ABSTRACT

Tang novels, or *tang chuanqi* (唐传奇), refer to a collection of short stories written by intellectuals during the Tang dynasty. This form of literature represents one of the earlier beginnings of Chinese fiction (小说) and has profound influences on the history of Chinese classical literature. However, previous studies on the Tang novels tended to focus on their historical background and textual criticism. Although many female characters play important roles in the Tang novels, and represent some of the most vivid characters in these short stories, they were rarely studied. This academic exercise, hence, has two main objectives: firstly, to make a systematic analysis of female characters in Tang novels; secondly, to see how these fictional characters actually reflect the social conditions of women in the Tang period.

In this study, female characters in the Tang novels were carefully reviewed and classified into five different categories: prostitutes, concubines, common folk, swordswomen and supernatural beings. In each chapter, a few representative characters of a particular category were analyzed.

Findings showed that though there are a number of different characters in the same category, they were portrayed in a similar manner, reflecting certain common themes. The authors' treatment of female characters in these short stories also expressed considerable sympathy and understanding towards women, even those of low social status, like prostitutes and concubines. In ancient China, women were generally regarded as the weaker sex and looked down upon. However, female characters in the Tang novels were portrayed as individuals of depth, and many even displayed a high standard of moral values and integrity unmatched by their male counterparts. In general, these fictional characters also reflected a generation of women who enjoyed relatively higher social status and were more liberated, as compared to those of the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties.