

Fantasizing, Struggling, and Reflecting—Study on the Development of Feminine Awareness Around Early 20th Century China

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Abstract: Feminine Awareness around Early 20th Century China had changed a lot, which could be examined in feminine literatures. By analyzing typical feminine literatures by early 20th century, such as *Zai Sheng Yuan*, *Jing Wei Shi*, *Miss Sophia's Diary*, *Tales of Hulan River* and so on, this paper tries to discuss the transformation of women's self-awareness from late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and the Republic of China (1912-1949), and arguably divides the changes of feminine awareness into three phases, namely fantasizing, struggling, and reflecting.

1. Introduction

Throughout the course of development in modern Chinese society, the feminine awareness as well as women's position in Chinese society has been fundamentally changed, whose concrete social appearance was seen booming during the period of late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and the Republic of China (1912-1949). Amongst the recent literary researches and historical studies, some stressed the importance of traditional "Boudoir Culture" as the peephole into women's living space and social network,¹ [1] while some put emphasis on modern shaping and reshaping of women's culture from the most public perspectives of popularization and plebification, by making use of newspapers and magazines.² [3][5] In addition, some highlight the rising and developing of women's political power under the national context of politics and warfare.³ [6]

These literatures have no doubt laid the valuable groundwork for our further discussion on the feminine issue in China as it first stepped into the era of the Republic of China. Based on the former studies, This article tries to focus on the dynamic changes of women's awareness mainly from women's literature and writing from late Qing to early period of the Republic of China, by addressing the feminine issue around the following three topics: First, how was women's view, taken from women-focused articles or that written by women themselves, different from that of men? Second, during the transition period between Qing Dynasty and Republic of China, a time when China was facing drastic and chronic social reform, how did women's situation alter domestically, socially, and nationally? Third, with contextualized reference to the feminine literatures at the time, how did women's role and their awareness develop through time?

2. Fantasizing and Changes in Traditional Family

As women experienced social transition, walking outdoor from their boudoirs in the deep yard, their minds were also released from their domestic bound which reeks of undeniable destiny, and stretched so lively into a more fulfilling stage, hence the notions like 'dream' 'fantasy' and 'accomplishment' emerging in their knowledge. The awakening of women's self-awareness was often mentioned in modern Chinese literature back then. [8] However, their newly found dream was

¹ Gail Hershatter, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. Susan Mann, *Precious Records : Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*. Stanford University Press, 1997.

² Li Xiaohong: *Women's Voices: Shanghai Intellectual Women and Mass Media in the Republic of China*. Shanghai: Xuelin Press, 2008. Liu Renfeng, *Research on the History of Chinese Women's Newspapers and Magazines*. Beijing: China Social Sciences and Society Press, 2012. Louse P Edwards, Mina Roces, *Women's Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Nationalism and Democracy*, Routledge Ltd, 2004.

³ Nicole Huang, *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s*, Leiden: Brill, 2005. Yang Jianli: *Women's Liberation in the Context of National Construction: From History to Historical Writing*. *Modern Chinese History Studies*, Vol.3(2013). Zhao Yanjie: *Breaking a Family for the Country: Reflection on the Theory of Family Revolution in Modern China*, *Modern Chinese History Studies*, Vol.3(2018).

still a shocking and frightfully unorthodox invention to the mainstream belief in the society and to the ruling authority itself.

Throughout the course of history of Chinese civilization, there was quite a long period up until the Republican time when women live in a society governed by the primitive doctrine that ignorance in a woman is a virtue, which has seriously held back the development of feminine literature. Yu Xuanji and Xue Tao, both talented woman in Tang Dynasty, could write beautiful poems at young age. But such an early declaration of intelligence was regarded by their own father as unvirtuous since such an artistic talent was not expected in a woman. As commodity economy started to boom in Ming Dynasty, people's lives became prosperous and thereby, the other aspects related to people's spiritual life including the study of psychology, cultural, and publishing industry also started to grow.

Tanci, literally meaning plucking rhymes, was a form of literal art first popularized in the Southern part of China in Ming Dynasty. The narrative is usually composed by rhyming verses at the length of 7 words, and is meant to be read or sung at ease for entertainment, mostly for women who spent most of the day at home to kill their leisure time. "Ladies in boudoirs they may be, Fair treat for your eyes you shall see." [10] As it was, both the audiences and the composers were mostly artistic women at that time who formed quite a confined circle. Therefore, the passing down of the script was, in most cases, by means of transcribing among friends and families, and rather secluded from the society that belittles the very idea. The emergence of Tanci not only provided the house women with an opportunity to learn about the outside world, it also served as a legitimate mean to bring their work out to the public. A large number of talented women were made known during this very period.

Cheng Huiying, a writer of Tanci, wrote in *Feng Shuang Fei* "For friend who understands, but not for vulgar who judges". [11] Chen Duansheng, another famous writer of Tanci, also wrote with similar sense of cynicism "Profaned by the worldly eyes, honored by our sister's grace", in the preface poem of the third chapter of *Zai Sheng Yuan*. [10] Those verses show vividly how resentful they were to the people outside of their group who didn't appreciate the beauty of their work as they seemed to do. But little did they care about being influential or inspiring that might perhaps lead to social reform and equal right for women.

Zai Sheng Yuan has certainly made the character Meng Lijun come to life. The narrative started with Liu Guibi, the son of a lord, asked Meng Lijun for marriage. After being rejected, he decided to frame her father and her betrothed, Huangfu, in order to force her into marrying him. Refused to succumb to her destiny, Lijun dressed as a man and escaped, taking up a new identity as Li Junyu. She then made herself in the society by her wits and talent, and won a place in court as the Emperor's officials so she could clear the name of her father and fiancé. However, the story didn't end at the success of her saving her family. After the justice was done, she refused to return as Meng Lijun and resume her marriage with Huangfu. Instead, she decided to stay in court to fulfill her ambition and exploit her talent. She denied her relationship with her father and Huangfu, and married her close female friend Su Yingxue as a disguise for her true identity. But when the Emperor found out about the truth and forced her to marry him, Meng Lijun was broken by the taunt of fate. That's where the story took its abrupt end.

In the time when women had no place in court and no right for equal chance, Meng Lijun no doubt was the perfect personification of the authoress' dream that women should have equal rights as men to have dreams and chance to realize them. This work was therefore way ahead of its time by conveying such an advanced idea in Qing Dynasty, which is why it was not accepted by the society at the time. As Chen Yinke wrote in his article *The Study of Zai Sheng Yuan*, "Chen Duansheng's Meng Lijun, was the portrayal of herself, the one who Du Shaoling once referred to as 'The one who all wanted to kill'." [12]

Because of the limitation of in that time, the authoress could not find a way out for Meng Lijun after her cover was blown by the Emperor. Chen Duansheng wrote, in the preface poem of the 17th chapter, "All my friends have read and praised; All I hear is this one phrase; Please keep the marriage true; Tie the old knot you must do". [10] From which we can see that in the eyes of the

readers, the marriage between Meng Lijun and Huangfu was still the ideal ending of the story. Chen died before she could finish the story, which was continued by another talented authoress Liang Desheng who gave the story the most wanted ending after all, which is for Meng Lijun to be pardoned by the Emperor and married to Huangfu along with her friend Su Yingxue, and the evil lord got his just desert at well. It was a perfectly happy ending, which seems somewhat tragic when given to Meng Lijun's story, for her ambitions and dreams are once again denied by the institution of marriage.

In the twilight of Qing Dynasty, Tanci successfully brought in many tragically heroic figures like Meng Lijun, who by will or force walked out of their family and started to yearn for success and accomplishment, and have the primitive notion of equality. Unfortunately, given the forceful social background and the harsh and rigor expectation of women, those characters, no matter how brave and fierce they were when they first broke the rule, would always be dragged back into their boudoirs and yield to the social convention in obedience after all, just like what people expected. This gave us rather decisive evidence that the women in late Qing Dynasty were still at the primary stage of self-awareness, fantasizing about breaking free from their family and be appreciated for their talent. But no actual fight has been put up in order to make a difference.

3. Struggling Into New Society

The end of Qing Dynasty marked the start of Republican period, where women were finally allowed to get out of their house to notice, to understand, and to change the reality. The Western thoughts had an important role to play in women's liberation, inspiring many women to start fighting in their course of asking for rights and equality.

As the Western culture being introduced and the Revolution of 1911 broke out at the end of Qing Dynasty, many women started to seek freedom of marriage and independent life for themselves. More stories with revolutionary ideas started to appear in Tanci script. *Jing Wei Shi*, written by Qiu Jin, a female revolutionist, was the representative of the feminine literature at that time period. The main character Huang Jurui, a talented and beautiful lady, was forced by her parents to marry a wealthy rascal. She furiously denied the arranged marriage and ran away to Japan for education where she met a few other poor women with similar stories and spirit. She then befriended them and made it their duty to fight for women's liberation against the old institution. Qiu Jin had experienced herself the oppression of women in China, so she decided, in her work, to unite those women to fight back.

Tanci in this period started to focus on the fighting and struggling, with more practical tactics and more firm belief compared to the plot of story while back in *Zai Sheng Yuan* where Meng Lijun had to disguise herself as a man to fulfill her ambition, which sounded more like a desperate hauler than a struggle with the hope to succeed. By the voice of those female characters in the book, Qiu shouted out her own belief, "The invaders will be gone, when men and women are made equal; As the God gave us equal right, we should all be together in one case." and "Awaking the ignorance nation from its sleep, takes men and women fighting bravely side by side".

While Qiu Jin's work focus on the awakening new women, another female writer Xiao Hong wrote a novel about traditional women who struggled their life in an small and outlying village. In the *Tales of Hulan River*, the Little Wife of Tuanyuan, also known as the child bride of Tuanyuan, was originally a robust, optimistic and cheerful girl. However, villagers thought she was too active and did not meet the criterion for a wife, and considered her as "ill". So they used sorcerer's dance, hot water bath and other ways to treat her "illness". In this way, a healthy girl could not bear the torture of hot water bath three times a day and passed away; beautiful, generous, industrious and capable, Lass Wang was originally praised by all villagers. However, when she got married with Twisted Mouth Feng regardless their difference in status, all the praises were replaced by reproach and sarcasm, and the people of her parents' home also detested and rejected her. Finally, she died miserably after giving birth to her second child.

Tales of Hulan River not only reflects a tragedy of some individual woman, such as Little Wife of Tuanyuan and Lass Wang, but also reveals the tragedy of women as a group under the

uncivilized feudal society. In this novel, women like Old Lady Yang, Third Granny Zhou, and the mother-in-law of the Little Wife of Tuanyuan, etc. are both victims and inflictors. It is more pathetic that they were indeed inflictors but did not realize it. Such a case is not a rare one in the history of China, for example, Ban Zhao was also a woman, but she put forward strict behavioral norms on ancient women in her book *Lessons for Women* (such as "the three obediences and four virtues"), and became the initiator of evil.

With fine and smooth writing full of sympathy, Xiao Hong described the tragedies suffered by women in her hometown. Her work does not adopt the simple and common binary opposition structure with man as the inflictor and woman as the victim, instead, it gives up the gender opposition, and reminds people to reflect that women themselves are also likely to be the inflictor of women, and strengthens the analysis of women consciousness and status transformation.

During this phase the society was experiencing the fundamental changes of political and social systems, and the feminine literature also took a turn from an entertaining product made exclusive to their own groups to a public publishing event with the view to evoke and appeal to the society for a change. From Qiu Jin to Xiao Hong, women's thought got more practical and meaningful, unlike that of the last phase where it was mainly feeble and romantic fantasy that could be easily put down. Like the female characters in the stories, women then had realized the source of their misery was the rotten and poisoned system which could only be overthrown by means of revolution. Only then could women have a chance for freedom and equal rights.

4. Dilemmas and Reflecting

Since women's awareness had changed and women began to struggle with the real world, contradictions and dilemmas also emerged a lot. Just like "What happened after Nora left home?", asked brilliantly by Lu Xun. The very question reminded us of those women who walked out of their family. After the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the radical authoress started to sit down and reexamine the situation of women in the modern society as they were still troubled and lost after they broke the cage.[8]

Professor David Der-wei Wang of Harvard University said "When we talk about Chinese authoress and the early feministic movement, one can never walk past Ding Ling".¹ [13] Ding Ling was the authoress who wrote the famous *Miss Sophia's Diary*, in which she created a brave young lady Sophia who was radicalized during the May Fourth Movement and decided to break free from her family as one of those so called "New Women". Sophia was open to romantic relationship and longing desperately for true love. But the love affair with Ling Jishi brought her nothing but pain and misery. As she was head over heel attracted to him by his charismatic manner, she soon discovered that he was not only a married man, but also a playboy who often visited the brothel, which confused and tormented her day and night. Although Sophia found the behavior of Ling truly repugnant, being lonely and bored, she was not able to refuse his court. Finally, after Ling tried to kiss her against her strong will, she finally was disillusioned and broke up with him once and for all. She went South and lived out the rest of her life.

The tragic story of Sophia was no doubt a miniature of the predicament faced by great many enlightened women post-revolution: after they answered the call of the Movement and denied their unjust fate, they, in many cases, found themselves lost in their lives. They refused arranged marriage and fought for true love, but seldom did they find true happiness. The disillusion of their dream after the burst of their expectation dragged them down into the abyss of void and loneliness.

Influenced by "May Fourth" ideological emancipation movement, many young women writers were not stingy on the description of free love anymore, including the love of the same sex among women. *A Matter As Follows* is a representative work of Ling Shuhua. Ling Shuhua is deeply influenced by the British woman writer Mansfield in writing style, and is good at fine and delicate depiction of female psychology through the details of life. In this book, the two girl students Yunluo and Yingman rehearsed the drama *Romeo and Juliet*; their relationship in the drama became

¹ David Der-wei Wang, *Novel China*, Taipei: Wheat Field Publishing Co., Ltd., 1993, pp.327-334.

true in reality and they fell in love with each other. However, under the pressure of her mother and elder brother, Yuluo was finally married to another man, and Yingman could not bear this news and fell into lunacy. It is worth noting that this book is a rewriting of *Why Did She Become Lunatic Suddenly* by Ling Shuhua under the invitation of its original author Yang Zhensheng. The two books share the same story blueprint, but are different in their description ways.

In the writing of Yang Zhensheng, the theme focuses on the opposition against arranged marriage; the love between two girls cannot be understood by other people, and people around are also puzzled at the cause for Yingman's lunacy. The author provides a shallow judgement of their love of the same sex, and interprets it with the "Replacement Theory", i.e. "it happens that they were born in a land of propriety and righteousness, and could not carry out proper social interaction between man and woman, so it is unavoidable for them to admire the people of same sex". While in the rewriting of the woman writer Ling Shuhua, she adds detailed description about the interaction and communication of the two girls in the drama rehearsal, which makes the loving falling process of the two more reasonable. Her description of surrounding students is more in line with the actual situation, for example, the roommate of Yunluo has a tacit understanding of their love and takes an attitude of approval.

Ling Shuhua does not ascribe the tragic ending of the two girls to the arranged marriage, instead, ascribes it to the joint contribution of multiple complex factors, such as the struggle between love and domestic affection, the miserableness that women could not live independently, and scruples about reputation. It reflects that the solving of women's problems requires their self-transformation in advance.

5. Conclusion

Chen's *Zai Sheng Yuan* represents a series of literal work that created many brave female characters, revealing the ambition of the women at the time hoping for a bigger stage for their talents, which is the first clue of awakening of their self-awareness as their needs and feelings started to be heard. The doom of Qing Dynasty brought in the modernized Western ideology that includes the equality in matrimony. Chinese women, inspired and empowered, started to put into action the idea of fighting for arranged marriage and for independence.

Qiu Jin, based on her own life experience, wrote the *Tanci Jing Wei Shi*, with hope that it could call up her fellow women to fight their corner and devote themselves to the course of feminism and anti-feudal revolution, bring the literal art to a different level. After the May Fourth Revolution, the feminine literature incorporated more delicate layers into the plot. In *Shuo You Zhe Me Yi Hui Shi* by Ling Shuhua wrote boldly about love affections between women. *Hulanhe Zhuan* by Xiao Hong also depicted the social tragedy where women unknowingly persecute other women under the long-lived social convention. Ding Ling's *Miss Sophia's Diary* narrates the illuminated and empowered women who broke from the chain of tradition at the call of revolution but ended up pain and confusion.

From late Qing period to early Republic of China, feminine literature no longer served the sole purpose of appealing, but also included the mature reflection on how women could achieve true equality in real life. Walking through the timeline from the late Qing Dynasty, we could examine, from the feminine literature created in different stages, the trend of development for feminine awareness before and after the social reform, from fantasizing their new prospect at first, to putting those notions into struggling actions later on, and finally reaching a point where women started to rethink of their troubled situation.

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