

Writing Man as Woman-The Gender Construction of You Ruilang in A Male Mencius's Mother

Qianchen Long

Chinese Literature, Hong Kong
Metropolitan University, Hong
Kong, 999077, China
E-mail: loongqc@163.com

Abstract:

A Male Mencius's Mother is a Storytelling Script Fiction written by Li Yu, who is a dramatist and novelist in the Qing Dynasty, and it is included in the *Silent Operas*. The fiction mainly tells the romantic relationship between You Ruilang and Xu Jifang, alongside You Ruilang's nurturing of Xu Chengxian akin to a mother figure. You Ruilang emerges as a distinctive character characterized by a blend of male biological sex and pronounced female social and biological traits within the text. While existing analyses predominantly concentrate on character depiction and plot progression, overlooking the structural elements of the Storytelling Script Fiction and the author's narrative influence. This paper examines Li Yu's gender construction of You Ruilang through narrative intervention, story structure, and textual content, highlighting how Li Yu crafts this character akin to his female characters.

Keywords: Li Yu, *A Male Mencius's Mother*, *Silent Operas*, Ming and Qing Novels, Gender Studies

1. Introduction

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, due to the prohibition of visiting prostitutes, the abolition of the official prostitute system and the establishment of the male dan system led male actors to assume the roles and functions of female prostitutes and actresses.^[1] This era marked a significant shift where men assumed women's roles. Li Yu's (李渔) perspective on homosexuality aligns with this trend: "We know not how the Southern Mode began. And women's travail was bequeathed to men: Face to back, opening the firmament. For lack of a woman, making do with a man." (南风不知何由始, 妇人之祸贻男子。翻面凿洪濛, 无雌硬打雄。)^[2] He viewed homosexuality

as an imitation of heterosexual relationships, with passive men emulating women.

Despite the prevalence of male homosexuality during the Ming and Qing dynasties, societal attitudes were largely negative. This disapproval led to the emergence of criticisms and admonitions directed at homosexuals. As an author, Li Yu emphasized the didactic role of literary works. In his work *Xianqingouji* (闲情偶寄), he endorsed the educational value of ancient legends for the general populace and advocated for the idea that fiction could serve the purpose of promoting virtuous behavior and condemning wrongdoing.^[3] This underscores Li Yu's emphasis on the educational aspect of fiction. In *Silent Operas* (无

声戏), he similarly upholds this creative philosophy. For instance, *The Ghost's Lost Bet* (鬼输钱) serves as a cautionary tale against gambling, *A Daughter Is Transformed Into A Son* (变女为儿) aims to promote virtuous actions, and *A Male Mencius's Mother* (男孟母) warns against the prevalence of homosexual relationships among men.

Li Yu's views on homosexuality and his purpose of using novels to admonish the world led to the following characteristics in this fiction. Firstly, Li Yu assimilated the homosexual behaviors into interactions between men and women and into the Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues (三纲五常), using them for explanation, deduction and moral exhortation. Secondly, he imitated those predecessors' narrative tropes like "talented scholar and beautiful lady" and the "virtuous mother and a worthy son". These characteristics led to You Ruilang (尤瑞郎), a male character in the receptive role, exhibiting pronounced feminine qualities. Therefore, by analyzing Li Yu's gender construction of You Ruilang from authorial narrative intervention, narrative structure and textual content, it can be discerned that Li Yu effectively "wrote male as female" in crafting You Ruilang.

2. Author's creative consciousness as revealed by narrative intervention.

The narrative mode of Storytelling Script Fiction (话本小说) is rooted in the art of storytelling (说话). The author do not conceal their identity as the narrator and frequently interrupts the narrative to directly engage with the reader, making they aware that narrator as an intermediary between them and the story.^[4] This behavior that author actively intervenes between the reader and the text is termed narrative intervention. By doing so, author conveys personal viewpoints, positions, and even creative intentions to reader and guiding them towards understanding the novel's deeper meanings. Storytelling Script Fiction preserve the characteristic of storytelling which author can intervene narrative directly, such as Pian Shou (篇首), Ru Hua (入话) and Pian wei (篇尾). Title and character's name may reflect the author's perspectives also. Consequently, Li Yu's narrative interventions in *A Male Mencius's Mother* reveal his creative consciousness. How did he conceive and create male homosexuality and You Ruilang? And how did he intend readers to understand this fiction and You Ruilang?

2.1 Narrative Intervention in the Pian Shou, Ru Hua and Pian wei of the fiction

Storytelling Script Fiction typically opens with a poem, which is Pian Shou, is used to highlight the chapter's

theme and summarized the core idea.^[5] Ru Hua is used to elaborate on the initial poem and transitions into the main text.^[5] After the story, the segment where the author summarizes the central theme or exhort audiences is Pian Wei.^[5] In sections concerning the generalization or evaluation of the entire text, Li Yu expressed his confusion and opposition towards male homosexual behavior. Its consist of two parts:

Firstly, Li Yu believes that the relationship between men and women is complies with natural. In Ru Hua, his judge of male homosex is: "Isn't it strange that it now competes with the Way of Man and Woman as created by Heaven and Earth?" (与天造地设的男女一道争锋比胜起来, 岂不怪哉?)^[2] Compare with homosex, he elucidates heterosex that:

Just look at the places where the male anatomy protrudes and the female recedes - the correspondence is certainly not adventitious. In shaping the male and female anatomies, Heaven and Earth intended that surplus element should supplement the deficient one and that, when it did so perfectly, pleasure would be the natural result.

(男子身上凸出一块, 女子身上凹进一块, 这副形骸岂不是造化出来的? 男女体天地赋形之以, 以其有余, 补其不足, 补得恰到好处。)^[2]

Therefore, in Li Yu's standpoint male homosexual behavior is not suitable in physiology rather than heterosex.

Secondly, Li Yu believes that a significant outcome of heterosexual relations is procreation. In Ru Hua he mentioned heterosexual relations is: "Accordance with the mutual interaction of yin and yang, the meaning of Heaven above and Earth below, and the function of Creation." (顺阴阳交感之情, 法乾坤覆载之义, 象造化陶铸之功。)^[2] So, sexual behavior between men and women can be "intimate without harm to morality and playful while furthering the case of propriety." (不碍于礼, 有益于正。)^[2] In contrast, male homosexual behavior can't produce offspring, therefore he hold this position that it doesn't benefit to anyone. (无生男育女之功, 不知何所取。)^[2] At Pian Wei he voiced his puzzlement again: "Why pour this essence, precious as molten gold, into that sordid place?" (为什么把金汁一般的东西, 流到那污秽所在去?)^[2]

It can be found that Li Yu's discussions and evaluations of male homosexuality consistently take heterosexual relations as their frame of reference. This evaluative approach reflects not only his understanding of male homosexuality in society but also the creative approach to depicting male homosexual narratives. Unable to comprehend male homosexuality on its own terms, Li Yu transposed homosexual characters into the interactional patterns and logics of heterosexuality and interpreted them through the lens of the traditional Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues. At Pian Shou, Li Yu wrote Southern Mode is

“women’s travail was bequeathed to men”(妇人之祸胎男子)and “For lack of a woman,making do with a man”(无雌硬打雄).^[2]This critique is grounded in the traditional norms of male superiority and female subordination, specifically the spousal hierarchy that positioned the husband as the sovereign authority.It fundamentally condemns man assuming the socially submissive role culturally prescribed for women within a sexual relationship.Towards the Pian Wei,Li Yu’s description of You Ruilang is “the No.1 chaste wife among catamites”(是做龙阳的第一节妇)^[2]reflects the principles of the Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues.At the Ru Hua he explicitly interprets this fiction as “a variant form of the Three Cardinal Guides,an intercalary point in the Five Constant Virtues”.(三纲的变体,五常的闰位。)^[2]Therefore, for Li Yu, You Ruilang occupies a feminine position in this relationship.And in creating this role, he actually imitates the female ideal prescribed by the Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues system.

2.2 Narrative Intervention in the title and character’s name

The title *A Male Mencius’s Mother* derives from *The Mother Of Meng Ke Of Zou*(邹孟轲母)in the *Biographies of Exemplary Women*(列女传)which is a specialised compendium of women’s histories and lives compiled by Liu Xiang(刘向)in the Western Han dynasty.This work was crafted to underscore male superiority,female inferiority,gender etiquette, and perpetuating the ethical doctrines of Pre-Qin Confucianism and Dong Zhongshu’s(董仲舒)Three Cardinal Guides.^[6]The story of *The Mother Of Meng Ke Of Zou* is found within the *Maternal Models*(母仪传).Liu Xiang wrote a preface to introduce the *Maternal Models*. The accounts in this collection are intended to highlight the behavioural norms and virtues expected of mothers and to underscore the responsibilities and influence mothers exert on the upbringing of their descendants.Novel’s title is derived from its central narrative.^[5]The title *A Male Mencius’s Mother* not only summarizes the story content and emphasising You Ruilang’s roles as wife and mother, but also situates him within the evaluative framework applied to women in order to commend his behaviour.

This evaluation criterion not only reflects in title but also

in character’s name. In Yuan Zhen’s(元稹)*Biography of Yingying*(莺莺传),which is the original story of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*(西厢记), it is noted: “Most beautiful women, if they do not harm themselves, will surely harm others.”(大凡天之所命尤物也,不妖其身,必妖其人。)^[7]The surname You(尤)of You Ruilang not only signifies his beautiful appearance but also suggests that his looks will bring misfortune to himself and others. By using You as the surname for You Ruilang, the author essentially evaluates him through the lens of feminine beauty and criticizes him based on the standards which traditionally applied to women.

Consequently, Li Yu has already placed You Ruilang within the system for evaluating women through both the title and the character naming conventions.

3. Creating You Ruilang as a Female Character

As previously noted, Li Yu’s portrayal of male homosexual narratives draws heavily on heterosexual stories and receptive partner was created by imitating female.You Ruilang was evaluated by moral standards of women. Therefore, this chapter will analyze how Li Yu imitated heterosexual stories and female characters when he creating this fiction and You Ruilang by comparative different texts.

A Male Mencius’s Mother primarily discusses two events. Firstly, it narrates the love story of You Ruilang and Xu Jifang(许季芳), from their acquaintance,love,until their separation by death.Secondly, it tells the story of You Ruilang raising Xu Chengxian(许承先)after Xu Jifang’s death.By comparing the love story with *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and the mother-son story with *The Mother Of Meng Ke Of Zou* similarities can be identified that You Ruilang, Cui Yingying(崔莺莺)and Mencius’s mother(孟母)belong to the same actantial role.

3.1 The love story

By arranging the love stories of *A Male Mencius’s Mother* and *The Romance of the Western Chamber* according to their narrative progression and comparing their key plot points, the following chart is revealed:

Table 1. The comparison of love stories between *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and *A Male Mencius’s Mother*

Narrative Phase	<i>The Romance of the Western Chamber</i>	<i>A Male Mencius’s Mother</i>
Meeting	Zhang Sheng(张生)is captivated by Cui Yingying’s beauty.	Xu Jifang is captivated by You Ruilang’s beauty.

Development	Zhang rents a lodge in the temple; they engage in exchange poems and fall in love.	Xu invites You to his private school;they exchange letters and fall in love.
Crisis	Cui's family is trapped in the Pujiu Temple siege;Zhang resolves the crisis by summoning troops.	You's family falls into poverty; Xu resolves the crisis with his financial resources.
Union	Zhang and Cui confess their love for each other; Cui married Zhang to repay kindness.	Xu and You confess their love for each other;You married Xu to repay kindness.

From it, two observations emerge. Firstly,the narrative structure of the romance in *A Male Mencius's Mother* is modelled on the structural paradigm of the Scholar-Beauty romance story like *The Romance of the Western Chamber*.Secondly, from an actantial perspective, Xu Jifang corresponds to the actantial role of the Scholar ,occupied by Zhang Sheng, while You Ruilang corresponds to the

Beauty,like Cui Yingying.

3.2 The mother-son story

By arranging the mother-son stories in *A Male Mencius's Mother* and *The Mother Of Meng Ke Of Zou* in the same way,the following chart is revealed:

Table 2. The comparison of mother-son stories between *The Mother Of Meng Ke Of Zou* and *A Male Mencius's Mother*

Narrative Phase	<i>The Mother Of Meng Ke Of Zou</i>	<i>A Male Mencius's Mother</i>
Mother raising son and relocate three times	Mencius's mother bring up Mencius(孟子). Mencius's learning was being adversely affected,so his mother relocate three times.	You Ruilang bring up Xu Chengxian. Xu's learning and life were adversely affected, You relocate two times and change a tutor.
Child get success	Mencius becomes a great Confucian scholar.	Xu Chengxian becomes a county magistrate and than promoted to a ministry official. You Ruilang receives an honorary title.

This comparison shows two key findings.Firstly,the narrative structure of *A Male Mencius's Mother* was mirrored *The Mother Of Meng Ke Of Zou* basically.Secondly, both Xu Chengxian and Mencius correspond to the actantial role of son, while You Ruilang and Mencius' mother correspond Mother role.

Thus, by comparing three texts it is becomes evident that You Ruilang's narrative function within the story's structure and actantial model is fundamentally feminine.And Li Yu's characterization is modeled on female archetypes.

4. You Ruilang's sex and gender in the text

In *Sex, Gender and Society*, Ann Oakley differentiates gender into two distinct concepts: biological sex and social gender.^[8] She argues that biological sex is a physiological term, whereas gender is a psychological and cultural construct.And gender is acquired through social learning, shaped by societal mechanisms and individual responses.^[8]This chapter will utilise Oakley's framework to examine the biological sex and gender of You Ruilang within the text.

4.1 Biological sex

4.1.1 Evasion of You Ruilang's Male Genital

The text describes Xu Jifang's evasive attitude towards You Ruilang's genitals.

You Ruilang was only fourteen when he married Xu Jifang,the organ in his loins was the size of a little finger and when he slept with Xu Jifang,it was passive and unobtrusive,like a woman's.(腰下的人道,大如小指,季芳同睡之时,贴然无碍,竟像妇女一般。)^[2]At this stage, they were deeply attached.However, as You Ruilang matured and his genitals developed, Xu Jifang began to express dismay, referring You's male genitals as his "enemy" and predicting it would lead to their eventual separation. He believed that You's physiology maturity would lead him longing for women and his charming, feminine appearance would disappear.These passages indicate that Xu Jifang only accepted,and indeed preferred,You Ruilang's feminine traits, but could not accept his masculine side.

4.1.2 Changes in the sexual organs of You Ruilang after castration

Upon hearing Xu Jifang's concerns,You Ruilang was profoundly unsettled. Resolute, he concluded that: "It's all the

fault of this root of evil! Better to cut it off.”(总是这个孽根不好,不如断送了他)^[2]then castrate himself. After that, the wound evolved in an unusual way: the resulting scar resembled a vagina.(那疤痕又生得古古怪怪,就像妇人的牝户。)^[2]Castration involves the removal of male genitals, resulting in a scar that resembles a vagina, thereby making You Ruilang’s sexual organs physiologically closer to a female.

From a creative perspective, Xu Jifang’s avoidance of You Ruilang’s sexual organs, You Ruilang’s self-castration and the changes of sexual organs mirrors Li Yu’s deliberate avoidance of You Ruilang’s male physiological identity. It makes You Ruilang’s biological sex more closely with a female role not a male role.

4.2 Gender

4.2.1 Social rituals and laws

There are two kind of male identities in this fiction: ordinary man and male favourite. In fact, You Ruilang should belong to the male favourite and the social rituals and laws ought to correspond to that also. However, in the story he is subject to the rituals and laws that apply to women.

Consider the marriage rule as an example. Facing financial hardship, You Ruilang’s father set the betrothal price for his son at five hundred gold pieces. However, the text observes that:

Although the practice of offering a bride-price for the Southern Mode did exist in Fujian, the amount offered was nominal, and the money, ranging from a few taels to several dozen, was regarded merely as an earnest. No one had ever paid five hundred taels for a boy!

(福建地方,男风虽有受聘之例,不过是个意思,多则数十金,少则数金,以示相求之意,那有动半千金聘男子的?)^[2]

Thus, the father’s demand far exceeded the conventional social and ritual norms governing such arrangements. Turning to Xu Jifang’s response, he offer precisely matched the price You’s father set then escort You Ruilang to his house and held a wedding. Furthermore, he accommodated You’s father to live with them, serving him like his own father. When You’s father died, Xu Jifang became gaunt and thin from inordinate grief, as if he were mourning his own parents.

These conduct indicate that Xu Jifang invoked the ritual formalities of taking a wife when marrying You Ruilang and assuming the role of a son-in-law toward You’s father. And they also demonstrate that the rituals and laws applied to You Ruilang were, in substance, those conventionally prescribed for women.

4.2.2 Family discipline

There are four family members around You Ruilang: his father You Shiyuan, his husband Xu Jifang, his uncle Wang Xiaojiang and his son Xu Chengxian. With the exception of Wang Xiaojiang, who is not described in detail, the other three consistently interact with You Ruilang according to the social protocols and norms traditionally prescribed for women. You Shihuan treats You Ruilang as a daughter awaiting marriage, keeping him secluded within home and demanding a substantial betrothal gift for his marriage. Xu Jifang regards You Ruilang as a wife and conducted the marriage according to the rites for marrying a woman. After You Ruilang castrated himself, Xu thought You might just as well dress as woman too, so the boy put his hair up and wore a dress. You’s feet were three inches in length, but Xu encouraged him to bind them lightly.(索性教他做妇人打扮起来,头上梳了云鬓,身上穿了女衫,只有一双金莲,不止三寸,也教他稍加束缚。)^[2] Moreover, when Xu lay dying, he demands You to remain chaste for the rest of his life. Xu Chengxian has filially revered You Ruilang as his own mother since childhood. After his promotion, he successfully petitions for You to be awarded the honorary title of a Lady. Upon You’s death, he buries him jointly with Xu Jifang, inscribing the tombstone: “Tomb of Madam You”.(尤氏夫人之墓。)^[2] It is evident that You’s family members collectively constructs his identity as a woman in their attitudes and actions toward him.

4.2.3 Self-acceptance

You Ruilang’s own gender identity leans toward the feminine, as seen in his ready acceptance of being betrothed and “married off”. This tendency becomes markedly more pronounced after his castration, which alters his male sexual characteristics. Following the castration, he changes his name to You Ruiniang(尤瑞娘), retreats entirely from public life and confines himself to the women’s quarters. He engages in needlework and weaving, fully assumes the role of a supportive spouse, enabling Xu Jifang to pursue his studies, like a traditional wife. After Xu Jifang’s death, You continues to wear women’s clothing, observes lifelong chastity in mourning for his husband and devotes himself to raising Xu’s child. He treats Xu Chengxian as if he were the child of his own womb.(竟像肚里生出来的一般。)^[2]

In conclusion, an integrated analysis of social rituals and laws, family discipline and self-acceptance reveals that You Ruilang’s life aligns precisely with the Three obediences(三从) outlined in *The Mother Of Meng Ke Of Zou*: obedience to parents in youth, obedience to husband after marriage and obedience to sons in widowhood.(年少则从乎父母,出嫁则从乎夫,夫死则从乎子。)^[6] Thus, from the perspective of social gender, You Ruilang was regard-

ed as female throughout his life.

5. Conclusion

Li Yu's creation of the character You Ruilang and the fiction *A Male Mencius's Mother* is fundamentally intended as a didactic critique. He using a parodic manner to discourage male homoerotic practices, aiming to urge everyone not to follow this deviant path. (劝世间的人断了这条斜路不要走。)^[2] However, because he did not understand male homosexuality, he could not portray it accurately. Consequently, he rendered the homosexual relationship using the conventions of a heterosexual narrative and fashioned You Ruilang as if he was a female character.

Narratively, the love relationship between You Ruilang and Xu Jifang parallels the "talented scholar and beautiful lady" motif found in *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, while the mother-son relationship between You Ruilang and Xu Chengxian mirrors the "virtuous mother and a worthy son" pattern of *The Mother Of Meng Ke Of Zou*. You Ruilang occupies roles conventionally assigned to female characters in both the story structure and the actantial configuration. Within the text, You's biological and social genders are ascribed female attributes, and his masculine traits are consistently elided by both the novel's characters and the author.

Consequently, although Li Yu labels You Ruilang as a male character, the character is, in effect, presented as fe-

male.

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