

Analysis of the Ugly Female Images in "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio" from the Perspective of Bourdieu's Sociological Theory

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Abstract: *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* is a collection of classical Chinese short stories created by Pu Songling, a Qing Dynasty novelist in China. It is known as a representative work of ancient Chinese classical short stories. Since its inception, it has been loved by the public and subsequently translated into multiple languages, spreading overseas. The English version of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, translated by British sinologist Minford in 2006, was published by Penguin Publishing, a leading publishing house in the UK, and is listed as one of the Penguin Classic series. This article will analyze the unique translation behavior of Minford's translation from the perspective of Bourdieu's sociological theory. In *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, Pu Songling portrays a series of ugly female characters, such as Lin Shi, Lv Wubing, Qiao Nu, etc. Although these women are not beautiful in appearance, they possess a beautiful mind of wisdom, kindness, and righteousness. Pu Songling used the method of comparing beauty and ugliness to describe them, greatly enhancing the artistic charm of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, while expressing his own ideals and reflecting his unique aesthetic pursuit of progressive women's views.

Keywords: *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*; Ugly women; Wisdom; Kindness; Renyi.

1. Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu's theory is the inspirational root of the framework and thus is clarified at first. This part is the concrete analysis model for John Minford's translation.

2. Introduction of Pierre Bourdieu's Theory

Pierre Bourdieu is an outstanding French sociologist, anthropologist, philosopher, and public intellectual. He, on a par with Anthony Giddens and Jurgen Habermas, is recognized as one of the three leading figures in modern European sociological academia. His research unifies different disciplines beyond their divisions, namely politics, history, anthropology, sociology, literature, law, linguistics and so on. Bourdieu's best known book is *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* published in 1979. The main idea is that different tastes themselves are the acts of social positioning. Other important works include *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, *In Other Words: Essays toward a Reflective Sociology*, *Language and Symbolic Power*, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, *Free Exchange*, *Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* and *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. His works have laid a firm foundation for his academic framework of views, namely the constructive structuralism that casts aside the dichotomy of subjectivism and objectivism and avoids endless disputes derived from the binary opposites of individual and society. Furthermore, he adopts an interactive view for the relationship between the individual and the society. More accurately, the individual and the society are not isolated from each other in a sociological analysis. Hence his theory is widely studied and applied in the analysis of various academic topics.

3. Bourdieu's Sociological Theory Applied in the Research

There are altogether three core notions applied in the research: capital, field and habitus. The ensuing part is a clear introduction of these concepts. (1) Capital Bourdieu points out that there are altogether four kinds of capital in a society: economic capital, social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital. The economic capital, as the term implies, is institutionalized in the form of property right. It can be calculated and measured by specific numbers. The social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are related to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships. The cultural capital, institutionalized by education qualifications, under certain circumstance can be transformed into economic capital. "The symbolic capital, or the use of symbols to legitimate the possession of varying levels and configurations of the other three types of capital." (Turner, 2004, p. 496) All forms of the capital can be changed into another one, but only to a certain extent. For instance, if one is a well-educated intellectual since his childhood, he could be hired and get paid as a professor at any university. In this way his cultural capital is converted into economic capital. The distribution of different capital is uneven in reality and naturally leads to ferocious struggles in different fields. Any agent, whether admits it or not, is involved in the conflicts and influenced by them. Hence the analysis of different capital struggles in different fields is necessary in the research. (2) Field Bourdieu uses the concept of fields to study the space of human practice. Its features can be concluded as follows:

"The field is a network of relations among the objective positions within it. These relations exist apart from individual consciousness and will. They are not interactions or intersubjective ties among individuals. The occupants of positions may be either agents or institutions, and they are constrained by the structure of the field. There are a number

of semi-autonomous field in the social world, all with their own specific logics and all generating among actors a belief about the things that are at stake in a field.”(Ritzer, 2000, p. 401)

Each field has its special operation rules and relatively independent mechanism. The agents in a field have their positions and the relationship among agents is not subjective. Moreover, every agent in the field is in the competition of obtaining higher position by making good use of his or her own capital, whose process even extends to the reproduction of a different capital. Therefore to analyze an agent in a specific field is correlated with the capital and the transformation of a different capital would in turn influence the position of an agent in the field. (3) Habitus The habitus in Bourdieu’s theory focuses on the individual’s choice and behaviour by probing into the past. In his book, he demonstrates his idea as follows:”The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices- more history- in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the “correctness” of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.”(Bourdieu, 1990/1980)

From the above, there are at least three features that should be noticed. First, one’s habitus is formed by his or her experience in the past and will influence his or her future thought and action. Thus the analysis of one’s past is indispensable for understanding his behaviour at present and in the future. Secondly, the habitus, despite its uniqueness for a single person, also encapsulates a group of similar people’s practice. To put it simply, to figure out one’s habitus needs careful study of the influence of his or her social circle. Thirdly, the habitus is transferable from one field to another, since the habitus can be observed from one’s lifestyle, language style, personal taste for music, informal interpersonal skills and so on. For example, if one has a clear classification of his clothes and shoes and always cleans his room to make sure his belongings in order, his habitus might make him a picky purchasing manager in his career. Hence the observation of a translator’s daily life might be useful to explain some of his unique translation behaviour. From what has been summarized above, the integrated notions- capital, field and habitus-provide a general thinking mode for the research but the specific framework has the following detailed backup logic. (1) The field, from a macro-level, can be divided into economic, political and literature fields for locating John Minford’s position in different struggles. This part would relate the real historical situation and national contrast to the specific analysis. (2) To find out the peculiarity hidden behind his translation behaviour, apart from the close text reading in Chapter Four, it can be traced back in the capital struggles among different agents surrounding John Minford, which more precisely refers to publishing agency, sponsors and readers. This part would probably answer some of the research questions. (3) Inspired by the micro-level concept- habitus, the further study of John Minford’s habitus in Chapter Five would help to expound the result of translation behaviour analysis in Chapter Four. John Minford’s habitus analysis is divided into three parts: family and education, personal character and life and academic experience. After stringing up the overall analysis, the conclusion part is loaded with reflection of the weakness of the research pattern and further possible research topics,

which may draw more attention to the combination of sociology and translation studies for later research models.

4. Appreciating the Ugly Women in Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio

In Pu Songling’s classic work “Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio”, we can appreciate the various forms of female images. These women usually have a commonality, which is that they are as beautiful as peaches and plums and as beautiful as immortals. However, in the chapter “Strange Tales from a Liaozhai” where there are countless beautiful women, there are several female characters who are quite unique. They do not have beautiful faces or graceful figures, and some are even ugly. However, the artistic images of these ugly women in Liaozhai shine brilliantly, surpassing those of the enchanting flower demons and fox fairies.

4.1. The Wisdom of Ugly Women

When it comes to “intelligence and cleverness,” people often have beautiful and playful female images in their minds. Pu Songling is also an ordinary person, and he has the habit of imagining ordinary people. Therefore, in Pu Songling’s works, many intelligent beauties such as Yingning and Xiaocui will be found. However, Pu Songling is not just an ordinary person. In his works, ugly women can still be intelligent and have a broad mind, deep understanding of righteousness, and reflect a kind of great wisdom. The story of “Lin Shi” in Liaozhai portrays such an intelligent woman. Lin’s neck was injured, so “only the head was pulled by the neck scar, often looking left.” [1] Lin felt that her appearance was ugly, so she began to arrange for her husband to marry her. However, her husband Qi Anqi deeply felt Lin’s loyalty and love, and refused to remarry. So, Lin began to use her brain and admonished her husband with a smile to do things as a husband and wife at night: “Those who come from rural families, it is unknown whether they are young or beautiful, and it is customary to sow seeds. The time for evening plowing has come.” [1] When her husband went to bed in the dark, she replaced herself with a maid named Haitang, who had been in contact for several months, but her husband did not know the details. She was worried that her husband would sell Haitang because she was pregnant, so she secretly bought a wet nurse and took Haitang’s two sons, one daughter, and three children to her mother’s house to raise. In order to continue the family’s good fortune, the Lin family “transplanted flowers and trees”, which can be said to be well intentioned. They hid their children to protect their maid Haitang from being abandoned from the family, while also continuing to “sow the common law that cannot be violated”. This delaying strategy is so ingenious. Relying on the transfer of space to avoid conflicts and filling gaps with the passage of time, Lin’s wisdom is not small wisdom, but rather a great wisdom with a long-term vision. Pu Songling wrote at the end of the article: “In ancient times, there were virtuous concubines like a forest, which can be said to be holy!” [1] Despite her ugly appearance, she harbored a deep heart of wisdom. This seemingly contrasting image subverts the aesthetic habits of ordinary people, breaks the inherent mode of “adding icing on the cake”, and makes the character image of the ugly woman three-dimensional and full, leaving a deep impression and endless aftertaste.

4.2. The Goodness of Ugly Women

Kindness can be said to be the highest level of virtue in human nature, and it is also the most concentrated expression of women's inner beauty. Goodness and beauty always seem to be good sisters, which is because writers like to highly unify the external beauty and internal beauty of women when portraying characters. However, Pu Songling did not blindly create facial makeup, as long as she had an honest and kind heart, "ugly women" could also become "typical". "Lv Wubing" is such a work. Lv Wubing is indeed not a beautiful woman. Her clothes are simple and clean, but slightly black and juicy, resembling a poor family girl. She also had a great deal of self-awareness. When her son Sun Qi, whom she sought refuge with, proposed to send a sedan chair to hire her, she said, "If you think you are inferior, how dare you hope for the enemy's body? If you talk about driving before filing, you should not hold a book." As a concubine, Wu Bing and the main wife Xu got along well, and even regarded Xu's child Ajian as her own flesh and blood. After the passing of Xu, Sun Gongzi married the beautiful but kind-hearted Wang. She harassed Lv Wubing with all her tricks and mistreated Ajian, causing his child to suffer from palpitations. Finally, the child was frightened and passed out. Wu Bing and his wet nurse were stranded in the wilderness, feeling helpless. The woman covered her eyes and said, "You take good care of your child. I'll go find his father." After seeing Sun Qi, "The woman shook hands and choked up, unable to speak. After a long time, Fang fell silent and said, 'I have gone through a thousand hardships, and fled to Yang with my son.' The sentence was not over, and I burst into tears and fell to the ground. This vivid and vivid passage vividly portrays Lv Wubing's burning anxiety. In 'Strange Stories from a Liaozhai' Among them, Lv Wubing's goodness is a label characteristic. She not only unconditionally loves Sun Qi, but also pours a lot of love into the Xu family's child Ajian, who has no blood relationship with her. She tries everything possible to save her life, and even becomes anxious to the point of being "speechless". This is how kind and benevolent it is. On the other hand, Wang's sharpness and harshness are a huge contrast. Having good intentions turns ugliness into beauty, while harboring evil in one's heart turns beauty into ugliness.

4.3. The Benevolence and Righteousness of Ugly Women

Qiao Nu is the ugliest female character in Pu Songling's works. "Qiao was born on the plain, and there was a woman who was black and ugly: with a narrow nose and a limp foot." [1] However, in the stories of Liaozhai, there are few people as kind, loyal, and righteous as Qiao Nu. Here, Pu Songling portrays an outstanding woman who, despite her ugly appearance, is kind, just, loyal, virtuous, and dares to resist feudal ethics. The ugliness of Qiao Nu is greater than that of Lin Shi and Lv Wubing, which can be said to be both cruel and ugly. However, as the plot of the novel develops, Qiao Nu's virtues are gradually demonstrated. After the death of Qiao's husband, Mu Sheng, a scholar surnamed Meng greatly appreciated Qiao and intended to marry her. However, Qiao politely refused and prioritized the virtues of a virtuous woman over marriage. However, after Meng Sheng's unfortunate death, Qiao Nu was extremely sorrowful because "her heart had already promised it." [1] In order to repay Meng Sheng's kindness, Qiao Nu overcame various

difficulties and helped the Meng family recover a large amount of industry from the hands of scoundrels. With such dedication to the deceased, Qiao Nu's benevolent and righteous heart began to emerge. Qiao Nu brought Meng Sheng's son, Aconitum, home to raise him and hired a teacher to teach him how to read, while allowing her child to work in the fields. After the Aconitum grew up, Qiao Nu accumulated family wealth for it, repaired the courtyard, and hired a wife. It is so virtuous and selfless to repay the kindness of a momentary encounter with a lifetime, sacrificing everything for oneself to fulfill the good life of others. It can be said that benevolence and righteousness are fully fulfilled. However, even so, Qiao Nu still prioritized chastity and demanded to be buried in the Mu family after death. Such a strong and resolute woman is rare in ancient Chinese novels, even a man and a man cannot match. She embodies the noble virtues of being a virgin, a martyr, a loving mother, and a virtuous wife, leaving a lasting impression on readers with an aura that is no less impressive than that of other women in Pu Songling's works.

4.4. Reasons for Pu Songling's Writing of Ugly Women

Why did Pu Songling take a different approach to shaping the artistic image of ugly women? Firstly, Pu Songling is well versed in the artistic expression of the contrast between beauty and ugliness. "Ugliness is right beside beauty, deformity is close to beauty, vulgarity is hidden behind sublimity, evil and good coexist, darkness and light coexist." [2] Secondly, The contrast between beauty and ugliness can often make beauty more beautiful and ugliness more ugly; Beauty and ugliness can also transform into each other under certain specific circumstances, and the contrast and mutual transformation between beauty and ugliness can produce extremely strong artistic effects. For example, Wang's "ugly behavior" highlights Lv Wubing's "virtues" and adds to the weight of beauty. "He concentrated some astonishing beauty on an unattractive woman, which can be said to be unparalleled." [3] "He used the ugliness of the character's appearance to contrast the beauty of the soul, giving these images an extraordinary artistic charm." [4] However, the true intrinsic motivation behind Pu Songling's writing in this way is his progressive view on women. Women in feudal society rarely had the right to be human. Under the constraints of divine, imperial, tribal, and patriarchal power, they always played the role of being insulted, harmed, and enslaved. However, in Pu Songling's mind, women should not have done so. Thirdly, The women in Liaozhai Zhiyi dare to hate and love, dare to break through feudal barriers, and pursue individual independence. The story of "Lin Shi" makes us feel the independence and liberation of women. They abandon the concept that "a woman without talent is virtuous", rely on their own intelligence and intelligence, become the backbone of the family, and strive for self-improvement and self-reliance. Qiao Nu not only possesses the traditional virtues of diligence, kindness, resilience, simplicity, and integrity of ancient Chinese working women, but also possesses excellent qualities and a spirit of confrontation, such as daring to break free from the constraints of feudal moral concepts, sympathizing with the weak, and fighting against evil social forces. Although they are not beautiful, they are sincere, kind, intelligent, value the awakening of self-awareness, seek the realization of self-worth, dare to pursue true love, and possess true beauty.

As the saying goes, "what is good for the heart is not in

appearance,” the beauty of the soul is the true beauty. The author endows ugly working women with beautiful virtues, praises and praises them, reflecting their true respect for women and their unique aesthetic pursuit of progressive women’s views.

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