

# A Comparison of Chinese and Western Prostitute Images from the Perspective of Feminism

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## Abstract:

“La Traviata” is the representative work of French writer Alexandre Dumas and also the representative work of Western prostitute image creation. The Yuan drama “Saving the Prostitute” created by Guan Hanqing, a famous dramatist in the Yuan Dynasty, is the representative of the image description of the prostitute in the Yuan Dynasty. From the perspective of feminism, this paper aims to compare the depiction and shaping of prostitute images in Chinese and Western literature and culture from three aspects: the origin of prostitutes in the Middle and Western countries, the influence of the commodity economy and overseas trade on prostitute groups and the reflection of male writers on their own circumstances with prostitute images. By deeply analyzing the evolution and characteristics of prostitute image in different historical backgrounds of China and the West, this paper reveals the profound influence of social and cultural factors on the image shaping of prostitutes.

**Keywords:** Prostitute Images; Feminism; La Traviata; .

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, research on the image of women has focused on ordinary women like homemakers, while prostitutes, as the lower class, have been widely discussed in the West. However, there is little discussion about Chinese prostitutes. As social women who are different from traditional women who take care of their husbands and children, prostitutes reflect the restrictions and regulations of the social ethical system on women outside the family and in society, with their unique cultural identity and individual life experiences. Therefore, it is necessary to study the image comparison between Chinese and Western prostitutes. To make a better comparison, representative Western works like *La Traviata* and works from the Yuan Dynasty of China are selected for research. The reason for choosing „*La Traviata*“ is that, since its publication, it has been widely read and adapted, making it a classic in the history of world literature. „*La Traviata*“ once published, caused a sensation in France, gained high visibility, and was widely circulated, thus representing the Western portrayal of the overall image of prostitutes. The novel „*La Dame aux Camélias*“ by Alexandre Dumas fils depicts a tragic and touching love story. The heroine Marguerite, who lived in a patriarchal society, although fell into prostitution, possessed a clear sense of femininity and repeatedly challenged the social inequality. Although she could

not ultimately compete with the overall social system, she still achieved the most splendid and wonderful chapter of her life in her own way. [1]

As for the reason for choosing „*Saving the Prostitute*“,“ from an artistic point of view, as a relatively famous work in Yuan drama, it has had a significant influence on later generations. During the Yuan Dynasty, class conflicts and ethnic conflicts were extremely intense. The tragic fate of women oppressed by the patriarchal society was hidden behind closed doors, and their figures were intentionally or unintentionally obscured by social history, easily overlooked by the world. However, this was precisely an important entry point to reveal the suffering and resistance at the bottom of society. [2] At the content level, the prostitute image depicted in this work is full and three-dimensional, making it representative of the prostitute image of the same period. The images of prostitutes in China and the West are comparable. Although they exist as special social groups, they have different situations because of different cultures and different social backgrounds.

In previous literature, studies on the group of prostitutes are mostly carried out with a period or a work as an example, and the main research direction is the study of the group image of prostitutes and the analysis of the image of prostitutes. With the change of social concepts and the deepening of research, the study of prostitutes and related issues is becoming more and more important. Therefore,

it is necessary to study the history, culture, and social status of prostitutes as a special group, as well as their image and fate in different cultural and social contexts. This paper discusses the comparison of Chinese and Western prostitute images from the perspective of feminism.

This paper will focus on the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western prostitute images. Through Chinese and Western historical documents, literary works, artistic works, and sociology, history, and other related disciplines, research results are combed and analyzed. Starting from the aspects of their social status, living conditions, and moral evaluation in their respective cultures, this paper discusses the evolution of prostitute images under different social systems in China and the West and the social factors behind them. This aims to deeply understand the role shaping, social status, and fate changes of prostitutes under different cultural backgrounds and reveal the influence of social, historical, and cultural factors on prostitute images.

## 2. La Dame aux Camelias

As a representative work of the image of Western prostitutes, the *Camellia* reflects the 'other dilemma' of Western prostitutes represented by Margaret. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir proposed that the reason why women become women is because they are shaped by society rather than congenital decision, and they gradually become 'other' under the influence of men. Unable to decide their own fate, they can only be attached to men. Under the oppression of patriarchal society, as the 'other', the *Traviata* women face multiple difficulties.

„*La Traviata*“ presents a unique and complex female image. Not content with her situation, Margaret longed to escape poverty. Through her beauty and intelligence, she gained a place in the spotlight of Parisian high society, but she was still seen as a tool of male entertainment, unable to achieve the same power and status as men. Under social inequality, Margaret was regarded as a dishonorable professional practitioner due to her low social status. The relationship between Margaret and Armand is central to the whole work. Their love is deep and sincere, and Margaret is willing to give up everything for this relationship, but due to differences in social status and external pressure, this relationship ends in tragedy. At the same time, Margaret and her friends also maintain a complex relationship, both friendship and interest exchange. Margaret enjoys the luxurious life while suffering betrayal. Additionally, Margaret had a deep connection with her family, whom she always cared about, supported with her own income, and still worried about their livelihood at the end of her life. However, Margaret's biggest dilemma lies

in the suppression of society. Under the patriarchal social system, Margaret *Camellia* is obviously in a weak position. This unequal social status makes her feel great pressure and inferiority when she contacts Armand and other upper-class people in society. She has no right to freedom. Her social status limits her freedom. As a prostitute, she is despised in society, unable to shake off the shadow of her past. Her professional identity becomes a stumbling block to her pursuit of freedom and true love, causing her to be caught in a contradiction between love and social status. She tries hard to change herself to be accepted by Armand and his family, but the intense pressure of social criticism and moral questioning takes a toll on their relationship [1,3]. At the same time, despite her inner desire to break free from the constraints of society at that time, she was limited by people's prejudices against her past and the expectations of the Armand family.

In *La Traviata*, Margaret's feminist thought underwent a process from submission to awakening, resistance, and struggle. When she first entered Paris, she was seduced by the world, chose to use her body for a luxurious life, attached to powerful men, and compromised the social hierarchy and male power. However, with the development of the story, she gradually realized the equality and freedom that women should enjoy, and she bravely pursued love, trying to break the shackles of patriarchal society in the process. However, her struggle still ended in confusion and helplessness, reflecting the constraints and restrictions on women's pursuit of equal rights in society at that time. Women and men do not have equal rights to love, and women's love is subjected to too many rules and standards by society. After considering various factors, she realized that she could not bear the consequences of sacrificing Armand's future. Therefore, she unilaterally gave up her hard-earned happiness.[1,4] However, she would never understand that it was not Armand who abandoned her in the face of love, but the status of women that made her lose everything. Margaret's miserable experience in love is the result of the supremacy of male power. Behind Margaret's gentleness and kindness is the pain she should not bear, and it is a social choice that women have to make.

## 3. Saving the Prostitute

Song Yinzhang, as the representative of Chinese prostitutes, belongs to the female group with commodity property in society. In the Yuan Dynasty, the contradiction between class and nation was extremely acute. Women were deeply oppressed by patriarchal society, and their tragic fate was deeply locked in the door of the family. Their figure was looming in the long river of social history, often ignored by the world and difficult to see. As a

special social group, prostitutes have long been subjected to objectification and marginalization in a male-dominated society, which belongs to the typical „other dilemma.“In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that women exist as the “second sex” distinct from men, as the “other” and the “internal constant”.[1,5]

Saving the prostitute creates a three-dimensional and profound prostitute image. Song Yinzhang was born poor and at the bottom of society, but she is not satisfied with the status quo and wants to be good, pursuing true love and a stable life. She was deceived by her naivete. However, she also has a certain spirit of resistance, unwilling to accept fate’s arrangements, tired of the wind and dust life. Early on, Song Yinzhang first married Zhou, but she suffered brutal treatment from him, being beaten and scolded like a plaything. With the help of her friend Zhao Paner, she successfully escaped and finally married An Xiushi. Song Yinzhang’s „trapped“ and Zhao Paner’s „rescue“ co-weave the plot, from which people can feel the glory of the female image rich in resistance and wisdom, but also need to see the narrow path of women’s struggle and the limited living space under glory. Under the social ideology that men are superior to women, unmarried women are laughed at, even regarded as family shame and abandoned by society. The regulation under the „Marriage“ section in Volume 80 of the „Hubu“ (Ministry of Finance) chapter of the „Yuan Dianzhang“ stipulates that if a husband beats or abuses his wife to the point of death in an „accidental encounter,“ he may still „not be held accountable,“ meaning he will not be convicted of a crime [2,6]. This regulation has greatly exacerbated the unequal status of women in the family and society, making them more likely to become victims of domestic violence and difficult to get fair protection from the law.

Under the long-term suppression of the traditional concept of male superiority and female inferiority, many women take Song Yinzhang as an example to equate the realization of the value of life with the success of marrying a woman. However, this concept is formed in the shaping of society and is not what they really want as subjects. They regard marriage as the ultimate destination of life, and the process of becoming a woman is also the process of a woman’s complete realization of her „other“ identity. „Marriage“ is the core contradiction in „Saving the prostitute“ and is also the most intuitive expression of the female „other“ identity. On the surface, it discusses the individual case of Song Yinzhang’s marriage, but in essence, it is a proposition without a solution for female groups [2,7].

## 4. Comparison

### 4.1 . Tracing the Origin of Chinese and Western Prostitute Culture.

As one of the oldest professions, prostitution is associated with primitive religious beliefs in both China and Europe. Regarding the origin of prostitutes in China, it is generally believed that in the Yin and Shang dynasties, priestesses, or witches, played an important role in society, serving religion and carrying out divination and prophecy. These women may have had some connection with later prostitutes and are seen as the precursors of prostitutes. Legend has it in many places that the beautiful prostitute priests in the temples, through the happy and joyful entertainment of god coitus, subdued the life-threatening demon, who was himself a male god. The gods in Qu Yuan’s *Nine Songs*, such as the East Emperor Taiyi and the King of the Clouds, need the priestess to please them through crazy sexual pleasure dances.

According to the article „A Study of High Courtesans in Ancient Greece,“ Scott argues that, „in the earliest times, prostitution was often associated with religion, and the earliest brothels were probably run by priests“ [8]. „This form later became popular in places like Corinth, Cyprus, and Erchux in Sicily, creating the „god prostitute system.““ In ancient Greece and Rome, prostitutes had a high status. Greek mythology has a special goddess of sex - Aphrodite, she was born in the penis of the father of the gods, with infinite vitality. Because the goddess Aphrodite has the divine power to decide the success or failure of the war, the prostitute has the divine glory that cannot be underestimated in the continuous city-state conquests. The religious divinity of prostitutes did not change until the 6th century BC.

### 4.2 .The Activities of Prostitutes Influenced by the Commodity Economy

In ancient China, with the further development of society and the emergence of a commodity economy, brothels gradually changed from simple sex trading places to commercial entertainment venues. Brothel operators make a profit by providing diversified services, such as singing and dancing, drinking and chatting, to meet the needs of different customers. This commercial model has made prostitute activities more market-oriented, and the identity of prostitutes has gradually changed from simple sex workers to commercial service personnel. The development of the commodity economy has also promoted competition and the standardization of the prostitute industry. Brothel operators, in order to attract customers, constantly improve the quality of service and management level, forming certain industry norms. At the same time,

the government also carried out certain management and supervision of the prostitute industry in order to maintain social order and public interests. However, the influence of the commodity economy on the activities of prostitutes is not entirely positive. Commercialization and marketization have made prostitute activities more profit-oriented, which may lead to some unethical and even illegal behaviors. At the same time, prostitutes are often in a vulnerable position in the commodity economy, and their rights and dignity may not be fully protected.

In the West, with the prosperity of Western trade, cities and ports saw a large influx of floating population, including merchants, sailors, and others. This increased the demand for the prostitute industry and promoted its development. Western trade also brought about economic and cultural exchanges, leading to the communication and integration of different cultures, making prostitution a more common occupation. However, the prosperity of trade also contributed to the decline of social morality and the proliferation of the sex trade. Prostitution is often associated with poverty, venereal disease, and exploitation, making it harder for prostitutes.

### **4.3 Male Writers Who Express Situation as a Prostitute**

La Traviata shows the struggle and helplessness of prostitutes in a male-dominated society. She has an independent, intelligent and charming personality, but under male domination and oppression, she still has to face the deprivation of low status, social marginalization and moral condemnation. This struggle with gender roles and social status actually reflects the situations and challenges that many male writers may have faced in society at the time. In the process of creation, they also need to face the constraints of social opinion and moral standards and strive for personal value and dignity. In the book *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett points out that male writers have obvious discourse hegemony over their female characters, which makes it necessary for feminism to criticize and clean up the patriarchy legacy in literary texts.[9]

The time of creation is the Yuan Dynasty, a very special historical period when the Mongols ruled the country, dividing people into classes, with the Han people at the lowest tier. As a Han writer, Guan Hanqing found himself in a difficult position. Living in the Yuan Dynasty meant facing a blocked path to official career advancement, exacerbated by the abolition of the imperial examination, which greatly reduced the status of scholars. For intellectuals like Guan Hanqing, the imperial examination represented the primary means to realize the value of life and pursue social status. However, during the Yuan Dynasty, this path was obstructed, preventing them from obtaining official

positions and thereby realizing their ideals and ambitions. Hence, the depiction of the plight of prostitutes serves as a reflection of their own circumstances. Guan Hanqing, imprisoned yet still battling his fate, embodies this struggle.

### **4.4 The Influence of Different Social Backgrounds on Prostitute Groups**

The influence of ancient Chinese ritual and music culture on prostitutes is profound and complex. Ritual and music culture, as the cornerstone of ancient civilization, advocate the concept of self-cultivation and understanding of the way of heaven. However, as the bottom group of society, the life of prostitutes is far from this ideal culture.

Rites and music culture first affected the identity and social status of prostitutes. In ancient times, prostitutes were regarded as unclean, immoral, and ostracized by mainstream society. Although they provided entertainment for the dignitaries, their low social status makes it difficult to gain respect. This lack of identity and low social status bring great psychological pressure to prostitutes.

At the same time, the culture of ritual and music also has an impact on prostitutes' behavior norms and moral concepts. Although ritual culture emphasizes morality and etiquette, the lifestyle of prostitutes makes it difficult for them to fully follow. They meet the needs of their guests while maintaining their own dignity. This contradiction leads to a vague moral concept of prostitutes, who desire freedom and equality but have to face the cruelty of reality.

Religion occupies an important place in ancient Western culture, and its influence on prostitutes cannot be ignored. Through tracing the historical context of Western culture, we can observe that the co-development of secular and religious cultures has led to the monopolization of the path to truth by males, with females excluded from it. According to Christian doctrine, women must endure the pains of childbirth generation after generation as a means of atonement for their sins. Furthermore, newborn infants inherit the original sin of humanity from their mothers' wombs, which is the sin of betraying God and truth [10].

Some religious teachings hold conservative views on sexuality and have a negative view of those who work in the sex trade, such as prostitutes. However, there are some religious cultures that have a more tolerant attitude towards prostitutes, and in some cases, prostitutes are even seen as part of religious rituals. This diversity of religious ideas has a complex effect on the social status and identity of prostitutes.

## **5. Conclusion**

By writing this paper, it becomes apparent that both in the East and the West, prostitutes are facing great difficulties.

As people on the edge of society, they actively seek their own way out, accompanied by the awakening of independent consciousness. Although they failed to completely break the shackles to win real freedom, they used their own way to prove to the world that prostitutes are not women with rotten souls; they are still living hard in the predicament, eager for freedom, eager for a beautiful love. Based on the two works "La Traviata" and "Saving the Prostitute", this paper makes a comparative study of prostitute groups in China and the West, mainly from four aspects. The origin of Chinese and Western prostitute culture; 2. The influence of China's commodity economy and Western trade on prostitute groups 3. Male writers' reflection on their own situation through the description of prostitute groups; 4. Influence of different social backgrounds and cultures in China and the West on prostitute groups. The results are as follows: the differences in social status and recognition, cultural background and values of prostitutes in China and the West lead to their different ways of resistance. Chinese prostitutes often passively accept their fate and change their fate by seeking love and marriage. On the other hand, Western prostitutes show more initiative and resistance spirit, and they fight for their rights and status through artistic performances and social activities. This paper believes that comparing the images of prostitutes in China and the West from the perspective of feminism not only helps to deepen our understanding of the status and fate of women, but also provides useful enlightenment for us to advocate gender equality and respect women's rights in contemporary society. By reflecting on the stereotypes and prejudices of prostitutes in history and culture, we can more objectively view the role and value of women in society, and promote the development of society in a more equitable and inclusive direction. Although the psychological state and mental health problems of prostitutes are concerned to a certain extent, the research on the psychological and social adaptation of

prostitutes is relatively insufficient. The awakening of women's consciousness and the influence of society on them deserve deep thought. With the continuous development of social science and humanities, new theories and methods are emerging, which provide new perspectives and tools for the study of the prostitute image. Future studies can learn from these new theories and methods to explore the formation and evolution of the prostitute image more deeply and carefully.

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