

Comparison of Cross Dressing in *The Twelfth Night* and *Yi Zhong Yuan*

COMPARISON DU TRAVERTISME DANS *LA NUIT DES ROIS* ET *YI ZHONG YUAN*

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Abstract: The device of cross dressing is adopted both by Renaissance writer Shakespeare and Chinese writer Li Yu in late Ming and Early Qing dynasty. This paper makes a comparison between Shakespeare's work *The Twelfth Night* and Li Yu's *Yi Zhong Yuan* (The Desired Ideal Matches), in which the female protagonists are dressed in men's cloth. The two female protagonists transgress into men's world by cross dressing, showing the ambiguity of gender identity and challenging the dominant system by men. However, they owed different attitudes towards cross dressing and different level of masculinity. Traced back into the concept of gender in two cultures, we may find an answer to this difference.

Key Words: cross dressing; gender; Renaissance; imperial China

Résumé: Le procédé du travestissement est adopté à la fois par un écrivain de Renaissance, Shakespeare, et un écrivain chinois Li Yu, à la fin de la dynastie des Ming et au début des Qing. Ce document établit une comparaison entre l'oeuvre de Shakespeare, *La Nuit des Rois* et celui de Li Yu, *Zhong Yi Yuan* (le Couple idéal désiré), dans lesquels les héroïnes se sont habillées en homme. Les deux héroïnes entrent dans le monde des hommes par le moyen de travestissement, tout en montrant l'ambiguïté de l'identité sexuelle et la contestation du système dominant par les hommes. Toutefois, elles ont des attitudes différentes vis-à-vis du travestissement et sont de niveau différent de la masculinité. En remontant au concept de sexe dans ces deux cultures, nous pourrions trouver une réponse à cette différence.

Mots-Clés: travestissement; sexe; Renaissance; Chine impériale

Cross dressing is a very interesting phenomenon in plays, which means women in men's attires or vice versa. It can be found both in Chinese and western traditions, which is adopted by playwrights to create intriguing plots to arouse the interest of the audience and entertain them. However, for cross dressing involves the transformation of the characters' gender identities, the study of cross dressing entails an

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investigation of gender issues from both cultures and the similarities and differences between them. This essay will discuss the special phenomenon of women characters in men's attires in *The Twelfth Night* written by Shakespeare from England and *Yi Zhong Yuan* (The Desired Ideal Matches) written by Li Yu from China, from the perspective of gender identity in Chinese and western cultures.

1. INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TWO PLAYS

1.1 Social background

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was a preeminent English poet and playwright in the Renaissance era. Li Yu (1610–1680) was an outstanding Chinese playwright and novelist in late-Ming and early-Qing dynasties. *Twelfth Night* is believed to have been written around 1600-1601, while *Yi Zhong Yuan* has been written in about 1653.

Although the two writers lived in different periods in different countries, the historical background of their lifetime are similar. Renaissance era is a period advocating humanism and self-awareness. Beginning in Italy, it spread to England by the early 16th century, whose influence affected literature, philosophy, art, science, religion, and other aspects of intellectual inquiry. The late-Ming and early-Qing dynasties witnessed the wane of feudalism and the germination of capitalism. Cultural movement in this period emphasized natures of human and liberation of humanity, freeing oneself from the oppression of feudal doctrines.

Many Renaissance novels and plays feature the device of cross dressing. Shakespeare produced five plays in which female characters are dressed in men's attire: *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Cymbeline*. Other famous plays featuring cross-dressed women in this era include John Lyly's *Gallathea* (1587), Thomas Middleton's *Roaring Girl* (1611) and More Dissembler's *Besides Women* (1615). (Liao Weichun 48) Generally speaking, women enjoyed more liberty in Renaissance than before, greatly influenced by the free society created by Queen Elizabeth. Her contribution to the country proves that women could also be outstanding, knowledgeable and masculine.

The Chinese folktale featuring cross-dressing woman hero Hua Mu-lan, who entered the army to replace her old father, is widely spread in ancient China. The story was deeply rooted in Chinese people. Traced back to her, cross-dressing female is beautiful and commendable. The imperial China, Ming and Qing dynasty, also produced many plays adopting the device of cross dressing, such as *Ci Mulan tifu congjun* (Maid Mulan enlists in her father's place) and *Nü Zhuangyuan cihuang defeng* (The female Number-One-Constant-Scholar gains a he-phoenix by declining a she-phoenix) by Xu Wei (1521-1593), *Yi Zhong Yuan* (The Desired Ideal Matches) and *Lianxiang Ban* (The Fragrance-adoring Companion) written by Li Yu. (Liao Weichun, 48) However, this theme is for the most part presented in female writers' works, showing women are equally competent as men either in civil or military skills, rarely used by male playwrights, and Li Yu was one of the few.

1.2 Theatrical background

Cross dressing was common both on Shakespearian stage and Chinese Stage. In terms of theatrical background, it is a tradition that boy actors played women's roles in Shakespeare's time. Women had little or no part in the English theatrical history before the restoration of King Charles II in 1660, when it became possible for women to pursue a theatrical career.

Corresponding to cross dressing on Shakespearian stage, Chinese plays also have the tradition of "Faan-Chuen", which means gender-crossing in the public understanding. The performers can explicitly "do gender" on-stage which subverts their gender identities. There are five categories of characters in Chinese plays: sheng, dan, jing, mo, chou, of which dan, meaning the female lead, are generally played

by males as custom.

Both Li Yu and Shakespeare created female characters dressed as men influenced by Chinese and western cultures? What different images have they created? Is there similarity between the characters? What's the cultural background behind this difference and similarities? I will answer these questions in this essay, focusing on *The Twelfth Night* written by Shakespeare and *Yi Zhong Yuan (The Desired Ideal Matches)* written by Li Yu.

2. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN TWO CHARACTERS

2.1 Cross dressing: subversion of gender identity

The cross-dressed female character created in *Twelfth Night* is called Viola. Surviving a shipwreck in which she thought her brother is drowned, she went to Illyria. And as it was inconvenient and dangerous for a woman being alone, she decided to dress herself as a man, changing her name to Cesario, to serve the Duke of Illyria, Orsino. She wanted not to "be delivered to the world" until she knew better what her situation was. Just like her, the female character Lin Tian-su also disguised herself as men in case there were dangers on the way to her hometown alone. Lin Tian-su was a well-known actress-prostitute in the play. Proficient in verses and painting, she attracted scholar Chen Ji-ru and was married to him later. Immediately after their marriage, she had to go back for the funeral of her parent. Her husband Chen Ji-ru worried that her delicate body could not stand the long distance of walking; in addition, women are vulnerable to dangers outside. She easily answered that she would dress like a man and there was no need to be worried.

Both of the two female characters put on male attires for the purpose of self-protection. Although in Shakespeare's time, women enjoyed more freedom and liberty in a social atmosphere created by Elizabeth I, the general moral ideals for them were still submission and obedience. To keep women subordinated, one important way was to keep women confined to the domestic household. It's common in Renaissance that "the best way for a woman to keep a good name was for her never to leave her house". (Howard, 1988, 424) The access to the public spheres for the majority of women was limited. In other words, women were not supposed to leave her house and travel alone. In late-Ming and early-Qing dynasty also, women were also limited to the domestic sphere. They were required to stay at home serving their husbands and feeding their children. Good virtues for women in that society are obedient and tender in character, reserved in manner and proficiency in needlecraft. They should clearly realize their position in the social patriarchal structure and behave themselves well, not transgressing the privilege of men.

Thus by putting on men's clothes, these two women subverted their gender identity in appearance. They did not think they were fragile and weak as the society attached to the term of women. What they lacked is the allowance and acceptance from the society which authorized them the freedom to exhibit their competence. By wearing men's attires, they stepped across the bound of women and transgressed men's world, enduing themselves with the legitimacy to behave like a man. As Michael, Mangan pointed out: "The cross-dressing plot can thus be read in a radical and liberating way as a critique of conventional Renaissance gender roles; at its most extreme it can be seen as an attempt to oppose the structures of domination inherent within patriarchy by destabilizing the notion of gender." (222)

2.2 Masculinity in two characters

Voila and Lin Tian-su did not only change their appearance, they also possessed masculine features in their life. Besides feminine qualities such as chastity, constancy, patience and selflessness, they also possess masculine qualities such as intelligence, activeness and determination.

They are both intelligent and capable. After losing her brother, Voila wittily changed herself into a man's look for protecting herself. She played her role as a servant to the Duke so well that the Duke

avored her more than anyone less than three days after she has come. Even Olivia fell in love with her at the first sight. When Viola finished a discussion with Feste, she also showed her intelligence in her judgment to him:

This fellow's wise enough to play the fool;
And to do that well craves a kind of wit;
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
The quality of persons, and the time,
Not, like the haggard, check at every feather
That comes before his eye. This is a practice
As full of labour as a wise man's art
For folly that he wisely shows is fit;
But wise men, folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit. (Shakespeare, 3.1. 120)

Viola, disguised as a man, was trapped in the love triangle of the Duke, Olivia and herself. She had to play the role of Cesario as well as herself. She coped with these two roles wisely and capably, eventually figuring out everything.

Lin Tian-su created by Li Yu was also an intelligent and competent woman. When she was on her way alone, she was caught by a brood of outlaws. In order to protect herself, she agreed to be their secretary at first, bearing in mind that she might think out a way to escape later. Then she ordered her maiden to escape out of the brood's fastness quietly and sent a letter to her husband Chen Ji-ru. Until the army troops dispatched by Chen Ji-ru's friend came to rescue her, she had divulged no trait of her female identity and dealt with the leader of the brood smartly. We see a woman full of wittiness and braveness in Li Yu's Play, which qualities are not supposed to be owned by women.

Even her husband Chen Ji-ru was astonished by her likeness to a man in men's clothes, not even a little showing the hoof. She said: "It's the air. If you tell yourself in your heart that you are a woman, you will lose courage in the crowd. You should identify yourself as a brave man and regard those men as women. Then you will gain great courage and confident air, without showing any weakness." Then she began to sing: "Who is male and who is female? Air can hold the body. Female can be male." (Li Yu, 358) The masculine air in her female body is greatly felt by readers. Her performance proves that "masculine prerogatives are based on custom, not nature". (Pitt, 1981, 433).

In addition, Viola and Lin Tian-su were both active and determined in love. Viola took initiative in her love actively instead of passively. She fell in love with the Duke in the first few days when she became his servant. But the Duke then strongly loved Lady Olivia and sent Viola to woo her. Viola says to herself: "Whoe'er I woo, myself Would be his wife." (Shakespeare, 1.4. 42). Disguised as a man, she could not reveal her love for the Duke. Yet she did show some allusion in her dialogue with him:

Say that some lady, as perhaps there is,
Hath for your love a great pang of heart
As you have for Olivia; you cannot love her;
You tell her so; must she not then be answered? (2.4. 96)

She was determined throughout the play to win the Duke's heart and succeed. At the end of the play when she discarded her man's clothes, the Duke asked her to be his wife.

Lin Tian-su was a famous actress-prostitute in the play. Although her background was not well, she still longed for a romantic love. She traveled to Hang Zhou with her maiden in hope of finding a genius scholar she will love. She admired Chen Ji-ru's paintings for a long time but has not seen him before. In Hang Zhou, she imitated one of his paintings on a fan and asked her maiden to sell it in a store run by a monk. Coincidentally, Chen Ji-ru saw the fan in the store and immediately fell in love with her. He sent a friend to Lin Tian-su's home as a matchmaker. Lin Tian-su agreed to marry Chen Ji-ru at the site. Her maiden thought she was so bold to marry a man she never met: "What if he is very ugly?" She answered: "A man excellent in appearance and talent is surely good. But the true talented may not have favorable looks. I can see him in his poems and paintings, whose charm cannot be surpassed even by Pan'an or Wei Jie2." (Li Yu, 345) Lin Tian-su attached great importance to a man's talent rather than appearance, which

² Pan'an and Wei Jie are well-known handsome men in Chinese history.

was seldom seen in Chinese literature works and was greatly praised by critics. She found love actively and positively in spite of her background. Once the ideal lover appeared, she made response rapidly and decisively, really showing the masculine quality in her.

3. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TWO CHARACTERS

3.1 Gender identification of oneself

Voila and Lin Tian-su had extremely different attitudes towards the men's attires they were wearing. Voila was confused of and anxious for her dual roles, while Lin Tian-su was proud to be like a man.

Voila once told herself: "Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness/ Wherein the pregnant enemy does much." (Shakespeare, 2.2. 72) She even called herself "poor monster" in clothes of the opposite sex. So uncomfortable and agitated, she suffered a lot from her disguise and longed for taking it off. Every time she encountered difficulties or dangers, she would show her helplessness, attributing it to her female identity. Not knowing how to deal with the love triangle among the Duke, Olivia and herself, she cried out: "O time, thou must untangle this, not I; /It is too hard a knot for me to untie!" (Shakespeare, 2.2. 74) When entrapped into a fighting with Sir Andrew, Viola's instinct response was to go back to Olivia's house for help. Because she herself was "no fighter" (3.4. 156) Frightened by the fighting, she cared not "who knows so much of my mettle" (3.4.158), which is obviously not masculine as defined by society. When finally forced into dueling, she cannot help exclaiming aside: "Pray God defend me! A little thing would/ make me tell them how much I lack of a man." (3.4. 160) So although Voila transgressed into men's world, she still lacked confidence. In contrast to Lin Tian-su, she still told herself deep in heart that she was a woman, as a result, she was cowardice and timid in front of problems. Under the disguised male appearance, there is still a female soul residing in her body according to how she identified herself.

And Lin Tian-su was comfortable in men's attires, which caused her neither confusion nor anxiety. She courageously acclaimed with defiance to men: "Men in this world are few, among whom the majority are females. Why worrying about being recognized by men as women? I would still be calm and confident." (Li Yu, 358) It really showed her mettle. What's important, here she did not define men and women by virtue of their physical body; instead she classified those women with courage and talent to men's group. She walked a further step than Voila in her awareness that there are no boundaries between men and women's world. When faced with the outlaws on the way, she showed neither countenance of scare nor nervousness. She calmly agreed their term at first and figured out a way rationally later. There's another interesting plot in this play. After Lin Tian-su's return from the outlaws' fastness, her husband asked her for a favor: pretending to be his friend Dong Si-ming, a genius scholar who to take office in Beijing, for proposing a marriage to Dong's beloved Lady Yang and taking her to Beijing to unite with Dong. Lin was willing to offer help and did her job quite well. Lady Yang was attracted by her talent and swelfish manner, immediately agreeing to marry her, not recognizing this man in front of her was actually a woman.

3.2 Different level of masculine

In men's attire, Lin Tian-su showed so-called masculine manners, praised by other characters as having the air of a swordsman. Voila on the contrary played her role as a eunuch, which was usually associated with effeminacy. The Duke eulogizes her charm that: "That say thou art a man; Diana's lip/ Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe/ Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound....." (Shakespeare, 1.4. 42) We inevitably see a woman with delicate beauty in these lines. When Voila went to Olivia's house to woo her for the Duke, Olivia's maiden depicted her as follows:

Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for
a boy; as a squash is before 'tis a peascod, or a
cooling when 'tis almost an apple: 'tis with him

in standing water, between boy and man. He is very well-favoured and he speaks very shrewishly; one would think his mother's milk were scarce out of him. (Shakespeare, 1.5. 54)

We had to say from the above that Voila lacks typical manner and action as a man. Although she owned many masculine qualities under men's attires, to some extent she was still a stereotyped woman in Shakespeare's writing. And in the duel issue, it's Voila's twin brother Sebastian, looking like her in appearance yet was a man, who showed his vigor and power in fighting. "Voila has never wished to be taken entirely as one of the male sex, and thus it has never been her intention to try a full fender identity transformation. In this sense, Voila's cross dressing only reinforce the dominant position of the male." (Liao Weichun, 2005, 80)

All in all, both Voila and Lin Tian-su in men's clothes possessed masculine features such as intelligence, activeness, courage and determination. By cross dressing, they encroached on men's world, challenged men's authority and to some extent realized liberty and freedom as women. But it's interesting that in Shakespeare's play, Voila could not achieve the same accomplishment as men, while in Li Yu's play Lin Tian-su could be as masculine as a man. Why is there such a difference? What's different attitude towards women do the two cultures hold?

4. GENDER IN TWO CULTURES

4.1 Gender in Western Culture

The ancient Greeks drew strict lines between males and females. Their society was patriarchal, emphasizing the superiority of male and inferiority of female. According to Aristotle's theory of hylomorphism, there is a connection between form and being male, and matter and being female. Furthermore, matter and form are not equal partners in Aristotle's metaphysics; form is better than matter. In reproduction, the males provide the form, which is principle, while the females only provide the body. For Aristotle, gender is the essence of an individual's identity. For women to be women or men to be men, they must behave according to the natural order of their gender. Men must show his masculinity and women her femininity.

Plato took a different view compared to Aristotle. In Plato's Republic, while gender is important, there is room for fluidity in gender roles according to individual ability. Although patriarchy still exists, citizen women are as privileged as citizen men; in other words, in Plato's utopian society, gender does not determine one's role. But in Timaeus he argues that women's weakness is biologically destined. Women are doomed to devote their life to baring and nursing children.

In ancient Rome, religion plays an important part in human life, where gender roles are used in religious practice. Men dominated the religious world which is characterized by patriarchal system. But as women's child-bearing role, women are included in religious field. However, women's religious activities were mainly bound up with fertility and chastity.

The Christian culture also inherited the concept of male domination. The bible tells that God first created the man Adam, and because "[i]t is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18), God made a woman out of his rib. The implication is that man is created earlier than woman and thus superior to the latter. The biblical texts also show that it is woman who cannot resist the temptation of the serpent and leads to the fall of the man. So women are destined to be subject to man, as the symbol of sinner.

4.2 Gender in Chinese Culture

The ancient Chinese culture is also featured by distinction between men and women. This concept can be dated back to the Chinese classic The Book of Changes (Yijing), coming into being three thousand years before, which evolves an elaborate system of Yin and Yang, meaning the shadowy and

bright side of a hill originally. Derived from this, gender system is established with the Yang associated with male and Yin female. The dichotomy of Yin and Yang is basis of ancient Chinese philosophy and is adopted to interpret many phenomena in Chinese culture. And obviously Yang, the bright side, connected with masculinity, is superior, standing for the positive, active, dominating and powerful leading force. While Yin, the shadowy side, connected with femininity, is inferior, standing for the negative, passive, silent, receptive and patient following force. Yin and Yang together reveals the patriarchal system of Chinese society.

However, The Book of Changes also emphasizes the interaction between Yin and Yang. In constant, altering flow, the two binary forces are phases of the same unity. It is impossible for Yin without Yang or vice versa. "The classic yin/yang diagram above shows dark yin and light yang, embryonic figures constantly in motion. The opposite colored eyes symbolize yin in yang and yang in yin, because the seed of one is always in the other." (Wu 15-6)

Confucianism and Daoism are two important schools in ancient China, greatly influencing Chinese culture. One of the Confucian classics, Book of Rites [Liji], dedicates a whole chapter, "Neize" [The Norm of the Family] to setting rigid gender boundaries for men and women in observance of the Confucian emphasis on the virtue of hierarchy and subordination of women. And in "three obediences" is considered as the highest virtue in the tradition of Confucianism: before marriage, the woman was to obey her father; after marriage, the woman was to obey her husband; and lastly, after the death of her husband, the woman was to obey her son.

Another philosophical school in ancient China Daoism seems to enhance women's position in general. It highlights the emphasis of The Book of Changes on the interrelatedness of all things and insistence of moving with the flow of things. According to Taoist Cosmology, the first movement into manifestation happens via Yang Qi and Yin Qi, the primordial masculine and feminine energies. At this level, there is equality between the masculine and the feminine. Chapter 28 opens with the lines, "Know the masculine,/ Keep to the feminine." The advantage of femininity is stated in p Chapter 61: "The Feminine always conquers the Masculine by her quietness, by lowering herself through her quietness./ Hence, if a great country can lower itself before a small country, it will win over the small country...." To conclude, not only does Daoism regarded female and male as a unity, it also extols the good virtues of female, obviously distinguished from western tradition.

So in Chinese culture, male and female identities are interactive. They are connected intimately and the absence of either will cause an imbalance between Yin and Yang. Both male characteristics and female characteristics are significant and praiseworthy in the universe. And according to western culture, the distinction between male and female is biologically destined and born with originally. Women cannot transgress men's sphere. This may explain why Lian Tian-su can act like a man and enjoy this role, while Voila act between men and women, calling herself a "monster".

5. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, Chinese culture attaches more fluidity towards female and male distinction, influenced by the concept of Yin and Yang. Moreover, it commends the goodness of Yin and emphasizes its importance in the motion of universe, although Yin is inferior to Yang. That's why such an image as Lin Tian-su gets sincere eulogy from the writer. But we cannot say that Li Yu endowed women with equality as men in his play. Why he praised Lin Tian-su for her masculinity was because he thought masculine was superior to feminine, as men were superior to women. By being masculine, she was heading forward to the "better". As to Voila, although she wears men's attire, she still owns a women's heart. Her weakness and cowardice in front of danger shows the western understanding towards women. Voila can never transgress into men's domain completely and she is not masculine enough to achieve the same "air" as Lin Tian-su.

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