

The Status of Women in Chinese Feudal Bourgeois Families

A Case Study of the Relationship Between Characters in Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*

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ABSTRACT

Thunderstorm is a tragedy of a bourgeois family with a strong feudal color in modern China. It is a reflection on the status of Chinese women under the May Fourth wave. This article will analyze the living environment of the female characters Zhou Fanyi and Lu Shiping and the identity of which associates with the male role Zhou Puyuan. It will clearly explain the spiritual oppression of women from different classes, and deeply explore the era significance of the female images created by Cao Yu.

Keywords: *Thunderstorm, Cao Yu, Female characters, Feudal family.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of female characters in *Thunderstorm* is colourful and delicate. This article will focus on Zhou Fanyi and Lu Shiping, who reflect to a symbol of low-status female figures in the feudal history, to give readers a general image. Cao Yu's works played an important role in the May Fourth Movement period, where he was dissatisfied with the continuation of feudal society after the change of Qing dynasty. He was considerate of the identity and status of women, and used literature weapons to refute the decadent patriarchal society for women.

In the *Thunderstorm*, in addition to the emphasis on female characters, Zhou Puyuan as an important male character still cannot be ignored. He has no contact or conflict with the outside world. However, there are influences and traces in the complex character relationships throughout the whole play. As a symbol of a feudal patriarch, Zhou Puyuan becomes a potential background and the source of other female's repressive living environment. Cao Yu gave him many outstanding characteristics, such as: a profit-driven capitalist, a father with absolute authority, and a lover who only values personal interests.

Fan Yi is a poor stepmother, and her husband demands that she needs to be extremely obedient. Her romantic relationship with her stepson is subject to the

ethical condemnation of incest. She has never gained love in her life, and can only be imprisoned in a big mansion alone. She is misunderstood to need medicine to cure her madness which is caused by Zhou Puyuan.

Lu Shiping is a tragic character, at the same time, her tragedy is inherited to her daughter. When Lu Shiping was young, because of her low status, she was kicked out of Zhou's family to wander after giving birth to Zhou Puyuan's children. Sadly, her daughter is also in love with Puyuan's son, a character who is considered as a playboy. Lu Shiping could not accept that her daughter is bullied by the Zhou family too.

To sum up, the storyline in the *Thunderstorm* is deduced through the relationship between the characters, which will be clarified later in order to give readers a comprehensive understanding of the status and identity of women in feudal family.

2. ZHOU PUYUAN: A SYMBOL OF AUTHORITY

The role of Zhou Puyuan is undoubtedly a representative of Chinese feudal patriarchal system, which is reflected in Zhou Puyuan's family concepts and interaction with female characters. Cleverly, the author does not place Puyuan in direct conflicts with the female characters, but paints him as an irresistible subconscious

authority. As a dramatic symbol, he is also closely associated with the feudal bourgeoisie. For example, when Lu Dahai broke into Zhou's house and criticized that Zhou Puyuan deliberately let the dam burst and drowned the workers in order to suppress opposition. He ignored the importance of human life, but stands up for his own interests. The author gave Zhou Puyuan a class character, which was a deliberate choice in the revolutionary historical period.

The most prominent feature of Puyuan's authority is that he attached great importance to the order and hierarchy of his family (Yang, 2008, p. 222)⁶. "The master won't like it to open" ("Thunderstorm", 00:15:17-22)⁴. The whole family was in the sultry study room in a hot summer. However, because of Puyuan's words, no one dared to open the windows for ventilation. The irony here is Puyuan was not in the study room at the time, and his potential prestige intimidated others to make decisions without permission. Another scene is when Lu Dahai represented the workers fighting for rights in Zhou's house, Puyuan's son Zhou Chong chose to negotiate with the workers, arguing with his father from the perspective of the workers. However, under his father's sharp eyes, Zhou Chong lowered his head. Meanwhile, other family members like Fan Yi and Si Feng also attended. The only thing they can do is to persuade Zhou Chong not to be reckless and make any comments on Zhou Puyuan (00:21:31-22:52)⁴. Puyuan's role as a feudal "father" showed that his instructions to his sons cannot be resisted, which were arrogant and unreasonable. He would not allow his sons to have any independent opinions and free thoughts other than father's words. Puyuan's educational model would also have a profound impact on his family. The sons would imitate him to educate the next generation in the future (Jiao and Feng, 2018, p. 83)³. It is easily to find that the elders often look down on young people (Jiao and Feng, 2018, p. 83)³. In other words, the old ideas that dominate and have absolute control would inevitably despise the new ideas that have not yet gained a firm foothold.

When seriously and deeply discussing the relationship between Zhou Puyuan and Lu Shiping, it shows a clear picture that when the feudal system forced him to choose between own emotions and practical interests, he obeyed the latter (Wu, 1988, p. 22)⁵. It is suspicious that Cao Yu was trying to create a role with a class-oriented tendency. In fact, like all young men in large feudal families, Puyuan was manipulated by his parents (Guo, 2010, p. 85)². Subject to the orders of his parents, Puyuan has no right to know and decide. He can only choose to accept the decision to drive Lu Shiping, a role of servant, out of the house. In 1962, when Cao Yu discussed the relationship between Zhou Puyuan and Lu Shiping, he used the word "play" ("玩弄"). In 1978, he used the word "spoil" ("糟蹋") when discussing with Wang Chaowen. Cao Yu also indirectly recognized that

Zhou Puyuan's image is not positive. In Lu Shiping's relationship, he is in a bullying position. In Puyuan's eyes, true love has prerequisites, which is the core of self and family interests. His character traits are defined by Cao Yu as "reactionary" and "hypocritical". The immoral behaviors of him are attributed to social systems and cultural concepts. In short, it is the result of social environment forcing people to alienate (Wu, 1988, p. 25)⁵. Zhou Puyuan himself has the characteristics of the feudal bourgeoisie, and he is also a perpetrator who accepts the concept of hierarchical marriage. The social environment has created the concept of feudal marriage based on social class status, which rules millions of families and people's emotional realm. The limitation of love is inhumane, and the excessive concern about "matching the family" reflects a materialistic society, which makes personal feelings take a back seat. Young people obey family interests when choosing a mate (Wu, 1988, p. 26)⁵. Readers have moral condemnation and reflection on the reactionary exploiting class.

The label "father" in front of the family is not only a feudal parent in the general sense, but also a gender symbol superior to women, which puts heavy pressure mentally. The author allows female characters to be in a complex relationship between characters, through the passiveness of the relationship or the twists and turns of fate, to constantly impact their vulnerability and strengthen their inner fear in spirit.

3. ZHOU FANYI: A SOUL IMPRISONED BY FEUDAL FAMILY'S CHAINS

Zhou Fanyi is a stepmother with a kind heart. The desperation for love made her willing to break the social norm. In the preface of *Thunderstorm*, Cao Yu described Fanyi as a "very close friend". He respected her bravery as a woman under the feudal society who is stick to follow her heart and felt unfair regarding how society treats women like hers (Cao, 1996, p. 2)¹.

Zhou Fanyi is always a rebel female image in the story. She refuses to drink bitter Chinese medicine (00:24:35-25:42)⁴. It is difficult to judge whether Fanyi is sick or not. We can infer that it was caused by mental torture. It is more like a paranoia, but not a physical illness. Puyuan's demands Si Feng and Zhou Ping to forces Fan Yi to drink the medicine. Fanyi never breaks openly with Zhou Puyuan or resolutely runs away from home during the long hardships. However, Fan Yi's inner conflict still can be found. She chooses to fight alone in the family cage, which is due to the potential influence of her identity and upbringing, which refers to her education in new style of the times and has both ideological factors of "new bourgeois women" and "old women" (Yang, 2002, p. 41)⁷. As a "new bourgeois woman", she is not willing to be pinned down by the feudal society values. She eagers to be herself: a woman dares to love and hate. As an "old woman", she obeys the value of the feudal

society as a mother, which makes her suffer from a mental disorder. Zhou Puyuan always emphasized that the so-called “mother image” forcing Fanyi to act as a role model, showing absolute obedience in front of her children. This is a kind of moral kidnapping, which makes Fanyi accept discrimination against her by her female identity. Under the traditional concept of acquiescence, an absolute class concept is formed.

Zhou Puyuan’s words to Zhou Fanyi are always compulsive: “Do as you are told” (00:48:31)⁴. Fanyi once made a helpless evaluation of Zhou Puyuan: “Doing the most atrocious in private, yet put the blame on others and wore a mask of morality, philanthropist and respectable figures” (00:36:36-42)⁴. We can infer that Fanyi knew Zhou Puyuan’s personality in his heart. When she complained to Zhou Ping: “your father is the hypocrite of all” (00:36:48)⁴. “You are the illegitimate your father gave to this poor girl”. “Because your father deserted her and she drowned herself” (00:37:03)⁴. She knew that she could not subvert Zhou Puyuan’s control, which will slowly corrode her. She hoped that Zhou Ping would realize his father’s sin and let him stop imitating his father. She not only screamed for help from Zhou Ping but also showed a kind heart to the girl. She could discriminate morally between right and wrong and dared to speak it out in front of her stepson, regardless of feudal society’s values of a “wife” or a “mother”.

Zhou Fanyi shouted to Zhou Ping: “Suddenly you came along and make me half stepmother half mistress. It’s you who seduced me” (00:37:38-46)⁴. Although trapped in the ethics issue, Fanyi was still willing to continue this kind of life if Zhou Ping treats her well as he used to. Zhou Ping, like his father, had deceived Fanyi through rhetoric, now Zhou Ping was closer to Si Feng. The relationship between Zhou ping and Fanyi compensated for Zhou Fanyi’s emptiness of love left by Zhou Puyuan. However, she tied her life to a coward who couldn’t dare to act and dare not take responsibility, which also determined that her love choice was predestined wrong, and the short-lived love eventually turned into a tragedy (Yang, 2002, p. 42)⁷. The scene compares the two characters’ attitudes towards love in the feudal bourgeois family environment, shows the weakness of Zhou Ping and the strengths of Fanyi.

“I can’t stand two generations of bullying” (00:41:30)⁴. Such incest is male-dominated, which dramatically degrades the status of women and makes women appear on the screen as male accessories. When Fanyi meets with Lu Shiping, the servant Lu Gui asks Fanyi to meet with the doctor: “Master’s order, please now go” (00:52:48)⁴. Although Lu Gui is the servant of Fanyi, he says this request in a commanding tone. Fanyi looked shocked, but accepts his proposition. Male domination still exists even with the class differences.

The image of Fanyi portrays the young educated women’s struggle at that time. As Cao Yu wrote in the

preface of *Thunderstorm*: “I can’t count how many Fanyi I have seen with my own eyes (of course they are not Fanyi, most of them are not as brave as her). They all live in the gutter, but their hearts are too high. Enthusiasm was an unquenchable fire, but God punished them to grow dry on the sand” (Cao, 1996, p. 2)¹.

4. LU SHIPING: AN AWAKENING WOMAN WITH STRONG HEART

In contrast to Fanyi’s image, there are not so many controversies in Lu Shiping. Most scholars believed that she was an awakening symbol of low-class working women with a kind soul. She knows the rules of society.

When Lu Shiping meets with Puyuan after thirty years, she tells Puyuan: “I have no grievances. What I have are hatred and regret. It is the suffering that I have experienced day by day”. However, she does not accuse Puyuan of possessing her against her will. what she accuses is Puyuan’s desertion and betrayal of love (Ye, 2013, p. 148)⁸. When Puyuan passes her the note, she immediately burns it, which shows the dignity and integrity.

In Lu Shiping’s accusation against Zhou Puyuan, after the abandonment, in order to take care of the child, she “had to beg, mend clothes, or serve people and married twice” (00:53:29-47)⁴. As a mother, Lu Shiping showed absolute perseverance in the face of being abandoned. Her love for her child made her strong. At this point, she awoke. If she was not abandoned, Lu Shiping may become Zhou Puyuan’s gentle and gracious wife. Walking the road of servant-master. The joy of love and gratitude for Zhou Puyuan’s unremitting love would make Lu Shiping’s love unbreakable. However, this dream of love was quickly shattered by the iron law of class interests, which forced her to wake up from the dream of love, and for the first time she saw the great power of the difference between the rich and the poor. When she woke up from the agony, she finally gave up her suicidal thoughts and started to live a truly poor life (Ye, 2013, p. 148)⁸.

However, the awakening had not made a complete change to Lu Shiping. She could choose to follow her heart coming back to Zhou Puyuan regardless of everything, or walked on the path of revenge. Instead, she chose to view things objectively. Hatred of Zhou Puyuan’s betrayal of love should be separated with preventing her son from hurt. Her son is a sign of love. In other words, she was strong enough to preserve a balance between the love she had enjoyed and the anger caused by the social rules in order to protect her son.

Lu Shiping knew that when her daughter Si Feng was pregnant with Zhou Ping’s child, she had a mental breakdown. She shouted: “I waited on you, now, my child is waiting on your sons” (00:56:00)⁴. The word “wait on” (“服侍”) here is a pun, which means that Lu

Shiping once thought that being kicked out of Zhou's family was not the original intention of Zhou Puyuan but the feudal idea of Zhou's parents. She was waiting for Zhou Puyuan. However, Zhou Puyuan never tries to get her back. It expresses the helplessness to the unfair status of serving Zhou's family obediently to both herself and her daughter.

When comparing Fanyi and Shiping, they are both strong and kind women. However, Lu Shiping is stronger than other characters in *Thunderstorm*. She knows the rules of the feudal society and therefore forbears herself for loved. She restricts her desire and locks herself in the pain of love. However, she is still not strong enough to accept the fact in the end. The feudal society alienates love and tears everyone apart.

5. CONCLUSION

There was a dialogue between Zhou Chong and Si Feng about study and the future. Zhou Chong insisted on sharing his study funds with Si Feng to study, thinking that reading could make up for Si Feng's servant status. This was refuted by Si Feng: "A woman is only a woman" (01:04:56)⁴. Here Si Feng did not express dissatisfaction with the unfairness of her social class, but expressed helplessness as a woman. Regarding the future of Si Feng, her brother Lu Dahai once said: "she is a daughter of a poor man and she is to marry a poor worker to do washing and cooking" (01:07:51-01:08:00)⁴.

The most profound part of *Thunderstorm* that reveals the status of women is that although the life experience and social class of its female characters are different, the endings are all tragic. We can prove from Fan Yi's confession: "finally I will be put in chains" (01:19:10)⁴. "I'm not sick. I'm not mad. I've been imprisoned" (01:34:24)⁴. Fan Yi's image shows the untimely hardships of upper-class women in old China pursuing freedom. The image of Lu Shiping is to show us the perseverance of women in the old age when they had to face with the predicament of survival because of their status as an abandoned mother.

In addition to the disadvantaged position of the women in the play, there is still a certain degree of awakening of women's pursuit of love and freedom in the transitional period between the old and the new China.

This article analyses the relations between the characters, which provides a general understanding of women's role in Chinese feudal family. The further researches can combine the original work *the Ghosts* with different forms of adaptations to show the complexity of women's rights in different cultural discourses.

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