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“Granny Wang” Archetype in Traditional Chinese Novels

Compared to classic poems or prose, traditional Chinese novels contain more sociocultural interactions among the working-class that has been long ignored by the mainstream imagination. Old hens with folk careers, literally translated into “Three Gu Six Po”(三姑六婆) in Chinese, possessing a diminished presence in all accounts despite their ubiquitous appearance throughout Chinese society. In these texts, “Wang Po”(Granny Wang, 王婆) is often a representative member of the “Three Gu Six Po”, more a term that expresses the character’s social position than it is an identifying “name”. They may be nuns, midwives or matchmakers, simultaneously presenting as deeply layered supporting characters as well as vital plot devices to the main story’s progress. Therefore, it is valuable to examine the representation of the “Wang Po” archetype in traditional Chinese novels and consider what it implies about the society she occupies. In particular, I want to study the frequent appearance of this “Wang Po” character in Ming-Qing-era town novels, such as *All Men Are Brothers*, *The Golden Lotus*, *Cases of Lord Shi*, et cetera. I make two assertions:

Firstly, we can learn about career norms, social status and patterns of life of these “Three Gu Six Po” during the Ming and Qing dynasties by using “Wang Pos” as an example. Characters like “Wang Po” may simultaneously be powerful due to their social roles within the domestic politics sphere while marginalised and diminished because they are women and of a less respectable working class. Furthermore, the development of social stereotypes and contemptuous attitudes towards “Three Gu Six Po” can also be explored by studying these texts.

Secondly, as a unique character archetype to Chinese novels, “Wang Po” has deep semiotic and narrative meaning. While “Wang Po” can occasionally be vivid characters, they mostly take on a very flat and templated personality, rendering this character more so a literary device than a deeply nuanced representation of a real person.

Different from servants or witches in western countries, “Wang Pos” are both professional and a locus of domestic power in China, and gradually become a special character archetype that is hardly seen in the global literature space.