On the Influence of Taoism on Female Characters in Moment in Peking

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Abstract: Moment in Peking is one of the most famous English novel of Lin Tangy. It was written when Dr. Lin lived in Paris from August, 1938 to August, 1939. It is modeled on the structure of A Dream in Red Mansions, and dedicated “To the Brave Chinese Soldiers”. It tells the vicissitudes of life and the feelings of gratitude and resentment of the Zengs, the Yaos, the News, from the Boxer Rebellion (1901) to the Anti-Japanese War. It showed the historical style and features of the changes of modern Chinese society. The book shaped hundreds of figures, including more than 50 women images. The author expressed in a unique angle to express his respect and admiration to women. Every woman has a different story, and distinct personality traits. (Wang Zhibo, 2006:4) Their personality is distinct, high status, even beyond men in some ways. Compared with the previous writers, the author has a detailed understanding of women, and his work is more closed to the real life, so as to achieve a new world. At that time, this had made a great progress, although flawed, but in spite of his flaws.

The author represents his Taoist thought through the whole novel, in terms of characterization, plot and etc. Taoist thought is not only the theme of the full text, but also determines the basic structure of it. The author in the book conveys details of Taoist thought and, reflects the Taoist thought on three levels, namely the Taoist chronological life, easy detachment of the outlook on life and the method of gaining liberation, and spiritual freedom.

Keywords: Moment in Peking; Taoism; Female Characters; Lin Yutang

1. Introduction

“One mind seeks the learning of ancients and moderns: Two legs straddle the cultures of East and West”. This is a couplet Lin Tangy wrote to himself at his fortieth birthday. As a Chinese writer, philosopher, linguist, translator, and poet, he had contributed to the world many great works, including essays, prose, fictions, and translation of Chinese classics into English. By so doing, he brought the Chinese culture and philosophy to the western world. (Friden, 1693:15)

This novel gave hope and encouragement to the Chinese both at home and abroad. It is mainly talked about the ups and downs of three big families, namely, the Yaos, the Zengs, the News, spanning almost half of the twentieth century. It is written for a western audience and takes many sides to explain a particular historical event or custom that a Chinese reader would easily understand. In this novel, Lin echoes a strong nationalist sentiment at every turn of the novel, forecasting his hope for China’s victory and the survival and the spirit of the Chinese people. A vivid picture of the Chinese society during that disastrous period was displayed before the eyes of the readers. Even today, a rereading of this fiction can also enlighten readers for its sparking soul would never die with the time. It is believed that Dr. Lin’s purpose of writing this book was to fully convey the Chinese society and culture to the westerners who despised China...
due to lack of understanding. As Dr. Lin’s eldest daughter, Lin Rusui said that Moment in Peking is the “trumpet” of Taoism. Zhan Shengbing analyzes the philosophy of Chungtse in Moment in Peking as representative. A thesis titled On the Character Depiction in Moment in Peking by Zhou Feng discusses the Taoism influences on the character of Yao Sian and his daughter Yao Mulan, but according to Lin Shuxian, Mulan is the combination of traditional Confucian ideal and western free and open spirit. (Zhou Feng, 2007:26) Chen Zhaoxu understands Mulan as the incarnation of Lin Yutang’s tragedy consciousness and gay-science. I will analyze Mulan through a feminist approach to find what is lacking in her characterization. ( Chen Zhaoxu, 2003: 4) Moreover, the female challenges to the feudal patriarchy will also be discussed here.

Moment in Peking is one of the most famous novels of Dr. Lin Yutang, who was a great introducer of the Chinese and value system to the Western society and who enjoyed international prestige during the 20th century. Like many other classical Chinese novels, Moment in Peking has a lot of characters, especially women. Nowadays, more and more people pay attention to Taoism, and a lot of Taoism’s ideas are recognized by people.

1.1 Background of study

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1.2 Significance of this study

Through analyzing the impacts of Moment in Peking, people can have a better understanding on Taoism culture and Female. This not only reduces the misunderstanding of Taoism culture, but also gives overall and comprehensive explanation according to the influence of Taoism on Female in Moment in Peking. ( Lin Shuxian, 2004:24-26)

1.3 Research methods

In the process of discussing this thesis, the methods the author adopted include collecting materials from reference books, surfing on the internet to find helpful materials. Research methods include using contrast, examples and analysis to support my thesis and inductive and summary method.

2. Literature review

Like many other classical Chinese novels, Moment in Peking has a lot of characters, especially women. As a female reader, I adopt a feminist approach and mainly focused on several typical women figures and their characterization in this research so as to add a new perspective to the study of Lin Yutang.

2.1 Studies on Lin Yutang

He has been regarded as the first writer proposing humor in modern China, winning a reputation of “Chinese Master of Humor”. Overflowing with gifts in language, he had made great contribution to the dialogue and communication between the eastern and the western cultures through his numerous works. During his lifetime and afterwards, his original works and translated versions have been printed and reprinted around the world. For four times, he was nominated for the Nobel Prize for literature. He is a bilingual writer and scholar and apt in both English and Chinese, custom, religion and their way of living. (Lin Taiyi, 1994:22) Many of his works were attempts to bridge the cultural gap between the East and West. His eleven Chinese works, forty English works, nine translations and hundreds of essays and prose have earned him an international fame in the literary world. Recently, more and more people became enthusiastic for his life and his works. Since he dedicated his whole life to bridging the gap between the two societies he lived, it is necessary for us to reread and re-examine him and his works in the current trend of globalization.

2.2 Studies on moment in Peking

Moment in Peking has been regarded as the most outstanding among Lin’s novels. Written in 1938, it was published one year later by John Company in New York. More than 50,000 copies were sold within the first six month of its
publication in America at the end of 1939. Either from an artistic or an aesthetic perspective, this novel is no doubt an epic masterpiece. (Yuan Lei, 2014:30-35) At that time, when China was facing the invasion of Japanese imperialists, this novel provided the Chinese at home and board with great encouragement and hope, and leaves reader with an anxious hope for the survival of the characters and a bitter disgust for Japanese behavior. Even today, a rereading of this fiction can also enlighten readers for its sparkling soul would never die with the time. Lin shows no kindness in his portrayal of the Japanese. Most importantly, this story-telling way makes the eastern philosophy and religions easy to be understood and accepted by the Western readers.

2.3 Studies on the female characters in moment in Peking

In this novel, there have hundreds of characters, most of them are women. Then it certainly to research Yao Mulan and Sun Manniang. Mulan is the perfect women image in Lin’s works. A deep study shows Mulan is a complex image in her characteristic: modern and traditional, old ideal and new thought, ideal and reality. As for Sun Manniang, she is a miniature of thousands of Chinese traditional women. Her conversion to Buddhism and her lifelong virgin widowhood exemplify the submissiveness of this type of women to the feudal patriarchal society. As for New Suyun, she challenges the feudal patriarchy. The first is a bondmaid who pursued the equality between the different social classes and the freedom of love. (Lan Runqing, 2004:23-26) After several failed struggles, she was finally installed in the Yao family of spirits after her death. The second rebel was a rich family daughter dissatisfied with her marriage and relations with her parents-in-low and sister-in-low. Fundamentally, her barrenness made her unfavorable in the eyes of her parents-in-low. But instead of being obedient to the elders and sticking to the virtues of a good wife, she pursued her own way of life with determination and established her own identity in the society through the sacrifice of her life for the nation.

3. Taoism and the main characteristics of Taoism

Religion is a uniquely human social phenomenon. As one part of society, it has the function to organize all kinds of social forces, mutual integration and mutual harmony relationship and tendencies, and tries to bind on people’s behavior and thoughts. In this process, the religious shows some kinds of political function. Taoism is a China’s local religion, it has a profound influence on Chinese ancient society, it used to be the ancient feudal social to build and maintained its internal order. It mixes with the Chinese traditional political ideology integrates constantly, forming a special political system: not only inherited the basic thoughts of Taoism, and according to the different dynasties political, melting perturbation method of Confucianism. In ancient China, it has many kinds of typical political mode; the Taoism has its very distinctive features. (Nan Huaijin, 2005:42) It advocates that the government officials to use the soft hard, hands-off, in maximum extent to reduce the direct political pressure of the people, and also advocate the people to accumulated virtue, and the monarch compared with the people, in other words, it advocates royal in real action. In this way, on the one hand, it restrains the monarchical power, and give the people a free development space, on the other hand, it maintains the advocacy of the public to Kings, and the public to the court. This is a way to give full play to social self-organization function of social control mode, it is in middle of rulers and ruled, it contains both “governance” and a “neutral” feature of “autonomy”.

3.1 The basic doctrines and development of Taoism

Taoism is one of the major religions in China. Due to the “Tao” as the highest belief, “Tao” is considered as the origins of the universe and also named “Taoism”.

Taoism’s main doctrines come from the idea of the Tao Te King. Taoism advocates respecting morals, hands-off, undisputed. Taoism comes from China, which has formed in the 2nd century AD, has been 1800 years of history. Taoism includes many things. It is based on the worship of ghosts and gods in ancient China. On the theory of Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu, inherited the Tales of Legendia from the Spring and Autumn period. Taoism considered Lao Tzu as the originator, thought the Tao Te King as the main classical books, “Tao” as the fundamental beliefs, all this is dating back to the teachings doctrine.

3.2 Tao Te King

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The Tao Te King is also named as “Lao Tzu”. It is a profound philosophical book, and it is considered as a “sealed book”. It has a great influence on China even around the world. This book only contains more than five thousand words, but is elegant and full of philosophy. It is not only explains the source of the universe, but also investigates the nature of life with the theory and explain Taoism’s hands-off theory. Since Tao Te King was handed down from ancient times to now, more than 300 version, it has been the most widely translation of literary works in addition to the Bible. (Lao Tzu, 2013:17) One thousand years, up to the Kings and princes all civilians from the wisdom of the human civilization on literature derive the governing home, cultivate one's morality raises a gender, the essence of people doing things.

3.3 The main characteristics of Taoism

Taoism is a Chinese traditional religion; it has a history of more than 1800 years. The doctrine of Taoism is closely combined with the Chinese native culture, which is deeply rooted in the Chinese fertile soil with distinct Chinese characteristics. It has a far-reaching influence on all aspects of Chinese culture.

3.3.1 Heaven-man unity

Ideological concept of “nature and humanity” comes up with Lao Tzu firstly, who is a Han dynasty thinker, the yin-yang theory after Dong development for the unity of nature and philosophy system, and thus build the main body of the Chinese traditional culture. Dong is important because he is the first narrator of Confucianism, before the Five Elements, the Confucian only approved the five elements and regardless of the Yin and Yang. Dong’s theory includes Yin and Yang, and the Five Elements. He is also known as one most famous Confucian, whose famous book is Chun-Qiu Theory.

3.3.2 Hands-off

Lao Tzu thought, the origins of the world is “Nothing”. “Nothing” only conforms to the way the principle of Taoism. Hands-off is the basic opinions of Taoism. “Nothing” in other words, it isn’t before the things, isn’t after the things, either. It is referred to in the course of nature. “Nothing” is the premise and condition of “Promising”, Han Shu said the Taoism’s basic spirit of Hands-off. In Pre-Qin period, Taoism’s Hands-off theory mainly including “Discarding Knowledge” rare product weren’t sought, make people not to steal etc. Lao Tzu advocated that the monarch should be “No Desire”, “Nothing”, “Deep Quiet”. The Hands-off theory of Taoism had a big impact on ancient China. The knowledge of the situation of the early Han Dynasty learned the thought of the Pre-Qin Taoism’s Hands-off theory. It adapted to the political turmoil period at the ending of the Qin dynasty, the idea of the situation, emphasize quietism, claims and taxes, and the people to rest, to take not to interfere in the people's political life and economic life or less interventionist, so as to settle them, to achieved the development of social production.

4. Analysis Taoism influences on female characters in moment in Peking

4.1 Influences of Taoism on moment in Peking

In the history of Chinese novels, many of them was guided by the thoughts of Taoist, including one graceful piece of the greatest work-the Moment in Peking. After reading this novel, we can find many Taoist thoughts and the basic theory of Taoism like: Hands-off, Undisputed run through the book.

The Moment in Peking can be divided into three parts, there are: “Taoist Daughters”, “Courtyard Tragedy”, “Autumn Songs”. In the front of the every part the author cited the Lao Tzu’s words. The book has more than seven million words, and it records some events happened nearly 40 years ago, from the boxer rebellion in 1901 to the eight years Anti-Japanese War, and it make up many characters like Yao Sian, Yao Mulan, Sun Manniang, New Suyun, and so on.

The author used the Taoist thoughts to net this book. Both in characterization and plot arrangement can reflect the Taoist thought. The Taoist thought not only commanded the full text, but also determined the frame structure of the entire article roughly. The author expressed the Taoist thought among the words and the lines, it reflected the Taoist thought in three levels, namely the Taoist chronological life, easy detachment of the outlook on life and the method of gain liberation, spiritual freedom.

4.2 Influences of Taoism on female character

4 | Lu Shibo
In the Taoist theory, the female characters are not dispensable or can be insulted easily, and what’s more, they even have an independent position. They have independent personalities, godhood and independent will. They are important roles with their own independent wishes. One important Taoist thoughts from the theory are about the harmony formed the “Yin and Yang, such as men and women”. Respecting women and treating them with equality like they treat men is the shining part of Taoism. Chinese Taoism has a special cultural style, which enriches the spiritual life of Chinese people and the content of the Chinese traditional culture. (Huang Yanquan, 2001:62-65)

4.2.1 Female psychology

After reading the Moment in Peking, we can find more than one hundred characters including more than 50 female among them, and we can also find the Taoism shown a lot in the whole book. Every character was influenced more or less by the Taoism. For instance, there is no doubt that Mulan is the central figure in the book, for someone says “Mulan is a perfect image of Chinese women in Lin’s works.” She is under the influence of her father Yao Sian to recognize thing in a special way, she always has an insight into the surroundings and finds the best way to deal with them. When she finds her husband’s infidelity, she realizes the girl is a young and beautiful college girl while she takes some special actions which are not like the way of some other traditional women. She asks the girl to meet at a restaurant and has a talk with her. After talking with the girl, they incredibly become good friends and Mulan even helps the girl a lot when the girl is in trouble. There is no doubt that Mulan is very smart and patient. (Dusinbere, 1975:33)She knows her husband Sunya’s thoughts, and even knows all about Sunya. She is certain that her husband has cheated on that girl for he considers his wife is a old and ugly woman, so then she takes a different strategy to protect her children and keep the family a complete one, she gives in. On the one hand, we may think that Mulan has no willing to fight, on the other hand, we may feel Mulan’s open-mind.

Another one distinctive character in the novel is Manniang. Manniang and Pingya are childhood sweetheart and innocence of childhood friends to each other. For some reason of her family, she went to the southern areas for a few years. Unfortunately, Pingya is badly ill. His parents wanted to saved his life and they choose “joyous”, which is a traditional way by doing something festive to get rid of Pingya’s illness. As a result, Manniang and Pingya are married. However, things are getting worse. On the night of the wedding day, Pingya passes away. She turns out to be the victim of the feudal and becomes a widow, and what’s worse, she determines to live in widowhood all her life. During the Japanese War of Aggression Against China, the Japanese solider brutally rapes Manniang, and then Manniang has to suicide miserably. Manniang is completely killed by Chinese feudalism system. The system has turned Manniang a total numb, who don't even know live for herself. In Taoism theory, Manniang is a perfect women, she lives according to feudalism system, obeying the the rule of the society. There is no doubt that she is a tragic character.

4.2.2 Female value

In Mulan’s eyes, her value is not only that she is a women, but also she is a normal person. However, Mochou and Manniang are quite different from Mulan, they just lived a traditional life like other traditional Chinese women.

Mulan has a pair of big feet, and she knows a lot about the oracle. She accepts the Chinese traditional school education and also learns the western science and cultural knowledge. There is no doubt that she has both the precious part of tradition like other Chinese women do and the liberal mind like some western women have. Born to be a traditional Chinese woman, Mulan tries her best to be a good wife, a good daughter-in-law, a good daughter, a good mother and a good sister. It is obviously to see that she does them all. Mulan’s father-Yao Sian regards Mulan as one of the most important achievement of his whole life. Each time talking about Mulan, her father often feels so proud of her. Being a elder sister, Mulan is very kind to her younger sister Mochou. When Mochou escapes from her own marriage, Mulan has no choice but to put the bride clothes on and replace her younger sister to get married. Fortunately, her parents-in-law always want their son to marry Mulan in the first. At the beginning of the story, it is said that Pingya should have married Mulan. While a few days later, Manniang comes back from the southern areas. Then Mochou escaped marriage, Mulan has to marry to Sunya. Mulan’s father-in-law and mother-in-law, Mr. Zeng and Mrs. Zeng, are very satisfied with Mulan, after Mulan has become a family member of the Zeng’s, they arrange Mulan to be their housekeeper of the entire family. As expected, Mulan does a great job and the family is in a perfect order. She doesn’t even make her parents-in-low feel any disappointment. Although as Sunya’s wife, Mulan doesn’t love her husband so much,
she still takes all responsibility of being a good wife. She lets her husband to go abroad to study further. When knowing her husband is having an affair, she can also properly deal with it. From all Mulan has done, we can conclude that Mulan is a real good wife. As a mother, Mulan never pays less attention to the her kid’s education. As an independent people, Mulan’s life is very perfect, too.

When she meets Kong Lifu, Kong Lifu is ready to went to the southern areas. Mulan doesn’t prevent Kong like other Chinese traditional women, however, she gives a lot support to Kong for her heart is yearn for what Kong Lifu do. Oracle is a symbol of Chinese civilization which Mulan understands and would like to make some efforts to study it.

On the contrary, the Manniang is totally a traditional Chinese woman. She is the victim of the feudal etiquette, a microcosm of the time. After joyous with Pingya, she becomes a widow, and doesn’t remarry. She spends her remaining years on this feudal family. In fact, she has a chance to revolt, but she doesn’t, for her mind is influenced by the feudal mind deeply.

4.2.3 Female marital view

In this book, most of the characters’ marriages are not a result of free love. Most of them doesn’t escape the form of the feudal marriage, which is always a result to gain the benefit of the big family or some political reasons.

In bystander views, both Mulan’s and Mochou’s marriage are a farces. Sunya and Mulan are innocence of childhood friends. Mulan and Kong Lifu are found congenial to each other. In order to saved Pingya’s life, Mr. Zeng and Mrs. Zeng want “Three Blessings” to be done. Mochou and Synya have been in conflict, so Mochou escaped from her family on the wedding day. Mulan has no choice but to marry to Sunya. When Mulan is a little girl, she get lost with her parents, then she meet Mr. Zeng luckily. Mulan is women who return the hospitality that one has received, so when Mr. Zeng beg she to marry to Pingya, she agrees. Then she marries to Sunya to save the Zengs’. As for she and Kong Lifu, though they love each other, they cannot get together. Between the lover and the benefactor, Mulan chose the latter.

Compared with Mulan, Mochou is much happier. Although she did not marry to her first lover, Sunya, she marry to a man that she loves and admires — Kong Lifu. In her mind, she feels sorry for her elder sister, she knows the relationship between her sister and Kong Lifu which has no way to make it even deeper. As for she and Sunya, they might have been the ideal husband and the perfect wife. But for some small things, they are in a conflict, Mochou runs away from the wedding. Fortunately, Mochou and Kong Lifu respect each other like guests.

At that time, it is not easy for women to have free love, the martial view is rarely known by women. (Zheng Yuedi, 2010:3) Even the love between Mulan and Kong Lifu cannot defeat the feudal forces, for love is always less important than the other things.

5. Conclusion

Moment in Peking is one of the most famous novels of Dr. Lin. The book includes many characters. Taoist thought throughout the book, every character are influenced by Taoist thought more or less. As we all know, in the materialistic dialectics, things have two sides, is not entirely positive role of Taoist thought, also had a negative effect.

On the one hand, the Taoist thought recognized by most of the people, many of them benefit from it. It provided a method to comfort oneself. Mulan and Manniang, life is not plain sailing. Both of them met with big or small setbacks, but they all got through it. This is the natural theory of Taoist thought.

On the other hand, it is hindered the liberation of women. At that moment, western culture and value view entered into China step by step, but Chinese women controlled by thousands years of tradition ideas, the acceptance of western advanced ideas is not high.

The life and fate of those typical female characters in this novel explain the dilemma that Chinese women faced with under the feudal patriarchy and Taoism—to obey or not to obey?

While the western women have peaceful life, they lose freedom and identity, the nonconformist get their freedom and make their voices heard but at painful prices of livelihood and security. Finally, through a Taoist thought reading of Moment in Peking, the paper tries to provide a new understanding of women in Moment in Peking so as to add a different perspective to the research of Lin Yutang’s Taoist thought.
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