

Rethinking the feminist literature under the influence of Chinese ideology and culture from the perspective of Comparative Literature

—A case study of “Unhappy Maiden” & “Kim Ji-young, Born in 1982”

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ABSTRACT

The topic of feminism has been attracting the attention of the whole society for a long time. Malaysia and South Korea have a close relationship with China from the history to the present. The Chineseness has been reflected and changed in different degrees in the feminist literature of the two places. Li Yijun and Cho Nam-Joo were born in two different countries, Malaysia and South Korea. Their representative works, “Unhappy Maiden” and “Kim Ji-young, Born 1982”, have similarities in the heroine's experience and fate. Readers can find out the reasons behind the two women's dilemma, which can enlighten the family and marriage of today's Chinese women and women from countries that have been deeply influenced by Chinese culture, such as women in Japan and South Korea, and Chinese women in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *Li Yijun, Cho Nam-Joo, Feminism, Family, Marriage*

1. INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of comparative literature, Li Yijun's “Unhappy Maiden” is obviously comparable with Cho Nam-Joo's “Kim Ji-young, Born 1982”. These two works both embody the realistic thought, focusing on the daily family and life of women, paying attention to the emotional changes and psychological activities of the heroines, showing the plight of the two heroines Luo Fengyi and Kim Ji-young in their own distinctive language, and then analyzing and reflecting on the real world and the development of Feminism.

With the development of the 21st century, the moral challenge of women's problems has gradually become a common problem faced by people all over the world. At the same time, women's status and women's concerns have increasingly become the focus of attention in the current era. Feminism was first proposed by the West. If we regard the declaration of human rights of women and female citizens in 1791 as the beginning of feminism, it is many years earlier than the awakening of feminism in

the East. The germination of Chinese feminism should be traced back to the last century.

With the spread of Western learning in the East, a group of modern intellectual women who had received both good education of traditional culture and modern higher education appeared around the May 4th movement. The famous patriotic poet Qiu Jin and the talented woman Lv Bicheng in the period of the Republic of China are the representatives of this group of women. Malaysia and South Korea are two countries closely related to China's history, and their feminist development is similar to China's. Historically, Malaysia is one of the countries with the largest number of Chinese immigrants. Malaysian Chinese society has been influenced by Chinese traditional culture for a long time. South Korea, as a subsidiary of China for many years, is also deeply influenced by Chinese Confucian culture in ideology and culture. Malaysian Chinese women's novels rose in the 1970s and 1980s, and have a certain influence in the literary world, while Korean women's studies first appeared in 1970s in the Ewha Womans University.

From a macro point of view, Malaysian Chinese feminist literature and Korean feminist literature are also influenced by Chinese culture. There are many similarities in both the female issues reflected in them and the development of feminism discussed in the novels. From the micro point of view, the two belong to different countries, even if their cultural backgrounds overlap, there must be differences, and the dissemination of feminist ideas and writing methods must be different. In this paper, the author compares the works of Li Yijun, a Malaysian Chinese feminist writer, and Cho Nam-Joo, a Korean feminist writer, in order to analyze the influence of traditional Chinese thoughts and Chinese feminist writing in the two countries, and then to explore the future of feminist literature in China and the countries strongly influenced by Chinese culture.

2. FAMILY WOMEN UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF CONFUCIAN PATRIARCHY

Influenced by western feminism, the feminist consciousness of writers in Eastern countries germinated in the early 20th century. After the end of World War II, its spread and development accelerated significantly, and its influence expanded continuously in the 1980s and 1990s. Intellectuals from all over the East, especially intellectual women, began to introduce new female images into their works intentionally or unintentionally (the new image here refers to feudal women who are different from the old feudal women who adhere to conventions and concentrate on being virtuous without talent). Most of their works reflect the plight of women, and the women in their families are the focus of their description.

Family is a view that cannot be avoided when we discuss women's issues. It is closely related to women's growth, marriage, love and even the breeding of the next generation, which affects women's emotions. First of all, the education and growth experience from the original family plays a decisive role in the development of women's personality. Although women will form new family later, it has been proved that many women in East Asia still face many difficulties in the life of their new family. Facts have proved that even with the development of feminist movement, many women in Malaysia and South Korea still face many difficulties in their family life. Based on the analysis of the two heroines' original family and new family, this paper explores the causes of their predicament.

From the perspective of the original family, the Chinese society in Malaysia and the Korean society are generally deeply influenced by the patriarchy of Chinese Confucianism.

“Unhappy maiden” is a female literary work which takes women as the main body of writing and takes the experience and feeling of women as the center. The original family of Luo Fengyi, the heroine, is rarely described in the novel, with only one mention about her mother who urged her to have a baby. However, the psychology of a modern middle-aged and elderly woman is fully displayed in few words. In the article, Mrs. Luo advised Feng Yi that “It is enough for a woman to live a happy life with her husband.” [1] It directly reflects the gap between the older generation's requirements for marriage and the modern generation. When thinking of her marriage, Fengyi often mentions the word “contented”, which shows the deep influence of her mother's concept. Such concept has a strong connection with Fengyi's later marriage misfortune.

“Kim Ji-young, Born 1982” is much more detailed in its description of the heroine's original family, Ji-young was born in a patriarchal family, her mother had repeated pregnancies and even abortions in order to give birth to Kim Ji-young's younger brother, which was a common social phenomenon in South Korea, China and other countries in the 1980s. Even now, there are still many women in family who are deeply hurt by such pathological gender concepts. In the process of growing up, Ji-young gradually learned about her mother's sacrifice, coupled with her grandmother's bias and her father's chauvinism, and she became more and more aware of the different treatment of women by family and society. But under the education of the native family, “girls should be careful in everything, dress conservatively, behave modestly, avoid dangerous time and dangerous people, otherwise the problem lies with those who do not know how to avoid.” Like most girls of her era, she took all this for granted, which set the stage for her later mental illness.

It can be seen that the two heroines' original family ideas always contain the Confucian idea of “men are superior to women”. Deeply influenced by this thought, the marriage of Luo Fengyi and Kim Ji-young is based on the marriage of traditional Chinese Confucianism. South Korean society has always maintained the traditional concept of marriage. “The book of Rites says that “Marriage is a kind of etiquette, which can make two families with different surnames make friends, comfort the ancestral temple, and reproduce for the family.” “The best of two surnames” can be understood as the combination of two families with different surnames for their own interests. It can be seen that in the traditional times, marriage was established on the condition of different surnames, and the purpose of marriage was to breed descendants who could worship their ancestors.” [2] However, because the Malaysian Chinese community is in a multi-ethnic country, their views on marriage are relatively complex. “Due to the differences in traditional culture between the Chinese

and the Malay, there are two different marriage systems in Malaysia. The Malay follow the Muslim law and practice polygamy, while the Chinese obey the new marriage law evolved from the traditional Chinese customary law.” [3]The so-called traditional Chinese customary law here refers to the Confucian traditional marriage etiquette of “Married from husband, husband for respect”.

“Unhappy maiden” mainly describes Fengyi's life in the new family. In the first half of the paper, the author describes the happiness and sweetness of Fengyi and her husband Hu Shuyuan after their newlyweds. Although Fengyi didn't think she has married a “dazzling husband”, she still looked forward to a happy life with her husband. And Shuyuan knew that he had married above his station, in order to make a better life for his wife and future children, he put pressure on himself. This is because of his man's self-esteem. He thought that himself as a man should bear the financial burden of his family. On this basis, he even proposes to let Fengyi resign from her good post after the birth of their child. Such a concept is actually a common fault of patriarchal society. Their marriage crisis appeared after the arrival of their children. Fengyi's temperament changed greatly during pregnancy, with symptoms of nervous sensitivity, trance and insomnia at night. These states are the manifestation of depression during pregnancy. However, her husband's carelessness and lack of compassion make Fengyi sad and angry, which is one of the reasons why they are more and more distant. After their children were born, Fengyi, who was pregnant late, devoted more energy to her children. But when Fengyi takes care of their baby wholeheartedly and enjoys the happiness of being a mother, she ignored her split relationship with Shuyuan, which also paves the way for Shuyuan's infidelity and their broken relationship.

“Kim Ji-young, Born 1982” reflects the plight of women in the new family life from different angles. The marriage between Kim Ji-young and Dae-hyeon is relatively happy, which may be due to the fact that Dae-hyeon's own conditions and abilities are better than Ji-young's and can meet the social requirements for men in the family. Similar to the birth of Fengyi by her mother, Kim Ji-young also suffered from childbearing pressure. When facing other people's unfriendly doubts about her body, she was helpless and dissatisfied with her husband's silence, which once became an important reason for the contradiction between the couple. Like Fengyi, Kim Ji-young worried that she needed to quit her job to be a full-time mother after giving birth, so everything she had accumulated over the years would be in vain. As the due date of delivery approaches, Ji-young's repressed emotions are accumulating more and more. She seems to be lost and helpless for the change of her identity and life. After the birth of her child,

because of a chance encounter, Kim Ji-young realized that the public despised the profession of full-time mother. She could not accept that she risked her life to give birth to the child, but became the “mother worm” in everyone's words, which became the last straw to crush her spirit.

Both of them have to face the choice of family or work. This kind of ideological pressure and bondage is rooted in the patriarchy of Chinese Confucianism, and is the result of the subtle influence of traditional Chinese culture in the two places. It is specifically reflected in the family, family and family life of women in the two countries in marriage. Women have been influenced by patriarchal thought since childhood, and gradually have psychological identification with it, or acquiesce in such inequality. This kind of thought accompanies them into marriage, continues to affect their life and even the life of their next generation, and finally becomes a mobius ring. The plight of Luo Fengyi and Kim Ji-young is also the dilemma faced by most Chinese women and women in areas once influenced by Chinese culture, such as Japanese women.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE "FEMALE WRITING STYLE" ON MALAYSIAN CHINESE FEMALE LITERATURE AND KOREAN FEMALE LITERATURE

In the traditional male narrative mode, women's misfortunes and difficulties are usually reflected by the oppression of the outside world. Men mostly appear in novels as family leaders or “saviors”. In feminist literary works, men have become the secondary role, and women have the main discourse power. This feature is particularly prominent in Chinese feminist literary works, such as the works of Chen Ran and Lin Bai, and this phenomenon is particularly obvious in the works of feminist writers in countries affected by Chinese culture. Such works often depict cowardly men to set off women's quality, mainly highlighting women's subjective consciousness, but the common feature of these women's roles is the lack of resistance consciousness and ability, and feminist writers are better at describing their plight for various reasons.

In the book “Misogyny”, Japanese feminist scholar Chizuko Ueno once mentioned that it is not easy to maintain the marriage of “women are higher than men”. “The dangerous and fragile thing is a man's self-identity.”[4]Luo Fengyi and Hu Shuyuan from “Unhappy maidens” perfectly interpret this saying. In the novel, it is mentioned that Feng Yi's standards of excellent men are rich in knowledge and good career, which are not met by Shu Yuan. In their marriage, Fengyi paralyzed herself with “contentment” and “no greed”, meanwhile Shuyuan's inferiority comes out

from time to time. He hoped that Fengyi can have a sense of dependence on him which satisfy his male self-esteem. Therefore, when Shuyuan can't feel Fengyi's dependence, he chose to betray the relationship, and Fengyi thought it was an "insult" to her. She can't accept the betrayal of the man she has always been contemptuous, so she finally went to the end of herself. In the novel "Unhappy maidens", although Hu Shuyuan is one of the main characters, author doesn't depict and describe his image intensively, only shows the readers a man who is cowardly, careless, not considerate of his wife and unfaithful to his marriage. Instead, the author spent more time on the description of Fengyi's psychological changes. The intellectual woman, who hoped to prove that the patriarchal view of marriage could be broken through her marriage with Shuyuan, failed to escape the dilemma she had set up.

The writing style of Li Yijun's "Unhappy Maiden" is closely related to the "female writing style" in China in the 1990s. The biased understanding of female consciousness in Chinese feminist criticism has influenced Chinese "female writing". [5] One of its characteristics is that it attaches importance to the display of the so-called female consciousness and the writing of women's secret experience and inner feelings, which belongs to pure female consciousness. But here Li Yijun's writing is obviously beyond. She not only focuses on the description of women's narcissism, masturbation and hatred of men, but also focuses on the process of Luo Fengyi's hatred of Hu Shuyuan from love and the entanglement of her being bound by male chauvinism.

The main male characters in the "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982" are: Kim Ji-young's father and her husband Dae-hyeon. Similarly, one of the major roles of these two men is to set off the women in the book. Ji-young's father is an obvious male chauvinist. As a description in "The Second Sex" "Women are the second sex, excluding the "other" from men. Power belongs to men, women are only vassals. The protection of vassal comes from power, and so does discrimination. In fact, it's a pity for a family to have a daughter." [6] The pressure of childbearing always falls on the women in the family. When Ji-young's mother was worried about not having a son and was eager for her husband's comfort, her father's replied: "Don't say anything bad, hurry to sleep." [7] When Ji-young was maliciously followed by her male classmates, she managed to escape. However, she was severely reprimanded by her father. Her father didn't teach her the ability to protect herself. Instead, he told her that girls should be conservative. Otherwise, if something goes wrong, she will suffer. Although the author does not strongly condemn and criticize Ji-young's father in writing, she satirizes such male chauvinism with the words of the woman who helped Ji-young. "It's not your fault. There are so

many strange men in the world. It's those people who have problems. It's not your problem." [8] Ji-young's husband, Dae-hyeon, is described as a tolerant and considerate husband. Compared with other men's obvious patriarchal tendency, his attitude is more moderate. But in fact, he also maintains a set of rules of the patriarchal society, which is the object of the author's criticism. When he saw and heard that society and family were unfair to his wife for gender reasons, he knew that he could not fight against the majority, so he had to choose keep silence. He has never defended his wife in front of his family. When Kim Ji-young is troubled and sad about being ridiculed as a "mother bug", the only thing he can do is to pat her on the shoulder and ask her not to think too much. Although Dae-hyeon has no actual patriarchal behavior, he acquiesces in and is used to the rules of patriarchal society, and tends to support these ideas in his heart. Therefore, he is an invisible defender of male chauvinism. In the process of growing up, Ji-young was aware of the injustice of the society to the female group, and also tried to resist. She once protested against the male privilege of having lunch first in the school, and got a small sense of achievement. But later, Ji-young's sense of resistance gradually disappeared in the social and family life. She was not unaware of the unfairness of the society to women, but was trained to accept and identify with such unfairness. Moreover, the huge male chauvinism group was not something she could fight against as a small housewife, which probably led to Ji-young's later mental disorder.

At the same time, "Kim Ji-young, Born in 1980" takes Kim Ji-young's growth stage as the clue, narrates according to the time development, describes Kim Ji-young's life from birth to now, is a documentary work. While recording Kim Ji-young's life experience, the author also intends to mention a number of women's problems that really exist in Korean society, such as the ratio of men and women in Korean population, the difference in wages and treatment between men and women in Korea, etc. Cho Nam-Joo focuses on the expression of Kim Ji-young's generation of women's survival dilemma and psychological struggle in the changing times, which is obviously similar to the "women's writing" which "challenges" the official history of modern China, feminist writers pay more attention to women's participation in history "Through the various definitions of women, they constantly transcend the writing tendency of essentializing women, and constantly rewrite the history that they have participated in through the description of historical gaps again and again." [9] It is speculated that it is influenced by Chinese feminist writing.

4. RETHINKING THE FEMALE LITERATURE WRITING WITH CHINESE CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

Southeast Asia, as a large gathering place of overseas Chinese, has the complexity of cultural heritage and the intersection of eastern and Western differences. Southeast Asian Chinese literature is also known as “Nanyang literature”, which is “not only the echo and feedback of the May 4th New Culture Movement in China, but also the enlightenment and origin of overseas Chinese new literature. One of its important characteristics is the “transplantation” of Chinese literature and culture, and “grafting” of Western literature and culture and literature and culture of the residence. Like the May 4th new literature, it not only absorbed and drew on a large number of excellent literary nutrition and artistic experience from western literature, but also formed its own distinctive characteristics in terms of timeliness and cutting-edge.....” [10]As one of the gathering places of Southeast Asian Chinese, Malaysia occupies an important position in Southeast Asian literature, so Malaysian Chinese literature also has such characteristics. After Malaysia's independence movement, modernism developed Malaysian Chinese literature on the aesthetic level. As an important part of Malaysian Chinese literature, Malaysian Chinese female literature was also affected. In the creation of Malaysian Chinese female writers, we can usually see the shadow of traditional Chinese culture, and even the integration of Western stream of consciousness writing style, realistic style with local literary characteristics, and Malaysian local literature atmosphere which once prevailed in Malaysian Chinese literary circles in the 1950s and 1960s. From this, we can see the diversity of writing methods of Malaysian Chinese female literature.

“In the 1990s, the gender identity in the Chinese female literature of Singapore and Malaysia tends to call for women's self-consciousness and reconstruct women's independent consciousness by showing modern women's dependence on men in Singapore and Malaysia society.”[11]Here, Li Yijun obviously wanted to break through the limitation of this inherent writing mode. Luo Fengyi is independent and has strong self-esteem, she does not need to rely on her husband's grievances in marriage. This just confirms this conclusion, “The Malaysian Chinese Female Novels in the 1980s and 1990s are the concrete practice of feminist theory, while the female novels in the new century are the innovation and breakthrough of creative techniques.” [12]However, the author's breakthrough is not complete. The feminist theory embodied in the novel “Unhappy maidens” is actually the reflection of masculinism. On the one hand, Luo Fengyi is deeply bound by the idea that men are strong and women are weak in the traditional patriarchal society. On the other

hand, she thinks that marriage should not be defined by this idea. She repeatedly suggests that she should be satisfied, but in fact, she suppresses her own emotions. This formed her contradictory personality and became one of the reasons for her later tragedy. From Luo Fengyi, we can see the shadow of traditional Confucian culture. “Traditional society often gives women an image, that is, women can only get a sense of satisfaction and achievement in the traditional role of wife or mother, so the most important responsibility of women is to be a wife or mother. Luo Fengyi is restrained by such a concept.”[13]

Although the full text of “Unhappy maiden” is narrated in the third person, in the last part, the author jumps out of the perspective of God and brings herself into the image of the heroine, which makes Fengyi's accusation more emotional. It is mentioned in “The interpretation of Malaysian Chinese literary texts”, “To a large extent, the lack of distance makes the narrator become the spokesperson of Fengyi. In addition, Fengyi is the “victim”, whose repeated ingratitude turns into the injustice repeatedly denounced in the novel. This accusation coexists with the previous author's unintentional rationalization of her husband's affairs, but it is a kind of approach to the patriarchal values.”[14]Here, I make a bold guess that the author's writing may imply a strong irony, intended to break the sweet relationship between husband and wife and the “contentment” repeatedly mentioned by Fengyi, and present a real and repressed Fengyi to the readers. The writing emphasizing individualism is of Western color, while the satire like the needle in the cotton, implicit and profound, is full of the characteristics of Chinese literature writing, which is the embodiment of bilateral characteristics of Malaysian Chinese female literature.

Cho Nam-joo was born in South Korea in the 1970s and grew up in South Korea in the 1980s. Her growth path greatly influenced her writing. She was the youngest daughter of her family. After graduating she worked as a PD for ten years in a TV program. After giving birth to her children, she retired to her family and became a housewife. “Kim Ji-young, Born 1982” is about the life of an ordinary girl, Kim Ji-young, who was born in the 1980s, but there are also the author's real feelings about life, including the feelings of thousands of Korean women. Since its publication in 2016, “Kim Ji-young, Born 1982” has become a bestseller with millions of copies sold. South Korean female scholar Kim Yeon-joo commented on the book as follows: “At the end of the day, you can't even tell whether the author wrote Kim Ji-young or yourself.” The author Cho Nam-joo affirmed this view in an interview, she said: “my first purpose of writing novels is to record the real life of women living in South Korea without any distortion or devaluation.”

Similar to the experience of Southeast Asian countries, South Korea has also been deeply influenced by Chinese culture, here referred to as Han culture. In the Han Dynasty, South Korea was once a county in the Han Dynasty, and later became a province and a subsidiary state of several dynasties, so it also became an important region for the spread of Confucian culture in history. In today's South Korea, the idea that men are superior to women is still rooted in the public thought, and the status of women is lower than that of neighboring China. Under the subtle influence of patriarchal culture, the phenomenon of women being materialized is extremely serious, and Korean men do not have much concept of sexual cognition and gender equality. Therefore, both men and women in Korean society generally have serious misogyny tendency and misogyny complex, and Korean society generally rejects feminism. Therefore, after the adaptation of "Kim Ji-young, Born in 1980" into a film, it was once called "the moan of feminism" by Korean audiences, which caused a strong controversy.

Interestingly, the first person narrator in the book is a male psychologist. In addition to talking about Ji-young's experience and illness, the author even create an imaginary space at the end of the book, "I" think of whether "my wife" has experienced similar experiences with Kim Ji-young. However, in the film, the narrator is replaced by a female psychologist. Although the narrative style remains unchanged, this change is still thought-provoking. Most female literary works are willing to choose to narrate from the perspective of women, because as women, they are more empathetic with the protagonists, just like the film. The narrative technique of the original work "Kim Ji-young, Born 1982", is quite rare in this type of works, which can be regarded as a major breakthrough in female literature writing. For a long time, women's literature has always been defined as works written from women's first perspective and subject. In such writing, men have become secondary roles and their images have been weakened. Thus forming a situation of "say to oneself" in women's literature and lacking equal dialogue. It is inevitable that this phenomenon will not be regarded as "the dominance of women's rights", which makes male readers subconsciously avoid and reject reading.

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the two women's literary works are obviously influenced by Chinese culture and Chinese women's writing, which also reflects the residual problem of male chauvinism and reveals the plight of women in their respective societies. The two writers have different ways of expression. Li Yijun's "Unhappy Maiden" tends to be narrative, while Cho Nam-Joo's "Kim Ji-young, Born in 1980" tends to be documentary. Both of them try to break through the previous female

literature writing mode. The purpose of female literature should be to describe and discuss a certain female problem, so as to attract the attention of the society and promote the problem to be solved. But today's women's literature, including these two works, is generally accepted as a way of writing by sacrificing male voice to expand women's discourse power, and even as one of the conditions to define women's literature. This paper thinks that this is not appropriate.

The survey found that most men rarely choose feminist works when reading, and even reject such female dominated works. Many feminists criticize the patriarchal society and unconsciously construct the maternal society, which arouses many people's antipathy. In fact, feminism is not only women, so the target readers of feminist works should not be only women. The ultimate goal of feminism is to strive for gender equality, not to regain the dominant power and discourse power of society from men. Therefore, is it time for feminist literature to change its writing style? Is it necessary to write from a female perspective to be called feminist literature?

As early as in 1980's, Zhang Kangkang mentioned in "We need two worlds" that "The excellent women's literature is also for men. It helps men to understand women's rich and sensitive mind, and therefore know themselves." [15] However, this paper argues that there is still a great deal of injustice in today's female literature writing, especially in China and the countries affected by Chinese culture. What feminists criticize is the exploitation and oppression of women in the patriarchal society. In this way, men should be given equal discourse power in the Oriental female literature, and more men should be guided to read this type of works. Women who talk to themselves cannot make men pay attention to the core of the problem. Only when the mainstream oppressors can see the plight of women and find a new balance in the combination of reality and literature, can they solve the gender problem.

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