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# Eastern and western feminist literary criticism: A comparison

## **Abstract**

Extract:

Compared with western society, eastern society enjoys a disparate developmental process and a distinct conformation system of consciousness, as well as different cultural traditions. Among the eastern national cultures, China's culture remains deeply significant. By studying Chinese women's literature through research on international literature, it is possible to define the characteristics of feminist writing in China, and make a comparison between eastern and western criticisms of women's literature.

## **Keywords**

Chinese literature, feminism, Women's Liberation Movement, women writers, female characters

## Eastern and Western Feminist Literary Criticism: A Comparison

*by Yan Ming  
and Fan Qi  
(1)*

Compared with western society, eastern society enjoys a disparate developmental process and a distinct conformation system of consciousness, as well as different cultural traditions. Among the eastern national cultures, China's culture remains deeply significant. By studying Chinese women's literature through research on international literature, it possible to define the characteristics of feminist writing in China, and make a comparison between eastern and western criticisms of women's literature.

### *1. Women's Awakening to the Sense of Self (2) in Chinese Contemporary Literature*

Entering the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the Women's Liberation Movement was being developed worldwide, Chinese women (especially female intellectuals) began to awaken and to struggle for the basic privileges of equality between male and female. Around the *May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement*, various newspapers and periodicals had published all kinds of articles on women's liberation. A special issue for Ibsen was presented in *The New Youth* and the play *A Doll's House* became popular throughout the whole nation. Going with the tide against the feudal ethical code, the voice of women's liberation, of the equality between the sexes, and of the freedom for both self-chosen courtship and marriage became louder and louder. Breaking away from the outdated traditional modes of thought, women tended to walk out of traditional families, and to step towards a newborn society. They began to receive education from the primary to the college level, and came to take part in social intercourse as well as political activities. As all these movements were catching on like fire, a number of audacious female writers appeared in the literary arena. Their works stirred society and rewrote the history of Chinese women's literature.

In *The Fiction Monthly*, published in early 1928, there was a novel written by *Ding Ling* named *The Diary of Lady Sophie*, which reveals the heroine's mixed feelings towards love. Lady Sophie, an awakened and gallant modern woman, associates with the opposite sex not to seek an ideal partner, but to conquer and defeat them. In her thought, men are natural targets to be despised and teased. Through her insolent eyes, she sees the cowardice of *Wei Di*, the clumsiness of *Yun Lin*, and the vulgarism of the man from Anhui. Even *Ling Jishi*, the man she once loved, is very superficial. This can be seen in the following descriptions: "A slim body, a delicate face, thin little lips, and soft hair," and: "The corners of the mouth are scarlet, tender and deeply concave." Apparently, the author made the misallocation of the description of the character deliberately, using the criterion which men usually choose, in order to enjoy this arrogant 'male beauty'. Finally, Lady Sophie conquers *Ling Jishi*, at the same time sees through his base personality, and then decisively leaves him. Differing from the normal style of love-story writing, the novel gives leadership to the woman, expressing her discontent, which has been felt by Chinese women for thousands of years, and challenges the male-centred system. This undoubtedly deeply disturbed the society of the time. The taunting attitude towards male authority and the rebellious mood of revenge for despotic male domination are the essential representations of feminism in society and literature at that time.

If the early works of *Ding Ling* mainly reflect the awakened courage of women challenging traditional male power, then *Bing Xin's* literary creations should be regarded as another example showing women's awakening of the sense of the body in a distinct aspect. During the 1920s and 1930s, *Bing Xin* accepted 'the philosophy of love', created by Tygel, the Indian philosophical poet,

and proposed the innocent heart and motherly love as the remedies for pessimism and for various social problems in her own poems and novels. In her opinion, only maternal love is unselfish, selfless and eternal: women have an innate sense of love, neither family warmth nor social prosperity can exist without women's love, and likewise women's liberation cannot be achieved if women fail to give full play to their loves. Based on these considerations, *Bing Xin* raised objections to some of the radical ideas in the Women's Liberation Movement. For example, she approved of the ideas of the equality between the sexes, the freedom for self-chosen marriage, independent individualities, and women participating in government and political affairs. However, she disapproved of the slogans that encouraged women to overthrow the intention to be a good wife and loving mother, and instead to step out of their family and to struggle against society.

Both *Ding Ling* and *Bing Xin* are gifted women writers with great impact. Through their different creative trends, a perplexity that has long troubled the critical theory of Chinese contemporary women's literature can easily be observed. To smash the bonds of tradition, women should step into society in order to achieve equality between the sexes, and at the same time retain the characteristics of the female during the liberation process - keeping the essential characteristics which distinguish the woman from the man. Therefore Chinese women were in a dilemma. In *Ding Ling's* early works, women's sense of self focuses on the first option, while in *Bing Xin's* mind, the choice made either by rationality or feeling obviously prefers the latter path. Whatever choice they make, it reflects the perplexity of the awakened Chinese woman. *Ding Ling's* early works were the intense manifestation of the women's awakening to the sense of personal self during the new Culture Movement. The influence that western feminism had made was evident. With *Bing Xin's* works there appeared some melding together of eastern and western ideas. In some senses, the traditional moderation of Confucianism still fulfilled a positive function. Therefore, as soon as the works of *Ding Ling* were published, they won the applause of the young rebels. Whereas, the publishing of *Bing Xin's* works had not caused a great response in literary circles, but it did win the approval and praise of more readers in the long term. Apparently, the expression of the female identity in *Bing Xin's* works has a more solid psychological foundation in the national culture and a more compressed and ideal representation of eastern society.

The two kinds of perplexity in the creations and criticisms of Chinese feminist literature still exist in today's literary circles, and reflect a deeper significance. In the early 80s, *Zhang Xinxin* and *Zhang Jie* wrote several books concerning the fate of modern professional women. They discovered that half a century after the Women's Liberation Movement, even in a society in which men and women have equal work, equal salary and an equal legislative position, women in China are still exhausted by the choice between love and work. The book *On the Same Horizon* is written about a young couple who love each other while resisting each other. Modern professional women have abandoned the traditional standard of women and stand on the same horizon with men through their own effort. But they have neither been accepted by public opinion nor been understood by their husbands, and they are even in danger of losing the privilege of love and being happy. The heroine (including the writer herself) feels distressed by the influence of the traditional gender characteristics which have pervaded every corner of society. Yet she has nowhere to go, because she can't design a way of life that she should live in as a woman. *Zhang Jie's Boat* describes the distorted life conditions of three divorced women. They are all successful in their work in today's society, and therefore they observe men with a sharper and more critical eye.

Similar to *Bing Xin's* return from the radical feminism of *Ding Ling* to the moderate position, after the middle 1980s the sense of identity of Chinese women has a tendency to return to motherhood. The representative female writers are *Wang Anyi*, *Tie Ning*, *Lu Xin'er* and *Zhan Rong*. Considerations of *Motherhood* include motherly love, as highly praised by *Bing Xin*, but are not confined to it. Contemporary female writers pay tribute to the sacredness, unselfishness, stubbornness and greatness of motherhood in everyday life, qualities which are indispensable parts of motherhood as well. Modern professional women strive during most of their lives to change the living style of traditional women, yet in real life they can hardly overcome the defenses of the patriarchy.

## 2. *The Transcendence of Traditional Female Characters*

In the several thousand years of Chinese literature, there have emerged countless female characters. According to the traditional moral standard, these can be divided into two groups: the orthodox and unorthodox. The former refers to well-educated 'ladies', good wives and loving mothers; the latter refers to 'bad' women who destroyed their families and corrupt the social ethos. At the beginning of this century, under western influence, the New Culture Movement broke out in China, negating traditional moral standards. The newborn feminist writings and literary criticism lost interest in the traditional female characters, or merely regarded them as a target for criticism and rejection.

After several decades of development, the critics of Chinese feminist literature found that female characters in these works are quietly returning to traditional roles. In recent years, the characters of modern good wives and loving mothers appeared frequently in novels, movies and plays (for example, *Liu Huifang* in the play *Yearning*), winning the applause of all groups in society. Such virtues as sweetness, tenderness, tolerance, hardiness, goodness, stubbornness and perseverance have assembled in these female characters. They were enduring the life tragedy that was caused by the frequent disturbances of Chinese society, showing their firm power of personality in weathering life's hardships. The persistent choice of Chinese readers and audiences has a meaningful cultural significance. It reminds us that feminist literature and criticism cannot neglect the will and feeling of the people. The liberation of women finally must be in accordance with that of men. The equality between men and women neither dispels the social division of labour nor obliterates the difference between male and female.

In the women's literature of Taiwan and Hong Kong, the tendency of returning to tradition and then finding a way to transcend it is even more evident. Just like the mainland, in the early 80s in the literary arena of Taiwan there appeared a climax of feminism. The outstanding representative is *Li Ang* with her works *Kill Husband* and *Dark Night*. These two striking novelettes unveiled serious social problems, encouraging women to go on a 'sexual rebellion' against sexism. What is profound in *Li Ang's* novels is that she discovered, either in the sexual closure under the control of feudalism or in the sexual liberation of modern society, that women were only regarded as sex objects to be enjoyed, that they do not own the same dignity and privilege as men. When the novel *Kill Husband* had been put on the screen, it aroused great controversy in Taiwan, as no one could finally decide whether it was good or bad. This phenomenon demonstrates the power and popularity of tradition in Taiwan's women's literature. For a long time, most of the female characters in the literary works were good wives and loving mothers, who embodied very eastern virtues. Like the heroine in *Qiong Yao's* novels, they bore the pressure and tolerated hardships, though they maintained their kindness and goodness, causing the men to feel awkward and regretful. Will this eastern model of good wives and loving mothers' respectable words and behaviour finally move and reform society, so that men and women live harmoniously and go on to a bright future together? This needs to be testified to by social practice. No matter what the result, this kind of transcendence of the traditional female characters in literary products has a great positive influence on social development, and the pioneer consciousness it shows is admirable.

The world's feminist literary criticism reflects the awakening of the female identity and the prosperity of the female writers' creations in this century. At the same time, such writing is national, because it cannot develop without the influence of its national culture, and is always in tune with national literature. The origins of literary criticism in Britain, France and America have made a great contribution to the study of women's literature, but these specific sets of critical theory do not exactly fit eastern feminist literature. Furthermore, they are obviously western-centred theories.

In recent years, some third-world scholars of feminism have pointed out the limits of western feminist theory, and emphasise that this is due to the cultural tradition and social systems of the developing countries. On such bases, they emphasise the particularity of feminist writings and literary criticism of different nations as well.

The western feminists pay great attention to sexual life, sexual customs and the influence on women of sexual culture: there even appeared a trend of 'Sexualism'. They wear distorting lenses when observing the conditions of the women in other countries. For instance, the interest of quite a lot of western feminist studies was concentrated on the specific customs such as traditional Chinese foot-binding, female circumcision, and restrictive dress codes in some Middle Eastern countries. They regard these customs as symbols of the women's position in that country, and described them in their literary works. Apparently, such descriptions often lack the proper historical context, and confuse ancient customs with modern realities, therefore often drawing false conclusions, which they then project onto women in the developing countries by controlling world opinion. They always take the attitude of the owner of a superior culture, as if the women in other countries cannot achieve liberation and civilised life without their feminist theories. Their neo-colonial attitudes surely were detected, and caused dissatisfaction among the feminists in developing countries.

The feminists in Britain and France also pay great attention to the social function of 'Sisterhood'. They use it to unite and assemble women of every class of the society to fight against the patriarchy. As a result, a lot of women's organisations appeared in Britain and France, forming a united battle-front to maintain the privileges and benefits of women. Many works displaying this sisterhood were created in feminist literature - there even appeared literary criticism approving and eulogising female homosexuality. Advocating sisterhood within a country would have had a cordial and natural publicising effect, especially in the field of political activity. However, the western feminists advocate such ideas to the world in order to use sisterhood to summon the women of the world to unite in struggle against the patriarchy. In this course, they neglect the distinct political and financial interests of the women in different countries, which are caused by the differences of race, nation and class. Actually, relying on a remote sisterhood, it is hard to cross the big gap in economic, political and cultural interests generated by colonialism. And for the women in developing countries, they lack realistic means to accept such theories.

In recent years, more and more feminist scholars have realised that there is a considerable divergence in the personal experience, cultural background and realistic problems that face women in developed countries verses those in developing countries. This gap often exceeds the gap between males and females caused by sex differences. The gap of physical and social differences is not the whole foundation that leads to women's actual living conditions and such factors often take effect through race, class, nation, social convention and culture. In many cases, the differences between races, classes and cultures will directly restrain women's life and social position. Actually, there has not yet emerged an integrated feminist theory which can encompass all the races, classes, national and cultural interests, nor has there been a feminist organisation which can globally integrate women's thoughts, utterances and behaviours. On such a basis, feminism (including feminist literary criticism) will inevitably develop in several directions. Meanwhile, the experiences and opinions of women in developing countries as well as the restraining factors of history, society and culture have begun to be attended to and even given importance.

### **3. Conclusion**

As an important member of the developing world and the major representative of eastern culture, China is exerting more and more obvious influence on the growing tide of world feminist literary criticism. Compared with that of Britain, America and France, the course of Chinese feminist literary criticism presents the following features: -

1. Chinese feminist literary criticism has a strong sense of approval of its own national culture. As stated above, although Chinese women's experience is full of hardship and suffering, women's contemporary literary works have not fundamentally negated the tradition role of good wives and loving mothers. Modern female writers unveil the difficult situation of women, and then more often than not, they give the heroine a personality of traditional virtues. At the same time, they try to transcend the traditional personality in every aspect. That is, they try to create a new female character who has both traditional virtues and shows modern consciousness. Feminist literary criticism also

presents a moderate attitude which does not thoughtlessly and completely negate the historical and cultural tradition of its own nation, but always tries to find a point related to, or consistent with, the new era while assimilating a brilliant cultural tradition so as to refresh and develop Chinese women's traditional virtues and fine characters.

The sense of approval of its national culture reflects not only on the contents of women's literary works, but also on its expressive methods as well as on the focus of feminist literary criticism. Chinese feminist writings mainly put the woman's fate into a cultural environment of family and society, the marked point of which is not necessarily the individual consciousness of the heroine, but the collective consciousness which represents women's fate of the particular time and place. As compared with that of Britain, France and other countries, Chinese feminist literature is less individualist, and much stronger in the common agreement with collectivism based on the approval of traditional culture. It is also the same with literary criticism. Chinese feminist literary criticism tends to value works from the angle of historical source, collective generalisation and social influence, instead of exploring the relation between female characterisation and female discourse from the angle of female body politics and desire-satisfaction, which French feminist critical theory has practised.

2. Chinese feminist literary criticism has a close relation to political ethos, which keeps a certain distance from the activities organised by the women's associations. Both women's awakening to personal identity in the 20s and the climax of women's literary creation in the 80s were directly connected with the open ethos of active minds and diverse opinions. When society develops to the stage of the old being substituted by the new, the basic social contradictions tend to deepen. And the most serious problems are often women's position and living conditions, which are also the easiest areas for a new power to destroy the old and build up the new. Marx recognised this when he said: 'The progress of society can be accurately measured by women's social position.' Chinese feminist literary criticism pays much attention to the social, propagative function of feminist literature. The writers directly expose the various difficulties of women, accuse and criticise the patriarchal system and patriarchal culture for their long-term suppression of women, thereby inspiring women to wake up and to fight against their oppressors. In this sense, Chinese feminist literary criticism has a clear political significance and is full of the unyielding spirit of struggle. It always corresponds to realistic political activities and itself often becomes the vanguard of the political wave. The problems revealed in feminist literature and criticism usually draw the notice of the whole society, and the resolution or relief of these problems can usually become a new starting point of social improvement.

However, after Chinese feminist literature has developed to a certain stage, it will tend to return to the women's virtues found in the traditional literature, and at the same time lessen the strength of struggle against the present social system in which androcentrism still exists. When this happens, female intellectuals need to strengthen their more independent consciousness in order to mediate and find a path in the cultural field. As a result, the pure political organisation of the women's association, subordinated to the leadership of a superior, can hardly become their proper form of organisation. At this point, Chinese feminist literary criticism is different from that of America. American feminist literary critics like to express unique personal opinions by debating in small groups, while Chinese critics prefer to act independently and unilaterally (most Chinese female writers and critics still don't admit they are feminists), though their opinions are quite identical. Apart from that, China has extensive geographical and economic, as well as cultural, gaps between the south and the north, town and country, eastern coastal areas and western inland areas. The social convention and living habits of women in different places varies greatly, and the development of modern travel and communication networks is also uneven. In such varied environments of time and space, Chinese feminist literary criticism will develop at a rather low level for women in poor villages while women in highly developed areas, especially in big and middle-sized cities, have relatively high material and spiritual demands. Modern Chinese women are in a complicated situation, containing great variations which have been richly and deeply presented in feminist literature and criticism.

3. We can see from the two aspects stated above that the development of feminist literature has been greatly influenced by the Chinese social system and cultural tradition. It is Chinese women's multi-faceted living conditions that have resulted in the multi-levelled contents and methods of exhibition in feminist literature. Among these levels, we can see both contradictory and harmonious relations between traditional cultural ideas and the development of modern society. So it is improper to measure the liberation of Chinese women merely with the criteria produced in the western Women's Liberation Movement, and it is also improper to judge the achievement of Chinese feminist literature only from the viewpoint of western feminist literary critics.

Combining comparative literature and feminist literary criticism will allow an exploration of a new field in two ways. Analysing it from the view of comparative literature, we can more clearly see the different artistic features of eastern verses western feminist literary criticism, and more easily understand the different theories of the two. Analysing it from the view of the long-term development of world literature, Chinese feminist literature, with the background of Chinese culture, has created a large number of eastern female characters, whose 'meekness-outside' but 'sturdiness-inside', uprightness, diligence and kindness indicate the primary factors of an ideal human spirit. They are not aristocratic as are French upper-class women, so that they do not have the luxury of empty conversation, nor are they excessively politicised, so that they avoid the extremes of thorough revolution. They are influenced by western values, but still maintain eastern virtues, pursuing friendship with the world's women, keeping in step with their own brothers and sisters, and advancing with a moderate attitude. The question of what the future of Chinese feminist literature will be can only be answered by history. But we can be sure of one point. Chinese women, with a literary tradition of several thousand years, will never follow in other people's footsteps. Instead, they will advance in their own unique way.

## Footnotes

1. Yan Ming is Professor and Vice-Chairman of the *Comparative Literature Centre*, the Chinese Department, Suzhou University. Fan Qi is an Associate Professor at Suzhou University, and Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Victoria, Canada.

2. *Editorial Footnote*: For the complex implications of the terms used to describe personal identity, self, or the 'social body' in Chinese culture, including words such as *shen*, *ti*, *xing*, and *qu*, see SIVIN, Nathan "Why Didn't Chinese Have Bodies?", *Chinese Studies Newsletter*, 18, February 1999, pp1-6. *Shen*, 'which refers to the person or the body, can be used in combination with the appropriate possessive pronoun to refer to oneself or one's own person', SHUN, Kwong-loi *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, p22.

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