

# Twin Lotus Blossomed, Two Women With The Same Sadness a Comparison of The Image of Songlian In “Concubines And Wives” And Pan Jinlian In “Jin Ping Mei”

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**Abstract:** Chinese writer Su Tong's “Concubines and Wives” writes about the plight of women in large feudal families in China. The character of Songlian in the book is similar to Pan Jinlian in “Jin Ping Mei” (Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, about 1567). By comparing and exploring the two characters, could discover the historical inheritance of modern Chinese literature from classical novels, and also inspires contemporary people to understand and reflect on the image of women in literature.

**Keywords:** Jin Ping Mei; Wives and Concubines; Pan Jinlian; Songlian

## 1. Introduction

Numerous images of concubines exist in the history of Chinese literature, and Pan Jinlian is a typical antagonist among them. Songlian, the heroine of *Concubines and Wives* (Su Tong, 1991), shares obvious similarities with Pan Jinlian, but with some innovations. A comparison of the two can be made in four ways: (1) Sorting out the similarities between the two books through close reading of the text; (2) Comparing and analysing the similarities between the two images; (3) Comparing and analysing the differences between the two images (4) Thinking about the significance of the two images.

Through comparative studies, It is possible to see how different social values under the old and new social systems were expressed in literature and how writers of different eras viewed the image of women. In the study, thinking about the ideological changes and the substance of the connotation of the works, and deeply taste the value of them.

## 2. Similarities between Wives and Concubines and Jinpingmei

When talking about the creation of *Concubines and Wives*, Su Tong has frankly admitted: “The

success of this story may have benefited from the literary nourishment from *Jinpingmei* and the *Family, Spring and Autumn*.”<sup>[1]</sup> Reading the two books, Many similarities between them can be seen.

## 2.1 Background

### 2.1.1 Social Background

Although *Jin Ping Mei* is set in the Northern Song Dynasty, the specifics of the story are closer to the era in which it was written, the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty. At this time, economic development, humanistic thinking sprouted, and the status of women was slightly improved, However, the feudal marriage system was still practised, and after the emergence of the Cheng-Zhu Theory, society became stricter on the issue of women's chastity, women were subjected to it and even lost their lives.<sup>[2]</sup>

*Wives and Concubines* takes place at the end of feudal China, an era of social change and unprecedented emancipation, in which the status of women was further improved and women had the right to education, but the feudal mindset was deeply rooted, the feudal marriage system was still practised in most families, and women were still surviving in the midst of oppression.

### 2.1.2 Family Background

Two families in two novels, Both come from big, wealthy merchant families in southern China.

## 2.2 Characters

Except for the heroine, some characters also have similar personalities and behaviours. Both novels depict lustful and brutal husbands, Religious and hypocritical wives, weak and unworthy heirs, young and smart adulterers.

## 2.3 Plots

Both novels depict the same plot: struggles between wives and concubines (birthday feast, festival and daily life), Concubine seeks adulterer after falling out of favour, Masters abuse their

slaves, Husbands abuse their concubines...

#### 2.4 Other Details

Some characters who play similar roles in each of the two books even have the same word appearing in their names, such as "Mei," "Lian," and "Chen" "Zhuo".

### 3. Similarities between Pan Jinlian and Songlian

As the heroines of the two works, Song Lian and Pan Jinlian not only have similar names, but also have highly similar life encounters, which are mainly reflected in their families of origin, marriages, survival environments, and life endings.

#### 3.1 Family Background

In the era in which the two novels are set, men were usually the main breadwinners and important pillars of life for their families, and played a key role in maintaining the stability of the family structure.

Pan Jinlian lost her father at the age of nine, then she was sold by her mother to wealthy families as a slave. When Songlian was nineteen, her family went bankrupt and her father committed suicide, so she had to drop out of school. After that, she asked her stepmother to arrange her marriage to some rich man and she never contacted the family again.

#### 3.2 Marriage and Maternity

##### 3.2.1 Marriage.

Pan Jinlian and Songlian both chose to marry as concubines.

Songlian decisively chooses the latter of the two life choices of work and marriage and asks her stepmother to let her marry some rich man, ("sell me to a good family"<sup>[3]</sup>), and she doesn't care about being a concubine. ("Is fame something that people like me should think about?"<sup>[3]</sup>).

Pan Jinlian knew that Ximen Qing was a flirt and had many lovers, but she didn't mind at all, and in order to be with him, she even planned to murder her current husband.

##### 3.2.2 Maternity.

Apart from serving their husbands, the main task and greatest value of women is to bear children, and it directly affects the family status of them. Wives without children might be repudiated, and concubines without children might face the fate of being killed or sold.

Song Lian and Pan Jinlian are in deep fear of

being childless after marriage. Because of her husband's old age, Songlian has little hope of conceiving a child. She foresees her fate as "drifting down the Chen family's path alone like a leaf"<sup>[3]</sup>.

In order to get pregnant, Pan Jinlian tried her best to keep Ximen Qing every day, and even resorted to religious metaphysics. She saw the concubines who had given birth to sons as a threat and even designed to kill them.

#### 3.3 Social Status

Songlian and Pan Jinlian face the "three powers of oppression" throughout their lives: husband's power, wife's power, and male's power.

##### 3.3.1 Husband's power.

Traditional marriage is male-centred, with the husband having absolute authority, and wives and concubines must obey and please them. In the unequal gender relationship, women lose their dignity, are controlled and degraded by their husbands, becoming objects of anger, lust and pleasure<sup>[4]</sup>. This also leads to frequent struggles between wives and concubines.

After marriage, competing for Ximen Qing's attention and favour is the most important thing in Pan Jinlian's life, and for this reason she can tolerate anything Ximen Qing does: cutting off her hair humiliatingly, being hung upside down for fun, and even using her mouth as a urinal...<sup>[5]</sup>

Chen Zuoqian, the husband in *Wife and Concubine*, is a cold, greedy man who burns Songlian's father's belongings, calls Songlian a "whore" when she refuses to have sex with him, kills the concubine who rebels against him, and imprisons the mentally disturbed Songlian. At the end of the novel, this cruel old man marries a new younger concubine.

##### 3.3.2 Wife's power

The oppression of the wife's power also threatens the life of the concubine. In ancient times, the wife had the right to dispose of the concubine and could scold, buy, sell or even execute her.

In the novel, as concubines, both Song Lian and Pan Jinlian pay their respects to their husbands' wives on their first day of marriage. In reality, concubines need to do the same.

In the Ximen family, when the Ximen Qing couple had a conflict, Pan Jinlian and the other concubines needed to take the initiative to reconcile the conflict to help them make up. After Pan Jinlian quarrelled with Ximen Qing's wife, whether it was her fault or not, Pan Jinlian had to take the initiative to kowtow and admit her fault

and ask for forgiveness. To please the wife, Pan Jinlian said, "Mother (the wife) is the sky, I am the mud."<sup>[6]</sup> After the death of Ximen Qing, his wife kicks Pan Jinlian and her servant Chunmei out of the house.

Although Chen Zuoqian's wife Yuru was old and out of favour, she still had the right to dispose concubines. Yuru repeatedly insulted Songlian ("shameless thing", "crazy bitch"), grounded Songlian, and let servants to slap Songlian.

### 3.3.3 Male's power

In fact, The most serious is the oppression of male power. Men's monopoly of social resources, constraints on women's behaviour and suppression of their status greatly weaken women's ability to survive independently, forcing them to rely on men for survival, This phenomenon was even more prevalent among the lower classes.<sup>[7]</sup>

Pan Jinlian was traded as an object in her childhood. She has a foot-binding and learnt to play the pipa to please men. She is young and beautiful, but she was forced to become the paramour of an eighty-year-old man, the wife of a disabled man. After marrying Ximen Qing, she was still in constant fear of being abandoned by her husband.

Songlian's tragic life is another example of women being destroyed by male oppression. Song Lien lived at the end of the feudal dynasty. Although society had developed and the status of women had improved at this time, It is still difficult for women to survive on their own.<sup>[8]</sup> Marriage or work? Songlian chose the latter. Song Lien's husband, 50-year-old Chen Zuoqian, believes that women should serve men. ("A woman should never climb on top of a man"). Over the centuries, although at least three women in the Chen family have died in mysterious ways, Chen Zuoqian is still taking new concubines.

## 3.4 End of Life

### 3.4.1 Endless loneliness.

Both Songlian and Pan Jinlian hope to make a secure and rich life for themselves by marrying a rich merchant, but after the marriage, they are afraid of losing their favour at every moment, crazy desire to be pregnant and suffer from restlessness and loneliness. But in the end, they didn't get what they wanted.

### 3.4.2 Miserable death.

Pan Jinlian did countless evils in her life, selfish and murderous. In the end, she was killed by Wu Sung and had a miserable death with her head cut

off and her heart dug out.

Songlian was trapped in the eerie Chen Mansion for the rest of her life. Having witnessed her husband's execution of a concubine, she went mad and became one of the many unknown women in the history of the Chen Mansion, tormented by fear every day until she died.

## 4. Differences between Pan Jinlian and Songlian

There are also many differences between these two characters due to the different times and purposes for which they were created. *Jin Ping Mei* was written at the end of the Ming Dynasty when there was political corruption and social chaos. By describing the story of Pan Jinlian and other characters, the author expresses his criticism of the dark society and shameless human nature. The *Wives and Concubines* was written in the 1990s. Writers trace history with a modern eye, and Su Tong emphasises that this book is more of a "story about 'pain and fear'".

### 4.1 Differences in Life Pursuits

#### 4.1.1 Panjinlian who lives passionately

Pan Jinlian's attitude towards life is passionate, and she strongly pursues material and desire fulfillment.

In order to marry the rich and powerful Ximen Qing, she could brutally kill her first husband, Wu Dalang. After marrying Ximen Qing, Pan Jinlian often ask her husband for expensive jewellery, gorgeous clothes, wine and food, and she never suppressed her sexual desire, and had countless lovers throughout her life.

#### 4.1.2 SongLian who lives numb

After getting married, the heat of Songlian's life soon drops and she becomes increasingly numb to life.

Songlian soon found herself unable to accept the lifestyle of a concubine in the Chen family. Other concubines fight every day to please their husbands and trap each other, Songlian doesn't want to and won't do what they're doing, she is spiritually empty, no pursuits, no healthy relationships, no children, has nothing to do every day. She loses her personal freedom and dignity, fails to realise the value of her own life, and can't find any hope or way out of life.<sup>[9]</sup>

### 4.2 Differences in Resistance Behaviour

#### 4.2.1 Jealousy and Murder

Pan Jinlian's rebellion against her life and fate is mainly expressed in extreme jealousy and brutal

murder. She chose to kill her disabled first husband and then remarry. Out of jealousy, she killed her husband's favoured concubine and the concubine's child. When she lost her husband's favour, she asked adulterer's company. and Pan Jinlian was a spirited and mean person who seldom repressed herself.

#### 4.2.2 perplexed and inquisitive

Unlike Pan Jinlian's "external resistance", Songlian turns to "internal struggle".

Songlian realise that she is in a difficult situation in life, but is unable to escape. No one respects her, and she is unwilling and unable to engage in the brutal battles between women. She cannot give up her dignity to please her husband. She has no children and no favourites. In the face of chastisement and humiliation, She was powerless, but only asked over and over again, "What am I?" "What is a woman?" "What is a woman?"<sup>[3]</sup>. After witnessing the murder of other concubines, Songlian know that the consequence of resistance is destruction. The reality of her predicament and the fear of death cause her to eventually have a mental breakdown.

### 4.3 Differences in the Meaning of the Ending

#### 4.3.1 Chopped Lotus

Pan Jinlian was killed by Wu Sung, who chopped off her head and dug out her heart and guts, which can be called the bloodiest and cruelest picture in the whole book. In the novel, Pan Jinlian is always a villain, she has murdered many people without repentance. The author intentionally set up such a death for her to expressing punishment and warning.

#### 4.3.2 Withered Lotus

Songlian walks into the grave of the feudal marriage system and witnesses the twisted sexual desire, deformed love, hypocritical affection and the threat of death under the oppression of the feudal system, All these make her realize the cruelty of the feudal society and fall into self-doubt and the dilemma of separation of spirit and flesh. Song Lian's madness has the implication of self-destruction. Although her physical body is still alive, her spiritual world gradually collapses until it is destroyed, and she eventually becomes a walking corpse.<sup>[10]</sup>

### 5. Conclusion

*Jin Ping Mei* created Pan Jinlian, an unique negative image that is beautiful but lascivious and venomous, became an inspiration for later writers to portray wicked women. Centuries

later, Contemporary Chinese writer Su Tong drew inspiration from works such as *Jin Ping Mei* create the novel *Wives and Concubines* and its heroine, Songlian.

The two women with the word "lotus" in their names are a hundred years apart, like twin lotus, share a similar tragic fate. They both survive in a feudal, male-dominated moneyed society, and having lost their father's patronage at an early age, choosing to become the concubines of wealthy merchants in the hope of leading a stable and affluent life, created the image of Songlian, a new age woman drowning in her old feudal family.

The unequal feudal marriage system, the repressive feudal rites, and the backward concept of male superiority over female, deprived them of their freedom, trampled on their dignity, enslaved them, alienated them, and made one of them brutal and evil and the other numb and crazy.

Due to the differences in the novel's story background and the writer's subjective creative purpose, compared with Pan Jinlian, Songlian's image is more contemporary. Songlian sprouts a spark of female consciousness at the end of her life, which makes her more pathetic and innocent. Unlike most of the heroines in the "May Fourth" theme who hate the feudalism, Songlian, who was educated in the new style and exposed to the progressive ideas, stepped into the trap of feudalism on her own initiative. This seemingly implausible point also makes the character more distinctive<sup>[11]</sup>.

The two lotus's characterisation and story line imply the social suppression and constraints on women for thousands of years, as well as the environment and living conditions of ordinary women in the past hundred years. From Pan Jinlian to Songlian, the transformation of women's self-consciousness from absence to germination, shows an example of the evolutionary trajectory of women's images in Chinese literature, and at the same time deepening the understanding of literary creators and readers on the portrayal of women's image. They will continue to inspire people to think about women's issues in literature and reality.

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