

Weaving and Unweaving the Web

-- Feudal Rites from the Marriage Rites and Culture of The Scholars

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ABSTRACT

Through the satirical portrayal and in-depth analysis of the marital status of different character images under the eight-part essay system, *The Scholars* discovers that the feudal rites of the ancient society are implied behind the marriage rituals. Through the scene depiction and in-depth exploration of more than a dozen weddings in *The Scholars*, this paper finds that the wedding scenes in the novel are all significant in enhancing the artistic features of the novel as well as exposing the reality and revealing the self-contradictory and decaying side of China's feudal and ritualistic society. At the same time, it also reveals that the author of *The History of Confucianism*, in his efforts to explore the culture of marriage etiquette and customs, shows his ambivalence in worrying about the status and wanting to make a change to it, but is unable to do anything about it because of his attachment to the culture of etiquette and customs.

KEYWORDS

The Scholars; The Marriage Rites; Feudal Rites.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of the imperial examinations, being successful in the imperial examinations and the wedding night were regarded as the two greatest joys of life, and these two joyous events were inextricably linked with each other. In the era of the unprecedented popularity of the imperial examination system, the social trend of obsessing over the imperial examinations made people attach great importance to the imperial examinations and merits in choosing spouses and getting married[1]. *The Scholars*, with its exquisite satirical art, centers on the theme of “fame and wealth”, and paints a vivid picture of all the people of Confucianism under the system of the eight-part essay examination. The book depicts different types of characters, such as the eight-part essay examination scribes, pseudo-famous scholars, sages, and oddballs, etc., and the author vividly depicts the marital status of many of them. The marital status of different characters and their attitudes towards “fame and wealth” combine to show the characters in the work more concretely[2]. An in-depth analysis of the marriage rituals and customs reveals that there are deeper social connotations hidden behind the marriage rituals and customs.

2. THE RITUAL AND ETHICAL CONNOTATIONS OF “RITES”

Since the Han Dynasty, Confucianism has been the dominant culture in feudal China, and the Confucian ideas and systems of rituals have profoundly influenced all aspects of Chinese culture. The function and value of “rites” lies in clarifying, coordinating and maintaining various relationships in order to form a harmonious and orderly social order. As society continues to develop, this function becomes more and more apparent.

Confucius not only emphasized the importance of various rites and ceremonies, but also explored and innovated the deeper core of “rites”, and finally established a complete set of rites and music system. It has two parts: one is developed from The Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, which covers specific rituals such as crown, marriage, township, archery, pilgrimage, hiring, funeral, and sacrifices, and contains systems and norms in all areas of social life, and is the form of the Rites; the second is the corresponding ethical values and connotations, which are distilled into four aspects, namely sincerity, respect, order, and fulfillment, each emphasizing “emotion”, “respect”, and “fulfillment”, and each emphasizing the importance of “emotion”. The second is the corresponding ethical values and connotations, which are summarized in the four aspects of sincerity, respect, order and performance, emphasizing respectively “emotional truthfulness”, “respectful attitude”, “hierarchical order” and “moral practice”, which are the forms of “rites”. This is the core of “rites”. Among them, rituals are the external manifestation of ethical values and connotations, and can also play the role of strengthening ethical values and connotations. The two are interdependent and complementary, and only by achieving organic unity can the “rites” play its key role in safeguarding the patriarchal system, maintaining the hierarchical order, and establishing a noble personality and promoting social harmony.

Ritual, as the external form, is the part that is most easily interfered with, while the ethical values and connotations are at a deeper level and not easy to control, so the two are prone to the problem of unbalanced development, moving towards a situation that favors the form. Especially after the Song Ming Neo-Confucianism, ethics became dogmatic and rigid, and the inherent emotional and ethical naturalness of rituals was weakened, while the rituals of the rules and regulations as external manifestations were only strengthened. At the same time, from the middle to late Ming Dynasty, with the sprouting and development of capitalist economy, people's desires were stimulated unprecedentedly[3].

3. THE ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DEPICTION OF MARRIAGE RITES AND CUSTOMS IN RULIN'S HISTORY

3.1. Enhancing Irony with the Help of Dramatic Weddings

Yan Gongsheng in the novel is an abominable person, and his hypocrisy and greed can be initially glimpsed through the descriptions in the fourth and fifth chapter, while the episode of his marrying his second son in the sixth chapter gives a deeper insight into his bad character. He claims to people that his son is marrying Zhou Xuetai's second daughter, but in fact he has no relationship with Zhou Jin, which the author reveals in the seventh chapter. The fact that he even lied to people about something like marrying his wife shows that he is vain and hypocritical. The next scene of the marriage is even more compelling - deducting the money of the blowers, and asking people to escort the blowers over, resulting in the sun going down and no blowers are willing to come to meet the bride. The son married such a big event, even the blowers are not willing to call, and the treatment of subordinates is very harsh, "from the morning to this moment, a bowl of rice is not given to the people to eat", visible its miserly to the extreme. On the way back to his hometown to welcome his bride, he pretended to be sick and blackmailed the boatman, through which he reneged on the boat fare, which shows his treachery to the extreme. Through such a comical and ridiculous wedding, the author

depicts Yan Gongsheng's hypocrisy, stinginess and treachery to the fullest, creating a typical image of an ugly intellectual under the imperial examination system, which is highly ironic[1].

The wedding of Ms. Lu and Mr. Wu, Mr. Qu was carried by a four-person sedan chair to Mr. Lu's house, and then he sat down to watch a play, when suddenly a mouse slipped on the beam of the roof and fell into the bowl, jumping down from the bridegroom's body and staining his big red satin suit. Serving soup of the country servants and just watch the play, knocked over the dishes, inviting the dog to snatch the dishes, the small make "from the heart of anger, make all the energy, stilt a foot to kick", do not want to kick the shoe flying, breaking the snacks in front of Chen Hefu, panicked Chen Hefu busy to get up, and inviting the overturning of the bowl of soup. These dramatic scenes, narrated in the author's writing, the wedding is like a farce. Their marriage is a continuation of their wedding, Miss Lu mistakenly thought that her husband was a scholar, but unexpectedly is a "famous scholar"; Qu Gongsun thought that his wife was a talented woman, but did not expect that it was a "eight-part essay talented woman". The author narrates the story without praise or blame, but the irony is clearly implied[2].

3.2. Strongly Suggestive

The wedding of Ms. Lu and Mr. Gongxun can be said to be the grandest in the novel, but in this lively and festive atmosphere there were several extremely embarrassing accidents, which made a mess of the wedding banquet. In this regard, wo xian cao tang commented that: "the auspicious period of the banquet suddenly gave birth to two strange things, is an ambush that Bianxiu will be sick and die, so point out that 'Bianxiu is aware that this is not very auspicious'. But the reader, up to this point, sees only the comical aspects of the scenes in the text, and cannot savor the subtleties of the clues." It can be seen that the author in the book's most ostentatious wedding arranged such embarrassing and comical farce is to foreshadow the development of the plot of the story, not only ambush the decline of the Lu family, but also foreshadowed Qu Gongsun and Ms. Lu's marriage of the two unfortunate.

The fifty-third chapter describes the dream of Pinniangu marrying Chen Munan. The prostitute of Laibin Lou, Huaniang, likes to socialize with officials, and after meeting Chen Munan, she wants to marry him as an official's wife. In her dream, she dreamed that she was dressed in cape and was carried to the State Duke's Mansion to marry the Master Chen Si, who had already been promoted to the Hangzhou Mansion, but on the way, she was pulled out by a yellow-faced, bald nun who said that she was her disciple. The reason why pinniangu has such a dream is because she has a strong desire for power and wealth, but it is impossible for someone like Chen Munan, who cannot even take care of his own livelihood, to satisfy her quest, and thus the ending of the dream also hints at the end of Huiniang's life - she leaves the house and becomes a nun's disciple[1].

3.3. Three-dimensional Approach to Building a Full-fledged Characterization

The depiction of the characters' marriages in *The Scholars* shows readers a fuller and more distinctive image of different types of characters, reveals the killing and maiming of human nature by the eight-part essay system, and deepens the theme of merit and wealth. Kuang Chaoren starts out as a kind and simple young man, but after coming into contact with Jing Lanjiang, Pan San and others, he gets a taste of the sweetness of fame and wealth and gradually becomes obsessed with profit, and after he succeeds in getting into the capital and had the metropolitan examination, he gradually becomes hypocritical and snobbish and ungrateful, and finally becomes completely corrupted. When he first married Zheng Laodie's daughter, he "saw that the bride was decent and good-looking, and he was full of joy". Although the Zheng's family was not considered a rich and noble family, he was still satisfied with the marriage. However, after he went to the capital and had the metropolitan examination, he claimed that he "wanted to be an official in the capital" and forced his wife to go back to her hometown, so he let her cry and went to the capital to seek asylum from Li Zaijian[2]. When he arrives at the capital to meet Li Gejian, he shamelessly hides the fact that he has

a family for fear that Mr. Li will despise him, and Mr. Li then wants to marry his niece to him as his wife. He was shocked to hear this, but after a little hesitation, he found a seemingly reasonable excuse for himself by using the theater story of "Cai Scholar Recruiting Niu Xiangfu", and then agreed to the marriage[1], no longer caring about the affairs of his hometown and family. Even after learning the sad news of his wife's death, his brother asked him to go home to take care of the funeral affairs, and he gave his wife a title of "enjoined wife", but finally he refused to go home, and gave a few dozen taels of silver to settle the matter[2].Kuang Chaoren married again in addition to his wife in order to covet fame and fortune, which is a great contrast to the filial and unsophisticated boy before[1].The change of him in marriage shows the process of his gradual extinction of conscience, and meticulously portrays the specific image of the fall of an unsophisticated boy in the temptation of fame and fortune[2].

4. THE AUTHOR'S EXPLORATION AND SELF-DENIAL OF THE RITUAL DILEMMA

We can see that in the dozen of weddings in *The Scholars*, the author is not entirely critical attitude, at least two weddings with a slight warm color, one is the wedding of Niu Pulang and Bu Laodie's granddaughter, and the other is Shen Qiongzhi's revolt against Song Weifu. In my opinion, these two weddings hint at the author's two explorations of the issue of getting out of the dilemma of ritual culture. It is still necessary to return to the ethical value and connotation of "rites". It is only that the former emphasizes the importance of the ethical connotation, while the latter advocates the courage to expose the falsity of the form of "rites". In the wedding between Niu Pulang and Bu Laodie's granddaughter, the author focuses on depicting that the two old men share the same fate, have sincere feelings, and do not hate the poor and love the rich. Although the wedding is extremely simple in terms of rituals and ceremonies, the hearts of the two old men are sincere and respectful. This is the closest to a wedding that honors rituals and relies on human relationships and emotions, and also the closest to the author's ideal of a ritualistic social life. The author is pinning his hopes on the lower class people who have less temptation in their lives and are pure in nature, but this hope is soon extinguished by the fact that Niu Pulang married again in addition to his wife for the sake of fame and fortune. As the environment changes, so do the temptations, and human nature changes from good to evil under the stimulation of desire. But in Shen Qiongzhi's conscious resistance to Song Weifu, the author puts more hope and confidence, Shen Qiongzhi's action pierces through Song Weifu's ugly face, and also exposes the falsehood and deception of the form of "rites". Through Du Shaoqing, Zhuang Shaoguang and other people's praise of Shen Qiongzhi's resistance, the author affirms the positive significance of this kind of resistance to the innovation of the ritual system. But how much hope and confidence did the author have? Shen Qiongzhi did not want to be a concubine to the Song salt merchant and managed to escape from the Song's residence to Nanjing. In Nanjing, she set up her own signboard, self-sufficiency, and also with Zhuang Shaoguang, Du Shaoqing and other "real celebrities" to make friends, seemingly breaking the "rite" of bondage, and live a free and easy life in the jianghu. However, this does not mean that the author advocates individual resistance to realize the innovation of the ritual culture, or he does not think that this is a feasible road. On the one hand, the ritual culture of Chinese feudal society is deeply rooted, especially closely linked with politics, and political corruption directly affects the ritual order of the whole society. After Shen Qiongzhi escaped, she was still escorted back to Jiangdu by the messengers sent by Jiangdu Yamen. Although there is a kind governor in the novel who asks the governor of Jiangdu to release Shen Qiongzhi, it also shows that this road is not available to everyone. This also reveals the author's despair that there is nothing he can do to change the status of the current ritual system. On the other hand, the author's request to the governor of Jiangdu "to return the son to his father and choose another son-in-law" also shows that the author still puts part of his hope on the officials adjudicate cases fairly and honestly, and the evil people can repent and be saved, so that Shen Qiongzhi can return to the normal ritual life, that is to say, the author is still full of infinite fondness and expectation for the ritual society.

Thus, it is obvious that although the author gives Shen Qiongzhi a brighter future, he still has not found the future path of Chinese ritual society. Through the scene depiction and in-depth exploration of a dozen weddings, *The Scholars* reveals the self-contradictory and decaying side of China's feudal ritual society, while the author, in his endeavors to explore, shows his ambivalence both in wanting to change the status with anxiety and in being unable to do anything because of his fondness for the culture of rituals[3].

5. CONCLUSION

This paper examines the cultural depiction and artistic features of marriage rituals and customs in *The Scholars*, and exposes the author of *The Scholars*'s exploration and self-denial of ritual dilemmas, which it finds the marriage rites and customs in *The Scholars* not only depict the cultural customs of traditional Chinese society and show the profound connotations behind them, but also let the readers see the social atmosphere under the imperial examination system and the degradation of the intellectuals, and the author satirized the sick society at that time with a skillful technique.

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