



## **Liniang Du and Portia: An Interpretation of the Triumph of Women’s Rights in a Patriarchal Society**

LI Xuemei<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> College of Chinese Literature, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing, China.  
 \* Corresponding author.

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### **Abstract**

Xianzu Tang and William Shakespeare were the representative figure of 17th century in both English and Chinese academic circles respectively. There are thought-provoking in the comparative study of two writings. In this paper, by comparing the Xianzu Tang’s *Liniang Du in The Peony Pavilion* and Portia in William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* in the marriage on the common pursuit of love, we study their resistance against the patriarchal, dominate their marriage and help their husbands. They show off women’s wisdom and courage and they are the image of women in the patriarchal society’s victory.

**Key words:** Patriarchal society; Women’s rights; *The Peony Pavilion*; *The Merchant of Venice*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Xianzu Tang and William Shakespeare both have important positions in the history of Chinese and Western literature. They were born at the same time: Xianzu Tang was born in the 29th year of Jiajing of Emperor

Shizong in the Ming Dynasty (1550), Shakespeare was born in 1564 of the reign of Elizabeth I, and both died in the same year (1616). One was a famous opera writer in Ming Dynasty, who was one of the most philosophical writers in Chinese cultural history. One is an outstanding example of English Renaissance drama. And Xianzu Tang has the name of “an Oriental William Shakespeare (Li. 2010, p.72),” and it can be seen that the two people in the world literature history of the common position. Comparative literature is essentially a comparative study of culture.

Today, more than 400 years after the death of Xianzu Tang and William Shakespeare, the comparative study of their works will further contribute to the integration of Chinese and Western cultures. This paper only studies the two heroines in *the Peony Pavilion* and *the Merchant of Venice*, their representative works, and reveals the author’s humanistic thinking and Chinese and Western women’s attitude towards marriage and love through their pursuit of love.

In the Ming Dynasty opera circle and even in the whole history of Chinese literature, *The Peony Pavilion* by Xianzu Tang is dazzling like a bright pearl. Xianzu Tang himself also said: “For my our dreams of life, I am proud of *the Peony Pavilion*.” (*Preface Qiu Maobo draft*) For the interpretation of Liniang Du in Xianzu Tang’s *The Peony Pavilion*, there are comments that “Liniang Du is an artistic symbol of breaking the feudal bondage and longing for individual freedom (Li. 2010, p.72).” Portia in *the Merchant of Venice*, William Shakespeare’s romantic comedy masterpiece, is also praised as “the most outstanding intellectual goddess in Shakespeare’s plays (Wang. 2013, p.58).” However, there is much to ponder by comparing them side by side and referring to the background of the times.

## 2. THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF CHINA AND BRITAIN IN THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### 2.1 The Social Background of China in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century

*The Book of Rites* says: "Food and lust are also human's great desires." Confucianism makes the human's natural behaviors ritualized. In the Song and Ming dynasties, the ideas had developed into the Neo-Confucianism: such thoughts opposed "human desire", which was the natural demand of human nature, to "the heavenly principle", which was innate, quiet and undesirous of human nature. Xi Zhu, a famous Neo-Confucianist had the saying: "To obey the heavenly principle, while destroy human desire." The specific content was to follow the three principles and five permanent moral codes of traditional society—"the ministers obey the king, son obeys his father, and wife obey her husband" had become the universal standard of moral practice. The whole society was further strengthened into a patriarchal society dominated by men.

This view was combined with the chastity view of women that "starvation is a small matter, but mismanagement is a big matter". Tens of thousands of young women could only live according to the set path, and the richness of individual life was denied.

The establishment of Jiuyuan Lu and Yangming Wang's thoughts—"Mind School" had revealed the enlightenment of individual liberation and human rights equality.

Opposing "dogmatic prohibition" and advocating "autonomy" were the full play of Yangming Wang's Mind School theory "conscience is your own standard", which was highlighted as the strong demand of personality liberation.

Xianzu Tang lived in the late Ming Dynasty, which had ruled for more than 200 years and was riddled with holes and decayed. The emergence of capitalism in the economy also gave rise to the emergence of the corresponding liberal thought.

Xianzu Tang was deeply influenced by the anti-neo-Confucianism, anti-tradition and anti-autocracy thought advocated by the Mind School of Yangming Wang. Xianzu was closely associated with Zhi Li, a prominent anti-feudal thinker, whose philosophical thoughts led him to form the idea of opposing Neo-Confucianism and pursuing individual liberation.

Through Liniang Du, the embodiment of "supreme feeling", *The Peony Pavilion* embodies Xianzu Tang's thought of opposing reason with feeling: Liniang Du's experience from birth to death and from death to life also shows the victory of female personality liberation in such a male-dominated society.

### 2.2 The Social Background of Britain in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century

England at the same time was in the reign of Elizabeth I, the last Tudor monarch (1559-1603).

This period is known as the "Golden Age", and it was also an important contradiction turning period in British history: the monarchy began to transform into parliamentary sovereignty; in the feudal economic form has sprouted the infant bud of capitalism; the defeat of the Spanish Armada set Britain on the path to maritime supremacy; the American colonies began to be established.

Known as "The Virgin Queen," the Queen Elizabeth remained unmarried throughout her life. She used her marriage as a bargaining chip to maximize Britain's national interests by balancing power in continental Europe, especially in the two great powers of France and Spain. Britain became the richest and most powerful country in the world.

During the reign of Elizabeth I, the English Renaissance was at its peak, known as the "Elizabethan Age" in literary history.

It was a time of unprecedented prosperity in English poetry, prose and drama. Literature, especially poetry and drama, entered a golden age. The policy of enlightened tolerance in culture led to the vigorous development of literature and art, and the wide spread of humanism. During this period, the culture of England reached a peak, with the emergence of such famous figures as William Shakespeare and Francis Bacon.

From the female characters portrayed in Shakespeare's romantic comedies, such as Helena and Hermia in "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*", Portia in "*The Merchant of Venice*", Olivia and Viola in "*Twelfth Night*", and Roselin in "*As You Like It*", we can conclude that "the Renaissance era is the era of women's liberation (Zhang, 2004, p.10)."

## 3. FIGHT AGAINST THE PATRIARCHY -- THE FIRST STEP OF LINIANG DU AND PORTIA'S FEMINIST VICTORY

### 3.1 Liniang Du's Revolt Against the Patriarchy

In *The Peony Pavilion*, the protagonist's father, Bao Du, is the representative of feudal patriarchal system and the opposite of Du Liniang's "love". In the family, the rigid thought of Bao Du, Liniang's strict father, asked Madame "how does Liniang kill her time the Spring?"

When he knew his daughter dozed off after embroidering, he blamed his wife, "it is a bad upbringing to let her be lazy (Tang, 2011, p.7)!" He asked her daughter to embroider or to read in spare time. He wished Liniang to get married a scholar family to make him glorious.

Beautiful Niang grew up to 16 years old, but "her hands are not allowed to take the swing, feet are not

allowed to step on the garden road(Xianzu Tang, 2011:11).” She never knew that there was a garden with beautiful flowers blooming in the backyard, and such beautiful scenery was ruined.

Such a cold image was the representative of the patriarchy at that time. In such a bleak reality, the dream of youth germination of Liniang was impossible to realize, the “dream” was helpless, the dream was shattered, and there was no chance to love, only to fight with death.

After Liniang’s death, a poor young man who prepared to take examination lived in the back garden, and he got a self-portrait of Liniang. He loved the lady on the painting and summoned the day and night.

Liniang did not lost her soul after her death, and the soul became a pure spiritual body firm faith. Missing her family, the soul of Liniang wandered into the back garden. She was moved by Mengmei Liu’s deep feeling, and revived! It showed the inner meaning of the free flying of individual will.

But Bao Du--Liniang’s father didn’t accept his daughter’s revival. He felt his authority had been challenged when Mengmei Liu got the number 1 in the examination. Bao Du called his revived daughter Liniang “a lust demon (Tang, 2011, p.210 )”and asked the emperor to kill her! In fact, all he did was afraid of lost his reputation. What a grim and unsentimental look he had!

Liniang showed a blatant resistance to the patriarchy: in the golden Hall, she was not afraid to face the emperor, and calmly accepted the ghosts of the resolution. She didn’t conceal that she had died of desiring for love and revived for love.

When she was blamed by the emperor that she couldn’t get married without the permission of parents and the participation of matchmaker, she refuted that her marriage was to pay the debt of Mengmei Liu’s reliving her, which was fit for the virtue of righteousness.

Finally, the emperor announced the rebirth of Liniang. She won the resistance to the patriarchy, and finally realized the existence of self.

### 3.2 Portia’s Revolt Against Patriarchy

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia, the daughter of a wealthy family, was also in a passive situation controlled by her father at the beginning. Her father’s will required the suitors to draw lots to decide the daughter’s life. Portia sighed: “I can neither choose the one I like nor reject the one I dislike; A living daughter’s will, but a dead father’s will to check (William Shakespeare, translated by Zhu, 2012, p.127).”

Faced with so many suitors, Portia could neither refuse nor choose, and was tired of the men who came from all directions.

In keeping with her father’s will, and in keeping the suitors from choosing the casket in which her picture was placed, Portia took advantage of the weakness of each suitor and turned them away.

Like Penelope, who faithfully waited for Odysseus to return home by using her wisdom to repel more than a hundred suitors, Portia waited for her ideal husband to appear. And such independent choice of marriage is achieved by overcoming the obstacles set by the patriarchy.

When her ideal husband candidate Bassanio proposed marriage, Portia secretly helped him make the right choice: she had the band sing songs that ended with the same rhyme of “lead” in the first three lines, so Bassanio chose the lead box so that Portia could marry the man of her choice.

Such a clever arrangement not only allowed Portia observe her father’s will, but also chose a satisfactory husband. She had got the victory against the patriarchy.

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## 4. DOMINATING THE MARRIAGE -- THE SECOND STEP OF LINIANG DU AND PORTIA’S FEMINIST VICTORY

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### 4.1 Liniang Du Dominated Her Marriage

In ancient Chinese society, women were always attached to men. The traditional ethics has formulated the “three obedience” for women: “A woman has the righteousness of three obedience, but no special way. Therefore, if he did not marry his father, he married his husband, and his husband died from his son (Zheng, 2008, p.2711).”

For women in ancient society, they could not choose a husband, and the choice of husband could only be arranged by their parents, while the match of family rank was the standard of ideal marriage in feudal times. Most women found out what their husbands looked like on their wedding night. It was their destiny to obey their husbands in marriage. Under the premise that women did not have free emotional life, it was meaningless to talk about women’s personal love.

The emergence of Yangming Wang’s mind theory in Ming Dynasty set off a new trend of pursuing individual liberation and free feelings, which had a strong impact on the traditional Confucian ethics. *The Peony Pavilion* shows Du Liniang’s initiative in the pursuit of ideal love, becoming a representative of female consciousness in the literary world. And she also demonstrates the dominance of women in the pursuit of marriage.

In *the Peony Pavilion*, Mengmei Liu picked up the self-portrait of Liniang Du. He fell in love with beauty and was fascinated with her skill of painting. So he praised and called the lady day and night. The soul of Liniang was moved by his feeling. Mengmei Liu promised to marry her legally; and Liniang told him that she could relive with the help of Mengmei Liu. Mengmei Liu dig the grave to open the coffin and feed the body medicine. Finally Liniang reborn.

Liniang Du has been reborn by virtue of her individual spiritual strength. When Mengmei Liu asked for marriage,

she wanted to get her parents' permission. Some critics thought she did not get rid of the tragic fate of women in the feudal society. But in my opinion, Liniang's efforts to get the recognition of the real society showed her fighting spirit-to dominate her own marriage. In such an active pursuit of happiness marriage, she has been in a leading position, highlighting women's pursuit of liberation and equality.

#### 4.2 Portia Dominated Her Marriage

Belmont in *the Merchant of Venice* was different from male-dominated Venice. It is a female-dominated world, full of warmth, friendship, romance, moonlight and music. Although Portia's father's will left her daughter in the grip of male power, Portia used her wisdom to choose the husband she wanted.

Portia had a humble statement to her husband, "I am just an uneducated, unenlightened woman... this house, these servants and me, are yours, my husband (William Shakespeare, translated by Zhu, 2012, p.157)." But such a statement can be regarded as the strategy and means used by women to get along with men. By using such self-deprecation and flattery, women can make men complacent and fall into the trap of women's devious gestures.

Portia verbally claimed that all the property and servants were at Bassanio's disposal, but in fact Bassanio had no "power." When Antonio's bad news came to Belmont, Bassanio had no choice but to turn to Portia for help. Portia help her husband to save his friend, and she gave a ring to Bassanio, "with this ring I give you all this; If you let the ring go from your side, or lost it, or gave it away, it would spell the ruin of your love, and I could blame you for it (William Shakespeare, translated by Zhu, 2012, p.157)." It was a trap she had set to give her the upper hand in the marriage when Bassanio made a mistake-the loss of the ring means the dissolution of the engagement.

At that time, there was a deep friendship among men of the same class. Men would spare money, even their lives for the friendship. Such a masculine affection would surely destroy the conjugality between Portia and Bassanio.

So later in court of Venice, she had a plan to ask for the ring, letting Bassanio fall into the passive position of losing his wife's gift. The husband had only hurriedly sworn, begging his wife to forgive him. And Antonio, too, was anxious to make another oath to guarantee that Bassanio would never again deliberately betray Portia. In this way Portia solved all the problems that might have threatened her marriage and was firmly at the head of the family.

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## 5. ASSIST HUSBAND--THE THIRD STEP OF LINIANG DU AND PORTIA'S FEMINIST VICTORY

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### 5.1 Liniang Du Assisted Her Husband

When showing Liniang Du's pursuit of love, Xianzu Tang

repeatedly explained that the relationship between Liniang Du and Mengmei Liu stems from true love, common interests and destiny of being married.

Liniang Du was the descendant of Du Fu, an excellent poet in Tang Dynasty and she had profound family learning. she wrote the beauty hairpin handwriting which amazed her master. Even Mengmei Liu was a poor scholar, he was the descendant of Zongyuan Liu, a famous scholar in Tang Dynasty. Both of Liniang Du and Mengmei Liu love poetry: Liniang had a dream that Mengmei invited her to write poems; while Mengmei got the self-portrait of Liniang, he admired her beautiful appearance and the elegant handwriting. Deciding that the woman in the painting was a perfect match for all her talents, Mengmei liu called the lady day and night, which moved the spirit of Liniang Du.

Xianzu Tang did not design this doomed marriage into a smooth combination—such as Li niang Du hid the shocking experience of revival to have a happy life with Mengmei as a couple, but let Liniang Du urged her husband to take the fame examination, in order to obtain the recognition of the family and society. The happy ending of winning the prize was old-fashioned, but on the other hand, it also reflected the author's good wishes for women to actively pursue a happy marriage. It conformed the traditional Chinese aesthetic standards and was accepted by the audience.

When the emperor decided that Liniang Du was a person, the stubborn Bao Du wanted Liniang to get divorced. Liniang reflected her father and defended her marriage. Such a clear answer was not only a statement of his love and righteousness, as a woman with independent personality, but also a reward for Mengmei Liu's firm support and sincere love for her. Liniang Du had a unique educational effect on women in Ming and Qing Dynasties with her own success.

### 5.2 Portia Assisted Her Husband

Portia in *the Merchant of Venice* showed her virtue. She instructed finance Bassanio to choose the right casket, and Bassanio was freed from the heavy debts of his extravagance. When Bassanio told her that his best friend Antonio had fallen into debt, Portia decisively sent Bassanio with money to help his friend to pay off the debt. How generous she was!

In order to save her husband's friend, Portia dressed up as "Dr. Bellario", in the Venetian court and launched a war of words with Shylock. When Shylock insisted on taking a pound of Antonio's flesh, Portia became merciless, pointing out that if Shylock let Antonio shed a single drop of blood, his land and property, according to the law of Venice, would be confiscated. Shylock had no choice but to accept mediation.

Portia's steely will and ruthless judgment were in line



with the values advocated by the patriarchal society, and her style has won the praise of people in this patriarchal world. She won women's rights in a patriarchal world by helping her husband solve problems!

## 6. CONCLUSION

By comparing Liniang Du in *The Peony Pavilion* and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, we can see that both Chinese and western women had been constrained and suppressed by male power and patriarchy in their pursuit of personality liberation and marriage happiness. In the end, women showed their wisdom and got happy ending. The novels had promoted the women's liberation in China and Britain respectively.

With the development of society, the status of women has been greatly improved. However, women have faced some inequality nowadays: men take it for granted that women should do housework; we can find the income discrimination that women tend to be paid much less than men for the same work.

Women should show strong perseverance and excellent wisdom in the process of pursuing a happy life, and finally break through the bondage of male power and obtain happiness!

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