

“YAN” AND “LI”: TWO TYPES OF FEMALE BEAUTY IN THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN CHINESE SOCIETY

Ziyan Yang *

*Abstract: some contents of ancient Chinese literary theories have lost vitality with the lapse of time. In contrast, others are still active and useful in interpreting works and supplementing contemporary theories. It is the case with the concepts of “yan” and “li.” They not only have essential theoretical value in the realm of ancient literary concepts but also are widely used in contemporary social life and can be used to interpret modern and contemporary literary works. For example, the Chinese novel *The Red Peony* and the American novel *Gone with the Wind* both display an opposition between two types of women: the primary heroine is flamboyant and rebellious, does not conform to social ethics and norms, and stands out for the characteristics of “yan”; the secondary heroine, in contrast, is elegant and poised, behaves appropriately, and is more likely to have the characteristics of traditional “li.” In a traditional society, the aesthetic value of “li” was more acclaimed; in a society transitioning from traditional to modern due to the conflict between old and new cultures and institutional systems, the women with the characteristics of “yan” might receive more affirmation and praise for the positive meaning resulting from their boast of personality and pursuit of utmost feelings.*

Since modern times, China has been deeply influenced by western culture and theories. In this process, the function and value of traditional Chinese literary theories have been significantly impacted, questioned, or even denied, which is wrong. Li Bai 李白 wrote: “as the water behind follows the water ahead, the water under the bridge has been flowing continuously from ancient times to the present day.” Ye Xie 叶燮 wrote in the *Origin of Poetry* 《原诗》: “the development of poetry is constantly changing and will not stop for a day.” The same is true of the inheritance of cultural and literary theories. However, suppose we want to prove that ancient literary theories still can play a role today. In that case, it seems that there is not much strong evidence. Many factors are causing this embarrassing situation, such as the over-detailed division of disciplines and the separation of theoretical research from the text. In spite of this, researchers should strive to connect ancient literary theories with contemporary and foreign cultures and literature rather than rest on the past glory and prove ancient literary theories with ancient literary theories. This paper is an attempt, trying to interpret modern and contemporary literary works with ancient Chinese literary theories and supplement modern and contemporary literary theories.

This paper studies Chinese writer Lin Yutang’s novel *The Red Peony* 《红牡丹》 and American writer Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. Lin Yutang 林

* Dr. ZIYAN YANG, Professor, Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China. Email: yangzy@cass.org.cn.

语堂 was a Chinese writer who spent half his time abroad and was influenced by both Chinese and Western cultures. He is familiar to western readers, and many Westerners get to know China through his *My Country and My People* 《吾国与吾民》. In contrast, domestic readers are more familiar with his masterpiece, *Moment in Peking* 《京华烟云》. The American novel *Gone with the Wind* has been widely spread worldwide, and the movie based on the novel won the Oscars, attracting worldwide attention. It is also one of the most researched foreign novels in China. A retrieval of cnki.net reveals that there are more than a thousand papers on *Gone with the Wind* and more than a hundred papers on the heroine Scarlett. *The Red Peony* and *Gone with the Wind* have not been compared. However, they have some common characteristics: both stories took place in the period of transition from traditional to modern society, and both focus on the growth, marriage, and love of young women. Scarlett and Peony, the primary heroines of the two novels, are rebellious and unorthodox, while Melanie and Jasmine, the secondary heroines, in contrast, are both women submissive to traditional culture and morality. The background setting, plot arrangement, and character comparison seem ordinary. However, the combination of various factors can form a relatively stable or even universal narrative mode: The different image styles and values of two types of women reflect two representative choices in the process of social development: one is to highlight ego, unleash personality, conflict with the social system, rites, norms, and morality, and reflect the centrifugal force of culture in social development; the other is to follow and maintain traditional rites, norms, and customs, and represent the centripetal force of culture in social development. In the transition period from traditional to modern, the former showed a certain degree of revolution in the conflict between new and old systems and cultures because of unleashing personality, breaking constraints, and conforming to social development. These two different value concepts and lifestyles are reflected in the images of women. Ancient Chinese theories could interpret them as “yan 艳” and “li 丽.”

I. Peony and Jasmine

Lin Yutang described himself as “stepping into both Chinese and Western cultures and commenting on articles in the universe.”¹ *The Red Peony* is one of his representative works. Originally written in English, the book was published by The World Publishing Company Cleveland and New York in 1961 and has since been translated into Chinese in several versions.² The corrected version published by People’s Literature Publishing House in 1988 based on the version translated by female Taiwanese writer Song Biyun and published by Taiwan’s Yuanjing Publishing House has been very popular in the mainland. This paper is mainly based on this version.

Compared with *Moment in Peking*, the characters and plot of *The Red*

¹ *Autobiography of Lin Yutang, Complete Works of Lin Yutang, Volume 10*, Northeast Normal University Press, 1994, p. 31

² Popular versions of *The Red Peony* in Chinese Mainland include the one translated by Zhang Zhenyu and published by Taiwan Jinlan Culture Publishing House in 1986 and the one translated by Song Biyun and published by People’s Literature Publishing House in 1988.

Peony are relatively simple, with a sense of exploration, but also more amorous. It tells the story of a young widow named Peony rebelling against feudal ethics and rites and pursuing ideal love and life. In contemporary discourse, the title can be “*The Amorous History of Widow Peony*.” The characters in the novel are a little stereotyped, and the cultural implication is relatively apparent. Peony 牡丹 is beautiful, intelligent, impetuous, and independent. She is a young woman who is sensitive and enthusiastic and actively pursues freedom and ideals. The novel begins with 22-year-old widow Peony handling her husband’s funeral. During the funeral, Peony talked with her neighbor Old Teacher Wang. The character and plot were thus unfolded. Newly married and childless, Peony said bluntly that she would rather have a child on her own than adopt a child. The naiveté of her words piqued the Old Teacher. “I see you are a kind of rebel,” he commented. “rebel” is the first label attached to Peony. She rebuked: “I am only a woman. You men scholars have thought it all out. The Sung scholars started this cult of widowhood. Confucius never started it. ‘No widowers abroad, no lonely women at home’ – wasn’t this what he taught?” Her following words are worth noting:

“Through the Hans and the Tangs, none of the Confucian scholars knew about li, Universal Reason.” Peony was quick to reply: “Does this mean that the Sung scholars were right and Confucius himself was wrong? So you place Universal Reason over and against human nature. The Han and Tang scholars never did this. The fulfillment of human nature was really what the sages taught as the human ideal. Universal Reason and human nature were one. Now the lishueh, Sung Puritans, came along and started to repress human nature as sin. It’s all Buddhism.”

These words, regarded as “heresy” by the Old Teacher, were obviously influenced by Dai Zhen 戴震 (Tai Chen, Tai Tung-yuan) of the Qing Dynasty and originated from Dai Zhen’s *Evidential Commentary on the Meanings of Terms in the Book of Mencius: On Reason (XV)* 《孟子字义疏证》: “*Li* said by ancients was not *li* said by Confucian scholars of later generations.” “What both self and others have is *qing*, with not too much or too little being *li*.” “*Li* is rarely seen in Six Classics, Confucius and Mencius teachings, biographies, and other classical books and records.” “Song Confucian scholars associate closely with Buddhism and Daoism.” Distinguishing Confucianism from Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, disapproving of the opposition between “universal reason” and “human desire,” and criticizing Song Confucian scholars for mixing up with Buddhism and Daoism, Peony’s ideas basically came from Dai Zhen. Scholars, including Hu Shi 胡适 and Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 spoke highly of Dai Zhen³ and so did Lin Yutang. Dai Zhen was directly mentioned in *The Red Peony*. Peony said: Tai Tung-yuan is my favorite.” (Song, 1988, 60)

³ Dai Zhen advocated objective “reason” and regarded subjective “reason” as “opinion.” He accused the ruler “use reason to kill people.” Hu Shi wrote *Philosophy of Tai Tung-yuan* and regarded Tai as a critical fighter opposing the School of Reason; his greatest contribution to the history of philosophy was the commentary on “reason”, which could best represent the scientific spirit of his era. Liang Qichao (梁启超)’s *Introduction to the Academia of the Qing Dynasty* had a special chapter titled “On Tai Chen and His Scientific Spirit”, which holds that Tai replaced “rational philosophy” with his “emotional philosophy,” similar to the essence of the trend of thought in the European Renaissance.

Peony also had feminist thoughts. She said: “The load of Confucianism is too much for us women. You men are sitting on top of it, we women under it.” “I say the truth of Confucius is too much for us women. We can’t bear it. It’s all right for the men scholars to say that all literature must bear the truth. Truth is too heavy for women to bear” (Ibid., 50). On the relationship between men and women, Peony told her clan cousin and lover Mengchia 孟嘉: “You men have the wrong idea. You think of women as only giving pleasure, and forget that we enjoy it as much as you do” (Ibid., 128). While living with Mengchia, Jasmine modestly asked academic questions, while Peony refused. “Since coming to live with him, I have, unlike Jasmine, purposely kept away from discussions of ideas and books with him. I am so afraid that I may become one of his girl disciples, that a teacher-student relationship might replace that of lovers. I want to meet him on a level of equality: he a complete man and I a complete woman. In the field of ideas and learning, I can never be his equal” (Ibid., 217). Peony emphasized getting along with lovers on an equal level, unleashing personality, emphasizing ego, and pursuing independence. Her personality was mainly reflected in the reckless pursuit of love, which was also different from the common love of souls, and the unity of soul and body. She said bluntly: “Love is physical.”⁴

Peony practiced the philosophy of happy life that Chinese people are familiar with and accustomed to, and pursued that the body had a soul, actions had goals, words and deeds had a meaning, not just eating and drinking like animals. In order to achieve this goal, to fight against and get rid of boredom and emptiness, Peony pursued love, and hoped to live an ideal life with an ideal man.

Peony had several lovers. They became lovers because of hope and separated because the hope was in vain. They were all idealized men with different characteristics. Her first lover Chin Chu 金祝 was “brilliant, young, handsome, and active. He was a writer, and she had always loved writers” (Song, 1988, 28). Peony and Chin Chu were models of youth and health. They were each other’s first love, falling in love at first sight. Due to family obstruction, the two married other people but maintained a lover’s relationship despite their respective marriages. After the bereavement of her husband, Peony shifted her love to clan cousin Mengchia after learning that Chin Chu could not get a divorce.

The relationship between Peony and Mengchia occupies a large space in the novel, and it is also the part that embodies the ideology. Compared with other men, Mengchia represented three fundamental forces in society: the power and relationship of a fourth-grade official in a hierarchical society; the high status and prestige within a clan; and a participant and leader of the Westernization Movement and science and technology. To Peony, Mengchia was much more than a man who had changed her life; much more than a friend. He was “a mountain of different, wonderful things.” To Mengchia, the young clan cousin with “fresh, warm, and artless enthusiasm” was very attractive. In their mutual affinity, Dai Zhen’s thoughts played an active role. Mengchia accepted and spread Dai Zhen’s

⁴ Zhu Dongyu, *Ethical Figures and Philosophical Theme - On the Cultural Spirit of “The Red Peony,”* Seeking Truth (Qiushi Academic Journal), No.3, 1998 holds that Peony is “a successful artistic image with compound cultural character,” and “a liberalist, individualist, humanitarian”; Xie Youxiang, *Psychological Compensation for Courtesan Complex and Romantic Love: On Lin Yutang’s Novel “The Red Peony,”* Journal of Sun Yat-sen University, No.6, 2000.

thoughts, while Peony turned them into the basis of her words and deeds by reading Mengchia's works. "The root of Neo-Confucianism of the Sung scholars is Buddhism – the Buddhist view of human desires as something to be suppressed or controlled by piety. Imagine, the keyword of the philosophy of Reason is *ching*, fear, and reverence. You don't get away from this fundamental fact. The Neo-Confucianists were fighting for their survival against Buddhism by taking over Buddhist ideas themselves, of sin and desires of the flesh. Tai shows from his study of Mencius that there was no such necessary conflict between our instincts and Pure Reason itself, that human nature is good. That is the basic naturalism of Mencius" (Ibid., 60-61). It was the primary theoretical support for Peony's conflict with reality. Compared with the simplicity and purity of Peony, Mengchia had two sides. He loved freedom as much as Peony did, and at the same time, he could not ignore the "form" (Ibid., 123). As a middle-aged man with rich experience, Mengchia understood and appreciated Peony and saw her as a unique existence. "There is only one Peony; there cannot be two" (Ibid., 151). However, after living together, Peony soon distanced herself from Mengchia and even abandoned him because middle-aged Mengchia lacked "the youthful image and fire of Chin Chu" (Ibid., 153).

An Tonien 安德年, a young poet, was Peony's third lover and had everything Peony craved - "He was a handsome, youthful-looking, yet mature man" (Ibid., 312). He was good at writing poetry and was also a modern celebrity who had studied in Japan. He was keen on praising the beauty of Mother Nature and women. When he first met Peony, Peony was with some prostitutes and others. He said that Peony was an ideal character like Du Liniang 杜丽娘, the heroine of *Peony Pavilion* 《牡丹亭》. Peony was very happy about that since *Peony Pavilion* was her favorite story. An Tonien was the ideal lover of Peony. They loved each other, but Peony left him because she had sympathy for his wife after the death of their son.

Fu Nanto 傅南德, a young boxer, was Peony's fourth lover and second husband, and he "had all the appeal of manly youth and handsome shoulders and strong limbs" (Ibid., 167). In addition to youth and primitive vitality, Fu Nanto was likable and enthusiastic but could not read or write. "He was the life of the street personified; he allowed nothing to happen which was not as it should be, which was not fair play and fair game, according to Peking custom" (Ibid., 172). Peony left Mengchia for Fu Nanto. She said bluntly, "who wants intellect in love? You want passion and muscles - a suspension of the mind" (Ibid., 251). In the end, tired of twists and turns, Peony married this "charming but unversed" young farmer. In a letter to her best friend Paiwei 白葦, Peony wrote: "Physical love I have and I shall be a mother of many children, I hope. That is now my ideal of happiness. I never want anything else. I ask for no more" (Ibid., 423).

Peony seemed to want the unity of body and mind; if there were only one choice, she would choose the body of youth instead. She had always been casual in her sex life. On her way home from Beijing, she had sex with a college student onboard. "My heart belongs to Chin Chu, but in my body I didn't care" (Ibid., 254). Such freewheeling behaviors were more based on her instinct, which Jasmine commented as "confused passion with love" (Ibid., 344). In the novel, Peony is referred to as "liquid temperament and floating pussy willows" and "nymphomaniac." Her father even calls her a "whore", which is directly related to

her behaviors.

The person in contrast with Peony is her younger sister Jasmine 茉莉. Jasmine is another type, and the novel repeatedly emphasizes the contrastive relationship between the two. “Jasmine seemed like a purified version of Peony” (Ibid., 211). “She was a younger, sweeter version of Peony, a Peony purged of her violent and impulsive caprices.” “Jasmine was to him the Peony that might have been, a Peony faithful and true” (Ibid., 350). Jasmine was “coy and demure,” and “she was paler than Peony, with soft, doelike eyes” (Ibid., 73). People around Jasmine loved her sweet posture and dignified appearance, and “she never speaks out of turn or lets an awkward word slip out of her mouth” (Ibid., 126). “Even as she was napping, she still looked every inch a ‘madame hanlin’” (Ibid., 350). “While she saw and felt a great deal, she was more clear-headed than Peony, always sweet-tempered. She never spoke tactlessly, or out of turn” (Ibid., 350). Jasmine embodied the requirements of traditional culture and moral customs for women. To Mengchia, whom Peony abandoned, Jasmine symbolizes peace and warmth. “For the first time he enjoyed a calm and peace which he had not felt in a whole year, almost as if he were a ship entering a harbor after buffeting a night of storm” (Ibid., 212). Not only Mengchia, other people, men, and women, young and old, with high and low status, all liked Jasmine, in stark contrast to widely criticized Peony.

II. Yan and Li

A Dream of Red Mansions 《红楼梦》 features the use of a specific word to describe a person. For example, Ping'er is “*qiao*” (pretty), and Qingwen is “*yong*” (brave). Likewise, Peony is “*yan*,” and Jasmine is “*li*.”

The Red Peony describes Peony as “*yan*” in many places. She has “white image of a half-moon, with the long, dark lashes, very straight nose, luscious lips and well-modeled chin.” “All her loves were like ‘a bird in rain and storm, which frantically builds her nest, lest my neighbors laugh and scorn, and say I have no house or home’” (Ibid., 221). The experience of Peony can also be summarized as a series of romantic encounters (*yanyu* 艳遇), amorous feelings (*yanqing* 艳情), and love affairs (*yanshi* 艳事). On their way to Paiwei’s home, the novel describes the relationship between Peony and Mengchia as: “They were free and alone with this magic of the eternally fresh mountains and water, with hearts dedicated to a budding romance (*yanshi*). She knew what was inevitable, what was going to happen that night” (Ibid., 108); at his home in Beijing, Mengchia guided Peony and Jasmine to write “sentimental poetry (*yanshi*)”, and it turned out that Peony read *Peony Pavilion* at the age of thirteen (Ibid., 150). In Peony’s relationship with An Tonien, “*yan*” appeared again: “she had not willed it, she had not sought it. The romance (*yanyu*) had come to her, and was no less enchanting for being just ‘poetic’ rather than carnal” (Ibid., 303). At the beginning of their acquaintance, Peony wanted to make the “romance” a date, while An Tonien “was making it a literary love affair” (Ibid., 310). The *Ballad of the Red Peony*, which describes the appearance and temperament of Peony, depicts her “*yan*” without using the character “*yan*”, as shown in the following verse:

*Be she sprite or woman, be she Fairy Caprice,
As far as here looks go, they don't come any better.*

*The toast of the town, and the curse of the wives,
Fatal was her charm to all who had met her.*

So what does “yan” mean in traditional culture and theory? “Yan” first means beauty in appearance. The *Xiaoya section of Mao’s version of the Book of Songs* (*xiaoya maozhuan* 《毛传·小雅》) interprets that “a good look is yan.” During the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern dynasties, there were many expressions and theoretical summaries of yan in the literary works. Zhong Rong (钟嵘)’s *Poetry Appreciation* (*Shi Pin* 《诗品》) comments Xie Lingyun (谢灵运)’s poems as “*fu yan* 富艳” (rich in yan), and nicknamed Zhang Hua 张华 as “*hua yan* 华艳”; while *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon* (*Wenxin Diaolong* 《文心雕龙》) praised Qu Yuan (屈原)’s works as “*jingcai jueyan* 惊才绝艳” (astonishingly beautiful). The palace-style poems are also known as “*yanshi* 艳诗” (amorous poems), and the feelings contained in these poems are also called “*yanqing*” (amorous feelings). *New Songs from a Jade Terrace* (*yutai xinyong* 《玉台新咏》), which contains a large number of palace-style poems, is regarded as a collective of *yan ge* 艳歌 (amorous song). Du Que 杜确 of Tang Dynasty pointed out in the *Preface to Works of Cen Jiazhou* 《岑嘉州集序》: “Emperor Jianwen of Liang and Yu Jianwu started the composition of frivolous and enchanting poems, known as the palace-style poems. From then on, poems became coquettish”. After the Tang and Song dynasties, “yan” has a more prominent presence in the styles of “*ci* 词” (lyric), “*qu* 曲” (song), and novel. For example, there was a proposition that “*ci* poetry belongs to the yan category.” “Yan” is most closely related to “*yin* 淫” (erotic), “*qing* 情” (feeling), and “*su* 俗” (vulgar). These words were gradually going beyond literary works and entering into social life, and are still widely used today, such as *xiangyan* 香艳 (voluptuous), *yanqing* 艳情 (amorous love), *yanyu* 艳遇 (romantic encounter), *yanfu* 艳福 (lucky in love), *yanshi* 艳事 (love affair), *ceyan* 侧艳 (flowery), *qiyao* 绮艳 (flamboyant), which are often related to beauty and sex, in compliance with moral norms, and have an impact on social order.

The mainstream of Chinese culture advocates “*yazheng* 雅正” (elegant and righteous) and belittles and despises “*qingyan* 轻艳” (frivolous and amorous). As “yan” is often related to “*yin*” (erotic) and “*su*” (vulgar), it has a derogatory meaning in use. For example, “*ceyan*” (flowery and frivolous) emerged in the Tang Dynasty and is the opposite of “*yazheng*” (elegant and righteous). What describes the beauty and conforms to “*yazheng*” in meaning is “*li*.”

“*Li*” appeared earlier than “yan” in traditional Chinese culture and was of more significance. It was regarded as a basis for literary self-consciousness. Yang Xiong 扬雄 distinguished “*li* with rules” from “*li* with over-embellishment.” Cao Pi 曹丕 proposed that “poetry and prose should be *li*”; Zhi Yu 挚虞 said, “If *li* exceeds the limits of beauty, it runs counter to the truth.” Chen Liangyun claimed that since Jian’an 建安 era, “with the gradual dilution of utilitarianism, the aesthetic tendency was gradually emerging. Cao Pi’s *Discourse on Literature* 《说文》 first mentioned ‘poetry and prose should be *li*,’ and ‘*li*’ signaled ‘literary self-consciousness.’” (Chen, 2006). The cultural connotation of “*li*” is very rich. It is the unity of “*ren* 仁” (benevolence) and “*ya* 雅” (elegance) in the

form of beauty.⁵

There are many studies on “yan” and “li” in academic circles.⁶ However, they are rarely compared, partly because they have similar connotations and have been used jointly, concurrently, and mixed in ancient and modern times. However, through literary and ideological history development, we can see many differences between “yan” and “li,” which, fundamentally, is because they carry two different value orientations. “Start with feelings and control with propriety” in the *Preface to Mao’s Version of the Book of Son* 《毛诗序》 is the core content of thought in Chinese poetry education, instructs ancient Chinese literary creation and criticism, and is also one of the most important evaluation criteria. “Yan” highlights “feelings” and subjectivity, while “li” emphasizes “propriety” and sociality. Therefore, the most immediate and noticeable difference between “yan” and “li” is whether it conforms to rules and morality. *Book of Han: Biography of Dongfang Shuo* 《汉书·东方朔传》 even wrote: “morality is li.” “Li” has also formed many words which have been widely used so far, such as *zhuangli* 壮丽, *yali* 雅丽, *qingli* 清丽, *xiuli* 秀丽, *fuli* 富丽, *xuanli* 绚丽, *qili* 绮丽, *jiali* 佳丽... These words all have a commendatory meaning, even *yanli* 艳丽 does so, which is in stark contrast to the meaning of “yan” combinations.

In *The Red Peony*, the heroine Peony is featured by good looks, self-indulgence, and willfulness, embodying the characteristics of “yan.” The name of Peony also emphasizes that. Flowers have different connotations in Chinese culture. Apart from “dignified posture” and “unparalleled beauty,” Peony is associated with maiden and love in the works of the Ming and Qing dynasties, such as *The Romance of the Western Chamber* 《西厢记》 and *The Peony Pavilion* 《牡丹亭》. There is a folk saying that “If I could die beneath a peony flower, I will still be as charming as a ghost.” *A Dream of Red Mansions* regarded *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and *The Peony Pavilion* as forbidden books for being “obscene”. In *The Red Peony*, Jasmine said: “I remember her reading *Moutanting, Peony Pavilion*, at the age of thirteen. The reading did her some harm, one might say, by opening her heart for love” (Song, 1988, 242). Adding “red” in front of Peony highlights its bright and distinctive image. Also, it makes the name more like the occupational name of a prostitute.

The heroine is “yan,” and the counterpart is “li.” Does this phenomenon only exist in *The Red Peony*? A similar situation can be found in *Gone with the Wind*, written by American writer Margaret Mitchell. The book became popular after it was published in 1936, and the movie further promoted its wide acceptance and dissemination. There have been many versions in China. The version translated

⁵ The characters with a meaning similar to “li” include “xiu 秀.” Erya writes: “The flowering of trees is called hua, the flowering of herbs is called rong; not flowering but bearing fruit is called xiu, flowering but bearing no fruit is called ying”; *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons: Latent Sentiment and Evident Beauty* writes: “xiu refers to beautiful sentences and expressions that accentuate the message of the writing.” In social life, xiu has two connotations: peculiarity, excellence, and beauty.

⁶ Related studies include: Xiong Xiao, *Sentimental Poetry: Origin of Name and Negative Comments*, Qiusuo, No.5, 2017; Liu Xiao, *Re-discussion on ‘Yan’ of Palace-style Poems*, *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, No.10, 2010; He Yilin, *On Li*, *Yindu Journal*, No.1, 2006; Zhang Youliang, *On ‘Li’ in Wen Tingyun’s Lyrics*, *Gansu Social Sciences*, No.5, 2002.

by Fu Donghua and published by Zhejiang People's Publishing House in 1979 has been the most well-received. His translation of the protagonists' names into “郝思嘉” and “白瑞德” has been widely accepted by the public, which is far better than the later translation of “斯嘉丽” and “瑞特.” This paper is mainly based on Fu's version.

The first sentence of the novel is: “Scarlett O'hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm as the Tarleton twins were.” (Fu, 1979, 1) Like Peony, Scarlett is a flamboyant, energetic, and very attractive young woman.

Scarlett, like Peony, indulged in personal fantasies in her teenage years and was outspoken and naïve in dealing with people and things. “Her true self was poorly concealed,” she was somewhat boyish, and “she could ride horses and climb trees almost as well as they (boys).” In reality, society had different requirements for men and women, and various experiences prompted them to grow and change. As they directly behaved as who they were, they encountered conflicts with social proprieties and customs from time to time. Highlighting personalities and conflicts with society was almost the same portrait of the two women. Scarlett's father's expectation of her was that “it doesn't matter who you marry, as long as he thinks like you and is a gentleman and a Southerner and prideful. For a woman, love comes after marriage.” Scarlett immediately replied, “Oh, Pa, that's such an Old Country notion!” Her father insisted, “the best marriages are when the parents choose for the girl.” Still, the girl wanted a marriage with love. On this point, there is no difference between the two novels.

If Scarlett were only portrayed as being independent and strong, she would not have moved the world and become a classic. Scarlett was primarily a beautiful woman with a lively nature and a pleasant manner. The whole person was as bright as a burning fire, attracting all the boys around her. In Ashley's view, Scarlett was “as elemental as fire and wind and wild things” (Ibid., 136). At the same time, Rhett Butler described her as “a girl of rare spirit, very admirable spirit” and “a girl of your tempestuous nature” (Ibid., 139). On this point, Peony and Scarlett are alike.

In the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, a woman could not remarry, so Peony had lovers. At the same time, Scarlett married one husband after another. Before she was married, Scarlett was “the belle of five counties” (Ibid., 65), “she looked sweet, charming and giddy”, “but she was, in reality, self-willed, vain and obstinate. She had the easily stirred passions of her Irish father and nothing except the thinnest veneer of her mother's unselfish and forbearing nature” (Ibid., 66). Peony's lovers had different characteristics, and Peony had feelings for all of them. Scarlett was different. She married 20-year-old Charles out of anger and soon became a widow because of the war. As a widow, “she had to be grave and aloof.” “Ellen had told her how easily a widow might get herself talked about. The conduct of a widow must be twice as circumspect as that of a matron” (Ibid., 157). On this point, China and the United States were the same. In order to save Tara Plantation, Scarlett had no choice but to marry her younger sister's boyfriend - 40-year-old Frank Kennedy, and appear in public to do business despite the mockery of others, which eventually led to Frank's death. She married Rhett after her first two husbands died, but she believed she would always love Ashley. “All she could think of was that she loved him - everything about him, from the proud lift of his gold head to his slender dark boots, loved his

laughter even when it mystified her, loved his bewildering silences.” (Ibid., 131)

The difference between Scarlett and Ashley was significant. It is the difference between the two types and between elegance and vulgarity in culture. Marrying cousins is a tradition in Ashley’s family. “Always fiddling with the piano or sticking their heads in a book. I do believe Ashley would rather read than hunt!” (Ibid., 102); Scarlett was uneducated, did not like reading, and even laughed at Melanie as a nerd.

Scarlett was blindly in love with Ashley, but Ashley was level-headed. He explicitly rejected Scarlett. “Love isn’t enough to make a successful marriage when two people are as different as we are. You would want all of a man, Scarlett, his body, his heart, his soul, his thoughts. And if you did not have them, you would be miserable. And I couldn’t give you all of me. I couldn’t give all of me to anyone. And I would not want all of your mind and your soul. And you would be hurt, and then you would come to hate me - how bitterly! You would hate the books I read and the music I loved, because they took me away from you even for a moment.” (Ibid., 135)

You will find a mutual interpretation if you read the two novels contrastively. Scarlett treats Ashley like Peony admires Mengchia, except that Peony came to her sense earlier. In her farewell letter, she wrote: “I loved you once, madly, blindly, with all the passions in my heart, but I suppose it was the novelty and the fascination of the unknown. Now that I know you, I have awakened and realize that what I regarded as love was merely admiration for the man who changed my life and taught me to laugh” (Song, 1988, 207). Scarlett only realized it in the end.

“*Yan*” is the characteristic of both Peony and Scarlett. After Chin Chu’s death, Peony cried over his coffin, shocking everyone around. After Charles’ death, his widow Scarlett attended a party. She accepted Rhett’s invitation to dance, which also shocked everyone present, and her reputation was “as good as ruined” (Fu, 1979, 228).

The person in contrast to Scarlett is Melanie, Ashley’s wife, and his kind. She is a tiny, frailly built girl, “too wide across the cheek bones, too pointed at the chin, it was a sweet, timid face but a plain face, and she had no feminine tricks of allure to make observers forget its plainness. She looked - and was - as simple as earth, as good as bread, as transparent as spring water. But for all her plainness of feature and smallness of stature, there was a sedate dignity about her movements that was oddly touching and far older than her seventeen years” (Ibid., 116).

Scarlett and Peony have similarities, and so do Jasmine and Melanie. The former was widely criticized, with a bad reputation; the latter was widely recognized and respected. After being widowed, Peony failed to keep her duty and became controversial. Scarlett, newly widowed, also did not abide by social rules. When she heard dance music at the charity bazaar, “she wanted to dance. She wanted to dance. She looked across the floor and tapped her foot to the music and her green eyes blazed so eagerly that they fairly snapped” (Ibid., 207). “I know I’m crazy but I don’t care. I don’t care a bit what anybody says. I’m so tired of sitting at home. I’m going to dance and dance” (Ibid., 228).

Scarlett and Peony both got a reputation of “*yan*.” Peony failed repeatedly, and she was exhausted and fell into a passive situation as time passed. On the contrary, Scarlett became increasingly courageous. She grew from a naive, lively, and vain girl into a brave, tenacious, cold, greedy, independent woman. Jasmine and Melanie were both ladies with a reputation of “*li*” and were evaluated

positively by society.

Why does the author take “yan” women as primary heroines and the more socially affirmative “li” women as secondary heroines? The reason is the same as why Sun Wukong 孙悟空 was praised for wreaking havoc in the Heavenly Palace in *Journey to the West* 《西游记》. In the transition period from traditional to modern, the old institutional system and civilization were most seriously impacted by new ideas. The social control over people’s ideology was relatively loose, which provided space and convenience for the growth of personality. The emergence of new theories and ideas also provided theoretical support for rebellious behaviors. Peony lived in the period of transition from traditional to modern in the late Qing Dynasty in China; Scarlett was in the American Civil War, the slave manor economy in the south and the industrial civilization in the north clashed with each other, and the south was transformed by capitalism.⁷ The change was obviously reflected in Peony and Scarlett, who not only had a flamboyant appearance but also embodied the sustenance of “yan” in Chinese culture, that is, by unleashing personality and pursuing personal value, unwilling to succumb to the shackles of the outside world and tradition, the significance of progress was demonstrated.

III. *Xingling* and Civilization

Analyzing from a cultural perspective, Lin Yutang’s intention and thought in writing *The Red Peony* are clear, that is, the concepts of “*xingling* 性灵” and “happy life 幸福.”

The Chinese culture, dominated by Confucianism, has always emphasized the balance of feelings and nature with rites and righteousness. The protrusion of personal feelings and nature can easily cause a situation that “start with feelings” but not “control with propriety,” leading to conflict between individuals with rites, norms, and customs. It has been collectively reflected in literary creation, especially in the novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties: one was to praise true and utmost feelings. The representative work was *The Peony Pavilion*. Feng Menglong 冯梦龙 even proposed “*qingjiao* 情教” (teaching of love), which was unprecedented; the other was to highlight secular desires, resulting in the emergence of a number of worldly novels, such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* 《金瓶梅》. What echoed, in theory, was “*xingling*”, advocated by Gong’an School 公安派 in Ming Dynasty and Yuan Mei 袁枚 in Qing Dynasty.

The Red Peony of Lin Yutang tries to integrate these and reflect them on the heroine Peony: first, cherishing love: Peony, the daughter of a clerk in the city of Suzhou in the late Qing Dynasty, was charming and sexy, with exuberant vitality. She was yearning for and pursuing romantic love and free life, had no feelings for the husband whom she didn’t love, and had no intention to live a widow’s life

⁷ Liu Zuochang, *History of the American Civil War*, People’s Publishing House, 1978. Jin Weixing, *Rethinking of the Nature of the American Civil War*, Journal of Suzhou University, No.3, 2008, opposes the view of the American Civil War as a bourgeois-democratic revolution. Jin claims that the war, in essence, is a violent conflict between two major powers within the American bourgeoisie - the northern industrial bourgeoisie and the southern plantation capitalists - over what kind of labor system to adopt.

after her husband died. She was looking for the life she wanted; second, emphasizing desires: Peony had several lovers, and valued the satisfaction of desires; third, reasoning – Peony expressed her support for “*xingling*” many times. She said: “I am a rebel. I always was a rebellious and capricious child and nobody could make me do what I did not want to do.” “The one thing I crave is total and entire liberty.” Behind these words is Lin Yutang’s view of “*xingling*”. “*Xing* is one’s temperament and *ling* is one’s mind.” “Everyone has a personality of his own, and the literature freely expressing this personality is known as *xingling*.” “In literature, we advocate the expression of personality, which has been known as *xingling*, and *xingling* is personality.” “The literature of *Xingling* School emphasizes ‘true’, expresses *xingling* to get true feelings, thus bringing about endless inspirations. No matter it’s as important as a state affair or as trivial as a personal feeling, it can be written down vividly and smoothly. The literature can naturally become popular and spread without special effort.” Therefore, as far as novel creation is concerned, Peony is the visualization of Lin Yutang’s view of “*xingling*”.

“*Xingling*” is the basis of the protagonists’ words and deeds, while “happy life” is the result. Peony and Jasmine had different characteristics but were fundamentally all greenhouse flowers. They had not experienced the ups and downs of life. They were not independent and had no real personality or ego. The author finally puts his hope on a happy worldly life. “I see you are trying to accept this life, this life of desires and feelings, and make the best of it” (Song, 1988, 116). It is conveyed through Peony, Mengchia, Paiwei, and Lin Yutang’s outlook on life. The result of Peony is to live in harmony with both civilization and nature, settle down in the suburbs of Beijing, marry and have children. It is also the traditional requirement for women and Lin Yutang’s solution for women’s problems. “Food and courting the opposite sex are the true meaning of life and the living source of the river of life. With the continuous irrigation of the river, life can flourish. The relationship between men and women represents the utmost feeling of life, leading to poetry and then literature.” (Lin, 1994, vol.13, 283-284). Peony’s “searching for some ideal young hero, questing for some impossible golden fleece” (Song, 1988, 186) obviously has some traits of western culture.

Studies on *Gone with the Wind* mainly focus on the analysis of characters based on the text, emphasize women’s consciousness of independence and claim that women should go out of the family and into society.⁸ This has inevitably led to the question about the requirements for ideal women in different cultures. It can be found that no matter at which stage of society, women who are gentle and obedient, industrious and kind-hearted, loyal and humble, and whose words and deeds while dealing with people and things are in line with social norms are always recognized and praised. It is believed that their harmonious unity of themselves with society is beneficial to the stability and development of society and family. As “*li*” emphasizes social responsibility and selfless dedication, it’s recognized and acclaimed, while “*yan*” tends to plunder and infringe upon the

⁸ Gu Shaoyang and Wang Liyan, *Gone with the Wind and Women’s Awakening-- an Analysis of Female Values in Gone with the Wind*, Journal of Xi’an Foreign Studies University, No.3, 2003; Xie Jingzhi, *Interpretation of the Charm of Scarlett’s Image in Gone with the Wind*, Journal of Henan University, No.2, 2005.

interests of others while unleashing personality and violating social rites, norms, and customs, so the result is often tragic. It is also in line with the general law of social development. Between social civilization and personality, the centrifugal force of social and cultural development plays a more significant role in social transition. In general, the centripetal force is dominant.

In *Slapping the Table in Amazement II* 《二刻拍案惊奇》, written by Ling Mengchu 凌濛初 of the Ming Dynasty, there is a story named “Ren Junyong fooled around in the boudoir and was castrated by Commandant Yang”, which writes: “the copper wall with extremely strict family rules and security guards can lock up their bodies, but not their minds.” The complex relationship between the inner self and social civilization is an eternal issue. Philosophers and writers have studied and explored from different angles. As for the different choices of young women in love and marriage, the way of life, and the various kinds of the beauty displayed, it is a charming part of the study and exploration. Unlike theoretical works highlighting logical thinking, literary works express rich and profound thought through characters and narration. The exposition of “yan” and “li” in traditional literary theories helps broaden the horizons and increase the dimensions of criticism in studying modern and contemporary literary works.

References

- Chen, Liangyun. 2006. *A Brief Account of the Occurrence and Evolution of Aesthetic Concepts in Ancient Chinese Literature, A Multidimensional Study of Orientalism* (dongfang congkan), No.3, 2006.
- Fu, Donghua (Trans.), 1979. Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*, Zhejiang People's Publishing House.
- Li, Yinhe (Ed.). 1997. *Women: The Longest Revolution - A Selection of Contemporary Western Feminist Theories*, SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- Li, Yong. 2005. *Commentary Biography of Lin Yutang*, Nanjing Normal University Press.
- Lin, Yutang. 1994. *Complete Works of Lin Yutang*, Northeast Normal University Press.
- Song, Biyun (Trans.). 1988. *The Red Peony* by Lin Yutang, People's Literature Publishing House.
- Sun, Kang-i. 1998. *Feminists Readings: Classical and Modern Perspectives*, UNITAS Publishing Co.
- Wang, Zhaosheng. 2005. *Lin Yutang: Stepping into Both Chinese and Western Cultures*, Beijing Press.
- _____. 2007. *Lin Yutang and Chinese Culture*, Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Wang, Yonghao. 2007. *Category and System of Chinese Literary Criticism*, Fudan University Press.
- Zhan, Furui. 2005. *Theoretical Category of Medieval Literature*, Zhonghua Book Company.
- Zhang, Yuneng (Trans.). 1996. *Friedrich Schiller on Grace and Dignity*, Culture and Arts Press.