
Hidden Patriarchal Mentality Behind Ren's Story

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In Ren's story (*Ren shi zhuan*), Shen Ji-ji depicted a female character with astonishing beauty and abundant personal charisma, Ren. Although Ren was presented as a "woman of the werewolf," her choices and agency still shed light into the interpretation of female characters in classic Chinese literature (Owen 1996, 518). And as Ren's story mainly discussed the theme of romantic relationship, many had traditionally interpreted Ren as the embodiment of females who were brave enough to rebel against feudal ethics and pursue the freedom of love. However, one would have to remind oneself of the time period during which Ren's story was composed to fully understand the true condition in which females lived in. Although the Tang Dynasty "is often depicted as the golden age of Chinese women," this depiction is true only in part (Lewis 2009, 179). Because it was also the period when the commercial market of women became a prominent part of urban life and when women "became economic commodities who were literally bought and sold" and then transferred into households in the form of concubines (Lewis 2009, 180-186). Given this historical background, one should be able to infer that much of the social conversation was still centered around elite men. They not only held privileges in political and economic activities but also had a much stronger voice in the cultural domain. Shen Ji-ji's

depiction of Ren was an example of elite men's attempts at shaping literary female characters in certain ways so to normalize their patriarchal expectations for actual living females.

More importantly, Shen had served as a court historian during Emperor Dezong's time (779-805) (Luo and Ye 2011, 396). This meant that he was also one of the people who benefited from males' dominance in social conversation. This implied that Ren's story could be a product of a traditional patriarchal cultural environment, fulfilling the need of elite men to materialize, neglect, regulate, and control women. Therefore, this paper focuses on examining Ren's story through a feminist lens to reveal the hidden patriarchal mentality throughout this literary work. Specifically, this paper proposes that Ren's story reflected female exploitation and ubiquitous patriarchal mentality during the Tang Dynasty. And the characterization of the main female character, Ren, was built to satisfy the patriarchal desires for possessing females' bodies and controlling their minds. Moreover, many plots that reflected female exploitation further indicated the absence of females' voices in marriages and intimate relationships.

First, the characterization of Ren from the beginning of the story was centered around her physical appearance, more than anything else. Shen Ji-ji described the first encounter between Ren and Zheng, another male character, as "no sooner did he see her than Zheng was infatuated" (Owen 1996, 519). Noticeably, there was also a sense of "sensuality" within Ren's beauty: "in all her movements there was a sensual loveliness that was virtually not of this mortal world" (Owen 1996, 519). This well reflected that Zheng's only concern when pursuing a relationship was whether the woman was physically attractive or not. His pursuit for physical beauty even surpassed the shock and fear that should normally arise upon knowing that this woman was "a fox that often [seduced] men" and not even one of his own kind (Owen 1996, 520).

However, Zheng's pursuit for physical attraction in women was not unique among male characters in Ren's Story. Rather, the other main character, Wei Yin, also expressed the same tendency. A perfect

demonstration would be Wei's reaction upon knowing about the existence of Ren. He first inquired about how she looked like, and then compared her beauty to other women he had encountered. These were all indirect depictions serving to emphasize Ren's "rare beauty." However, they also reflected how males' pursuit of feminine beauty in romantic relationships had resulted in their disregard for females' inner values besides physical appearances. Furthermore, the fact that the two main male characters both exhibited the same tendency to view females in such a way implied that it was universally acceptable for men to do so. Under this highly gendered logic, females were deprived of their own voices but made into symbols of sex to satisfy males' sensual needs. Therefore, when males encountered beautiful females like Ren, all they could think of was to possess her body by having sexual intercourse with her. Zheng's intention was well revealed upon seeing her on the street and on the same day they went to bed together. And Wei's reaction upon seeing Ren further highlighted how females' existence was succumbed to only satisfying males' sensual needs. Ren's physical beauty aroused his sensual needs so much that he attempted to rape a woman that he had never met before.

Indeed, there was a sense of transformation in Wei's character. After being rejected for sexual intimacy with Ren, he "came to love her and honor her," suggesting the possibility of a platonic friendship that departed from the pre-established male-female relations (Owen 1996, 522). However, platonic opposite-sex friendships were normally interpreted based on the equity theory, specifying that "fair relationships occur when the ratios of inputs to outcomes are identical for the two parties" (Messman, Canary, and Hause 2000, 70). In this case, Wei and Ren certainly did not maintain the required equity in their relationship. Wei provided Ren with "all her firewood, grain, and meat" while all Ren needed to do was just allow Wei to go about with her everyday (Owen 1996, 522). Besides materialistic inputs, there was also a lack of description for Ren's feelings towards Wei. Although Ren had expressed her gratification and apology towards Wei for being unable to develop a romantic relationship with him, there was little more than

this. Therefore, it was reasonable to conclude that although their relationship alluded to the possibility of platonic friendship, the conditions did not fully match the requirement for platonic opposite-sex friendships previously discussed.

The story also included a detailed description of how Ren protected herself against Wei's assault. On the surface, it seemed like Ren should be celebrated for her braveness and loyalty towards Zheng. But a comprehensive analysis including Ren's intention and behaviors throughout the story would suggest otherwise. First and foremost, Ren had never been presented as a figure who would be faithful to her partner or a follower of monogamous relationships. She fell easily into a sexual relationship with Zheng. And according to the shop owner that Zheng had inquired, incidences like this had "happen[ed] a few times now," further confirming that Ren should not have suddenly become loyal towards Zheng (Owen 1996, 520). Let alone mentioning that their relationship was built on mere physical attraction rather than solid emotional bonds. The reason that she talked herself out of the situation and stayed loyal to Zheng was only due to pity for Zheng. Her words "Zheng is six feet tall yet is unable to protect a woman—how can he be a real man!" explained the true reason for her rejection of Wei, someone who would be considered as socially and economically superior than Zheng (Owen 1996, 521). In other words, Ren's "loyalty" did not result from her own will but the intention to preserve the dignity and the image of another male character, since having one's romantic partner being humiliated by another person was considered mortifying for a man at that time. Therefore, this very act of a female protecting the sovereignty of her body showcased how males projected highly gendered roles onto female characters to satisfy their desire for owning females' bodies.

Although Ren strongly resisted when Wei tried to force himself onto her, she continued to grow "very familiar and intimate with [him]...except for sexual intimacy" (Owen 1996, 522). This seemed quite paradoxical compared to the image of a loyal female partner who would never betray her significant other, further proving that the character was constructed around a hidden patriarchal mentality.

Moreover, the way Ren treated other female characters in the story continued to highlight the patriarchal and sexually discriminatory logic lurking behind the narrative. In order to show gratefulness for Wei's kindness, Ren even offered to bring other beautiful women including her own cousin, Miss Zhang, to entertain him. She also deceived Chong-nu's family into sending their daughter over to Ren's household, and later Wei impregnated Chong-nu. This morally condemnable act of Ren's further testified that she was a character built entirely around the masculine desires of possessing feminine bodies, as she was willing to inflict harm and exploit other females who were put into situations which she had also experienced. Being deprived of her own feminine voice, Ren became an empty shell, only taking initiatives that followed the hidden patriarchal logic intending to own females' bodies and control their minds.

Besides female characters previously discussed, there was also a female character that was often left out of the discussion about this tale, Zheng's wife. She was also a relative of Wei Yin. This character had never been properly introduced in the story, yet she should not be ignored. Because the theme of female exploitation in this tale did not only apply to certain individuals but to all females as a whole. The male characters took pleasure in females' beauty and bodies, treating them as simply playthings. And this status of being viewed and treated as playthings led to indifference towards rights of the entire feminine collective. Zheng's wife was also a victim of such a highly gendered social system. Although her husband was poor and "lived as a dependent of his wife's family," their standings within the marriage were clearly reversed. Zheng was able to pursue wine and love for pretty women without being concerned about his wife or his wife's family. And as a relative of Zheng's wife, Wei happily colluded with Zheng instead of admonishing Zheng on his wife's behalf. Therefore, it was not hard to tell that there was an overall inattention to females' rights within marriages and romantic relationships. By ignoring the feminine voices, the author presented his readers with this glossed illusion that females were content with such discriminatory treatment and willing to sacrifice

themselves for masculine needs. More importantly, he purposefully constructed Ren, a female character described as supporting and flattering men's exploitation of female bodies, to cover up for the true tension in male-female dichotomy.

The characterization of Ren also perfectly fitted into the images of "virtuous wife" (賢妻) and "sensual woman" (蕩婦) that were often presented as in contrast to one another. These two contrasting images were products of the biased evaluation system of feminine value according to feudal masculine authority. They divided up all females based on these two derogatory images. The "virtuous wife" was loyal and kind, willing to sacrifice herself for her husband and family. The "sensual woman," however, was flirtatious and seductive, readily initiating advances in sexual relations. Under the patriarchal social framework, the former was praised while the latter was condemned. This was because only the "virtuous wife" could fulfill the masculine need to control females and ensure their virginity and fidelity. Simon de Beauvoir theorized that "the woman's body is an object to be purchased" by men (Beauvoir 1949, 507). And through marriage the woman would be "imbued with all of the virtues useful to society, family, and the head of the family, virtues he [the husband] knows how to keep locked in his home" (Beauvoir 1949, 230).

However, the "virtuous wife" alone did not satisfy the masculine desire for possessing as many beautiful female bodies as possible. This dilemma resulted in an internal conflict of males, causing them to despise the "sensual woman" in public while secretly hoping to be with her. Simon de Beauvoir gave an excellent analysis of this mentality: "Man's double demands condemn woman to duplicity: he wants the women to be his own and yet to remain foreign to him; he imagines her as servant and sorceress at the same time. But he admits publicly only to the former desire; the latter is deceitful demand hidden in the depths of his heart and flesh" (Beauvoir 1949, 243). But it was clear that this dilemma was solved in the characterization of Ren in Shen Ji-ji's depictions. The features of "virtuous wife" in Ren were reflected through the plots of Ren rejecting Wei and helping Zheng to earn money

through buying a horse with some disability on one of its legs. Ren's rejection for Wei, who was both socially and economically superior compared to Zheng, was a projection of the idea that a virtuous woman would stick with the man she married no matter what kind of man he was. In this case, Zheng came from an unknown poor family and lived as a dependent of his wife's family. It seemed like he could barely support himself, let alone improving the life circumstances of his partners. But Ren still did not abandon him or pursue a better partner. She even utilized her supernatural power to help Zheng make a huge fortune which improved his economic status. This arrangement was a clear demonstration of Ren corresponding with the image of the "virtuous wife," as she not only displayed fidelity towards her partner but also assisted him into becoming a more dignified person who no longer needed to rely on others to live. Knowing that Zheng was already married, she never showed any jealousy, which was the most common reaction of women within the polygamous familial system in many other similar stories. This sense of forbearance again added to the previously mentioned image of the "virtuous wife," making Ren an idealized symbol of masculine imagination about womanhood.

On the other hand, Ren was also portrayed as a "sensual woman" who was willing to maintain a romantic relationship with Zheng without asking him to marry her as a concubine. She was "flirtatious, forward, and amoral, readily accepting the advances of a stranger" considering the fact that it did not take so long for Zheng to end up on her bed (Hsieh 2008, 98). Although she was extremely beautiful, her beauty was still perceived as a sign of danger. When Wei asked a merchant to deliver some clothes for Ren, the merchant said to Wei, "she is not someone to be kept in the mortal world. I urge you to send her back as soon as possible before some disasters fall on you." (Owen 1996, 524). It was also suggested that Shen Ji-ji was using the character of Ren to "allude to Emperor Xuanzong and the disasters initiated by his infatuation with Yang Guifei," considering that Ren also died in Ma Wei just like Yang Guifei (Hsieh 2008, 99).

In the end of the tale, Ren was killed by a dog and transformed to her original form. Shen Ji-ji was indeed quite brilliant in designing Ren's exit from the story in such a way. Although extramarital affairs were not forbidden at that time, they usually would not last long; especially for a person like Zheng who used to rely on his wife's family and just started his own official career. Therefore, there would be only two possible endings if this story occurred in reality. Zheng could either choose to marry this beautiful werewolf as a concubine which would probably result in discontent from his wife's family, or he could desert this relationship and leave. It was obvious that the second ending would disrupt the innocence of the moral images of male characters that the author was trying to convey. Therefore, having Ren killed by a dog not only preserved the innocence of masculinity but also helped the male character in the story to effectively end a risky extramarital relationship without being burdened with any guilt or condemnation. Another reason that the author had to end Ren's life in this way was to connect back to the image of "sensual woman" associated with Ren. Throughout the story, Ren was only loved and valued for beauty and supernatural power. There was nothing internal about her, such as personality or morals, that attracted Wei and Zheng initially. Although the author described that there was friendship between Wei and Ren later, such relationship was built on the fact that Wei saw no way to be sexually intimate with Ren after his attempted rape. Therefore, she remained as a "sensual woman" who was meant to be fooled and played around in romantic relationships according to the patriarchal mentality behind this story.

Last but not the least, there was one more masculine voice in the story: Shen Ji-ji himself. By creating this highly idealized female character revolving around various masculine imagination about females, Shen Ji-ji also revealed his own moral orientation and his identification with the idea of male dominance. Noticeably, at the end of the story Shen Ji-ji made such comments: "I am struck that such humanity could be found in the feelings of a creature so alien...Among women today there are those who are not her equal" (Owen 1996, 525). These comments perfectly showcased that the author was not satisfied

with females in reality. Therefore, he placed characteristics he wished to see in women into the character of Ren. This also explained why Ren was highly gendered and all her actions served to satisfy patriarchal needs. Ren was described as being beautiful, virtuous, loyal, and docile. These characteristics seemed almost too good to be true, because it basically fulfilled all characteristics males tried to pursue in their female partners.

To include all the characteristics of the perfect female partner, the author employed special narrative strategies which provided him with more space in building up this character. Starting off with the story, the author specified that Ren was not a human by identifying her as a “werefolk” (Owen 1996, 518). It was suggested that he was “clearly equating his fox heroine with a category of important yet marginal women including singers, courtesans, and prostitutes” to highlight this ignored stratum of the society (Hsieh 2008, 100). His word choice for the surname “Ren” (任) which pronounced the same as the word “human” (人) in Chinese language also implied the same intention. However, Shen Ji-ji eventually decided to describe Ren as a fox spirit instead of a prostitute. This could be interpreted as one of his narrative strategies to expand the space of characterizing Ren. In Chinese literature, foxes were often portrayed as being able to “[metamorphose] into handsome men or beautiful women in order to pursue sexual relationships with humans of the opposite sex” (Kang 2006, 20). This could be dated back to the fourth century and “a classic example [was] the story of ‘Azi (the Purple)’” (Kang 2006, 20). It was also believed that “fox spirits might appear as women or men and transform themselves into youths or elders; they are just as variable as human beings themselves” (Kang 2006, 2). This sense of variability and malleability helped Shen Ji-ji to shape Ren’s character in whatever ways he wanted. Moreover, the colloquial expression of “*huli jing*” (狐狸精) which refers to fox spirits connoted “a dualism recognized by many: the enchantment of a female beauty and her power of lustful destruction” (Kang 2006, 2). This connotation attached to the image of fox spirits

later assisted Shen Ji-ji to incorporate the characteristics of a “sensual woman” into Ren’s character. Besides physical charm, fox spirits and especially nine-tail foxes were regarded as “auspicious creatures” and symbols of fertility as their tails represented “abundant progeny” (Strassberg 2002, 89). This connotation imbedded in the image of fox spirits made the author more convincing when illustrating how Ren utilized her supernatural power to bring wealth to Zheng and how she matched the characteristics of the “virtuous wife” according to patriarchal standards. By incorporating the implied connotations in the image of fox spirits into Ren’s character, Shen Ji-ji was better able to build up the idealized female character to satisfy the unbridled desires of the patriarchal collective including himself and his potential audience. Moreover, the fact that Shen Ji-ji depicted Ren as a non-human spirit instead of a prostitute or courtesan commonly found in the society implied his belief that it was almost impossible to find a woman who could be a “virtuous wife” and a “sensual woman” at the same time in reality.

By reading and analyzing Ren’s Story through a feminist lens, it was obvious to see the character of Ren was not a true reflection of females’ self-sacrificing for love or reciprocating faith in romantic relationships. Rather, Ren’s character was an idealized creation of the hidden patriarchal mentality which aimed to confine, control, and exploit femininity. This figure was created by mixing the two images of “virtuous wife” and “sensual woman”, which perfectly fitted into the masculine imagination of the perfect female partner. Moreover, as a female figure, Ren’s initiative and morality was completely deprived. Her actions such as assistance for exploiting and inflicting harm on other beautiful women rendered her a mere carrier of masculine desires without any subject consciousness. Her appearance, existence, and even disappearance in the plots of the tale all served to straighten out the sexually discriminatory logic that the patriarchal authority employed. However, this logic was not created by the author himself. It was rooted in the masculine collective unconsciousness. This was also why patriarchy was so fearful for females in feudal Chinese society. Besides

being confined in romantic relationships, marriages, and families, they were even deprived of their true voices and thoughts in the literary realm. Their positions were replaced with imaginary female figures who exhibited submission, docility, and flattery towards masculine desires. Behind such figures was the absence of feminine voices and inattention to feminine appeals. However, by analyzing and breaking down such figures like Ren, the omnipresent patriarchal mentality and expectations that females faced during the Tang Dynasty could be revealed.

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