

Comparative Study of the Disciplinary Spaces in *The Scarlet Letter* and *White Deer Plains*

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Abstract

Despite the vast temporal and spatial disparities, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Chen Zhongshi's *White Deer Plains* both reveal how dominant cultural systems of a certain society impose discipline and punishment on the deviant behaviors of individuals. The core disciplinary spatial images in these two works-the scaffold in Puritan society and the clan hall in Confucian patriarchal society-serve as critical focal points for analysis. As material entities, their architectural layouts symbolize the ethical orders of their societies. As carriers of power, they materialize and function as primary sites for the enactment of religious theocracy and clan authority. As technologies of discipline, they employ mechanisms such as public shaming and ritualized punishment to subjugate the human body. Utilizing the space theories of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, this comparative study explores how space is shaped by power and, in turn, operationalizes power within Western Puritan and Chinese Confucian clan societies. It further examines the varied responses and resistance strategies individuals adopt when confronted with spatial discipline. It deepens the understanding of the dynamic relationships among space, power, and the body, revealing the perennial tension between individual freedom and social norms across cultural contexts.

Keywords

The Scarlet Letter; *White Deer Plains*; Scaffold; Clan Hall; Space.

1. Introduction

The Scarlet Letter, a masterpiece by American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, has been regarded as a classic of American literature since its publication in 1850. It deeply demonstrates the ethical and moral values of 17th-century Puritan society and its oppression of individual voices. *White Deer Plains* is a full-length novel by contemporary Chinese writer Chen Zhongshi, which was first published in 1993. Set in the village of White Deer, known as the "Village of Benevolence and Justice" on the Guanzhong Plain in Shaanxi Province, the novel spans more than fifty years of history from the late Qing Dynasty to the founding of New China, delicately reflecting the clan culture and living conditions of that time and demonstrating the profound transformation of Chinese society from conventional to modern. *The Scarlet Letter* and *White Deer Plains* stand as canonical works in American and Chinese literature, respectively. Though separated by time and space, both narratives dramatize the individual's struggle against the moral codes and social constraints imposed by a dominant cultural system-Puritan Christianity in Hawthorne's 17th-century New England, and Confucian clan ethics in Chen's depiction of rural Shaanxi from the late Qing to the founding of the People's Republic. In these two works with such a large span of time and space, some similarities can be found in the plots of Hester and Tian Xiao'e, for example, both of them are publicly punished for adultery, and the punishment for them was administered by the man with whom they committed adultery, etc. Within these narratives, the scaffold and the clan hall emerge as central spatial images, the

material embodiment of the mechanisms of social discipline and moral judgment in their respective contexts. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the scaffold appears three times, and at each instance, it serves as a significant point in the development of the plot. The scaffold serves not merely as a space of judgment and punishment for moral transgression in Puritan society, but more profoundly evolves into a spiritual locus where characters confront their inner turmoil and pursue redemption. The clan hall appears 175 times in *White Deer Plains*. As an important symbol of Confucian culture, it represents the authority and ethical order of the family. The clan hall is not only a place of worship for the ancestors, but also the centre of social norms and moral education in White Deer Village. At the same time, the clan hall, as a traditional cultural symbol of a bygone era, becomes a site of resistance for the characters, reflecting the conflict between traditional ethics and modern consciousness. In addition, they as spatial symbols embody the core connotations of Western Puritan culture and Eastern Confucian culture, respectively; the scaffold and the clan hall are not only narrative pivots of the two novels but also core cultural carriers for maintaining order, transmitting values, and consolidating power in two distinct social forms at home and abroad. Their pivotal status and influences permeate multiple dimensions, including social structure, cultural inheritance, and individual cognition. Through comparison, it can be revealed that the cross-cultural differences and commonalities in how early modern societies employed spatial authority to regulate human behavior.

So far, there are few comparative studies on *The Scarlet Letter* and *White Deer Plains*. Chinese scholars mainly study the two works from the perspectives of themes and female characters. Based on the theme of redemption, Zhu Xingchun (2009) explores the differences in redemption between the two works from three aspects: the object of redemption, the ways of redemption, and the reasons for and the essence of the differences in redemption, and finds that "although the sinners in *The Scarlet Letter* are guilty, they take the initiative to redeem themselves, and thus to a certain extent they are redemptive, whereas the sinners in *White Deer Plains* do not find a way to self-redemption, but become the accompaniment and tool of Confucian patriarchal clan culture"[19]. Wang Xuan and Zhou Weiwei have both engaged in feminist analyses of these two literary works. Wang Xuan(2019), focusing on the oppression and resistance of female characters, points out that Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* and Tian Xiao'e in *White Deer Plains* both show the spirit of resistance to traditional society, but they differ in the motives and results of resistance[12]. While Zhou Weiwei(2020), discussing the works through the authors' own feminist consciousness, analyzes the circumstances and portrayal of female characters, ultimately guiding readers to consider issues of female independence in a more dialectical approach[18]. However, as popular classic literary works, the research value of the two works is self-evident. Scholars at home and abroad have conducted a great deal of research on these two works. Research abroad about *The Scarlet Letter* has primarily focused on several main directions such as the Puritan background of the work and its connection with Hawthorne's era, the analyses of the characters and the author from a feminist point of view, the study of the connection between the work and Hawthorne's personal experience, the symbolic significance of the work's images, the work's and the author's religious complexes, and so on. Charles Ryskamp(1959) argues that the incidents, places, and persons noticed in the work not only reveal Hawthorne's knowledge and interests in the unusual, obscure facts in New England, but also show Hawthorne's trying to identify the time past and present in the same profound moral engagement[9]. In "Revisiting Hawthorne's Feminism", Nina Baym(2005) believes Hawthorne is a feminist in that his works insist on women's equality with men, but Hawthorne denies the universal applicability of ideals[1]. And Leo B. Levy(1969) argues that the picturesque symbol not only creates the actuality of the forest but also plays an important role in expressing the author's attitude and emotions[8]. Critical studies of *The Scarlet Letter* emerged rapidly after 1995, focusing mainly on the analysis of the symbolic meaning of the work's images, character analysis from a feminist perspective, and the analysis of the theme of

the work and the psychology of the characters. The research on images mainly focuses on the letter A, the wilderness, the forest, and so on. Chen Rong(2007) focuses on the image of the needle and thread, and suggests that the needle and thread are closely linked to Hester's gender roles and class identity, which, to some extent, frees her from the constraints of male ideology but at the same time dilutes the subversive nature of her image[2]. Research on *White Deer Plains* focuses mainly on the traditional perspectives of thematic analysis and character analysis, and on its links with the social and cultural context. Some other studies in the field of linguistics focus on the Guanzhong dialect and character designations. Most of the research on the images of *White Deer Plains* focuses on the white deer and the clan hall. Wang Manli(2020) explores the image of authority in the clan hall from the perspective of spatial poetics[11].

Most of the current research on the images of the two works focuses on the level of natural scenery and lacks a deep comparison of core images, such as the scaffold and the clan hall. As the important images and symbols of the cultural background of the two works, the research is still insufficient, and the comparative analysis of the cultural connotation and social function is still to be in-depth. Besides, existing scholarship has not fully explored how the scaffold and the clan hall as power spaces shape the logic of discipline, resistance, and identity in their respective narratives. Moreover, few studies have employed spatial criticism theory to systematically unpack the relationship between space, authority, and the body, which may reveal that these spaces do not merely host power but produce it through their layout, rituals, and exclusionary practices.

This study fills that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the scaffold and the clan hall, drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the "production of space," which argues that space is not a neutral container but a social construct shaped by power relations, and Michel Foucault's concept of space and the "docile bodies", which explains how institutions use spatial design and rituals to discipline human behavior. Lefebvre's framework helps illuminate how the physical layouts of the scaffold and the clan hall reflect and reinforce the power structures of their societies, and Foucault's insights, meanwhile, reveal how these spaces target the body to produce compliant subjects through public shaming, ritualized punishment, and the gaze of onlookers. Drawing primarily on the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, this study conducts a comparative analysis of the scaffold and the clan hall as material entities with distinct architectural layouts and cultural symbolism, carriers of power that embody religious and clan-based authority, and technologies of discipline that are used to train the bodies and incite resistance. Through this comparison, the study explores the similarities and differences between Puritan society and Confucian patriarchal clan society in terms of cultural value formation and power operations. It further aims to reveal how space shapes both the individual and the collective, and to examine the bodily resistance this shaping provokes. Ultimately, this study may help to uncover deeper cultural parallels and divergences in the relationship between the individual and society, and between ethical discipline and human freedom.

2. The Scaffold and the Clan Hall as Material Entities

From a materialist perspective, space, as an objective form of material existence, constitutes one of the fundamental lenses for describing human social experience (Zheng 2016:90)[17]. In literature, space functions not only as a physical setting but also as an embodiment of psychological states, social relations, and cultural meaning. As material entities, the scaffold and the clan hall themselves act as cultural symbols that acquire cultural significance and social functions and reflect the religious morality of Puritan society and the patriarchal clan ethics of feudal society, respectively.

The scaffold is a product of 17th-century New England Puritan society, which emphasized strict religious morality. It served as a constant reminder that individual behavior must conform to rigorous moral codes. As a material instrument of moral judgment in Puritan society, the scaffold embodied the absolute demands of religious morality on individual conduct and suppression of personal emotion and freedom in the name of religious dogma. In *White Deer Plains*, the clan hall is situated in the center of the White Deer Plain, the former land of the Qin Dynasty, where the patriarchal system was deeply rooted. Before the upheavals of revolutionary movements, White Deer Plain represented a typical patriarchal clan society. Clan culture, centered on patrilineal authority and blood relations, venerates common ancestors and emphasizes the binding force of ritual and morality. Guided by Neo-Confucianism that prioritized “heavenly principles” over “human desires”, it enforced a rigorous suppression of human nature, leading to its repression and devastation. As a materialized form of this patriarchal clan culture, the clan hall functions as an administrative organ where the clan chief exercises control through clan regulations, undertaking key social functions such as punishment, ancestor worship, cultural inheritance, and education etc. The cultural meanings and social functions of these two spaces align with the perspective of the production of space: social space is produced by society, and in turn, it produces social models and forms that are compatible with itself (Xie 2012:161)[15]. Viewed within the cultural contexts of both works, both spaces symbolize the imposition of extreme moral standards by society upon the individual, which inevitably leads to tragedies and the oppression and destruction of human nature.

While the scaffold and the clan hall both perform vital social functions with a certain degree of sociality, they differ in their degree of openness. The scaffold in *The Scarlet Letter* is a profoundly public and open space. Its three key appearances structure the novel’s plot: Hester, with the scarlet letter A on her chest, walked up to the scaffold at the west end of the market with Pearl in her arms to be punished by standing on the scaffold for a period of time; Dimmesdale stood up on the scaffold in the middle of the night and confessed quietly with Hester and Pearl; Dimmesdale overcame his ego and cowardice and bravely went to the scaffold, confessing to the crowd his sin that he had been hiding for seven years, and thus freed himself from Chillingworth’s control and torment, and set his soul free. The scaffold represents a public space that affects the morality and behaviour of the whole community, oppresses the individual’s freedom of self-expression and emotion in public, and represents the trial of the individual by society and religion. Hester is forced to stand on the scaffold and be humiliated for her adultery, and the scaffold becomes a space for the visualization of her crime, where the residents of the town can comment on and accuse her of her sin. The clan hall in *White Deer Plains*, on the other hand, only open to certain members of the clan, is more self-enclosed and secretive. The clan hall, as a space for ancestral rites and punishment ceremonies, assumes the functions of trial and mediation. When family members violated family ethics or the township covenants, the clan hall became a place of punishment. Unlike the scaffold, the clan hall is only open to members of the clan, especially males, and outsiders are not allowed to enter or participate in the trial, which has the secretive nature of the family. In the clan hall, family members face a kind of invisible pressure, which is often more persistent and controlling than external humiliation, and under which they are forced to submit to the family’s instructions and arrangements and to follow the family’s morals and ethics.

Lefebvre(1991) states that space is the materialization of social relations, and it reflects social structure through layout and functional division. The architectural layout of the scaffold and clan hall reflects the social structure to a certain extent[7]. The scaffold is located in a public square and is a symbol of a public event. It makes the activities on the scaffold the focus of social attention through its centralized layout and open design. At the beginning of the novel, Hester was standing on the scaffold wearing the scarlet letter A that symbolized the sin of adultery.

The scaffold is a wide, massive platform that is raised above the ground, and the person standing on it appears extremely small and insignificant. In this space, Hester is at the centre of the gaze and is in a relationship of staring and being stared at with both the common people and the upper class (Yu 2024:76)[16]. The punishment for Hester was to stand on the scaffold for three hours in front of a crowd of villagers. The gallows was situated on a platform as high as a man's shoulder, and Hester stood on top of it so that she could stand out from the crowd of onlookers. The township's authority figures, such as the governor, the judge, the general, and the priest, are located in the balcony of the meeting hall and look down upon the scaffold, leaving Hester in the vulnerable position of being looked down upon and scrutinized from above. More importantly, this high-low layout maximizes the humiliation and mental torture of the human mind. It is impossible to hide no matter how much the guilty person may be ashamed of the stares of the crowd. "There can be no outrage.....more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame"(Hawthorne 1986:43)[6], and even when the sinner was hanged, he could only be seen with his neck cocked for all to see. The sinner on the scaffold becomes the object to be watched, and the spectators off the scaffold are the subjects of the watching, the scaffold being a marvellous association between watching and being watched (Wang 2003:34)[13].

The clan hall, mentioned 175 times in *White Deer Plains*, is described with precise detail by Chen Zhongshi. Its spatial layout is closed and located at the centre of the White Deer Village, symbolizing internal management. The centralized layout and closed design make the clan hall the centre of the spiritual life of the clansmen. Among them, "The fallen leaves and grime have accumulated in the tile gaps of the five main halls and six side houses....." (Chen 2017:61)[3], and the five main halls are significantly higher than the six mansions, standing on top of the steps. The full text of the Township Covenant was engraved on lapis tablets which was set on both sides of the main entrance of the clan hall, just "mirroring the 'Benevolent and Righteous White Deer Village' vertical tablets planted in the courtyard" (2017:94)[3]. During punishment, unlike the scaffold which the sinner faced the public, the sinner usually faced the ancestral tablets in the hall, with the clan chief standing next to the sinner to enforce the law, while the clansmen stood under the hall and watched. Outsiders are not allowed to enter the hall. This spatial layout reflects the authority of the clan and the cultural value of ancestral supremacy in a patriarchal society. The humiliation of the punishees in the clan hall also has an additional dimension of the individual's shame towards the clan's ancestors. So unlike *the Scarlet Letter*, the shame here is aimed towards the past rather than the present, a clear indication of the emphasis on ancestry and heredity in Chinese culture.

3. The Scaffold and the Clan Hall as Carriers of Power

Michel Foucault points out in *Space, Knowledge, Power* that space is the foundation for the operation of any form of power (Bao 2001:13-14)[5]. Space is not a neutral container, but rather a product and medium of social power relations. Power is produced, maintained, and operated through space, and meanwhile, space also provides a field for challenging and resisting power. The scaffold and the clan hall function not merely as backdrops for the operation of power, but as instrumentalized agents of social control within their respective sociocultural contexts, materializing and enacting power through their very physical and symbolic presence. While both spaces function as carriers of disciplinary power, they diverge in the sources of their power, the mechanisms of power operation, and the impact of power, reflecting the distinct power structures of Puritan theocracy and Confucian patriarchal society. In terms of the source of power, the scaffold in *The Scarlet Letter* and the clan hall in *White Deer Plains* share a common source of authority, i.e., moral restraint. Both are places for publicly disciplining individuals who violate ethical codes. Hester is tried on the scaffold for adultery,

which Puritan ethics could not tolerate. Similarly, in *White Deer Plains*, Tian Xiao'e is brought to the clan hall to be flogged for adultery. Both women are punished for violating the traditional ethics and morals. At this level, the moral constraints of the society are part of the source of authority of the scaffold and the clan hall, which is reflected in both works. However, the broader sources of power differ due to their sociocultural contexts. *The Scarlet Letter* is set in an era of Puritan society that pursued the unity of church and state, where Puritan doctrine controlled law and religion, and thus the spirit and lives of the citizens. For Puritan society, the scaffold was an integral part of the overall punishment machine and was the place where Puritan society punished sinners. In another perspective, the scaffold was a place where the guilty person publicly confessed their sins, repented of their punishments, and atoned for their sins, and thus was also a tool of social authority to humiliate the individual. Hester is put on the scaffold for the sin of adultery and is judged not only by the law but also by religion. Therefore, Puritanism and the law under its control are the support of the authority of the scaffold in *The Scarlet Letter*. The authority of the scaffold is derived from the legal and religious discourse system of Puritan society, which is not only an instrument of punishment for individuals but also a symbol of social discipline and control. Unlike *The Scarlet Letter*, the interior of a clan hall in *White Deer Plains* usually houses the common ancestral tablets of one family or related connected clans, and it becomes a place for clansmen to pay tribute to their ancestors, reflecting a strong Chinese concept of clan. The admission of a person to enter a clan hall and his participation in its major activities represent the affirmation of clan affiliation and identification. This ancestor worship became an important source of authority in the clan hall. The authority of the clan hall also comes from the assumption of responsibility for the family and the guardianship of the cultural values of benevolence and righteousness, which makes the clan hall a place for ancestor worship, discussing important matters, morality teaching and punishment, and gradually evolves into the centre of authority in the White Deer Plain, a symbol of the power of the clan. Meanwhile, in *White Deer Plains*, the operation of clan rules and the Township Covenant also unfolds in the space of the clan hall, with the Township Covenant being posted on the outer wall of the gatehouse of the clan hall, and later engraved on stone tablets and set on both sides of the main entrance of the clan hall, further growing the power of the clan hall.

In terms of the operation of power, a fundamental distinction lies in the contrast between official and autonomous forms of their authority. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the scaffold functions as a symbol of state-sanctioned judicial power. The process is both formal and institutionalized. Hester is escorted from prison to the scaffold for public sentencing before being returned to custody. The spatial configuration itself resembles a courtroom: the accused occupies the gallows, the judges preside from the balcony, and the spectators gather below the scaffold. This arrangement highlights the fusion of religious and civil authority in Puritan theocracy, with the scaffold serving as an extension of the official legal apparatus. By contrast, the clan hall in *White Deer Plains* serves as a quasi-judicial tribunal operating primarily through clan autonomy. It constitutes a self-governing institution that seeks to resolve internal matters without recourse to external governmental intervention whenever possible. This autonomy, recognized broadly by people at that time, positions the clan hall as the principal and preferred venue for the exercise of social control, emphasizing internal mediation over external adjudication. Consequently, the operation of these two sites diverge sharply. The power of the scaffold is exercised through overt, ritualized, and concentrated spectacle. Its three key appearances in *The Scarlet Letter* deliver a profound visual and psychological impact. This ritualized public shaming, exemplified by Hester's forced exposure before the crowd, aims to engrave moral boundaries deeply into communal consciousness through a dramatic, memorable performance. In contrast, the power of the clan hall functions through mundane, continuous, and subtle infiltration of daily life. It is not merely a site for punishment, but a multifunctional space for

education, collective decision-making, and ceremonial activities. Such daily reinforcement works to rationalize and legitimize clan authority, gradually molding it into a naturalized, intergenerational habitus. Thus, the power of the clan hall relies on sustained normative influence rather than ritualized shocks.

In terms of the impact of power, both the scaffold and the clan hall were symbols and instruments of the enforcement of authority in their respective social structures. The scaffold, as a punitive tool in Puritan society, publicly humiliates and punishes individuals before a crowd of spectators. This inflicts not only physical but also profound mental and spiritual torture, reflecting the cruelty of the Puritan social code and placing the individual under immense pressure for moral judgment and redemption. Puritan society emphasized the observance of moral and religious codes, and the punishment at the scaffold was both legal and religious. This dual torture made individuals subject to strict moral and legal constraints in society. The punitive mechanism of the scaffold puts the individual under pressure for moral judgment and redemption. The Puritan ethic required the individual to take responsibility for his or her actions and to achieve spiritual liberation through repentance and redemption. However, the clan hall, as a symbol of clan authority, has a profound influence on all members in the clan. Through the clan hall, the clan organization exercises control, including the power to indoctrinate them, to make economic rulings, and to investigate and report on public security, etc., and these authorities make the clan hall legitimate and authoritative in the rural society. Clan halls regulate the behavior of their members through their township covenants and clan rules, which have become the norms for people's daily behavior. Ceremonies held in the clan hall require the participation of the whole clan. For example, when Bai Jiaxuan punished his eldest son, Xiaowen, who had violated the clan rules in the clan hall, the ceremony was very tedious, with a recitation of the relevant articles of the township covenant and the clan rules, and the execution carried out by the chief of the clan before the punishment was inflicted. This is an exhibition of rituals in which the entire clan observes the process of disposing of those who have violated the clan rules. This process is both a spiritual and physical discipline, as Foucault argues that the power exerted over the physical body should not be seen as an ownership right, but as a strategy. It not only becomes an obligation or confinement imposed on the powerless but spreads through them as it intervenes in them, and it is precisely when they resist its control that it exerts pressure on them (Foucault 1977:28)[4]. This power, when exercised, disciplines the speech, behavior and thoughts of the clansmen, influences the other clansmen to observe the laws of the clan and township, strengthening the clansmen's identification with the sense of the clan group, and consolidating the status and authority of the clan.

4. The Scaffold and the Clan Hall as Technologies of Discipline

Space itself is at once a production, shaped by social processes and human interventions of varying scales, and a force that in turn influences, directs, and limits the possibilities of human action and ways of being in the world (Wegner 2002:181)[14]. As spatial entities, the scaffold and the clan hall, through their disciplinary mechanisms, shape and regulate the human body. Foucault identifies three core techniques of disciplinary power: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and examination, all of which rely on space to target and regulate the body. The scaffold and the clan hall deploy these techniques, but their focus on bodily control diverges: the scaffold prioritizes public, visible bodily subjugation to enforce moral conformity, while the clan hall emphasizes private, ritualized bodily submission to entrench patriarchal loyalty. And these divergent approaches not only shape bodily experience differently but also generate distinct forms of resistance.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the scaffold's disciplinary power hinges on turning the transgressor's body into a public spectacle. It operates by normalizing judgment and examination primarily through the mechanism of public humiliation and physical exposure. The layout of the scaffold serves as a crucial condition for implementing such disciplinary techniques. As the layout has been analyzed in detail above, it will not be repeated here. This elevated and centrally located layout constitutes examination, rendering the sinner the object of everyone's gaze-their body is fully exposed with no way to escape the crowd's stare. The crowd does not merely watch; instead, they judge, comment, and even jeer, transforming collective gaze into informal discipline. Hester's forced upright posture and the scarlet letter A mark her body as a symbol of sin, and her body becomes a site where Puritan moral norms are performed: her forced stillness and public shame demonstrate what happens to bodies that violate God's law, deterring others from similar transgressions. Even after descending from the scaffold, Hester remained subjected to continuous normalizing judgment: the community enforced invisible punishment through social isolation. When "Hester Prynne's term of confinement was now at an end", "She could no longer borrow from the future to help her through the present grief. Tomorrow would bring its own trial with it; so would the next day, and so would the next: each its own trial"(1986:45)[6]. And the letter A continues to discipline her body: she avoids public gatherings, dresses plainly, and serves the community through needlework. All these acts of self-control originate from the initial bodily shaming inflicted by the scaffold. Unlike the scaffold's public spectacle, the clan hall's disciplinary power operates through private, ritualized bodily submission, targeting the body to align it with Confucian patriarchal norms. The clan hall primarily enforces discipline through hierarchical observation, with its operational mechanism closely resembling Foucault's panoptic model. The clan hall's closed, hierarchical space frames the body not as a public example, but as a member of the clan, whose movements and gestures must honor the lineage. The clan hall employs ritualized bodily performances to subject individuals to discipline. During ancestor worship, for instance, clan members must kneel three times and bow nine times before the ancestral tablets. This is a bodily act that symbolizes submission to the clan's collective authority. When punishing Tian Xiao'e, "Bai Xiaowen, holding burning incense, led the clansmen assembled in the main hall and courtyard through three ritual kowtows before solemnly pronouncing judgment" (2017:174)[3]. These rituals are not arbitrary: they train the body to feel the clan's authority, turning physical compliance into emotional loyalty. Besides, while the scaffold relies on real-time human observation, the clan hall uses the ancestral gaze as invisible discipline to create a sense of constant surveillance. The ancestral tablets, though inanimate, function as permanent observer. The clan members feel their bodies are being watched by their forefathers, even when no one else is present. This invisible gaze is more effective than the scaffold's visible crowd, as it internalizes discipline more deeply.

Notably, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale, who acts as the executioner, is equally bound by religious morality. In the following, he confesses his offence and receives his punishment on the scaffold. But in *White Deer Plains*, the traditional patriarchal society is sustained by blood, but that blood is patrilineal. Under the influence of this culture, men's rights are rationalized and institutionalized. During the trial and punishment of Tian Xiao'e in the clan hall, the real adulterer, Lu Zilin, who was also the executioner, used a trick to get himself out of the punishment and falsely accused another man, Bai Xiaowen, of adultery. It fully exposes that under the patriarchal clan culture, punishment is totally decided by the ruler, which also leads to the familial and unequal nature of clan rituals. The contrast between these two also predetermines how people view scaffolds and clan halls, which then influences their choices of resistance.

Hester's resistance is not a challenge and disobedience to the scaffold, but a struggle against social prejudice and self-redemption through inner perseverance and desire for freedom.

Hester feels that she has sinned even though she believes that her love for Dimmesdale is justified and holy. This suggests that Hester still recognizes, in her heart, the religious moral constraints of Puritan society. She also practices the standard of salvation in her discipline after the scaffold. Besides, Hester's living environment is more open than Tian's. Although she is once pushed to the edge of society by the public discipline on the scaffold, she is not completely cut off from society. Hester earns a living by doing needlework, gradually gaining recognition for herself, and her image of Hester changes from that of an adulterer to that of a clever woman. She transforms the punishment on the scaffold into a redefinition of her identity, transforming the scarlet letter A from a symbol of shame to a symbol of strength. As stated in the text, "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A"(1986:47)[6]. She embroidered the scarlet letter A exquisitely, as if to proclaim to the world that she would not succumb to the judgment of society. Her struggle was not to overthrow the oppression of the Puritan society, but to gain dignity and respect for herself.

In contrast, the development of society has its own laws, and the feudal patriarchal society will inevitably be replaced by a modern, civilized society, which will inevitably encounter challenges in the process of modernization (Wang 2016:21)[10]. The traditional patriarchal culture and ethics of Tian Xiao'e's time could no longer adapt to the development of the society, but became an obstacle. Against this social background, although the people of the White Deer Plain were unable to escape the influence of patriarchal culture, the young generation began to rebel against its shackles. Tian Xiao'e's disapproval of clan discipline symbolizes the weakening of the disciplinary function of the clan hall, which leads Tian Xiao'e's resistance and retaliation more directly and fiercely than Hester's. By eloping with Heiwa, she rebelled against her father's decision to marry her off to Guo Juren, a direct challenge to feudal propriety. When she was judged in the clan hall, she expressed her will to resist fearlessly, and even after she was punished, she still voiced her protest through spirit possession, manifesting her vengeful consciousness through the body of Lu San, demonstrating a strong spirit of resistance. This way of resistance reflects Tian Xiao'e's instinctive defiance against feudal rites, as well as her unwillingness to accept her fate. However, in the process of resistance, Tian Xiao'e was still deeply influenced by the patriarchal society and regarded herself as a subordinate of men. This internalized subjugation, which prevented her from truly transcending the shackles of clan culture, ultimately predetermined the failure of her resistance. Moreover, in the closed nature of the clan culture, when Xiao'e was punished in the clan hall, the patriarch took the unprecedented step of letting all the women in the clan to participate in the scene, and after the punishment Xiao'e is also pushed to the fringe of the clan, but unlike Hester, all the people in the clan followed the tradition of the clan after witnessing the punishment, and Xiao'e's connection with other people disappeared until death, which also dooms the tragic end of her unsuccessful resistance. Although Tian Xiao'e's resistance was unsuccessful, her spirit of defiance inspired a new generation of women, such as Bai Ling, and provided spiritual support for subsequent women's struggles.

5. Conclusion

As important space symbols within their respective societies, the scaffold and the clan hall both shape social order, reinforce cultural norms, and provoke deep individual struggles. Drawing on the space theory of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, this study analyzes these sites from three interconnected perspectives. It can be found that both of them, as the places of punishment and discipline at that time, serve important functions of moral judgment and discipline, and embody the extreme ethical and moral constraints imposed on human nature. They symbolize the core authority of their respective political cultures, while also witnessing

and provoking resistance of people to such extreme moral oppression. Nonetheless, key differences exist between the two. As material entities, the scaffold is openly situated in public squares and emphasizes the public exposure of transgressors, in contrast to the more enclosed clan hall, which highlights internal exclusivity among clan members. As power carriers, the scaffold draws power from Puritan doctrine and theocratic law, which are exercised through religion and public trials, but the clan hall relies on ancestral worship, clan rules, and the Township Covenant, which are enforced via the clan chief. As disciplinary technologies, the scaffold relies on public shaming to ensure compliance, while the clan hall fosters ritualized submission and invokes the invisible ancestral gaze to internalize patriarchal loyalty.

Across seemingly distinct cultural contexts (Puritan theocracy and Confucian patriarchal society), “space” serves not as a passive container, but as an active agent in social governance. It materializes abstract power, normalizes prevailing moral standards, and shapes individual behavior through specific spatial arrangements and practices. While both societies employ disciplinary technologies for social control, the specific forms these take, and the resistance they provoke, remain deeply conditioned by cultural and religious contexts. These distinctions above in architectural structure, power operations, and disciplinary techniques ultimately reflect broader cultural patterns in different societies and are conditioned by fundamental predispositions toward Western individualism versus Eastern collectivism as well as divergent systems of authority-religious theocracy in western context and ancestral clan authority in eastern one. This comparative analysis not only deepens the understanding of these two literary classics but also advances broader cross-cultural discussions on the complex dynamics among space, power, and resistance. Moreover, It uncovers the tension between individual freedom and collective authority, which is a central theme in human societies across time and cultures.

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