

Reconstructing Female Roles in The Tale of Jinyun Qiao: Social Identity, Gender Transgression and Tragic Fate

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Received: 19 July 2026 / Accepted: 14 August 2026 / Published online: 15 August 2026

Abstract

As a full-length novel focusing on women's destinies in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, The Tale of Jinyun Qiao depicts women's struggles and resistance under social discipline during the dynastic transition through the multiple identity transformations of the protagonist Wang Cuiqiao, who changes from a gentlewoman of an official family to a courtesan, a concubine, a nun, and finally the wife of a bandit leader. Based on the Qing dynasty block-printed editions collected in Dalian Library, this paper conducts analysis from three dimensions. Firstly, Cuiqiao's identity changes epitomize the social roles of women in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Though her behaviors at every life stage strictly conform to the feminine norms of the era, she still cannot escape the classic fate of "a beautiful woman is doomed to misfortune". Secondly, Cuiqiao subverts the traditional gender division of labor that "men manage external affairs while women take charge of domestic affairs" by taking the initiative to undertake family responsibilities such as selling herself to redeem her father and participating in military decision-making including persuading Xu Hai to accept imperial amnesty. Thirdly, through Cuiqiao's revenge plot and dream prophecies, the novel embodies the awakening of female consciousness while exposing how the concept of "beautiful women doomed to misfortune" obscures the essential causes of women's tragic destinies. This paper holds that while inheriting the tradition of scholar-beauty novels, The Tale of Jinyun Qiao reconstructs social power relations from a female perspective, serving as a crucial turning point in the evolution of female images in vernacular novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Keywords: The Tale of Jinyun Qiao; Female Roles; Social Discipline; Gender Transgression; Beautiful Women Doomed to Misfortune

1. Introduction

The Tale of Jinyun Qiao, written by Qingxin Caizi, was completed roughly in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Up to now, academic circles have not reached a consensus on the true identity of Qingxin Caizi. The novel has two textual systems: the abridged version and the expanded version.

The Kangxi-period expanded block-printed edition and the Shunzhi-period abridged block-printed edition collected in Dalian Library are the representative versions of the two systems respectively.

Current academic research on *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* mainly falls into three categories. First, the perspective of literary history. As an outstanding work of scholar-beauty novels, the novel's innovative narrative modes and subsequent literary influence have been fully discussed by numerous scholars. Second, the perspective of cross-border communication. Introduced to Vietnam, *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* was adapted into a classic Vietnamese poetic epic, giving rise to abundant comparative studies on the differences between the Chinese original and its Vietnamese adaptation. Third, the perspective of gender research. Centering on the legendary female protagonist Wang Cuiqiao, the novel is of great significance to the study of women's literature, attracting a large number of academic papers on its gender connotations.

The novel shapes a vivid and distinctive female character, which embodies the author's unique view of human nature in his era. Though the portrayal of women is still constrained by the mainstream social and cultural norms of the time, it possesses profound innovative significance and occupies an irreplaceable position in the history of Chinese novels.

Existing studies have not thoroughly explored the social mechanism behind Cuiqiao's identity transformations and the textual construction of the "beautiful women doomed to misfortune" concept. Based on Foucault's power theory, this paper analyzes how women are disciplined by social roles and resist such discipline through gender transgression. Taking the two Qing dynasty block-printed editions preserved in Dalian Library as the core textual basis, this paper analyzes the reconstruction of female roles in the novel.

2. Discipline and Resistance of Social Roles

The subversive depiction of traditional gender roles in *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* forms a unique cultural landscape in Ming and Qing vernacular novels. By shaping the image of Wang Cuiqiao, the novel breaks the traditional gender division of labor of "men manage external affairs while women manage internal domestic affairs", and fundamentally challenges the gender essentialism derived from *The Book of Changes*. In traditional Confucian cosmology, this gender division is regarded as conforming to the natural cosmic order: the external sphere refers to public social affairs, while the internal sphere is limited to family life. Patriarchal culture regards male descendants as the sole inheritors of the family, resulting in a widespread social preference for sons.

Cuiqiao's feat of selling herself to save her father seemingly inherits the tradition of filial heroines such as Mulan and Ti Ying, but contains more complex cultural connotations. Her powerful words — "If my father and brother die, the family lineage will be broken, my mother will be helpless, and my sister and I will be displaced. It is better to sacrifice myself to save my father and brother, preserve the family lineage, and protect my mother and sister" (Qing, 1983)— reflect both compromise with traditional gender norms and latent resistance against them. To comfort her grieving parents, she claims that "Daughters belong to external families and are never permanent members of their natal families"(Qing, 1983). This seemingly fatalistic statement paradoxically

endows her with legitimate grounds to intervene in family affairs that were traditionally monopolized by men.

The reconstruction of her gender identity is inherently contradictory. In the name of filial piety, Cuiqiao undertakes family responsibilities that belong to men, but this morally virtuous act of gender transgression brings implicit social punishment. Though her parents are initially reluctant to let her sell herself, Cuiqiao's firm and resolute attitude endows her with masculine courage and perseverance. Different from Mulan, whose temporary cross-gender military experience ends with a return to domestic feminine order, Cuiqiao's sacrifice fails to save her family and plunges her into deeper tragedy. This difference reflects the stricter disciplinary mechanism against fundamental gender transgression in the Ming and Qing dynasties: Mulan's temporary gender crossing is tolerated by society, while Cuiqiao's fundamental break with gender norms is severely punished.

Simone de Beauvoir's gender theory in *The Second Sex* provides an important interpretive perspective for this novel. Her famous proposition that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 2021) distinguishes biological sex from social gender, proving that masculine and feminine identities are relative and fluid constructs shaped by cultural institutions. As anthropological studies confirm, different cultures institutionalize gender hierarchies in diverse ways, and Cuiqiao's life experience vividly presents this social construction process of gender. Forced out of the secluded boudoir into the public social sphere, she has to adapt to a brand-new set of gender behavioral norms.

In the brothel, Cuiqiao's transformation into "Ma Qiao" turns her into a commodified sexual object. This status decline represents a thorough reconstruction of her gender role. As a courtesan, she has to learn to please guests with her body and master new behavioral norms. This forced gender performance reveals the social constructedness of the so-called "innate feminine traits".

After becoming Shu Sheng's concubine, Cuiqiao undergoes another reconstruction of gender roles. The complex family hierarchy, involving her husband, jealous legal wife and servants, requires her to adopt sophisticated performative strategies. She has to play multiple roles simultaneously: a tender lover, an obedient concubine and a prudent subordinate. The diversity of these roles deconstructs the singleness of traditional gender archetypes.

The subversion of gender roles reaches its climax in the plot of persuading Xu Hai to surrender. Cuiqiao intervenes in military and political affairs with orthodox Confucian political discourse such as "Two warring states do not kill envoys" (Qing, 1983), breaking the male monopoly on state discourse. Her political advice to Xu Hai — "I have heard that those who achieve great deeds must embrace tolerance and overlook all rivals" (Qing, 1983) — completely subverts traditional gender expectations of women. More subversively, she transforms feminine virtues in the private sphere such as tolerance and compassion into political wisdom for public governance, deconstructing the traditional taboo against women participating in politics and proving that gender temperament is a product of power operation rather than innate biology.

As the bandit leader's wife, Cuiqiao undertakes military and political functions traditionally monopolized by men. She participates in strategic decision-making and optimizes the military discipline of Xu Hai's army. The text records: "Madam Wang persuaded him to stop burning

civilian houses, insulting women and indiscriminately killing the elderly and children. Xu Hai followed her advice. From then on, his army strictly prohibited murder and adultery during marches, all thanks to Madam's persuasion."

Her in-depth participation in public affairs brings a fundamental transformation to her gender identity, turning her from a passive feminine object into an active subject with independent consciousness. Notably, her public performance is not a simple masculinization, but a creative integration of traditional masculine resolution, strategic vision and feminine empathy and humanitarianism. This integration breaks the rigid binary gender view and implies the diverse possibilities of gender identity.

However, the novel's subversion of gender norms is limited by the historical context. The depiction of Cuiqiao's appearance — "Her eyebrows are slender and long, eyes bright and vivid, face as beautiful as autumn moon, complexion blooming like peach blossoms, with elegant bearing surpassing swans and dragons"(Qing, 1983) — continues the traditional narrative of objectifying women as ornamental objects for male appreciation. In contrast, the male character Xu Hai is described as "with stern brows and a heroic jaw, bearing the look of a valiant general" (Qing, 1983). This stylistic difference verifies the traditional Chinese literary summary proposed by Li Guikui in *Research on Characterization in Chinese Novels*: male characters are metaphorically compared to powerful and majestic animals, while female characters are compared to soft and delicate plants. This textual contradiction reflects the transitional characteristics of gender concepts in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties: social changes gave birth to new gender imagination, while deep-rooted cultural inertia still played a dominant role.

The garden tryst between Cuiqiao and Jin Zhong seemingly follows the clichéd scholar-beauty narrative, but contains profound implications. They meet by chance in the private garden of the female residence and exchange a golden hairpin as a token of love, which conforms to traditional conventions. However, the subtle transformation that takes the female protagonist as the active emotional agent creatively renovates the traditional gender narrative mode.

The tension between subversion and convention runs through the whole text. On the one hand, the author endows Cuiqiao with wisdom and subjectivity beyond traditional feminine norms; on the other hand, he repeatedly confines her to the framework of traditional tragic female images through aesthetic appearance depiction and fatalistic plot arrangement. Her final tragic ending — being rescued after drowning and forming a nominal marriage with Jin Zhong — both affirms her spirit of resistance and reveals the limitations of her rebellion. This paradox embodies the transitional gender consciousness in the Ming-Qing interregnum, where emerging progressive gender ideas coexist with stubborn patriarchal traditions.

The unique literary value of *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* lies in its dual presentation of the plasticity of gender roles and the structural obstacles to gender reconstruction. Though Cuiqiao shows tenacious vitality in endless sufferings, all her misfortunes originate from male-centered power, and her redemption can only rely on male authority. This profound paradox exposes the inescapable structural dilemma of women in Ming and Qing patriarchal society: women could temporarily break gender norms, but could never completely get rid of male domination.

From a macro historical perspective, the gender narrative of the novel reflects the cultural anxiety amid social transformation in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The development of commodity economy and intensified social mobility shook the traditional gender hierarchy, giving rise to both exploration of new gender relations and nostalgia for traditional patriarchal order. This contradictory mentality is a typical feature of literary works in social transition periods.

In this sense, *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* is more than a literary entertainment work; it is a valuable cultural artifact for studying the transformation of premodern Chinese gender politics. It records the persistent inertia of traditional gender norms and foreshadows the germination of modern gender consciousness. Through the image of Wang Cuiqiao, we see a female subject struggling between patriarchal traditions and emerging liberal ideas, whose tragedy belongs to both herself and the era of drastic social changes.

3. Deconstruction of the “Beautiful Women Doomed to Misfortune” Concept: From Fatalistic Narrative to Power Critique

The Tale of Jinyun Qiao presents profound contradictions and critical thinking in its interpretation of the traditional literary trope of “beautiful women doomed to misfortune”. The novel inherits this classic narrative framework while dismantling its ideological essence by attributing women’s sufferings to specific power operations. This dual dimension elevates the work from a simple fatalistic tragedy to a powerful critique of patriarchal gender politics. This chapter analyzes the trope from three aspects: the ideological function of fatalistic cosmology, the breakthroughs and limitations of the revenge narrative, and the power essence hidden in the “beautiful women doomed to misfortune” concept, based on close textual reading and Ming-Qing social historical context.

The literary origin of the “beautiful women doomed to misfortune” trope can be traced back to *Book of Han·Biographies of Empresses and Consorts*, which records the lament “I am doomed to misfortune, suffering hardships before the Jingning reign” (Ban, 2000). After centuries of evolution, this trope formed a fixed narrative mode that attributes women’s misfortunes to abstract fate rather than concrete social institutions. In *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao*, fatalistic ideology is strengthened by the prophetic dream of the Broken Intestine Immortal, who predicts their reunion by the Qiantang River. After waking up from the dream, Cuiqiao is “in a daze with tears streaming down her face” (Qing, 1983), embodying the traditional acceptance of predetermined tragic fate.

This cosmic fatalistic narrative has developed into a complete symbolic system in Ming and Qing literature. Dream prophecy serves as a predestination literary device, transforming social institutional violence into aesthetic tragedy. According to Louis Althusser’s ideological state apparatus theory, the trope of “beautiful women doomed to misfortune” interpellates female individuals into recognizing their “ill-fated” identity, thus maintaining the patriarchal gender hierarchy (Fu & Shi, 2020). Contemporary feminist studies point out that “beautiful women doomed to misfortune” and “beautiful women bringing ruin to men” are two sides of the same ideological coin, both objectifying women: the former eliminates female resistance through sentimental tragedy, while the latter justifies violent oppression by demonizing women.

Nevertheless, the novel subtly subverts fatalistic cosmology through Cuiqiao's real life experience. Every decline in her social status stems from specific man-made social factors: her family's ruin results from official frame-ups; her fall into prostitution is caused by human traffickers' conspiracy; her persecution by Huanshi originates from the exploitative polygamous concubine system (He, 2021). These concrete sources of suffering form a sharp contrast with abstract dream prophecies, exposing "cosmic fate" as a rhetorical veil covering up institutional violence.

In terms of the revenge motif, *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* both inherits and transcends traditional literary traditions. Compared with revenge heroines in Tang legends such as Xie Xiao'e and Huo Xiaoyu, Cuiqiao's resistance has three distinctive innovative characteristics.

First, the transformation of revenge motivation. Different from traditional heroines who avenge their fathers or husbands (Xie Xiao'e for her father, Huo Xiaoyu for broken love), Cuiqiao's revenge is purely for self-redemption. Her oath to Jue Yuan in Chapter Eighteen — "Witness Wang Cuiqiao avenge my own sufferings" — centers on individual female trauma, marking the awakening of independent female subjectivity (Li, 2015). This narrative transformation is closely related to the individual liberation trend in the late Ming dynasty, reflecting the social revaluation of individual value.

Second, the innovation of revenge methods. Abandoning the supernatural posthumous revenge mode of Huo Xiaoyu, Cuiqiao punishes her persecutors with secular power through Xu Hai's influence, making the brothel madam Xiu suffer branding torture and forcing Huanshi into public humiliation (Li, 2024). This realistic and tangible resistance breaks the long-standing literary convention that women can only obtain justice through supernatural afterlife means. Moreover, her revenge is highly strategic: she punishes Madam Xiu by replicating the exploitative labor model of brothels and reverses the gender power hierarchy to make the legal wife Huanshi endure the humiliation of a concubine, completely subverting the passive image of ill-fated beautiful women.

Third, the paradoxical outcome of revenge. The most critical part of the novel is that Cuiqiao's seemingly successful revenge leads to deeper tragedy. After persuading Xu Hai to surrender to the imperial court, she is granted to a tribal chieftain as a concubine by General Hu Zongxian. His remark — "I spare your life for your meritorious service and bestow you on the tribal leader; what grievance can you have?" — thoroughly objectifies women as transferable private property (Li & Zou, 2021). The narrative loop of "resistance followed by co-optation" reveals the structural limitations of female resistance in patriarchy: even if women temporarily seize power through male favor, they are still disposable assets controlled by male elites. Michel Foucault's power theory explains this mechanism: individual resistance is constantly absorbed into the reproduction of dominant power structures.

By depicting Wang Cuiqiao's life trajectory in detail, the novel ultimately deconstructs the three major ideological functions of the "beautiful women doomed to misfortune" trope (Yuan, 2015). Firstly, the trope shifts the blame of institutional violence to abstract fate. Close textual analysis shows that all of Cuiqiao's misfortunes have specific perpetrators: Madam Xiu and Ma Bujin conspire to sell her into prostitution; Huanshi persecutes her out of jealousy; Hu Zongxian betrays

her for political interests. The karmic retribution narrative of “suffering for past sins” covers up these oppressive social networks, diverting readers’ attention from social institutional criticism to individual moral self-examination. Walter Benjamin’s theory of aestheticized politics applies here: institutional oppression is packaged into acceptable tragic aesthetics.

Secondly, the trope legitimizes female suffering through aesthetic beautification and negates the legitimacy of resistance. Cuiqiao’s repeated internalization of fatalistic ideas embodies the psychological mechanism of ideological interpellation, which Mikhail Bakhtin defines as authoritative discourse: dominant social norms are internalized by marginalized groups as self-cognition. The novel’s depiction of Cuiqiao’s transformation from defiant resistance to compliant loyalty reveals how traditional moral codes discipline female cognition.

Thirdly, the trope reproduces patriarchal power structures through tragic aesthetic catharsis. The enduring popularity of tragic “beautiful women” narratives satisfies multiple cultural desires: male authors realize the fantasy of saving women; readers obtain moral satisfaction through aesthetic distance from female suffering; social institutions strengthen female obedience through normative tragic narratives. Julia Kristeva’s abjection theory explains this cultural mechanism: society defines moral boundaries by excluding “impure” marginal female images such as Cuiqiao. Cuiqiao’s final drowning suicide meets the traditional moral requirements of female martyrdom and achieves tragic aesthetic closure, while covering up the institutional violence that causes female trauma.

The profound critical power of *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* lies in its dual perspective: it reveals the pervasive influence of the “beautiful women doomed to misfortune” concept while exposing its root in structural gender inequality through Cuiqiao’s personal experience. In this sense, the image of Wang Cuiqiao transcends fictional characterization and becomes a critical lens for examining gender discourse in premodern Chinese literature (Zhang, 2013). Her tragedy proves that women’s misfortunes stem not from accidental fate, but from systematic patriarchal power structures, which are reflected in three interrelated dimensions.

First, the deprivation of economic autonomy. Cuiqiao falls into desperate predicaments every time she loses control of personal wealth, including confiscated family property and stolen private savings. She never has independent financial dominance throughout her life.

Second, the deprivation of bodily autonomy. From secluded boudoirs to exploitative brothels and hierarchical polygamous families, women’s bodies are always tradable commodities circulated among male owners.

Third, the absence of discourse power. All evaluations of Cuiqiao—“chaste martyr” or “ill-fated beauty”—are made by male characters. She is always in the position of a judged object, deprived of the right to define her own identity.

This multi-dimensional power analysis endows *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* with transcendent critical value in women’s literature research. Beyond recording gender changes in the Ming-Qing transition, the work serves as a classic case for contemporary gender studies. Deconstructing the traditional “beautiful women doomed to misfortune” trope helps to re-examine the gender political logic in traditional Chinese narratives and explore new paths for female-centered literary creation rooted in authentic female subjectivity.

4. Conclusions

Through the multiple identity experiments of Wang Cuiqiao, *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* profoundly reveals the dual disciplinary mechanisms restricting women in Ming and Qing patriarchal society. On the one hand, overlapping institutional systems including family ethics, prostitution systems and religious precepts impose systematic structural discipline on women. On the other hand, any female behavior that breaks prescribed gender boundaries will be subject to symbolic punitive narration. This mechanism of “discipline and punishment” runs through all of Cuiqiao’s identity transformations: from noble gentlewoman to prostitute, concubine to nun, bandit leader’s wife to suicidal martyr. Each identity change brings new restrictive norms, while every attempt of gender transgression is ultimately co-opted and neutralized by mainstream orthodox values. The recurring narrative cycle of “transgression and co-optation” is the core strategy of patriarchal society to maintain rigid gender order.

Wang Cuiqiao occupies a pivotal position in the evolution of vengeful female archetypes originating from Tang legends such as Xie Xiao’e and Huo Xiaoyu, inheriting their resistance spirit and achieving unprecedented breakthroughs in narrative depth and realistic thickness. Different from Xie Xiao’e, who only avenges her relatives, Cuiqiao’s resistance targets the entire oppressive social system. Unlike Huo Xiaoyu’s illusory posthumous ghost revenge, Cuiqiao’s realistic power practice through Xu Hai embodies a more mature proto-feminist consciousness, marking a crucial turning point in the shaping of female images in Ming and Qing vernacular novels.

Cuiqiao’s literary influence on later generations is multi-dimensional. Her image provides spiritual nourishment for *A Dream of Red Mansions*: Lin Daiyu inherits her talented poetic temperament and tragic fate, while Wang Xifeng develops her political awareness into pragmatic family governance strategies. Cao Xueqin divides Cuiqiao’s dual spiritual attributes — poetic resistance and realistic power operation — into two independent female characters, which not only surpasses the characterization of *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* but also confirms its value as a transitional literary archetype. In addition, Cuiqiao’s political wisdom in persuading Xu Hai to surrender forms a hidden spiritual connection with the utopian imagination of female governance in *Flowers in the Mirror*.

From a macro historical perspective, Wang Cuiqiao’s tragedy is the inevitable result of structural patriarchal violence. Such violence manifests externally as physical oppression including corporal punishment and domestic abuse, and internally as the fatalistic ideology of “beautiful women doomed to misfortune”. The novel’s dual depiction of Cuiqiao — tenacious in resisting fate yet unable to escape tragic ruin — exposes the cruelty of gender oppression and the inherent limitations of individual female resistance. This thematic depth elevates *The Tale of Jinyun Qiao* beyond ordinary scholar-beauty novels, making it a classic text for studying patriarchal power relations in traditional China. Its contemporary practical significance lies in revealing that genuine gender liberation relies on systematic institutional reform rather than individual heroic resistance.

Author Contributions:

All contents of this paper are independently composed by Yujie Fan. Authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding:

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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