

From Daughter to Wife: The Trajectory of Married Women in Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's
May Fourth Period Works

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates works of two late-Qing period born, well-educated, May Fourth period first-generation female writers, Ling Shuhua 凌叔华 (1900-1990) and Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君 (1900-1974) who both had a literary creation peak during the 1920s-1930s. Born in a high-ranking official family, Ling is known as a Chinese modernist writer and painter. Born in a wealthy literati family, Feng being known as a scholar of Chinese classical literature and literary historian. A similar life trajectory didn't make them write comparably but having a remarkably different one.

By looking at *Temple of Flowers* 花之寺 (1928) by Ling Shuhua and *Trace of Spring* 春痕 (1927) by Feng Yuanjun, the central argument of this thesis is that the authors' writing style is considered different simply because they have depicted women in different marital states. The theme of marriage is through-line which connects both writers and also reflects experiences of women's lives during the May Fourth period. The first chapter examines the male figures among Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's work, where there is always a lack of specific description as well as the male characters being physically absent in the stories. Although these stories show the independent side of women and criticize men who are unfaithful in love, there are subconscious limitations on the self and female consciousness through the authors' historical milieu. Chapter two looks at the empowered elder woman roles in the traditional family system who functions as the unexpected oppressor towards the younger generation in the patricidal society. By tracing May Fourth feminism, individualism and female awareness in Ling and Feng's writing, I aim to show an inner conflict between modern ideologies and traditional morality in the two writers' works, and their depiction of women is formulaic.

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Introduction

This thesis engages with modern Chinese literature during the May Fourth Period, exploring the early period Chinese feminism by working on two leading female writers Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's representative short stories. Modern Chinese literature grew rapidly during the Republican Period (1912-1949), and both Ling and Feng wrote excellent literary works during this time. The May Fourth Movement created opportunities for women to pursue education or gender equality, and it also provided the space for female intellectuals to write. This indispensable event can be thought of as the progress of modernization from feudalism to women's progressive ideologies, and the writing woman group became a prominent characteristic of this movement as well. For these female writers, language and pen give them the agency to deliver their voices. As Lydia Liu argues, "May Fourth Women's literature, especially women's literature of the self, also provided a public space for women to construct, explore and strengthen their subjectivity of women."¹ My research responds to the influence of May Fourth Movement on well-educated female writing groups by providing a compelling comparison on how two May Fourth Period leading-feminist writers, Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun, who reacted differently related the concept of marriage both in their writing styles and contents.

In this thesis, I will focus on their creations in a time frame from the 1920-1930s, which can be thought of as the peak stage of their literary output. Through this decade, we can also see the gradual changes through analyzing their creation. In Ling and Feng's works, their romantic rebels find themselves searching for a model to structure their brand-new identity. This kind of new identity searching is the beginning of self-awareness and the grounding of the concept of individualism that they are trying to reject the tradition and break down the existing social norms.

The scope of this thesis is an investigation on short stories from *Temple of Flowers* 花之寺 (1928), *Women* 女人 (1930) by Ling Shuhua and *Trace of Spring* 春痕² (1927) by Feng

¹ Lydia H. Liu, "Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature," in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed. Tani E. Barlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 153. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/9780822396840>.

² There is no official translation for the book title. It is my own translation.

Yuanjun. I will mainly focus on the concept of marriage and woman roles in family system among the stories, with the hope of revealing that the two female intellectuals who lived in a conventional society has inner conflict between their deep-rooted ethical norms and modern ideologies which resulted in their feminist awareness still have limitations, even though they have been referred to as modern women.

Early Period Chinese Feminism and May Fourth Movement

Ling Shuhua 凌叔华(1900-1990), one of the most famous early 20th-century modernist female writers, has been significantly studied in modern Chinese literature. Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君(1900-1974) was relatively less known than Ling Shuhua, and was known more as a scholar of Chinese classical literature. Both Ling and Feng were born in a high-ranking official family in the same year of the late Qing period, being well-educated women and participated in the May Fourth Movement. Although they both stayed in Beijing for an extended period, they didn't get to know each other, and they weren't friends. Their similarities in the social background and educational background didn't make their writing styles similar, but rather markedly different.

Ling Shuhua's peak writing period was in the 1920s and the early 1930s. Western literary works heavily influenced her writing. Her writing style is a typical representation of the so-called *guixiu pai zuojia* 闺秀派作家 (boudoir school writer)³, which means the writing style tended to be more feminine and focused on the narrower topic of women's lives. The term '*guixiu pai*' deserves some discussion. As Rey Chow mentions, "the fusion of domestic femininity and literary critical terminology is indicative of a deep-rooted ambivalence toward the relationship between women and their attempts at artistic representation."⁴ Unlike the typically May Fourth Women's writing, female characters in Feng Yuanjun's works were more unconventional and bolder, but ultimately failed other liberated May Fourth intellectuals' expectations. Feng only wrote for a few years during the early 1920s, but she still significantly impacted the early May Fourth

³ The term *guixiu* 闺秀(well-bred young ladies) to a woman in a complimentary manner who has been excellently brought up at home. Here it is transferred into the language of literary criticism to describe the work of a woman writer. See Rey Chow, "Virtuous Transactions: A Reading of Three Short Stories by Ling Shuhua," in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed. Tani E. Barlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 92.

⁴ Chow, "Virtuous Transactions: A Reading of Three Short Stories by Ling Shuhua," 92.

literature. In Feng's later life, she gave up writing after getting married and started researching classic Chinese history with her husband, Lu Kanru.

Women's issues became the focus of cultural discussions during this time due to their close association with the larger political and ideological concerns of the May Fourth intellectuals in reforming China. Influenced by a Western ideal of liberalism, the May Fourth radicals had seen the subjugation of women in feudal China as evidence of the most conspicuous aspect of the inhumanity of Confucian traditions.⁵ In conventional Chinese society, the education women received had to inculcate the good mother and virtuous wife ideology so that they could in the future fulfill their responsibility to the state by *xiangfu jiaozi* 相夫教子 (assisting husbands and instructing sons) - the phrase identical to that used by the late nineteenth century male and female reformers championing women's education.⁶

The family is a prototypical traditional Confucian structure that trapped women within the domestic sphere and forced them to live as parasites who must rely on men. When introduced the category of women as a universal category of *nüxing* 女性 (woman), Chinese feminist writing was flooded with texts representing women as the "playthings of men", "parasites", "slaves" as dependents of men or simply as degraded to the point of nonexistence.⁷ The concept of *duli renge* 独立人格 (independent personhood) is a hallmark of May Fourth feminism. For those educated female writers, as Yan Haiping reflected that, "the lifeworks where the predicaments of the 'weaker sex' are so figured that they are not only inextricably linked with, but also paradigmatically evocative of the 'destiny' assigned to the variously marginalized, exploited, displaced or dispossessed as 'prey of the strong' in modern history, regardless of their actual sex."⁸ Notably, in the early 20th century, most Chinese women's fictional writing was closely related to their real lives, and the writing functions as a method to deliver their feeling to readers. In other words, their writings are more like an autobiography, self-reflections of their irresistible destiny.

⁵ Xiufen Lu, "Chinese Women and Feminist Theory: How Not to do Cross-Cultural Studies," *East-West Connections: Review of Asian Studies* 5, no. 1(2005): 137.

⁶ Paul John Bailey, "The 'woman question' and education in the May Fourth period," in *Gender and education in China: gender discourses and women's schooling in the early twentieth century* (London: Routledge, 2006), 113.

⁷ Tani E. Barlow, "Theorizing 'women'," in *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 53. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.04244.0001.001>.

⁸ Haiping Yan, "Introduction: On Empowerment," in *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905-1948* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.

Rather than use the so-called ‘weaker sex’ to refer writing women group, this thesis instead investigates their resistance towards the ethical code of the Confucianism under a male-dominated society.

In the case of writing women in the modern Chinese literature period, readers well-versed in the literature from this historical moment are aware of the feminine identities constructed by the leading male intellectuals such as Hu Shi, Lu Xun and Cai Yuanpei. As Amy D. Dooling points out, “discussions of female emancipation, women’s suffrage and education, and even marriage and foot binding in the early May Fourth press had become largely dominated by male voices, giving rise in certain circles to concerns about the role women themselves were to play in resisting patriarchy.”⁹ Women writers are trapped in a dilemma that they are still being characterized as a parasite who needs to rely on male writers for the chance to publish. Although these female writers’ rebellion against the conventional definition of femininity received attention from the public, the reality was that liberating females from the traditional family were unrealistic.

Moreover, the concept of marriage is the common task that female writers targeted; they aimed their criticism towards the conventional ethical code under the depiction of the traditional female figure and women’s marriage. Revolution and reform from the final years of the Qing dynasty to the present have been corrosive and preservative of family arrangements, reconstituting gender relations in ways that can be distressingly predictable or intermittently surprising. Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun’s early works, they have spent time depicting the free love and romance between well-educated young intellectuals. May Fourth lovers were first and foremost rebels who struggled to reject the Confucian family and its ethical and ritual codes. But the romantic rebels found themselves in search of a model on which to structure their brand-new identity. As Lydia Liu suggests that the discourse of individualism enabled May Fourth intellectuals to open a new battlefield in their struggle to claim “modernity” and to reject “tradition.”¹⁰ They are trying to reject the tradition and break down the existing social norms. So, female writers started to pursuit their freedom of chasing love and tried to escape from arranged marriages.

⁹ Amy D. Dooling and Kristina M. Torgeson, “Introduction,” in *Writing Women in Modern China: An Anthology of Women’s Literature from the Early Twentieth Century*, eds. Amy D. Dooling and Kristina M. Torgeson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 14.

¹⁰ Liu, “Invention and Intervention,” 153.

Love for them is the ultimate affirmation of individual freedom and sovereignty. In identifying the family as their adversary, they believe that the battle is won once they succeed in breaking away from its claws and forming a free union. Young lovers dream of building a more rational and humane community of two—the companionate marriage—on the strength of the redemptive power of romantic love. Among depicting how female protagonists pursue modern love, Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun showed their commonality as members of the *xin nüxing* 新女性 (new woman) groups that, in their works, the male figures are always absent feature vague description of the masculine characters. The female protagonist’s recollection of the process of love is just to experience the happiness and sorrow from it and make it a spiritual support outside of the feudal system. Moreover, the female authority figures in arranged marriage is another essential element that both two female writers advocated the subjectivity of individual life and established a modern identity towards the freedom of love. At the same time, those female protagonists always feel guilty towards their mothers during their struggles with filial love. Furthermore, a vast difference existed between Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun’s works that focus on the different aspects of the concept of marriage. For Feng, her works emphasize the process of chasing freedom, love and escaping from an arranged marriage. As Ling is more careful and delicate in her writing than Feng, she paid attention to female’s lives after marriage since marriage is still largely the only role available to women. They enter romantic liaisons with earnest expectations of marriage and as a result, often end up bitterly disappointed and victimized.

Be in a Dilemma: Critiques on May Fourth Writing Women Group

Many scholars in the field have ignored the fact that the feminist identity recognition among early period May Fourth writers hasn’t been fully established. The existing scholarship occludes how these well-educated female writers struggled on their different conception of self, and simply categorized these female writers as a monolith: the new woman group. Moreover, scholars have already worked on how the *xin nüxing zuojia* 新女性作家 (new woman writers) are similar to each other, but no one has worked on how they are different. This thesis is trying to provide a new perspective by comparing two leading female writers’ different period works to examine the concept of marriage in their works and why they are different from each other.

Since scholars always misinterpreted the concept of marriage in the May Fourth period literary work, the task of this thesis is to reconstruct this specific understanding.

Female intellectuals in the May Fourth period still suffer from a lack of scholarly attention. Among the existing scholarship, there is no precise and official categorization of writing genres for female writer. In that case, we can see in numerous works of scholarship that these female writers are all referred to as the boudoir school based on particular conditions, such as family background, creation period and whether they are famous or not. The blurry definition of May Fourth female writers is the best proof that people erase female writers' achievements in the May Fourth literature. Since scholars only seek female writers' consistency and ignore their diversity in writing creation, the definition of new woman in early 20th century China is unclear and problematic. Although the boudoir school is the most representative genre of female writing during the May Fourth period, the genre new woman was also used to categorize female writers. The definition of the term *guixiu* 闺秀 (well-bred young ladies) of the so-called *guixiu pai* 闺秀派 (the boudoir school) in the Republican Period China has a different meaning from the original usage of the term. This term was originally used in the Southern Song Dynasty, which is usually used on talented daughters from a distinguished family and particularly refers to unmarried girls in later periods. In a book called *Xianqing Ouji* 闲情偶寄 (Leisure Notes) written by Li Yu, the following passage is found, “以闺秀自命者，书，画，琴，棋四艺，均不可少。” (Women who call themselves well-bred young ladies, must be skilled in the four scholarly arts of calligraphy, painting, playing the guqin and playing Chinese go.)¹¹

The boudoir school in the Republican period is more like a social identity delegated to the May Fourth female intellectual who were well educated and came from a prominent family and published literary works. Though there is some unclear definition of categorizing Republican period female writers, several scholars have discussed this issue. As early as the 1930s, critic Yi Zhen divided May Fourth writers into three categories: The boudoir school consisting of Bing Xin 冰心 (1900-1999) and Su Xuelin 苏雪林 (1897-1999), whose works focused on love and beauty, and described maternal love, childlike innocence and nature, all of which were in line

¹¹ Li Yu 李漁, *Xianqing Ouji* 闲情偶寄 [Leisure Notes] (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chuban she, 2001), 243, quoted in Anita Xiaoming Wang with Wang's translation, “The Idealised Lives of Women,” *Arts Asiatiques* 73 (2018): 68. In the original: Li Yu 李漁 (1610–1680) “以闺秀自命者，书，画，琴，棋四艺，均不可少。技艺以翰墨为上，丝竹次之，歌舞又次之，女工则其分内事，不必道也。”

with the basic conventions for female writing. Others like Ling Shuhua, who is categorized into the subgenre of the *xin guixiu pai* 新闺秀派 (new boudoir school) or *xin guige pai zuojia* 新闺阁派作家 (new boudoir writer) based on descriptive skills and aesthetic attitudes towards love. The new boudoir writers are not as restrained by etiquette and social norms as the boudoir school writer group, but they also consider the social influence and the identity towards themselves. Their behavior and thoughts are similar to the new woman, but their writing is still confined by societal norms and conventions. Another group, represented by Feng Yuanjun being called as the new woman writers, are seen as braver than the other writers in that they challenged the feudal ethical code and norms and chasing for free love and equality for females.¹² Regarding Yi Zhen's categorization, Zhu Ling provides another perspective on reading them. Zhu concluded that,

无论哪一类，他们的文本都是描写社会上层家庭中青年女性的闺阁生活和心理的作品，或婉约，或叛逆 都可以被称之为“闺阁文学”创作。这些出身于“闺阁”的女作家早年深受文化熏陶，青年时代又有留学的经历，沐浴着西方文明的“欧风美雨”。

“It doesn't matter which writing genre (these female writers) belong to, their literati creation are all the works describing the boudoir life and psychology of young woman in upper-class families. These works may graceful, may rebellious, but can be called 'boudoir literature' creations. These women writers from the boudoir were deeply influenced by the culture in their early years and had the experience of studying abroad when they were youth. They all have seen and experienced western civilization.”¹³

In this thesis, I intend to prove that these female writers' feminist consciousness is constantly changing with society and is an evolving process. Therefore, a single classification based on several works is not realistic since it ignores its growth process. I agree with Zhu's argument that these female writers still retain some fixed ideas that being trapped by traditional social norms as they lived in that circumstance. However, I argue that this is the inevitable outcome of the

¹² Yi Zhen 毅真, “Ji wei dangdai Zhongguo nü xiaoshuojiamen” 几位当代中国女小说家们 [A few contemporary Chinese women writers], *Funnü zazhi* 妇女杂志 16, no. 7 (1930), quoted in Zhu Ling 朱凌, “You guige zouxiang shehui- shi lun kangzhan qi jian guige zuojia chuanguo de zhuan bian” 由“闺阁”走向社会-试论抗战期间“闺阁”作家创作的转变 [Moving toward Society from “Guige”: Discussing the Creation Change of “Guige” Writers During the War of Resistance Against Japan], *Zhong hua nüzi xue yuan bao* 中华女子学院学报, no. 3 (2007): 52-57. See also Chen Jingzhi 陈敬之, *Xiandai wenxue zaoqi di nü zuojia* 现代文学早期的女作家 [Women writers of the early period in modern Chinese Literature] (Taipei : Chengwen chubanshe, 1980), 21.

¹³ Zhu Ling 朱凌, “You guige zouxiang shehui- shi lun kangzhan qi jian guige zuojia chuanguo de zhuan bian,” 53. Unless specified, all translations are my own.

overall historical moment because they cannot achieve a perfect ideological transformation through their rebellious consciousness alone.

In 1918, Hu Shi 胡适 (1891-1962) gave a presentation on the ideology of new woman, who is the first person to do so in China. While giving this speech at the *Beijing shifan daxue* 北京师范大学 (Beijing Women's Normal School), Hu depicted an image of the modern woman who is completely in opposition to traditional norms and deep-rooted ethical code. As Joshua Adam Hubbard points out that, Hu Shi used the term *xin funü* 新妇女 (new woman) to refer the woman who¹⁴

衣饰古怪，披着头发...言论很激烈，行为往往趋于极端，不信宗教，不依礼法，却又思想极高，道德极高。

wears unusual clothing and lets down her hair...whose views are radical, whose behavior tends to be extreme. She does not believe in religion and does not conform to traditional conventions. She is high-minded and maintains high moral standards.¹⁵

Hu Shi's article was the beginning of what is widely known and read as advocacy on the term new woman and he himself was hailed as one of the pioneers on woman liberation movement during a moment where many thinkers were considering the topic. However, in one such essay from 1916, Hu Binxia explicitly characterized three of her acquaintances as new woman by using the Chinese character *xin nüzi* 新女子 (new woman). The printed use of this term in 1916 predates Hu Shi's later use of new woman, often cited as the origin of the new woman trope in China.¹⁶ Hu Binxia's article, "Ershi shiji zhi xin nüzi" 二十世紀之新女子 (The New Woman of the Twentieth Century), demonstrates that the image of a new woman had already become a discursive tool for discussing the intersection of modernity and femininity in China by early 1916.¹⁷ In this context, the use of the term new woman predates Hu Shi's use, and also challenging the view that the discussion of new woman merely reflects the anxiety of male

¹⁴ Joshua Adam Hubbard, "Troubling the 'New Woman': Femininity and Feminism in *The Ladies' Journal (Funü Zazhi)* 《妇女杂志》, 1915-1931," (master's thesis, The Ohio State University, 2012), 1.

¹⁵ Hu Shi 胡适, *Wencun* 文存, Vol. 1 (Taipei: Yuandong tushu gongsi yinxing, 1953), 662, translation with slight modification from Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 11, quoted in Hubbard, "Troubling the 'New Woman'," 1.

¹⁶ Hubbard, "Troubling the 'New Woman'," 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

intellectuals.¹⁸ This raises the salient question of why do women's voices not receive a public response in the same way that the male intellectuals receive, or why have women's voices been ignored in the first place?

The Objectified Female Under Male Gaze

Gender does not necessarily refer to the difference of sex between man and woman, but how this sex-difference is formed and understood by society. Gender seems to have become a particularly useful word as sex and sexuality studies have proliferated. It offers a way of differentiating sexual practice from the social roles assigned to women and men.¹⁹ In this case, gender analysis can also be used in this paper. It's not hard to see that Chinese literature has always been dominated by men, even when it comes to women's issues. Either from the call for equality in Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927)'s *Datong Shu* 大同书 (Book on the Great Unity) to the advocacy on liberating woman in Chinese literary magazine *Xin Qingnian* 新青年 (New Youth) found by Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879-1942), all the voices came from men. Even though it supposed to be woman who had the most say in these female related issues. However, women's voices and words are barely heard. Besides, male intellectuals are often selectively imported into issues related to female consciousness in accordance with the traditional Confucian society. Women's liberation is often closely linked with the state as well, and gendered nationalism becomes a significant factor in the propagation of the significance of women's liberation.

Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967) had been an active spokesman for women's liberation and their participation in writing since the early 1920s, and also being known as one of the prominent writers during May Fourth period. In one of his most well-known essays, entitled "Nüzi yu wenxue" 女子与文学 (Women and Literature), Zhou advocates modern Chinese women participate in the cultural reformation and encourages them "take advantage of their own creative

¹⁸ Hu Binxia 胡彬夏, "Ershi shiji zhi xin nüzi" 二十世纪之新女子 [The New Woman of the Twentieth Century], *Funü zazhi* 妇女杂志 2, no. 1 (1916): 1-13; Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1-18; Louise Edwards, "Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China," *Modern China* 26, no. 2 (April 2000): 115-16, quoted in Hubbard, "Troubling the 'New Woman'," 25.

¹⁹ Joan W Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053, doi:10.2307/1864376.1056.

abilities to express their true feelings and thoughts and to eradicate age-old misunderstandings and misgivings about women.”²⁰ This is supposed to be a good start for female intellectuals, but unfortunately, Zhou’s notion of women’s liberation carries a heavy air of male-centred nationalism. His promotion of women’s education and women’s liberation functions as a tool of serving nationalism. Interestingly, in his later essay concerning the woman’s question written in 1928, “Funü wenti yu Dongfang wenming deng” 妇女问题与东方文明等 (Women’s question and Eastern civilization), Zhou Zuoren claims that, “我觉得中国妇女运动之不发达, 实由于女子之缺少自觉, 而其原因又在于思想不通彻, 故思想改革实为现今最应重视的一件事。” (I think the reason the feminist movement does not flourish in China can be attributed to a lack of female consciousness, and the fundamental reason for that is because they [women] are not yet enlightened. Therefore, ideological remolding is an issue that deserves our fullest attention.)²¹ Using Zhou Zuoren as example, who as an influential public figure who promoting women’s liberation, he has a firm grip on their right to speak out. Male intellectuals can have the right to criticize and evaluate everything, from the encouragement women’s participation in both society and writing creations before to accuse women lack female consciousness. They control what educational resources they can give women, but they don’t provide these new women time to proceed the knowledge and give opportunities to make women’s voices heard. In that case, the public can rarely hear elite women comment on men. Also, the same male-centred ideology appears in Zhou Jianren 周建人 (1888-1984)’s article, “Funü zhuyi zhi kexue de jichu” 妇女主义之科学的基础 (The Scientific Foundations of Feminism), where he promotes the social advancement of women while also maintaining the biological inferiority of most women compared to most men.²² While Zhou Jianren’s arguments seems to allow for a certain degree of flexibility in gender identity, it can be easily figure that his arguments build up on an assumption or a preset condition that masculinity is superior to womanhood.

²⁰ Dooling and Torgeson, “Introduction,” 14.

²¹ Zhou Zuoren 周作人, “Funü wenti yu Dongfang wenming deng” 妇女问题与东方文明等 [Women’s question and Eastern civilization], in *Zhou Zuoren zaoqi sanwenxuan* 周作人早期散文选 [Selected Earlier Essays by Zhou Zuoren], ed. Xu Zhiying (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1984), 136, quoted in Xiaoquan Raphael Zhang with Zhang’s translation, “A Voice Silenced and Heard: Negotiations and Transactions Across Boundaries in Ling Shuhua’s English Memoirs,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 49, no. 4 (2012): 590.

²² Zhou Jianren 周建人, “Funü zhuyi zhi kexue de jichu” 妇女主义之科学的基础 [The Scientific Foundations of Feminism], *Funü zazhi* 妇女杂志 9, no. 4 (1923): 2-4, quoted in Hubbard, “Troubling the ‘New Woman,’” 43.

Female intellectual group has been always live under the male gaze and the society still being dominated by the male group. They rarely could take the initiative, and at the same time, there is no way to escape the male's control completely. Everything they have, including the education resources, job opportunities, and even the platforms for publishing writing pieces, are all designed through following the ideology of the male elite group. That is why the existence of women's literature is essential, which is a vital way to listen to women group's voices.

Structure of the Chapters

This thesis will link Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's works together by using the topic of marriage. In my opinion, these two writers describe women in different marital statuses when they write about marriage. Feng Yuanjun's new women fail to achieve freedom, and Ling Shuhua depicts the traditional women who are forced to accept marriage is the beginning of their marriage. As such, I discuss how the two writers' express women's self-perception around the issue of marriage. Furthermore, I investigate the female protagonist's awareness changes bring and the change of their family status in a conventional society. If viewed in terms of marital status, the two writers' literary works depict the best embodiment of women's lives under the mixing of old and new ethical ideologies during the May Fourth period.

Although two female writers advocated the subjectivity of individual life, there still have a self-contradicted identity that exists towards free love. In Chapter One, I focus on the embodiment of the female consciousness in the works of the two writers and the limitations of the cognition of independent individuals when creating the roles of independent women. When it comes to men in a relationship, the authors lack a clear description, which thematically strengthens women's control over a relationship by reducing men's presence, but always lacks men's participation when different situations arise. In addition, when the two writers describe the self-pursuit of women, it always ends up with female protagonists leave the home. The relatively single and fixed description reflects that the two writers feel confused about the future of independent women.

In Chapter Two, I mainly discuss the role of women in the traditional family system. Over time, women have different perceptions of themselves after the change of family identity and the neglected relationships between different generations of women without male figures. Women, through marriage, end up with a certain amount of power and become the voice of the

patriarchal society: in Ling Shuhua's works, the married women, the mother-in-law is an oppressor towards the daughter-in-law; among Feng Yuanjun's works, the figure of a mother always oppresses her daughter by using the name of filial piety and love to force them accept the arranged marriage.

Contribution

Even on issues related to the women movement, women's voice has been long ignored, especially about women's writing has always been discussed in general terms. Whenever the May Fourth period female writers are mentioned, they take up but a few lines of scholastic research. Scholars would be brought up the name of female writers as much as they can in limited lines, which resulted in many of them being underestimated. Meanwhile, whenever the names of female writers are mentioned, the public pays more attention to their private lives, with one such example being the fascination with Ling Shuhua and her affairs. This thesis only focuses on these two writers' literary creations without further emphasizing their private lives beyond what has already been provided to the interested public.

In addition, I think the classification of female writing schools during the May Fourth period is still unclear. At the same time, there should be more ways to categorization female writers rather than simply using their writing styles. In this thesis, I used marriage thematic as a starting point to compare Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's works which are usually considered different writing styles.

Chapter One

Imperfect New Woman: A Transformation From Rebellious Daughter to Compliant Wife

By analyzing Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's short stories, this chapter explores May Fourth female intellectuals experiencing an identity crisis in a dilemma between finding feminist consciousness and conventional morality. To respond to modern ideas brought about by the May Fourth Movement, female writers tried to break away from male-centered moral constraints. In this chapter, I mainly discuss the similarities between Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's works and the issues in their understanding of the independent consciousness of a new woman. The kind of problematic knowledge regarding female independence is the common thread linking May Fourth Period female writers. At the same time, compared with the classification of Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's writing styles into "new woman writers" and "new boudoir writers", I categorize their writing as featuring women characters with various marital statuses. In this chapter, the female protagonists described by Ling is the new woman after marriage, while Feng's female protagonists are the new woman before marriage.

This chapter is organized into three sections. In the first part, I provide a close reading of Ling Shuhua's "Lü tu" 旅途 (Journey, 1931) and Feng Yuanjun's "Wu dian" 误点 (Delayed, 1928), and I argue that these two writers are still subconsciously portraying female protagonists as parasites attached to each of the men they loved. Simultaneously, I further explore a point of commonality between the different writing styles regarding depicting the lack of men appearing within the stories. The second part presents an analysis on Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's unquestioning and idealistic feminist thoughts when they depict female protagonists pursuing the freedom of love and independence by examining Ling's "Qixia" 绮霞²³ (1927) and Feng's "Lü xing" 旅行 (Travel, 1924). The third part analyzes "Hua zhi si" 花之寺 (Temple of Flowers, 1925) by Ling and "Wo yizai aishen qian fanzui le" 我已在爱神前犯罪了 (I have committed a

²³ Qixia 绮霞 is the female protagonist's name that there is no specific meaning, so I didn't provide the English title translation for this story. This name can be literally translated as the beautiful rosy cloud.

sin before Cupid, 1925) by Feng, showing that both writers were adopting a satirical style to criticize men implicitly while concurrently questioning the free love of new women.

Both writers attempted to find their own identity by searching for the value of women themselves. It is almost impossible for female elites to escape from social pressure and seek changes immediately under a conventional society. Therefore, their pursuit of free love is a kind of egotistical and naive endeavour. The May Fourth movement has always been regarded as a milestone on the path of Chinese women's liberation. Along with this liberation movement for democracy and freedom came a wealth of literary works. Male writers mostly wrote more widely circulated literature about women's sovereignty and independence during the May Fourth Movement. This chapter aims to redefine these underestimated literary works created by women during the same period and discusses the diversity of female writers' self-consciousness. Moreover, besides the limited space for these female elites to write freely due to historical constraints, their self-recognition is still at a nascent stage, which is also why the characters in their writing are relatively one-dimensional and static. Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun, as the first group being influenced by imported idealism, are also heavily influenced by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's three-act play—*A Doll's House*. Ibsen's play is another reason the way they described the fate of the new women has similarities.

Introduction

The origin of Chinese feminism, rather than a discrete phenomenon linked to the dominant idea of the May Fourth Movement, surged from the New Culture ²⁴ era and was a continuation and an explosion of a feminist discourse that had existed in China since the late Qing.²⁵ The journey of Chinese feminism started far earlier than people thought; modern feminism arose in China in association with the reform movement of the mid-1890s.²⁶ Anarchist He

²⁴ New culture movement (1915-1919) was a movement that happened in China during 1910s and 1920s. It criticized traditional Chinese ideas such as Confucianism and promoted a new culture based Western ideas such as science and democracy. This movement was led by many famous scholars such as, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879-1942), Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940), Li Dazhao 李大钊 (1889-1927) and Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) who studied abroad.

²⁵ Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 44.

²⁶ Peter Zarrow, "He Zhen and Anarcho-Feminism in China," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (1988), 797.

Zhen and poet-revolutionary Qiu Jin, who lived in the late Qing period, represented some of the most dynamic representations of femininity in the nineteenth century. He Zhen pointed out that women wouldn't truly achieve equality with men until they became economically accessible and able to support themselves one day, a preliminary concept of what we call independent women nowadays. Following the New Culture, the May Fourth movement's appearance is another turning point for Chinese women, which afforded opportunities to use literary forms to deliver their voice. Educated women challenging male-dominated literature had not occurred before 1919; the May Fourth Movement of 1919 was a student movement, a political challenge to the then government's failed policies vis à vis the foreign powers decision regarding the fate of the nation at the Versailles Peace Conference, and a social, cultural, and intellectual watershed.²⁷

Under the significant concepts of gender equality, *hunyin ziyou* 婚姻自由 (free marriage) and *ziyou lian'ai* 自由恋爱 (free love) in the May Fourth movement, intellectuals were awakened to feminist awareness and discourses in searching for self-identification and individual liberation. Meanwhile, a fictional heroine who provided great inspiration to many Chinese women in this period was Nora²⁸, from Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906)'s play *A Doll's House*, translated by Hu Shi 胡适 (1891-1962) and published in *The New Youth Magazine* in 1918.²⁹ Hu Shi's representation of Ibsen's character undeniably became a transition point for society, especially for women who received an education and engaged with cultural reformation. The ending scene of *A Doll's House* about the new woman Nora leaves her home in order to chase her pursuit had a significant influence on female intellectuals. However, in light of the social reality of China at that time, Lu Xun's provides a pessimistic analysis on his speech, *Nuola chuzou hou hui zenyang* 娜拉出走后会怎样 (What Happens to Nora After She Leaves Home, 1923), he believed that there were only two outcomes for Nora after she left home: either sell herself sexually or go home.³⁰ Lu Xun's speech is the discussion based on the play *A Doll's*

²⁷ Janet Ng, "Introduction," in *May Fourth Women Writers: Memoirs*, eds. Janet Ng and Janice Wickeri (Hong Kong: The Research Centre for Translation, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1996), 9.

²⁸ *A Doll's House* also translated as *A Doll House*. It is a three-act play written by Norwegian playwrights Henrik Ibsen. This play deals with the fate of a married woman, Nora, who didn't get a chance for self-fulfillment in a male-dominated society. See Henrik Ibsen and Simon Stephens, *A Doll's House* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012).

²⁹ Ng, "Introduction," 9.

³⁰ Eileen J. Cheng, "Gendered Spectacles: Lu Xun on Gazing at Women and Other Pleasures," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2004): 11.

House, which reveals the social questions about freedom and equality for Chinese females. As Xu Chang concluded in the article “The Construction and Conflicts of the May Fourth New Women Mythology: Focusing on the Textual Fissures in Feng Yuanjun’s ‘Siberian Cocklebur’” that,

因而，“娜拉出走”模式的五四新女性神话建构，与其说表现了女性追求自由解放、挣脱封建礼教的束缚，不如说是有着“启蒙”愿望的知识分子蒙着意识形态色彩和一定的政治实用心态集体建构、想象和塑造的产物。这些被描写成决然叛逆的“现代”新女性形象及其演绎的故事，在历史的更深处反映着五四思想的潜流。

...the construction of the myth of the May Fourth movement new woman in the mode of “Nora’s leaving” rather than about the expression of women’s pursuit of freedom and breaking the shackles from the feudal ethics, is more about the product of collective construction, imagination and shaping by intellectuals with the desire of “enlightenment” under the certain ideological and political mentality. In these stories, the female protagonists are described as the rebellious “modern” new woman images and reflect the May Fourth movement’s undercurrent.³¹

Xu analyzed modern ideology from a political perspective and described the situation of female intellectuals during the May Fourth Movement period. Although the movement of women’s liberation is under the male gaze and also carries certain political motivation, the figure Nora represents the enlightenment for female intellectuals on how they understand the modern woman and the concept of individualism. Meanwhile, it also became a fixed creation model, that many female writers using the female protagonist leaves home as the ending of the story.

In this chapter, the concept of feminism is only used to describe Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun’s unique approach as May fourth period leading female intellectuals. As Lydia Liu argues in her chapter “Invention and Intervention: The Making of a Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature,” that terms such as *nüxing yishi* 女性意识 (female consciousness) and *nüxing wenxue* 女性文学 (female literature) are invented by critics who wish to conceptualize a female tradition that will recognize women as historical subjects rather than objects of male patronage.³² This distinction serves a further purpose for this thesis in attempting to draw attention

³¹ Xu Chang 徐畅, “Wusi xinnüxing shenhua de jiangou yu maodun chongtu- yi fengyuanjun *Juanshi* zhong de wenben liexi wei zhongxin” 五四新女性神话的建构与矛盾冲突—以冯沅君《卷菴》中的文本裂隙为中心 [The Construction and Conflicts of the May Fourth New Women Mythology: Focusing on the Textual Fissures in Feng Yuanjun’s Siberian Cocklebur], *Sanming xueyuan xue bao* 三明学院学报, no. 3 (2018): 7-12.

³² Liu, “Invention and Intervention,” 153.

to the underestimation of women's literature during the May Fourth period. This chapter will only focus on the in-text close reading and the combined analysis of the May fourth period background and the living environment of Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun themselves.

The majority of theorists have conceptualized sexuality as socially constructed, but precisely how this process occurs has been the focus of much debate. In this case, focusing on female literature is the best approach to learning what kinds of messages these female writers intended to deliver. Moreover, the terms such as female consciousness and female literature will be used to discuss Ling and Feng's works, which expresses the importance and specific pertinence to the results of the female elite and refers only to the works being forgotten or neglected by the public when they study on the May fourth period literature.

Since scholars tend to only pursue female writers' consistency and uniformity in their analyses and ignore their diversity in writing creation, the definition of new woman in early 20th century China is unclear and problematic. The female literature here is read through a different perspective rather than holding the same view as Wendy Larson argues in "The End of "Funü Wenxue": Women's Literature from 1925 to 1935", where Larson stated that, "...good literature is not an investigation of social problems but rather the outpouring of emotions,"³³ which contributes meaning to women's writing or writings related to human emotions. This is important in that it shows that the public starts to formulate an idea about the concept of *funü wenxue* 妇女文学 (women's literature). Larson also defines Chinese literature as "basically feminine and lyrical, and even though most famous authors have been male, men are imposters when they try to write."³⁴

As a representative of the boudoir school, Ling Shuhua is known for her writing which describing women's married life. Also, she achieved fame for becoming the significant critique she got in her writing career. Rey Chow argues in the "Virtuous Transactions: A Reading of Three Stories by Ling Shuhua" that, "in the 'public' realm of Chinese letters, the presence of *guixiu* qualities becomes regarded as the limitations of the woman writer: she does not write enough about "important" matters; she is too confined to the domestic world of feminine sorrow,

³³ Wendy Larson, "The End of "Funü Wenxue": Women's Literature from 1925 to 1935," in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed. Tani E. Barlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 63. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/9780822396840>.

³⁴ Larson, "The End of "Funü Wenxue," 63.

and so on.”³⁵ Chow also points out that the problem at hand is not merely that women writers’ contributions to modern Chinese literature must be recognized as having equally profound meanings as men, but how they can be recognized in their specificity. Chow’s article is the first well-known scholarship to label Ling Shuhua’s writing style as boudoir school writer, effectively making her name a metonym for this genre. Further contributing to Chow’s argument, this chapter tries to display the female protagonist’s growth among Ling’s short stories.

The second female writer I discuss in the chapter is Feng Yuanjun, who is well known as the representative of the new woman writers. Unlike Ling Shuhua’s typically feminine writing style, her writing style is more unconventional and rebellious. In this thesis, the two writer’s differences are used to contrast one another. Much in the same way as Ling, the new woman in Feng’s stories still encounters problems as, although advocates against feudalism and looking forward to the emerging modern ideologies, they still obey conventional morality subconsciously.

Ching-Kiu Stephen Chan in “The Language of Despair: Ideological Representations of the “New Woman” by May Fourth Writers”, attempts to read the dilemma of modern Chinese realism as a crisis in the formation of “self” for the women within a “new” sociocultural space that was still very much organized by a language that spoke of despair through a patriarchal voice.³⁶ Chan’s article reveals that people had given overly high expectations to female intellectuals before this article during May Fourth Movement. They struggled in the margins of the May Fourth Movement; the modern culture put women in the center of the storm but did not give them enough room to present and show them the respect they deserved. Moreover, unlike Chan’s article which treats Feng Yuanjun’s writing as a cry of despair towards the patriarchal society, I argue that Feng’s unconventional style was limited to a certain extent, and her boldness was established within the acceptable range of the masses while struggling to move beyond them. Therefore, she accepted some new ideas but failed in upheaving deeply rooted traditional ideas.

Among Feng’s works, her transgressive female protagonists dare to love and hate, and some of them even commit suicide to show their determination in pursuing free love. They

³⁵ Chow, “Virtuous Transactions: A Reading of Three Short Stories by Ling Shuhua,” 92-105.

³⁶ Ching-kiu Stephen Chan, “The Language of Despair: Ideological Representations of the “New Women” by May Fourth Writers,” *Modern Chinese Literature* 4, no. 1 (1988): 36.

belong to the category of unmarried women. Regarding to Ling Shuhua's writings, many female protagonists are *xinshi taitai* 新式太太 (new style wife), which refers to the well-educated women who chose to marry because of free love. In other words, the significant difference between the two writers is in the direction and position, whether before or after marriage, in which they focus on the effects of unions between people. Feng Yuanjun's works always end with the new women who bravely ran away from their parents to chase free love. In Ling Shuhua's stories, there is always new woman still being trapped in household duties although they get married because of free marriage. Thus, I aim to link the two writers' work together that the unmarried new women in Feng's works will eventually become housewives as Ling Shuhua depicted.

Male Figures: An absentee at the scene

By analyzing Ling Shuhua's "Lü tu" 旅途 (Journey, 1931) and Feng Yuanjun's "Wu dian" 误点 (Delayed, 1928), this chapter shows that both Ling and Feng, or the female writers in the May Fourth period, share a common problem in that they subconsciously depicted female characters as parasites of men once they have established certain interpersonal links such as the marriage relationship as described by Ling and lovers as illustrated by Feng. Moreover, the male protagonists are always the absentee at the scene since Ling and Feng's description of men is still one-sided and lack of specific physical appearance.

In "Lü tu", there is no clear description of the male figure in the story, yet his shadow permeates through the story through select profile descriptions and exchanges of dialogue between the mother with the narrator or between the son and the narrator. The male figure's image is depicted as a husband who is not loyal to his wife, a father who does not love his family. The figure of the sick mother in the story is the traditional image of a married woman who loves her husband. This story uses first person narration and gives the same attitude towards the role that male plays in a family and questioning the concept of love. One of the issues that I will engage with is that Ling Shuhua, who has long been criticized for only writing about women's boudoir lives, has a story that discusses what happens during the female protagonist trip. I read how Ling's depiction of female protagonist's behaviour who walks out of the home

and interacts with the outside world as a kind of growth or development of female individuality. This also represents the author was trying to prove that women are stepping out of the conservative life, and Ling herself, as a writer, also can write on the female who participates in society.

This story's narrator is a new woman who loves reading, needs to go to Peiping by train because her aunt is seriously ill. She meets a pregnant and sickly woman in the carriage, holding a small boy in one hand and taking care of an infant in the other. The purpose of this trip is to take care of her sick husband. According to her description, this pregnant woman's husband suffered from some contagious venereal diseases, which seemed to have been passed on congenitally to their son. The narrator feels that the mother did not know her illness was related to her husband, so suggests the mother protect herself and use birth control. However, the sickly woman is determined to continue procreating for her husband's family. Based on the sympathetic feeling the narrator has, she does not want to tell the woman that her husband is suffering from a venereal disease.

During the trip, the narrator first has a conversation with the little boy. From the description, it is not hard for a reader to speculate how irresponsible and uncaring the father was towards his children. Otherwise, he wouldn't have let his children get a venereal disease. The narrator states in a passage:

医学常识告诉我说，花柳症深的父亲所生的子女不会有多长寿命的，大约幼年期的死亡率很大。眼前这孩子既然发了父亲一样的病，他的运命恐怕已在冥冥中被决定了。

It is well-known medical knowledge that tells me that children born to a father deeply affected by the venereal disease will not live long and have a higher mortality rate in their early childhood. The boy who stands in front of me had suffered the same illness symptoms as his father. I'm afraid his fate has been sealed in the unseen.³⁷

From the medical knowledge the narrator possesses, she can be identified as a well-educated female elite, and it is clear to her that the father's illness was contagious. However, as the

³⁷ Ling Shuhua 凌叔华, "Lü tu" 旅途 [Journey], in *Hua zhi si* 花之寺 [Temple of Flowers] (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2016), 184.

narrator is unsure whether the woman knows, she began to test whether the mother by asking where they are headed to first.

“到石家庄。他爸爸生了病，写了几封快信来让我去看看。”

我忍不住往下问道：“你们先生的病不厉害吧？你们离开有多少时候了？”

“倒也不算厉害，不过不容易就好。从前-三四年前，他犯过一回这样的病，废了不少钱才医好。光打针不知花了多少钱了。花钱还是小事，就是他犯病时脾气大得很，他又爱玩，偏偏又不能出门，只能在家里闹。。。这一次我到 he 那里去，够操心的！”

“To Shijiazhuang. His father is ill, and he has sent me some express mail that that I should go see him.”

I could not help asking that, “Is your husband that ill? How long have you been apart?”

“It’s not that bad, but it doesn’t get better easily. From... from about three or four years ago, he had another bout of this sickness, where it cost a lot of money just to treat and make it better. I do not know how much it cost to have the shots. Spending money is no big deal but that he has a bad temper when he’s sick. He loves to go out and have fun, but he can’t leave the house when he’s ill, all he can do is stay at home, and this time I’m worried enough to go see him.”³⁸

From the conversation between the narrator and the mother, this is not the first time her husband has suffered from this illness. However, the father continued to live the same lifestyle and even had multiple children with his wife- this sickly woman, who is being asked to travel to look after him even though she is in the advanced stage of pregnancy. At the same time, the narrator learned that her husband was not only involved in family life but also had a bad temper. Despite the character flaws of this man is visible to the reader, the mother feels nothing is wrong with her husband. Instead, she took her efforts for granted and ties her fate firmly to her husband’s. She regards herself as an object, which was also a woman’s self-recognition in feudal society. After marriage, women and their husbands automatically became a community of shared destiny. Marriage robbed their roots on where they have come from. The following conversation between the narrator and the woman can show how she looks at herself as an individual and her sense of belonging as a female after marriage. It is also a comparison between new women and conventional women, which illustrates the importance of education popularization. Moreover, the narrator senses that the woman lacked medical knowledge. Out of sympathy, the narrator still gently persuades the woman.

³⁸ Ling, “Lü tu,” 186-187.

我忍不住同她说：“你们先生的病过不过人？我看你应当小心一点才好，你有这几个孩子，可病不得。”“我还不知道过不过人呢。上次他犯时，医生就嘱咐我小心一点儿，千万别传了他的病。可是，您说两口子怎能防得许多。”

“您娘家在石家庄吗？”我问道

“在，在，又会怎样？‘嫁出去的女儿卖出去的货’，我任吃了多少苦都不回娘家说的。”

I could not help saying to her, “Is your husband’s disease contagious? I think you ought to be more careful. You have a few children, and you mustn’t become unwell.” “I do not know it’s contagious or not. The last time when he had it, the doctor told me to be careful and do everything I can to not get sick from him. But how can a couple stop things like that?”

“Is your family³⁹ in Shijiazhuang?” I asked.

“Yes, yes, what would it be? ‘Married daughters are like sold goods.’ No matter how much I’ve suffered, I won’t go back to my parent’s home to complain.”⁴⁰

It can also be used as a contrast between traditional women and new women. In this short story, Ling Shuhua contrasted the narrator with the conventional woman who had to interact with society because of her husband. Under the same scenario that a husband has an infectious disease, the woman is steadfast that no matter what difficulties she meets, she will not turn to her parents for help. This can be seen as a demonstration on the power of traditional ethical norms that limit possibilities. As a new woman, the narrator would subconsciously want to separate from the husband and return to the maiden home. Therefore, the woman’s definition of self-value is put within the family and fully attached with her husband, the narrator as a well-educated woman, consciously thinking about the relationship between the self and family and treating herself as an individual.

Notably, the new woman, the narrator, doesn’t make a statement or a clear stand towards neither this kind of love between the mother and her husband, the male figure, but instead expresses sympathy and pity.

……虽然我有许多理由要劝告她节育。这样的生命只是耗费与磨难，要这生命做什么？可是我忍心对一个为了生存已经焦头烂额的苦人再告诉她一件她忍受不了的事实吗？”我不忍说出口，我缺少教徒救世的苦志，我有的只是一种感伤情绪。

³⁹ *niangjia* 娘家, here refers to home of a married woman’s parents.

⁴⁰ Ling, “Lü tu,” 186-187.

Although I have many reasons to recommend birth control to her, what is to be done with such a life, which only expends energy and suffers? But do I bear to tell her one more truth to such a woman who is struggling to survive about something she can't take?" I cannot bear to say, and what I lack too is the religious salvation of the bitter will. I only have a kind of sentimental emotion.⁴¹

The 'sentimental emotion' the narrator has, is a new woman point of view on the feminine fate. As mentioned above, the narrator thinks this woman's life is only waste and suffering. Therefore, the narrator's exclamation above reflects Ling Shuhua's sympathy for the fate of conventional women who live for their husbands. Compared with Feng Yuanjun's bold expression of emotions which will be discussed shortly, Ling's description of feelings and personal attitudes in the story is subtle and restrained. Her feminine writing is constantly being praised, but this kind of writing style has few robust expressions of emotions among her short stories. This story is Ling Shuhua's later period work which does not belong to the May Fourth Movement's peak. Still, it reveals the writer's exploration on the topic of marriage and the meaning of a woman's life.

Moreover, this story doesn't directly criticize the oppression brought to women by a male-centred society; but only looks at the women persecuted by conservative feudal ideology from the perspective of a well-educated new woman. As Fan Qingmei argues,

“觉醒而又困惑”便是“五四”女作家笔下爱情的特征。由于时代的局限,她们无法去也不会去作深入的人性探寻,却为后来的女性文学开启了一个说不尽的话题。

“Awakening and perplexity' is the characteristic of love in women writers' works during the May Fourth period. Due to the time limitation, they could not go and would not look for a more in-depth exploration of human nature; but had also opened an unlimited topic for the later period female literature.”⁴²

Unlike Ling Shuhua, who works more on depicting conventional women's married lives, Feng Yuanjun spent more time writing about the contemporary woman's romantic relationship. By analyzing Feng Yuanjun's "Wu dian", I would argue that the male figure always exists when

⁴¹ Ibid., 188.

⁴² Fan Qingmei 樊青美, "Juexing yu kunhuo-lun "Wusi" nüxing wenxue zhong de aiqing shuxie" 觉醒与困惑 - 论“五四”女性文学中的爱情抒写 [Awaking and Puzzlement: On the Love Describe of Woman Literature in the Period of "May Fourth"], *Xinzhou shifan xueyuan xue bao* 忻州师范学院学报, no. 1 (2004): 24.

everything goes well. I call her male protagonist a fair-weather lover since they always disappear when the female protagonists need them. Feng Yuanjun's female consciousness has fully established, but their understanding of independent women still belongs to the preliminary stage. Also, nobody knows what will happen to the writer's female protagonists once they get married because Feng hasn't written about women's marriage life. Are they still insisting on being new women who pursue gender equality and freedom? It is not difficult to tell that the way Feng writes about love is fixed and single. The male protagonists under her pen always appear in a one-sided, abstract image and can never be as brave as female protagonists. Undoubtedly, Feng Yuanjun's female protagonists are bold and unconventional but seems a little lost since the pure love she firmly believes exists only in a self-sacrificing way.

In the story, Feng Yuanjun depicts an irresponsible man whose only strength is at sweet-talking. The heroine Yan Jizhi 燕继之 is a new woman. After attending a party organized by her old classmates and teachers, she receives a telegram from her hometown saying that her mother is seriously ill and hopes Jizhi could return home to visit her as soon as possible. Jizhi is worried that her mother has missed her too much which brought about this sickness. On the other hand, as she already has a lover Yang Yuxiang 杨渔湘, she is also afraid that this telegram might be intended to trick her into returning home and forcing her to accept an arranged marriage. The female protagonist struggles in deciding to return home to visit her mother or not.

母亲病了不回去看看，良心实也难安！我情愿牺牲生命来殉爱-母亲的爱，情人的爱！爱的价值不以人而生差别，都值得以生命相殉。我们此次分离，究竟是生离是死别，谁知道！

If my mother is ill and I do not go back to see her, it will be hard for my conscience to rest. I would sacrifice my life for love- for the love of my mother, for the love of my lover! The value of love has no difference between different people; they are worth using my life to sacrifice. We are separated this time, who knows what will happen.⁴³

From the beginning to hesitating whether to go home to visit her sickly mother rather than deciding to go back immediately at the moment she received the letter. This kind of behaviour proves that she is steadfast in her love. In the heroine's view, whether the family or her lover cannot

⁴³ Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君, "Wu dian" 误点 [Delayed], in *Feng Yuanjun xiaoshuo: Chun hen* 冯沅君小说:《春痕》 [Feng Yuanjun's novel collection: *The Trace of Spring*], ed. Sun Xiaozhong 孙晓忠 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 43.

give up, she would have sacrificed her life to protect either. So, she is worried that she may be separated from her lover if she chooses to go home. In contrast to Jizhi's display emotion, her lover Yuxiang behaves differently. After telling her lover that she had received the telegram from her mother, they wept and silently hugged. When Yuxiang heard Jizhi's final decision on returning home, his first reaction was wanting to end their relationship

“我们各有个人的前途。我们都是明白人，谁也不要牵制谁。我们的友谊就此截算！”

“We each have our futures. We are all grown up; neither of us should prevent each other from doing things. This is the end of our friendship!”⁴⁴

“继之！要知道天下的事不是这么简单。我们的缘已尽了！你如爱我，我们从此义断恩绝！”他叹了口气，推开她，扬长去了。

“Jizhi! You should know that the world isn't that simple. Our love is ended now! If you love me, we will no longer be in any relationship!” He sighed, pushed her away and went on his way.⁴⁵

Although Yuxiang has put forward to end the relationship, Jizhi is adamant that the love between them has not changed. In the face of possible family obstacles, the heroine firmly believes in the love between her and her lover. From Jizhi's point of view, nothing can stop them from being together, and she will try to get back to her lover. However, the male figure's first reaction is to sever the relationship, and he chooses to avoid everything that might happen afterwards. In this relationship, the couple can enjoy happiness together; but Yuxiang will be absent whenever anything happens and leaves Jizhi alone. As Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua conclude that Feng Yuanjun's lack of specific description towards the male figure is because,

她很少用“自我”与“他”来区分自己和所爱之人。她与他同一主体。这样她的小说便没有设计要不会涉及女性通过恋爱所可能获得的性别感受或性别视点，在她那些女主人公的叙述中，真正漏掉的，匮乏的，乃是女主人公的女性自我。

She rarely uses the words 'me' and 'he' to distinguish herself from the person she loves. In this way, her stories are not designed to address the gender feelings or gender

⁴⁴ Feng, "Wu dian," 45.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 46.

perspectives that women may acquire through love. What is missing in her narratives is the heroine's sense of self.⁴⁶

From the beginning to the end, it seems that Jizhi is the only one who is making efforts towards this relationship, moving back and forth between family and lover. Even in the face of the breakup brought up by her lover, the female protagonist also acts as if it did not happen. Her blindness in this relationship reveals that her love is firmly attached to the male character.

Later, Jizhi returned home after a long journey. She was relieved to find her mother was healthy; but soon endured a sermon from her brother, Yanzhi, who expresses his anger at his sister's unruly behaviour and his hatred of free love. After this conversation, Jizhi learns that her mother in fact used the health problem as an excuse to trick her into returning home. After returning home, Jizhi's mother was very strict about her correspondences. But Yuxiang still tried his best to send a letter to express how much he misses her. In the letter, he mentions that what he said to Jizhi is because he is angry that he could not protect the person he loved deeply. Because he needed a place to vent his anger, he chose to join the army. The letter also mentioned that he would help her return to school by sending a school administration office's fake letter to ask her to go back to school.

And when he writes to Jizhi, who was trapped by her mother at the same time, this is how he describes his mood:

我逃出情场，加入战场。战场的壮烈，与情场的温柔，一样的伟大，一般的使人陶醉。

I ran out of love and joined the war. The courage of the battlefield, as great as the tenderness of love, all makes people intoxicated.⁴⁷

Yuxiang is always avoiding this relationship, from trying to end it several times to go to the army to wait for Jizhi. It can be seen from the description in his letter that although he tried to help her escape the plight, Yuxiang himself did not take specific actions. He neither said he would be at school waiting for Jizhi to come back nor tell her what kind of plans he had for their future. He finds another safe place, the army, and awaits his girlfriend to sort everything out

⁴⁶ Meng Yue 孟悦 and Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Fuchu lishi dibiao: xiandai funü wenxue yanjiu* 浮出历史地表: 现代妇女文学研究 [Emerging from the historical horizon: a study of modern women's literature] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1989), 53.

⁴⁷ Feng, "Wu dian," 52.

before continuing their relationship. It seems that the female protagonist is the only one who has been firmly convinced of their love and believes they will be together. Their love was a spiritual pillar for the female protagonist. The heroine's resistance to pursuing free love and rejection of the arranged marriage is originated from her unilateral love for her lover. Such kind of links established by free love is characteristic of Feng Yuanjun's writings. However, there is nothing in the story that can prove that their love is indestructible; rather it demonstrates that love is supremely fragile.

Surprisingly, the story ends with the female protagonist giving up on going back to school. Jizhi, who has a notice from school, has a legitimate reason to go back. However, when she went to the train station to wait for the train back to school because the train was delayed, Jizhi changes her mind and decides to go home. As Feng Yuanjun writes,

继之呢，暂时败退的情人的爱，又起而与母亲的爱苦战，她深悔方才不应该允许母亲今年不往北京去。

As for Jizhi, the love towards the lover being temporarily defeated, raised again and started struggles again with the filial love towards mother. She deeply regretted having promised her mother about not going to Beijing this year.⁴⁸

The ending here has similarities with Ling Shuhua's "Lü tu" as I have discussed previously; both new women characters are in a dilemma about women's self-realization, and the definition of independent personality is relatively vague. The female is in a dilemma between the modern ideology on pursuing free love and the traditional moral viewpoint represented by filial piety. For Jizhi, who is a well-educated woman, she begins to consider what she desires and tries to rebel against arranged marriages. Although her definition of free love is somewhat vague, she is still courageously pursuing freedom.

In summary, from the discussion on both stories, the two writers have certain stereotypes and inherent consciousness about love and marriage, no matter if the relationship is free or arranged. When the romantic relationship establishes a particular emotional link, then there is no significant difference between Feng Yuanjun's heroines as new women. Ling Shuhua's female characters have traditional patriarchal ideas. This kind of writing on free love also leads to

⁴⁸ Ibid., 52.

Feng's female protagonists' fatal shortcoming that her new woman protagonists' awareness on individualism is relatively vague.

Where can the May Fourth Period Feminism go?

In the previous section, I examined the absence of male figure in Feng Yuanjun and Ling Shuhua's works, and further analyzed how the two writers implicitly criticize the men and masculinity, which can be interpreted one of the early and most incipient examples of discourse on the topic of individualism. This section will further investigate Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's works, finding out more textual evidence of how the female protagonists' pursuit of independence. Meanwhile, both female writers are holding an unclear recognition of individualism ideology. Moreover, Ling Shuhua, as a representative of the boudoir school, emphasizes describing the new woman differently compared with Feng Yuanjun's description of the new woman.

For example, in Ling Shuhua's "Qixia" 绮霞 (1927) and Feng Yuanjun's "Lü xing" 旅行 (Travel, 1924), both two heroines begin to rethink their lives and trying to figure out what does the idea of an independent woman actually mean. They begin with what they are interested in and what they want to do with the rest of their lives, rather than discussing being a good wife or a good mother. This can be thought of as a symbol of women gaining the ability for independent thinking. An interesting point is two writers have implicitly mentioned the significance of education for women. Education plays an essential role for new women, making them start rethinking a female's social position and the importance of women's existence.

Although these highly educated women are aware of the importance of themselves as women, issues regarding this fact persist. Since none of them have mentioned where institutional education will eventually lead their female consciousness to, we can see among their works that the well-educated female protagonists of the short story begin to see themselves as separate individuals, rather than the parasite of the patriarchal society, which is labelled as wife, daughter, and mother; each of them demonstrates some notion of individual existence. That's also why I call their realization of individualism as a preliminary feminist formulation. They either begin to think about the meaning of being socialized as women or begin to observe a feeling of compassion for those who live in traditional societies. However, in their respective stories, the

authors do not mention how these heroines think about the patriarchal society nor how they will choose their fate and marriage. These female protagonists and the authors themselves do not know what the protean idea of independent women will represent and where their vague pursuit of freedom and equality will lead them to.

In the short story “Qixia”, Ling Shuhua uses the account of heroine Qixia 绮霞 to talk about how women should balance the tension between marriage and career. Qixia was a new woman with musical talents; after falling in love with Hu Zhuoqun 胡卓群, they soon got married as they both desired it. After marrying Zhuoqun, Qixia became a housewife whose only focus is toward her husband. One day, she sees that her once cherished violin has become worm-eaten. After chatting with an old friend at a party later on, Qixia suddenly realizes that she had been losing her sense of self as a new woman. When she talked to her friends about music and her violin, which had been put on hold for a long time,

她忽觉到自己性灵堕落，以前自己对男女平等问题，自己曾经如何的唱高调，讥消闺阁女子易于满足，故学艺不能与男子比并，现在自己怎样呢？

She suddenly realized that her soul had fallen. In the past, she was so proud and brave about the issue of equality between men and women that she ridiculed that those trapped by the conventional idealism, that they can be satisfied easily that they could not compare with men. But at this moment what was she going through herself?⁴⁹

Qixia didn't want to give up being herself; thus, she tried to pick up her favourite musical activity again by starting to practice the violin and resolving to abandon the household duties. But her neglect of family chores was ridiculed by her mother-in-law. Sooner, she realized that these days, she indulged in playing the violin and reviewing old music scores and did not care about whether her mother-in-law happy or not. Qixia started to rethink the value of being a woman herself, or from her perspective, she was supposed to be responsible for her family after she got married.

As stated in the short story,

“本来是，”她想，“一个有家有务的女子，为了丈夫，为了自己，应当把全部精力都用在那上头才对的，不能用在那上头，就是不安本分了。”

⁴⁹ Ling Shuhua 凌叔华, “Qixia” 绮霞, in *Ling Shuhua jingdian zuopin* 凌叔华经典作品 [Classic work collection by Ling Shuhua] (Beijing: Dangdai shijie chubanshe, 2004), 112.

“It should have been,” she thought, “a woman who has a family to take care of ought to devote all her energy to the family, both for her husband’s sake and for her own. If she couldn’t spend her energy on that, then she’s just going to get her fair share of restlessness.”⁵⁰

她想到这里，觉得近日发狂的拉琴，抛下一切零碎家务不理，实在有些不安分，不但对不起卓群，连自己也对不起。因为爱卓群就应当为了他牺牲一切，如今为了不要放弃自己的音乐，满足自己的嗜好，便不顾他家庭的幸福如何，这无论怎样巧辩，也于礼义上说不过去的。

Thinking of that, she felt that she had been madly playing the violin as of late and had neglected all the chores. She felt a little restless and sorry, not only for her husband Zhuoqun, but also for herself. For it was her duty to sacrifice everything for him, and no matter how delicate the argument was, it would be unjustifiable for her to disregard the happiness of his family for the sake of not giving up her music and indulging in her hobby.⁵¹

This description reflects Qixia’s conflicted inner heart appropriately. It is also the inevitable result of the transition during the Reformation period. During that time, there were no existing examples to follow, and no one knows how new women can reflect their values through the housework simultaneously after having a family. Those issues persist to the present moment, where women in the workplace are often asked how to fulfill their values while fulfilling their family commitments. Qixia doesn’t have the option to find an appropriate way to balance her family and hobbies. The decision she is going to make is cruel: either she continues to live as a housewife for her husband she loved so much, voluntarily accepting the rules of being a good mother and wife as the traditional patriarchal society requires; or she needs to abandon her family to chase for the independence again. As Ling Shuhua writes,

道理已经很明白的摆在面前，想组织幸福的家庭，一定不可继续拉琴，想音乐的成功必须暂时脱却家庭的牵挂。

The truth has been evident and right front of her, that she must not continue to play the violin if she wants to organize a happy family. If she wants to succeed in music, she must temporarily get rid of the housework.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ling, “Qixia,” 115.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 119.

Finally, Qixia gathered up the courage to leave her home and continue to pursue her music dream. In a farewell letter to her husband, Qixia says

向来我们的相敬相爱是彼此深知的，你一定会疑惑我有别的意思吧？可是，我想这几年家里或者还得有个女人照应照应，老太太跟前也不能没人服侍，那末，请你破除成见，再娶一位夫人，当我死了或休了都可以。

You cannot doubt that I had an ulterior motive since our love and understanding for one another has always been this deep. But as I suppose there should be a woman to take care of the house in the following years, my mother-in-law cannot be left unattended. Please break down your prejudices, to marry another wife, assume I'm dead or we've divorced.⁵³

The use of the word *xiu* 休 (cast off) is quite interesting because it refers to traditional society. The word *lihun* 离婚 (divorce) did not come into the Chinese lexicon until the 1920s. Before that, one could only find the word *xiu* 休, the closest equivalent to “divorce,” which literally means “a man getting rid of his wife,” or “sending the wife back to her own home.”⁵⁴ Moreover, a male can use a letter to announce his wife's divorce because the wife didn't behave well or did something unforgivable. As a modern woman, Qixia still chooses the term. She also faithfully believes that the blame rests squarely on her shoulders and asks her husband to marry another woman because she cannot take care of the household. This kind of reaction shows Qixia's vague reception on the idea of individualism in that she needed to find herself again. She just felt that it was a pity to give up her violin, but she felt as if she had made a mistake, since she was already married and was supposed to devote herself to this family. Qixia still unconsciously behaved like a conventional young lady.

Moreover, in the same letter, Qixia also brings up her definition of marriage and independent women,

以前我同你论过一个理智强的女子，不应当结婚。因为幸福的家庭，大都由感情培养成的。有许多的地方，完全是因了感情牺牲一切成就的。

⁵³ Ibid., 120.

⁵⁴ Xiongya Gao, “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China,” *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 3 (2003), 118.

I have discussed with you before that a sensible woman ought not to marry. Because of a harmonious family is mostly cultivated by affection, and there are many places where all achievements are sacrificed simply because of emotion.⁵⁵

The ‘achievement’ in the sentence refers to Qixia’s music dream that, through her ideological perspective on the idea of family, the woman must sacrifice her ambitions to cultivate a well-functioning family. In Qixia’s world, her concept of women’s self-pursuit is divided. She believed that an independent woman’s life should be without marriage because having a small family of her own and pursuing her ideals are doomed to be unable to coexist. She consented that a harmonious marriage is the need to sacrifice their pursuit of goals and dreams. Qixia’s definition of an independent woman is similar to Nora’s choice to run away from her family to pursue freedom through Ibsen’s writing. This kind of black-and-white decision often appears in the works of Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun when women face choices between family love and romantic love, personal pursuit and family. Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua refers Nora as

...“五四”文坛上另一位女性形象却几乎代表了新文化新女性观的全部标准，这形象便是娜拉。不论是在文学还是在现实中，新的女性恐怕都是在娜拉式的精神，娜拉式的思索的示范下，迈出属于她们区别于旧女性的第一步。...娜拉的形象俨然参与着五四女性的主体生成过程。

...another literary character, who represents almost all the new culture’s standards and new woman views for the May Fourth period literature. Whether in literary or physical reality, the new women have taken their first step to distinguish themselves from the traditional image of womanhood under the demonstration of Nora’s spirit and thinking... The image of Nora participates in the process of the main body of the May Fourth period females.⁵⁶

Taking Nora as a model, it also explains why the May Fourth period female writers, including Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun, are always holding similarities in their depictions of women who are pursuing their dreams or fighting against arranged marriages. Their story endings are relatively rigid and formulaic.

Returning to Qixia’s story itself, the end of this story shows Qixia rebuilding herself but sacrificing her marriage since Zhuoqun married someone else after leaving home. In this case, is this the destined way out for a new woman? Is this the happy ending for the female protagonists

⁵⁵ Ling, “Qixia,” 120.

⁵⁶ Meng and Dai, *Fuchu lishi dibiao: xiandai funü wenxue yanjiu*, 66.

in Feng Yuanjun's short stories pursuing the so-called free love and free marriage? If so, there is no difference between a daughter or a wife falling back into another patriarchal society anyway. We classify well-educated women, women who are pursuing equality and freedom, as new women, but in this case, does this classification prove productive in any way? Marriage here seems to function as a causation for new women that they pursue before becoming meaningless when they get married. If we must tell the difference, they get a true love who is worth she willing to fold up their dreams and pursuit, rather than being forced to give up.

From the reading above, the living space for a woman who refuses to be a housewife is still limited and compressed. When the woman's virtuous transaction with her society is almost complete, and when her self-sacrifice is most unreasonable-that, the narrative is most poignant and most suggestive of the need for social change.⁵⁷ Ling Shuhua's writing does not directly point out the how deep the oppression to woman under the patriarchal society goes, but only criticizes the suffering that the patriarchal society has brought to women by describing the woman's everyday life.

Moreover, a hypothetical situation emerges regarding the new woman's marriage in Ling Shuhua's short stories which makes women return to a conventional society within the traditional Confucius idealism. Feng Yuanjun's unmarried female protagonists are still struggling with the moral ethic code involving the conduct of sexual intercourse. In this case, it is reasonable to speculate that the heroines in Feng's works follows the new women's footsteps after marriage under the depiction of Ling's works.

In Feng Yuanjun's "Lü xing", this short story mainly talks about the first-person heroine who falls in love with a married man passionately and has a ten-day trip with him, the name of her classmate. This story uses the first-person perspective to describe the inner feelings of the narrator, expressing the heroine's anxiety and the dilemma between chasing true love and afraid of rumour from others. During the whole story, this couple pretends to be classmates and rented two rooms in a hotel to hide from the public but continue living together. Although they are sleeping together, the two of them never break the boundary with amorous activity. They adhere to the purest love of the heroine's heart, spiritual love. The heroine claims that people didn't believe that spiritual love exists because they have never experienced it themselves.

⁵⁷ Chow, "Virtuous Transactions: A Reading of Three Stories by Ling Shuhua," 83.

Undoubtedly, the narrator in this story is brave and a new woman with radical thoughts. She is also an independent woman who advocates free love, but her degree of courage is limited. Her definition of free love also has strict standards. Her braveness and openness are based on the premise of not violating the traditional moral precepts she has learned and protecting the female chastity theory required by the traditional society. The comparison of her standards on free love is obvious. When they are on the train head to the destination, the action was initiated by the narrator first.

我很想拉他的手，但是我不敢，我只敢在间或车上的电灯被震动而失去它的光的时候，因为我害怕那些搭客们的注意。

I want to hold his hand, but I dare not, only when the car's electric lamp was shaken and lost its light because I fear the attention from travellers.⁵⁸

The heroine is brave because she wanted to hold hands with her lover and did so. But she did it privately since she is still afraid of rumours from others. Later, when they arrived at the hotel and preparing for going to bed, the narrator found out that the male protagonist had put the covers on one bed, seemingly with the intention of sleeping together there. Through the description, the narrator seems to be upset and was resistant to sexual advances and even a little bit disappointed with the male protagonist.

我所稀奇的就是，我们既然相爱到这样程度，还是未能免俗。当他把两条被子铺成两条被窝，催我休息的时候，不知道为什么那样害怕，那样害羞，那样伤心，低着头在床沿上足足坐了一刻多钟。

What amazes me is that we love each other to this level that we are still unable to break away from the convention. When he spread two quilts into bed and urged me to rest, I know why I was so afraid, so shy, and so sad. I sat on the edge of the bed with my head down for more than fifteen minutes.⁵⁹

The heroine's bravery is limited and built on the premise of not being seen by others because she takes the initiative to hold hands and resists having sex with her lover. Her criteria for

⁵⁸ Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君, "Lü xing" 旅行 [Travel], in *Feng Yuanjun xiaoshuo: Chun hen* 冯沅君小说: 春痕 [Feng Yuanjun's novel collection: *The Trace of Spring*], ed. Sun Xiaozhong 孙晓忠 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 18.

⁵⁹ Feng, "Lü xing," 20.

the love she seeks does not involve actual sexual intercourse. So, when it came to the detailed description for, they are going to bed, she was moved and felt respected by her lover that he stopped to undress her to her underclothes and stopped before taking it further.

他代我解衣服上的扣子，解到最后只剩最里面的一层了，他低低的叫着我的名字，说：“这一层我可不能解了。”他好像受了神圣尊严的监督似的，同个教徒祷告上帝降福给他一样，极虔敬的离开我，远远的站着。我不用说，也是受着同样的感动-我相信我们这种感动是最高的灵魂的表现，同时也是纯洁的爱情的表现。

He helped me to unbutton my clothes. Until it was only the innermost layer left, he whispered my name and said, “I can’t unbutton this layer.” Like a churchgoer praying for God’s blessing on him, he stood far away from me with the most remarkable piety. I was, needless to say, touched in the same way - a feeling which I believe to be the expression of the highest soul, and at the same time, the expression of pure love.⁶⁰

In her mind, love without sexual interaction is pure and praiseworthy. In this short story and in many other stories where Feng Yuanjun writes about sexual activity, she always refuses to describe it in detail. Instead, she will praise the purity and rarity of spiritual love. For Feng, it seems she is still struggling with the line of patriarchal morality that any behaviours related to sexual intercourse violate moral ethics and her pursuit of an idealized expression of love. Fan Qingmei concludes Feng’s struggle as that, “冯沅君对性欲“分寸感”的过分夸张和解释，无意中泄露了她潜意识中深恐遭到传统伦理道德指斥，畏惧被传统群体规范抛离的胆怯心情。”(Feng Yuanjun’s over-exaggeration and explanation of the “proper” sense of sexual desire unintentionally revealed her fear of being scolded by traditional ethics and morals subconscious mind and her timidity of being abandoned by conventional groups.)⁶¹ Similarly, Feng Yuanjun’s heroine’s view of marital status is also related to the ethical codes. After the detailed description of the couple sharing a bed, she also elaborated on her different views on love before having a lover and after having one. This contrast reflects the contradictory psychological state of a new woman, both radical and inherently obeying the traditional moral concepts. This is what the narrator thought earlier,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁶¹ Fan, “Juexing yu kunhuo-lun “Wusi” nüxing wenxue zhong de aiqing shuxie,” 24.

我素来是十二万分反对男子们为了同别一个女子发生恋爱，就把他的妻子弃之如遗……
我认为这是世间再不人道没有的行为……⁶²

I've always had a solid objection to men abandoning their wives to have free love with another woman...
I think there is nothing more inhumane than this...

After the narrator has fallen in love with the married man and having a closer relationship as they shared one bed,

但是现在我觉得那人是我的情敌，虽然我明知道他们中间只有旧礼教旧习惯造成的关系。我觉得我们现在已经到了不可分离的程度，而要减少他在法律上的罪名与我们在社会上得来的不好的批评，只要把他们中间的名义上的关系取消。

But now I felt that that person was my rival in love, though I knew that their relations were only the result of conventional etiquette and ethical code. I think that we have now reached such a point of inseparability. However, to lessen his legal guilt and the society's criticisms towards us, we only need to abolish the nominal connection.⁶³

In this story, the heroine's views on love and purity are contradictory: her pursuit of free love and women as independent individuals is based on their own, not violated the traditional social morality required. Meanwhile, she emphasizes that even though people knew she fell in love with a married man, they didn't have any sexual intercourse. Therefore, the love between them is pure. On the other hand, it is a way of getting away from anything that could relate to socially objectionable activity and touches on other concepts and issues such as purity and extra-marital affairs, and so on.

In one of the later sections, when their ten-days trip is almost at a close, in the discussion of sex-related issues, the heroine never explicitly mentions any words related to sex, only to emphasize that most people do not understand what love is. She claims that the love they have is the purest in the world, and other people cannot understand it because they have never met a good lover.

⁶² Feng, "Lü xing," 22.

⁶³ Ibid., 22.

饮食男女原是人类的本能，大家都称柳下惠坐怀不乱为难能，但坐怀比较夜夜同衾共枕，拥抱睡眠怎样？不过我以为不信我的话的人并不是有意轻蔑我们，是他不曾和纯洁的爱情接触过，他不知道爱情能使人不做他爱人不同意的事，无论这事是他这样企慕的。

Carnal desire is normal. Everybody says the chaste Liu Xiahui is rare. How about comparing that with embracing together and sleeping in one bed? But I think those people who do not believe me do not mean to despise us. That's because they have never learned what pure love is, and they do not know that love can keep a man from doing what his lover disapproves of, no matter how desirable it may be.⁶⁴

This statement seems to be a powerless emphasis on the importance of love's purity as if sex were the last wall to protect the definition of free love. Whereas Liu Siqian reads this kind of emphatic description as a "fragile defense line" and can be called as "self-deceiving" that, "然而这道防线是脆弱的, 甚至可以说是自欺.....或者换句话说, 它是“五四”女儿们一道脆弱的心理防线。” (Or in other words, it is a weak psychological defence for the May Fourth period female elites.)⁶⁵ It shows that they are accepting new ideas but are trapped by traditional beliefs. For the female protagonist in this story, such pure love is the proof for her as a woman being respected by men, since her love was defined at the expense of the traditional sense of physical contact as sexual intercourse. There is no mention of any male expressing any of his thoughts and opinions, but there are several conversations between him and the female protagonist in this story. Most of the content consists of the heroine's monodrama with multiple inner monologues and outpouring of emotions. Her avoidance of sexual behaviour- along with repeated emphasis on pure love and exaggerated explains why she would avoid having sex with her lover- is an apparent resistance and distinguishes her love from her so-called secular love. In this way, her love is sublime, and she has a say in this relationship.

As Zhuang Ying observes,

在冯沅君的爱情叙事中，女性的自我崇高感和母性情怀，使得爱情成为某种成全，这种成全满足了女性渴望独立、脱离男性庇护和从属地位的心理需求。小说逃避了

⁶⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁵ Liu Siqian 刘思谦, "Paihua yu jiamen neiwai -Feng Yuanjun xiaoshuo jiedu" 徘徊于家门内外 —冯沅君小说解读 [Hesitate in front of house - An Interpretation of Feng Yuanjun's novels], *Zhongzhou xuekan* 中州学刊, no. 4 (1991): 95.

对于男性的描述，于是也很难见到他们有任何抗争的举措，实质上透露出此期的女性作者还难以兼顾两性视角的创作局限。

...Among Feng Yuanjun's love stories, women's sense of self-notability and maternal feeling make love become a kind of fulfillment that satisfies women's psychological needs of longing for independence and escaping from the shelter and subordinate status of men. These stories avoid men's description, so it is hard to see how female characters any actions must fight. It also reveals that the female writers are still in a dilemma that they face limitations when their writing perspective needs to work on both sexes.⁶⁶

Later in the story, at the end of the ten-day trip, when the narrator talks about how I would react if others criticized the trip, the narrator had a statement like,

退一步说，纵然我们这行为太浪漫了，那也是不良的婚姻制度的结果，我们头可断，不可负也不敢负这样的责任。

Even if our behaviour is too romantic, it is the result of a lousy marriage system. We may break our heads, but we cannot nor dare to take such a responsibility on for ourselves.⁶⁷

The statement above can be interpreted as both a criticism of the arranged marriage system and a kind of excuse for the narrator and the male protagonist. It is because of the inhumanity of the conventional marriage system that the narrator has this kind of romantic behaviour. Female characters avoiding the mention of sexual desire in the short story are exactly what the author herself is trying not to mention. For Feng Yuanjun, those thoughts triggered by modern ideas have not fully transformed into her existing ideology. Therefore, even if she is famous for her unconventional writing, the works are still carefully structured. Such boldness and caution can be seen multiple times when she tries to deliver her view through the heroine's mouth. Though Feng has a vague description of the perspective on writing for both sexes, her failure to take both into account reflected the milieu of the new women at that time reflects in her writing. Furthermore, this kind of limitation for female writers on direct expression within the concept of sexual desire and the critique to multiple issues under the conventional society morality requirements. Those

⁶⁶ Zhuang Ying 庄莹, " 'Wusi moshi' yu wenben lixi-yi Feng Yuanjun zuopinji *Juanshi* wei zhongxin" "五四模式"与文本裂隙——以冯沅君作品集《卷菴》为中心 [The May Fourth Pattern and Text Fissure- Based on Feng Yuanjun's *Juanshi*], *Henan daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 河南大学学报 (社会科学版), no. 1 (2013): 110.

⁶⁷ Feng, "Lü xing," 25.

modern thoughts related to anti-feudalism and anti-tradition sentiment whereas the May fourth elites advocated, actually haven't been internalized into the deep psychological level to become their value norms.⁶⁸

Comparing the two works discussed in this section, although Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun have different level of limitation in their scope of writing the theme of their writing consistently focuses on the concept of marriage. It's worth noting that the new woman under their works has made entirely different choices during the journey of pursuing themselves. Qixia chooses to pursue her dreams and ends up losing her husband. Using Qixia as an example, there are two choices for Ling Shuhua's female protagonists. The first choice is after marrying someone you love and then giving up your ideas and personal pursuits. Otherwise, get a divorce after married someone you loved; then go back to chasing your dream with the loss of love and family simultaneously and carry the spiritual insecurity and moral guilty towards the husband. I read these two kinds of choices as Feng Yuanjun's heroines - those unmarried new woman's futures, who still seek free marriage and free love.

Moreover, it's not difficult to find that the protagonist under both two writers' descriptions is determined and non-negotiable. But why they do not have other choices? It seems all their options are predetermined that whether Ling Shuhua or Feng Yuanjun, they all have a fear of being abandoned by this society lurking in their subconscious. For example, Feng's heroines are unable to overcome the concerns related to sexual behaviour. Yang Xianqin reading Feng's avoidance on describing sexual intercourse as “冯沅君小说对人物性爱描写的特点,恰恰是她深层意识中传统意识残存。” (The existence of traditional consciousness in her deep consciousness.)⁶⁹ For Ling Shuhua, the female protagonists will automatically return to the traditional lifestyles under the feudal society after getting married and become the *taitai* 太太 (madame). The madame characters in her stories are “close to the new-style woman but in their mentality cannot overcome the gentlewoman's habits.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Liu, “Paihuai yu jiamen neiwai -Feng Yuanjun xiaoshuo jiedu,” 95.

⁶⁹ Yang Xianqin 杨现钦, “Feng Yuanjun xiaoshuo chuanguo de sixiang jiazhi lun” 冯沅君小说创作的思想价值论 [The Ideological Value of Feng Yuanjun's Novels], *Henan shifan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 河南师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版), no. 2 (2008): 184.

⁷⁰ Jeelson Hong, “The Chinese gentlewoman in the public gaze,” in *The Quest for Gentility in China: Negotiations beyond Gender and Class*, eds. Daria Berg and Chloë Starr (New York: Routledge, 2007), 238.

Sometimes, the contradiction between old and new ideas reflected in the works would often overlook the public. Since it can be read as just women expressing their inner emotions and not related to social interactions, it does not require any further attention. Numerous scholarly articles examine the works of Chinese women writers during the 1920s and 1930s period with a predetermined answer; in any case, they can only get an explanation as to because these female writers owing to their preoccupation with private emotional experiences. So, Rey Chow reads this phenomenon as (they) were unable to move beyond the subjectivism and sentimentalism that were characteristic of a feminine mode of writing to a broader vision of reality.⁷¹ Contra Chow, I read this focus on personal emotional experience to better understand what female elites thought during the May fourth reformation period. Their struggles and explorations are well conveyed through their delicate words. Their works represent the internalization and a process of applying modern ideas they have learned in social interaction. Female writers are learning new concepts, thinking about their value as new women, and imitating foreign models to give their heroines a better future.

The End of Free Love: Some Implicitly Critiques Towards the Disloyal Man

In the discussion in the previous two parts, the absence of detailed male images among Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's works reveals that females' limited involvement in society and female's powerlessness in a family; in this part, I would like to argue both two writers' satirical writing contains the implicit criticism on men. By sticking to the concept of marriage, what differentiates this section is that the female protagonists in these two stories are new women who are already married, instead of reading the two works along the line of marital status as I had done before. With analyzing Ling Shuhua's "Hua zhi si" 花之寺 (Temple of Flowers, 1925) and Feng Yuanjun's "Wo yizai aishen qian fanzui le" 我已在爱神前犯罪了 (I have committed a sin before Cupid, 1925), Ling and Feng are questioning on the so-called free love insisted by the new women during the May Fourth Period, and criticizing male intellectuals who were attributing their feminine fickleness and infidelity to the pursuit of freedom.

⁷¹ Chow, "Virtuous Transactions: A Reading of Three Stories by Ling Shuhua," 90.

It's worth noting that as the leading figures of the May Fourth period, female writers Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun are famous for portraying female lives. Among the rarity works using male figures as main protagonists, they coincidentally depicted an unloyalty man who was pursuing love and ignore his wife suffering under the guise of freedom. In the stories, many sentences are full of the suspicion and distrust of love and feelings addressed by two writers which shows their criticism to men, even society as a whole. As the woman figures of the two stories mentioned here are married women, the concept of *taitai* 太太 (madame) worth some discussion in this section. The term *taitai* 太太 refers to the wives of official and wealthy bourgeois, in other words, upper-class men. But in the May Fourth generation, this term included newly educated women and the relatives, friends, or classmates of the new women. Moreover, a madame was associated with modernity because she could accompany her husband on social occasions.⁷² Many new women who get married feel like they were gradually becoming less like the new women they used to be, that the traditional morality makes them become nothing more than housewives. They will be confused about their self-value and gradually doubt the free marriage they pursued.

Ling Shuhua's "Hua zhi si" 花之寺 (Temple of Flowers, 1925) tells a story of a man who pursues extra-marital affairs and becomes angry after his wife finds out. This story happens on an afternoon in mid-April. Poet You Quan 幽泉 and his beloved wife, Yan Qian 燕倩 are sitting together. You Quan wants to go out to take a walk with his wife, but they did not make it because he already had an appointment with his friends in the afternoon. So, You Quan asked if his wife could go for a walk the following day, but Yan Qian has an appointment with her friends. You Quan is angry about this since his wife's female friends are, in his eyes, too dull. He cannot understand why Yan Qian wants to waste her time staying with them. Later afternoon, You Quan received a letter that appears to be written by a woman, inviting him to meet tomorrow. Instead of telling his wife about the existence of the letter You Quan lied to her before going to bed that he said he would be going out to enjoy some fresh air the next day. In the early morning of the next day, You Quan carefully dresses before going out. After waiting for a while in front of the famous temple, Temple of Flowers, he saw his wife and realized that the person who wrote the letter is Yan Qian. When they meet, You Quan said to his wife that he had already found her tricks and has waited for her for a long time. He also blamed her said she was testing him.

⁷² Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 20.

When You Quan considers the idea of emotionally cheating on his wife, he gave himself several reasons to convince himself. He thought this behaviour is reasonable, and at the same time, he took his wife's understanding of what he is doing for granted and firmly believe she wouldn't see this as a problem.

“...我去...燕倩知道怎行呢？可是她已经明说我们不过文字之交而已，她知道也不会怎样吧！去一次看看又何妨呢？...她不会怎样的...”他拿着信自己商量了好一会儿，到底他决定去看看，他说，“一定去看看，人生能有机会做到奇美的梦。她素来明白我的，必不会为这小事生气，文字之交，有什么不行？...奇美的梦，做一次。”

“...If I go..., what should I do if Yan Qian knows? But she has made it clear that we only pen pals, and even Yan Qian knows it doesn't matter! Why not go and take a look?... She won't do anything...” He took the letter and talked to himself for a while. Finally, he decided to take a look. He said, “I must go. She knows me well enough not to be angry at such a trifle. Literally, why not?... A wonderful dream, I will dream it one time.”⁷³

Interestingly, when You Quan convinced himself that Yan Qian wouldn't be mad at him for meeting a pen pal, he still chooses to lie to his wife. If that's only meeting a pen pal as how he convinced himself before, why he still worries his wife know about the existence her female pen pal?

临睡时幽泉对燕倩说她精神枯闷的慌，明天清早他要到城外看看山光草色，换换空气，他夫人也赞成他出去走走。

Before going to bed, You Quan told Yan Qian that her spirit was dull and stuffy. So, he would go outside for sightseeing for some fresh air tomorrow morning. His wife also approved of him for going out for a walk.⁷⁴

However, when his intention to betray Yan Qian was sussed out, You Quan acted as if nothing had happened. He pretended that he had known about it and gradually became angry about Yan Qian. You Quan started to blame Yan Qian for writing that letter and testing him. He entirely forgot he is the person who fails to be loyal to their love.

⁷³ Ling Shuhua 凌叔华, “Hua zhi si” 花之寺 [Temple of Flowers], in *Ling Shuhua* 凌叔华, eds. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxueguan* 中国现代文学馆 and Ji Lei 计蕾 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1997), 47.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

这时幽泉忽的脸上热起来，忸怩的笑着，向前一把抓住燕倩的手，高声说，“我又上你的当了，...哦，原来不出我所料，又是你播弄的花样。.....好好，你累我在这破庙蹲了一早上，我这回可不能饶你了。”

You Quan's face suddenly turned red, with a bashful smile, he grasped Yan Qian's hand and said loudly, "I was tricked by you again...Oh, as I expected, it was you again. Well, you made me stayed all morning in this ruined temple. I can't forgive you this time."⁷⁵

他嚷道：“还拿我开玩笑？如果不因为你车上已经带了吃的，我一定不依你。谁叫你写那封信，那样会说？”

“Are you still making fun of me?” He shouted, “If there isn't food you brought in the car, I will listen to you. Who told you to write a letter like that, in a glib way?”⁷⁶

Yan Qian's reaction is also worth the reading deeper, in that she didn't express any anger towards her husband but merely expressed confusion about her husband's intention to cheat in an interrogative way. But her statement also shows a new woman's dissatisfaction with her husband. She mentioned 'you males' in the sentence, as if the thing was always happening around her. At the same time, she seems to question the meaning of marriage as well. In her mind, 'talking about love and dating' should be the same before marriage and after marriage. From her husband's actions, it seems "love" loses its meaning after they get married.

“算了吧，别‘不依’我了。.....我就不明白你们男人的思想，为什么同外边女人讲恋爱，就觉得有意思，对自己的夫人讲，便没意思了？.....”⁷⁷

“Come on. Please don't pretend you won't listen to me. I don't understand the way you males think. Why do you find it interesting to talk about love with women outside and feel bored talking about love with your own wives?

Here, Yan Qian is dissatisfied with her husband's behaviour, but she does not directly point out that the root of the problem is her husband's infidelity in the first place. Instead, she simply states several sentences in a grumbling tone, seemingly afraid to bring this problem

⁷⁵ Ibid., 50-51.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 50-51.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 51.

forward and avoid the possible conflict with her husband. At this juncture, Li Ling reads Ling Shuhua's avoidance as the suppression on the self that, “凌叔华有限度地从女性角度表达了对男女性爱权利不平等现象的轻微忧虑, 但又对女主人公压抑自我主体意识以成全男性性爱多样性的做法毫无审视、批评。” (From a woman's perspective, Ling Shuhua only expresses slight concern about the unequal sexual rights between men and women. Still, she does not examine and criticize how the heroine represses her self-subject consciousness to fulfill male sexual diversity.)⁷⁸

Moreover, when You Quan blaming her on why she wants to test him, You Qian didn't say anything towards her husband, neither give him any more criticism nor point out his disloyalty towards their marriage. This story ends with the following sentences:

幽泉笑了笑答：“我就不明白你们女人总信不过自己的丈夫，常常想法子试探他。”
“幽泉你不要冤枉人吧，这那是试探？我今天打发你出来纯粹因为让你换新空气，不用见不愿见的人，听不爱听的话罢了。难道我就不配做那个出来赞美大自然和赞美给我美丽灵魂的人吗？”

You Quan smiled and answered, “I don't understand why you women always believe in your husbands and often try to test them.”
“Do not accuse anyone unjustly; is this a temptation? The only reason I sent you out today is to let you breathe the fresh air and don't need to meet with those people you don't want to meet or hear anything you don't want to hear. So, I am not worthy of being the one who comes out and praises nature and praises the person who gave me a beautiful soul?”⁷⁹

In this story, the male figure, the husband You Quan, intends to cheat on his wife. Although there is no actual cheating, it is only because his wife is writing the letter. What if the person who writes to him wasn't his wife? Ironically, the husband's first reaction is to question his wife and further blame women as a whole. Surprisingly, Yan Qian did not make any attempts to retort but obediently changed the conversation topic. But the Yan Qian's last sentence, also the ending sentence for the whole story, can be read from different perspectives. Yan Qian stated that, ‘so, I

⁷⁸ Li Ling 李玲, “‘Wusi’ nǚxing wénxué zhōng de xìng’ài yìshì” “五四”女性文学中的性爱意识 [Sexual Love Consciousness in the Feminine Literature of the May Fourth Movement], *Liaoning daxue xuebao (zhèxué shèhuì kēxué bān)* 辽宁大学学报 (哲学社会科学版), no. 6 (2006): 39.

⁷⁹ Ling, “Hua zhi si,” 54.

am not worthy of being the one who comes out and praises nature and praises the person who gave me a beautiful soul?’

Yan Qian can interpret this sentence as the wife is a little jealous, so she uses a euphemistic way to blame her husband. For fear of making her husband angry, she did not dare to speak out expressly. She could only use interrogative questions to express her dissatisfaction. From another perspective of interpreting this sentence, this can be thought of as a new woman for her question on the free-choice marriage. She began to wonder that what made them different from before. Why did she no longer enjoy the scenery freely outside and be praised by others but started to live as a traditional woman who takes care of the household? In fact, in this story, Yan Qian had a good reason to argue with her husband, but she gave up. She ended the matter quickly by changing the conversation topic. Her giving up reveals that this modern woman subconsciously tries to avoid creating tension between herself and her husband; she also does not want to upset her husband. This also shows, “女性因长期处于生存弱势而产生的思想怯懦。” (the cowardice of women’s ideology due to the long-term oppression they have been through).⁸⁰ The only question she had is about herself that why she couldn’t be as accessible as before.

Feng Yuanjun’s short story, “Wo yizai aishen qian fanzui le” 我已在爱神前犯罪了 (I have committed a sin before Cupid, 1925) reveals a similar plot as Ling Shuhua’s work. The difference between these two works is that Ling mainly uses a female perspective to describe her husband’s infidelity. In contrast, Feng uses a male perspective to describe the process of how he was attracted by women other than his wife. This short story is one of the few works that written by her from a male perspective. By adopting the first-person narrative, the male protagonist, the narrator sends a letter to his friend Mengqi 梦琪. In the letter, the narrator tells his story that he was falling in love with his female student Wu Qiufan 吴秋帆 as a married male teacher. The narrator describes his journey of how he knows Qiufan and how he fell in love with her. The narrator also mentioned his wife Biyan 碧琰 in the letter, saying that he and his wife are free love, and he had already told his wife that he fell in love with his student. Biyan, as a new woman, says she respects him for his freedom. She thinks that the absolute liberty of both sides is a vital attribute of love. The short story ends with the narrator stating he was in a dilemma since he didn’t know how to find Wu Qiufan, the schoolgirl who had gone to Shanghai with her brother,

⁸⁰ Li, “‘Wusi’ nüxing wenxue zhong de xingai yishi,” 39.

or how to face his wife when he was committing the crime infidelity. Similar to Ling Shuhua's work, Feng Yuanjun also depicted a married man who is mentally unfaithful to his wife, Biyan. After explaining on he won't fall in love with others easily, the male protagonist starts to express his love towards his student. At the same time, when he mentioned his wife, he said she would understand him and won't blame him at all.

第一，因为我这个人是很无情的，往往大家共同欣慕的女性，而我却不将她放在眼里。第二，碧琰的温柔明慧和她为我牺牲都能击着我的心，使我自然而然的对她真挚，对她专一。但是朋友！人性太神秘了，太自私了。素来不轻易为女性动心的我，今日竟为秋帆（我的爱门生）迷的不能自主。我明知此种念头是对不住碧琰的，纵然伊了解我，不说什么。可是我不能否认我爱秋帆，我不能抵制我爱她的心情。

First, because I'm ruthless, often it's a woman that people all admire, but I don't put her in the eye pay attention to her. Secondly, Biyan's tenderness and wisdom and her sacrifice for me can strike my heart, which makes me naturally sincere and dedicated to her. But my friend! Human nature is too mysterious, too selfish. I have never been easily tempted by women, today I can't help myself from being attracted to Qiufan (my beloved student). I knew this kind of emotion is betraying Biyan, even she knew me very well and won't say anything. But I can't deny that I love Qiufan; I can't resist my emotion on my love for her.⁸¹

Unlike Ling Shuhua's male protagonist, Feng Yuanjun's male protagonist is more straightforward and even takes action. He said he had told his wife about the existence of his beloved student, Qiufan. He stressed that he and his wife were married because of free love, so his wife respected his freedom and fully understood him. In the later part of the story, through the male protagonist's statements, he kissed his student Qiufan.

你知道我和碧琰也是爱情的结合，我们中间向来是丝毫隔阂都没有，所以我给她的信中，也提到秋帆的秀美聪明，和我爱她的心思。她虽然极尊重我的自由，但到此心中也未免有点酸意。

You know that Biyan and I are also the union of love. There is never a gap between us. In the letter I wrote to her, I also mentioned Qiufan's beautifulness and cleverness and emotion. Though she had great respect for my freedom, she was still a little jealous.⁸²

⁸¹ Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君, "Wo yizai aishenqian fanzui le" 我已在爱神前犯罪了 [I have committed a sin before Cupid], in *Feng Yuanjun xiaoshuo: Chun hen* 冯沅君小说: 《春痕》 [Feng Yuanjun's fiction collection: *The Trace of Spring*], ed. Sun Xiaozhong 孙晓忠 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 98.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 101.

要不是我的自惭的念头还不曾消灭，我真要抱她，吻她了！然而我也试了几试。...

If the thought of my shame had not been extinguished, I should have embraced and kissed her. However, I have tried a few times...⁸³

The following sentences are what the male protagonist mentioned in the letter to his friend about how his wife Biyan respond to this incident.

只要她也爱你，你要同她亲密下子也可以。我相信你不会因她忘弃了我们当年患难中结合的盟誓。其实就忘了，又有什么要紧的？双方的绝对自由，是爱情的重要的属性。万一有此事发生，也只能说是我的不幸；道德上决不发生问题。我谨祝你们的爱成功！

As long as she also loves you, you wanting to be intimate with her now is fine. I trust you will not let her forsake the oath of our bond for what we have been through together. Actually, what does it matter even if you forget it? Absolute freedom of both sides is an essential attribute of love. If it happened, it would be my misfortune; there is nothing relevant to morality. I wish you success in love!⁸⁴

Biyan's responds with some jealousy but still expresses her support for her husband's action and respect for his freedom to chasing love. However, as a new woman, some problems exist in understanding the couple's liberty in a marriage relationship. From her perspective, freedom is more important than anything else and is essential in this relationship. So, even if she and the main protagonist were married and her husband falls in love with someone else; it only Biyan's misfortune. Biyan didn't blame her husband but rather states that nothing is morally wrong with him. The blind pursuit of free love seems to reflect Feng Yuanjun's rigid understanding of female consciousness. In Feng's writing, freedom trumps everything. But this kind of space does not lead a woman out of the traditional inherent consciousness since the male protagonist's release is based on her self-sacrifice. What Biyan only blamed is her destiny as a woman.

The following paragraph is the male protagonist's reaction after receiving a letter from his wife, Biyan:

⁸³ Ibid., 103.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 101.

朋友！你说她的措辞厉不厉害？我接到此信后，马上回她封最恳挚的信，表明我的心迹。深夜中跑到院里向上帝祈祷，表白我忏悔的心情，虽然我素日是不信上帝的。

My friend! Look at what she said! As soon as I received this letter, I replied to her with a most cordial letter to show my feelings. At midnight, I ran to the courtyard to pray to God and confess my penitent feelings, though I did not believe in God.⁸⁵

朋友哟！我怎样好呢？往上海找她吧，诺大个上海更从何处找起？回家吧！我已在爱人前犯了不忠实的罪，怎见我的多情多义的碧琰！...

My friend! What shall I do? If I go to Shanghai to look for her, where I supposed to find her in such a big city? If I go home, I have sinned through my unfaithfulness to my beloved wife. How can I confront my affectionate and righteous Biyan?⁸⁶

Ironically, after he professed his loyalty to his wife, he kissed his student. At the end of the letter to his friend, he is still in a dilemma because he does not know how to choose between his beloved student and his wife. This is what he calls loyalty and love for his wife. I interpreted this ironic dilemma as a reflection of Feng Yuanjun's criticism of men.

Through reading these two stories, I treat them as two female writers questioning the so-called true love by men. Two writers take a satirical approach to discuss men's attitude towards free love and the insinuation that men are still justified when they are not loyal to marriage first. The obvious criticism towards men can be seen in that women open the door of female consciousness, not merely obeying their husbands and other male characters. As mentioned in the story, Biyan, the new woman depicted by Feng Yuanjun, shows no anger towards her husband's infidelity. The male protagonists have the absolute freedom to fall in love with others in this relationship. In the letter, Biyan only stated that she was a little sad and clearly expressed that it was no problem for her husband to fall in love with someone else. She rationalized her husband's behaviour of cheating. What if it was the wife who loved someone else? As for the new women in Ling Shuhua's work, Yan Qian expresses slight dissatisfaction and doubt about men's lack of loyalty in the marriage. Later, she herself gives up having further discussion on this topic and decides to suffer silently, which can be read as her fear of her husband. Li Ling made a comparison

⁸⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 103.

on these two female writers' avoidance on writing about having conflict with men and read it as different kinds of cowardice that,

如果说冯沅君的怯懦, 在于以女性身份为男性的性霸权演绎心理合理性、否定女性在男性泛爱中所受到的心灵伤害;那么, 凌叔华的怯懦则在于, 面临强大男权力量时, 她倾向于让女性通过放弃自我去迁就男性霸权来赢得生存空间。

If Feng Yuanjun's cowardice is to deduct the psychological rationality of male sexual hegemony as a woman, negate the heart injury suffered by women in men's extensive love. Therefore, Ling Shuhua's cowardice is, in the face of solid male power, she tends to let women win the living space by giving up themselves to accommodate male hegemony.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Moreover, when responding to the advocacy about gender equality and repositioning of women related to the marriage and family issues, May Fourth female writers started to think and involved in the creation of an understanding about themselves. However, there are still some problems that existed in their modernized self-perception. These female writers subconsciously recoiled when confronted with undermining male authority and provided a one-sided and blindly optimistic understanding of their definition of independent women. As Fan Qingmei concluded that,

但由于乐观简单的处理方法,使这一问题流于肤浅、片面。想提出来解决而又无法给女性以准确的定位,这是时代的局限、思想的局限。

...Because they are adopting the optimistic and straightforward method to deal with this kind of issue, this issue is superficial and one-sided. To propose this issue to solve it but fail to give females an accurate positioning, which represents the limitation of both periods and people's thoughts.⁸⁸

In the first two parts of this chapter, I have investigated the idea of shared destiny by having an analysis of Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's works. When female writers construct the short story, the missing male figure represents that the discourse of individualism and gender consciousness still belong to the nebulous beginning stage for them. Both Ling Shuhua and Feng

⁸⁷ Li, "Wusi' nüxing wenxue zhong de xingai yishi," 39.

⁸⁸ Fan, "Juexing yu kunhuo -lun 'Wusi' nüxing wenxue zhong de aiqing shuxie," 24.

Yuanjun had not yet come to terms with why they are struggling to escape or what they are trying to escape from. In that case, the all-male figure under these newly awakened female writers' writings represented the patriarchy and dominancy, either implicitly or obviously.

During the May-Fourth Period, men continued to dominate society and defined who can be thought of as having a role as an oppressor. Under the old moral order, husbands or any other male figures always represent the whole family's breadwinner and would not be involved in family affairs. This might be why the male model is still missing or has an unclear depiction of these two writers' works. The objectification of women means the simultaneous subjectification of men.⁸⁹ Sheila Rowbotham has argued that people shouldn't be confused by the abstract definition of patriarchy and the father figure in real life and further states that a complex picture began to emerge of 'manhood' and 'fatherhood' and our contradictory needs and images of both.⁹⁰ Rowbotham further pointed out that, "because these were men with whom we were connected passionately and intimately, however painfully, it was impossible to settle for an oversimplified stereotype in which they could be objectified as 'the enemy' or even 'the other'."⁹¹ However, this statement under the context of May Fourth era China is invalid. During that specific generation, from a female perspective to read that can see the gender difference.

Moreover, in the majority discussion about the May Fourth period female writers, Ling Shuhua, are always labelled as boudoir literature leading figure. She is also frequently brought up as the sharp contrast with Feng Yuanjun, who is categorized as the most representative writer for the new woman writers. Lu Xun has stated in one article saying that, "Ling Shuhua's fiction differs from the boldness and frankness of Feng Yuanjun. In a properly restrained manner, she delineates the obedience of the traditional woman..."⁹² Instead of comparing the two writers and looking for their differences, I prefer to discovering their similarities. Therefore, in the second part of this chapter, I argued that both Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's writing still within a range that spends most of the time work on females' daily lives but describes females' two social

⁸⁹ Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 303.

⁹⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, "Our Lance," in *Fathers: Reflections by Daughters* (London: Virago, 1983), 213.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁹² Lu Xun 鲁迅, "Xu yan" 序言 [Preface], in *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi* 中国新文学大系 [The Collection Of Chinese New-Vernacular Literature Works], ed. Zhao Jiabi 赵家璧 (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu gongsi, 1935), vol.2, 1485-86, quoted in Eileen J. Cheng with Cheng's translation, "Virtue in Silence: Voice and Femininity in Ling Shuhua's Boudoir Fiction," *NAN NÜ-- Men, Women & Gender in Early & Imperial China* 9, no. 2 (2007): 360.

statuses. It can be roughly divided as female before marriage and female after marriage. In other words, both Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun have been criticized for only portraying boudoir literature and women's life, which can be perceived as evidence that proves that females are always out of touch. These May-Fourth female intellectuals were also wandering on the margins of the male-centred society; the characters in Feng and Ling's works, whether married or unmarried, all lead to the same destination: they all lost their freedom and individuality, which is used as the cost for their free love and free-choice marriage.

As a result, May fourth male intellectual constantly criticizes female writers who haven't participated in this society. I argue that lack of participation within society demonstrates that they are trapped in the trifles of daily life; and including these female writers themselves, women didn't get the attention they deserve. Instead, they function as the best tool for male intellectuals for reform and liberation for the new youth. On the other hand, to a certain degree, we can see how these female writers unconsciously internalize patriarchal values. The Republican period society, no matter whether during the May Fourth movement or New Culture movement periods, endowed women with far more severe restrictions than men have. Those female elites didn't establish a perfect ideological structure, nor did they break away from the patriarchy's inviable ideology.

Female writers are always easily influenced by traditional male aesthetic standards and social values. In that case, they easily to looking for affirmation and support from male intellectual groups. This kind of predisposition always leads to an internal conflict, self-deprecation and ultimately destruction of the woman.⁹³ From this perspective, women's literature, whether criticized as without depth or never concerned about a nation, only shows the inevitability and necessity of this kind of literature. It is an essential part for women to search for themselves and their consciousness of independence through writing.

⁹³ Josephine Donovan, "Toward a woman's poetics," in *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, ed. Shari Benstock (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 98-109.

Chapter Two

Elders as implicit oppressors: Redefining woman's role in a male-centered family

This chapter explores the multiple roles female characters undertake under the well-known idea of *xiaoshun* 孝顺 (filial piety) in the conventional Chinese family, along with the process of their identity transformations in the short stories written by leading female writers during the May Fourth period. During the reformation period, the issue of gender equality becomes the most frequently discussed topic for many literary elites when they attacked the concept of filial piety. Within the cultural canon of literary works, writers tended to portray women as the victims of patriarchal society. In this chapter, by analysing Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's short stories, I aim to prove that many people have overlooked female elders' role as oppressors when we discuss the issue on arranged marriage. I would argue that once women are empowered, they also participate in the younger generation's oppression both consciously and unconsciously. After giving birth to the next generation, they change positions and reinforce patriarchal standards within society. The character of woman plays multiple roles in the family, from daughters to wives; after bearing children, they become mothers and mothers-in-law. As such, this chapter also discusses the change of different social statuses in women's lives. At the same time, this transformation process also reveals how women would empower in the family system.

This chapter will be organized into two sections. First, by investigating Ling Shuhua's two works, including "Youfuqi de ren" 有福气的人 (The person to blessed, 1926) and "Qixia" 绮霞 (1927) and using filial piety as the cultural context background, I focus on the image of mothers-in-law, who gradually empowered in the patriarchal society after she has established the family connection with her son. Other than the younger generation male, elders and mothers-in-law act as the most powerful person in family dynamics. In contrast with Ling Shuhua, Feng Yuanjun spends more time on depicting the figure of mother. Through a close reading of "Ge jue" 隔绝 (Separation, 1923) and "Ci mu" 慈母 (Fond mother, 1923), I argue that through marriage, women are assimilated invisibly by the patriarchal society. Through the process of bearing children, women can gain control of their children through kinship authority. For the daughters, the

mother is also an unexpected oppressor figure under the patriarchal society where they supposed belong to a same group as woman.

However, getting married, having children, becoming an elder and acting as oppressor to the next generation is not the only outcome among the literary works. The concept of committing suicide is also an underestimated tendency in many works of May Fourth literature. Using Ling Shuhua's "Wo na jian shi duibuqi ta" "我哪件事对不起他?" (In what matter did I do him wrong?, 1924) and Feng Yuanjun's "Gejue zhihou" 隔绝之后 (After the separation, 1923)⁹⁴ in which both two female protagonists of these two stories commit suicide at their conclusion, I argue that the action of committing suicide is the last but most powerful weapon for women in a conservative environment. I also read using women's suicide as a way to conclude the story as the authors' avoidance of visualizing the future of women. Unlike the canonical literary tradition in which women committed suicide to prove their loyalty to their husbands and protect their chastity, suicide in May Fourth literature is a condemnation of the persecution of women by conventional ethical norms. The choice of suicide is also a protest on the moral shackles given to women by the conventional society. It can also be understood as the May Fourth female elites' response to reformation on gender equality and criticism towards the traditional Confucianism ideology.

Tracing Female Roles in a Traditional Family

During the Republican Era (1912-1949), female writers have undergone a shift in self-identity and realized that women are individuals rather than only belong to the family system. During the May Fourth period, issues concerning women, such as the reform of the family system, marriage, divorce, chastity, suicide, suffrage, and the education of women were framed by attacking the old values of Confucianism.⁹⁵ One of the famous slogans of the May Fourth Movement, an anti-imperialist, anti-feudal movement, was "Down with the Confucianism." As a result, as Confucianism came into question, significant changes in ideology and social practice

⁹⁴ "Gejue zhihou" 隔绝之后 (After the separation, 1923) is a sequel of "Gejue" 隔绝 (Separation, 1923). The story's protagonists have remained identical but using the female protagonist's cousin as the narrator to tell the following story after the heroine got home.

⁹⁵ Gao, "Women Existing for Men," 124.

began to be discussed.⁹⁶ In her book, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation*, Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee defined Confucianism as, despite all its ambiguity and complexity in historical reality, having been consistently perceived as the moral backbone and the grand synthesis of Chinese high culture.⁹⁷ Therefore, this thesis instead tackles several deep-rooted concepts of moral behaviour that originated from May Fourth attacks on Confucianism. Moreover, Rosenlee also points out that numerous existing works of feminist scholarship are too radical to support the predominant feminist view on Confucianism. Without specifying the period of time she is working on, the author raises the concept of Confucian feminism to figure out what Confucianism means to women and feminism. She further referred to this concept as a “liberation for Chinese women by indicating what might be the steps necessary to construct Confucian feminism.”⁹⁸ Different with Rosenlee’s perspective, this chapter neither pushes the discussion on the oppression of women brought by the patriarchal society to the center of the critique, nor does it single-mindedly support feminism and criticize everything about the Confucianism ideology. It does not support a universal position that all women under patriarchal society as victims, nor will it support every statement produced by Chinese May Fourth feminism. Instead, I will elaborate on how the moral concept of the conventional society enabled women to change the concept of their identity and explore what impact they have on both themselves and the next generation of women.

Filial piety is a rigidly observed moral concept for people who are being educated in a Confucian culture. One of the most challenging aspects of trying to define filial piety is that, after the Han adoption of Confucianism as the state ideology in 136 BCE and the Han state’s broad dissemination of the *Xiaojing* 孝经 (Classic of Filial Piety), the term ‘filial piety’ began to circulate as an empty signifier of virtue.⁹⁹ Strictly speaking, traditional filial piety is a convention of relationships, mostly between men, which orders and forms interactions between people based on their position to one another; the fact that women account for the minority of these conventions contributes to the lack of space for women in traditional Chinese culture. As discussed in “Living under the Same Roof: A Genealogy of the Family Romance between

⁹⁶ Ibid., 124.

⁹⁷ Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 2.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁹ Maram Epstein, “Toward a New Paradigm of Emotions,” in *Orthodox Passions: Narrating Filial Love during the High Qing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019), 45.

Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law in Modern Chinese History,” Daisy Yan Du points out many Western feminists have ignored the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughter-in-law, which are particularly prominent in patrilineal cultures such as China.¹⁰⁰ By mainly working on the literary works, I will investigate how the oppression of the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law forms through age, generation, and class. Moreover, this chapter does not emphasize their similarities as women and the differences in the power and relations with men, I discuss the identity recognition between mothers-in-law and daughter-in-law among Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun’s works. Furthermore, Du mainly discussed intergenerational bonds of mother and son into the patriarchal society after establishing the connection by examining literary texts written by men.¹⁰¹ This chapter emphasizes the relationship between filial piety and women, specifically analyzing women’s roles in the traditional family system within the feudal ethics.

This chapter also investigates the female roles being assigned by the feudal system around the theme of marriage. Sally Taylor Lieberman’s *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China* has a more in-depth discussion on the female roles, including multiple mother figures, both in the society and family under the Confucian ideology. The chapter “The Idealized Mother and the Politics of Personhood” explores motherhood in contemporary debates about the woman question and family reform by working on the early May Fourth period writers’ fictions.¹⁰² In the chapter “The Lost Mother and the New Woman Heroine,” Lieberman critiques the social definition of the mother figure under the Confucianism patriarchy and points out that, among the May Fourth period literature creation, writers depicted mothers as the figure who fully participate in the lives of their sons for whole life. In contrast, in the life of the female protagonists, the mother is noticeably absent or, in some of the most interesting cases, present in her daughter's psyche as an absence.¹⁰³ As for this thesis chapter, instead of focusing on the absence of the mother figure, I look at an elder woman who participates in the protagonist’s oppression or serves as her oppressor.

¹⁰⁰ Daisy Yan Du, “Living under the Same Roof: A Genealogy of the Family Romance between Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-Law in Modern Chinese History,” *Gender and History* 25, no. 1 (April 1, 2013): 170.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁰² Sally Taylor Lieberman, “The Idealized Mother and the Politics of Personhood,” in *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 20.

¹⁰³ Lieberman, “The Lost Mother and the New Woman Heroine,” 104.

In the fiction I discuss below, the differences and antagonism between mothers and daughters in a conservative environment emerge. Xiongya Gao also conducts similar research in “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China,” foregrounding the history of the transformation of female identity from daughter-to-daughter mother-in-law, which plays a role in sorting out the transformation of female identity in this article.¹⁰⁴ Unlike the general overview on womanhood I mainly compare the female protagonists created by two female writers, Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun, who actively participate in the literary circle during the May Fourth movement period to explore their representation and understanding of the identity of women.

Artistic works are always the best approaches to access the author’s ideology and consciousness straightforwardly since the protagonist created by the author represents themselves to a great extent. In this chapter, I mainly focus on the women figures in the May fourth period rather than broadly using the genealogical approach as a framework adopted by the authors. I will re-read Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun’s works and figure out how the period changing affects their understanding towards filial piety. The May Fourth period ideology distorted people’s understanding of filial piety, which is significantly different from the knowledge of its emotional value in pre-modern China. This change also leads to more critique on the authoritarianism of Confucianism.

Both Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun were born in the later imperial period (1644-1911) and grew up in the significant context of the Republican Era (1911-1949) and were heavily influenced by Confucianism morals. For Ling Shuhua, in her autobiographical work, *Ancient Melodies*, she mentioned about how she started on her road to education throughout the works. In the story “Tutor Ben”¹⁰⁵, Ling recorded how her father wants to inherit Chinese traditional culture, sent her to a private school to learn the traditional Chinese classics. Inside this story, the figure of Confucius and the classical Chinese tradition is frequently raised. Similarly, in *Feng Yuanjun Zhuan* 冯沅君传 [The Biography of Feng Yuanjun] written by Rongxian Yan 严蓉仙, also mentioned that during Feng’s two years spent in private school, she also had the opportunity to learn about the “Four Books” and the “Five Classics” of Confucianism.¹⁰⁶ Based on the

¹⁰⁴ Gao, “Women Existing for Men,” 114 -125.

¹⁰⁵ Ling Shuhua, “Tutor Ben,” in *Ancient Melodies* (New York: Universe Books, 1988), 116 -136.

¹⁰⁶ Yan Rongxian 严蓉仙, *Feng Yuanjun Zhuan* 冯沅君传 [The Biography of Feng Yuanjun] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2008), 3.

similar background for these two female writers, it's reasonable to assume that under an era of early modernization, the two female writers had more exposure to both domestic and foreign cultures, their inner conflict within deep-rooted conventional ideology is predictable. As such, there will be more aspects worthy of in-depth exploration in the woman roles they have created under the invisible concept of filial piety.

Empowered Woman: Oppressions from the figure of mother-in-law

In the May Fourth discourse, women's definition has a noticeable transformation: they are no longer satisfied with the traditional female roles trapped by family, kinship, and Confucianism ethical code. Female intellectuals started to look for self-identities since "traditional social relations were said to deny women individual identities and turn them into "playthings", "appendages", "parasites" and "slaves".¹⁰⁷ They start to criticize those traditional female roles defined by the Confucian doctrine. As a woman, entering into marriage would allow them to perform the role of being a filial daughter, including allowing the course of her life to be controlled by parental figures. After marriage, she must serve her husband as a wife, and her elders as a daughter-in-law, allowing all of these figures to control and structure her life. Such are the conventional ethical norms which form the basic requirements for women in conventional Chinese society, and those norms were precisely what May Fourth writers attacked. Commonly referred to at the time as the *sancong* 三从 (three obedience), this term refers to the prescription of obedient relationships to the father before marriage, to husband following marriage, and to sons in widowhood. This term was also analyzed alongside the *side* 四德 (four virtues), which prescribed "womanly virtues, womanly speech, womanly deportment, and woman work."¹⁰⁸ Therefore, women, whose entire existence is structured and shaped by filial piety, will barely have a chance to form a notion of herself as an individual throughout her life. As Xionggya Gao has pointed out, "Confucianism seems to have assigned three roles to a Chinese woman: the sexual object and possession of the man, the child-bearing tool to carry on her husband's family name, and the servant to the whole family."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Lieberman, "The Idealized Mother and the Politics of Personhood," 22.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰⁹ Gao, "Women Existing for Men," 118.

Although the situation of Chinese women had been a concern of reformers since the late nineteenth century, and although the term “women’s rights” entered Chinese public discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century, the woman problem was most widely publicized and popularized during the May Fourth era.¹¹⁰ As part of the first generation of May Fourth period female writers, Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun created multiple female characters who help readers understand what the female lives looks like during this period. They also showed how female writers observe their fellow women since their literary works examined different stages of women’s lives. It also can be read as a critique of women’s oppression by the patriarchal society. Insofar, I focus on the female relationships under the marriage thematic by reviewing women’s different roles and status transformations in the family system.

Conventional knowledge dictates that filial piety refers solely to the relationship between father and son. Research on the filial relationship between the mother-daughter and the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is relatively limited. This section mainly discusses the different depictions of elder female family members created by Ling and Feng; an area of focus that has not been explicitly explored by most other scholars. By focusing on the moments in these stories when older women have power in the family, I argue that they become unacknowledged oppressors in patriarchal societies. These two types of female elders mentioned here refer to the mother-in-law and the mother. Ling Shuhua, known for describing married women’s life, mentioned a unique linkage created by marriage: the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. By analyzing “Youfuqi de ren” 有福气的人 (The person to blessed, 1926) and “Qixia” 绮霞 (1927), I argue that when women, through reliance on their sons and becoming mothers-in-law and elders, have a particular power to structure relationships. The two stories mentioned reveal the oppressiveness the mother-in-law figure brings to the daughter-in-law as a senior under filial piety required ethical norms. While a mother-in-law could be somewhat integrated into the patriarchal system and assume some power in the domestic sphere, the daughter-in-law was situated at the bottom of the power hierarchy based on generation and

¹¹⁰ Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 3.

seniority.¹¹¹ Therefore, the image of a mother-in-law figure is an empowered woman, who upholds and “reinforces social practices” that keep young women subordinate to men.¹¹²

Among these two stories, Ling Shuhua depicts the image of a mother-in-law in different ways. In “Youfuqi de ren”, the main character is the mother-in-law; and in “Qixia”, the main protagonist is the daughter-in-law. Through both short stories, we can observe that once women became mothers-in-law, she has the latent pressure on the next generation, especially towards her daughter-in-law. While men are absent from the family sphere because they in charge of the external affairs and won’t get involved in the internal spheres, the mother-in-law becomes the dominant matriarch in the family sphere due to her old age.¹¹³ In this way, an older woman has empowered through the etiquette of filial piety and her seniority after having daughters-in-law. In Ling’s “Youfuqi de ren”, through the third-person perspective, the author utilizes a sympathetic tone to carry out an interesting mother-in-law figure, Granny Zhang 章老太太, a traditional Chinese female elder and looks like the most powerful female in their family. It worth mention that Granny Zhang’s life is emblematic of a traditional Chinese woman, a standard image of *xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母 (virtuous wife and good mother) under the conventional ethical norms. I read this as Ling Shuhua’s ironic criticism of the traditional feudalism ideology. Compulsory filial piety is likely to get a family member’s compliance and obedience with a particular purpose.

The story starts by introducing Granny Zhang, who has four sons who have all been married, along with three daughters who have married and moved away. In the eyes of most people, Granny Zhang is the most blessed person. She lives a life of comfort and contentment; as well as having many children and grandchildren, she has dutiful daughters-in-law. Granny Zhang is kind and unbiased to everyone, it appears as if the whole family is in harmony. However, three days after her sixty-ninth birthday, she overhears a conversation between her eldest son and his wife. She realizes that all her blessings were not real, and that the two characters are only interested in accessing her wealth. Her so-called filial sons and daughters-in-law are illusory in their roles, maintained by the promise of monetary fortune.

From Granny Zhang, a mother-in-law’s point of view, she did not play an oppressive role towards her daughter-in-law, and there is no obvious moment to show her suppression as a

¹¹¹ Du, “Living under the Same Roof,” 178.

¹¹² Nancy Foner, *Ages in Conflict: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Inequality between Old and Young* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 91.

¹¹³ Du, “Living under the Same Roof,” 171.

mother-in-law in the story. However, based on the reactions of her daughters-in-law, they feel certain pressure from her. At the same time, we can see how they respect Granny Zhang and show obedience to please her and reflecting her authority. Although there is a satire contrasting with the later section, Granny Zhang found their obedience is driven by money. At the beginning of the story, there is a description introducing how filial her daughters-in-law are,

二少奶奶同四少奶奶常特别预备好吃的东西，来央给老太太尝。老太太吃过后，若有些儿饱涨的毛病发作，她们就整天责备自己好逞能。大少奶奶和三少奶奶的嘴不大巧，也常常特出心裁使老太太欢喜...这样贤孝的儿妇，真不多见，但是老太太家竟有一双。

The Second Young Mistress¹¹⁴ and The Fourth Young Mistress often prepare some delicious food for Granny Zhang to taste. Once Granny Zhang feels sick after overeating, they would blame themselves all day for showing off. The Eldest Young Mistress and Third Young Mistress don't have a glib tongue and use different ways to make Granny Zhang feel happy... This kind of daughter-in-law is rare, but Granny Zhang has a pair of them.¹¹⁵

Granny Zhang's daughters-in-law always have to think of different ways to win her favor. That is also the filiality she enjoyed; however, such filial piety has a strong purpose. Moreover, the oppression comes from Granny Zhang's family status, in that having the role of elder and the mother-in-law makes it imperative for daughters-in-law to please their mother-in-law first. This submissiveness and gratification are limited in the daily trifles and the management of family affairs. As the author writes,

这几年里虽是大少奶奶同二少奶奶轮流替代婆婆管理家事，但是她们没有一件事不要请教过才敢做。

In recent years, although the Eldest and Second Young Mistress took turns to replace the mother-in-law in managing the household affairs, they did not dare to do anything without asking for advice.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ *Shao nainai* 少奶奶 here refers to the young master's wife of this house. It is the form of address by servants in the late imperial period and early reformation period.

¹¹⁵ Ling Shuhua 凌叔华, "Youfuqi de ren" 有福气的人 [The person to blessed], in *Ling Shuhua* 凌叔华, eds. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxueguan* 中国现代文学馆 and Ji Lei 计蕾 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1997), 63.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

From the statements above, it is not hard to imagine just how vital Granny Zhang is to the management of the household. Meanwhile, a daughter-in-law's devotion to her mother-in-law was supposed to be unconditional and unidirectional, no matter what kind of person her mother-in-law was and no matter how her mother-in-law treated her.¹¹⁷

她们来问事，老太常装生气说：“你们总要来麻烦我，看我闲的难受不是？米粒大的事，值得跑来问一趟吗？知道的人就说你们做事小心，不知道的，一定说这老婆婆厉害，吓得做媳妇的一些主意都不敢拿。”

When they came to ask questions, Granny Zhang often pretended to be angry and said, “You always want to bother me. It's tough to see me relaxing, isn't it? It's a trifling matter, is it worth for you to come ask me? For those people who know us, they will say you are careful. For those who don't know you, they must tell the old woman is so fierce that her daughter-in-law dare not to have her own ideas.”¹¹⁸

As the description on Granny Zhang who often ‘pretending to be angry’, she seems deliberately pretending she was tired of dealing with those questions her daughters-in-law has raised. Her full statement tries to deliver a sense that she doesn't want to intervene and doesn't enjoy the power to control the family affairs. Although she praised her daughters-in-law for being cautious, she also wanted to prove that she wasn't a malevolent elder. A traditional family was usually a legal entity under the leadership of a head (male first, then female) who was usually the oldest and most respected in the family.¹¹⁹ Based on the unequal power distribution for a traditional family, once the mother-in-law is empowered, she will enjoy respect and having authority at the same time.

The following statements also reflect Granny Zhang's paradoxical actions: she said she didn't care about the power of control of the whole family, but she also enjoyed being on top. She was happy to feel being respected by her daughters-in-law.

大少奶听见这话立刻陪笑答：“妈什么时候都体恤我们，可是碰到我们请示主意的工夫就不能体恤了。我们那敢存心来麻烦你老人家。我们恨不得也长你老人家一付聪明心肝遇到事知道做呢。”

¹¹⁷ Du, “Living under the Same Roof,” 175.

¹¹⁸ Ling, “Youfuqi de ren,” 63.

¹¹⁹ Chiyen Chen, “The Foster Daughter-in-Law System in Formosa,” *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 6 (1957): 302.

After hearing this, the Eldest Young Mistress immediately accompanied her words with a smile and replied, “Mother, you always sympathize with us. However, once we ask for a tool, you aren’t sympathizing anymore. We dare not mean to bother you. We wish we could be as wise as you are.”¹²⁰

二少奶觉得大少奶的话似乎不圆通，她必立刻装要饭的口音求道：“老奶奶，可怜可怜这天生的笨虫吧？”老太太听这可怜声音便立刻带笑带骂的吩咐一切了。

Second Young Mistress feels the Eldest Young Mistress’s words seem not to be tactless; she must immediately affect a beggar’s tone and begged: “Grandma, please have the pity on this inherently stupid worm?” At this pitiful voice, the old lady gave orders along with laughter and blaming [them].¹²¹

From the phrase used in the description, it can be seen both two daughters-in-law have been carefully thinking about their choice of words and their facial expressions when they talk to Granny Zhang. For the Eldest Young Mistress who is accompanied by a smile immediately, as well used the words ‘to empathized with’; ‘how dare I to...with particular intention’ with a humble tone. Meanwhile, the Second Young Mistress may think the Eldest Young Mistress’s statement sounds like they are blaming their mother-in-law for not caring for them, and this tone is not acceptable. Then, she gave the impression of weakness to Granny Zhang by putting on begging airs. The two Young Mistresses were afraid of any sign of displeasure from the most authoritative person. Since the mother-in-law functioned like the patriarchy’s female deputy in the Chinese family, she was the immediate, unchallengeable supervisor of her daughter-in-law’s work and life.¹²²

Moreover, if Granny Zhang truly has respect from her daughters-in-law and sons, then she should undoubtedly be the luckiest one. Unfortunately, in the three days following her birthday, this old lady finds out that she has only the false display of affection from her daughters-in-law, and even her sons aren’t on their mother’s side; their sole concern is her wealth. She was planning to visit her grandsons when she walked to east garden, she heard her eldest daughter-in-law’s voice who is complaining on other daughters-in-law.

¹²⁰ Ling, “Youfuqi de ren,” 63.

¹²¹ Ibid., 63.

¹²² Judith Stacey, “Principles and Contradictions of the Confucian Patriarchal Order,” in *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 54.

你看二少奶多机灵，想着法儿哄老太太，好东西都轮到她管了。四少奶更厉害，整天围着老太太，来了不过一年多，弄的老太太现在简直离不开她，将来老太太的东西还不给她哄光了，……

Look at the Second Young Mistress, how clever she is. She is always thinking of ways to coax the old lady, so all good things are her turn to manage now. The Fourth Young Mistress ever tricker, she hung around the Granny Zhang all day. She had just been here for more than a year, and now the old lady could hardly stay away from her. In the future, won't the old lady's treasure be being coaxed away by her...¹²³

After hearing the statements above, her facial expression becomes colder, so she asked to servant Liu Ma to look at the chrysanthemums with her,

她扶着刘妈走进西院后入门，隐约的听见四爷和四少奶说笑，“你是说顶爱她那钻石帽花吗？你这样会哄她，这东西迟早还不是你的？”夹着微笑声....
他们说到这里，老太已将走近窗前，望了望刘妈，她高声咳嗽一下，屋内人声忽静。

After stepped into the back gate with Liu Ma's help, she walked into the west courtyard, vaguely heard the Fourth Master and Fourth Young Mistress are laughing, saying, "you say that you love her diamond hat flower the most? You are good at making her happy; won't it be yours sooner or later?" With the sound of laughing.... As they said this, Granny Zhang already approached the window and glancing at Liu Ma; then coughed loudly, and the room became silent.¹²⁴

Granny Zhang understood many things at once through the conversations, but she still doesn't want to embarrass herself in front of her servant. So, she used the cough to let the people in the room know she is there and acted as if nothing had happened. The dialogue between her sons and daughters-in-law at the end of this whole story made this story full of satire and sadness which caused a sharp contrast to Granny Zhang's good life described earlier. The greatest contrast in the story can be seen in how the story opens with an introduction to Granny Zhang, which begins with:

做婆婆做祖母也许不是什么了不得的福气。最令人羡慕的还是她自己妆奁私储的富足，和她的儿子媳妇以及孙媳妇都孝顺她吧。

¹²³ Ibid., 66.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 66.

Being a mother-in-law and a grandmother is not a great blessing. What makes people envious is that she still has her wealth and riches, and her son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren respect her immensely.¹²⁵

As Ling Shuhua depicted initially, Granny Zhang has been admired most because she has wealth and the most respectful children and children-in-law. As the story progresses, the author makes an ironic comparison that everyone imposed Granny Zhang is a lucky person whereas the cruel reality shows the respect is all for nought. With a pitying tone, the author described a traditional woman's life, a woman who thought she is owed authority at home and had won respect from the filial children by being an elder, a mother-in-law. Ling also criticizes the compulsory filial piety, where everyone only cares about the rules themselves but do not consider differences in human nature, which can occasionally be driven by money. For the daughters-in-law, their humble behaviours come from the oppression they get from their mother-in-law and the desire for money.

In "Youfuqi de ren", Granny Zhang is an old-style image of a mother-in-law, where shows the pattern of getting along between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in a conventional family. There is no apparent description of the mother-in-law's oppressiveness on her daughters-in-law, but rather the reader finds lamentation on the sad life of women under the norms of filiality. If the readers view these behaviours from the perspective of a mother-in-law, they may not feel what kind of pressure she brings to bear upon the daughter-in-law. Different from using the elders' perspective to describe a woman's life as a mother-in-law, in another Ling Shuhua story entitled "Qixia", she uses the account of heroine Qixia 绮霞 to depicts the image of a mother-in-law from the daughter-in-law's perspective.

In this short story, Qixia doesn't feel any warmth from her mother-in-law; the only emotion she feels is her mother-in-law's dissatisfaction with her as a daughter-in-law. Unlike Granny Zhang, who, as an empowered woman, feels warmth from her compliant daughter-in-law Qixia, as a daughter-in-law, who only encounters direct oppression from her mother-in-law. When men were absent from the domestic sphere due to the division of inner and outer spheres and the taboo against the mingling of sexes, the figure of the mother-in-law becomes the dominating matriarch in the domestic sphere due to her seniority.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹²⁶ Du, "Living under the Same Roof," 171.

Through the story, Qixia feels the blatant oppression is from the day she tried to pursue her dream again at home and started playing the violin. But she neglects family chores and is subject to sarcastic comments by her mother-in-law. As such, Qixia always pays attention to her mother-in-law's mood.

忽听见张太太向老太太在堂屋提起了琴字，因为这些日子老太太见了她总是不大说话，她不由得留心细听。

“她这些日子简直变了一个人似得，黑白都抱着一个琴玩。”

“也很好听的。”张太太笑了笑，似想平息老太太的不平。

“从前她不大玩琴的，新近有个朋友送一个琴给她，她就整天拉玩，咳，有家有务的人！”老太太话忽止住，长长的叹一声，她们就谈别的了。这些日子她沉湎于拉琴，温习旧谱子，实在没有余力顾到老太太高不高兴了。

Suddenly, she heard Mrs. Zhang mentioning the violin to her mother-in-law in the main room. Since her mother-in-law didn't talk much here these days, Qixia could not help but to listen more carefully.

“She seems changed into someone else these days. She was always holding her violin at all times, no matter if it's day or night.”

“The music sounds good.” Mrs. Zhang smiled as if trying to appease Qixia's mother-in-law.

“In the past, she didn't play the violin very much. But when one of her friends sent her one recently, she started playing it all day. Ah, she has family and household to take care of.” Qixia's mother-in-law's voice broke off with a long sigh. Then they began to talk about something else. These days, Qixia only indulged in playing the violin and reviewing the musical score. She was unable to care whether Mrs. Zhang was happy or not.¹²⁷

After hearing dissatisfaction from her mother-in-law, Qixia felt she was in a dilemma. Even though she was a modern woman, in the eyes of others she had a duty to fulfill her role as a filial daughter-in-law, which includes taking care of her extended family. In this role, she is supposed to know how to behave toward her husband's family, not only having to please her husband but also his siblings and parents. She is required to pay special attention to pleasing her mother-in-law, who occupied a powerful family position.¹²⁸ Due to this role, she needs to put down her beloved violin temporarily. Then, she intuitively felt the change in her mother-in-law's attitude toward her.

¹²⁷Ling Shuhua 凌叔华, “Qixia” 绮霞, in *Ling Shuhua 凌叔华*, eds. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxueguan 中国现代文学馆* and Ji Lei 计蕾 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1997), 115.

¹²⁸Gao, “Women Existing for Men,” 121.

近来老太太时时同她说话，面色似乎也不似前几天那样板板的闷着，卓群饭量也增加，每天回家也早些了。

Recently, Qixia's mother-in-law talked to her from time to time and no longer pulled a long face as she did a few days ago. Qixia's husband Zhuoqun also ate more food and came home earlier than before.¹²⁹

Later, Qixia still doesn't want to give up on her violin, so she started to play it again. Before Qixia realized it, another half month has passed. The more time Qixia spends with the violin, the less her mother-in-law spoke to her, until one day:

只一个下午竟学了五支大曲，她高兴极了，笑吟吟的走入饭厅收拾饭桌，忽然望见老太太已经坐在那里，脸色板的可怕，她吓得不知怎样好了，只好陪笑抱歉道：“原来已经预备好了开饭，我还不知道。”“唔，”老太太鼻里哼了哼，脸上微露出不自然的笑容，“他们那里敢惊动你呵！”

Only spending one afternoon she unexpectedly managed to learn five songs, and Qixia was pleased. She walked into the dining room with a big smile and wanted to clean up the table. Suddenly, she saw her mother-in-law already sitting there with a grim face. Qixia was too frightened to know what to do; she apologized and accompanied with a smile, saying that “I didn't know the meal was ready.” “Humph!” snorted her mother-in-law with an unnatural smile on her face, “how dare that disturb you!”¹³⁰

From the statement above, there is a clear sense that Qixia's mother-in-law was extremely unhappy about Qixia's recent behaviours. Simultaneously, the mother-in-law feels her authority is being challenged, that her daughter-in-law is no longer as compliant as usual. Although the mother-in-law's power, strictly speaking, is partially borrowed from her son, she is still an authority figure to her daughter-in-law. Thus, what Qixia has done makes her feel uncomfortable. Due to the privileged position of the mother-in-law, predicated on filial piety and inter-generational bonds, a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law could assume unequal status within the family, usually with the mother-in-law dominating the daughter-in-law by borrowing patriarchal power from her son.¹³¹ The conversation between the mother-in-law and Zhuoqun displays

¹²⁹ Ling, “Qixia,” 116.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 116.

¹³¹ Du, “Living under the Same Roof,” 174.

how the mother-in-law shows her dissatisfaction towards her daughter-in-law through complaining about how her authority as an elder had not been respected.

今夜卓群有饭局，她们俩一声不响的吃完了饭，绮霞照常陪老太太坐了一会儿，只说了两三句话，老太太说要静躺一躺，她便到卧房里收拾东西。一会儿忽听到说话声：

“那里还成个体统，高老太太和王老太太来了半天，也只是我一个人陪着。把我累坏了。”老太太声音。

“绮霞不在家吗？”卓群答。“在家，谁敢打扰她的琴兴呀！”谁字特别重，竟似“我不配管她”。

Tonight, Zhuoqun has a feast outside, so the mother-in-law and Qixia have dinner together. They finished the meal in silence. Qixia sat with her mother-in-law for a while as usual. After they exchanged a few words, the mother-in-law said she wanted to lie motionless to take a rest, so Qixia went to the bedroom to do some household chores. A few moments later, she heard a voice say:

“How downright outrageous it is! Granny Gao and Granny Wang have already come for a while, and I was the only one accompanying them. It is wearing me out.”, said Qixia's mother-in-law.

“Isn't Qixia at home?” Zhuoqun answered. “She was at home, but who would dare to disturb her when she was with her music!” The word ‘who’ was particularly stressed, and it sounded like “I am unqualified to say a word to her.”¹³²

Through the mother-in-law's statement, two things made her feel embarrassed by Qixia. She felt disappointed when her friends Granny Gao and Granny Wang visited her, and Qixia did not stay to talk with them. So, she emphasized ‘I am the only person there’, which shows she thinks Qixia no considerations for her feeling and let her entertain guests on her own. Having discussed filial piety as the concept of respect, it becomes clear that it is not enough for a daughter or daughter-in-law to be filial inwardly; she has to fulfill her obligations in order to maintain her own and her elders' prestige.¹³³ In other words, because of the desire to maintain a level of respect, filial piety serves as a disciplinary function for the conventional Chinese family. Furthermore, she felt she could not control Qixia, who was not that obedient as a daughter-in-law in the traditional sense. This mother-in-law did not feel Qixia's respect for her, as described in the story that ‘who would dare to’ and ‘sounds like “I am unqualified for asking her to do something”’ are complaining about her daughter-in-law because she supposed to be the one who have the power to

¹³² Ling, “Qixia,” 119.

¹³³ Yi Zhang, “Practising and Displaying Xiao - Young Mothers' Negotiations of Obligations to Elders,” *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 3, no. 1 (2016): 16.

dominate the younger generation. Moreover, the mother-in-law is also very tense about the relationship between daughter-in-law and son. As Margery Wolf states,

“[...] A] mother-in-law was more advantaged than her daughter-in-law in that she could always partake of patriarchal power by seeking recourse to her son, who was usually the representative of patriarchal authority and who was expected to be submissive to his mother in line with the etiquette of filial piety.”¹³⁴

When Qixia's mother-in-law complains about her daughter-in-law to her son, she wants support from her son. For a mother-in-law, the daughter-in-law is supposed to be filial to her husband's parents, but she can never be the core part of the family. Margery Wolf described the daughter-in-law's image as a polite stranger to her husband, who in no way threatening the emotional bond between mother and son or the respect between father and son.¹³⁵ As a mother-in-law, her authority would suffer directly if she did not have her son's support. So, she had to make sure her son was still on her side and always filial to her. Meanwhile, she would complain to her son about daughter-in-law when Qixia was not around. She needs to maintain her authority over Qixia and show her son the image of a loving mother. As the elder, she seems like the empowered one, but the center of this family is her son, Qixia's husband. Margery Wolf explicitly points out the life being a woman in the male-centred society that, “[...] during the three stages of a woman's life defined by male ideology, she was the property of different groups of men who were responsible for her care but who could, as with any property, dispose of her as they saw fit.”¹³⁶

Through the close reading of Ling Shuhua's two stories, we can see possible avenues for the construction, transformation and maintenance of feminine identity and status through filial piety. From marriage, an outsider who can only closely rely on her husband and accept pressure from the mother-in-law. In the story, Qixia tries to resist this kind of norm, but her inner morality still makes her give in to some particular perspectives. Through giving birth, and specifically through birthing male heirs, she has the possibility of shifting away from her husband and his family towards her own sons. Conceivably, after her sons marry and her family acquires a

¹³⁴ Du, “Living under the Same Roof,” 172.

¹³⁵ Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 7.

¹³⁶ The three stages here refer to three obedience for women who were being governed: as an unmarried girl, a woman must obey her father and her brothers; as a married woman, she must abide by her husband; and as a widow, she must comply with her adult sons. See Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China*, 2.

daughter-in-law, she becomes a mother-in-law and continues to put pressure on the next generation. The well-known Chinese phrase, “after many a long year, the daughter-in-law has finally stuck it out and become a mother-in-law,”¹³⁷ exemplifies the bitter cycle that each generation has passed through.¹³⁸ As a result of this mentality, one always looks forward to getting old and reaching the senior position to be served by and take advantage of the younger generation. In this way, under the patriarchal dominated society, women's life is like an endless cycle that they have the same life, only the main protagonist has changed.

Generally speaking, the Confucian female ideal is essentially family-centered: a woman should become a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother.¹³⁹ The mother figure is another empowered woman role in the traditional family system definition other than the mother-in-law figure. The status and identity of women is predicated on their relationship to the institution of marriage. From an unmarried daughter to a married wife, she becomes a mother; then she will be a mother-in-law if she has a son. Her family status takes time to transform because it takes time to bear a child, bring them up, and wait for them to get married. Under the traditional society context, marriage provides women with the only form of culturally legitimate security, respect, and power available to them the opportunity to assume the role of mother, and ultimately mother-in-law, through which each could establish a uterine family of her own.¹⁴⁰

Empowered Woman: Mother as an unexpected oppressor

This section will look at another elder woman character, the mother figure, as an unexpected oppressor for their daughters who belong to the new woman group. By looking at Feng Yuanjun's “Ge jue” 隔绝 (Separation, 1923) and “Ci mu” 慈母 (Fond mother, 1923), I argue that mother figures function as an unexpected role of the oppressor on their daughters; they force

¹³⁷ The saying in Chinese will be “多年媳妇熬成婆”. It can be read as one always looks forward to getting old and reaching the senior position to be served by the younger generation and vent on it the bitterness at the treatment suffered at the hands of the previous older generation. See Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen, “The Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety: Their Didactic Role and Impact on Children's Lives,” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1999): 22.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³⁹ Tangjia Wang, “Towards a Proper Relation Between Men and Women: Beyond Masculinism and Feminism,” in *The Renaissance of Confucianism in Contemporary China*, ed. Ruiping Fan (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 96.

¹⁴⁰ Stacey, “Principles and Contradictions of the Confucian Patriarchal Order,” 52.

their daughters to have an arranged marriage by utilizing the concept of filial love. In Feng Yuanjun's case, the contradiction between mother and daughter is unusual because people tend to ignore the relationship between women in the family system. A woman's family connection usually consists of a husband-wife relationship or mother-son relationship. The female protagonist was not only hostile to her mother, but towards feudal society as represented by the mother figure. The new woman's identity tending toward independence is "built upon the rejection of the traditional familial plot and traditional roles, intransigence towards the patriarchy and serving maternal ties."¹⁴¹

Feng Yuanjun's female protagonist is always in a dilemma between two sorts of love, maternal love, and romantic love. This kind of difficulty can also signify the conflict between traditional norms and modern ideology from a conventional mother and a daughter as a new woman. I argue that the collision of ideas between the two generations makes the mother figure in Feng Yuanjun's story become an unexpected oppressor. Meanwhile, among the stories, as Lieberman defines that, "(these heroines are) shaped by a cultural prescription that children must endlessly endeavor to repay an unrepayable emotional debt to their parents."¹⁴² Thus, as an elderly woman, the mother is empowered by manipulating the endless guilty emotion from her filial daughter and becoming an unexpected oppressor who always forced her daughter to accept the arranged marriage.

"Ge jue" is one of the most representative short stories among Feng Yuanjun's works, because it describes the dilemma between maternal love and free love of the new woman group. The epistolary story centers on the unnamed protagonist's letter to her lover Shizhen 士軫. In the letter, she conveys her determination that she is willing to sacrifice her life for their love. Meanwhile, in the letter, the narrator complains about how her mother tells a lie by saying she was sick in order to trick the narrator home and put her under house arrest. While expressing her sadness because she is not understood by her mother, the female protagonist shows the reader her inner conflict in being forced to choose between free love and kinship. Moreover, the collision of old and new ideas is mentioned many times in the story, representing the most significant conflict between the traditional and new youth groups. This conversation also shows why does the mother force her daughter to accept a traditional marriage.

¹⁴¹ Ng, "Introduction," 14.

¹⁴² Lieberman, "The Lost Mother and the New Woman Heroine," 109.

我的哥哥姐姐们虽然很和我表同情，屡次谏我的母亲不要这般执拗，可是都失败了。她说我们这种行为直同姘识一样，我不但已经丢尽她的面子，并且使祖宗在九泉下为我气愤，为我含羞。假如他们要再来帮我，她就不活了。

Although my brother and sister are sympathetic and have tried on numerous occasions to persuade my mother to give in, they have, unfortunately, failed. She says that what we did was tantamount to adultery, and that not only have I dishonoured her, but even my ancestors in heaven are furious and ashamed of me. She says that if my brother and sister insist on helping me, she will kill herself.¹⁴³

The narrator's siblings all accept the idea of free love and attempting to persuade their mother not to force the narrator to accept the arranged marriage. However, the mother saw no difference between marrying for love and adultery. To not make a fool of herself, the heroine's mother insisted that her daughter have an arranged marriage. At the same time, she even threatened her children with her own life to stop her children from persuading her to change ideas because she knew how potent this threat was to her children. This mother is more concerned about the threat of losing face rather than her daughter's willingness. In contrast, the narrator struggles with balancing the constraints of maternal love with the pursuit of free love.

我爱你，也爱我的妈妈，世界上的爱情都是神圣的，无论是男女之爱，母子之爱。试想想六十多岁的老母六七年不得见面了，现在有了可以亲近她老人家的机会，而还是一点归志没有，这算人吗？我这次冒险归来的目的是要使爱情在各方面的都满足。

I love you, but I also love my mother. Love is sacred, whether it is the love between a man and woman or between a mother and a child. Try putting yourself in the place of a mother already in her sixties who has not seen her children for six or seven years. Could I still call myself a person if I did not desire to return home and be close to her while I still can? I took the risk to come home hoping that my love could be fulfilled on all sides.¹⁴⁴

After telling her lover that her mother won't listen her reasons for wanting to marry for love, the protagonist goes further to discuss how conflicted she feels at this moment. As she

¹⁴³ Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君, "Ge jue" 隔绝[Separation], in *Feng Yuanjun xiaoshuo: Chun hen* 冯沅君小说:《春痕》 [Feng Yuanjun's novel collection: The Trace of Spring], ed. Sun Xiaozhong 孙晓忠 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 1-2. English translation quoted from Janet Ng in Amy D. Dooling and Kristina M. Torgeson's *Writing Women in Modern China: An Anthology of Women's Literature from the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 105-106.

¹⁴⁴ Feng, "Ge jue," 2-3.

described that, “世界上的爱情都是神圣的, 无论是男女之爱, 母子之爱。” (Love is sacred, whether it is the love between a man and woman or between a mother and a child.) In the female protagonist’s inner heart, maternal love and free love are sacred and placed on the same level and non-comparable. This kind of expression is also presented in Feng Yuanjun’s another story, “Ci mu” 慈母 (Fond mother, 1923), which I will be examining later in this chapter. Instead of choosing a specific love, the protagonist tries to balance the two kinds of love.

It’s not difficult to see that the identity of modern women is based on the rejection of traditional family plots and roles, the uncompromising of patriarchy, and the service of the maternal bond.¹⁴⁵

我发现人类是自私的, 纵然物质上可以牺牲自己以为别人, 而精神上不妨因为要实现自己由历史环境得来的成见, 置别人于不顾。母女可算是世间最亲爱的人, 然而她们也不能逃出这个公例。……又发现人间的关系无论是谁, 你受他的栽培, 就要受他的裁制。

I have discovered that humans are selfish; although they make material sacrifices for others, they have no spiritual regard for them because they are so trapped in their historical circumstances. The bond between a mother and a daughter is perhaps the dearest in this world, but even it is susceptible to this general condition. I also discovered that no matter what kind of relationship you are in, the one who nurtures you also controls you.¹⁴⁶

She didn’t blame her mother’s oppressiveness on forcing her to accept an arranged marriage. Still, she concluded this kind of behaviour as trapped in their historical circumstances, which refers to the vestiges of the feudalistic society. As Li Yuefeng points out, Feng Yuanjun “认为‘五四’女性的反抗更多的是反对父权、夫权的束缚, 而同为牺牲者的母亲并未在列。” ([She] believed that women’s resistance in the May Fourth Movement was more against the bondage of patriarchy and the power of the figure of the husband, while mothers who were also victims were not included.)¹⁴⁷ Moreover, the protagonist never specifically mentioned her

¹⁴⁵ Ng, “Introduction,” 14.

¹⁴⁶ Feng, “Ge jue,” 2-3.

¹⁴⁷ Li Yuefeng 李岳峰, “Ai yu shang de jiao zhi-lun Feng Yuanjun xiaoshuo de chuanguozuo tedian” 爱与殇的交织——论冯沅君小说的创作特点 [Creative Characteristics of Feng Yuanjun’s Novels], *Liaoning xueyuan xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 辽东学院学报 (社会科学版), no. 3 (2020): 96.

mother's behaviour but used the word human beings to increase the scope from the specific person to a universal level. Also, she credited this fault to filial piety by saying 'the one who nurtures you also controls you' (你受他的栽培, 就要受他的裁制). This quote reflects that the protagonist knows her mother is controlling her, but she attempts to justify her mother's behavior.

But it seems that not every mother plays an oppressively dominant role to her daughter. In the short story "Ci mu", Feng Yuanjun depicted an unrealistic mother figure who compromised with her daughter and supported her in her pursuits of free love. The plot of this story is almost the same as "Ge jue", it mainly talks about a mother who pretended she was ill and asked her daughter, who is studying in another province, to return home. After the daughter returns, the mother would force her into an arranged marriage. But the mother here is Feng Yuanjun's ideal figure, and as such she respects her daughter's decision, and the female protagonist avoids conflict and does not need to make a choice between free love and kinship.

This short story uses the first-person narrative to describe a young woman who has not returned home for six years after fleeing from an arranged marriage. However, as time goes by, her brothers who have studied abroad return home and set up a separate branch of the family in the provincial city. The heroine's mother finds her previous letters to her have not been answered, so she asked the female protagonist's brother to write to the heroine. In the letter, the mother says that she will go to her if the heroine does not come home. The heroine finally sets foot on the journey home, and she even makes a suicide pact with her lover Xianggu 香谷. Later, after returning home, the heroine confessed to her mother that she wanted to break off the engagement. Although the mother felt ashamed to face the dead ancestors because her daughter is following an unconventional path, she decided to respect her daughter out of love.

Feng Yuanjun starts the story by using a metaphor to describe the heroine's difficult choice to either be a filial daughter or being a modern woman.

我常说北京仿佛是我的情人, 故乡仿佛是我的慈母; 我便是为了两性的爱, 忘记了母女的爱的放荡青年。

I have often said that Beijing seems to be my lover, and that my hometown seems to be my loving mother. I am the unconventional young man who forgets the maternal love between mother and daughter to pursue my lover's passion.¹⁴⁸

However, the mother figure in this story seems the ideal mother figure that Feng Yuanjun wants to create, and such she titled this story as a fond mother. After receiving this piece of mail from her mother, the heroine feels upset because she feels like she finally cannot escape the arranged marriage's fate. She already decided how to kill herself to show her dedication to her lover and the pursuit of freedom. So, she states that,

所以在别人看这样是家人团聚的好消息，我却看作催这场家庭悲剧开幕的掌声。

While others see this as the good news of a family reunion, I see it as the applause for this family tragedy's opening.¹⁴⁹

However, the heroine does not expect that the person who gives in first is her mother.

她只说了这样的几句话：“你们要代我想，我要是这样做了，怎有脸再见你们的伯叔们。...但是我虽想得到而没有勇气去做。把你强送去...我心中不忍看你受委屈。...你们若以你们注意为是，你们便照你们所认为是的做去，我这个老人任她难受去吧！.....”

All she said was, “Think for me how I shall ever face your uncles again if I do that. ... Nevertheless, though I wanted to, I had no courage to do it. To forcibly send you ... I can't bear to see you suffer grievously... If you think your opinion is correct, just do as you want and let me, an old woman, suffer it! ...”¹⁵⁰

As Chai and Luo have reflected in their journal article, “为父权‘代言’，充当扼杀“女儿”爱情的‘刽子手’。” (She will be deeply influenced by the patriarchal culture and become the spokesman for the patriarchy and acted as the executioner who strangled her daughter's love.)¹⁵¹ That is the reason why in the beginning, the mother would say, ‘I feel ashamed if I am

¹⁴⁸ Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君, “Ci mu” 慈母 [Fond mother], in *Feng Yuanjun xiaoshuo: Chun hen* 冯沅君小说:《春痕》 [Feng Yuanjun's novel collection: *The Trace of Spring*], ed. Sun Xiaozhong 孙晓忠 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 28.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵¹ Chai Xujian 柴旭健 and Luo Zheng 罗峥. “Shuangchong jiaoyu beijing xia de er'chong renge- Feng Yuanjun nüxing xiezuo de qingzhi chongtu yu huayu qeshi” 双重教育背景下的二重人格——冯沅君女性写作的情智冲突

doing so' since if she helps her daughter, because this violates the traditional ethical norms. However, through the entire conversation, the dilemma of choosing between lover and mother is resolved, so the heroine does not have to choose either. Because it was her mother who faced the dilemma of choice, and out of love for her child, she finally decided to respect the child's wishes and bear it all herself as she cancelled the wedding for her daughter.

Feng Yuanjun has created an idealized mother image. This figure would be the exception to the norm even in the reformation period when people start to learn about free marriage. This probably the best way Feng could think about how to balance parental love and romantic love. When two kinds of ideology interact, someone had to give in to create a happy ending. At the end of the story, the female protagonist planned to go back to school, so her mother brings her three grandchildren to send her off the train. In the train station, the female protagonist fed with sweets by her mother along with the grandchildren,

在这糖的甜蜜的滋味中，我又领略了母亲的爱，原来在母亲的眼中无论怎样大的人，都是极小的孩子呵。

In the sweet taste of the sugar, I feel the love from my mother again. So, one is always a little child in one's mother's eyes, no matter how old they are.¹⁵²

The female protagonist switches her identity from a grow up to a child which eliminates the possibility of conflict between her and her mother. I read the mother's concession here as Feng Yuanjun deliberately weakening the conflict between the two generations to avoid letting the heroine choose between kinship and romantic love. That is the reason why I think the image of the mother here is idealized. Also, in both stories, the use of the mother's image refers to the oppression of the traditional-thinking society behind her. She used her daughters' filiality as a bargaining chip, try to stop her daughter's pursuit of freedom, thus becoming an unexpected oppressor under the patrilineal society.

The difference between the authoritative woman images in the Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's works is based on the martial state of their children. Through the theme of marriage,

与话语缺失 [Dual Personalities in a Background of Dual Education- The Conflict of Sentiment and Fragment Absence in Feng Yuanjun's Feminine Writing], *Jiannan wenxue (jingdian jiaoyuan)* 剑南文学 (经典教苑), no. 8 (2012): 357.

¹⁵² Feng, "Ci mu," 36.

the empowered female protagonist in the two writers' works can be compared. The empowered elder roles represent the different oppression that a woman needs to face within a family unit. Before getting married, she will face the pressure from the arranged marriage and become a dutiful daughter-in-law under the oppression of conventional filiality norms until the day she creates her own small family and becomes an elder.

Committing Suicide: A Different Ending of Women's Liberation

In addition to rejecting or accepting an arranged marriage, both writers also describe another potential outcome, namely suicide. Ling and Feng's main characters sometimes choose suicide to use the value of their own life in exchange for their freedom or to accuse this society of women's injustice. In this section, by investigating Ling Shuhua's "Wo na jian shi duibuqi ta" "我哪件事对不起他?" ("In what matter did I do him wrong?", 1924) and Feng Yuanjun's "Gejue zhihou" 隔绝之后 (After the separation, 1923), I argue that the female protagonists' act of committing suicide is their most substantial criticism towards the male-centred society, with the dual role of enshrining victimhood through their lives and also as a method to escape from reality. Moreover, different from the female protagonist who uses suicide as a weapon, I read the concept of suicide as serving another purpose for these two female writers. For Feng and Ling, the use women's suicide to conclude the story is their compromise to the society to avoid visualizing women's future. Young intellectuals demanded that marriage arranged by their parents be dissolved, while others argued for divorce to end loveless marriages. Some resisted marriage ran away from home or even took the extreme step of suicide.¹⁵³ "Free marriage" was one of the most resounding slogans of the May Fourth period, and the following two stories tackle this subject in unconventional ways.

One of Ling Shuhua's most representative works, "Wo na jian shi duibuqi ta" deals with divorce as an end to a loveless marriage. Mrs. Hu 胡少奶奶 married her husband, Mr. Hu when she was only seventeen. After being married for three years, Mr. Hu went abroad to study for seven years. So, she tried her best to serve her parents-in-law as she learned what she was

¹⁵³ Meiyi Lu, "The Awakening of Chinese Women and the Women's Movement in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Holding up Half the Sky: Chinese Women Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Tao Jie, Zheng Bijun and Shirley L. Mow (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2004), 66.

supposed to do as a daughter-in-law. Mrs. Hu initially thought they could have a happy life when she finally waited for her husband to come back. However, when she finally saw her husband again after seven years and was ready to start a new life with him, her husband was disgusted with this marriage arrangement. He feels bored living with Mrs. Hu, who does not share a common language with her. By chance, Mrs. Hu found out that her husband was having an affair, with her husband stating that he would divorce Mrs. Hu and marry someone else. Mrs. Hu felt a mixture of grief and anger at the same time. She finally committed suicide.

At the beginning of the third person narrative, the author depicts Mrs. Hu's daily life as a daughter-in-law and the relationship with her parents-in-law.

她公公是城中有数的老绅士，婆婆是有名的女善人。她对他们恪尽妇道，晨昏定省，只听见柔声细语，唯唯诺诺，表示上慈下孝的气象。

Her father-in-law is a well-known senior gentleman in the city, and her mother-in-law is a well-known, kind woman. She was caring and respectful to them as the female virtues require, paying respects to them in the morning and evening. Her parents-in-law only heard her soft voice and her blind subservience. The family environment has consisted of kindness from parents-in-law and obedience from the daughter-in-law.¹⁵⁴

公婆见爱子不归，常常不欢，她又须尽力侍奉。

Her parents-in-law cannot see their loving son coming back to them; they often feel sad. So, she must try her best to serve them.¹⁵⁵

In contrast to the traditional parents-in-law discussed in other stories, Mrs. Hu's parents-in-law in the story are portrayed as warm and loving. Mrs. Hu has repeated this kind of life for years before her husband back to home. Her steady life has changed after she started to live with her husband, because she accidentally found the letters between Mr. Hu and the woman he admired.

忽见她丈夫怒容满面，手足无措的走进来，一边嘟哝道：“谁这样不讲道德，趁我不在书房把我的信都偷走？”可怜她是柔顺惯了的，本来想和她丈夫大吵一顿，无奈当生气上头，喉咙哽起来，手足瘫软，一句话也讲不出，只会哭泣。

¹⁵⁴ Ling Shuhua 凌叔华, “Wo na jian shi dui bu qi ta” “我哪件事对不起他?” [“In what matter did I do him wrong?”], in *Hua zhi si* 花之寺 [Temple of Flowers] (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2016), 162.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 164.

她丈夫顺眼看见她手上的信及床上的，都是他最宝贵的，又是羞愧，又是气恼，急走过去用手一把抓起来放在口袋里，正想往前走，忽听他女人叫住他：“喊！我问你-要...把我怎样？”他正没好气，悻悻地道：“我们离婚罢，你不肯，我就要跑了避你。”

She suddenly saw her husband awkwardly enter with an angry look on his face. He said, “Who would be so unprincipled as to steal all my letters while I was not in the study?” Poor Mrs. Hu, she was so submissive; originally, she wanted to quarrel bitterly with her husband, but when she was angry, her throat would get choked up and she would become paralyzed, so much so that could not even say a word. All she could do was cry. Furthermore, her husband saw that the letter was in her hand and that other notes lying on the bed were his most precious ones. By feeling ashamed and angry, he rushed to the bed. He snatched the letters up in his hand and put them in his pocket. When he wanted to leave, he suddenly heard his woman call him: “Ah! I want to ask you - that... What will you do to me?” He was angry at that time, so he said, “Let’s get a divorce. If you refuse, I’ll run away from you.”¹⁵⁶

In this conversation, Mr. Hu’s attitude is also worth paying attention to. From Mrs. Hu’s perspective that, it was Mr. Hu who is at fault, there should be no reason for him to react as a victim. Later, the news as Mr. Hu wants to divorce his wife became known to the whole family. So, Hu’s family has a meeting together. As for the poor Mrs. Hu,

她也听不清楚她公公说的什么话，只愿悲悲切切在厅子中间向公婆跪下来，哽咽说道：“请爹妈给我们判断一下，我自从入胡家以来，哪一回失了媳妇规矩？哪一件事对不起丈夫？现在他...”

She could not hear clearly what her father-in-law was saying, and she could only kneel to her parents-in-law in the middle of the hall with great sorrow. “Please pass judgement on us,” Mrs. Hu said, sobbing. “Ever since I entered the Hu family, have I ever broken the rules that as daughter-in-law supposed to obey? What have I done wrong to my husband? Now he is...”¹⁵⁷

As the only outsider in this family, once a wife lost her husband’s favor, her life would be spent in loneliness, misery, and constant jealousy. Now, Mrs. Hu has nothing since she lost the support from her husband. As discussed before, although women in the reformation period had surface-level interaction with imported notions of modernity-related ideas, the deep-rooted

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 170-171.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

ethical norms are still a gap they cannot easily overcome when they contemplate divorce. As Mrs. Hu herself states in the story,

“我还是写下一信，叫人家知道我不得不走这路的原因好些。咳！当这年头，像我这样的女人必不少，写一信叫人家也知道我们的苦衷。”

“I had better write and let others know the reason which compelled me to go this way. Curses! Nowadays, there must be many women like me; thus, I need to write a letter to let people know our difficulties.”¹⁵⁸

Dealing with desperation, Mrs. Hu finally committed suicide. Before she committed suicide, however, Mrs. Hu leave a note to her parents-in-law to let them know the reason why she decided this course of action,

翁姑大人膝前：

媳不孝，竟不能侍奉二亲矣。溯自入胡门，蒙慈爱有加，方图反哺；岂料家门不幸，横生变故耶。媳已三思，唯有一死已全夫婿孝道，以保大人桑榆暮景之欢。再者，近年离婚妇女，多受社会异眼；老父远客未回，大归亦不能。媳生长深闺，未习谋生自立之道，茫茫大地，竟无媳容身之所，媳只有死之一途耳。

Dear Parents-in-law:

The daughter-in-law is unfilial, in that she cannot serve two elders anymore. Since I entered the Hu family, I was lucky enough to enjoy your warmth and love. I was about to repay this love; unexpectedly, something changed. I have thought carefully that I can only sacrifice myself and use my death to keep my husband's filial piety and to protect your happiness in your old age. Moreover, in recent years, divorced women have been treated differently by society. My old father has not returned from a long journey, and I cannot go back to my natal home. I grew up in the boudoir and I did not learn any way to make a living. In this case, in this boundless world, I am unable to find shelter. Death is my only way out.¹⁵⁹

As it has been clearly stated in the letter, Mrs. Hu herself also knows that she has no other way out after the divorce since she barely can earn a living by herself, and the divorce is stigmatized. Because in terms of her current situation, divorce would be inevitable. Otherwise, is there anything she can do to save her marriage? It is just as same the title of this story, what had she done wrong? If no one is wrong, why is it that Mrs. Hu must pay the price for her husband's

¹⁵⁸ Ling, “Wo na jian shi duibuqi ta,” 174.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

indiscretion with her own life? Mrs. Hu's suicide was the loudest indictment she could make of the unfairness of that patriarchal society. While the practice of women's suicide—a traditional display of chastity and loyalty to men—was widely condemned by new-style intellectuals as a cruel and oppressive practice, in this story, suicide is depicted as the only viable alternative for a traditional woman confronted with her “modern” husband's infidelity and the prospect of divorce.¹⁶⁰ On the one hand, her death revealed that women in the early reformation stage are speechless and powerless among the family. On the other hand, it is also suitable proof that a conventional woman could use her suicide to condemn the old ethical norms that persecuted women. As Margery Wolf has noted, suicide was the most “potent accusation”¹⁶¹ that a woman could make. Mrs. Hu was brought up through the moral standards as a traditional woman, and she was also influenced by the new culture. So, she left a letter before she killed herself. While crying about her fate, she also let society hear the unfair treatment she got as a conventional married woman. Her husband wants to pursue freedom and try to escape from the arranged marriage, which is fair according to the advocated free love during the May Fourth period. But as a married woman, she is once again being victimized. Before education was completely universal, such freedom would surely drive many women, like Mrs. Hu, who grew up with deep-rooted conventional ideology, to death. Before that, women were not able to participate in society like most men.

Although the female protagonist in Ling Shuhua's story is different from Feng Yuanjun's unmarried new women who commit suicide for the sake of freedom. However, there is no doubt that two female characters are women trapped by filial piety. Suicide is the only most potent weapon available for women to resist oppression; and the only chance to prove that they can wrest control of their lives. In Ling's story, committing suicide proves Mrs. Hu's loyalty to her in-laws as the greatest daughter-in-law. I read this ending as Ling Shuhua criticizing the harm that free marriage leads to traditional women. As for Feng Yuanjun's short story, committing suicide is the protest of the unmarried female protagonist against the arranged marriage after failing to escape completely from home. However, being deeply influenced by filial piety, these characters decide to use suicide to refuse to choose between the filial love to mother and the free love.

¹⁶⁰ Cheng, “Virtue in Silence: Voice and Femininity in Ling Shuhua's Boudoir Fiction,” 330.

¹⁶¹ Bryna Goodman, “The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory, and the New Republic,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 1 (February 2005), 68. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911805000069>.

In contrast, according to Feng, committing suicide is the bravest thing one can do for free love and the most inspiring way to express one's will. In the journey of recognizing self-identity as an individual, the female protagonist always in a dilemma to choose between her natal family and her lover. The moral guilt traps her towards her mother and against the desire for free love. It also indicates that, the female protagonist is ultimately running away from the situation since there isn't a perfect solution to choosing between family love and free love.

Feng Yuanjun's "Gejue zhihou" 隔绝之后 (After the separation, 1923), told in the third person. The tragic love story is narrated by the female protagonist's cousin and is the sequel of "Ge jue" 隔绝 (Separation, 1923). This short story focuses on the female protagonist Juanhua 隽华, a new woman, who is forced to return to her hometown. Her mother lures her back by saying she is sick. Juanhua still returns to her hometown despite knowing that this is a trap. As soon as she returns, her mother places her under house arrest and arranges a marriage for her immediately. Juanhua asks one of her cousins to send a letter to her lover Shizhen 士軫. In the letter, Juanhua explains that she planned to escape by jumping over the wall at midnight. However, her mother suddenly fell ill and the plan of running away fails due to everyone in the house being awake during that time. The story ends with Juanhua committing suicide and leaving a suicidal note to her mother.

In the letter to her mother, the female protagonist states the reason why she chose to suicide,

少年抚育之恩未报，怎肯就舍你而去？但是我爱你，我也爱我的爱人，我更爱我的意志自由，在不违背我后二者的范围内，无论你的条件是怎样苛刻，我都可以服从。现在，因为你的爱情教我牺牲了意志自由和我所最不爱的人发生最亲密的关系，我不死怎样？

How can I leave you when I have not repaid the grace of you raising me? But I love you, I also love my lover, and love the freedom of my will more. I can obey your terms, no matter how harsh they are, as long as they are within the limits of not violating my latter two loves. Now, because your love makes me sacrifice the freedom of my choice to have the most intimate relationship with the person, I love the least, what else can I do if I don't commit suicide?¹⁶²

¹⁶²Feng Yuanjun 冯沅君, "Gejue zhi hou" 隔绝之后 [After the separation], in *Feng Yuanjun xiaoshuo: Chun hen* 冯沅君小说:《春痕》 [Feng Yuanjun's novel collection: The Trace of Spring], ed. Sun Xiaozhong 孙晓忠 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 13.

From the filial daughter's perspective, she can do everything her mother asked her to do. From a woman's perspective, she is a new woman who has self-awareness on independence and a desire for freedom to make herself. This kind of inner conflict eventually led to a tragic ending. Even it is the daughter who endures suffering; the writer still tries to explain the mother image, claiming that what they have done to their daughters is because of love.

现在，我可知道点人事了，不但不能好好的侍奉你老人家，并且连累你受社会上不好的批评。我的罪恶比泰山还要高，东海还要深，你看见我死了，只当我们家谱上去了个污点，千万不要难受！

Now, I am growing up, but not only can't attend upon you well, and it brings you destructive criticism from society. My sin is even higher than Mount Tai, deeper than the Eastern Sea. When you see my death, just treat it as a stain on our family tree, and absolutely do not beat yourself up over it!¹⁶³

Ironically, the female protagonist uses her life to deliver how desperate she is; she still needs to comfort her mother and take all the blame. Furthermore, Feng Yuanjun also makes a clear explanation of what committing suicide means for this character. The female protagonist defines her suicide as the only way to balance what she cherished in the world. She is trying to figure out a better way to solve a problem that has no solution.

你也不要怨我，我也不怨你，破坏我们中间的爱情的，是两个不相容的思想的冲突，假如以后这样的冲突不消灭，这种惨剧，绝不能绝迹在人类的舞台上。

Please don't blame me, and I won't blame you as well. It is the clash of two conflicting ideas that destroy the love between us. If this clash is not extinguished in the future, this kind of tragedy must not disappear from humankind's stage.¹⁶⁴

In many of Feng Yuanjun's works, the concept of committing suicide to prove devotion to love has frequently appeared, such as in the two works mentioned above. It was the most significant resistance to arranged marriage since female protagonists could not escape successfully and could not change the mother's determination which led to resistance by suicide. Both Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's heroines are representatives of the May Fourth period, presenting

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

differing groups of women. The behaviour of committing suicide represented that woman have minimal abilities beyond the control of their bodies. Their awareness on leaving letters, in order to let others know the reason why they choose to kill themselves actually on behalf of a gradual recognition of women as individuals. They want to be heard by others and take control of the few things they had could exercise power over.

I read this behaviour as representing the two authors' avoidance and confusion about depicting the future of woman group; they refuse to make choices about the problem's women fate. For example, Mrs. Hu, who is a traditional married woman who has no independent ability. It looks like Ling Shuhua herself does not know what kind of outcome such women will face after being abandoned when creating a female protagonist like Mrs. Hu. So, the writer gave Mrs. Hu an ending as killing herself before she knew her final fate. As a representation of Feng Yuanjun's point of view, Juanhua as a new woman desperate for freedom, who does not know what kind of situation she will face if she fails to escape. Moreover, she also doesn't know how to make a clear choice between familial love and romantic love. Meanwhile, this kind of escapism also reflects Feng Yuanjun herself struggling with unconventional thoughts and deep-rooted ethical norms. Both Ling and Feng's avoidance of visualizing women's future and refusal to choose the future of women is also the limitation of May Fourth feminism.

Conclusion

Building on the May Fourth feminism discussed in the previous chapter, I have examined the characters in Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's works. In my opinion, Ling's female characters are married women; the unconventional young ladies in Feng's works will eventually become the wives in Ling's work. As the representative writers during the May Fourth Movement period, they used their works to record how women lived in the collision of old and new ideas, proving the significance of women's existence and woman literature worth more attention.

In the first half of this chapter, I discuss how the transformations formed when women are empowered. By borrowing concepts by scholars such as Margery Wolf, Rey Chow and Dai Jinhua, I began analyzing how Ling Shuhua depicts the relationship between mothers-in-law and her next generation. Moreover, I have also analyzed the change of women's two different

statuses, before getting married and after marriage. A woman who initially wasn't belonging to her natal family's lineage before getting married and occupies a precarious position after her marriage. As an outsider in her mother-in-law's uterine family, she needs to live under oppression and then wait for a chance to build her own small family. Following this, I discussed the mother image in Feng Yuanjun's works, a woman assimilated by the patriarchal society to oppress her daughter in the name of love. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, I read their works on the two empowered female identities that women have in the family system under the andro-centric ideology, from her depiction of the relationship between the daughter and the mother before marriage to Ling Shuhua's description of the relationship between marriage as a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law.

In the second part of this chapter, I examined the idea of women choosing suicide in the two writers' stories. While two heroines from Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's stories use their bodies as weapons to decry their suffering to the outside world, I argue that it is also an action taken to escape from facing reality. Either the new woman Juanhua depicted by Feng chooses to commit suicide for her own free will to escape the choice between kinship and love, or Mrs. Hu, the traditional woman in Ling's works, does not want to face her divorce, and chooses to commit suicide. As the female protagonists were escaping from reality, it also reflects the female writers' subliminal escape and their confusion about the future of women at the same time.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have raised a diverse method on categorizing Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's writing where two authors' writing styles are defaulted by scholars as different genres. I read their distinct writing styles as they have depicted women in different marital states. If the theme of marriage is mainline, the works of the two writers can be linked together, which will perfectly reflect women's lives during the May Fourth period. In the first chapter, I work on the male figures among Ling and Feng's work. There always a lack of specific descriptions of males and male protagonists physically absent in the stories.

Moreover, although two writers show the independent side of women and criticize men who are unfaithful in love, there are subconscious limitations on the self and female consciousness. Also, both two writers have implicitly mentioned the significance of education for women. Education made them start rethinking women's social role and the importance of woman's literature. The second chapter looks at the elder woman roles in the traditional family system that have been overlooked. The older women's self-identity has a transformation brought about by their marital status. They are also oppressors in the patriarchal system towards the younger generation in society. Moreover, by tracing the May Fourth feminism, individualism and female awareness in Ling and Feng's writing, I aim to show an inner conflict between modern ideologies and traditional morality in the two writers' works that their depiction of women is relatively formulaic and rigid.

For these female writers, the advocacy on the independent woman and raising their social statutes allowed them to learn about the self-identity. But their modernized thoughts still have limitations since the transformation of one's deep-rooted ethical norms and redefinition of oneself is not so easy. As Xu Chang points out that, “(她们) 开始摆脱作为男性客体的对象, 获得了自我建构主体的权利, 但她们仍然未能摆脱男性对于女性建构的影响, 她们建构自身的经验也是来源于男性主导“娜拉出走”的神话。” (Female intellectuals began to get rid of the objects as male objects and gained the rights of self-construction subjects, but they still failed to get rid of the influence of men on female construction. Also, their experience of self-construction came from the myth of a male-dominated “Nora's leaving”.)¹⁶⁵ These May Fourth Period leading

¹⁶⁵ Xu, “Wusi xinnüxing shenhua de jiangou yu maodun chongtu,” 9.

figures are the first generation to break the existing Confucian doctrine on women and use what they have learned from the modern ideology to refine women's roles in the family and society. However, they have not defined modern women entirely independently because men still dominated all their education sources. They are relying on the male-dominated reformation to write and speak for the woman group. In addition, their definition of independent women during the May Fourth Movement period was also limited to the image of Nora, which well explained why these women's writing techniques were relatively fixed and formulaic. Also, as the early period May Fourth female writers, who were deeply influenced by the western world, there is no wonder why Ling Shuhua and Feng Yuanjun's writing have many commonalities. Furthermore, their self-awareness towards women as individual subjects did not fully transform them from the traditional morality. This unfinished transformation also leads to their female protagonist having to unconsciously avoid some modern idealism such as the concept of sexual desire, the description of sexual intercourse, and the courage to criticize the conventional patriarchy morality straightforwardly.

I mainly work on female writers because when I read literature works related to the May Fourth Movement, the public has ignored many female writers. Although many slogans advocate improving women's social status, most of the time, women writers' names appear in groups, and many scholars ignore many writers and works that deserve further study. I understand that writers' fame might be the most attractive element that can lead people to pay attention to their works, but that should not be why some writers are forgotten by the public simply because they are less well known. What made me want to study these two writers was simple, they have similar life trajectories and stop creation after the arising of Proletarian literature. Both Ling and Feng were born in the same year; they are known as writers but have multiple titles simultaneously. Also, they were representatives of different genres of writing. I wonder why people think they are so different in their writing styles. And I am wondering if there is any other way of distinguishing their work apart from the writing technique. Or does this kind of categorization on writing style work? They're supposed to have a more precise line on defining May Fourth Period female writers since they share a relatively similar ideology. I found out that they were writing about women in different marital states, and this is also the preliminary conclusion I have for my thesis.

Moreover, from my point of view, this thesis has several limitations. Firstly, I haven't made all the comparisons for Ling and Feng's creations; some pieces might not fit my argument. But based on the analysis I have done so far; this is an interesting topic that deserves further research since currently there is no existing scholarship working on the same issue. Secondly, this thesis does not include too many personal life and environmental background of the author as a reference during the in-text analysis process. Rather than their personal lives, the writer's creations should be deserving more attention, especially for female writers, people pay more attention to their private life. However, I cannot deny that their writing reflects their personal experience at a certain level and the environment of their natal family also shaped their writings. So, if including those factors inside the discussion, I am not sure that the initial conclusion I have now still hold up. However, I think the literary creations themselves prioritize the analysis rather than combining the works. An author's personal life since the creation themselves will be what the author is trying to deliver. Another limitation will be the concept of filial piety being brought up in this thesis. The background of my analysis is based on a comprehensive framework on Confucianism and Filial piety. I am aware that there are many variations about this concept, which makes my argument somewhat weak. However, I still think the two groups: the relationship between two mothers-in-law and daughter-in-law; mother and daughter in traditional Chinese society, is worth more discussion. It can help us understand the women's views on these relationships through the writings on women's lives.

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