

# Shen Congwen's *The Husband* — Miao Marriage and Christian Marriage Law in the Early Republic

Lung-Lung HU

Senior Lecturer, Chinese Department, School of Language, Literatures and Learning,  
Dalarna University

**Abstract:** This paper aims to use Shen Congwen's (沈從文, 1902-1988) short story *The Husband* (丈夫, published in 1930) to examine ideas of monogamy and marriage in Miao culture. Shen was a Chinese Miao who wrote about the Miao people (苗族), an ethnic group in China that contains within it several racial and cultural divisions. Shen's story *The Husband* aims to show that Miao couples have a bond which corresponds in strength and validity to the Western idea of monogamy as enshrined in Christian marriage law.

Marriage law in the West has a long history. Marriage itself has its roots in early Christianity. The act of marriage is considered a sacrament, alongside baptism and communion. This holy act was soon protected by a large legal edifice which became the basis for Western marriage law. When Western marriage laws were introduced into China from the West and, at the end of the Qing dynasty in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, traditional Chinese laws were reformed, the principle of monogamy in Chinese marriage was also established.

Since monogamy did not exist as a concept in Chinese society and contradicted traditional Chinese ideas about marriage, many Han people in the early Chinese Republic continued their practice of concubinage and ended up violating the idea of monogamy of new marriage laws. On the other hand, the Miao people, although their culture was more tolerant of informal romantic relationships, tended to display a greater degree of monogamy within them. Therefore, by considering marriage from a legal and religious point of view, the author aims to analyse *The Husband* to show that Shen not only criticised the dark side of society in the early Republic from his perspective as a Miao, but also used a story that resembles the

account of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis as a way to praise the Miao concept of marriage and love. Since *The Husband* has been adapted for the screen as *Mainland Prostitute* (村妓, Cunji, 1994), the film will also be used to accentuate the author's idea.

**Key Terms:** Shen Congwen, *The Husband*, Miao Culture, Marriage Law, Christianity, Monogamy, The Garden of Eden

*Marriage is the union of male and female and the sharing of life together, involving both divine and human law.*<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Shen Congwen (沈從文, 1902-1988), later as Shen, was born in Feng Huang, Xiangxi (鳳凰, 湘西). His mother was a Tujia (土家) and his paternal grandmother was a Miao (苗).<sup>2</sup> Shen always wrote stories about his life, and did not follow the trend. He was criticised that some of his works were erotic and pornographic, luring people away from the revolution.<sup>3</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s he wrote numerous stories about the Miao people and his hometown. Miao culture has undeniably influenced Shen's writing. As Liu Hongtao (劉洪濤) states: "The culture of the Miao people is deeply involved in and has strongly influenced all of the artistic elements of Shen's work, such as plots, implication,

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan Watson (ed. and trans), *The Digest of Justinian*, vol 2 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p.199. Latin: Nuptiae sunt coniunctio maris et feminae, consortium omnis vitae, divini et humani iuris communication.

<sup>2</sup> "Miao" is a general term in this paper. As Paul R. Katz says: The term "Miao 苗"... is highly problematic. While traditional labels for ethnic groups considered to be "Miao" have tended to focus on color (Hong Miao 紅苗, Hua Miao 花苗, Hei Miao 黑苗, etc.), ethnographic methodology favors the use of autonyms, including Kho Xiong (or Qho Xiong, Qoxiong Kuoxiong) for Western Hunan and Northest Guizhou, Hmu or Khanao for Southeast Guizhou, and Hmong (or Mong, A Hmao) for Sichuan, Western Guizhou, Yunnan, and the Indo-Chinese peninsula. See "Dances of the Doomed: Ritual and Resistance among China's Western Hunan Miao in the 1940s," *Asia Major* 30.2(2017): 133-186, note 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Kuo Mozuo (郭沫若) said in 〈斥反動文藝〉, 《大眾文藝叢刊》第一輯:《文藝的新方向》(香港:生活書店, 1948), p.19.

and metaphors.”<sup>4</sup> Shen's stories about Xiangxi, and his portrayal of marriage and romantic relationships within Miao culture, must be based on his own experiences and observations of Miao culture.

In this paper, I will try to use Shen's short story *The Husband* (丈夫, published in 1930) to explore Miao attitudes towards marriage and the idea of monogamy in Christianity when the new Chinese marriage laws was introduced during the late nineteenth-century early Republic.<sup>5</sup> *The Husband* has been adapted into a film called *Mainland Prostitute* (村妓 Cunji) in 1994, which was directed by Huang Shuquin (黃蜀芹). This film shows a different interpretation of *The Husband*. I will also use the film to accentuate my idea about *The Husband* that Shen used a story that resembles the account of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis as a way to praise the Miao concept of marriage and love.

## 2. *The Husband* and Miao Culture

*The Husband* is a story about a woman called A-Qi (阿七) who lives with her husband in an extremely poor village in Xiangxi and moves to the city, Chengzhuo (辰州),<sup>6</sup> and becoming a boat-prostitute. A-Qi's Husband then comes to the city to visit her. He meets many people and has conversations with them that trigger discussions about marriage in Miao culture.

*The Husband* is usually discussed from the perspectives of Marxism and gender equality, because of the way it portrays the confrontations between the countryside and the city and the dominant and the dominated, and because of the way it treats the sexualisation

---

<sup>4</sup> 劉洪濤,〈沈從文對苗族文化的多重闡釋與消解〉,《二十一世紀雙月刊》25(1994.10): 77.

<sup>5</sup> Monogamy was affirmed in the 1912 Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China (中華民國臨時約法) and was officially put into effect according to Family Law of the Civil Code of the Republic of China (中華民國民法親屬篇) in 1931. The Enforcement Law for Part IV, Family Law of the Civil Code was created on 20 January, promulgated on 24 January, and put into effect on 5 May 1931. See *Laws and Regulations Database of The Republic of China*, <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawHistory.aspx?pcode=B0000005> (retrieved 2022.2.10).

<sup>6</sup> Even though *The Husband* does not mention where the story takes place, *Pozi* (柏子), one of Shen's other stories which also deals with prostitution alongside the river, is set in Chengzhuo (辰州).

and exploitation of women.<sup>7</sup> It is rarely analysed from a legal or religious point of view to examine the idea of marriage in Miao culture. This is because the story highlights the poverty of the Chinese countryside with the income-earning potential of the city in the early Republic. A key element of the story is the fact that the husband's after-tax income is insufficient to support his family,<sup>8</sup> thus forcing A-Qi to move to Chengzhuo and work as a prostitute. *The Husband* also says very little about the cultural life of A-Qi and her husband. Unlike his other stories, Miao beliefs, attitudes and rituals are not mentioned at all. The city in *The Husband*, however, is populated with bullies, corrupt officers and drunk soldiers.

Despite these qualifications, *The Husband* can still be used to explore the idea of marriage in Miao culture. It does not matter if A-Qi and her husband are Miao or not, since membership in a group is based not only on blood but also on culture and language, and even on self-identification. On top of that, Miao is a complicated and problematic descriptor. Besides, because of multiple waves of migration and population movements, driven either by force or freewill, the Miao and other groups, including the Han people, have cohabited and intermarried amongst themselves for centuries.<sup>9</sup> Hence, it does not matter if a person from a rural area is an ethnic Miao or not, Miao culture is still an iconic and influential presence distinct from Han culture. In other words, what is important when considering marriage within Miao culture is the similarity and difference between Miao culture as Shen has portrayed it in a literary form and how it appears in legal documents.

---

<sup>7</sup> For example: 陳惠齡,〈女人的船屋與男人的牛車——探析沈從文〈丈夫〉和呂赫若〈牛車〉二文中「典妻賣淫」訊息及訊息言說的方式〉,《台灣文學學報》20(2012.6): 47-74.

<sup>8</sup> Rural areas during the early Republic were hard hit by industrialisation and poverty was widespread. At the same time, provincial expenditure, especially on the military and police, was increasing, thus making the tax burden on the local population at least four times heavier compared with the late Qing dynasty. See 曾賽豐 and 曹有鵬,《湖南民國經濟史料選刊(一)》(湖南:人民出版社,2009).

<sup>9</sup> Ph.D. dissertation: 李儲林,《交流、互動與融合:明清時期黔东南地區苗漢民族關係研究》,華中師範大學中國史博士論文,2018.

### 3. Shen Congwen and Christianity

Shen has a multi-faceted identity: he is Miao and Han, modern and traditional, rural and urban. These elements are both contradictory and juxtaposed against each other while they are also merged into one. That is how Shen can write about the beauty and innocence of Miao culture at one point while elsewhere describing the Miao people and villagers as ignorant.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Shen was deeply influenced by Christian culture, which had a powerful influence on the writers of modern Chinese literature at that time.<sup>11</sup> As Shen himself said:

As I had just arrived in Beijing, I had not gotten used to the usages of punctuation marks. The only book I could read was *Shiji* (史記). Then I got an old and worn-out Bible by accident. I was not a fan of religion; however, I liked the vernacular style translation and some of the chapters full of lyrics. From reading these two works more and more again, I acquired a lot of positive inspiration and learnt the basics of narration.<sup>12</sup>

At a time when there was a cultural vacuum, when Confucianism was being severely criticised and abandoned, the spirit of the Christian god and Jesus Christ were a convenient and appropriate replacement for many Chinese intellectuals.<sup>13</sup> As Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀), a leader of Chinese literature revolution, said at the time, “We (Chinese) need to cultivate the sublime and great personality and the enthusiastic and profound compassion of Jesus Christ in our blood. Then, we will be saved from the cruel, dark and filthy ditch in which we were trapped”.<sup>14</sup> Both the literary form of the Bible and the spirit of God influenced

---

<sup>10</sup> 劉洪濤,〈沈從文對苗族文化的多重闡釋與消解〉,《二十一世紀雙月刊》25(1994.10): 78-80.

<sup>11</sup> Christian culture nurtured many Chinese writers at this time, such as Zhou Zuoren (周作人) and Chen Duxiu. 楊劍龍,《基督教文化對五四新文學的影響》(臺北: 新銳文創, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> 沈從文,〈沈從文小說選集題記〉,《沈從文全集》,vol.11 (廣東: 花城出版社, 1982), p.67.

<sup>13</sup> Christianity was also considered a superstition in the May Fourth movement where it was criticised as a part of western imperialism. 中國青年社非基督教同盟編,《反對基督教運動》(上海: 上海書店, 1924), p.1.

<sup>14</sup> 陳獨秀,〈基督教與中國人〉,《陳獨秀著作選》,vol.2 (上海: 上海人民出版社, 1993), p.84.

Shen's writing.<sup>15</sup> However, to Shen, God was a realisation of life, love and beauty.<sup>16</sup> God represented a religious spirit that a compassionate writer should have. As he said: "It is inevitable that a writer becomes a believer and a philosopher in writing. When I pause and wonder, there is always a sympathetic emotion flowing into my exhausted heart. The same serendipity and solemnity that a believer or a philosopher would have before death."<sup>17</sup> To Shen, God is broader than the Christian God. Nevertheless, Christian culture is an undeniable element in his writing.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Love and Marriage

Shen was not interested in the system of marriage in Miao area, but in the marital relationship within Miao society that was based on love. In Shen's writing, the familial relationship between a man and a woman is freed from and superior to marriage.<sup>19</sup> Romantic relationships in Miao culture are pure, innocent and uncontaminated. However, *The Husband*, as a story about romantic love in Xianxi, is seemingly far removed from this ideal. If the husband and A-Qi are Miao, their relationship does not fit the image of Miao lovers that Shen has created. To avoid the question of why a faithful Miao wife would betray her beloved husband by prostitution, and thus violates the husband's lawful ownership of sex with his wife, *The Husband* can only be understood from the perspective

---

<sup>15</sup> Kinkley mentioned how Shen's writing was influenced by religion: "Shen went on in the 1930's to equate religion and art functionally, and even to name art as the successor to religion after the Death of God". See Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p.112.

<sup>16</sup> As Shen said: When a person falls in love with all beings, he discovers beauty and god.... Beauty is everywhere... The highest calling in life is to know the truth that "god manifests in life". 沈從文,〈美與愛〉,《沈從文全集》,vol.17, pp.359-360.

<sup>17</sup> 沈從文,〈談文學的生命投資〉,《沈從文全集》,vol.17, p.459.

<sup>18</sup> As to the relation between Shen Congwen and Christianity, see 王本朝,〈沈從文與基督教文化〉,《贛南師範學院學報》2(2001): 24-29.

<sup>19</sup> As Peng Xiaoyan (彭小妍) says: "Men and women of Miao in Shen's works are depicted as the most beautiful and kindest people in the world .... Young people of Miao break the bondage of traditional marriage. These works show the desire of an anarchic utopia...". 彭小妍,〈沈從文的烏托邦世界〉,《中國文哲研究叢刊》1(1991): 385.

that evil capitalism and debauched urban values have corrupted a naïve and innocent Miao girl from the countryside.

However, I would argue that a so-called betrayal in marriage, as represented by A-Qi's prostitution, is a necessary literary and legal device to show that love and marriage between a Miao couple is beautiful and cannot be contaminated by the secular world. Romantic love in Miao culture can only be highlighted through the setting of a challenged marriage. Marriage is intended to be a sacred relationship where the two parties are faithful to each other. The Christian idea of marriage as a holy covenant, then, becomes an ideal way for Shen to focus on and enforce his understanding of the beauty of love and marriage in Miao culture. Marriage, no matter if it exists as a form of law or as a social system, cannot survive without love. Yet romantic love does not need the approval of marriage. However, romantic love and marriage share something in common: the exclusiveness and fidelity between a couple. Therefore, the combination of free love alongside the practice of exclusive and faithful marriage within Miao culture becomes the most ideal romantic relationship in the world. Only marriage ordained by God can compare with it.

In 1929, one year before *The Husband* was published, the new Chinese civil law had been released (drafted in 1914, finished in 1925 and put into effect in 1931). The law was based on Chapter Two People (人民) of the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China (中華民國臨時約法) of 1912 which dealt with basic human rights, including equality between the sexes in marriage. The interpretation of monogamy as published by the Constitutional Court of the Republic of China in 1989 says:

The present idea of monogamy, which originated in the Christian ethics of the Middle Ages and Kantian philosophy, has become the basis of the civil law of every democratic country that maintains marriage and domestic practices. Even though monogamy is not specifically stated in the constitution of all these countries, it corresponds to the idea of democracy and freedom, the equality between man and woman, humanitarianism and the dignity of both sexes that

is promoted in every constitution.<sup>20</sup>

The principle of “one husband and one wife” in marriage law, therefore, had been a feature of Chinese marriage since the Qing dynasty Draft Civil Law (大清民律草案) of 1910.<sup>21</sup> However, practices associated with the old marriage law, such as the Han custom of “concubinage” continued to exist.<sup>22</sup> Even though some Miao marriage customs such as polygamy, marriage by capture and child brides, still existed in Hunan province at this time. The practice of monogamy had already spread widely, even before the coming of Christianity and the introduction of modern Chinese marriage law. The monogamic nature of Miao marriage, therefore, was based on free love. In *The Husband*, then, the legally-binding monogamy of modern marriage law becomes a stage for Shen to perform the sanctity of romantic love in Miao culture and the secularity of marriage regulated by law.

## 5. Infidelity and Adultery

In the Bible, marriage has been a figurative display of the relationship between God and human beings.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, just as God loathes idolatry, so also does he hate violations of the marital relationship. Divorce is, therefore, portrayed as the violence a husband does to his wife<sup>24</sup> and adultery as the unfaithful deeds a wayward wife carries out behind her

---

<sup>20</sup> Judicial Yuan, Constitutional Court Republic of China (Taiwan) Reporter: Interpretation No, <https://law.moj.gov.tw/LawClass/ExContent.aspx?ty=C&CC=D&CNO=242> (retrieved 2022.2.10).

<sup>21</sup> In Family law, article 1335 about marriage says that “bigamy is prohibited by the law”. (楊立新點教,《大清民律草案、國民律草案》, 長春: 吉林人民出版社, 2002, p.171.) Besides, the Civil Law in the early Republic, the Draft Civil Law of the Republic of China had also specified that bigamy is prohibited by the law in article 1102. (《大清民律草案、國民律草案》, p.350.)

<sup>22</sup> The additional article 12 of the Provisional the Criminal Code of the Republic of China (暫行新刑律) of 1914 justified concubinage and granted concubines the legal status as lawful spouses. 黃源盛,《晚清民國刑法史料輯注》chapter 7 (臺北: 元照出版社, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> In the Catholic church, marriage is a sacrament that represents the unity between Christ and the Church. In the Christian faith, marriage is an institution and a life-long relationship ordained by God. In this paper, marriage is used to emphasise on the sacred and unbreakable bond between husband and wife.

<sup>24</sup> Malachi 2:16.

husband's back.<sup>25</sup> Marriage is a covenant, a life-time commitment that has been witnessed by God and should not be broken. God has acted as a marriage protector<sup>26</sup> from the time of the Garden of Eden, when he oversaw the marriage between Adam and Eve, the first ever in the history of humanity.

God could have created Eve out of nothing, just like He had done with Adam. Instead, the fact that Eve is made out of Adam's rib represents that human beings who are created by God should worship and obey Him, just as Eve is made for and belongs to Adam. However, the relationship between Adam and Eve is not only about the dependence of women. As Michele Brooks writes about marriage law and the Christian covenant:

[t]he very fact that Eve was made from Adam's body symbolizes the one flesh relationship that a husband and wife share. Certainly, in the sexual consummation of marriage.... But scripture implicates so much more. Men and women, despite their physical separation, seek what they have lost: complete unity. It seems that once a man and woman are joined in the covenant of marriage, they achieve not just physical unity but also unity of spirit and flesh from that day forward.<sup>27</sup>

Marriage was at first a physical and spiritual unity of a man and a woman that was blessed by God. This relationship was then enshrined as marriage in laws verified by the Church as Canon law.<sup>28</sup> In modern times, marriage has become secularised and forms part of the civil law. Divorce and adultery are no longer regulated by the Church and marriage is nothing but a legal contract that can be terminated at any time and in any way. However, since when marriage was imbued with a sense of romantic love, a lifelong and love-based marriage is still a desirable goal to pursuit and one that bestows proof of a romantic

---

<sup>25</sup> Proverbs 2:16-17.

<sup>26</sup> According to Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 when speaking of marriage "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" suggesting it is God's presence which protects the relationship.

<sup>27</sup> Michele Brewer Brooks. "The Biblical View of Marriage: Covenant Relationship," *Regent University Law Review* 12[125](1999-2000): 132.

<sup>28</sup> Title VII. Marriage (Cann. 1055-1165), [https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic\\_lib4-cann998-1165\\_en.html#TITILE\\_VII](https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib4-cann998-1165_en.html#TITILE_VII) (retrieved 2022.2.10).

relationship.

As historian Lawrence Stone says: “Only one person in the world with whom one can fully unite at all levels...; love is the most important thing in the world, to which all other consideration, particularly material ones, should be sacrificed...”.<sup>29</sup> Romantic love not only promotes the idea of free love but also requires exclusiveness and sacrifice. Therefore, marriage in modern times still needs somehow to preserve the idea of romantic love. Thus, the unity of love-marriage in Miao culture is a perfect embodiment of the combination of marriage and romantic love as designed and intended by God. In order to manifest the superiority of Miao culture, romantic love and marriage as a sacred bond in *The Husband* can only be highlighted by the cruelty of marriage in reality.

Due to financial difficulties, A-Qi moves to Chengzhuo and becomes a boat prostitute, who lives and does business on boat. Prostitution is good business. Although adultery was considered an unlawful act according to the criminal law of the Republic of China because it violated a husband’s ownership of the sexuality of his wife (a definition that was only abolished on 29 May 2020), prostitution was a sexual act to which a husband could grant his consent. In *The Husband*, it says:

The women of the boats call this activity by the same name as it is known elsewhere: business.... It holds the same status as any other work, being neither offensive to morality.... A young woman... goes to the city while her husband still earns his living by honestly and arduously tilling the fields back in the village. Her earnings from two nights in the city, remitted to him once a month, provide him a better life. He keeps the rights to his wife and the profits, too....<sup>30</sup>

There are many such husbands in Huang village.... He reasons that his woman still belongs to him in name; the children she bears will be his, and, if she prospers, he will get his share of the proceeds.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p.287.

<sup>30</sup> Shen Congwen, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, trans. by Jeffrey C. Kinkley (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004), p.34.

<sup>31</sup> Shen Congwen, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, p.40.

Even though what Miao wives were doing was prostitution, it was nothing to be ashamed of because prostitution in the early Republic was still a legitimate career like all other occupations and thus protected by the constitution.<sup>32</sup> Besides, prostitution did not affect the status of a husband because, according to the customary laws in some Miao areas, prostitution was not adultery. For example, in Liangwang, a small village in Rongjiang county (榕江縣兩汪鄉),<sup>33</sup> even when a married woman committed adultery, the case could be easily addressed if the woman, found to be the perpetrator and culpable for the adultery, was willing to pay a certain amount of money to compensate for her husband's loss, which amounted to around 50 or 60 strings of coins. However, this money was usually paid out by the woman's lover that turns adultery into a prostitution-type relationship.

That is to say, the ownership of a wife's sexuality could be temporarily transferred and could be redeemed by the wife or paid out by the lover thus making adultery a form of business, like renting. In other words, A-Qi's financial difficulties not only justify her recourse to prostitution, they also exempt her from jeopardising her marriage. Her sexual activities carried out for these reasons are not considered unfaithful or adulterous. I am not saying that Miao wives were allowed to commit adultery in the name of business. In *The Husband*, however, Shen plays with the idea, since the legal guilt of prostitution which is usually thought toxic to marriage can be exempted by law, that A-Qi and her husband's story can exemplify an understanding of marriage in Miao culture and marriage as a sacred bond anointed by God that cannot be infringed by anything, even prostitution.

Even though A-Qi's husband has accepted the way his wife makes a living, he is not happy about it. This arrangement, however, becomes a necessary plot device that serves to illustrate the conflicts, not only between him and his wife, but also between this couple and the difficulties in their marriage caused by a fallen city.<sup>34</sup> According to Liu Hongtao, the

---

<sup>32</sup> A legal decision of case no. 374, which was prosecuted by criminal code 231, made on Jan 1st, 1939 that "a prostitute who has left the brothel and got married cannot be discriminated due to her former profession" shows that prostitution was legal back then. See 全國法規資料庫, <https://law.moj.gov.tw/LawClass/LawSingleRela.aspx?media=print&PCODE=C0000001&FLNO=231&ty=J> (retrieved 2022.2.10).

<sup>33</sup> 吳一文 and 覃東平, 《苗族古歌與苗族歷史文化研究》(貴陽: 貴州民族出版社, 2000), p.188.

<sup>34</sup> *The Husband* can easily be considered a criticism of the dark side of a sinful city, like Sodom and Gomorrah, that makes the wife a prostitute and takes away the husband's manhood and identity, not a story about romantic love and the divinity of marriage in Miao culture.

image of love, or even just sex, in Christianity is holy and pure. However, in Shen's stories the portrayal of sex is usually tainted and not religious. That is to say "the natural, unsophisticated, and blunt sexual desire, which Shen inherited from his aboriginal roots in Xiangxi, had never been tamed by Christianity. On the contrary, such desire in his works is shown to be absurd and miscellaneous".<sup>35</sup> However, I would argue that such a claim indicates the fact that the Christian idea of love, marriage and sex can be used as an analogy, not to criticise Christianity, but to analyse the love-marriage relationship of a Miao couple in Miao culture. *The Husband* and the Christian ideal of marriage are analogical not only because of the fact that the Bible influenced the writings of Shen and his contemporaries, but also because the portrayal of marriage and love in Miao culture can thus be verified by referring to the origin of marriage law in the West — the story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis.

## 6. Husband/Adam and Wife/Eve

In the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden because of their disobedience to God. Since then, men and women had lived in sin. Then, according to the New Testament, through the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ, humanity had the opportunity to be with the Lord and restore their relationship to Him as it has been in the Garden of Eden. *The Husband* models a similar structure. The wife leaves her home in the paradise<sup>36</sup> of her Miao homeland to work in a corrupt city. Her husband comes to the city to visit her. Many things happen to the couple and make them realise that the life here is not suitable for them. In the end they leave the city and everything they possess there to return to where they are from, the paradise. *The Husband* shows that their marriage is unbreakable. All the difficulties about sex, money and the abuse of power they encounter in the city are not reasons to criticise the city. They are part of a journey they needed to go through in order to get back to the paradise. That explains why Shen has appeared to be uncritical of life in the city. He was just trying to show the beauty and purity of love and

---

<sup>35</sup> 劉洪濤,《沈從文小說與現代主義》(臺北:秀威資訊,2009),pp.88-89.

<sup>36</sup> Shen Congwen's stories about the Miao people are often considered a depiction of paradise. 彭小妍,〈沈從文的烏托邦世界〉1(1991): 385-411.

marriage as it emerged from the ashes. Or it could be that to Shen ashes are beautiful and pure. Or that there are, in fact, no ashes at all.

In the original Paradise, men and women were innocent and did not think to worry about the relationship between each other and between them and their Father. In the secular world of the city, they no longer have a relationship with the Father and their marriage and love are challenged. In *The Husband*, both A-Qi and her husband are transformed as a reaction to the fallen city. The stages in the husband's transformation are: the acceptance of A-Qi's prostitution, a growing awareness of her fidelity, his wrath regarding his loss of dignity as a man and his uncertainty about whether or not to fight for his identity as a husband<sup>37</sup>. At the end of the story he cries for a restoration and a returning, which had been foretold in the scene of a sickle, lost but now found, which acts as a premonition of the finale of the story — the return to paradise. To the river warden, who is in charge of the security in his area as a sort of notary public, the husband remarked about the missing sickle:

I blamed Seventh Maid, and she cried. Still we couldn't find it. Devils' surprise, covered up my eyes — it was hidden in a rice basket! .... Then I remembered. I'd been whittling pegs with it when I cut myself. With my finger all bloody, I got mad and chucked it aside.... Ha ha, found it at last.... Yes, I'm glad to have it back. Because I always suspected that Seventh Maid had dropped it in the stream and was too embarrassed to admit it. Now I know she wasn't lying. I know, I wronged her...."<sup>38</sup>

The sickle represents the husband's wife and her fidelity, his trust in her and their love and marriage. It also represents the impotence he feels for not being strong enough to support his family. His wife had hurt him and made him bleed in the name of business, so he threw her away. Later on he realises that, even though he was reluctant to admit it, he had wronged and misunderstood her. Thus, he tries to look for her, to bring her back home and make their love and marriage shine as new once again. A-Qi also has a transformation. It begins with the narrator's speech about wives who come to the city to become prostitutes:

---

<sup>37</sup> Shen Congwen, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, p.52.

<sup>38</sup> Shen Congwen, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, p.54.

Through their business, they gradually turn into city people. Slowly they grow estranged from their country villages, and slowly they learn the vices that are useful only to city folk. And then they are soiled. But this happens very gradually. It takes so long that it goes unnoticed.<sup>39</sup>

In the beginning A-Qi was an innocent girl and a faithful and diligent wife in her remote village in Xiangxi. Then, she moved to Chengzhou city and became a prostitute. In the city she seems have lost her innocence and naivety. One day, after her husband comes to visit her, she goes shopping in the market even though he is waiting for her back on the boat. But it turns out that she is going to get a gift for him, a huqin fiddle, because she knows he would love to have one. At night, she still conducts business even in his presence. It is because she wants to pacify two drunk soldiers looking for trouble by asking her husband to play huqin for them that makes him feel humiliated. At these moments, it seems as if A-Qi may not as yet have made up her mind to go back with her husband. The time she decides to leave is when she sees him crying like a baby, showing that he cannot bear her prostitution any longer. Now he desperately wants her to come home even though he must show a vulnerability that a man is not intended to show.

In the movie version of *The Husband*, A-Qi and her husband return home too. However, the ending in the film shows that A-Qi and her husband struggle and are in pain, and that another Miao prostitute cries because her husband dies. Such an ending serves to strengthen the conflict between this innocent Miao couple and the evil and cruelty of a fallen capitalist city. In contrast, in the original story, Shen adopts an extremely light touch approach when describing the ending of this story. When the river warden comes to A-Qi's boat to invite her husband to eat with him, he learns from A-Qi's procuress and servant that: "husband and wife had returned to the countryside together early that morning"<sup>40</sup> This ending maximises the human power of free will, proves that love does conquer all and that "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it".<sup>41</sup> Even though life has

---

<sup>39</sup> Shen Congwen, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, p.34.

<sup>40</sup> Shen Congwen, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, p.84.

<sup>41</sup> Corinthians 10:13.

been hard and their love and marriage has been challenged and possibly damaged, this couple can still leave the fallen city behind and return effortlessly to the paradise, as the prodigal son is always welcomed by his father no matter what he has done<sup>42</sup>. As a Miao couple, A-Qi and her husband have upheld their love in the Miao culture that Shen seeks to praise. As husband and wife, they have obeyed the law God made for marriage, so they can accept God's blessing and mercy freely. As it says in Romans 3:23-24: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus".

## 7. Conclusion — Father/God and Law/Mercy

God is not only a lawmaker and a keeper of morals, who creates rules for people to follow and punishes them when they break them. He is also a lifesaver, love-giver and embracer. He loves His children unconditionally, protects them when they are in trouble and knows their hardships.<sup>43</sup> The implication of the story of the Samaritan woman<sup>44</sup> is that God will embrace us if we repent our sins and return to His arms. God as Father is an incarnation of law and mercy. Shen created such a father figure in *The Husband* in the form of the river warden.<sup>45</sup> He not only represents the law but also plays a role as a guardian angel, the protector of all lives on the river boats. In the film, the river warden is portrayed as a bully who helps the local government and military forces take advantage of the boat prostitutes, thus making the story more miserable and the depiction of the authorities and the city more vicious. In contrast, in the original story, the river warden is less a willing accomplice of the victimisers and more an ally of the victims. As Shen states:

---

<sup>42</sup> Luke 15.

<sup>43</sup> As in John 4: 9-10. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

<sup>44</sup> John 4.

<sup>45</sup> In the original text, there is an acquaintance, a female character in the film, bringing Miao wives to the city. This person can also be seen as the serpent in the Bible that lured Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Shen Congwen. *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, p.35.

A river warden was lord of the river, up on everything that went on there. Originally this one had made his living on the water like all the others, and on the wrong side of the law. The officials, then, as was their practice, used him to control the others.... He had gradually become a peaceable and respected man. But, if his job was to help the authorities, his heart remained with the boat people. In these circumstances he had become a moral exemplar, every bit as respected as the officials, yet without all the fear and dread. He was godfather to many women in the trade. By dint of these social habits, his behaviors and his way of handling things tended to favor the people.<sup>46</sup>

A-Qi's husband mistakenly thinks that the river warden is one of A-Qi's regular clients. Even though he looks like one, he is, in fact, a loving father who never hurts his daughters and only seeks to protect them. He comes to visit A-Qi on her boat because he has been appointed by the local authority to investigate some petty thieves suspected of three minor robberies. Even though A-Qi's husband is a stranger and acts suspiciously towards him, the river warden still talks nicely to him. As Shen's description that A-Qi calls the warden 'Godfather' and that the warden, when meeting her husband, felt it was like "getting to meet his son-in-law for the first time".<sup>47</sup> After these introductions the warden then says to the husband: "I'll take you out for a drink, now that we're friends"<sup>48</sup>, a promise which he keeps. On the morning A-Qi and her husband return to the countryside, the warden comes back to their boat to "escort his quest from afar to his feast"<sup>49</sup>. Even when A-Qi's husband is suspected by the police, the river warden is the first to speak up for him.

As the quote from Herennius Modestinus states, marriage law and its principle of monogamy, which was legislated, passed, and put into effect in the early Chinese Republic, is not only a civil law in the secular world that regulates the rights and obligations in marriage as a social apparatus, it is also a covenant that embodies a lifelong commitment and denotes a blessing and protection from God. In Miao culture, marriage is also built

---

<sup>46</sup> Shen Congwen, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, pp.42-44.

<sup>47</sup> Shen Congwen, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, p.48.

<sup>48</sup> Shen Congwen, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, p.56.

<sup>49</sup> Shen Congwen, *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*, pp.42, 84.

based on free will and romantic love. Therefore, the best way to write about love and an ideal marriage for Shen was to write a story about a Miao couple's married life. The best way to accentuate the perseverance required for a marital relationship based on love, and the divinity such a relationship could encompass, was to put it to a great test. The difficulties A-Qi and her husband face in this story make it an analogy for marriage as designed by God. Thus, *The Husband* becomes a way for Shen to examine the love and marriage in Miao culture in terms of the civil law of the early Chinese Republic, the customary laws of Miao people and the Christian marriage ideal. In addition to the exploration of these legal and religious ideas, the most important thing about *The Husband* is that Shen wrote it to praise the beauty, purity and divinity of marriage and love between Miao couples.

## Reference

### 1. Chinese

- 中國青年社非基督教同盟編，《反對基督教運動》，上海：上海書店，1924。
- 王本朝，〈沈從文與基督教文化〉，《贛南師範學院學報》2(2001): 24-29。
- 司法院，〈大法官解釋釋字第 242 號〉，《全國法規資料庫》，<https://law.moj.gov.tw/LawClass/ExContent.aspx?ty=C&CC=D&CNO=242> (檢索於 2022 年 2 月 10 日)。
- 吳一文、覃東平，《苗族古歌與苗族歷史文化研究》，貴陽：貴州民族出版社，2000。
- 李儲林，《交流、互動與融合：明清時期黔东南地區苗漢民族關係研究》，華中師範大學中國史博士論文，2018。
- 沈從文，《沈從文全集》，廣東：花城出版社，1982。
- 郭沫若，〈斥反動文藝〉，《大眾文藝叢刊》第一輯：《文藝的新方向》，香港：生活書店，1948。
- 陳惠齡，〈女人的船屋與男人的牛車——探析沈從文〈丈夫〉和呂赫若〈牛車〉二文中「典妻賣淫」訊息及訊息言說的方式〉，《台灣文學學報》20(2012.6): 47-74。
- 陳獨秀，《陳獨秀著作選》，上海：上海人民出版社，1993。
- 彭小妍，〈沈從文的烏托邦世界〉，《中國文哲研究叢刊》1(1991.3): 385-411。
- 曾賽豐、曹有鵬，《湖南民國經濟史料選刊（一）》，湖南：人民出版社，2009。

黃源盛，〈晚清民國刑法史料輯注〉，臺北：元照出版社，2010。

楊立新點教，〈大清民律草案、國民律草案〉，長春：吉林人民出版社，2002。

楊劍龍，〈基督教文化對五四新文學的影響〉，臺北：新銳文創，2012。

劉洪濤，〈沈從文對苗族文化的多重闡釋與消解〉，《二十一世紀雙月刊》25(1994.10): 76-82。

劉洪濤，〈沈從文小說與現代主義〉，臺北：秀威資訊，2009。

## 2. English

Brooks, Michele Brewer. "The Biblical View of Marriage: Covenant Relationship," *Regent University Law Review* 12[125](1999-2000): 125-144.

*Code of Canon Law*. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic\\_index\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_en.html) (Retrieved 2022.2.10).

Judicial Yuan. "The Enforcement Law for Part IV, Family Law of the Civil Code," *Laws and Regulations Database of The Republic of China*, <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawHistory.aspx?pcode=B0000005> (Retrieved 2022.2.10).

Katz, Paul R. "Dances of the Doomed: Ritual and Resistance among China's Western Hunan Miao in the 1940s," *Asia Major* 30.2(2017): 133-186.

Kinkley, Jeffrey C. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

Shen, Congwen. *Selected Short Stories of Shen Congwen*. Trans. by Jeffrey C. Kinkley. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004.

Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977.

Watson, Alan (Ed. and Trans). *The Digest of Justinian*. Vol 2. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

**Date of first draft:** Feb. 15, 2022

**Approved after review:** Mar. 04, 2022

**Executive editor:** Lu, Hsuan-Yu (盧宣宇)

**Author:**

Lung-Lung HU (胡龍隆) :

輔仁大學比較文學所博士

Senior Lecturer, Chinese Department, School of Language, Literatures and Learning, Dalarna University

Address: Gruvgatan 16, LGH 1103, Falun 79162, Sweden

E-Mail: llh@du.se

# 從沈從文〈丈夫〉論民國初年之苗族婚姻與基督教 婚姻法

胡龍隆

達拉納大學語言、文學與教育學院中文系助理教授

**內容摘要：**本文擬從沈從文的短篇小說〈丈夫〉（發表於1930年）來檢視苗文化中的婚姻與一夫一妻觀念。沈從文作為具有苗血統的作家，寫了很多關於苗族（中國少數民族之一，具有多個文化與族群分支）的故事。沈從文的〈丈夫〉旨在描寫，近似於基督教婚姻法中神聖的一夫一妻觀念，苗人夫妻間堅定的羈絆。

婚姻法在西方有很久遠的歷史，其根源可追溯於早期的基督教文明。婚姻，與受洗和聖餐一樣，被視為一種神聖的結合。這種神聖性隨後被法律所確保，再進一步成為西方的婚姻法。當西方婚姻法在清末，傳進是時傳統法律也處於革新時期的中國，確立了中國現代婚姻法中一夫一妻制。

一夫一妻原本並不存在傳統中國社會，而與中國傳統婚姻一夫一妻多妾的概念相衝突。民國早期，很多人在法律中一夫一妻原則確立後，仍然違背法律進行納妾。相對於漢文化，苗文化儘管對婚姻此觀念比較開放包容，苗族配偶仍很大程度地實踐一夫一妻原則。因此，筆者擬從法律與宗教的角度分析〈丈夫〉以闡明，除了揭發民國早期社會黑暗面此一視角之外，沈從文其實是以一個類似創世紀伊甸園裡亞當夏娃的故事來讚美苗族夫妻間的婚姻與愛情。因為這篇小說亦曾於1994年改編成電影《村妓》，所以筆者亦會援引電影中的內容來支持文中之論點。

**關鍵詞：**沈從文、丈夫、苗文化、婚姻法、基督教文化、一夫一妻、伊甸園