

Superstition and Women: Patriarchal Trap on Women Empowerment in Ling Shuhua’s “Mid-Autumn Eve” Title

Galuh Dwi Ajeng^{1*}, Febriyantina Istiara², Dian Windriani³, Hajjah Zulianti⁴

^{1,2,4} STKIP PGRI Bandar Lampung, ³Politeknik Negeri Lampung

fgaluhajeng@gmail.com *

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to analyze about superstition as one of the characteristics of Chinese literature and how superstition is part of patriarchal agenda in oppressing women depicted in Ling Shuhua’s “Mid-Autumn Eve” translated by Marie Chan. Superstition is often manifested in Asian literature because it is part of Asian culture. By analyzing Ling Shuhua’s “The Mid-autumn Eve”, the research finds out that modern Chinese society still believes in the superstition, such as “harmony duck” that symbolizing the prosperity and eternal love; for instance, how the couple who eat the “harmony duck” in the Mid-autumn festival will live together forever. Therefore, T’ai-t’ai forces her husband to eat the duck because she is afraid that his failure in eating the duck will be an ill omen for their marriage. Through feminist perspective, superstition can lead women to fall into the trap of patriarchy. By believing in superstition, women are associated with ignorance, stupidity, and weak that needs to be excluded in men’s matter, such as decision making. In the case of Cheng-jen for instance, by letting T’ai-t’ai, her wife, takes a decision that is based on superstition, Cheng-jen faces big regret in his life; he cannot be together with his foster sister before she dies.

This is an open access article under [CC-BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license.



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Chinese literature;
superstition;
woman

Article History:

Received: 30 November 2024
Revised: 31 December 2024
Accepted: 3 January 2025
Published: 6 January 2024

How to Cite in APA Style:

Ajeng, G. D., Istiara, F., Windriani, D., & Zulianti, H. (2025). Superstition and Women: Patriarchal Trap on Women Empowerment in Ling Shuhua’s “Mid-Autumn Eve” Title. *Lexeme : Journal of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics*, 7(1), 111–118.

<https://doi.org/10.32493/ljal.v7i1.46063>

INTRODUCTION

Superstition becomes one of the themes in Chinese literature besides nationalism, filial piety, and history. According to *Encyclopedia*, superstition is an irrational belief or practice resulting from ignorance or fear of the unknown, such as the power of magic and witchcraft and in such invisible forces as spirits and demons (Encyclopedia, 2005). Gehan M. Anwar Deep explained “the superstitious beliefs include popular saying, rituals, witchcraft, ghost, spirits, and possession of lucky charms” (2005:77). To strengthen his argument, Deep perfectly cites Cicero arguing that “the word superstition derives from the term *superstitiosi* which means those who are “left over” like “survivors or descendants”, connecting it with excessive anxiety of parents in hoping that their children would survive..” (2005:77). It means that superstition happens because human being tends to have massive fear and insecurity in their mind, so they need hope and protection in the form of lucky charm or belief in order to make them feel comfortable or think that they can control their own destiny. Agarwal is well cited by Wong, Abdullah, and Lim said that if the house owners in China have lucky addresses, they will have less experience of car accidents and traffic summons (2017:1). Chong and Du believe that the number “4” is considered

as unlucky number because it sounds “death” when it is pronounced in Cantonese. In contrary, number “8” is a lucky number because its pronunciation is associated with “prosperity” (2017:2). Even further, Chinese belief in superstition is also depicted in Amy Tan’s novel, like *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001). Although those novels set in modern era when people start to reject the irrational thinking, each novel reveals how the characters practice the superstition, either spiritually or psychologically, especially in their decision making or way of thinking.

The idea of superstition in Chinese literature has been studied by Gal Gvili in “Gender and Superstition in Modern Chinese Literature” (2019). Her research aimed to explore how superstition developed in China and how the connection between gender and superstition manifested in Jin Tianhe’s *The Women’s Bell* and Lu Xun’s *Medicine*. Yongkun Wan also examined about superstition in Chinese culture depicted in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (2018). Yongkun Wan applied the Orientalist approach to analyze Chinese cultural symbol, such as *Fengshui* and astrology in order to attract her White reader and construct Chinese American culture identity. Framing through feminist point of view, this research analyzes about superstition as the characteristic of Chinese culture and how superstition is actually part of patriarchal agenda in oppressing women depicted in Ling Shuhua’s “Mid-Autumn Eve” translated by Marie Chan.

Ling Shuhua’s “Mid-Autumn Eve” sets in China where Chinese society is still celebrating Mid-Autumn Eve. The story tells about a couple who falls apart because of the wife’s selfishness in insisting the husband to follow Chinese superstition. T’ai-t’ai as Ching-jen’s beautiful wife believes that in the Mid-Autumn Eve, the couple should eat a ‘harmony banquet’ in order to keep their love and stay together forever. At this moment T’ai-t’ai has not finished cooking the food yet, but her husband should go immediately to his foster sister’s house because she is ill. The problem is that T’ai-t’ai is unwilling to have Ching-jen leave the house before eating the ‘harmony duck’ because she is afraid that his failure in eating the duck will be an ill omen for their marriage. Therefore, she forces him to wait and eat, she says, “It’s bad luck not to eat the ‘harmony duck’. Ching-jen, please take a piece” (Chan:1975: 118). Because Cheng-jen cannot refuse her, so he waits and eats the duck, finally, he can visit his foster sister. Sadly, when he arrives there, his foster sister has already died five minutes earlier before his arrival. Therefore, he blames his wife in insisting him to eat the banquet, but the wife also blames him in cursing her, then they are divorcing. Ironically, eating the ‘harmony duck’ in Mid-Autumn Ever should be a lovely and happy moment for the couple, but for them it is a kind of disaster for their marriage.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nature vs Culture: How women are stereotyped?

The dichotomy of nature and culture is used to differentiate the position between men and women. Women have natural traits that must be subjugated to make them more cultured. It is clear that the efforts in civilizing women have created unequal relations between women and men in society. Mary Wollstonecraft through *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, therefore, criticizes society’s view on women that tend to degrade the status of women in status quo. Wollstonecraft argues that women are inferior because they are not given same chance and access like men and they are frequently taught to be passive, obedience, gentle, and having good temper since they were child. In the end, their sole ambition is to be fair and beauties, not to be intelligence, in the end their ambition will only raise their emotion instead of respect.

“Women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue” (Leitch, 2010, p. 586).

“Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they; be beautiful, everything else is needless” (Leitch, 2010, p. 586).

Even worse the degradation of women into “a weak character” is supported by some writers, like John Milton and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

“All the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr, Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more, useless, members of society” (Leitch, 2010, p. 588).

Milton explains that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace and Rousseau argues that men are so perfectly rational that women should follow their guidance. From these arguments, Milton and Rousseau want to build a narrative that women are narrow minded compare to men. For this case, Rousseau compares women to military soldiers who are only following orders and not having any core reason or virtue guiding what they do.

“As a proof that education gives this appearance of weakness to females, we may instance the example of military men, who are, like them, sent into the world before their minds have been stored with knowledge or fortified by principles. The consequences are similar; soldiers acquire a little superficial knowledge, snatched from the muddy current of conversation, and, from continually mixing with society, they gain, what is termed knowledge of the world” (Leitch, 2010, p. 590).

Wollstonecraft argues that the reason why women’s intelligence is depriving is due to the fact that they are forced to look the world as a series of unrelated phenomena, whose connections might be random. In this case, they are told that they need to focus only on the present, narrowness of perspective that effectively increases and solidifies their dependence on men. That is why education for women according to Rousseau is useless because women are only able to learn about the world by looking at the surface of things. In other side, men are from their infancy regaled with “method” and the need for systematic and exact though; women “receive only a disorderly kind of education,” being taught to rely on “a sort of instinctive common sense never brought to the test of reason.”

This patriarchal phenomenon is not only happening in Western world but also Eastern world. In china for instance, there are two concepts of Chinese philosophy, *Yin* and *Yang*, which completing each other. *Yin* represents negative, feminine, passive, intuitive, dark, night, earth, while *Yang* represents positive, masculine, active, logical, light, and sky. According to Chinese Cultural Study cited by Penelope Rodriguez, “women have yin energy while men are considered to be more *Yang*. Women are sweet, weak, and are positive force of preservation of life. Men are dominating, aggressive and protective towards their yin” (Rodriguez, 2017). *Yin* and *Yang* do implicitly explain that the position of women in society is naturally inferior to men; *Yin* (earth) is controlled by *Yang* (sky). Therefore, as women, they must be passive, weak, and obedience to men who are active, strong and self-will.

METHOD

Since this research aims to find out how superstition is a patriarchal agenda manifested in Ling Shuhua’s “Mid-Autumn Eve”, this research therefore employs qualitative research method. Ary et. al., stated, “Qualitative research strives for testable and confirmable theories that explain phenomena by showing how they are derived from theoretical assumption” (Ary et. al., 2010: 420). The primary source is Ling Shuhua’s “Mid-Autumn Eve” translated by Marie Chan. Ling Shuhua’s “Mid-Autumn Eve” tells about a couple who falls apart because of the wife’s selfishness in insisting the husband to follow Chinese superstition. The story sets in China where Chinese society is still celebrating Mid-Autumn Eve. The secondary sources are taken from academic journals, books, and theories. This research uses Ary’s framework in analyzing the data: (1) familiarizing and organizing, (2) coding and reducing, (3) interpreting and representing (Ary et. al., 2010). In the first step of analyzing the data, the researchers try to understand the data by reviewing and re-reading the short story. Secondly, the researchers code and identify the data based on several categories and reduce them into several specific areas. Thirdly, the researchers

interpret all data collected in the form of descriptive analysis in order to answer the research question.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Superstition as a Symbol in Lingshuhua's "Mid-Autumn Eve"

In Eastern world, one of the inherent characteristics of people is believing in superstition. Superstition is a belief originating from ancestors that are presented in the form of stories of unclear origin and cannot be proven scientifically (Ira M. Tulis, Ceysi N. Wuntu, Augustine C. Mamentu, 2023, p. 185). People tend to believe in superstition although there is no scientific evidence to explain about it.

In Indonesia for instance, people are afraid to wear green outfit when they go to Parangtritis Beach. People believe that if they wear green outfit, they will drown in the sea. In Chinese culture for instance, it is very common for Chinese people to bring a lucky charm or avoid certain action in order to make sure that everything can run well in their life. Li-Shia Huang said that "It's more than 5,000-year development, the Chinese culture has accumulated many distinctive superstitious traditions" (Huang, Li-Shia and Ching-I Teng, 2009) Another example, Chinese people believe that the position of a building and the interior arrangement can influence the fate of the person living in that building. Another example, Chong and Du believe that the number "4" is considered as unlucky number because it sounds "death" when it is pronounced in Cantonese. In contrary, number "8" is a lucky number because its pronunciation is associated with "prosperity." Therefore, Chinese people believe in the importance of *feng-shui* or preferences for the numeral 8 and soon. Uli Schmetzer said that Chinese people still believe in superstition, even further, four decades of atheism and communist purification campaigns have failed to dismiss the power of witch doctors and fortune tellers in China. Schmetzer explained,

A recent government survey found that 90 percent of the rural population is superstitious and 60 percent still believe in the Shen Han (God man), the Wu Po (woman sorcerer) and the cult of Fung Shui-the exorcising of evil spirits from homes and stables... China's official media found that Shen Hans and Wu Pos remain the unofficial village high priests and are consulted for propitious days and homemade cures. They decide where to place the family tomb or the new matrimonial bed, how many windows should go into a new house, and the most favorable date for conceiving a baby... In fact red belts quickly sold out everywhere in China. Nobody had forgotten that red belts are thought to be the best protection to ward off evil (Schmetzer, 1991).

Believing in superstition become a symbol which is reflected in literature, therefore, the readers have to interpret the symbol in literature in order to find the implicit meaning. According to Abrams, "A symbol is anything which signifies something; in this sense all words are symbols. A symbol can be "conventional" or "public", thus the cross, the red, white and blue color are the symbol that can be determined through certain culture" (Abrams, M. H., and G. G. Harpham, 2012, p. 311). However, the writers tend to use 'private' or personal symbol in their writing and it is sometimes difficult to be interpreted. He then explained,

In *The Romance of the Rose*, a long medieval *dream vision*, we read about a half-opened rose to which the dreamer's access is aided by a character called "Fair Welcome," but impeded or forbidden by other character called "Reason," "Shame," and "Jealousy." We readily recognize that whole narrative is a sustained *allegory* about an elaborate courtship, in which most of the agents are personified abstractions and the rose itself functions as an allegorical emblem which represents both the lady's love and her lovely body (Abrams, M. H., and G. G. Harpham, 2012, p. 312)

In Ling Shuhua's "Mid-Autumn Eve", superstition becomes the main symbol that need to be interpreted by the readers. Believing in superstition in the story is performed by T'ai-t'ai; she is Ching-jen's beautiful wife believes that in the Mid-Autumn Eve the couple should eat a 'harmony banquet' in order to keep their love and stay together forever. At this moment T'ai-t'ai

has not finished cooking the food yet, but her husband should go immediately to his foster sister's house because she is ill. The problem is that T'ai-t'ai is unwilling to have Ching-jen leave the house before eating the 'harmony duck' because she is afraid that his failure in eating the duck will be an ill omen for their marriage. Therefore, she forces him to wait and eat,

"Do take a piece of duck before you leave. You must eat a piece on this feast day." She chooses a fleshy morsel and put it in his plate.

"I don't have time to eat. There's someone waiting for me with her dying breath. I don't have the appetite."

She felt abused but she was afraid that his failure to eat the duck would be an ill omen. She begged him in a low voice –

"It's bad luck not to eat the 'harmony duck'. Ching-jen, please take a piece" (Chan, 118).

Superstition as a Symbol of Patriarchal Agenda in Ling Shuhua's "Mid-Autumn Eve"

Ling Shuhua (1904-1990) is a modern Chinese painter and writer whose writing focusing on the domesticity of women. Her works are *Temple of Flower* (1928), *Women* (1930), *Two Little Brothers* (1935), *Ancient Melodies* (1953), and some short stories. She is often called as "Katherine Mansfield" of China because she often cites and is greatly influenced by Mansfield's fiction. Ling Shuhua was a daughter of a high rank official. Like other young ladies who grew up in a privileged-class family, Ling Shuhua received private training in classical Chinese literature and painting. Amy and Kristina explained,

These accomplishments would once have been more than sufficient for the well-bred daughter of a high official, but Ling Shuhua came of age just as the clamor for advanced educational opportunities for women reached a fevered pitch. In 1922 she enrolled, along with fellow woman writer Bing Xin, in Yangjin University to pursue degree in foreign literature. Soon after graduating, she married Chen Yuan, the founder of the important May Fourth journal *Contemporary Review*, and in 1927 the couple moved to Hunan so that Chen could teach at Wuhan University (Dooling, A. D., and Kristina M. Torgeson, 1998)

Seeing the biography of Ling Shuhua, it is appropriate to see her works through feminist perspective. In Ling Shuhua's "Mid-Autumn Eve" for instance, this story tells about how superstition becomes patriarchal tool to maintain and strengthen their agenda in oppressing Chinese women. In the beginning of the story, Cheng-jen is depicted as a filial son because he is always paying his respect for his ancestor while T'ai-t'ai is portrayed as a very beautiful and wife to her husband. Her role is only in domestic sphere, like cooking the food and taking care of her husband. Both T'ai-t'ai and Cheng-jen are ideal wife and husband according to Chinese culture which is massively influenced by Confucianism. Lauren J. Littlejohn said that according to Confucianism, men as the head of the family must be superior and complete the rituals to the patrilineal ancestors while women must be demeaning and inferior. In order to strengthen his argument, he cites the quotes from *Analects*,

It's women and small minded men that are impossible to nurture. If you are close and familiar with them they lose all humility. If you keep your distance, they're full of resentment (Littlejohn, 2017, p. 4).

Women are assigned to handle the domestic affairs such as nurturing children, cooking, weaving and other household work. Men, on the other hand, handle public and social affairs such as farming, commerce and, for some men, holding government office (Littlejohn, 2017, p. 5).

It can be seen how kitchen becomes the place for T'ai-t'ai to gain her freedom and power. In this place, she can do everything that she wants, even ordering and dictating her cook.

He noticed that she was wearing the same lake-colored silk dress that she wore on the third day of their wedding this spring. The shoulders, sleeves and the hems of the skirt were embroidered with gold and green sprays of flowers... he thought she was very beautiful

this evening.

She instructed the cook as she worked: “You’ll serve the dinner in a while; don’t cook the fishy any more. The chestnut chicken should be stewed with some cooking wine. Put some more sugar in the vegetable dish before you cook it. The ‘harmony duck’ is not tender enough; simmer it a little longer” (Chan, 116)

This is how patriarchy works; it uses gender construction in order to maintain men’s supremacy in society. According to Pilcher and Whelehan, “patriarchal society uses certain facts about male and female biology (chromosomes, anatomy, hormones) as the bases for constructing a set of masculine and feminine gender identities and behaviors that serve to empower men and disempower women” (Tong, 2009, p. 51). Patriarchy can sustain gender inequality in status quo because they integrate their ideology with the important elements in society, like culture, tradition, and religion. For example, women are willingly placed in domestic sphere, like taking care of the house and children, while men are in public sphere because they are considered it as their tradition or common sense without paying attention on oppression and exploitation behind it. Even if women are given freedom by patriarchy, the freedom that is experienced by women is not purely freedom, but freedom under certain condition. Like what happen to T’ai-t’ai, it seems that she has full controls over the family, in fact, her control and freedom only happen in her kitchen.

The interesting thing is that even if T’ai-t’ai is presented as an obedient wife but she is very vocal, she does not want to be oppressed by her husband. It can be seen how she curses her husband, when her husband shouts and angry at her.

“What’s the matter with you? Why are you deliberately picking a quarrel with me tonight?” she started to sob. “You refused to eat, you smashed a vase on a feast day. How can one celebrate this auspicious day? I too ...” (Chan 119).

By cursing her husband, it is a good starts to empower herself and resist the patriarchy. However, she is finally trapped under patriarchal construction by believing on the superstition.

“My mother told me, eat a ‘harmony banquet’ and you’ll not be separated from each other throughout the year.”

“Why is the ‘harmony duck’ still not served” Master is nearly finished. T’ai-t’ai was getting anxious. She was afraid that he would leave without tasting the ‘harmony duck.’ When the duck finally appeared, he was rinsing his mouth and hurriedly putting on his jacket. She was most unhappy; the peach bloom left her face as she pathetically looked at him...

She felt abused but she was afraid that his failure to eat the duck would be an ill omen. She begged him in a low voice—“It’s bad luck not to eat the ‘harmony duck”, Ching-jen, please take a piece” (Chan, 118).

Superstition is an irrational belief or practice resulting from ignorance or fear of the unknown. By believing in superstition, patriarchy wants to give narrative that women are irrational, stupid, ignorant, so they have to be excluded in the decision making. Because women are irrational, so their decision is not based on their logic but their instinct and feeling whose truth is still questionable. Like what happen to Cheng-jen, because T’ai-t’ai insists Cheng-jen to eat the duck, Cheng-jen comes late in visiting his foster sister; he cannot be together with his foster sister before she dies.

How can you ask? Had I got there five minutes earlier, I would have seen her. It is all because you insisted that I eat that bowl of rice and delayed me for ten minutes... poor thing, all she had was a foster brother in Peking and he could not be with her when she dies... her death is too tragic.” His throat felt scratchy. He felt as if he could still see his foster sister that very moment, see that pinched and shriveled white face, those dim and tear-soaked eyes which were wide open and that mass of tangled hair. She was covered by a white bed sheet with yellow coins scattered over it” (Chan, 119).

It can be concluded that although women hardly try to empower herself, they will still be trapped under patriarchy hegemony through many ways. In Ling Shuhua’s “The Mid-autumn

Eve” for instance, T’ai-t’ai falls into patriarchal trap by believing in superstition that is associated with ignorant, stupidity, and weak.

CONCLUSIONS

Superstition is often depicted in Asian literature because it has already become part of Asian culture. By analyzing Ling Shuhua’s “The Mid-autumn Eve”, the study finds out how Chinese society still believes in the superstition, such as “harmony duck” that symbolizing the prosperity and eternal love, so the couple who eat the “harmony duck” in the Mid-autumn festival will be together forever. Therefore, T’ai-t’ai forces her husband to eat the duck because she is afraid that his failure in eating the duck will be an ill omen for their marriage. Through feminist perspective, superstition can lead women to fall into the trap of patriarchy. By believing in superstition, women are associated with ignorant, stupidity, and weakness that need to be excluded in men’s matter, like decision making. In the case of Cheng-jen for instance, by letting T’ai-t’ai, her wife, takes a decision that is based on superstition; Cheng-jen faces big regret in his life; he cannot be together with his foster sister before she dies.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H., and G. G. Harpham. (2012). *A Glossary of Literary Term*. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Dooling, A. D., and Kristina M. Torgeson. (1998). *Writing Women in Modern China: An Anthology of Women's Literature from the Early Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Huang, Li-Shia and Ching-I Teng. (2009). Development of a Chinese Superstitious Belief Scale. *Psychological Reports*, 104(3), 807-819.
- Ira M. Tulis, Ceysi N. Wuntu, Agustine C. Mamentu. (2023). Superstition as Seen in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. *JELTEC: Journal of English Language Teaching, Literature and Culture*, 2(2), 182-193.
- Leitch, V. B. (2010). *The Northon Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Littlejohn, L. J. (2017). Confucianism: How Analects Promoted Patriarchy and Influenced the Subordination of Women in East Asia. *Young Historias Conference*.
- “Mid-Autumn Eve”. Translated by Marie Chan. URL: https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/rct/pdf/e_outputs/b04/v04p116.pdf.
- Rodriguez, P. (2017, August 18). *The Yin and Yang of Masculine and Feminine*. Retrieved November 26, 2023, from Mind Key : <https://mindkey.me/yin-yang-masculine-feminine/>
- Schmetzer, U. (1991, July 21). *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved November 26, 2023, from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1991-07-21-9103210544-story.html>
- Tong, R. (2009). *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*. Colorado: Westview.

