History, Sociocultural Implications and Archetypal Characters of "Three Gu Six Po" in Traditional Chinese Novels

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Abstract:

Grannies with folk careers, literally translated into "Three Gu Six Po" in Chinese, are ubiquitous in traditional Chinese novels and colloquial stories. They may be nuns, midwives, or matchmakers from a relatively unprivileged status, seeking any temporary work opportunity and providing various services in and out of households. The interesting dynamic between these characters taking on deeply nuanced positions in Chinese sociocultural traditions while also adhering to archetypal roles provides begs two assertions:

Firstly, we can learn about the career norms, social status and life patterns of these "Three Gu Six Po" during the Ming and Qing dynasties by delving into the stories and related reviews in historical accounts. Noticeably, their roles can be simultaneously 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. And the development of social stereotypes and contemptuous attitudes towards "Three Gu Six Po" can be explored by studying these texts. Under the unnoticeable biased narratives of the elite literati during that period, this group of characters in literary works does not have a complete or identifying name and usually takes on relatively flat and templated personalities, with fixed impressions such as eloquence, greed, and lewdness, which suggests a concentration on the issues of gender and class inequalities in that period.

Secondly, as a representative member of "Three Gu Six Po", "Granny Wang" has gradually become a typecast nameless character and is continuously being rewritten. Based on the basic profile of

"Three Gu Six Po", some writers have occasionally given the character more detailed and vivid portrayals, and in some cases have developed her into a round character with own agency who was aware of her domestic power and made use of it. The logic behind the empowerment of "Granny Wang" through service can be traced back to Chinese philosophy, which makes the character archetype very different from servants or witches in Western countries.

Keywords: Three Gu Six Po; Granny Wang; Traditional Chinese Novels; Social History of Women; Servant

Introduction

Traditional Chinese women lived within a narrow social sphere with great obligations inside the family and very limited rights in the community. However, Tseng Yuho noted that clusters of women poets and painters emerged during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Women were gradually accepted as professionals in the seventeenth century, and "the sale of their artworks was regarded as an honourable means of livelihood" (1993, p. 249). Richard Smith also pointed out that "many traditional Chinese divination techniques were employed by women even more than by men" (1993, p.1) throughout the Qing period. In brief, large numbers of women had careers of their own and were more involved in socially productive activities to a greater extent during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Nevertheless, as women have been marginalized for most of recorded history, documentary evidence is difficult to come by. Authoritative historical sources, such as encyclopedias, official histories, and local gazetteers, seldom devote attention to women, let alone those of working-class backgrounds, because such non-do-

mestic behaviour is incompatible with or contrary to the concept of "righteous womanhood" (e.g., the Three Obediences and Four Virtues). The traces of these professional women can be found almost exclusively in traditional Chinese novels or colloquial stories, as these works contain more working-class sociocultural interactions that the dominant imagination has ignored.

In terms of academia, research into the history of Chinese women ' s literature emerged in Taiwan since the 1920s, followed by the flourishing of academic institutions in Hong Kong, mainland China, and some western countries. However, as Jen-der Lee (1996) pointed out, most articles concentrated on a few specific well-known women with great social status or stunning appearances. Masses of females indeed struggle to stand out from the background, while the narrative often tends to follow a few selected characters who are given a name. Therefore, grannies with folk careers, literally translated into "Three Gu Six Po" in Chinese, possess a diminished presence in all accounts despite their ubiquitous presence throughout Chinese society.

Introducing the excluded women as "dangerous women", Victoria B. Cass (1999) described grannies as a governing force of the feminine that implied aspects of the yin, taking Granny Liu and Granny Wang as examples, and vividly painting a more fine-tuned picture of grannies' role in the late imperial period. Undoubtedly, Yi Ruolan's master's thesis (2002) Three Gu Six Po: The Exploration of Women and Society in the Ming Dynasty Filled the research gap in more detail, carefully depicting the folk careers and cultural connotations of this crowd from a historical perspective. Subsequently, Hu Guixiang (2013) reviewed this book and analyzed misogyny by comparing the condemnnation of the "Three Gu Six Po" with the witch hunts in Europe in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries. From a different perspective, Chen Baoliang (2009) called these women "Nü Bang Xian" and regarded them as a crucial new form of social networking system for females in the late Ming dynasty. Afterward, Zhang Angxiao (2012) further studied the literati's attacks on "Three Gu Six Po", and Yang Zhiping (2016) explained grannies'

functions for story-telling and the symbolic meanings of these figures in traditional Chinese literature.

Initially inspired by the works of Victoria B. Cass (1999) and Yi Ruolan (1995), this paper focuses on the history, sociocultural implications and some typical characters of "Three Gu Six Po" in the town novels mostly during the Ming and Qing dynasties, in order to study how they represent the working-class women and restore the sociocultural history for these masses of female workers. Furthermore, as "Granny Wang" (Wang Po, the Chinese word "Po" is usually translated into English as "Granny" in academia) is often an archetypal character of the "Three Gu Six Po" in these texts, this article reflects on the cause, flexibility and sociocultural logic behind the insouciant naming process of this character. Besides, the comparison of "Granny Wang" characters in traditional Chinese novels with their similar figures, such as maidservants in Western literature, can further reveal the different cultural logics and social orders.

The history and cultural implications behind "Three Gu Six Po"

The collective noun "Three Gu Six Po" was first noted in WeiZhengJiuYaoand ChuoGengLuduring the Yuan period, both referring to grannies with nine kinds of folk careers. According to Victoria (1999, p.47), they assume roles in areas including matchmaking, fertility, birth, nurturing, and illness and death. Shouldering the heavy burden of life, they had to be "versatile" and seized every opportunity to make money.

However, there were only a few records of the "Three Gu Six Po" in the Yuan Dynasty, and it was only after the Ming Dynasty that the "Three Gu Six Po" proliferated as a collective image or individual figure in various types of novels and operas. The frequent appearances of "Three Gu Six Po" in Ming-Qing-era town novels reversely prove that these "Three Gu Six Po" were very active and a

necessity in the social life of Ming and Qing dynasties. Taking The Golden Lotus (JinPing Meizhuan, 1617) as an example,

there is not only "Granny Wang" but also "Aunt Xue" (the Chinese word "Gu" is usually translated into English as "Aunt" in academia), "Aunt Wen", "Granny Zhang", "Granny Feng", etc... All of these characters belong to the group of "Three Gu Six Po", helping construct the common life in the streets. Zhang Zhupo (1670-1698), a Ming Dynasty scholar, once commented that the depiction of the life of grannies in The Golden Lotus revealed the fact that it was almost a must for women living in small households to seek folk careers after their thirties or forties.

Interestingly, those working-class grannies were jacks-of-all-trades rather than specialists to seize every opportunity to make money. And although those "Three Gu Six Po" are often well versed in all sorts of household things in order to make profits, their works were not considered as a serious career. Remarkably, most records of "Three Gu Six Po" reflect the literati's negative attitude towards this female group. As Yi Ruolan (2006) concluded from historical records and literary works, scholars mostly treated the group of "Three Gu Six Po" with great contempt and regarded them as destructive elements of Confucian rituals and patriarchal authority. One of the potential threats of "Three Gu Six Po" is their ability to roam both inside and outside households, which naturally rebels against the ritual concepts of "righteous womanhood" (e.g., Three Obediences and Four Virtues, No physical contact between men and women) that emphasize the gender segregation and social division of women's staying inside the chamber while men work outside to be breadwinners. Yi also pointed out that intellectuals portrayed those grannies as dangerous women involved in bribery, witchcraft, and intrigues, with stereotypes of eloquence (likou), greed (tancai), and lewdness (yinmei),

while suggesting that this "vulgar group" should be regulated, deported, and chastised. More specific evidence can be found in family precepts of the literati, such as Huo Tao (1487-1540) and Xu Zhenji (1575-1645), both literary officials during the Ming Dynasty.

These biased opinions can be scrutinized under issues of gender and class inequality, which further reveals the double marginality of these grannies with folk careers: both an innominate working-class nobody and an aged woman without much feminine value under the patriarchal gaze. Apparently, the elitist and patriarchal system prevented elder working-class women from any possibility to assume the sort of high-profile roles. Worse still, the oppressive, male-dominated environment of Ming and Qing China, without acknowledging the significance of occupying the boundary between the private and public, placed many restrictions on their existing working opportunities. Shouldering the heavy burden of living in their small households, those grannies had to be "versatile" and seize any opportunity to earn money.

Even though most of the records hold negative attitude towards this female group, it is not possible to erase their existence because of their prevalence and their powerful social role within the domestic politics sphere. As teachers and spokeswomen of the inner chambers, these grannies moved in and out of the households and through the streets of the cities, making profits, owning social statures, and to some extent, partially gaining their independence from many patriarchs. This is particularly evident in the portrayal of the character Granny Wang in The Golden Lotus, which will be discussed later.

The naming and a typical character of "Granny Wang"

Aforementioned, "Three Gu Six Po" constitutes an informal bureaucracy that supervised life's transitions and plays an indispensable role in traditional Chinese novels or colloquial stories. In these texts, "Granny Wang" (Wang Po) can be a representative.

"Granny Wang" (Wang Po) contains both a first name ("Wang") and a flexible personal pronoun "Po" (the Chinese word "Po" is usually translated into English as "Granny" in academia). Generally speaking, the surname "Wang" is always one of the most

popular family names in China, so writers often create characters named “Granny Wang”, which further diminishes the specificity of the character. And the word “Po” is a kind of personal pronoun referring to aged women. Naming this group of characters in such a flexible way, “Granny Wang” gains the possibility of developing into a literary archetypal character offering various services.

“Granny Wang” was mostly depicted as a matchmaker since the colloquial stories of the Song and Yuan dynasties. A family would first consult a granny-matchmaker go-between to find a suitable bride or groom. For example, in the book ABriefHistoryof the Chinese Novel (Zhongguo XiaoshuoShilüe, 1925), Lu Xun mentioned a story named Ghostsofthe Western Hill (Xishan Yi Guiku, a colloquial story in the Song Dynasty), where Granny Wang helps the protagonist Wu Hong to make a match. In the town novels or colloquial stories during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the frequency of the role of “Granny Wang” has experienced a considerable increase, appearing in many classics including Water Margins (Shui Hu Zhuan), The Golden Lotus (Jin Ping Mei), Three Words Two Beats (“Sanyan Erpai”), Cases of Lord Shi (Shi gong An) and so on.

One of the most influential grannies must be Granny Wang in The Golden Lotus, around character with a distinctive personality and infamous reputation. Unlike the

homonymous Granny Wang inWaterMargins, the granny in TheGoldenLotushas deeper and longer involvement, and a particularly vivid first-person psychological description that cannot be found in that in WaterMargins. In TheGoldenLotus, readers know that there was an old woman who kept a tea shop from a third-person perspective. But she quickly points out by herself that,

> *People imagine that I keep a tea shop here, but to tell you the truth, a*
> *ghost playing the night watchman would fill the part as honestly as I do*

mine. One day, I certainly did sell some tea. It was three years ago, to be
precise, when snow fell in the sixth month; but I've sold none since. No,
sir, I make my living in quite another way.

(Clement, 2011, p. 76-77)

This old woman has been an efficient and busy go-between all her life, occasionally taking care of children or other temporary fortune-making tasks, fully fits the traditional roles and images of "Three Gu Six Po". Yet unlike the former figures with flat personalities, this granny is depicted detailedly and develops strong agency and her own grievances for she has been clearly aware of her authority within the domestic sphere. Her past experiences and the burden of breadwinning make her to be a resourceful, clever, and even dominant character. The narrator concludes that she is "a thoroughly accomplished rogue" (Clement, 2011, p. 75), while Ximen Qing, the ruthless parvenu of the book also marvels at her accomplishments. By deliberately confusing the word " damsons" with "damsels", Granny Wang successfully stirred the depraved desire and sexual passion of Xi Mengqing. She even taught Ximen Qing the five necessary skills for seduction and carefully laid out ten plans, which proved to work. This character was thrilled with her power to disrupt. On this basis, we can agree with Victoria's insight: "In a culture that yields to women low status and precarious economic existence, grannies in Ming literature have a miraculous contempt for the lord of the estate...A very uneasy truce existed between the ruling male and the unruly granny" (Victoria, 1999, p. 72).

More specifically, these grandmothers gain authority through their knowledge of appetites and desires, because they know that men and women are made of flesh. This is not a complicated truth, but it is one that is constantly denied and attacked by the disciplined and the respectable. Granny Wang, however, becomes one of the few who can name the unnameable in these texts, making her a rebellious force against the established rules.

Grannies Are More Than Servants

When comparing Chinese grannies with servants in English literature, the special service patterns and servantship make the former archetype distinguishable from the latter. Elizabeth Rivlin has concluded that service and servanthood were very closely linked in early modern England, especially in Shakespeare's works. She argues that the praise of volitional service or love in service mainly derives from Christian beliefs, where religious ideology and biblical scripture were invoked to defend slavery (Elizabeth, 2015, p. 27 & p. 36). However, there is still an essential tension existed that between service and servant, between the act and the person.

Both providing various services to their employers, Chinese grannies turn out to be very different from servants in Western countries flourishing in a similar period. In other words, those Ming-Qing-era town novels may spotlight different perspectives on service and servant because of their unique culture and social order. Although grannies with folk careers also provide many services to their employers, they can never be categorized into a vertical hierarchy or a servant-master structure that Western cultures emphasize. Instead, these grannies may develop their own agency and enjoy their dominant power in the domestic sphere. Living outside the constraints of elite customs, they are also blessed with the freedom to ignore these customs.

Service as Empowerment

As Elizabeth pointed out, different critiques and understandings of literary service in Shakespeare's works in the past few years "have opened up a split between materialist and idealist modes of criticism", and "have created an ideological divide which replays larger debates in literary studies" (Elizabeth, 2015, p. 24). Overall, these debates were about "the precarious nature of the divide between will, choice, and agency, on the one side, and constraint, coercion, and force, on the other" (p. 30).

Service, a sacred bond between masters and servants, has long been scrutinised under a hierarchical pattern. However, it is also a chic word since "service" seems freer from the vertical hierarchy than "servant" does. And nowadays, we rely very much on actions or functions that happen to be performed by people (not servants) on a daily basis. Then it comes to the question: In addition to the master-servant relationship under the hierarchical order, what other relationship cam "service" construct between the act and the person?

The anonymous "Three Gu Six Po" provided a possible perspective: for those Chinese grannies, service can be an empowering process in a feminine way. On the one hand, grannies' participation in labour production meant a lot, both in terms of making a handsome contribution to the incomes of individual households and filling positions that were more suitable for female workers. For example, Richard Smith (1993) and Yi Ruolan (2002) agreed that females were urgently needed for the occupations like diviners and missionaries. Additionally, scholars including Xu Zhoujian (1993) and Wang Zhong (1995) all stressed that women's participation in social production led to an obvious improvement in their family, economic and social status. On the other hand, the service of grannies has dramatically expanded the activity space and the conceptual transition for women. Firstly, the service of "Three Gu Six Po" has the potential of "breaking". Taking advantage of grannies' informative visits, young girls and devout wives at that time had more access to knowledge of the outside. Their roaming transcended internal and external boundaries and broke down the fences separating one home from another. Secondly, their services and servanthood were sometimes destructive, reflecting folk lures and desires that may overthrow the traditional beliefs of chastity and marriage. It is also the reason why "Granny Wang" always succeeds in creating domestic chaos and becomes a hint of the so-called "repressed modernities" (Wang 1997). Thinking of *The Golden Lotus* in this way, we will find that the depiction of self-indulgence, particularly in four vices of drunkenness, lust, greed, and anger,

provides us with a very feminine approach to inner reflection, which differentiates it from masculine ritual disciplines. In the case of *The Golden Lotus,* Granny Wang becomes a powerful glue for all these liaisons and helps further unleash the power of human nature.

In conclusion, Chinese grannies' services differ from those emphasized in indoor service and master-servant relationships in Western countries. Their services can empower and help with the boom of folk feminine power within the dynamic socio-economic environment in late imperial China.

Concentrated but Not Hierarchical

Different representations of service and "servants" may be traced to social and cultural differences. More specifically, if we say that the West fits into a vertically hierarchical model, Chinese society may be described as "concentric circles. " The distinction is subtle, but leads to profound differentiation.

In the article above, Elizabeth Rivlin also reveals that English literature is influenced by Christian ideas that intimately link service and servanthood, because ultimately the social order is hierarchical and everyone is in different levels of servitude to God. However, there is less of a sense of vertical hierarchy in Chinese cultures. Chinese philosophy, especially Confucianism, is grounded by concentric circles of relevance – which expand from the self (body), to family (immediate family & extended family), to a group, to a state, and finally to Tianxia (Liji-Daxue). For this reason, "Three Gu Six Po" in Chinese texts and social contexts are naturally endowed with more freedom through their domestic power.

Conclusion

By studying the "Granny Wang" archetype, we learned about career norms, social status, patterns of life, and the temporal evolution of these "Three Gu Six Po" during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Influenced by cultural and socio-economic facts, archetypal characters of "Three Gu Six Po", such as "Granny Wang", may simultaneously be powerful due to their social roles within the domestic politics sphere while marginalized and diminished because they are women and of less respectable working class. And it also stimulates new thoughts and perspectives when comparing the service of Chinese grannies with those of Western servants.

Due to the limitations of length and the author's knowledge base, many arguments still need to be fully developed. But it is worth doing further research on the history, cultural implications and typical characters of "Three Gu Six Po" in literary works, because this seemingly marginalized granny group works both as servants and as a locus of domestic power – which is not seen anywhere else in the global literary space.

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