

การวิเคราะห์ตัวละครสำคัญในนวนิยายชุด *The House of Earth* จากมุมมองสตรีนิยมเชิงสังคมนิยม*

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บทคัดย่อ

ในศตวรรษที่ 21 ความเสมอภาคทางเพศถูกมองว่าเป็นความต้องการขั้นพื้นฐานในอารยสังคม แต่ความไม่เสมอภาคทางเพศยังปรากฏอยู่ ช่องว่างระหว่างเพศเกิดจากการสร้างสามัญทัศน์ทางประวัติศาสตร์และวัฒนธรรมเกี่ยวกับสตรีว่ามีความด้อยทางกายภาพและจิตใจกว่าบุรุษจึงทำให้ได้รับโอกาสน้อยกว่า สุตยอววรรณกรรมถูกสร้างให้มีพลังเพื่อสะท้อนและวิจารณ์ความเหลื่อมล้ำทางเพศซึ่งนำไปสู่อิสรภาพของสตรี ดังนั้น บทความนี้จึงศึกษานวนิยายชุด *The House of Earth* จากมุมมองสตรีนิยมเชิงสังคมนิยมเพื่อชี้ให้เห็นถึงอุปสรรคความเหลื่อมล้ำทางเพศที่สะท้อนในนวนิยายชุด และแนวทางแก้ไขที่เหมาะสมในการเสริมสร้างพลังแก่สตรี ผลการวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นว่า สถานะทางสังคมระดับต่ำของสตรีในประเทศจีนส่วนใหญ่เป็นผลมาจากชนชั้นทางสังคมที่เหลื่อมล้ำกัน และระบบการปกครองแบบปิตาธิปไตย การศึกษาช่วยให้สตรีมีอาชีพและแสวงหาความเท่าเทียมด้านสถานภาพทางสังคมและเสรีภาพได้อย่างมีสติ การศึกษาที่เหมาะสมให้พลังสตรีและอารยธรรมร่วมกับความเสมอภาคทางเพศในมิติทางเศรษฐกิจและวัฒนธรรม.

คำสำคัญ: The House of Earth Trilogy สตรีนิยมสังคมนิยม สถานะทางสังคม จิตสำนึกสตรีนิยม
เสรีภาพ

*บทความนี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของวิทยานิพนธ์ “การวิเคราะห์ตัวละครสำคัญในนวนิยายชุด *the House of Earth* จากมุมมองสตรีนิยมเชิงสังคมนิยม” หลักสูตรศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษระดับสูงเพื่อการสื่อสาร บัณฑิตวิทยาลัย มหาวิทยาลัยหัวเฉียวเฉลิมพระเกียรติ อาจารย์ที่ปรึกษา: ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ ดร. นพรัตน์ ธนานุรักษ์กุล

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***อาจารย์ประจำสาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษ คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยหัวเฉียวเฉลิมพระเกียรติ

An Analysis of The House of Earth's Main Characters from a Perspective of Socialist Feminism*

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Abstract

In the 21st century, gender equality is seen a basic requirement for civilization, yet gender inequality still exists. Gender gap is an establishment of historical and cultural stereotypes that women are physically and mentally inferior to men, so they are given fewer opportunities. Great literature is made powerful to reflect and criticize gender inequality leading to women's liberation. This study thus explores Pearl S. Buck's *The House of Earth Trilogy* from a socialist feminism perspective aiming to identify barriers to gender inequality issues as reflected in the trilogy and find out solutions appropriate to empower women. The findings suggest that Chinese women's low social status was mainly due to unequal social class and the patriarchy. Education enabled women to have professional work and consciously seek the equality of social status with men and freedom. Right education empowers women, and the civilization co-exists with gender equality in economic and cultural dimensions.

Keywords: The House of Earth Trilogy, Socialist feminism, Social status, Feminist consciousness, Freedom

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Introduction

1. Gender inequality

Women, on the one hand, can be naturally empowered by their gender hardship because they do the work men cannot do and that is childbearing. On the other hand, women are socially and culturally made submissive by the rules or norms set in any male-dominated society, especially China and India, which creates great gender gap. For centuries, feminists struggled to free women's submissive mentality or improve gender gap.

Today, Kenscht, Clark and Ciambone (2016, p.1) claim that gender gap is smaller than it was a century ago. However, gender inequality still exists as gender-egalitarian values have been endorsed in many schools and families. While some institutions, which are harmful for women, disappear, people's cognition of sexism on women still exists. This is true in China, where men are socially and culturally given more privileges in many aspects. Educationally, men are more literate. Professionally, men earn higher income for doing the same work as women. Politically, men are more selected as politicians.

Chinese women, socially and culturally given fewer privileges than men, can be seen through certain exploitation. A number of women have died of diet or plastic surgery because they consciously want to please men with a new thin look (Kenscht, Clark & Ciambone, 2016, p.174). A number of women are also threatened by gender violence (Tegbar, Yibrie, & Kebede, 2017). Sex-selective abortion which is female infanticide remains practical (Bharadwaj & Lakdawala, 2013). The exploitation indicates that Chinese women are still treated unequally by the society.

Giving choices to women means lessening gender inequality. When women have equal choices in economical productivity and cultural treatment with men, women can do much more contribution to the whole society (Dover, 2014). In fact, treating women as a human being is basic and necessary for real civilization.

2. Reflection of gender inequality in literature

As literature reflects social reality, gender inequality is commonly shown in literature. Women in male writing are portrayed either as angels who do everything to follow men's will or as monsters who do things against men, yet all men are heroes (Rogers, 2016). In contrast, feminist literature reveals a voice that women need to be empowered so as to overcome their struggle for rights. Virginia Woolf in 1929 (as cited in Kathmann, 2012), the founder of modern feminist literary criticism, gave a historical analysis about gender inequality in literature that women's writing was not accepted by literary tradition because of their lack of education and money, which was the basic literary training. Woolf in 1942 further pointed out that women could not write because they were eager to be 'Angel in the House', which was the Victorian image of the ideal wife who did everything to please men and lost their own self. In order to urge a woman to write, 'Angel in the House' must be killed (Sánchez Cuervo, 2017).

Apparently, women's submissiveness leads to their oppressed position in literary criticism. That is why literary study was based entirely on male literary experience and the figure of the mad woman was important for feminist rebellion (Showalter, 2011 cited in Rogers, 2016). In terms of women's images portrayed in novels, Srisermbhok (2003, pp.22-23) adds that the category between female and male can be explained in dichotomy because gender inequality is present. Men embody the positive element of 'self' and they are assumed to superior, dominant, strong, brave, intelligent, protective, heroic, devoted and active, whereas women are defined through the negative description of 'other' and they are thought to be inferior, controlled, weak, submissive, passive, less intelligent, and dependent.

It can be said that women can have mental freedom if they have education, financial support and privacy to start or continue writing. When they meet these requirements, they can produce great literature, which crosses time and culture, reflects gender inequality and

transforms emotions of sympathy, anger, and sorrow (Averill, 2001; Agnew, 2012). Great literature empowers women and enlightens the society.

3. The House of Earth Trilogy

Pearl S. Buck's *The House of Earth* trilogy, including *The Good Earth* (1931), *Sons* (1932), and *A House Divided* (1935), illustrated a historical social change which influenced three generations of women. They are considered great literature because they reflect gender inequality and transform sympathy, anger and sorrow. *The Good Earth* was rewarded the Nobel Prize in 1938 and particularly brought enlightenment to feminist literature because the novel reflected the society of China after 2000-year monarchical rule was destroyed by bourgeois. In this novel, Buck created O-lan, the main female character, and used her to reflect the oppression of Chinese women further conveying that men could not actually survive without women.

In *Sons*, the story was mainly set in the background of the warlord period (1916—1928). Being influenced by the development of feminism, women had more rights including education and inheritance. The main female character in this novel did not have the exact name; Buck called her 'the lady', who represented the upper-class educated women whose experience was influential over women's liberation. Buck portrayed women's oppression, resistance and liberation through the lady, and used her entire life to fight for women's liberation.

In *A House Divided*, published in 1935, the story was mainly set after the warlord period in the coastal city where it was the most open and modern in China. The main characters faced the conflicts derived from feudalism, colonialism and imperialism in this open and modern city. At the same time, the traditional culture bondage to women was to be destroyed gradually with the influence of the western modern culture. Buck focused on women's inner voice and their self-discovery through the main female character, Mei-ling, who had the eastern and western virtues. She and Wang Yuan's happy ending indicated Buck's best wish for women and men to live an equal and harmonious life.

Although Buck wrote about the oppression of Chinese women through the lens of O-lan and solutions to the oppression through the lenses of other characters in the trilogy over a century ago, gender inequality still exists today and it empowers women to seek freedom in many aspects. The lives of these main characters can be beneficial not only for women to reposition themselves socially but also for men to reconsider women's social status culturally in the current era.

4. Socialist feminism

A large number of studies relating to Buck's works have been carried out. Among them, it is evident that Western literature criticism has been applied increasingly in China during the last three decades when the country introduced its Opening Policy. It appears that many types of feminism have been applied to analyze *The House of Earth Trilogy* including the third world feminism (Liu, 2013), post-colonial feminism (Xiang, 2011), ecofeminism (e.g. Mao, 2010; Zhu, 2011; Cheng & Tu, 2013), and general feminism (e.g. Su, 2014). However, there is no evidence of investigation into *The House of Earth Trilogy* from a socialist feminism perspective.

Socialist feminism is influenced by the economic theory of Marxism. Economic determinism is seen as the primary source of women's oppression because their financial dependence on men is the major cause of gender stereotypes (Yusuff, 2014). In fact, women's oppression exists in the interaction of the capital system based on inequalities of social class and patriarchal structures (Holvino, 2010). This idea provides the thinking of the oppressed social classes and patriarchy, which the father or eldest male is the family head leading to women's oppression. Socialist feminism also refers to politics that relates to gender, race, and class and recognizes women's situation, marriage styles, and sexual orientations (Luxton,

2014). Socialist feminism perspective in this study refers to perspective of feminist theory or feminism, or women's personal experiences in their social reality or changes including their production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization of children.

It appears that women in Western countries have already entered a new era of socialist feminism. For example, in America, working-class women in the 21st century increasingly participate in politics, and this phenomenon can empower women's social status (Brenner, 2014). In Norway, Skarpenes and Nilsen (2015) posit that gender equality has been socially promoted in employment through the state policy, while it is culturally accepted for women to do more house chores than men. In fact, Norwegian women, like other Westerners, prefer to be a housewife and a full-time or part-time employee.

The social changes illustrated in *The House of Earth Trilogy* directly link with socialist feminism and implies that Chinese women's social status is influenced by social changes. The changes of social status may influence individuals' experiences and their feminist consciousness, which is culturally embedded in their mentality. Therefore, this study analyzes *The House of Earth Trilogy* from a socialist feminism perspective.

Objectives

The study aims to identify barriers to gender inequality issues as reflected in *The House of Earth Trilogy* and find solutions that are appropriate to empower women.

Material and Methods of Investigation

Material in this qualitative study was based on Pearl S. Buck's three original novels in English, *The Good Earth*, *Sons*, and *A House Divided*. Six of 60 characters were selected. Three main female characters were characterized by women's issues including gender and feminism. Three main male characters were characterized by their evaluation of women illustrating women's social status. Wang Lung and his wife, O-lan, from *The Good Earth*, Wang the Tiger and his wife, the lady, from *Sons*, and Wang Yuan and Mei-ling from *A House Divided* were selected characters.

Data in this study were collected through those six main characters' speech, actions and consciousness portrayed in the three novels. It was easy to collect the characters' speech as it was normally portrayed in quotation marks. Verbs like 'sit' and 'gap' were the actions whereas 'ponder', 'think', 'say to himself' and 'reproach' indicate that the contents following were consciousness. These selections reflected characters' attitudes, evaluation and consciousness to personality and society and revealed a variety of women's issues surrounding feminism, gender issue, social prejudice, identity and freedom.

The data were categorized into two themes: women's social status, and women's feminist consciousness, based on Stanley's and Wise's (1993) feminism. They were then analyzed from the main female characters' experience based on Mitchell's (1966) four structures: production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization of children as well as Srisermbhok's (2003) main characters' dichotomy between genders.

Findings and discussion

The Good Earth

The Good Earth was Buck's first novel in *The House of Earth Trilogy*, published in 1931. It was riveting family saga and story of Olan's female sacrifice and victimization by the unequal social status and patriarchal thoughts. China was a Semi-Colonial and Semi-Feudal country during 1842 and 1949. The social class structure at that time could be compared with a pyramid conceptualized by Lasswell (1950 as cited in Tananuraksakul, 2009) that "the influential are those who get the most of what there is to get. Those who get the most are elite; the rest are mass". In the case of *The Good Earth*, the elite referred to the empire of Qing

Dynasty that had the most property and power while the mass were the peasants who had the least. Peasants were the mainstream in the society and their life was harsh. In this background, Buck began the story with Wang Lung's wedding day that this poor peasant would pick up his wife, O-lan who was a slave in the Great House of Hwang.

Theme 1: Women's social status

Through O-lan's life, women's social status was perceived low in the society and compared with men's, it was lower, which could be seen in certain ways. The obvious evidence revealed gender inequality as well as physical and mental oppression. In O-lan's alienated childhood, she was a daughter of poor peasants and had to beg on the streets. When she was ten, O-lan was sold to a rich family, the Great House of Hwang to be slave. Her life was full of complaint and criticism from the upper social class as a slave in the bottom of society.

In the production dimension, O-lan was not paid for her labor as she was sold by her mistress to marry Wang Lung who was a poor peasant when she was twenty. In the reproduction, O-lan was treated as a reproduction tool by bearing seven children for her husband and her physical appearance after seven pregnancies turned Wang Lung to criticize her from head to toe and eventually abandoned her for a young girl, Lotus.

In the sexuality dimension, O-lan was treated as a sexual object with powerlessness in the family affair. Wang Lung took O-lan's pearls by force to please Lotus. When she wanted to stop Cuckoo, the slave who had oppressed her in the rich family to move in her house, Wang Lung thought in his mind that: "Well, and it is my house and whoever I say may come in, she shall come in, and who you are to ask?" (p. 191).

O-lan was one of the mainstream women living in the bottom of society and the social rules were cruel for her. She lived in a distorted society that the bound feet were seen as beauty and sexual subjects. Women had to bind their feet although it was a terrible experience to make the normal feet become small, called "three-inch golden Lotus" when they were tenth. As a slave, O-lan could not bind her feet, and this made her feel ashamed for the whole life. Since O-lan was married, the unbound feet had been the knot in heart between her husband and herself.

Wang Lung was not satisfied with her big feet on the marriage day, but he did not say anything as he was poor. After Wang Lung was rich, he verbally abused her big feet many times and then chose to enjoy Lotus's bound feet. The society was sexism as sons were honorable beings, while daughters were humble creatures. Girl infants could be killed. Young girls could be sold as slaves, prostitutes or concubines. Women's value was rejected by men and even by the women themselves. In the socialization of children dimension, O-lan was both the victim and the maker of sexism.

Through this theme, Buck portrayed Chinese women's lives through the lens of O-lan's childhood and adulthood experience and it reflected the mass living in the bottom of society in China at the end of the 19th century. Women were manipulated and dictated by poverty, which triggered social and gender inequality. Men, poor or rich, were culturally inherited to be oppressors over women while rich women were more socially privileged than poor women. Economically, poor women had no other choice to make a living and live a good life except begging and being enslaved.

Theme 2: Women's Feminist Consciousness

Feminist consciousness regards women's awareness of their social status and how they recognized their perception from the family and the community. As theme 1 showed, O-lan was treated unequally in the family and community. Her awareness of social status, obedience and resistance to class oppressors and the patriarchy are discussed in this theme.

The terrible life in the Great House of Hwang made O-lan a speechless woman. Wang Lung found that Olan had “the stolid face, the unexpressed, half-fearful look of her eyes, made nothing of her” (p. 27). The oppressor’s abused words dug in her heart: “I will bring the meats to the door only—and well I know I am ugly and cannot appear before the great lord.... Well I know I am ugly and cannot be loved” (pp. 243-244). Culturally, physical beauty was decided by the social master and became the social stereotype as the feminist Morrison (1970) said: “you looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly... It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question” (p.39).

Like a normal person, O-lan still wanted to be respected and admired, so she imagined one day she would return to the Great House of Hwang gloriously with her son. This speechless woman was full of thoughts:

When I return to that house it will be with my son in my arms. I shall have a red coat on him and red-flowered trousers and on his head a hat with a small gilded Buddha sewn on the front and on his feet tiger-faced shoes. And I will wear new shoes and a new coat of black sateen and I will go into the kitchen where I spent my days and I will go into the great hall where the Old One sits with her opium, and I will show myself and my son to all of them. (p. 32)

As a faithful wife, O-lan turned the hard life she faced into an opportunity to make a good living with the family and this fulfilled Wang Lung’s vanity. She had done great contribution for the family to survive, but she never asked for anything in return and tried to be “Angel in the House” by serving the family even before the last moment she gave birth to the first child. She did not forget to prepare food for the men and took off to do farming work at once after bearing the second child. In order to decrease feeding during starvation, she also killed her new born girl and planned to sell another girl for money so that Wang Lung could return home when they were in the southern city.

Despite O-lan’s faithfulness, Wang Lung betrayed her for another woman because she did not have beautiful hair or the bound feet to satisfy him. Since she was always ashamed of her unbound feet and fearful of him, she would bind her daughter’s feet: “My mother did not bind them, since I was sold so young. But the girl’s feet I will bind- the younger girl’s feet I will bind” (p.161).

This theme manifests poor women as the mass and the emperor as the elite. It appeared that the poor women were unable to liberate themselves from sexism as they could not escape from poverty and inequality. Socially, poor women were the mass in the society. They did not have rights in managing the land, house, money and other properties. Culturally, women had certain mindset or customs, including service duty in the family, husband’s power and bound feet, so they considered themselves inferior to men. It can be said that women were aware of social inequality, but they were unaware of gender inequality.

Sons

The story began with Wang Lung’s death, and his three sons divided the large inheritance. The third son, Wang the Tiger who worked in the army used the inheritance to develop his own army to be a warlord. The lady, a doctor’s daughter, married him. As Wang the Tiger only cared about the son, Wang Yuan was born by another wife. The lady brought her daughter, Ai-lan to live in another greater city and go to school, and she raised many adopted female children. Nevertheless, she failed in cultivating Ai-lan to be a great woman because Ai-lan became a social butterfly. As the lady appeared in *Sons* and *A House Divided*, data in two themes were collected from these two novels.

Theme 1: Women's Social Status

Women's social status was less inferior to men in *Sons* as they had more rights and opportunities in physical liberty, education and property. However, women remained oppressed by sexism, arranged marriage and pressure from the new rights and opportunities.

Wang the Tiger was a radical man with sexism on women. This would be found below:

Cannot any woman have sons, and do I not desire a son more than any mere woman? I will have a son. I will take a woman or two or three until I have a son. I have been a fool that I do always cling so to one woman—first to a woman I never even knew beyond a few scattered words such as a man may speak to a slave in his father's house and I went sore for that woman nearly ten years, and then there was the one I had to kill.... I shall be as other men are and I will see if I cannot make myself free as other men do and take a woman and leave her again when I please. (*Sons*, p. 286)

The texts above manifest Wang the Tiger's depressed emotion experience, his painful emotion and his cruel decision. His failed love experiences made him outwardly strong but inwardly weak by treating women disrespectfully. In his views, he would have one or two or even more wives and their only duty was to bear him sons. In the reproduction and sexuality dimensions, women remained a reproduction tool and a sexual object.

Because of his emotional frustrations, Wang the Tiger at last assimilated into the mainstream exploitation, and this was the reason why the lady did not feel loved but felt lonely. With the education taught by her father, the lady left Wang the Tiger's court with an excuse to educate her daughter in the great city. She had incomes from Wang the Tiger and her father's inheritance. She told Wang Yuan that:

I am glad I have used my own silver for Mei-ling. Yes, I have a sort of pride to do that, and my father left me enough, since he had no son, before he died, and he put his moneys in a good sound foreign bank where they have lain safely all these years. He loved me very well, and sold many of his inherited lands even, and turned them into silver for me. (*Sons*, p. 295)

The lady used the inheritance to raise an adopted girl, Mei-ling, to be independent and content. It could be said that the lady's educated father had great influences on her. The father treated her without sexism so that the lady could properly treat herself and confidently leave Wang the Tiger. In addition, her father's inheritance helped her be independent economically to fulfil her meaningful life. In the production dimension, the lady set herself free from the reproduction. In the production dimension, the lady was productive for the whole society. As an educated woman, the lady played the role of the socialization of children without sexism.

This theme manifests Chinese women at the beginning of the 20th century. Poor women remained the mass in the society while educated women who did not bind their feet were the rare with difficulty to be accepted by the traditional society. The power of tradition also forced the educated women to marry through the arranged marriage and they were seen as materialistic and functional women. However, the inheritance rights socially gave them choices to start a new life if their marriage fails.

Theme 2: Women's Feminist Consciousness

As an educated woman, the lady understood her own social status and others' well but struggled with women's equality with men in education, marriage and other opportunities. The lady suffered from Wang the Tiger's hatred toward women and decided to leave the family and resisted all the prejudice against women. Many years later, she recalled this experience:

But I used to know how he longed for a son, and all the months he was away I used to tell myself that if I bore his son—I am not foolish, Yuan, as most women are—my father taught me all his learning. I always thought that if your

father would only look at what I really am, see what my heart is, he might have taken comfort in me for the little wisdom I have had. By now, to him I was ever no more than a woman who might bear a son for him—and I bore no son, only Ai-lan.... At last in my own loneliness, Yuan, I told myself I would leave his courts—not openly, but with the excuse of schooling for my daughter, and I was sure that I would let Ai-lan have everything a son would have, and do my best against this bondage of a woman’s birth. (*A House Divided*, pp. 63-64)

As the text showed, at first, the lady tried to please Wang the Tiger, but she failed and felt lonely and frustrated. At last, she let her daughter have everything a son would have, which was her way to resist Wang the Tiger and the whole patriarchal system.

Compared with O-lan, the lady neither lived with husband hopelessly, nor went back to her mother’s house. She built her own house after leaving the family to search her identity. She did “against this bondage of a woman’s birth” not only through her daughter, but also through other unwanted female children. She raised these children to be working and independent women. Although her marriage had failed, she hoped that the next generation would have a good marriage as she said: “They are to be the wives of working men” (*A House Divided*, p. 93).

In the lady’s views, the external beauty needed the support of the inner beauty. Ai-lan was westernized by the hedonism, so she lost herself in external appearance and ignored the inner ability and spirit. The lady was frustrated about this: “Against this beauty have I fought my whole life, but I have lost” (*A House Divided*, p. 258).

At last, the lady’s identity or inner freedom was blocked by her failed marriage and uneducated daughter. When Wang Yuan studied in America, his old teacher invited him to his house. The old teacher’s wife reminded him of his lady mother in China. He found the differences in the two:

For about this lady there was an air of contentment and simple satisfaction of the soul which his lady mother had not. It was as if this one had her heart’s desire in her lifetime, but the other had not. By two roads the two had come to a good tranquil age, but the one had come by a happy road and with companionship, while the other had come by a darker way and she walked alone. (*A House Divided*, p. 187)

The text illustrated these two women’s different spiritual outlook due to their different experience. The American woman had a happy marriage because her husband respected and loved her. However, the lady’s life was full of disappointment, frustration and depression from the failed marriage.

This theme manifests poor women as the mass in the society, educated women as the influential that freed them from the sexism. The educated were aware of their own gender inequality and they were against it through resisting the arranged marriage, supporting the independent marriage, raising unwanted baby girls and teaching them to be working women. Nevertheless, they were unable to free themselves mentally from the failed marriage.

A House Divided

The novel began with Wang Yuan’s return home from the school of war. He resisted the marriage managed by Wang the Tiger by escaping from home and living with the lady instead. There he saw the westernized modern city and met the foundling girl Mei-ling. Later, Wang Yuan went abroad for study. After six years, when he came back to China, he fell in love with Mei-ling who became an independent modern woman.

Theme 1: Women’s Social Status

With the influence of the Western culture and modernization of the country, women were relatively equal with men. The gender equality in the education and marriage allowed women to have more choices for social activities. During the warlord period, the countless

wars between warlords who fought for territory and power worsened the country. In order to save the country, the new generations of the warlords educated in the school became revolutionists against the warlords: “both men and women even kill their parents to show their loyalty” (p. 36), so women had become an indispensable part of revolutionists to confront the warlords.

As a result of the colonization, people worshiped materialism. They were more open-minded and tolerant to the gender relationship, and women could decide on their marriage without the parents’ permits, just as Wang Yuan was excited about: “This was his world—this new world—this world of men and women free and free to live in each his own way” (p. 112). Women also had the educational rights that became a new custom, and Mei-ling was this product with a great hope of the lady:

I have taught her all he taught me, and now she goes to a foreign school of medicine. She has two more years to learn, and then she must work in their hospital for more years. I say to her do not forget that for internal humors it is we who know best our own frames. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that for cutting and sewing up again the foreign physicians are best. Mei-ling will know both (p. 240).

As the text showed, Mei-ling was portrayed as an ideal woman who kept the balance between Chinese and Western knowledge and culture. In the production dimension, Mei-ling attended the social production. In the eyes of Wang Yuan, Mei-ling “is between, too, not wholly new, and yet different from the old” (p. 342), so they were similar. Mei-ling owned Wang Yuan’s identity and love as Buck illustrated at the end of the novel:

He put his lips on hers.... She hung her head down and looked at the ground, and now she was as shy as any old-fashioned maid could ever be.... She held herself bravely and she straightened her shoulders square and sure, and she lifted up her head and looked back to him steadfastly, smiling, waiting and Yuan saw her so.... “We two,” he said— “we two—we need not be afraid of anything.” (pp. 374-375)

Buck’s aim to keep men and women equal and harmonious came true because Wang Yuan, a teacher in the school, and Mei-ling, a medicine student, depended on themselves. Both were new generations without much money, land or other properties, but they had the spirit to have a content life together. In the sexuality dimension, Mei-ling was treated equally.

This theme manifests Chinese women in the Chinese coastal city during the 1920s and the 1930s. Poor women continued to be the mass while educated women appeared to be the influential in the society. In general, women had the equal education and freedom of marriage rights with men and they were valued and respected by the community. Through education, women had ability to work and live independently. They could decide on what they wanted to be and who they wanted to marry.

Theme 2: Women’s Feminist Consciousness

Women had equal rights with men in education and marriage, and the oppression of women disappeared. Therefore, Buck portrayed Mei-ling to explore women’s inner freedom. Mei-ling studied Chinese and Western medicine and culture. She was a special girl as the lady discovered: “(She) has some spirit in her.... She is so quick at letters, so true to every teaching, so to be depended on” (pp. 93-94). This clever girl wanted to be a doctor as the lady expected. She talked to Wang Yuan about her ideal:

My foster-mother made me think of it at first,” she said and threw her quiet beaming look upon the lady, “and now I like it very well. Only it has meant a long time to study, and a great cost, and this my foster-mother has done for me, and I shall always care for her in return; where I am she shall be, too. I want a hospital of my own one day in some city, a place for children and for women,

and I want a garden in the center, and round it buildings full of beds and places for the sick—not too large, not more than I could do, but all very clean and pretty. (p. 261)

There is no doubt that Mei-ling was an inspired woman with traditional virtue and modern independence. She had a filial love that she would take care of the lady in return. Furthermore, she was ambitious that she had her target to be a doctor and built a hospital to serve people. It is true as Mill (1869 as cited in Pan, 2004) argued that women were refused to enter the public areas including the professional and politics. Ninety percent of men had the professional work; however, ninety percent of women had the normal work. As Mei-ling had the professional work, she was independent economically and entered the public areas as a productive woman.

Mei-ling supported the freedom of marriage as it was advantageous for the working women like her. She said: “If I were not too old I would myself do something in that hospital. It is a better day than mine was. It is a very good day when women are not forced to wed!” (p. 262). Mei-ling was not inferior to criticize Wang Yuan, ‘a westernized man’ when he was drunk:

You are like all the others, Yuan—like all the other foolish idle Wangs. I have made myself a fool. I thought, ‘Yuan is different—he is not a half-foreign fop, drinking and dancing all his good years away!’ but you are—you are! Look at you! Look at your silly foreign clothes—you reek of wine—you are drunk, too”. (pp. 350-351)

From the text, Mei-ling’s outlook on life and value were released. She looked down on those rich men who misbehaved and spent their days meaninglessly.

This theme manifests poor women as the mass and educated women as the influential in the society. It appeared that the educated women were able to liberate themselves. Subjectively, women had independent spirit and kind heart. They received education and had the ability to be independent. Objectively, men treated women with respect, for they deserved love from men.

The findings suggest that: 1) Chinese women’s low social status was mainly due to unequal social class and the patriarchy. The reform of women’s roles in production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization of children could lead them to liberation. When women were set free from the cultural chain or the patriarchy, women would gain contentment through men’s respect and love; 2) Education and professional work as the production tool enabled women to seek the equality of social status with men and freedom consciously.

Conclusion

Nowadays knowledge-based economy has increased equality within each gender by rewarding people with good education, skills, and professional networks. Reducing gender inequality is not only a solution but also a key resource of social problems, such as poverty, hunger, and premature death. Women need right education which makes them intelligent, supports them economically, and continues their lifelong learning. Education not only provides women with work but also empowers them mentally. Men thus need to culturally reconsider female stereotypes in the trilogy so as to help women reposition themselves socially. The findings are valuable for not only women but also men in the current era.

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