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Analysis of Female Characters in the Political Strategy Novel "Langya List"

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ABSTRACT
The four female characters in Langya List—Nihuang, Concubine Jing, Qin Banruo, and Gongyu—break through the stereotypical positioning of women in traditional political strategy narratives. They actively participate in power struggles through unique power practices in the military, court, villain camp, and Jianghu (martial arts world) respectively, demonstrating diverse subjectivity and agency. The portrayal of these characters subverts the traditional perception that gender determines power, presenting pluralistic forms of female power. This has important implications for the shaping of female images in contemporary literary creation and echoes the awakening of female consciousness in real society.

KEYWORDS
Langya list; Political strategy novel; Female characters

1 Introduction

As a classic modern political strategy novel, Langya List centers on the power changes in the imperial court of the Liang Dynasty, constructing a sophisticated male-dominated game network. In this work where male characters are the absolute main body, female roles such as Princess Nihuang, Concubine Jing, Qin Banruo, and Gongyu, though limited in number, break through the stereotypical positioning of women as "assistants" or "victims" in traditional political narratives through unique power practices, becoming key forces that stir up the power structure.

In traditional ancient costume political narratives, female images are often simplified as appendages to male power: either as tools for political marriage or symbols of harem rivalry, their significance always revolves around male characters. However, the female group in Langya List presents a completely different narrative logic—they no longer passively accept fate but actively intervene in multiple fields such as military, court, intelligence, and Jianghu, constructing unique power spaces with their respective strategies. Nihuang establishes military authority on the southern battlefield; Concubine Jing infiltrates implicit influence in daily court life; Qin Banruo challenges court order with an intelligence network; Gongyu connects Jianghu and the court with professional abilities. The power practices of these four female characters collectively subvert the audience's traditional perception that "gender determines power."

2 Analysis of female characters

2.1 Princess nihuang: a gender rebel in the military sphere

As the guardian of the southern border of the Liang Dynasty, Princess Nihuang completely subverts the traditional image of a princess as a "delicate lady in the boudoir." In the male-dominated military system, she constructs a unique mode of power practice as a female general "able to fight with a spear," becoming a challenger to the gender order.

2.1.1 Balancing the tension of dual identities

The charm of Nihuang's character lies in the harmonious coexistence of her multiple identities. As the only female master in the top ten of the Langya Ranking, she has guarded the southern border in armor for ten years, "enjoying high prestige and being revered by both soldiers and civilians," showing military talents no less than male generals. As the eldest daughter of the Mu family, she took up arms after her father's sacrifice, took charge of military power on behalf of her young brother Mu Qing, and found a balance between family responsibilities and personal will. As Mei Changsu's childhood sweetheart, she retains female delicacy but never loses rationality due to love.

This "combination of hardness and softness" is particularly prominent in her refusal of the emperor's arranged marriage. Facing imperial pressure, she not only adhered to her military duties but also safeguarded her personal will, took the initiative to cooperate with others, and stuck to her resolve when being plotted against, without being controlled by power. This breaks the traditional logic that "women need to 依附 men through marriage."

2.1.2 Gender narrative in military power

In the military narratives of ancient costume dramas, women usually exist only as symbols of "rewarding the army" or "peaceful marriage," but Nihuang directly holds the right to speak in military decision-making. Her deployment of

southern border defense, prediction of enemy tactics, and even questioning of the court's military policies all reflect independent military thinking. When Mei Changsu proposed to borrow troops from the southern border, her response was not unconditional obedience but a rational cooperation based on the premise of "protecting the territory and people." This equal attitude completely eliminates the power gap caused by gender. Nihuang "elevates female wisdom to the court level"; her acquisition of military power does not rely on male grants but stems from solid military achievements and prestige, which can be called a breakthrough in male-dominated political dramas.

2.1.3 Modern turn in emotional narrative

The emotional line between Nihuang and Mei Changsu breaks away from the stereotype of "love first," presenting adult rationality and restraint. After learning Mei Changsu's true identity, her choice is not to indulge in the joy of reunion or the choice between old and new emotions, but to become a strategic ally with the attitude of "helping you redress the injustice." When she learns that Mei Changsu has a short life, she, though heartbroken, respects his last wish of "returning to the battlefield."

This choice of putting national justice above personal love not only conforms to her identity as a military general but also highlights the modern female view of "non-attachment and non-blind obedience." Compared with narratives in other works where women resort to all means for love, Nihuang's emotional expression is more subjective—love is an extra blessing for her, not the whole meaning of life.

2.2 Concubine jing: an operator of implicit power in the court sphere

Concubine Jing's rise to power in the harem is a model of "overcoming hardness with softness." Unlike the Queen or Consort Yue who are eager for power, or other concubines who are caught in jealousy, she breaks through from the edge to the center with unique implicit strategies in a seemingly passive situation. Her power practice coincides with Foucault's "capillary power" theory, which emphasizes that "power permeates daily life."

2.2.1 Survival wisdom of "competing without competing"

Concubine Jing's initial positioning as an "unnoticed concubine" becomes her protective color. She focuses on medical skills in the harem, dispelling others' vigilance with the appearance of "indifference to fame and wealth." For example, the Queen's temptations and provocations all dissolve in her "responding with calmness." This "showing weakness" is actually a clever strategy: by reducing her threat, she can move freely in the complex harem power network and secretly observe changes in the situation.

When Prince Jing was at a disadvantage in the struggle for the throne, she did not directly intervene but subtly influenced the emperor's attitude towards Prince Jing through daily interactions such as conditioning the emperor's health and telling past stories. This "moistening things silently" way of power operation is more penetrating than explicit favoritism.

2.2.2 Medical skills as a medium of power

Concubine Jing's identity as a medical woman provides a unique carrier for her power practice. Through the opportunity of diagnosing the emperor, she can not only grasp the emperor's physical condition (an important political information in ancient courts) but also skillfully convey information in the name of "medical advice." For example, she recommended musicians from Prince Jing's mansion on the grounds that "quiet cultivation requires listening to the qin," which not only avoided the suspicion of "interfering in state affairs" but also provided an intelligence channel for Prince Jing's camp.

This way of transforming professional skills into power tools shows women's strategic survival wisdom when resources are limited. Concubine Jing's medicine box, incense burner, and chessboard all become props in power games; each diagnosis and each medicinal herb contains her accurate judgment of the situation.

2.2.3 De-instrumentalization of maternal role

In traditional palace fight dramas, the mother role is often reduced to a tool "serving her son's fight for the throne," but the relationship between Concubine Jing and Prince Jing presents a more equal mother-son interaction. She supports Prince Jing not out of desire for power, but out of recognition of her son's "pure heart." When Prince Jing is anxious due to the pressure of fighting for the throne, she advises him to "keep his original intention" instead of instigating him to use vicious means.

This portrayal, which separates the "mother" identity from the "individual" identity, makes Concubine Jing get rid of the label of "power appendage." Her eventual becoming the Empress Dowager is not the result of deliberate pursuit but the natural accumulation of her implicit power, which subverts the narrative inertia that "women must actively compete

to gain power."

2.3 Qin banruo: a strategic gambler in the villain sphere

As the main "villain" in the play, Qin Banruo's portrayal breaks the stereotype that "female villains must be due to emotional changes or jealousy." Driven by the mission of revenge as a survivor of the Hua tribe, her professional strategies and means make her an undeniable opponent in the male-dominated political network, showing the complex humanity and subjectivity of villainous women.

2.3.1 De-gendered revenge narrative

Qin Banruo's motivation stems from the trauma of national subjugation and the subtle teaching of her master, Princess Xuanji, rather than the emotional entanglements common to traditional female villains. She establishes the "Red Sleeve Gang" intelligence network and assists Prince Yu in fighting for the throne, with the ultimate goal of reviving the Hua tribe. This narrative centered on "ethnic interests" makes her transcend gender restrictions.

Different from the trajectory of women in other works who become 黑化 due to jealousy, every strategy of Qin Banruo serves the revenge plan: she intensifies conflicts between the crown prince and Prince Yu, collects court officials' privacy, and manipulates public opinion. Her methods are as ruthless and precise as those of male counselors. The audience "still admire her wisdom and courage" precisely because her villainous behavior gets rid of the label of female "emotionality" and shows strategic thinking equal to that of men.

2.3.2 Gender advantages in intelligence network

Qin Banruo makes full use of the information advantages brought by gender. In the male-dominated officialdom, women are often regarded as "insignificant existences," but she just uses this prejudice to infiltrate into various power corners through members of the "Red Sleeve Gang," who disguise themselves as maids, concubines, and singers, becoming an excellent cover for collecting intelligence.

This intelligence system based on female social networks forms a sharp contrast with Mei Changsu's male counselor group: if Mei Changsu relies on "righteous friendship" among men, Qin Banruo is good at using women's penetration in private fields. In a world seemingly controlled by men, women's private communication space has become a blind spot in power games.

2.3.3 Transcendence of tragic failure

Qin Banruo's failure is not due to female "incompetence," but to Prince Yu's suspicion and the historical limitations of Hua tribe's revival. After Prince Yu's downfall, she did not collapse or beg for mercy like traditional female villains, but chose to burn intelligence and perish together. This "preferring to be broken rather than intact" ending endows the character with a tragic heroic color.

Her tragedy does not lie in "women's inevitable failure in participating in politics," but in the conflict between personal ideals and the historical trend. This narrative makes her jump out of the shackles of "gender original sin" and become a loser fighting for faith, not a villain failing due to gender defects.

2.4 Gongyu: a practitioner of emotion and strategy in the jianghu sphere

As an intelligence agent under Mei Changsu, Gongyu's character combines the chivalry of Jianghu people with female delicacy. In the male-dominated counselor group, she participates in political games in a non-typical way, showing the subjectivity and agency of auxiliary women.

2.4.1 Professionalization of occupational identity

Gongyu's core identity is "Mei Changsu's subordinate," but her existence is not a simple "tool man." As the top musician in Jianghu, she uses melody as a cover to complete tasks such as delivering intelligence and monitoring targets. Her professional ability plays a decisive role in key plots: she touches Princess Liyang with the song Phoenix Seeking Its Mate at the banquet in the Xie mansion, laying the groundwork for exposing Xie Yu's crimes; she skillfully obtains various information by attracting dignitaries with exquisite qin skills.

This setting that combines artistic talent with intelligence work makes her get rid of the label of "male appendage" and become an irreplaceable professional role in the political network.

2.4.2 Restraint and consciousness in emotional expression

Gongyu's love for Mei Changsu never turns into interference in action, but rises into the motivation of "helping him succeed." After learning about Mei Changsu's relationship with Nihuang, she chooses to withdraw silently, transforming

her emotions into focus on work. When Mei Changsu is seriously ill, her concern is reflected in carefully prepared items and timely suggestions, rather than entangled confessions.

This emotional view of "loving without disturbing" shows modern women's healthy cognition of emotional relationships—respecting each other's choices and maintaining self-independence. Compared with the narrative in traditional ancient costume dramas where women "resort to all means" for love, Gongyu's emotional expression is more modern, proving that "deep affection" and "reason" can coexist.

2.4.3 Integration of Jianghu ethics and political strategy

Gongyu's behavioral logic has both the chivalry of Jianghu and the duality of political strategy. As the daughter of an assassin, her motivation for revenge for her father conforms to the Jianghu ethics of "quickly avenging grievances." As Mei Changsu's subordinate, she can stick to the bottom line of political strategy when executing tasks and not kill innocent people indiscriminately.

This duality is particularly obvious in the incident of "overthrowing Xie Yu": she both desires to avenge her father and obeys Mei Changsu's overall arrangement of "not acting for the time being," showing political awareness beyond personal grudges. Gongyu's existence connects the two fields of "Jianghu" and "court" in Langya List, and her free movement as a female character implies women's adaptability and flexibility in different power spaces.

3 Conclusion

Although the four female characters—Nihuang, Concubine Jing, Qin Banruo, and Gongyu—are in different fields and hold different positions, they jointly construct the breakthrough portrayal of female images in Langya List. Their power practices are diverse: Nihuang challenges the gender order with explicit military power; Concubine Jing infiltrates the power network with implicit daily practice; Qin Banruo participates in politics with professional strategic games; Gongyu realizes her value as a professional auxiliary role. But all point to the same core: women's subjectivity does not depend on gender labels, but on their strategic choices and practical abilities in the power field.

This group portrayal has important implications for contemporary literary creation. First, it breaks the binary opposition of "female images being either good or evil." For example, Qin Banruo's complexity proves that villainous women can also have independent motivations and logic. Second, it shows the pluralistic forms of female power, proving that women do not have to imitate male power models (both Nihuang's hardness and Concubine Jing's softness are effective strategies). Finally, it integrates female narratives into the grand theme of political strategy, making gender issues no longer an "additional item" but deeply intertwined with core propositions such as power, ethics, and humanity.

In a broader social sense, the female group in Langya List echoes the awakening of female consciousness in real society. Their stories tell us that women's value does not lie in attaching to men or becoming "like men," but in finding their own survival strategies and value coordinates. In a male-dominated world, women can completely construct their own power space through wisdom, courage, and resilience—this spiritual resonance across ancient and modern times is the enduring charm of female images in Langya List.

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