Resisting While Holding the Tradition: Claims for Rights Raised in Literature by Chinese Women Writers in the New Period

Xiaojiang Li

ABSTRACT

The following essay presents a brief survey of the historical conditions and political origins of contemporary Chinese women's literature. Author Li Xiaojiang denies that the May Fourth Movement of 1919 produced the kind of sexual equality promised by socialism, and instead argues that true women's liberation in China was begun only after 1949. Li argues that this post-1949 period was the time in which socialism marked a legitimate change in the status of women—women entered the workforce alongside men, women were entitled to legal rights, etc. Li's essay deals primarily with two main periods in recent Chinese literary history: the late seventies to mid-eighties, in which works such as Zhang Jie's *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* (1979) highlighted the awakening of a women's consciousness, and a second period, beginning from the late eighties—which coincided with certain urban reforms in 1986—in which were featured new images of women with a sense of Self. After presenting the struggles for independence documented by writers in the New Period of Chinese literary history, Li advocates a greater tolerance for conventional relationships and moderation in changing values.

KEY WORDS

May Fourth Movement
Zhang Jie
Xiang Ya
sexual liberation
Ma Zhongxing
Love Must Not Be Forgotten
"Women Speak"
"women's rights"

To teach European and American literature in a university in China, you have, first of all, to present the history, culture, life experience and creative background of the author before you can begin talking about his or her actual writings. Similarly, if an introduction to the literature by contemporary Chinese women writers is to be given to foreign readers, it is especially important for us to delineate the road Chinese women have taken towards liberation. This road is the shared background of their creative voice.

Real change for women began not with the May Fourth Movement of 1919 but with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Socialism marked a new age; the lives of both women and men underwent enormous change, breaking for the first time with Chinese tradition. For women, change was manifested in the legal right of "sexual equality," in the ideology of "men and women are the same" and in a new era of social practice where "women hold up half the sky." Women entered the workplace and, through participation in society, began to acquire some political power.

Contemporary Chinese women's literature sprang from the soil of these new conditions. Unlike women's literature of the May Fourth Movement, it has developed in an atmosphere of sexual equality, raising as never before the banner of "women ."

"Women," as an issue, has posed a challenge—a challenge to the rights, already won, that are threatening to revert to traditional ways; a challenge to the thousands of years of that tradition; and a challenge to the new tradition of "sexual sameness" that has predominated social relationships in China for the last forty years. Making "women" an issue and confronting these challenges has opened a new

page in the Chinese women's liberation movement—the awakening of group consciousness.

It took Chinese women nearly a century, from the first steps of social and ideological change in the late nineteenth century, to come to this awakening. The period between the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the onset of urban reform in the eighties marked the end of this road and the beginning of a new awareness of ourselves as women. Our women writers have taken part, with their lives and their pens, living and recording this process in its becoming.

Looking back over the last fifteen years of works by Chinese women authors, we can discern two main periods: The first, from the late seventies to the mid-eighties, dealt primarily with the awakening of a women's consciousness. Zhang Jie's "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" (1979) sparked a literary genre that portrayed the unique experience of women (as compared to men) in the previous thirty years, particularly during the Cultural Revolution decade. Describing the inner journey of women's unavoidable awakening, the most prominent pieces of that time lit the fire to raising group consciousness.

The second period coincided with the urban reforms of 1986. New images of awakened women with a sense of Self began to appear. Confident of women's social status, literature of this period raised a series of claims to "women's rights," claims that cut deeper to the root of the women's problem than the usual discussion of rights in society.

Two collections of literature by contemporary Chinese women writers are scheduled to come out in English this year. Professor Zhu Hong of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has compiled a book of short stories from the early eighties. Her selections, drawn from the first period outlined above, highlight the process of women's awakening. The pieces in *I Wish I Were a Wolf: The New Voice in Chinese Women's Literature*, on the other hand, were written in the latter half of the eighties. They are about awakened women making claims to their rights as women.

China's legal system guarantees sexual equality. What other rights could these writers be talking about? In contrast to the feminist

movement in the West, little is said about rights in society; in contrast to previous demands made by Chinese women (up through the modern period), the question of "sexual equality" is deliberately avoided. Women already awakened, they find expression to critique their present state: The rights they lay claim to are exactly those that their sisters of the older generation discarded on the path to that awakening.

What claims are made in this collection?

A Woman's Right to Love and Be Loved

The notion of love as a woman's "religion " has been covered from every angle, exhausted beyond possibility. To love a man—not any man, but her husband alone—this was the religion of every Chinese woman in years past. Han Chunxu's "Rejecting Fate" tackles the topic with a different twist. On the surface, it's the story of an "outside lover," a young woman who gets pregnant out of wedlock. Forced to give up the unborn life inside her, she comes to analyze the meaning of her own life. A woman, and yet she says: "How I wish I could be a real woman, as lovely as a poem, a woman who understands love, who knows how to love, who loves with warmth, with passion, with delight; to be a lover, a wife, a mother. And to experience all the sensibilities of a woman for myself."

In prose as beautiful as the emotions conveyed, Han's protagonist defies tradition—both familial norms and moral values. Having bent to external pressure, her ultimate victory lies in her true and whole-hearted love. She claims the right to say: "What is it we shouldn't forget about the love, so Chinese, that Zhang Jie writes of in 'Love Must Not Be Forgotten'? A love like that, so shrunken, so pitiful, so hideous . . . ."

Liu Xihong's "You Can't Make Me Change" and Wang Anyi's "Brothers" tackle the issue from a different angle. They explore admiration and affection between women, and doing so, challenge conventional love. The writers offer no moral judgment. Their characters act; they record. The stories do however, appeal to a revaluation of

what is considered reasonable behavior. Further, they render aesthetic actions that would undeniably incite criticism in both the old and new societies. Who can resist this aesthetic? We can only admit their right to love as they will.

A Woman's Right to Sexual Expression

Unlike love, sexual expression is a new topic for Chinese women writers. In that sex fit into the scheme of marriage, Confucian ethics dictated for women a passive role. Yet the repugnance Chinese women have felt all along for the sexual act and insistence on linking sex to love does not necessarily result from Confucian training. These ideas are more probably related to self-hatred stemming from unwilling resignation as an instrument of "sexual service" for their husbands' pleasure.

Reform in the eighties did not prompt landmark discussions about "sex." Nor has there been the "sexual liberation" that took Western countries by storm in the sixties. Ideas about love and sex among the new generation of women writers, however, have changed dramatically. By the late eighties, sex had become a regular topic in the work of women writers. Speaking through their female protagonists, they either bind sex to love or treat it on its own, allowing interpretation to swing from the "sexual repression" of real life to the "sexual liberation" of fantasy.

Xiang Ya's on-the-spot reporting in "Women Speak" takes the air out of free interpretation by using real stories to chronicle real change: the onset of a sexual revolution, a revolution that has come full cycle for some women. Her article did not incite a whirlwind when it appeared in 1988 because, for most intellectual and career women, a base of social equality and group consciousness had already been laid. Shatter the traditional view of sex, and claims to the right of sexual expression follow.

One voice in particular in this stream of changing ideas clamors for attention. Asserting that sex should be freed from the confines of marriage, an interviewee in "Women Speak" asks: "Your world is so

big, how can you fit a man in?" A woman with little faith in men, she says: "Sex and love are two different things. If you can't find a man worth loving, are you going to give up the chance to enjoy sex?" Right or wrong, this voice circulates today among educated women. Claiming the right to sexual expression. Part of a woman's personal liberation remains thus, on some level, a dilemma for women already "liberated."

A Woman's Right to Choose Her Own Lifestyle

In the old society, women endured the same pattern of life for thousands of years. Marriage, the only respectable route allowed, defined two primary occupations: wife and mother. Women were thrust into society and granted new rights in 1949, but traditional roles in the family held fast; they merely became "working" wives and mothers. Tradition, the invisible lasso, continued to bind, pulling women down the same old road, a road marked with the sign: "You have no Choice."

Awakened women boldly claimed right to control their own destinies. The narrator in "You Can't Make Me Change" demonstrates her independence by pursuing her own career and freely socializing with friends of both sexes. The young woman in "Rejecting Fate" likewise determines to call her own shots. She will have love regardless of marriage. "The present is all I need," she says. " That is enough."

Though such claims are gaining acceptance today, ten years ago even, they would have been decried as heresy by men and women alike. Take, for example, another interviewee in "Women Speak" who has her own ideas about the way she wants to live:

> ". . . I do want a child. I don't think it's anybody else's business but my own who the father is. I went at lunchtime to have a talk about this with the Party Secretary.
>
> "'I plan to have a child,' I announced to him. He looked happy to hear the news. 'Well then,' he smiled, 'when are

you getting married?'

"I'd been thinking over the problem for some time; when he said that, I broke out angrily: 'What makes you think I should get married to have a child?!' Food from his chopsticks splattered all over his lap . . . . He stared at me for the longest time, then asked, 'Why are you bringing this up? Is it morally right?'

"I got even more excited: 'Why bring it up? Because it's my right! I'm a woman, and it's in my nature to have children. Restricting my right as a woman to give birth is inhumane! Nature has given me not only the ability to procreate but also the inclination to do so. Giving birth is my right!'"

A Woman's Right to Self-Development

Self-development and "women's liberation" are two different but related pursuits. The goals of "women's liberation" are group-oriented; the struggle is directed against opposing forces inherent in a male-dominated society where women have always been the "second sex." A woman's claim to the right of self-development, on the other hand, is one outcome of this movement toward liberation. It's the cry raised by women who are saddled with the dual responsibilities of career and family.

Ma Zhongxing's "I Wish I Were a Wolf" portrays the typical married working woman's life in urban China. Shen Rong first tackled the subject in 1980 in "At Middle Age," depicting the despair and powerlessness of a woman doctor caught between the demands of career and family. "I Wish I Were a Wolf," written in 1988, takes a different bent. The protagonist describes herself as a "sheep" herded by her mother-in-law, sacrificed to husband and sons. "I am oppressed, suffocated, ground down, stupid and lowly." Like her illiterate, jobless mother-in-law, she is ". . . strangled. (Their) lives have flowed from different streams into the same current of household slavery." But there is a difference: As a college instructor, she must

get up to lecture in front of class. "Failing would not only mean my career; it would affect me spiritually."

Ma's protagonist, when caught between the demands of career and family, thinks: "I've wondered a thousand times whether I could have endured the loneliness of staying single. Every time I start to sink under the tremendous weight of life, I berate myself: Why couldn't I have had enough sense and determination as a young woman to choose that path?" In the end, she comes to the conclusion: "If I could live my life over again, I'd be a wolf and not a sheep."

To be a "wolf" represents the resistance a woman must put up to protect her chances for self-development. What happened when Xia Zhixian, a central character in the play by Bai Fengxi, "Friend on a Rainy Day," played the wolf? She is quoted on the title page as saying: "A woman is not the moon. She can shine by her own light." The price she paid for illumination, however, was divorce from the man she loved. A woman of crowning achievements, she says: "Don't you think it is hard on a woman who wants to develop her professional skills but in doing so has to give up the pleasure of a family? Is that supposed to prove she's strong? Of course not!" She tells her daughter who's bent on taking the same path: "I don't want to see you make the same mistakes I have."

From the differing negations of Self expressed in "I Wish I Were a Wolf" and "Friend on a Rainy Day," we can see that for modern-day women, the claim to self-development is multi-directional. It is the claim to overall growth toward a more well-rounded life.

In fact, though most of the stories in this collection express claims to specific rights, all reflect a desire for well-rounded development. The "wholistic consciousness" written into the female protagonists lies at the heart of the women's movement in China today.

In our quest for "wholism," however, we inevitably run into a wall of opposition. What makes up that wall? To whom do we submit our claims? The wall is not built from law or society, the family, or even men. The wall is simply the tradition from which we ourselves have grown.

In the overhaul of the old social system, antiquated ideas like "a

woman's place is in the home" were repudiated and new concepts of "sexual equality" absorbed. Women hold up not only "half the sky" by working and participating equally in society, but with their responsibilities at home, are required, in fact, to shoulder the whole sky. Tradition, nonetheless, envelops and binds our "new society" like a giant net. Traditional values flow through our veins; we carry them inside us and pass them along. How can we escape when we ourselves are the tradition?

It is not surprising, therefore, that while the works in this collection rebel against tradition, they do not champion women's rights per se. They attack the stock of old ideas, beliefs and behaviors we and our communities are made of—the tradition which hinders our development. Tie Ning's "Octday" is a case in point. Divorced at thirty-four, ". . . every time (Zhu Xiaofen) thought about her age and her divorce, she felt so happy she wanted to jump rope . . . ." From the eye of tradition, divorce is a tragedy; everyone is sympathetic. Tie Ning turns on her wit in free-flowing language to enumerate good intentions gone awry. Untangled, as it were, from the web of marriage, Zhu Xiaofen falls into a web of divorce. Who is she up against? Those who good-heartedly contribute to her post-marriage discontent are none other than colleagues, bosses and close friends. The narrator in "I Wish I Were a Wolf " has a similar experience. Who forces her to become a "wolf" but those most intimate—husband, sons and mother-in-law.

Two claims for Chinese women today stand out above the rest: the right to love, drenched as it is in tradition, and the right to equality in the work-place. The latter, a forty-year-old legacy of socialism, has placed women in the social arena and ensured economic self-sufficiency, thus laying the base for all other demands.

In the stories presented here, when danger of losing other rights looms, the protagonist invariably looks to work for compensation. She 'd give up everything, even love and family, rather than lose the base to her "rights in society." Whereas her sisters of yesterday would have sought refuge in the family, today's woman reaches outside of herself to work, to what she has in society. Grasping this point is

critical to understanding the thought, emotion and spirit behind the works in this collection. It is the key to understanding contemporary Chinese women.

Finally, how do men fit into these works by women authors? None of the stories follow the traditional romantic narrative. Women take the leading roles, men play second fiddle. In Wang Anyi's "Brothers," the three women, contrary to custom, label their men "family." Love, nonetheless, appears to exist. No matter how great their disappointment in men, they do not reject them completely. It is through loving men they create a vision of what it means to be women.

On this point, "Brothers" is a highly symbolic work. The thoughts and emotions, interrelations and unfolding destinies described in the story represent those of contemporary career women. The so-called "brothers" are three women. Implied is that women today are equal to, if not better than, men in school and at work. The characters "overstep" their bounds, not only in the classroom and society, but also at home. "Lao Da" disregards her husband and takes over the house with her friend. "Lao Er" decides irrespective of her husband whether or not to have a child. "Lao San," on the other hand, betrays her "brothers" to leave with her husband. She goes not because she has no choice, but because she chooses her husband's love over a job in the city. Like her "brothers," she takes responsibility for her own fate.

The "brothers" constantly point out what is lacking in men, but in the end, despite the strength of their fraternal union, they still choose them. Though men take no principal part, the male role is obvious: In school, the three women "compete" with the men students; they call themselves "brothers," their husbands are "family." The minute a man shows up, however, they are forced apart and back to their original state—that of women. They ask themselves: "What is a man anyway?" and answer: "He is the natural complement and companion to a woman."

All the works in this collection express women's willingness to compromise and cooperate in their love relationships with men. This

is an accurate reflection of the attitude prevalent among Chinese women today. Rather than reproach ourselves for being too traditional, we should respect this grip on the past—it in itself is a form of resistance. We live in an era of change—modern culture is replacing tradition; material culture is subverting human links of empathy and love; the woman's movement is upending conventional relationships between women and men, calling for independence at the cost of personal happiness.

In this world of changing values, the hold contemporary Chinese women maintain on their right to love in a "Traditional" fashion requires courage and vision. Humanity, after all, is comprised of both women and men. If men cannot be liberated, can there be a women's liberation or human liberation? Without women's tolerance and love, is the liberation of men possible?