Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN Print: 3104-4328
ISSN Online: 3104-4336
CD ISSN: 3104-4344
https://doi.org/10.63313/SSH.9065

The Important Value of Traditional Chinese Virtues: An Ethical Literary Analysis of The Touch

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How to cite this paper: Yu, X. X. (2026). The Important Value of Traditional Chinese Virtues: An Ethical Literary Analysis of *The Touch*. *Social Sciences and Humanities*, 3(2), 15-21. ISSN Print: 3104-4328; ISSN Online: 3104-4336.
https://doi.org/10.63313/SSH.9065
Published: 2026-03-05

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Abstract

Set within a realistic narrative of traditional Chinese ethic in the latter half of 20th in China and British, The Touch by Liu Hong in 2005 can be regarded as a masterpiece to represent traditional Chinese virtues. This essay applies Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism to analyze how different Chinese people in different periods of contemporary China to make the choices for the others for good to develop the whole narration of this novel. Traditional Chinese virtues embodied in the heroes of The Touch are self-devotion, forbearance, fortitude and tolerance, etc. The analysis reveals that Liu Hong provides a new writing to comprehend the traditional Chinese virtues. By applying the elements of traditional Chinese virtues, the novel actually builds up the new image of Chinese people in contemporary China and British. It proves that it is the function of traditional Chinese virtues that ensures Chinese people live in harmony with themselves and foreigners.

Keywords

Ethical Literary Criticism; The Touch; Traditional Chinese Virtues

1. Introduction

Liu Hong is a famous contemporary immigrant British novelist. She was born in China in 1965. In 1989, she got the scholarship to study in Britain, whose major is feminism while her favorite is anthropology. In 2001 she published her first English novel Startling Moon. In 2003 she published The Magpie Bridge, then The Touch (briefly TT, hence) in 2005. Her novels are translated in several languages and liked deeply by readers, especially British readers.

As her third published novel, TT narrates a story about three generations of a Chinese family. The heroine Lin Ju is a doctor in a small clinic in the suburb of London. She is a good acupuncturist. Lin Ju divorced and left her little daughter Tiantian in China. She left China and her small family because she was guilty of her carelessness when she was 12, which led directly to the disability of her grandfather and the death

of Steel, his illegal son, who was the best friend and uncle for girl Lin Ju and. As a doctor in England, Lin Ju met her patient Lucy and her husband Mark. In an accident, Mark hurt his neck and he went to Lin Ju's clinic. They chatted a lot and gradually they had a good feeling for each other. After a severe emotional struggle and deep reflection, Lin Ju decided to leave. She expressed her good wish for Lucy's whole family. At last she left her job and come back to China to live together with her daughter. She visited the graves of her grandfather and uncle and hoped to get their forgiveness at the end of the novel. The Guardian described TT as a "charming and compassionate" novel. Liu Hong 's novel promotes traditional Chinese culture and virtues. In TT, the term "Touch" refers to "pulse diagnosis" in traditional Chinese medicine. Traces of cultural mediation are evident throughout in this novel, which is why her writing is regarded as a form of "cultural translation" (Chan 399).

2. Theory Frameworks for Analysis

Ethical literary criticism is a famous literary theory and was put forward by Nie Zhenzhao, a contemporary Chinese scholar in 2004. He argues that "literature is the product of ethics; literature is one form of ethical expression of people in some specific historical time, and it is essentially an art of ethics" (Nie 13) . Professor Nie Zhenzhao proposes a series of concepts for ethical literary criticism, such as moral model, moral teaching, rational will, ethical identity and ethical question, etc. In TT, the heroes face different kinds of ethical problems and make different kinds of ethical selection eventually. What they choose at last all show that they abide by traditional Chinese virtues.

This novel expresses that traditional Chinese virtues are very influential in the minds of Chinese people in the world today. "Traditional Chinese virtues are one of the most important parts of traditional Chinese culture, which also are one of the most remarkable contributions for China to human race" (Zhang 210).

3. The Narration of Traditional Chinese Women Virtues in TT

Traditional Chinese virtues are fully embodied in two female heroes in TT: Lin Ju and Hu Linzhi.

According to Confucianism, the morality of a person lies between two ends of good and evil, with ultimate goodness at one end and ultimate evil at the other end (Qian 115-133). Lin Ju and Hu Linzhi belong to different generation and Lin Ju calls the latter Auntie Hu. They face different ethical questions, but they eventually make the choice which always do good to others.

"Hold the needle as you would a tiger. Once it's in, wait for the chi to connect, with the same patience as you would attend the most respected guest" (TT 1). This is the mottos for Lin Ju to practice for many years as an acupuncturist. She is a good doctor and good at taking the patient's pulse. Lucy is her first patient in her clinic, who improved dramatically after three weeks' treatment with acupuncture and herbal

medicine. Lucy thinks highly of Chinese medicine and she tells Lin Ju "Lucky me. Finding you was the best thing that's happened to me for a long time" (TT 14). Lin Ju is an intellectual and good doctor, inheriting all the knowledge of the herbal medicine from her Laoye, Doctor Lin. She is an innocent girl and a close friend of Steel from childhood. By accident she got to know Laoye is the biological father of Steel and was very excited to run to tell Steel. As soon as he knew the truth, Steel climbed to the cave near a cliff to find Doctor Lin. Carelessly he fell into the cliff and died. Doctor Lin hurt badly and disabled in order to rescue his son Steel. Auntie Hu, Steel's mother, came back to her miserable life with losing her son forever, who prepared for a big dinner for the reunion of her family at that night. This big tragedy hit Lin Ju to utmost degree and she knows it is her who caused it. She felt so guilty and went to British in order to forget it. But in London she still did not forget it and she found she cannot share this memory with her husband, which led to their divorce. Lin Ju reflected what she has done and carelessly fell into the couple relationship of Lucy and Mark, who came into the bad period of marriage. Mark expressed his passion for her, but Lin Ju refused for she knew how a tragedy comes into being and it will destroy a family easily. At last she chose to go back China and live with her daughter forever.

Lin Ju represents a typical Chinese traditional woman. She is brave, clever and kind, though she was innocent when she was a little girl. She knows her disadvantages and is willing to spend her rest life atoning for what she has done. So she left her husband and little daughter. When she found a good feeling for Mark, the husband of Lucy, one of her patients, she was clear to know what is her choice. Lin Ju struggles a lot, "I'd managed to double-book myself with Mark again." (TT 147) "It was so at odds with my picture of their relationship. Even now that I had heard of their rift from Mark's lips, I did not know what to make of it. But I was sure of one thing: a growing sympathy for the man in front of me." (TT 150) Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), one of the most Austrian writers, describes the danger of pity in the relationship between a man and a woman in his famous novel Beware of Pity (1939). Lin Ju feels so lonely and is easy to fall into a new relationship with Mark, who suffers from the new problems of his marriage with Lucy at the same time. But at last, Lin Ju knows it is very unfair for Lucy if she chooses to fall into love with Mark. She makes an excuse and lies to Lucy "He told me how much he missed you and Connor. ……So, yes, we did meet, but Mark was being kind, listening to a lonely woman. Nothing happened between us, Lucy. Nothing of the sort you imagine, I promise you." (TT 217) Lin Ju knows that she could not make mistakes again.

After Lin Ju comes back to China and lives with her daughter Tiantian, she goes to hometown to pay a visit to the graves of Laoye and Steel. Lin Ju shows the great power and influence of Chinese traditional virtues, which derives from the education from her grandpa, laoye. Not only does laoye teach her all the herbal knowledge, but guide her to be a good person for the society. Reading also is one important part of her life in her small clinic in British. Missing her little daughter and feeling guilty for

the death of Steel and the misery for laoye and his lover, Lin Ju feels that the only happy thing for her to do in London is to read the few Chinese books she had brought from China. At that time she could feel safe and happy in her own world. Anyway, the moral values of Lin Ju come from traditional Chinese literature and culture., which is so powerful and influence her forever.

Hu Lingzhi is an important figure in this novel. She is the lover of Doctor Lin. Lin Ju calls her Auntie Hu. Lingzhi is also the most precious herb of all the herbs in Chinese medicine. Thus it is very symbolic for the writer to name it to the beautiful woman Hu Lingzhi. She is a very traditional Chinese woman, whose life represents the life of a typical Chinese woman in Modern China before and after liberation. She is a very beauty woman and had to marry firstly with a bandit. Aunt Hu, her present husband has always kept in bed for he was one of her admires and was badly punished by the bandit leaders who heard of his love for her. After liberation, Auntie Hu became free and she could leave the bandit. She was willing to marry with Aunt Hu and looked after him ever since then. In some degree, she is the symbol of all the miserable and beautiful Chinese women in modern China. But she has all the virtues a traditional Chinese woman should have.

Auntie Hu is very able and can cook most delicious egg fried rice, which makes Lin Ju always remember and becomes her happiest time in her childhood. She is very clever and knows about medicine as she is the daughter of a famous herbalist. Uncle Hu is seriously ill and has to lie in bed year after year. During the time when Uncle Hu needs medical treatment from Doctor Lin, Auntie Hu gradually develops a special relationship with Doctor Lin. They become lovers and she bore Steel, their illegal son, whom she calls Ming Ming. But Doctor Lin worries about that Steel could disclose his secret relationship with Auntie Hu, so he sent baby Steel to a peasant in a remote village. And he told Auntie Hu that baby died after birth. Over twenty years past, Uncle Hu died from his illness and Auntie Hu got to know that Steel, Ming Ming, her only son still lives. She feels so happy and is looking forward to getting together of her family. But at that night, Steel looked for his father, Doctor Lin, and carelessly fell into the cliff and died. Doctor Lin became disabled for he was fallen in the way of searching for his son, Steel. Lingzhi lost her son in one night and looked after Doctor Lin for the rest life. She represents the misery of Chinese traditional women, but she never fails to lose heart.

In a word, Lin Ju and Hu Lingzhi are the representative of traditional Chinese women, who have the traditional Chinese virtues, such as forbearance、fortitude、tolerance and self-sacrifice, etc. It is these virtues that guide them to overcome all the difficulties in their lives.

4. The Narration of Traditional Chinese Men Virtues in TT

Traditional Chinese virtues are also fully embodied in two male heroes in TT: Doctor Lin and Steel. Doctor Lin and Steel belong to different generation. Steel is the illegal

son of Doctor Lin. They face different ethical choices, their tragedies at last show the cruelty of life, but they insist on choosing the best of life for the others.

Lin Ju's grandfather (also called laoye in north China) is a very famous doctor in his province of China. He is also called barefoot doctors, who usually treat ordinary people and does not dress like a prince. After liberation, the average people in most remote areas of China live a relatively poor life and not have enough medical equipment and medicines when in ill. Grandfather learned the knowledge of herbal medicines and picked the herbs in the mountains to produce medicines. He cured so many people and won the respect from people. Lin Ju suffered from asthma when she was a little and was cured by grandfather. Grandfather loves his granddaughter so much that he decided to educate her as a doctor, who will be dept in Chinese medicine. Contrary with other grandpa, Doctor Lin told his granddaughter Lin Ju to grow up to be truly strong and be a real hero. "Real strength is in your mind, your head." (TT 26) This rule of education is greatly different from those of Lin Ju's mother told her. Such as girls are girls, they should not play with mud and fight, etc.

Doctor Lin likes to help others. He never hesitates to help his neighbors or friends when they are ill, but he hates it if they made too much of it. He is very humble and modest. Modesty is one of the typical merits for Chinese people.

The animist thought is one part of Chinese traditional cultures. Chinese people believe it very much, especially for the people living in remote areas of China. They think god blesses them and it is their duty to show great respect. Doctor Lin shows great respect for traditional Chinese herb culture. He kneels down to pray in front of herb god, the small clay statue of an old man with a long white beard and a walking stick on a bed of herbs. He tells Lin Ju that herb god protects him from snakes and falling off cliffs. After his prayer he baths himself to show respect to the Being, "the soul of the mountain", "…who yields all the fruits and leaves for me to pick." (TT 38) Doctor Lin believes that the most precious herb could only be found and picked by those most sincere. He told little Lin Ju that in the old days people had to rise early in the morning and meditate till all unclean thoughts were banished, dress in white and make offerings. Even then it was not guaranteed that you would find Lingzhi, the most precious herb. Only the brave and true would glimpse it.

Not only is Doctor Lin a good doctor, but he has a very kind heart. He cherishes the life of every people to utmost degree, even an unborn baby. Of all his life, he saves the life of so many people and cure their diseases. He only makes one mistake, which is that he cannot save the life of an unborn baby, which makes him feel guilty for his whole rest life. Thus "…… he refused payment for all the treatment he gave people: he had been atoning for the one death he'd caused." (TT 232)

Steel is an important figure in this novel. As an illegal son by Doctor Lin and Auntie Hu, Steel was born and immediately sent to a village people. He lives a very miserable life since he has no parents. Other classmates call him a deserted mongrel. But Steel lives a very decent and good life with his strong will and good personalities. He grows

up to a good young man and becomes a leader of Red Guard. He saved a young beggar in the train. His great goal of life is to serve the people. Lin Ju likes Steel and finds he is the representative of the model of Red Guard, "he had behaved like the heroes of the old days that I had only heard of in stories: the Red Army martyrs who would starve themselves rather than pilfer from poor peasants, like the Nationalists did." (TT 162) Though coming from a big city, Steel never shows his contempt to the poor peasants. He always tells other Red Guards to learn from the peasants and treat them with respect. But he always feels disappointed at the fact that they do not seem able to. Even at that bad time, Steel never feels disappointed. He is a real leader, not only for the Red Guard, but for the village people.

One of the most important tasks for Steel to come to villages is to be a doctor to help the diseased. He teaches himself and others the medical knowledge. But Steel is young and has not had enough education at school, which also could not make him get enough medical knowledge. This fact directly causes a medical accident, which makes an unborn baby died. The mother is in great relief. Steel apologized his fault very sincerely and he told the mother "If you want revenge, punish me, I am responsible……I know we are not the most accomplished doctors yet, but both Bell and I have always tried our best for all our patients. We practiced the needles on each other and would never use any herbs without tasting them ourselves……I do not want to sound as if I am trying to find an excuse, but it is our duty to perfect our skills as barefoot doctors." (TT178)

Steel represents the positive and ideal world in the novel. He also builds up a sincere relationship with little Lin Ju. He sends her a gift: the red book. Lin Ju knows this is a token of his trust and faith in her. Little Lin Ju feels the beauty and kindness of life and world so much that she even has an extra desire. She wants to be the girlfriend of Steel. But she feels soon that Steel does not interested in this narrow relationship for Steel likes another girl. This cruel fact does not destroy their good friendship. This is why Lin Ju feels so excited when she knows Steel is Laoye's illegal son. But the fact that as soon as she tells this good news to Steel, the tragedy of the whole family occurs, which is the biggest tragedy for little Lin Ju from then on.

5. Conclusion

"The symbolic meanings embodied in TT are dual, even multiple; it is an ineffably polysemous symbol embedded in a bicultural context"(Li 139). Actually the symbolic meanings are very rich in this novel. The verb "touch" means the communication and collision of Chinese culture and British culture, as well as the relationship of moralities between these two countries. The Classic of Filial Piety • states, "He who loves his own parents dares not show malice to the parents of others; he who honors his own parents dares not treat the parents of others with contempt" (Yang 24). The heroes in this novel show their great respect for their ancestors. Lin Ju came to visit the graves of her grandfather and her uncle, which show that she loves her

grandfather and her uncle to the utmost degree. Ethical literary criticism emphasis on the moral function of literature and TT is a good example.

Acknowledgements

This article is profoundly grateful to the National Social Science Fund of China “A Study of the Writing of Traditional Chinese Culture in Contemporary British Literature” (24BWW038）.

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