

Ancient Matriarchal Kingdoms In India And China: A Case Study of Strīrājya of Mahābhārata and Nüer Guo of Journey to The West

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Abstract

India and China are home to ancient civilizations marked by extensive cultural and interpersonal connections dating back over two millennia. These enduring societies not only resisted external invasions but also left an indelible impact on the development of diverse and unparalleled communities throughout history. Given their vast geographical expanse, both nations hosted numerous kingdoms in East and Southeast Asia, predominantly led by male rulers, thus establishing them as patriarchal domains. However, amid this prevailing trend, certain kingdoms distinguished themselves by being exclusively governed by women, nurturing well-established matriarchal societies. Noteworthy examples of such female-led kingdoms can be found in both ancient Indian and Chinese literature, suggesting a potential impact of Indic literature and culture on shaping the mindset of the Chinese populace. Delving into these ancient matriarchal realms not only provides insights into the socio-political status of women in these two countries but also presents an opportunity to reflect on the folk ethics, customs, and beliefs that set these kingdoms apart from other male-dominated societies.

Keywords: Matriarchy, India, China

1. Introduction

The roots of matriarchy are believed to trace back to the inception of human civilization. In the initial stages of human societies, largely centered around hunting and gathering, men often enjoyed increased power and social standing due to their engagement in physically demanding tasks. Nevertheless, with the progression of human society and the establishment of clan-based structures, there were instances of societies led by women that emerged across various regions globally. This phenomenon contributed to the cultural notion of the world's creation being influenced by feminine powers, as reflected in folk traditions and the worship of deities, particularly prevalent in the eastern world.

In Indic traditions, the cosmic feminine forces, represented by concepts like Śakti (divine power) and Prakṛti (nature), play a crucial role in the manifestation of the universe. This perspective has led to the characterization of the world as a mother in ancient Indic texts. The coming together of Śiva and Śakti, symbolizing the male and female forces, stands as the fundamental catalyst for the genesis of various forms of life in the universe. [1] The worship of a Mother Goddess was also prevalent in the Indus Valley civilization (3300-1300 BC), where individuals venerated Śakti and Paśupati (an epithet of Śiva). This

assertion is supported by the discovery of numerous terracotta figurines portraying female deities at the archaeological sites of this ancient civilization. The inhabitants of this society, primarily engaged in agriculture, held the belief that the Mother Goddess played a vital role in nurturing seeds and providing sustenance, thereby elevating her status above male forces. [2]

In ancient Chinese society, there was a recognition of the significance of feminine forces and the equilibrium between male and female energies that uphold the world. In the initial periods of the Han Dynasty (206 BC- 220 AD), myths associated with the world's creation were formally established. According to these beliefs, the world emerged from a state of chaos, where two deities, Yang (representing the male) and Yin (representing the female), manifested, with Yang controlling the heavens and Yin administering the earth. [3] Nonetheless, there existed no distinct boundary between heaven and earth; instead, they were fused together like an egg. According to mythology, the deity Pan Gu played a pivotal role in separating heaven and earth. After this division, a female deity named Nüwa created human beings by molding them from mud using a rope. [4] Due to her procreative prowess, Nüwa became venerated as a Mother Goddess, frequently associated with themes of fertility and bountiful harvests. These cultural beliefs and mythologies not only heightened the status of women in ancient Indian and Chinese cultures but also reinforced the idea that females were equally capable, if not superior, to males in terms of governance and leadership.

2. Ancient Kingdoms, Societies and Tribes with Matriarchal Influence in India and China

At different junctures in history, numerous kingdoms and regions in ancient India have experienced the ascendancy of women into positions of authority. The Greek explorer Megasthenes (350-290 BC), who visited India during the rule of Chandragupta Maurya, extensively documented the socio-political conditions prevalent in various realms in his work titled *Indica*. In his writings, he noted that the Pandya Dynasty, which held dominion over much of the southern Indian peninsula, operated under a flourishing matriarchal system. Megasthenes also mentioned that Pandaia, the daughter of Herakles, founded the Pandya dynasty and its rulership followed a matrilineal descent. [5]

In Southern India, several tribal communities have historically adhered to a matrilineal system, a cultural trait that persists to this day. Tribes like the Nayars, Kurichchians, Kundu Vadians, and Malayaurs practiced a form of matrilineal inheritance known as Marumakkathayam, wherein property was passed down through the maternal lineage. [6] In Orissa, the Bhauma-Kara dynasty, (736-950 AD), boasted a total of eight rulers, with six of them being female. Noteworthy among them was Queen Tribhuvana Mahadevi, and her era is celebrated as the golden age of Orissa. [7]

In the northeastern parts of India, various tribes and clans historically saw women in leadership roles, and some of them continue to uphold these traditions. The Khasi and Garo tribes in Meghalaya stand out as one of the remaining matriarchal societies in today's world. The term 'Khasi' directly translates to 'to be born from a mother.' Within this community, women not only assume leadership roles within the clan but also take on ceremonial responsibilities during cremations, a practice uncommon in other Indian cultures. [8] The Garo tribe also adheres to matrilineal inheritance practices. Within this community, the youngest daughter assumes the responsibility of caring for elderly parents, and the social standing of women typically surpasses that of men. [9]

Some aspects of Chinese culture suggest the existence of matriarchal societies in ancient China. An illustration of this is the Chinese character 'xing,' meaning 'surname,' which consists of two components: 'nü,' signifying 'woman,' and 'sheng,' meaning 'to give birth.' [10] Though, there is no solid evidence of

matriarchal society in China predating the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BC). Nevertheless, historical records indicate active involvement of queens and concubines in governance during the Western Zhou period (1040-771 BC). Bronze inscriptions from this era detail the significant roles played by queens in the governance structure. The *Book of Rites of Zhou* (Zhou Li) enumerates several crucial imperial positions held by women during this time. [11]

During the Qin, Han, and Sui dynasties, women actively contributed to governance, offering counsel to the emperor and occupying crucial positions in the imperial court. Despite their notable roles, a woman at the helm of power was something which was yet to be witnessed in the Chinese society. This can be conceivably attributed to the patriarchal norms established by Confucianism. Confucianism's theory of three bonds (san gang), forming the hierarchical structure of ancient Chinese society, positioned women as subordinate to men. [12] Following the introduction of Buddhism from India into China during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), numerous Indic folk elements became integrated into Chinese culture. This assimilation encompassed the traditional Indic practice of venerating nature as the Mother Goddess and advocating for equal status for women in various societal roles. It is noteworthy that during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), recognized as the golden age of Buddhism's dissemination in China, the emergence of Wu Zetian as the first and only female emperor in Chinese history may not be considered a mere coincidence. [13]

Matriarchal societies were primarily prevalent in the mountainous landscapes of western China, exemplified by the Mosuo tribe in Southwest China, the Qiang ethnic group in Northwest China, and the Yao-Miao people in Southern China. Among these, the Mosuo people represent the last surviving matriarchal society in China, where women hold authority in both agricultural and domestic spheres. In Mosuo culture, women occupy the top position in the family hierarchy and inherit property. Additionally, they practice a distinctive tradition known as 'walking marriage' (zou hun), a form of polyandry wherein women have the authority to choose their partners. [14]

3. Parallels between Strīrājya and Nüer Guo

Strīrājya is a mythological kingdom mentioned in *Jaiminīya Mahābhārata* which was written by Sage Jaminī who was the disciple of Sage Vyāsa, author of the *Mahābhārata*. [15] The *Aśvamedha Parva* in this epic recounts the tale of the horse sacrifice. Yudhiṣṭhira's released horse ventures into a realm known as Strīrājya, or the 'Kingdom of Women,' where the queen named Pramīla seizes the steed. Arjuna, in his attempt to reclaim the horse from Pramīla, encounters her proposal of marriage. However, upon Arjuna's refusal, a battle ensues between them. Subsequently, a celestial prophecy advises Arjuna to cease the conflict, leading to the restoration of peace. [16]

Journey to the West (Xi Youji), penned by Wu Cheng'en in the 16th century during the Ming Dynasty, stands as a revered and widely enjoyed novel in China, acknowledged as one of the four classics. This literary work draws inspiration from the travelogue titled *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* (Datang Xiyuji) of Monk Xuanzang (602-664 AD), who undertook a journey to India to procure Buddhist scriptures. The narrative revolves around Monk Xuanzang as the central figure, incorporating various fictional characters accompanying him on the expedition to India. Many of these characters find their roots in Indic mythology and folklore. The 54th chapter of this novel is based on the challenges faced by Xuanzang and his disciples in a kingdom known as Nüer Guo, which interestingly also means 'Kingdom of Women'. [17]

From the beginning, both narratives exhibit striking similarities, suggesting a potential influence of the Indian tale on the Chinese author. To begin with, both Strīrājya in *Jaiminīya Mahābhārata* and Nüer Guo in *Journey to the West* depict realms governed exclusively by women, characterized by beauty and dignity. In Strīrājya, women assume the role of warriors within the kingdom, displaying bravery sufficient to capture the ceremonial horse of the formidable Pāṇḍavas. It is further mentioned that any man entering this realm would not endure for long. [18] Likewise, the women in Nüer Guo in *Journey to the West* engage in all labor-intensive duties such as farming and woodcutting, actively participating in military endeavors. It is also noted that few travelers in history managed to reach this kingdom. [19]

Secondly, in both narratives, the matriarchal queen of the Kingdom of Women expresses her affection for the male protagonist, only to face rejection when making advances. Specifically, in *Journey to the West*, the queen of Nüer Guo considers Xuanzang's arrival in her kingdom as a divine blessing. She proposes that he assume the role of king, father children with her, and carry on the imperial legacy. [20] Likewise, Queen Pramīla of the Strīrājya gleefully welcome Arjuna into her kingdom and extends a proposal of marriage, luring him by saying that she would give all kinds of pleasures to him which he has never experienced in his entire life. [21]

Thirdly, following the rejection by the male protagonists, the matriarchal authorities in the Kingdom of Women in both narratives become profoundly angered and are determined to engage in a fierce battle to avenge this perceived dishonor. In the case of *Journey to the West*, the queen of Nüer Guo transforms into a scorpion demoness and kidnaps Xuanzang, posing a threat to his chastity. Xuanzang's disciple Sun Wukong, a character inspired by Hanumān, employs his array of skills and ultimately rescues Xuanzang from potential disgrace. [22] Similarly, in the *Jaiminīya Mahābhārata*, Queen Pramīla engages in a heated confrontation with Arjuna after he rejects her marriage proposal. However, on the brink of war, a celestial proclamation advises Arjuna not to battle against Pramīla, as he would be unable to defeat her. Subsequently, Arjuna invites Pramīla to accompany him to Hastinapur and assures her that suitable husbands will be found for all the women in her kingdom. [23]

While these matriarchal kingdoms depicted in the Indian and Chinese narratives may initially appear fictional, certain historical records hint at the existence of analogous matriarchal societies within regions influenced by the Indosphere. This implies that Strīrājya might not merely be a mythological kingdom but a tangible reality that could have attracted the interest of Chinese monks and scholars visiting India, possibly evolving into the concept of Nüer Guo in *Journey to the West*. In his travelogue *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, Monk Xuanzang (not to be confused with Xuanzang of the novel *Journey to the West*, which is a fictional character) gave an elaborate record of various ancient places, which existed in the Indosphere. His descriptions encompassed the geographical details, socio-political dynamics, and religious associations of these places. In recent centuries, these records have evolved into crucial resources for comprehending the historical landscape of ancient India.

This book contains references to two matriarchal realms that offer clues to the location of Strīrājya. The first is the Eastern Kingdom of Women (Dong Nüguo), situated near Brahmapura (in the present-day Garhwal and Kumaon region). Referred to as Suvarṇagotra (sufalaqudaluo guo) in the book, Xuanzang notes that women have governed this kingdom, which is bordered by Tibet on the east, for generations, with the men primarily engaging in warfare and agricultural pursuits. [24] The records also refer to a second matriarchal realm, known as the Western Kingdom of Women (Xi Nüguo), situated close to Folin (the Byzantine Empire) in Persia (modern-day Iran). Notably, this kingdom is depicted as an island

exclusively inhabited by women. It is important to note that Xuanzang clarifies that these territories lie beyond the sphere of Indic influence, and he did not personally explore these areas. [25]

The details from the aforementioned records about the two matriarchal kingdoms strongly suggest that Strīrājya from the *Mahābhārata* likely had its location in the northern Himalayan regions of India. Monk Xuanzang's accounts of this kingdom would likely have intrigued Chinese intellectuals, as matriarchal rule was unprecedented in Chinese history. It is conceivable that, in adapting these records to resonate with Chinese readers, the author of *Journey to the West* created the fictional Kingdom of Women (Nüer Guo), drawing substantial inspiration from Strīrājya in Indic narratives.

4. Conclusion

The notable parallels between Strīrājya in the *Jaiminīya Mahābhārata* and Nüer Guo in *Journey to the West* suggest a significant impact of Indic literature and philosophy on the Chinese perspective. This highlights the Chinese admiration for specific elements of Indian culture that were absent in their own. Despite the ingrained concept of Yin-Yang forces shaping various aspects of life, China lacked a strong tradition of female leadership, let alone a matriarchal kingdom. While the author of *Journey to the West* calculatedly depicted Nüer Guo as a symbol of women's empowerment, certain aspects of both narratives, including their resolutions, illustrate the distinctions between Indic and Chinese moral values. In the story, after facing rejection from Monk Xuanzang, who attempts to deceive her, the queen of Nüer Guo transforms into a scorpion demoness, seeking to compromise his chastity. This reflects a pervasive theme of deception and vengeance found in various Chinese stories. In contrast, Queen Pramīla in the *Jaiminīya Mahābhārata* does not resort to malicious engagements against Arjuna. Instead, they reach a truce, leading to Pramīla's marriage to Arjuna. This highlights the concept of compassion (*karuṇā*) deeply ingrained in Indic folk ethics, as evident in various other narratives.

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