

An Introduction to Modern Chinese Female Literature

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Abstract: Due to the influence of Western learning and new developments in the modern society, modern Chinese female literature has gone through many transformations. This article expounds the new changes, growth and developments from the aspects of, writing style, ideological implication, aesthetic style, etc.

Keywords: Modern Female Literature, Female Writers, Writing Style, Aesthetic Scope

With the continued influence of Western learning to modern China and the development of modern feminist movement, modern Chinese female literature has undergone many changes compared

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with the traditional ancient Chinese's female literature, which became very obvious in the later period. The changes are mainly reflected in the aspects like, the changes in female writings, the transcendence of writing styles, the expansion of aesthetic scope, the changes in artistic styles, the integration of Chinese and western culture, and so on.

I. Female Writers at a Glance: From Ancient to Modern Period

China has long been known as a country of poetry and rites. There were many women famous for their literary works in ancient China and few of those have been handed down to generations. This is especially true in the south of Yangtze River after the Qing Dynasty, where there were a considerable number of female poets and ci writers. According to the records of *An Investigation of Women's Works of Past Dynasties* (later referred to as *Investigation of Women's*) by Hu Wenkai, there were over 4,000 pre-modern Chinese female writers, most of whom were *guixiu*. Therefore, the two characters "guixiu" often appeared in the titles of ancient Chinese female poetry collections. For instance, *the Collection of Guixiu's Works of Past Dynasties* compiled by Wu Yuexiao, *The Biographies of Guixiu in Qing Dynasty* compiled by Yun Zhu, *The Catkin Collection of Guixiu Poetry in Qing Dynasty* by Huang Zhimo, *Guixiu's Notes on Classical Poetry* edited by Tiao Xisheng, *An Outline of Guixiu's Literary Works in Qing Dynasty* edited by Shan Shili, *An Introduction to Guixiu Poets in Qing Dynasty* edited by Shi Shuyi and so on. The so-called *guixiu* generally referred as ladies from scholarly family. Ancient *guixiu* had the following characteristics: Most of them were born in scholarly and financially well off families. They led a comfortable and stable life, did not have to worry about daily necessities of life and were provided with good environment for study. The education they received was mainly a family based education or family school edu-

cation. They were trained in a very traditional pattern and their study mainly covered three areas First, *Commandments for Women, The Four Books for Women*, etc.; Second, ancient poems, cis, prose and odes; and third, historical records. Their living area was largely confined to boudoirs, courtyards, around family members and relatives. Because of the above limitations, it is generally regarded that the visions of female writers in ancient period were not so broad; their writings were quite uniform, mainly focused on hidden love and romance like, female parting sorrows, spring longings, autumn thoughts and boudoir love affairs.

Compared with the traditional Chinese female writers in ancient period, modern (especially in the later period) female writers were quite different in terms of theme selection, way of expression, etc. These were mainly because of: They received different education. Some of them received modern as well as traditional education. Women education began to develop by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1898, Jing Yuanshan set up China's first girl's school in Shanghai called Jing Zheng Girl's School. Since then, girl's schools were set up in many cities including Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, Nanking, Hankou, Changsha, Hangzhou, Shaoxing, Weixian, Chongqing, Canton, Fuzhou. By 1907, there were 428 girl's schools in China in total, enrolling 15,498 girl students. After the foundation of the Republic of China (1912), with the promulgation of "The Educational System of 1912-13," various girls' schools mushroomed. Boys and girls could study in the same school. Colleges and universities also allowed women to enroll. Therefore, women education got a big boost during this period. According to the 1918-19 statistics, there were 215,626 girl students enrolled in elementary schools across China, which increased by 13 times from that of 1907; women's secondary school education also achieved further development. According to statistics of 1916-17, there were total 8,382 girls enrolled at secondary schools in China (724 for ordinary high schools, 5,792 for secondary normal schools and 1,866 for secondary vocational schools.¹ Meanwhile, women's higher education started

to develop. Main colleges were, to name a few, Beijing Concord Women's College, Jinling Women's College, The Women's Institute of South China, and Beijing Women's Normal College. According to the survey by China Education Reform Bureau, 887 women students were receiving higher education in the school year 1922-23.² The above data's indicates that around 'May 4th Movement,' there were over 220 thousand women who had received modern education. Though it was only a small proportion to the whole female population of China, it was a qualitative leap compared with ancient China. The development of women's modern education laid a foundation for the rise in number of modern women writers. According to currently collected materials, late modern period witnessed the emergence of a large number of poets, novelists and translators such as Xu Xiaoshu, Zhang Zhaohan, Zhang Hanying, Chen Jiaqing, Huang Cuining, Chen Cuina, Chen Hongbi, Lu Yi, Qiu Yufang, etc. Most of them received modern education (including missionary school education). We may tentatively call women who had received modern education as intellectual women; they were actually the modern women intelligentsias. The knowledge anatomy of modern intellectual women had changed tremendously compared with that of the ancient *guixiu*. It is mentioned earlier that ancient *guixiu* received family based education or family school education. The traditional ethics for women had inhibited their study content and cognitive domain. A quite number of intellectual women received modern education. A few outstanding women had studied overseas (or had overseas experience) such as Qiu Jin, Kang Tongbi, Lu Bicheng, Zhang Zhaohan, Zhang Hanying, Yan Bin, Chen Xiefen, Shan Shili, Yu Deling, He Zhen, Yang Zhuang, Chen Hengzhe, Zhang Shaonan, Tang Hongfu. Some of them never engaged in literary creation such

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1. The above statistics are from Du Xueyuan, *The General History of Female Education in China*. Guiyang: Guizhou Education Press, 1996. p. 333, p. 432, p. 443, p. 457, p. 447.
 2. China Education Reform Bureau, *A Survey of China Educational Statistics*. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1924. p. 12.

as Jin Yamei, Kang Aide, Shi Meiyu, Xia Xunlan, Chen Yanan, Sun Duokun, Cao Rujin, Wang Lian, Hua Gui, Hu Binxia, Fang Junji, Qian Fengbao, Soong Qingling and her sisters, He Xiangning, Cao Xuefang, Zeng Baosun, Lin Zongsu, Zheng Yuxiu, Zhang Mingbao, Zhang Xinghua, Wang Liansheng and Zhou Shuan. Their education included at least foreign languages, natural science, social science and art, which was obviously different from that of the ancient *guixiu*.

On the concept and value of life, a quite number of modern intellectual women had transformed from the stereotype ideal concept of womanhood to 'female citizens' with independent thought and personality.

The change in the attitude and style of the modern women writers can mainly be ascribed to the modern education system. When they got chance and walked from boudoir to society, broadened their vision, renewed their knowledge structure and transformed their value of life and conception of literature. When all these changes were reflected in the literary writings, modern female literature was endowed with individual connotation and features different from those of traditional female literature.

II. Transcendence in Writing Styles

Traditional Chinese female literature was characterized by poems, *cis*, prose and odes; especially poems and *cis* were the popular themes. The highest aesthetic ideal of the ancient Chinese poetry was softness and honesty. This aesthetic standard coincided with the ethical standards for women. Therefore, a scholar in the Qing dynasty once said, 'only poetry was appropriate for women to write. Their talents and virtue can be reflected through poetry.'³ Especially since the Ming and the Qing dynasties, women's poetry prospered. In the Qing dynasty itself the number of women poets 'exceeded

3. Chen Jushan, *The Collected Works of Purple Bamboo Mountain Cabin*. Volume 7.

3,000.⁴ Women writers in the Qing dynasty wrote a lot of poems and prose, but none of them wrote novels though novels were very popular at that time. The reason why traditional women writers did not write novels was well worth pondering deeply over.

Novel in ancient China was regarded as 'indecent,' 'anti-Confucianism,' and not appealing to the refined taste. Mr. Lu Xun once said, 'Novel in China was never been regarded as a literary form.'⁵ It was 'long been regarded as evil'⁶ by feudal ruling class. Because novel mainly drew themes from folk life, the so-called 'street gossip,' it was regarded by upper circles as 'fallacies,' 'despicable and ridiculous,' or even further slandered as to 'propagate sex and violence.' Most enlightened literati and officialdom considered that women's temperament matched with the poetry, which required the feeling of softness and honesty; but they did not accept women to write novels. For instance, Chen Duansheng was the writer of the beginning seventeen chapters of *The Predestined Next Life*; his grandfather Chen Jushan was a somewhat famous writer in the Qing dynasty. He also considered women fit for writing poetry, but not for writing *tanci* (storytelling to the accompaniment of stringed instrument) and novels. At that time, the literary writing forms were strictly stratified. With this cultural background, few women dared to write novels. Strictly speaking, before 1840 (the twentieth year under Daoguang Reign) no Chinese woman wrote novels. It was told that Wang Duan (1793-1839), a woman poet and scholar of the Qing dynasty, once wrote a novel *The Unrecorded History in Yuan and Ming Dynasties*. But I doubt whether this book had been finished or published. *An Investigation of Women's Literary Works of Past Dynasties* by Hu Wenkai had

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4. Hu Wenkai, *An Investigation of Women's Works of Past Dynasties*·Preface. Shanghai: Shanghai Antique Press, 1984. p. 5.
 5. Lu Xun, Forward to 'Feet Wearing Straw Sandals.' *The Collected Works of Lu Xun*, Volume 6, Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1981. p. 20.
 6. Lu Xun, Preface to 'A Collection of Running Errands' by Xu Maoyong, *The Collected Works of Lu Xun*, Volume 6, Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1981. p. 295.

a complete list, but did not mention this book, which might provide evidence to my doubt.

Why did women in ancient period do not write novels? The probable reasons may be summarized as follows: One was limited interaction (mainly boudoirs), were incompetent to write novels because lack of the broad social and experience; feudal ethics and rites inhibited the other, women only had the right to have words within boudoirs. It was supposed that 'Words inside boudoirs shall not leak out, and words outside boudoirs shall not pierce in'; but the aim of novel-writing was not for self-entertainment within the boudoirs, it was for 'entertain people,' 'educate people' outside the boudoirs, in brief it was for others to read, which does not fall into 'the ethics for women'; third was the deep-rooted concept in feudal society that novels were despicable exerted a subtle influence on women.

In modern China, with the social changes and development, transformations in the literary concept and the influence of Western learning, a small number of women started to write novels. The first women novel writer was Gu Taiqing (1799-1877) from Man nationality 满族. She wrote *Dream Shadow of the Red Mansion* in her remaining years in the name of Yuncha Waishi. As we know, feudal literati and officialdom opposed women to write novels. Gu Taiqing was the first to break that taboo, and dared to be the first woman to write novels. Her behavior itself was 'taking a risk to attack men's fortress,'⁷ and finally led to doubts about the copyright. But it is a historical fact that Gu Taiqing did write *Dream Shadow of the Red Mansion*, which was testified by her poem and the preface written by Shen Shanbao, a contemporary woman writer.

After the first women's novel was born, soon *The Mansion of Banished Immortals* by Chen Yichen, *The Beautiful Female Prisoner* by Wang Miaoru (around 1877-1903) from Hangzhou, *The Chivalrous*

7. Paula Caplan, 'Aurora Leigh' and Other Poems. Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory*. Changsha: Hunan Art Press, 1989. p. 202.

Beauty by Shao Zhenhua from Jixi were published. All these novels belonged to *zhanghuiti* (type of traditional Chinese novels with captions for each chapter). The first group of women writers in Chinese literary history appeared in the late modern period, the first twenty years of the 20th century. According to me and my student, Dr. Xue Haiyan's preliminary estimate, the figure was over 60, of which the important novelists were Wang Miaoru (due to limited space, works is omitted here), Lu Yi (Yunqing), Mao Xiuying, Huang Bihun, Huang Cuining, Huang Jingying, Wang Yongxia, Chen Cuina, Yang Lingfu, Wen Qianhua, Shao Zhenhua, Li Zhang Shaonan, Jiang Zeng Shuwen, Jiang Wu Jianwen, Chen Shouli, Zhu Huaizhu, Xu Binling, etc. These novelists were mainly the natives of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong provinces, which coincided with the place of origin and prosperity of modern literature. Most of them received modern education, some studied overseas. The emergence of this group of women novelists was very significant in the literary history. It not only created a precedent for women to write novels, but also provided samples of literary forms and laid literary foundations for the first generation of women novelists emerged after 'May 4th Movement.' I used to think why a group of novelists such as Bing Xin, Lu Yin, Feng Yuanjun and Ling Shuhua stood out immediately after 'May 4th Movement.' Now it seems the answer is very clear: it was the writing practice of the first generation of novelists at the beginning of the 20th century that laid the ladder of success for the women novelists of 'May 4th Movement' period. But the significance of this issue has been seldom expounded so far theoretically or practically.

III. Expansion of Aesthetic Scope and Changes in Artistic Style

Due to their narrow living spaces in ancient period women writers mainly focused on the themes like, spring longings and autumn

thoughts, parting sorrows and boudoir life. Since the Ming and the Qing dynasties, with the social development and expansion of their social intercourse, the themes of women's literary writing had changed to some extent. Besides writing about themselves, they also showed concerns to the state affairs and social reality. But generally speaking, writing about their life was still the core of ancient female literature. Modern female literature changed considerably on this point. The literary themes have expanded from pure love and marriage to social life, ethics, education, law, business and so on, which indicates that female literature started to show concern about social reality and broader life. Wang Miaoru's novel *A Beautiful Women Prisoner*, Yang Lingfu's novel *The Bank Collapse*, Illusion Lady's novel *The Agony*, Xu Binling's novel *Peach Flower Face*, Liu Qingyun's opera *The Bond of Snobbishness*, and poems by Wu Zao, Lu Xiang, Wu Shangxi, Gu Taiqing, Ding Yuying, Lu Deyi, Xu Zihua, Lu Bicheng and Qiu Jin all described about the modern social reality from different angles. Some disclosed about people's destitution and homelessness caused by warfare (Wu Shangxi: *He Xin Lang*·Written in the boat when returning home with Mum in late autumn of 1901), especially the misery inflicted on women (Ding Yuying: *The Mid-autumn Festival in 1901*, Lu Deyi: *Turn Around*), some expressed women writers lofty sentiment and aspiration for devotion to national crisis (Zhang Zhaohan: *Reflections When Writing on Autumn nights*, Jiang Yuzhen: *Time of Lament*), and their patriotism in anti-colonialist aggression (Lu Xiang: *Indignation in Writing in 1901*, Lu Yi: *Worries about the Nation*), some even reflected the embezzlement in modern financial circle (Yang Lingfu: *The Bank Collapse*). In women's literary works, advocating feminist rights was the common interest of topic among female celebrities.

Since the Ming and the Qing dynasties, women had showed a signal for self-emancipation, which was mainly expressed by women's query about the sexual inequality and the view that men are superior to women. Some women tried to break through the prohibition inflicted by the traditional ethics, longing for a platform

to demonstrate their talents and intelligence. So women writers in the Ming and the Qing dynasties designed a narrative style that women disguised as men in their imagined world (literary creation), and made contributions to their country through intelligence and talents. *The Predestined Next Life* and *A Gifted Pen* in the form of *tanci*, Wang Yun's opera *The Dream of Blooming Flowers* all depicted this theme. The opera *Disguise* written by Wu Zao in her early years portrayed a woman disguised as a man read poetry and essays. This was the first ever another way of expression to show women's admiration to male and imagination. All these indicates that well before the modern period, women in Ming and Qing dynasties had had a desire to break away from their subordinate status.

In modern time, with the influence of western culture, the emancipation of women became an irresistible tide, and gender equality became the dominating topic of the times. But in the early modern period (before the Reform Movement of 1898), the influential advocators of female emancipation were mainly males such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Tan Sitong. In the late modern period, female celebrities became more active. In literary circle, the group of women novelists represented by Wang Miaoru, Lu Yi, Huang Cuining, Chen Jingying, the group of women translators represented by Chen Hongbi, Zhang Zhaohan, Tang Hongfu, the group of Nanshe women writers represented by Xu Zihua, Xu Yunhua, Lu Bicheng, Zhang Hanying and Tang Qunying all stepped onto the literary arena successively. In their literary works, women's sense of independence, equality and problems concerning emancipation (such as unbinding feet, setting up girl's schools and making their own decisions in marriage) were reflected to some extent. Lu Yi (another name: Yun Qing) once wrote a novel *Rosy Clouds Coming*. A poem at the beginning of the novel was as follows: 'unique skills equal the value of gold; the sentences in Xiang Ting were ridiculous. Extraordinary women should be independent, why relying for happiness on their lover's conscience?' Xiang Ting here refers to Yuan Shu's poem in the Qing dynasty, 'my misery or happiness in the future is

predestined. Whether you value or despise me depends on your conscience.' which was a typical women's outlook toward life and value in a feudal society. While 'Extraordinary women should be independent, why relying happiness on their lover's conscience?' in Lu Yunqing's novel reflected modern women's desire for independence and change of subordinate status. In this aspect, Qiu Jin's poems were more representative. She opposed the view that men were superior to women, in one of her poem she wrote: 'Do not regard men are superior to women. An emperor once wrote a poem praising a brilliant woman, which added glory to we women, and strengthened our belief that women can also be heroes.' (Inscription to 'Vanilla Shrine Notes') In this poem, Qiu Jin quoted the anecdote that Chong Zhen Emperor in Ming dynasty wrote a poem honoring female general Qin Liangyu, and felt proud for having female heroes.

She also wrote *Man Jiang Hong* in the form of *ci*:

May I ask how many heroes were men in this dirty world? Only brilliant women stood out now and then. Qin Liangyu and Chen Yunying won honors through sweat and blood. In drunkenness, I stroked my sword, which roared lamentably like a dragon. I have always longed to light the incense of freedom. When can I take revenge against the humiliation on my motherland? I would like to advise women that it is the right time to strive hard. Rejuvenation of China requires stabilizing all people. Prosperity is in no way the jade decorated on cloth. Foot binding is too useless and shall be banished.

In this *ci*, the author challenged men without hesitation. 'May I ask how many heroes were men in this dirty world?' She then referred to the female heroes in history and drew a conclusion 'Only brilliant women stood out now and then.' Though this conclusion might not fit for the historical facts, it is undoubtedly a huge lash to male hegemony. It was a sound unheard in ancient Chinese female literature. The strong sense of feminism was also reflected in her *The Jingwei Stone* in the form of *tanci*: She choose Hua Mulan, Liang

Hongyu, Chen Yunying, Qin Liangyu for examples as these were women heroes who fought bravely and were loyal to their country, and then said, 'It was all men who betrayed and surrendered. What a shame for men to be traitors. If men and women were compared in this field, it was men who were most shameless.' Though this saying had a suspicion of overcorrecting, but in a man's society of that time, the rebellion and subversion to male power had indeed caused a huge shock. It fully displayed the bravery of a vanguard of feminist movement.

Writing on overseas themes was another characteristic of modern female literature.

It is mentioned earlier that there were a few overseas students and residents among the group of female writers. The number was not large and even fewer who had written literary works. But their writings had indeed injected new blood to modern female literature and brought a new phenomenon, that was, women started to write on overseas themes. Describing scenery and customs of other countries, depicting foreign history, culture and in their thought and writings were exactly the new conception, new object, and new thoughts advocated by 'Poetry Revolution.' Famous works in this field included Shan Shili's overseas travels such as *The Travel Notes in 1903* (1903) and *Returning From Diving* (1901), Lu Bicheng's *ci* and Qiu Jin's poems. These works were of significant cognitive and aesthetic values in broadening the readers' vision, enriching their aesthetic judgment and having a sight into modern female's cognitive attitude towards western culture.

The artistic styles of modern female literature (take poetry and *ci* for example) also gone through many changes compared to ancient Chinese female literature. In summary there were two basic changes: One, the artistic style changed from exquisiteness to powerfulness and boldness. The artistic style of ancient Chinese female poetry was softness and honesty. The main key of 'the sound of boudoir' was tenderness and gracefulness, which formed the aesthetic style of traditional female poetry. Due to the expansion of

living space and the shift of role from boudoir to society, some writers even participated in the bourgeois democratic revolution and this led to the transformation in the artistic style of literary works of this period to powerful and bold subjects. The works of Wu Zao, Gu Taiqing and Zuo Xijia had shown this indication of change, while works of Qiu Jin, Tang Qunying and Zhang Zhaohan and so on even showed a more obvious indication. The other was the sentimental, tragic artistic feature. Sentimentalism was one of the main characteristics of traditional female literature, which was closely connected with women's social status of being a weaker sex. Chinese traditional philosophy regarded women as the synonyms of weakness, meanness, dependence and obedience, which predestined their unhappy or tragic life. Therefore, their works were always enveloped with a sentimental atmosphere. Apart from the influence of sentimentalism of traditional Chinese female literature, tragedies of the era such as national crisis, frequent warfare, state sufferings and personal misfortunes (misery brought to women by wars) added sentimental and tragic elements to modern female literature, which was clearly expressed in the works of Zuo Xixuan (1829-1900), Zuo Xijia (1830-1894), Shen Queying (1878-98) and so on. Modern period also awakened the individuality. Some women intellectuals resorted to literary creation to express their despair and sadness. The works of Wu Zao and Shen Shanbao were typical examples. Even some works of revolutionary women were filled with some grief when faced with grim reality and setbacks of revolution. Qiu Jin's many poems were permeated with sad and tragic aesthetic style such as 'though full of patriotic fervor, I still cannot bear to look back. I was heart-broken when revolution finally failed' (*Time for Reflection*). 'It is hard to express my sentiment and resentment though having patted all the railings. The last drops of rain were too sad to be listened to.' (*The Resentment of Zhaojun*) and 'autumn rain and wind makes one gloomy to such an extent' in *The Suicide Note*.

Modern female literature was livelier and rich compared with ancient literature; it had not only multiplied literary forms, but also

new features in thoughts and art. It was an important force in modern literature. But due to the lack of study in this field, modern Chinese female literature has long been neglected. This article is only gives an outline of modern Chinese female literature in the hope of drawing attention from the academic circle. Please do not hesitate to point out the inappropriateness in it.

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