenon of Western stepmother culture stems more from the "evil theory of human nature" proposed by Western philosophers Augustine, Thomas Hobbes, Kant, and others. Augustine pointed out that "there is evil in the universe, and if God is not aware of it, then he is not omnipotent; if God knows evil but has no ability to prevent it from happening, then he is not omnipotent, Kant's "theory of ethical evil" directly points to the essence of evil. He believes that "evil is not because the object of love is evil, but because the order of love is chaotic or reversed", and human free will will cause "love" to turn upside down into "evil". [7] Extending to the phenomenon of stepmother culture, it can be seen that stepmothers are full of love for their children, while treating their stepsons and daughters with malice and evil. This phenomenon arises on the one hand due to economic interests, where the children born to their predecessors will inherit some of their property, and the stepmother becomes a villain due to competition for benefits; On the other hand, it is the purity of bloodline inheritance. During the medieval period in Europe, medical conditions were backward and premature infant deaths often occurred. To ensure bloodline inheritance, stepmothers naturally gave priority to taking care of their own children, abusing or abandoning the children born to their predecessors. Therefore, the formation and development of the phenomenon of Western stepmother culture are usually caused by economic interests, human nature, and the purity of blood inheritance. The narrative of stepmother culture in folk literature stories is reasonable and can reflect the ethical and moral orientation of Western culture.

5. The Transformation and Remodeling of the Cultural Form of Stepmother in the Context of Modern Society

With the rapid development of audio-visual and cultural media such as television, movies, and new media in recent years, "stepmother" as a special cultural symbol is also constantly changing. Especially in the modern social context of advocating gender equality, "stepmother" is no longer naturally seen as the embodiment of evil demons, but as an independent and free personality, highlighting the human nature inherent in "stepmother".

Since the 1990s, the global divorce and remarriage rates have shown a rapid growth trend, and marrying other men as "stepmothers" after divorce has become a common phenomenon. In this social environment, Eastern and Western countries have created a series of film and television works based on the theme of "stepmother". The film "Stepmother" directed by Russian director Ludmila Uvarova has created a loving and kind stepmother image; In order to cater to modern audiences, mainland China's radio and television media have also created TV dramas such as "The Heart of the Grass", "The Heart of the Queen Mother in Spring", and "Infinite Love". These works have all created maternal and great stepmother images without exception. In the movie "Stepmother", there is a harmonious and normal relationship between the stepmother and stepdaughter, Kerscaria. The stepmother respects, cares for, and loves Kerscaria, but Kerscaria never calls her mother. [8] With the appearance of Kajia, a tenant in the Corsican family, the image of the stepmother herself became more noble and complete. Kajia believed that "Philip's family is very bad, And I gave up my extramarital affair with Felipe because he had many women. "The stepmother refuted Kajia's statement," Think about it, you took their father away from the children, Finally, Corsica shouted "Mother or Mother" to her stepmother.

Similarly, Chinese TV dramas such as "The Heart of the Grass", "The Heart of the Queen Mother in Spring", and "The Infinite Truth" have created a series of images of stepmothers who endure humiliation around the theme of "stepmothers" raising children. Widow Jin Feng, bottom class women Xiu E, and Zheng Mei are all abandoned female images by the times. They are at the bottom of society, but never complain about the unfairness of fate. Instead, they are filial and virtuous, diligent in managing their families, and do their best to raise their elderly elders and young stepsons, portraying touching life stories. However, American female writers S.M. Gilbert and Susan Guba pointed out in their book "The Mad Woman in the Attic" that "selflessness not only means nobility, but also means death." They do not agree with the image of women like angels who blindly give, believing that this is a moral deception. [9] Therefore, from this perspective, how to

transform stepmother culture towards a more normal and coordinated direction in social development, reshaping positive or negative phenomena of stepmother culture, has become an important topic worth discussing in the context of modern society.

6. Epilogue

Since the 15th century, the image of "stepmother" in Eastern and Western literary creations has often been fixed as a negative image. In Chinese "Twenty Four Filial Piety" stories, there are characters such as malicious stepmother and loyal stepson. In Western fairy tales such as "Snow White", "Cinderella", and "Candy House", there are also malicious stepmother images. The formation of these stepmother cultural phenomena is closely related to the concept of the times and human nature. Since the 20th century, after the artistic adaptation of related movies and TV dramas, the "stepmother image" of stepmother culture has undergone a significant transformation. The stepmother image in film and television works is more diversified and more in line with the requirements of modern social value orientation, reflecting the improvement of the stepmother image and women's rights in the era of gender equality.

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