Little Women in China: How is a 19th-century American Novel So Popular in China Today?

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Abstract

The popularity of Little Women bears the question as to why a 19th-century American novel took contemporary China by storm? This article examines the gender roles depicted in Little Women to unpack the aspirations and limitations when women tried to undermine gender stereotypes in 19th century America. Through comparing Little Women to a popular Chinese cultural product - the 'domineering CEO' drama genre - today, this article aims to examine how the 19th century story fits into the popular culture in contemporary China. Based on Raymond Williams's cultural theory, this article argues that Little Women has become popular in 21st century China because it attempts to reflect the awakening of female consciousness, but at the same time emphasises patriarchy and gender stereotypes, which coincides with the current cultural trend in contemporary China. While the call for gender equality has become a mainstream social trend, which is the 'dominant' culture, the remnants of gender stereotypes towards women in a traditionally patriarchal society still exist in China today.

Keywords

Green logistics; PEST analysis; Development model.

1. Gender stereotyping in Little Women

Since 1992, there have been at least 45 versions of the Chinese translation of Little Women, the first of which sold out in 2000 copies in one night. (The number is obtained from Jingdong, China's largest online retailer, and counted manually by the author of this paper. There could be more than 45 versions) Hong Yi and Ye Yu were among the first to translate the book into Chinese in 1992, followed by Liu Chunying and Chen Yuli in 1997, whose version was sold millions of copies and is still being reprinted and republished. According to the mid-year Good Book List 2020 issued by Dangdang, a popular book-selling platform in China, Little Women is on the list of the top ten best books in the fiction category. The list is based on Dangdang's book sales in the first half of 2020. Numerous reviews from professional editors, book reviewers, and millions of readers indicate the continuing popularity of the novel among the Chinese people.

In the late 19th century, Louisa May Alcott, an American author, introduced a women's coming-of-age novel entitled Little Women, depicting the growth of four sisters in the March family as they confronted the struggle from girlhood to womanhood (Ekasanti & Hernawati, 2019). The novel was primarily written in two volumes: Little Women, published in 1868, and a year later, a sequel entitled Good Wives was published in 1869. Nowadays, the two volumes are published under the title Little Women. Ekasanti and Hernawati (2019, p. 112) argue that the novel reflects how women in the late 19th century America were 'not considered as significant as men, hence "little".' Some studies have described the novel as a work that represents the awakening of women and their independence. For example, Tang (2020) states that this novel plays an important role in deconstructing patriarchal society and further promoting feminism. Others state that the novel contains numerous descriptions of women's subordination to patriarchy,

reflecting the traces of a patriarchal society. For example, Grasso (1998) argues that although there is evidence showing Alcott's feminist 'rebellion', the book reinforces the gender stereotypes of women in 19th century America.

The most significant factor in analyzing what Little Women attempts to convey is the portrayal of the main female characters, the March sisters, and the social condition of the late 19th century. The most critical factor contributing to the four sisters' gender roles are their ideas of marriage, as women are often considered more likely than men to enact interpersonal roles centered on family and intimate relationships (Lauzen & Dozier & Nora Horan, 2008). The change and formation of Jo's idea of marriage are the most noteworthy in the novel, since she is the only girl who initially shows disinterest in, and even disgust for, the gender roles she is supposed to abide by. However, Alcott does not intend to arrange for Jo to break out of stereotypical gender roles. As her career takes off a little, she falls in love with Professor Bhaer, whom she meets in New York, and the two get married soon afterwards. At the end of the text, Jo March submits to the conventional roles she has been taught since childhood and fulfils society's expectation that women are to marry, raise children and be responsible for keeping the home as cozy as possible in order to keep their husbands satisfied. The other three sisters accept the roles that society has assigned to them without doubt. Meg, the eldest sister, aspired greatly to marriage and agreed that meeting a decent guy is a milestone in a woman's whole life. As a result of her marriage, Meg became more feminine in her character and wiser in the 'domestic arts', which fit the profile of a 'real woman' (Alcott, 2012, p. 226). Meg found herself occupied solely in the domestic sphere, eager to be an excellent housekeeper and to make her husband feel at ease in their home because that was expected of her. Meg takes on the role of mother soon after getting married, which Alcott defines as 'the deepest and tenderest of a woman's life'. (Alcott, 2012, p. 394) Beth, the softest and shyest of the March sisters, lost her life to scarlet fever and thereby missed out on marriage. She was considered 'tender' because she stayed at home and learnt to contribute to the family. Amy, the youngest one, is permitted to travel to Europe to learn art in order to fulfil her ambition of being an artist after impressing her wealthy Aunt March as a 'proper lady'. However, she falls in love and marries Theodore Lawrence, and consequently loses the chance to leave her family to realise her dream. She ends up assisting her husband in business, caring for the family, and socializing, which her family considers a tremendous achievement. The March sisters end up playing such a traditional, socially expected gender role.

It is evident that the March girls became submissive to the conventional gender roles, and Little Women thereby evoking gender stereotypes in the 19th-century America. Eagly and Steffen (1984, p. 735) state that social stereotypes always 'reflect perceivers observations of what people do in daily life'. In other words, if perceivers frequently see a certain group engaging in a specific activity, they are more inclined to assume that the abilities and personality needed to accomplish the activity are typical of that group (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Gender stereotypes are also formed in this way, for example, perceivers are more willing to suspect that qualities deemed appropriate for children caring, such as nurturance and warmth, are common for women, if they regularly see women caring for kids (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Social roles decide the majority of behaviours of people, as a result, 'stereotypes about groups of people should reflect the distribution of social roles in society for those groups'. (Eagly & Steffen, 1984, p. 735) By reading Little Women, perceivers may develop the idea that even if women once had their dreams and beliefs, they would eventually return to the family domain, acting as a thoughtful wife and later a caring mother.

The gender stereotypes embodied in Little Women originated in society. In the late 19th century, American women faced a lot of challenges when attempting to break the 'belief of domesticity' so that they could place themselves in 'both the domestic and public spheres' (Ekasanti & Hernawati, 2019, p. 114). The novel was published in 1868, which was about the same time as the end of the Civil War and the start of the Second American Industrial Revolution. Women

began to gain control of their education rights, growing their intellectuality and launching protests seeking the fulfilment of their rights, trying to smash conventional gender roles and values (Ekasanti & Hernawati, 2019). The Second American Industrial Revolution propelled a large number of people out of the domestic domain, leaving behind the ideology of 'true woman' (Ekasanti & Hernawati, 2019, p. 116). However, by depicting main female characters who abandon their dreams and return to the domestic sphere, the novel re-emphasises the gender issues that were prevalent in society at the time. It indicates that women were subjected to rigid gender stereotypes as a result of the deeply entrenched patriarchal culture. As a result, on the one hand, Little Women also depicts the idea of women struggling for their rights and freedom. On the other hand, however, the main female characters' submission to marriage and family domain are, to some extent, emphasising the stereotyping of gender roles in late-19th-century America. Miraculously, a TV drama genre in 21st century China has similar connotations to those of Little Women.

2. The Gender Stereotypes in Shanshan Laile

In recent years, there has been a noteworthy trend in the portrayal of male protagonists in Chinese television dramas, whereby they are generally portrayed as possessing superior family backgrounds, wealth and status, as well as physical attractiveness. In China, this representation of male characters is summed up by the term 'domineering CEO', which does not simply refer to the boss of a company who behaves in a domineering way in the workplace. Rather, it refers to male chauvinism (Wang, 2016). Specifically, a domineering CEO is the definition of a young man whose family, wealth, stature, looks, and abilities match those of the social elite in every respect. Generally, such a man displays a strong, arrogant role in his life. This type of drama has a similar storyline - a handsome and wealthy man falls in love with a girl who is from an ordinary family and is not professionally superior nor dominant, always presenting a soft and innocent image. The 'domineering CEO' falls in love with the 'Cinderella' and can solve her problems at any time, meeting both her material and spiritual needs.

Many scholars have researched the origin and features of the term 'domineering CEO'. Liang Yi (2015) discusses the transition of the 'domineering CEO plot motif' from literary works to the screen, pointing out that this image will continue to be popular in literature and dramas in the future. Wei (2017) briefly outlines the features of this genre, indicating that it usually tells the story of many wealthy, elite men pursuing an ordinary, innocent woman. Dong Sheng (2018) argues that the origin of the term 'domineering CEO' can be traced back to the 1970s when many literary works were set in the context of 'rich men and poor women'. Dong (2018) also analyses the reasons for the huge commercial value of the 'domineering CEO' image and states that the biggest reason for this genre's financial success lies in its grip on the psychology of the female audience, presenting them with an image of a perfect husband. Some scholars have critically analysed the connotation of the 'domineering CEO' image. Li Chao (2017) argues that this image is a joint work of the author's and the viewer's imagination of the 'upper rank' in society. According to Max Weber (2010), the concept of 'rank' emphasises an extremely formalised economic-social structural relationship, and the 'upper rank' refers to people of great wealth. As I shall discuss with the example of Shanshan laile, the superiority of the 'domineering CEO' is greatly enhanced by the dependence of women from lower economic and social classes on the process of heterosexual courtship.

The drama Shanshan laile was broadcast in 2014 and reached a staggering 133 million online view counts in a single day, and is the only modern idol drama to have been replayed more than 100 times in recent years. In 2020, the Tiktok videos about Shanshan laile received over one million likes (Chinese Entertainment Focus, 2020). According to Wang (2016), the popularity of this drama sparked a debate on the 'domineering CEO' drama genre. Li (2020) suggests that

the rise of 'the domineering CEO' drama satisfies people's emotional needs, while Gu (2019, p. 110), on the other hand, argues that this drama genre represents 'a brutally optimistic façade', placing men and women in extreme inequality. On 8th April 2015, there were approximately 150 million entries related to 'domineering CEO' on Baidu website (Liang, 2015, p. 110). It is evident that the concept of 'domineering CEO' has become more accepted and familiar after the broadcasting of the 2014 drama Shanshan laile.

The drama Shanshan laile is a love story between Xue Shanshan, an ordinary employee, and Feng Teng, the CEO of Feng Teng company. Feng recruits Xue, who has a rare blood type, to give a blood transfusion to his younger sister. Then Feng falls in love with Xue, and the two go through all sorts of difficulties and hardships, but in the end, they get married. While reaping the rewards of love, Xue Shanshan also opens a jewellery shop with the help of Feng Teng to realise her dream. In the following part, I will focus on analysing the characterisation of the main male and female characters and the narrative structure of Shanshan laile. The analysis shows that the main male characters are all depicted as both rich and decent, while the rich female characters are often malevolent and flighty, indicating the construction of stereotyping gender identities.

In this drama, there are two main male characters, Feng Teng and Zheng Qi, who are both portrayed as being handsome, powerful, wealthy, wise, and mature. There are two main female characters: Xue Shanshan and Yuan Lishu. The former is an ordinary, plain girl who is pitiful, innocent, and tender, while the latter has a powerful family background, though she is scheming and arrogant. It is easy to see from the portrayal of characters that the main male characters are very attractive and almost perfect, from their status, physical appearance to their personalities. Conversely, both main female characters have their weak points: Xue is of average intelligence, and the only reason she gets a job in a large corporation is that she donated blood to the CEO's sister and is hired as a 'mobile backup blood bank'; Yuan, who comes from a rich family, attempting to interfere with Feng and Xue's relationship, is clearly an unlikable character in the drama. According to Wang (2016), the 'domineering CEO' image has two common features based on the setting of the characters in Shanshan laile. The first is the idealised design of the protagonist: this type of drama necessitates the creation of a charismatic male character who is loved by the audience and who acts perfectly in terms of physical appearance, temperament, and morality, becoming a representative of the perfect human being; The second feature is that the supporting male characters must be set up to be subordinate to the protagonist, appearing as helpers or hindrances to the protagonist. They are almost as affectionate and wealthy as the protagonist, or even more charming than the protagonist. However, when it comes to the female supporting characters, they often play antagonistic roles, creating conflicts and obstacles for the two protagonists, with much less positive portrayals throughout the drama (Wang, 2016).

In terms of the storyline, Li (2017) indicates that the most notable aspect is the way in which the 'domineering CEO' always utilises a combination of financial and social capital to force women into submission. In Shanshan laile, for example, when Feng Teng, the company's CEO, is courting Xue Shanshan, he pressures her to attend a party with him and demands her to have lunch with him every day. In addition, in Shanshan laile, to highlight the overpowering abilities of the domineering CEO, the scriptwriters are tempted to design the female protagonist Xue as a thickheaded girl, and the male protagonist always enjoys the female protagonist's dependence on him and willingly helps her to overcome all difficulties. In this way, the female protagonists only need to stay there and wait for the domineering CEO to bring everything to their lives. Just as in this drama, since the male protagonist appears, the real difficulties in Xue's life are easily cleared up by him, so Xue ends up having a good job, a big house, and a good life which is in line with the good life propagated by the popular consumer culture (Liang, 2015).

In conclusion, CEO romance dramas tend to portray men as extremely dominant characters, while female protagonists are mediocre or even a bit dumb, as Xue in Shanshan laile demonstrates. In addition, this drama genre illustrates the gender stereotypes that women should be reliant on men if they want to succeed, and that women, in general, are less qualified than men.

3. Where Do the Two Works Meet?

Wang (2016) states that people in different historical contexts have different aesthetic preferences. Therefore, to match the public taste, the TV series will design the protagonists' characters in line with the popular aesthetics of the times. The popularity of Shanshan laile reflects that the imagination of males and females in this drama fit the public imagination of gender in contemporary China, indicating that most Chinese people perceive men as strong, capable elites whereas women as fragile, dependent ones.

This kind of imagination of gender is not new to the Chinese people. In traditional Chinese society, the dominant social ideology, represented by Confucianism, expected a woman to be a virtuous wife and gracious mother who was confined only to family life, and a series of norms of female behaviour were established in relation to this. Among these norms, the 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' set out comprehensive and strict rules on women's speech, behaviour, dress code, appearance, and thoughts. (The 'Three Obediences' is from the Book of Rites, a collection of texts describing the social institutions, governance, and ceremonial rites of the Zhou dynasty, is one of the Confucian classics (Legge et al., 1967). The 'Four Virtues' is from the Rites of Zhou, a work on bureaucracy and organizational theory (Kelleher, 2005)) The 'Three Obediences' suggest that a woman is required to obey her father before marriage, obey her husband during married life and obey her sons in widowhood. 'Obeying father' means that the father decides on the marriage of his daughter, who is not free to choose her lifelong partner; 'obeying husband' shows the transfer of control from the father to the husband through marriage; 'obeying son' indicates that the gender order precedes the strict hierarchy of seniority (Wang, 2007, p. 66). The 'Four Virtues' refer to 'fidelity', 'physical charm', 'propriety in speech' and 'efficiency in needle work'. 'Fidelity' requires women to attach importance to chastity; 'propriety in speech' asks women to speak appropriately and not to offend men; 'physical charm' means that women should conform to the aesthetic requirements of traditional society and to please their husbands; 'efficiency in needle work' refers to housework, such as spinning, weaving, sewing, cooking, etc., restricting women to only show their dexterity in these areas (Wang, 2007, p. 67). These socially defined norms for women have led to a traditional society in which women lack independence, autonomy, freedom of thought, and economic independence. Women at that time were deeply influenced by these norms. They relied heavily on men and did not participate in social activities, considering their main role to be child-rearing and homemaking.

This situation changed in the late Qing Dynasty, especially after the New Culture Movement at the beginning of the last century, when the role of women began to be reshaped and women who had long been confined to the family realm, began to move into society. (Late Qing Dynasty: 1840-1912, The New Culture Movement was a movement in China in the 1910s and the 1920s, during which Chinese traditional feudal thoughts were transformed into modern scientific thought, criticising the patriarchal family and promoting individual freedom and women's liberation (Liu, 2019).) It was not until the founding of the People's Republic of China that the role of women underwent a significant change. The idea of equality between men and women gradually permeated society, and women began to try to get out of the domestic sphere. After the reform and opening-up, women gradually integrated into most social spheres. (The reform and opening-up started in 1978, during the process of which women's liberation changed from

the original desire for marital autonomy to broader social, economic and political rights as well as their socio-economic status. (Zhou, 2014).)

Then, why can we see from Shanshan laile - a TV drama in contemporary China - a remnant of male superiority culture in traditional China, that is, untalented and docile women are considered cute and they are dependent on powerful men to live their ideal lives? Does this mean that the culture of the past is still influencing the cultural trends in contemporary China?

As Raymond Williams (2008) states, the complexity of culture is not only in its fluid processes and social definitions - traditions, customs, institutions, configurations, etc. - but also in the dynamic relationship between factors that have changed or will change historically. Raymond Williams (2008) further dismantles culture into different ideological fragments: dominant, residual, and emergent. In contemporary China, women's sense of autonomy has increased with economic development, and their overall power has grown, which is the 'dominant' culture (Zhou, 2014). However, in a social climate that emphasises the equality of men and women, the 'emergent' cultural phenomena - the popular 'domineering CEO' drama - reflects the recognition and acceptance of a male-centred gender order, showing that the traditional notion of gender hierarchy, although no longer dominant, still exerts its influence in a residual and renewed form. This explains why a remnant of male superiority culture in traditional China can be seen in a 21st Century Chinese TV drama.

Little Women and Shanshan laile, these two works belonging to different historical periods, though, have striking similarities. Like the TV drama, the novel Little Women is a product of an 'emergent' culture - the first wave of feminism that began in the 1840s. Feminists stated that sexism is the source of male dominance, they pushed for women to struggle for liberation and rebel against injustice via revolution rather than reform (Yu, 2015). According to Liu (2015), feminism began to affect the development of literature. Feminist writers strove to express sexual liberation in the portrayal of female characters, brought attention to gender inequalities, and combated patriarchal ideas in their literary works. Louisa May Alcott, the author of Little Women, was one of them. Little Women, according to Tang (2020), depicts the status of women's consciousness in American history at that time. The March sisters in the novel, behaving like female liberals, seek their rights as women, realise their autonomy, and appreciate each other for their individuality. According to Ekasanti and Hernawati (2019), at the time of the Civil War, women who were restricted in the domestic sphere had become more educated and more women leapt out of the family field. As a result, the demand for women in a variety of work fields has increased, including writers and teachers (Ekasanti & Hernawati, 2019). In Little Women, Alcott let Jo earn money as a writer to support her family and made Meg work part-time as a governess, showing the gradual entry of women into the professional fields in America at that time.

The similarity between Little Women and Shanshan laile is also reflected in the fact that both of them embodied the influence of residual patriarchal ideas. During the first wave of feminism, in the late 19th century, women in America commonly got married at an early age, usually before 25 years old, and their husbands were always much older than them since it emphasised the 'natural' hierarchy between the two sexes (Ekasanti & Hernawati, 2019). According to Evans (1997), at that time, marriage is where women's domesticity is found and is the realm where women were designed and developed to embellish as they found comfort in their families. This indicates that in that period of time, women were considered to have nothing to do except staying at home, take care of their husbands and raise their children. As Kuersten (2003) states, women were prevented from pursuing higher education, entering the workplace, and operating enterprises, unless they were asked by their husbands to assist them. Ekasanti and Hernawati (2019) indicate that this trend stemmed from the stereotyping of gender identities imagined and constructed by American society, in which the concept of a 'perfect woman' referred to

those who stayed in the family field, serving their husband, nursing the children and doing household chores.

These gender stereotypes, as I analysed, are clearly shown in Little Women. Little Women, written during the first wave of feminism, reflect only a superficial rebellion against gender stereotypes and emphasises the indestructibility of the patriarchal society. Just as Ekasanti and Hernawati state in Representation of Gender Stereotyping in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women: Endorsement of Traditional Gender Roles:

'Little Women's author, Louisa May Alcott, did not use her platform to promote the spirit of breaking boundaries for the purpose of providing a better life for women of the late 19th century. Yet, she endorsed the traditional gender roles instead, a traditional idea where women need to remain as being pious, pure, and submissive in order to be considered as a respected being (Ekasanti & Hernawati, 2019, p. 115).'

In a social climate that introduced an 'emergent' cultural fragment - reducing gender stereotypes towards women, the patriarchy, presented as a 'residual' cultural fragment, posed its influence on Little Women, leading to the failure of combating stereotyping gender identities in the novel. As a result, Little Women and Shanshan laile meet each other in a similar social context where they were created: people were struggling for gender equality and women's rights, however, the society was still influenced by the age-old residual notions of stereotyping gender identity and patriarchy.

4. Conclusion

In Conclusion, Little Women reinforces the influence of 19th-century American patriarchal society on people's gender identities, mainly by reinforcing female stereotypes. Contemporary Chinese 'domineering CEO' dramas such as Shanshan laile, on the other hand, tend to reinforce gender stereotypes in 21st century China by portraying men as associated with terms such as 'hegemonic', 'powerful', and 'upper class'. Despite their different social contexts and different ways of stereotyping gender, the two works come to the same end - showing the fact that gender identities in both 19th century America and 21st century China are profoundly influenced by patriarchal societies. Little Women, a 19th century American novel, has become a huge hit in contemporary China precisely because its embodiment of 'restricted, incomplete women emancipation' coincides with the current state of contemporary Chinese society. In China today, although women are coming to the fore in politics, economics and other crucial fields, the public still sees women as the weaker party who are in need of support and promises from powerful men in marriage and in the workplace.

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