

## **A Study on the Consciousness of Female Subjectivity and its Historical Limitations Reflected by the Queen in *Journey to the West***

Liu,Zhen

Xi'an Shiyou University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710000, China

**Abstract:** "Journey to the West", authored by Ming Dynasty writer Wu Cheng'en, features a pivotal female protagonist—the Queen of the Kingdom of Women (Daughter Kingdom) in its narrative framework—. This influential ruler demonstrates exceptional administrative competence and leadership skills, standing as a remarkable representation of women in the classic tale. This study examines the historical significance of this queen through two dimensions: her subjective initiative and the constraints imposed by the era.

**Keywords:** *Journey to the West*; The queen of the kingdom of women; Female consciousness; Limitations of time

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"Journey to the West", a literary masterpiece from the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty, chronicles the legendary pilgrimage of Tang Monk and his four disciples to the Western Heavens to obtain sacred scriptures. Among the nations encountered during their quest, the Western Liang Kingdom—ruled by women—stands out prominently. In Chapter 54 of the novel, the author portrays a queen from the Kingdom of Women who embodies both feminine wisdom and emerging self-awareness. This character serves as a poignant reflection on the social hierarchy that marginalized women during Ming Dynasty's mid-to-late period, while also demonstrating the author's visionary foresight that anticipated contemporary societal developments.

Women's autonomous consciousness refers to the independent and self-determined ideology constructed by women as cognitive subjects, reflecting their systematic understanding of their social positioning, functional attributes, and value dimensions in the objective world. From an academic perspective, this concept encompasses three dimensions: First, women's conscious awareness and practice regarding their historical mission, social responsibilities, and life obligations; Second, their rational grasp of their unique characteristics and attributes; Third, women's realization of social transformation through distinctive participation methods, thereby confirming and fulfilling their subjective needs and value aspirations. The Queen of the Kingdom of Women, holding a key position and shouldering significant national governance responsibilities, stands as a classic literary figure embodying women's autonomous consciousness. This paper analyzes the female consciousness manifested in her conduct and administrative capabilities, aiming to provide a fresh perspective for literary criticism.

### **1. The Aense of Female Autonomy Embodied by the Queen**

In *Journey to the West*, the Princess of the Kingdom embodies an open and free-spirited female character, sharing similarities with modern women. Possessing beauty, wealth, and power, she governed her nation with wisdom and talent, transforming it into a prosperous realm that challenged the traditional notion of women being confined to subordinate roles. Against the backdrop of Ming Dynasty's patriarchal feudal ideology where men held supremacy over women, her portrayal stands out as particularly striking. In the article, the sense of female autonomy she shows  
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#### **About the Author**

Liu,Zhen (2000-), Gender: female; Ethnicity: Han; Birthplace: Henan Province; Academic Qualification: Master's degree; Research field: International Chinese education.

is mainly divided into two aspects: first, having the right to marriage and love; second, realizing social value by their own ability.

### **(1) Women's autonomy in love and marriage**

First, through the perspective of an ordinary female character, the Queen demonstrates autonomy in marital decisions. Women living in feudal society were constrained by moral codes and social ethics. During the Ming Dynasty, various social classes paid close attention to women's chastity, continuously reinforcing moral education through publications like "Nü Jiaoshu" (Women's Education). For instance, Emperor Chengzu commissioned scholars like Xie Jin to compile "Biographies of Exemplary Women Through Ages"; Empress Xu, known for her benevolence and filial piety, adopted works such as "Nü Xian" (Women's Constitution) and "Nü Jie" (Women's Admonitions) as part of her "Inner Training" collection<sup>[6]</sup>. These educational texts became exemplary models for women's education during the late Ming and early Qing periods. In such a social climate, most women lacked the freedom to choose their own love.

In the Kingdom of Women, when choosing a spouse, the queen disregarded wealth and social status, rejected rigid conformity to traditional standards, and boldly pursued men based on "destiny" rather than hesitation. She selected Tang Monk, a handsome and dignified figure from the pilgrimage group. When courting him, she showed genuine affection without pretense. Unlike feudal rulers who coerced marriage through royal authority or used beauty and wealth as bait, she transcended social hierarchy. She personally welcomed her beloved, showed meticulous care during the wedding banquet, and ultimately offered her entire kingdom and throne as a gift, demonstrating unwavering passion. In the ascetic Ming Dynasty, her courageous pursuit of normal romantic love was commendable. This open-minded approach became the ideological foundation for women's pursuit of marital autonomy, profoundly challenging the outdated practice of "matching social status" in marriage customs.

### **(2) Realize social value with their own ability**

As the supreme ruler, the Queen not only demonstrated exceptional administrative skills but also exhibited leadership qualities that emphasized balanced perspectives. Her governance style maintained authoritative decision-making while demonstrating inclusiveness towards subordinate suggestions. Breaking away from the traditional pattern of women in secular society being dependent on others for survival, she demonstrated strong self-awareness.

The Kingdom of Women flourished with socioeconomic prosperity and contented citizens. Its development mirrored the grandeur of China: "Six dragons spewed vibrant colors, twin phoenixes heralded auspiciousness... Fragrant scents permeated the air, auspicious mists rose from the land. Golden fish and jade pendants adorned officials, while women with cloud-like hairpins and pearl curtains stood in orderly rows. Mandarin ducks fanned the imperial carriage, phoenix hairpins adorned emerald curtains. Flute melodies and zither harmonies filled the air." <sup>[3]P416</sup> The streets bustled with vitality: "Neatly arranged houses and grand shops lined the streets—salt and rice vendors, taverns, teahouses, and trading towers. Banner pavilions and waiting halls hung with embroidered curtains." <sup>[3]P413</sup> This demonstrates the Kingdom of Women's capable governance, maintaining social order, economic prosperity, and a contented populace.

From the perspective of public life, the Queen granted equal social status to all citizens. The book states: "Women dominated all professions—agricultural workers, artisans, merchants, and artisans—all women." Women were active in various sectors of society, from individual businesses selling rice and salt to operators of restaurants and teahouses in the catering industry. Even when the four disciples of Tang Monk crossed the river, the boat was rowed by a female ferrywoman who "possessed thick, strong wrists," "paddled vigorously with the oar," and "crossed the river in moments" <sup>[1]P411</sup>. These tasks, typically considered physically demanding, were demonstrated by women as exceptional performers. Under the Queen's rule, every woman could utilize her talents in social affairs. Such depictions undoubtedly represent a breakthrough from the subordinate status of women in society at that time.

Under the Queen's governance system, all social sectors exhibited highly specialized division of labor, maintaining stable and orderly mechanisms. In the bureaucratic framework, female officials demonstrated exceptional work efficiency and political engagement. During the specific scenario of receiving the Tang Monk delegation, when the four disciples first arrived at the post station, a female official greeted them. After the disciples finished their tea, she inquired, "What brings you here, venerable monks?" This approach not only allowed guests to rest but also balanced duty with etiquette. Though the text provides brief records, this micro-case reveals that female officials demonstrated systematic work ethics in official receptions: adhering to ceremonial norms while accurately gauging work rhythms to complete tasks promptly. Moreover, these women excelled not only in administrative execution but also in candid advice. When the Queen decided to pursue Tang Monk, she immediately informed him. At this moment, all female officials advised: "Matchmaking requires matchmaker—As the ancient saying goes, Love needs to be arranged by the god of love" After deliberation, the Queen deemed this approach more appropriate and gladly accepted her ministers' suggestion. This phenomenon not only indirectly validated the Queen's governance effectiveness but also highlighted women's unique meticulous qualities in administrative management.

## 2. The Limitations of the Era of the Queen's Self-Awareness

"Journey to the West" was written during the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty, a period when early capitalism began to emerge. This intellectual awakening sparked people's pursuit of personal liberation. However, as traditional Confucianism had long dominated Chinese society, capitalist influences failed to fully awaken people's sense of autonomy and freedom. Consequently, societal consciousness remained constrained by feudal ideology. Therefore, although China was not completely bound by feudalism at that time, in this era, both sexes, especially women, were still restricted to a certain extent by the doctrine of Cheng Zhu Neo-Confucianism, "preserving heavenly reason and suppressing human desire".

Though the queen embodies enlightened governance and possesses the awakening consciousness of a woman breaking free from marital constraints, she remains trapped by the author's era-bound character portrayal. In statecraft, she advocates for social equality and harmony through division of labor. Yet in matters of love, she abandons her governance achievements to pursue Tang Seng with the imperial throne as her betrothal gift, declaring: "With my nation's wealth, I originally sought to make you king. Now I shall become your queen." This act reduces herself to a male subordinate, revealing the queen's mentality remains fundamentally rooted in male dominance and belonging.

The King of the Kingdom of Women's Love Choices reveals that while author Wu Cheng'en demonstrated nascent feminist consciousness in portraying transcendent female characters. But the narrative suggests that even an exceptionally talented and beautiful queen would ultimately end her romantic journey as a male accessory—a conclusion that merits serious reflection.

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