

# The Destiny of Women Lived in Traditional Feudal Society

## —A Simple Analysis on the Obedience and Rebellious of Women in Novel “White Deer Plain”

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### Abstract

The reasons of the tragic suffering of women in the novel “White Deer Plain” are discussed. Three types of women facing feudal oppression are analyzed. The author of the novel “White Deer Plain” rethinks the traditional culture and shows its ruthlessness in some cases though it plays an important role in keeping social stability in feudal society. The novel shows author’s much sympathy on opposed women lived in feudal patriarchal system through several typical women characters. The author praises the awakening of self-consciousness of women and the rebellious spirit to the traditional culture. Though the author appreciates the traditional culture, he also realizes that part of the traditional Confucian culture is becoming the hindrance of history’s wheel.

### Keywords

Traditional Culture, “White Deer Plain”, Tragic Destiny of Women, Awakening of Self-Consciousness, Feudal Patriarchal System

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## 1. Introduction

At the beginning of the novel “White Deer Plain”, written by Chen Zhongshi, the Balzac’s dictum is quoted (Chen, 2009): “Novels are regarded as the secret histories of nations.” The “White Deer Plain” is a novel which describes the struggle history of the traditional women under the mature system of patriarchal society during the Chinese feudal period. The novel opens up to readers the scene of colorful Chinese traditional country life at the age of turbulence and describes a lot of vivid characters by the description of the ups and downs of several generations of three families in the White Deer village located at the

White Deer plain, the Central Shannxi. It also describes the women's pain and suffering in old times when they were the men's vassals and were confined in the old ideological system, embodying the author's sympathy to the women in the feudal times and the praise to the women who dared to resist the patriarchal society and owned thoughts of new times.

This paper takes Baizhao, Baiwu, Tian Xiao-e and Bai Ling as examples to analyze what is the thoughts of the author on the women's living circumstances under the traditional cultural environment, and the struggling history of women oppressed by feudal ethic codes.

## **2. The Female Characters Obeying the Traditional Patriarchal System**

In "White Deer Plain", Baizhao and Baiwu are typical female characters who were compromised to the feudal ethics totally. Baizhao is Bai Jiaxuan's mother, the absolute authority in the women of the family. She was harsh and severe to the womenfolk. For example, when she knew that his eldest grandson, Bai Xiaowen, was excessive indulgence, she taught her granddaughter-in-law ostensibly, in fact she scolded her severely mixed with vulgarisms, which caused her granddaughter-in-law cried with humiliation."Ho, all the mistakes are due to my grandson? You, dumb duck, are all right?" The favoritism to Xiaowen showed that she taught her granddaughter-in-law at the angle of feudal patriarchal system. That is why she always thought her grandson was valuable while her granddaughter-in-law was just like an animal. The reason is that she was used to take women at a lower state of men, which reflects the lower state of women in feudal society.

Baizhao protected the feudal patriarchal system for her whole life. After her husband died, she took over him to work hard for the procreating of the large family. Since her Son, Bai Jiaxuan, married with six women in succession and died oddly, gossip was spread out from mouth to mouth in the White Deer plain. When she felt her son's fear of the marriage, Baizhao said (Chen, 2009): "Women are merely the paper for pasting windows which can be just replaced once it was damaged or rotted...It is worth to spend all the family properties to marry another one, which is better than that the property is occupied by other families if you have no sons." In the viewpoints of Baizhao, the daughter-in-law was just a tool to have sons to carry on her family name, so she thought the inheritance of the family was the most important. In this regard, she was more decisive and firmer than her husband. Baizhao was only one of the thousands of women who were persecuted by the feudal patriarchal system. Her thoughts were ingrained because it was formed by the education since her childhood. She was introduced in "White Deer Plain" (Chen, 2009): "She abides by the old maxim that one should obey her/his parents and obey her/his husband once marriage and obey her/his son in old age. She let her son deal with the family affairs without intervention very wisely." In her long life, she was educated by similar words day after day till she identified and supported the feudal patriarchal

system totally. When she seated on the place which the old “controller” once seated, she taught the next generation with the feudal thoughts which she concluded in all her life, which was the continuity of the old system, old thoughts and the persecution to women due to feudal patriarchal system.

The daughter-in-law of Baizhao, Baiwu, was also a woman living in the shadow of feudal patriarchal system. She was intelligent, kind and virtues and abided the feudal thoughts of “the three obediences and four virtues” opposed on women. She was a typical model in the feudal society. She and Bai Jiaxuan gave birth to three sons and one daughter, which broke the curse about Bai family in the White Deer plain that Bai Jiaxuan was fated to mourn his wife death. In the point of requirement of feudal society to the women, Baiwu was excellent because “the three obediences and four virtues” became her lifelong creed. She abided her father to marry with Bai Jiaxuan whose previous six wives were all died fast, and then abided her husband in their wedding night but disobeyed the requirement of the judge. At last, she died peacefully for safeguarding her husband’s dignity after abiding her husband’s cheat. More importantly, she gave birth to three sons for the family. On the surface perspective, Baiwu brought good luck to Bai family and knew the rules in that times and behaved strictly according to the feudal ethical codes. However, on the deeper perspective, the tragedy of Baiwu just was originated from the loss of herself-consciousness. Baiwu’s destiny was doomed since she married into Bai family. She abandoned herself value but lived only for Bai family. She minimized her own feeling and life demands and gave all her time and energy to her husband and children. In “White Deer Plain”, the responses of Baiwu to the help of Bai Jiaxuan for the first time was described as: “She drunk a bowl of water without stop and was moved to shed tears. It was the first time of this man to boil and served water for her.” Even if she had large contribution to Bai family, Baiwu still sheds grateful tears for her husband’s little effort. All these show the sadness of women in feudal times. They could not control own destiny. Their only meaning of existence was just to maintain their husbands’ benefits and willing to the greatest extend and lived as men’s appendants. Baiwu, just liking all the unknown women on the White Deer plain, exchanged a stone arch and several rows of words in the county annuals by her whole life.

### 3. The Female Characters Having Struggling Spirit

The author, Cheng Zhongshi, gave much preference to the character of Tian Xiao-e. The author once recalled how and why to create the role of Tian Xiao-e: “After I have seen more than 20 volumes of ‘Lan Tian County Annuals’”, I was surprised to find that four to five volumes in those volumes were used for recording the stories of the chaste women and heroic women in this county.” “Those women were given a very simple description with several words after long cruel suffering to abide the sacred restrictions specially set up for them..., I felt the ravages they suffered.” He also thought the stories about many “sour

cabbage “spread in the folk, and the memory of a woman escaping marriage was slashed by a thorn brush in his childhood. These factors bring the image of Tian Xiao-e to float into his mind (Chen, 1993).

As the most controversial character in “White Deer Plain”, Tian Xiao-e was sold to Guo, a former second degree candidate in the provincial examination, to exchange very few silvers. Since then her tragic life started. She had to do many odd jobs in the day while satisfy the abnormal desire of Guo at night. Her misery was just like what uncle Li said (Chen, 2009): “Guo married that concubine is not to give birth to a child but to soak Chinese dates.” In the viewpoints of Guo and his wife, Tian Xiao-e was just an object, so she could not get any respect and consolation of feeling. Self-willed Tian Xiao-e bravely resisted Guo after suffering so much humiliation. She chose to betray her husband and had affair with Heiwa. Their behavior was found by Guo soon. Heiwa was then expelled out of the family of Guo and Tian Xiao-e was cast off. They both regained freedom and returned White Deer plain. However, their behaviors were known by the people under the cross-questioning of Lu San. Heiwa was one member of the family Bai, but he was refused to go into the ancestral temple by Bai Jiakuan. In White Deer plain, a marriage cannot be allowed to go into the ancestral temple means it is not blessed. It appeared that Tian Xiao-e came out from one feudal cage into another one. The root reason is that she couldnot break away from the feudal patriarchal system. However, she got the short-lived happy life she wished. In this respect, her first struggle was not failed totally. Since the White Deer village couldnot accept them, Heiwa bought a dilapidated cave dwelling with five silvers just outside the village where they spend a short-lived happy time. After that, Heiwa was stirred up by others to join in a immature revolution for rice. He had to escape everywhere after they were exposed. As a traditional woman, Tian Xiao-e was fooled around to cast herself on Lu Zhilin. Surely, Lu Zhilin was not obsessed with her beauty but wanted to put Bai Jiakuan out of countenance. Tian Xiao-e was taken into the ancestral temple after her footsie with Lu Zhilin was found. The eldest son of Bai Jiakuan chaired and everyone in the village joined in the meeting for punishing Tian Xiao-e. “White Deer Plain” takes the local customs and practices in the middle of the 18 century as background when is in the last stage of feudal society in China. The social mood in counties was open gradually, but it was still very conservative in villages due to the blockage of information. That is why the tragedies performed in wide villages at that time. Tian Xiao-e was stimulated by the open humiliation. She was full filled with angry to Bai Jiakuan. In the evening, when she was canvassed by Lu Zhilin (Chen, 2009): “You ‘d better let his eldest son to pull his pants down, which just like you to urinate on the face of the clan elder, Bai Jiakuan.” And then, Tian Xiao-e started the second struggle. Bai Xiaowen was a nerd full of archaisms such as thou and thee and wherefore and is it not so, he had not any resistance when facing so attractive Tian Xiao-e. Tian Xiao-e had an affair with Bai Xiaowen at the neighbouring village during they watched a play one night without any ef-

fort. However, Tian Xiao-e felt not any happiness but inner torment even if she had revenged on Bai Jiakuan successfully. It showed that she was kindness. Unfortunately, her kindness did not bring her anyone's sympathy. She was killed by Lu Shan bloodily at last. The author once recalled that he felt that everything changed into black before his eyes when he finished the description of the death of Tiao Xiao-e. He wrote in the paper when he recovered from the sadness: "bitterness of birth, bitterness of living and bitterness of death." It is the real summary of Tian Xiao-e. After the death of Tian Xiao-e, a great epidemic attacked White Deer village. The people in the village thought that it was the revenge of Tian Xiao-e on this place. In fact, it reflected the guilty to Tian Xiao-e. Tian Xiao-e provoked Bai Jiakuan by taking up Lu Shan's body to "revive from death": "Who have I bothered in White Deer village? I have not steal a piece of cotton of anyone. I have not steal a handful of wheat straw. I have not scolded any old people. I have not hit any children. Why cannot permit me to have a small place to shelter myself? (Chen, 2009)" This is the third struggle of Tian Xiao-e, but as a ghost. No matter what she said, Bai Jiakuan persisted in that Tian Xiao-e could not be accepted by the family of Bai due to the influences of traditional feudal thoughts. Tian Xiao-e was not only an epitome of the tragic women in "White Deer Plain", but also the epitome of the whole feudal society.

Like throwing straws against the wind, none of the three struggles of Tian Xiao-e was completed. The reason is of the lack of independent ideology and the helplessness of women in feudal society. As an illiterate woman, all her struggles were passive after strong suffering. There were too many shackles and prejudices to women in feudal society. Women were used to leech on men in that time. Few women dared to try a change. For example, someday, Bai Ling met Tian Xiao-e and asked her to go to live in the city together. But Tian Xiao-e asked with a little wish and a little confusion: "But, ...I know nothing, How can I live there?"

The image of Tian Xiao-e is undoubtedly well-rounded portrayer. She was kind. For example, when she saw that Bai Xiaowen was punished with disgraced impalement, she did not feel happy but breathed in heart: "I have really hurt a men." Meantime, she was capricious: "He ate the Chinese dates soaked in my urine." She was also clear-cut on whom to love and whom to hate. When she knew the scheme of Lu Zhilin against her, she urinated without hesitation on his face. She was unyielding, she tried to live no matter how many difficulties she faced. She was pitiful, in the feudal environment, she unavoidably became the victim no matter how she struggled (Fa, 2021).

### **The female characters having rebelling spirit**

Bai Ling, the daughter of Bai Jiakuan, is the typical character owning rebelling spirit in this novel. Though she was grown in a traditional patriarchal family, she was not restricted by the old feudal ethics, but chose to rebel intensely the feudal patriarchal tradition. She refused foot-binding to rebel the feudal ethical codes counting her father's spoiling. She firmly refused the engagement assigned by her parents. She also forced her father to let her go to school by threat of death.

So she was the first girl going to school in city in White Deer plain. After accepting new culture and new thoughts, she escaped from her feudal family without hesitation and took the revolutionary road thoroughly (Wang, 2021).

Bai Ling had firm position and strong character. For example, she firmly chose the Communist Party of China and broke up with Lu Zhaohain who chose the Chinese Nationalist Party. As an awakened woman, Bai Ling bravely challenged the traditional patriarchal society and pursued free love. She bravely joined in the revolution and fought with the decayed feudal forces.

Bai Ling, as the outstanding representative of women with strong self-consciousness in the White Deer Plain, got special partialness of the author. The author gave her special halo, for example, the occurrence of a white deer before her birth, the singing of larks during her birth, the occurrence of a white deer in the dream of Bai Jiakuan. Obviously, the author tried to shape her into a symbol of spirit in the White Deer Plain (Xu, 2020). However, she could not avoid the death due to political fighting. It shows that the process for women to break up the restraining of feudal system is long and hard. In her short but wonderful life, she liked a beam of sunshine to penetrate thick dark clouds and bring wish to the dark world. Nevertheless, her tragic ending triggered people to think about the female fate deeply (Bi, 2020).

#### 4. Discussions

Just like all those women lived in the traditional feudal society, the tragic destiny of women in White Deer plain was doomed due to the feudal social environment. At that time, the clan consciousness affected people's behavior deeply. The males owned absolute rights while females had to be attached to males. Just like what Beauvoir said in "The Second Sex" that the male chauvinisms regard the women as only the carrier of sex without independence of personality (de Beauvoir, 1998). The lower social inferior of women caused them cannot get any rights, especially the education right. Therefore, females were imprisoned by the traditional feudal ideology in a very long time and still thought it was certain. Baizhao was one typical character of this kind of females.

In some cases the feudal system was encountered struggling after some females was suffered too much monkey's allowances. Nevertheless, the struggling was often instinct but not self-conscious because the thoughts of these females received were still feudal ethic codes. They were illiteracy and so could not contact any new thoughts. Their self-consciousness was difficult to wake up. Therefore, their struggles were often halfway and ended in failure, such as Tian Xiao-e.

Only those received education and got new thoughts had active behavior to fight with the old feudal thoughts and old social order. Their self-consciousness was waked up totally, so their rebelling was firm. They were rid of the fetters of old feudal ethic codes. They did not depend on males anymore. Certainly, it did not mean that their fights would succeed definitely. The result was determined by their effects and the environment's limitations. The character, Bai Ling, was a

model of this kind of females.

Generally, the self-consciousness of females is always awakened gradually even under the oppression of the long-term feudal patriarchal system. The fight of females with the old feudal yoke cannot stop. All these impel the society develop. Conversely, the development of society environment leads females get more rights such as education, equality of man and women, and so the self-consciousness of more females is awakened. In this way, the status of females can change thoroughly.

In “White Deer Plain, we can see that the author praises the good contents of traditional Confucian culture. Obviously, he appreciates Bai Jiaxuan who held the point of “cultivation and read to bequeath to the family” and persisted in “Ren (benevolence) and Yi (righteous)” in his whole life. He also describes Mr. Zhu in a rich and colorful manner. Mr. Zhu was another firm defender of Confucian in White Deer plain. He was thought as the sage in White Deer plain. He would rather civilize people than be a official. He was also patriotic. For example, the author describes vividly about that he helped the county magistrate forbid opium and persuaded governor Zhang to withdraw 200 thousand solders to protect the people. After his death, people talked about him:”He left so many anecdotes. All of those are for the good of others.” Mr. Zhu did not like the behavior that disobey Confucian, especially loathed those who have not Ren and Yi, such as the speculator Lu Zhilin. Lu is also one of the main characters in “White Deer Plain” that the author characterizes emphatically (Li, 2006). As the opposite of Bai Jiaoxun, Lu was the destructor of Confucian. He could try any unscrupulous means in order to get what he wanted. He helped petty official Tian Fuxian to trample the people. He suborned Tian Xiao-e to harm Bai Xiaowen and Bai Jiaxuan. At last, the author sets his ending as a madman, which shows the remarked dislike to him.

Nevertheless, the author rethinks the Confucian culture in “White Deer Plain”. The author notices that part of the traditional culture is becoming the hindrance of history though he appreciates and is reluctant to the Confucian culture. The description of the oppressed women exposed the ruthlessness of the traditional culture in some cases. The experiences of the whole life of Bai Jiaxuan clearly demonstrated the traditional culture from powerful to weak. When he was young, Bai Jiaxuan managed the White Deer village well with the Confucian codes, but he obviously felt that the constraining effects of Confucian codes became weaker and weaker, till he felt helpless at last. The author wants to show the irreversible tendency that some codes of the Confucian culture is becoming the hindrance of the wheel of history by the rebelling of Bai Ling and Lu Zhaoling. Both Bai Ling and Mr. Zhu were the carriers of the white deer. Bai Ling is the symbol of the people in White Deer Plain who pursued good life. Mr. Zhu, who devoted all his life to the Confucian culture, symbolized the declining of the values of Confucian (Wang, 2019).

In the times of “White Deer Plain”, China was undergoing a great change that

had not happened in thousands of years. Confucian could not reform immediately and had to fade gradually when facing such intense transition. However, once the society becomes stable again, Confucian will finish revolution gradually by its strong vitality and recall the “Ren” in the hearts of the people and benefits the society (Wang, 2021).

Chinese traditional culture is the result of the collision and fusion of the thoughts and culture of all the nationalities of China in thousands of years. It affects the thoughts and behavior of Chinese deeply since formation. On one hand there are positive contents which have facilitations to the morality education of people, the social stability and even national administration. For example, “as heaven’s movement is ever vigorous, so must a gentleman ceaselessly strive along” encourages people to work hard till success. “Governing a country according to the moral principles” to demand the government to run a country with morality etc. On the other hand, our society develops continuously, so those having not changed with time to suit the needs of new society in the traditional culture become dregs, such as “the three obediences and four virtues (Confucian ethics)”, “Man is superior to woman”, “foot-binding”. For traditional culture, we should take the essence and discard the dregs.

## 5. Conclusion

The “White Deer Plain” depicts numerous women characters, for example, Baizhao who totally abided the feudal patriarchal system and lost her self-consciousness, Tian Xiao-e who struggled but died of feudal thoughts, Bai Ling who rebelled the feudal ethical codes bravely. It is shown that the author has much sympathy with those who were persecuted by the feudal patriarchal system such as Baizhao, Tiao Xiao-e and praises those who struggled with feudal ethical codes such as Tian Xiao-e and Bai Ling.

On one hand, the author rethinks the negative value of the traditional culture by this novel, on the other hand, he has some suspicions on the complete negative and rebelling on the traditional culture. For example, he sets the ending that Bai Ling died of political fight.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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