Women's image and historical characteristics reflected in Chinese and Western painting art: Take the Sistine Madonna and Female Figures in the Tang Dynasty

Chaoyue Deng*

Shenzhen College of International Education, Shenzhen, Guangdong, 518000, China

Abstract. Recently, the status of women as well as gender equality has aroused a general concern in society, and this topic is frequently concerned in academic research. However, the origin of this issue needs to be traced back to ancient times in human culture and history, considering the cultural, religious and other factors. Therefore, based on this background, this article will compare and analyze the images of women in Chinese and Western paintings to explore gender roles. Through the study, it can be found that during the historical evolution of China and the West, different views of women were created in various aspects, and women were depicted in different ways. In many places, especially in ancient China, women were seen as the possession of the ruling class and patriarchal society. Women are also oppressed in Western countries, and most of their rights are denied. But on the other hand, the female figures in the paintings were given strong religious colors and they looked lenient and wise.

1 Introduction

Women’s images present the development and features of historical periods, and those images provide numerous materials for historians to discover the essentials of specific history. Female figures from the Renaissance and Tang dynasty are compared since these two periods have certain similarities. Firstly, both periods are prosperous in art and ideology aspect, and people are relatively open-minded. Secondly, Portrait and especially portraits with women are a typical example of these periods. Furthermore, during the Tang Dynasty, the economy prospered and culture developed as never existed before, and the Tang art scene was thriving. For the Renaissance period, after the 11th century, with the recovery and development of the economy, the growth of cities and the improvement of living standards, people gradually changed their previous pessimistic attitudes towards reality and began to pursue the pleasures of secular life. Therefore, Renaissance took place, as a new anti-feudal cultural campaign launched in the name of reviving classical Greco-Roman culture to spread the idea of Humanism.

Therefore, this paper is going to illustrate the relationship between Women's Image and Historical Characteristics Reflected in Chinese and Western Painting Art [1,2].

2 Visual analyze

2.1. Sistine Madonna

Sistine Madonna is an oil painting created in 1513–14 by Raphael, who was the master painter of the Italian High Renaissance. The painting was one of the artist’s final Madonnas. The putti at the bottom of the painting becomes one of the best-known images in the history of art. It is an oil painting painted on the wall in the Church of Sistine. Take a glance at the picture, soft light comes from the back of Madonna, cultivates a prominent comparison between bright and dark colors [3].

The Madonna walks with the baby Jesus in her arms while the curtain at the top of the picture opens. She is wearing colors that stand for purity, love, and truth: those are white, red, and blue. Her clean face has a gentle seriousness that conveys the mother's grief and powerlessness and foreshadows the fate of the Son. As Fig.1. depicts, look at her eyes, she is about to stare at somewhere ahead her attentively. Jesus, His right hand is trembling as it grips a part of his mother's coat, as if trying to hide some unspoken anxiety [4].

Fig. 1. Sistine Madonna. [5]
2.2 The Hairpin Lady

The Hairpin Lady is a rough silk painting by Zhou Fang from the Tang Dynasty. The painting depicts six colorfully dressed noblemen and their maids enjoying the garden in spring. The painting does not have a background filled with color, which is also known as a technique called Liu Bai in Chinese painting. The painting contains five women, a female servant, and a small dog, cranes and flowers. The whole picture of the six figures are skillfully arranged with a specific order of nearby and far. The brushwork and the lines are vigorous, flowing and colorful. Dense coloring, the hair style, facial expressions, clothing decorations, are extremely skillful work, better expressed the delicate and tender skin of noble women and silk fabric.

3 Comparison

3.1. Technique

Regarding to the techniques, Western artists tend to favour oil painting. They use high saturation colors in order to make the paintings look full and rich with tensions. Characters looked three-dimensional and real due to the precise perspective technique. Chinese painting emphasizes the technique of "Liu Bai", which emphasizes the flavor and harmony of the picture, and the blank space makes the picture look like it is "breathing". To be specific, there are only several characters in the scenery. The picture is blank from character to character. The image is light and not redundant, yet meaningful. This structure leaves enough space for imagination, for example, people can imagine what the land and roads under their feet looks like.

3.2. Art environment

Relating to the art environment, these two periods were relatively prosperous and open-minded, and women's status were elevated, but still being oppressed. Meanwhile, the Western Renaissance built on this foundation as it revived Greco-Roman civilization. The Tang Dynasty was characterized by rapid economic, political and cultural development, which left a foundation for the creation of works of art. At the same time, the rulers carried out social reforms, and the social atmosphere gradually became more open, women could ride horses, shoot arrows and wear men's clothes, so many works of art were characterized by diversity and openness. The Renaissance advocated humanist thinking, and various schools of art flourished. Renaissance paintings abandoned the rigid style of the Middle Ages and added the representative technique of perspective, promoting the technical development of artistic painting.

3.3. Theme

Pertaining to the theme of these two paintings, the author would conclude that they all convey the idea of secularization, or humanism.

During the Renaissance, Western artists advocated humanism, which encouraged people to explore their identity, so the style of paintings returned to reality, and characters were fleshed out vividly. The themes of the paintings were no longer limited to religious theology, but were expanded to include love, affection, and also natural landscapes.

On the other hand, the frequency of women's images in artworks gradually increased in the Tang dynasty. Images of women riding horses, shooting, planting flowers, and traveling in the mountains often appeared, and they were close to the real life of the common people.

However, those themes could reflect the aesthetic taste of specific periods, which was somehow influenced by the ruling class. The Madonna is respected and praised for her elegance, kindness and dignity. Sistine Madonna is the perfect combination of Queen and Mother's typical features, and it is the perfect figure of Madonna in Raphael's opinion. During the Tang dynasty, beautiful women were characterized by well-rounded body shapes, a typical example is Yang Guifei, as Fig.2. shows. The women in the paintings have rounded cheeks, and eyebrows that look like the wings of moths, and are all dressed in red, yellow, brown and white.

![Fig. 2. Yang Guifei](image)

In the Hairpin Ladies’ Picture, the ladies are dressed in gorgeous costumes and appear to live with freedom. However, their eyes and facial expressions show that they are actually lonely. Women in the palace spent a lot of time dressing themselves and entertaining, but years of luxury changed them from young girls into idle creatures. The puppies and cranes in the paintings were the pets of the ladies, but also reflect the fact that women were also at the bottom of the social ladder at that time, acting as the playthings that being oppressed by the male-dominated society. The Sistine Madonna is a Renaissance work deeply influenced by Plato's aesthetics. Unlike medieval female portraits, which are generally
rigid, it has a strong religious atmosphere, reflecting the sanctity of religious figures.

In this work of the Sistine Madonna, the writer used saturated colors and depicted the Madonna in color block fills. Comparing to classical Chinese paintings, Western works emphasize more on authenticity, for instance, the skin texture of the Virgin Mary's skin is portrayed vividly in the painting. This also reflects the Western Renaissance, the demand for liberation of humanistic thought, and the development of individuality. Ancient Greek culture emphasized the homogeneity of gods and humans, and as a legacy and development of ancient Greco-Roman culture, Renaissance works illustrate this perspective well.

3.4. Aesthetics and idealization
During the Tang dynasty, Chinese aesthetics highlighted the harmony of natural and internal beauty. Women were regarded as soft, gentle, dignified and humble features. This aesthetic was widely expressed in painting, poetry and literature. Tang dynasty poets often praised women for their gentleness. This aesthetic taste was also reflected in Tang Dynasty paintings, where female figures were often depicted as tender ladies with elegant costumes and soft tempers.

From the ideology aspect, during the Tang dynasty, ideal women were always described as loyal and educated figures. Educated women considered models, such as Yang Guifei and Princess Wencheng, since their images emphasize the wisdom and morals of females. During that specific period, women always played an indispensable role of family and society, which indicates the values and social responsibilities of women.

The aesthetic favor of the Renaissance period is very different from the one of Tang dynasty, which emphasizes the scientific and artistic exploration of the human body, and the beauty of the female body was widely studied and depicted. Famous artists such as Leonardo da Vinci were dedicated to exploring the perfect human body portraits. Women were seen as art objects with graceful curves and wonderful bodies shapes. In the Western culture, ideal female images are usually described with attraction, education and social skills. Women during this period were encouraged to develop their talents and cultural skills, instead of being constrained in the role of wife and staying at home. The idealization of women was also reflected in paintings, where they were depicted with nobility and self-confidence.

3.5. Social roles and power structure
During the Tang Dynasty, women's social roles were mainly related to households. They were regarded as the core members of the family's domestic life and were responsible for bearing children, caring for their husbands and managing the household. Although there were some outstanding women in Tang society, such as Princess Wencheng, who played an important role in the political and cultural spheres, but most women's social roles and rights were limited.

Pertaining to the power structure, the power structure of Tang society was based on the feudal system and bureaucracy. Political and social power was concentrated by the emperor and the officers, while women's participation in the political field was very limited. Although some concubines and royal women possessed some political influence, their power was usually constrained by male relatives.

During Renaissance period, women's roles started to be diversified. Many women began to participate in social and religious activities, and they also developed artistic and literature creations. The power structure of the Renaissance retained some aspects of feudalism, but it also began to change. Women's participation in the political and social spheres increased, especially in court politics. Some women such as Elizabeth I of England and Isabella I of Spain became powerful national leaders.

4 Gender role

4.1. Role of women in Tang Dynasty
In the Hairpin Lady painting, the author presents gender role by depicting the internal loneliness of those upper-class women. The six women in the picture are gorgeously dressed and graceful [7]. Some hold fans in their hands, while others reach out to play with animals. The small number but large variety of animals in the painting further illustrates the affluence of court life. However, this luxurious life cultivates a huge contrast towards the internal situation of the spirit of the ladies. Living in the palace permanently, they became empty and bored. There is only fun, money and fame inside. They have no access to the lives of the common people either and are constrained to the role of "maids", whose only task in life is to please the emperor [8].

In order to satisfy the aesthetics of women in feudal society, women were demanding of their appearance to a pathological degree. In ancient times, women's pursuit of foot-binding lasted for thousands of years, which appeared to be a voluntary compromise to cater to the preferences of the other half of the family. This specific kind of esthetic conception demanded women to wrap their feet tightly in fabric to limit their growth, deforming the bones of the feet to make them smaller. This had a disastrous effect on women's physical and mental health.

But in fact, the impact of this "compromise" on women's bodies had reached the level of punishment. However, in reality, this "compromise" has affected women's bodies to the extent of "punishment".

Glancing at the Tang Dynasty and even the ancient China, women were at the bottom of the social ladder. They all suffered from the obstacle of being objectified. Women were one of the two things during that period: Sexual object or men's property. The elegant upper class women of the court were the playthings of the ruling class and they were deprived of their minds. Commoner girls of lowly birth were bound to the role of wives and restricted by various feudal rites. They could only serve
men and their families. This is one of the saddest parts of the long history.

4.2. Gender role during Renaissance Period

During the Renaissance, some women did have an intellectual awakening and their social status was somehow improved. According to Changes in the status of women during the Renaissance, there was an influx of intellectual and wise women, they had the opportunity to study Latin and were able to learn Greco-Roman biographies, literature and philosophy [9]. Secondly, the political status of women has improved. Women have more rights to participate in political life.

However, there has been no substantial improvement in their status. Above all, patriarchal authority is still dominant. Fathers control the economic origin and manipulate the family’s daily life. Wives belong to their husbands as private possessions. Women did not have the same right to education as men. Some girls from rich families may be educated, but the knowledge they were taught was not about advanced thinking and abilities, but about how to raise a family. This kind of education not only fails to liberate their minds, but also makes them more submissive to male power.

During the Renaissance, different artists depicted different images of women, either as a venerated Madonna or as a natural outpouring of their true selves. The similarity is that the artists express their thoughts, feelings and mindsets, showing different perspective viewing the world, meanwhile boosting the liberation of human nature and ideology [10].

4.3. Orientalism

Orientalism is a style that characterized Asian figures with a Western perspective.

Recently, a set of comparative pictures of the Mawei slope incident in China's Tang Dynasty appeared on the Internet. The first picture has a strong Western artistic character ---- saturated colors and intertwined perspective with light and shades. What is confusing and even annoying is that in this picture, Yang Guifei is depicted as a woman lying on the ground with a few pieces of clothes. This is clearly not historically true. The second picture, on the other hand, is clearly from a Chinese painter, as it emphasizes the importance of lines. At the same time, the expression of the figure and the proportions of the body are in keeping with Chinese characteristics. In this picture, Yang Guifei is dressed in white, with a pale face and eyes of deperation and numbness, which is in line with the historical background of the time. Through this comparison, it can be seen that China and the West portray the same event distinctively, using stereotypical orientalism to distort certain aspects of East Asian history and culture.

Furthermore, the Western world is also good at degrading the East, which is at a relatively weak political position, by using sex. As a representative of Orientalism exploration, said reckons that the people who stand for Orientalism spread the idea that the East is regarded as the realistic object of the Western sexual fantasy and desire [11].

5 Conclusion

The paintings of different countries and periods can connote specific historical backgrounds through the female figures. Ancient Chinese painters followed certain social and ethical norms in their creations, which presented the secular life at that time and catered to the aesthetic needs of the ruling class. They left abundant materials for the study of history and a unique undertone for the civilization of the nation. Western painters have incorporated the moral values of religion into their works, spreading the core values of kindness and dignity of Christianity, and at the same time exposing the evils of greed and betrayal. There is no superiority or inferiority between Chinese and Western figure paintings, but only due to the differences in their historical backgrounds and cultural concepts, and various social ideologies which lead to the formation of different artistic expressions. At the same time, the images of women in Chinese and Western paintings reflect the spirit of a particular era as well as the characteristics of civilization, and women are always the objects of oppression and objectification. In some paintings, women are not portrayed realistically, but are portrayed as the ideal image of women in men. But women's thoughts should not be buried. People should have a comprehensive understanding of the art history development in different countries, innovate on the basis of inheritance, and create diversified art.

References

6. wapbaike. baidu. “Yang Guifei.” (nd.) Available online at: https://cn.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid=MXKW88Qt&id=DF6EAADE00C7CF85FA273E6F52364F6E1B1D6781&thid=OIP.MXKW88QTm87Tq8-W1voVQHaKJ&mediaurl=https%3a%2f%2fimgcdn.bcebos.com%2fpic%2f60824ab18972bd4073281290470899e510eb30980&cdnurl=https%3a%2f%2fs1.cn.mmm.bing.net%2fth%2fid%2fR-C3.17296f3c42d33ced3abcbf66f6a15ad%3frik%3dWcdG25PNIjVg%26pid%3dimgraw%26r%3d0&exph=1755&expw=1280&q=%E6%9D%A8%E8%


