

The Death of the 'Perfect' Woman: The Social Implications of Song Yunping in the Reform Themed Novel *River of Time* (2009)

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Abstract

The character Song Yunping is beloved and commemorated in the tribute drama *Like a Flowing River*, celebrating the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening-up. The gender dilemma and inequality she endures in the original online novel *River of Time*, as well as the patriarchal social ideology, are often overlooked. Her 'perfect' image is shaped by the aesthetic paradigm of patriarchal society, aligning with traditional ideals of women. Her tragedy lies in the paradox of being confined to the domestic sphere while shouldering excessive public labour without compensation or professional dignity. From the grand narrative, her role as a virtuous wife clashes with the modernity demanded by the reform period. Her death marks not only the end of traditional womanhood but also symbolizes the fading of a bygone era during China's transitional period from the beginning of reform and opening-up in 1978 to the pursuit of socialist modernization.

Keywords: Chinese Reform-Themed Novels, Patriarchy, Feminism, Modernity, River of Time

Introduction

River of Time (2009), is an online novel created by the famous author A Nai, reflecting the significant societal changes in China following the reform and opening-up policy that began in 1978. The character Song Yunping in the novel *River of Time* and its adapted television series *Like a Flowing River* (2018), has sparked widespread emotional resonance, emerging as a highly discussed female figure. However, there is an ongoing debate of the evaluation of Song Yunping. Some scholars regard Song Yunping as the archetype of the 'perfect' woman (Wang, 2019; Qin, 2020). Yichuan (2019), Dean of the School of Arts at Peking University, employed the term 'perfect' fourteen times in his paper, indicating the extent of his positive evaluation of Song Yunping. However, feminists such as Ju & Wang (2019) utilise the feminist geography theory to illustrate that Song Yunping embodies tragic dimensions, is marginalized from public engagement, and is subjected to a voiceless predicament. Song Yunping's tension across the discourse systems of 'patriarchal culture versus feminism' and 'traditional culture versus modernity' amplifies the complexity of this character. This paper

aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of the character Song Yunping in the novel through the lens of both patriarchal and feminist perspectives. Additionally, it places her within the historical context of China's reform and opening-up, offering a thorough re-evaluation from two distinct perspectives: modernity, and the dignity and ethics of labour.

River of Time was published by Changjiang Literature and Arts Press and won the 11th Five One Project Award from the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China the same year (Tang, 2019). In 2018, it was adapted into a television series titled *Like a Flowing River*, which also received the Five One Project Award (Sun, 2023). Moreover, this novel was included in the selections of '20 Notable Works of Chinese Online Literature over 20 Years'¹ and '70 Novels from 70 Years'² (Mei Jia, 2019). The novel is recognized as comparable to *Ordinary World* (1986), a renowned Chinese novel that won the prestigious Mao Dun Literature Prize (Liu, 2018; Wang, 2022; Xue, 2022). The Chinese Online Literature Network's Critic Committee awarded it the title of 'Private History of reform and opening-up', establishing it as a classic work reflecting the spirit of reform and opening-up. It stands as a peak in the history of online literature and an undeniable cultural phenomenon in contemporary literary history (Tang, 2019; Li, 2019; Xue, 2022; Wang, 2023).

As a genre focused on China's reform and opening-up, novels from the late 20th century and early 21st century predominantly feature male reformers and strivers (Chen, 2018). Women are typically portrayed as mere 'extras', 'bystanders', 'objects of salvation for heroic reformers' or 'tools of practical value' (Lu, 2021; Ma, 2018). The literary criticism surrounding female characters in reform-themed novels remains exceptionally sparse. Scholars often centre their analysis of female characters in literary works on aspects such as women's bodies, love, marriage, and family relations. However, it is crucial and more urgent to explore how to portray and perceive women within the grand narrative of reform and in public spaces. Female characters traverse both private and public domains. Furthermore, their activities and emotions exhibit more richness, complexity, and tension compared to their male counterparts. This dynamic reflects the gender consciousness of both authors and readers, the level of societal civilization, the spirit of the times, and the prevailing national ideology. Therefore, it is essential to analyse the portrayal of female characters in reform-themed novels.

In *River of Time*, Song Yunping is the elder sister of Song Yunhui, one of the protagonists. She married Lei Dongbao, another protagonist, in 1980. Tragically, she passed away in an accident during her pregnancy in 1983. Her untimely death brought endless pain and remorse

¹ On March 29, 2018, the 'Seminar on 20 Years of Development of Chinese Online Literature' was held at the Shanghai Writers' Association, jointly organized by the Online Literature Committee of the China Writers Association, the Shanghai Press and Publication Bureau, the Shanghai Writers' Association, and Yueshen Group. During the event, the selection results for the '20 Outstanding Works in 20 Years of Chinese Online Literature' were announced. This award is one of the most authoritative, professional, and representative evaluations in the field of Chinese online fiction.

² The *70 Novels from 70 Years* series, jointly published by ten leading publishing houses, was created to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949–2019). This collection includes seventy carefully selected, exemplary long-form novels that vividly portray the daily lives of the Chinese people, capture the profound social transformations, reflect contemporary social realities, and emphasize the central role of the people.

to her family, earning her the status of 'white moonlight'³ and 'lingering regret' in the hearts of many readers. On the night the television series aired the death of Song Yunping, the hashtag #PingpingIsGone even surged to the top of media trending lists (Jiang & Sun, 2020). As a tribute to the fortieth anniversary of China's reform and opening-up, the character Song Yunping in TV series prominently embodies the advocacy of positive values through her selfless dedication. However, this idealization also diminishes and obscures certain complex realities and survival struggles that women face within the traditional gender hierarchy. Only through careful reading and analysis of the original novel can one uncover a truly comprehensive view of Song Yunping. Under the lens of patriarchy, she appears perfect; however, when examined from a feminist perspective, this may not hold true. Yet, most readers/audiences and critics fail to perceive this discrepancy. The previously mentioned research by Ju & Wang (2019)'s research significantly contributes to revealing the tragic nature of Song Yunping's existence, the oppression of patriarchy, and the segmentation of gendered spaces. However, the analysis primarily focuses on spatial dimensions. Although this perspective offers unique insights, there remains potential for further expansion, especially in exploring the multifaceted socio-cultural dilemmas faced by Song Yunping.

The 'Perfect' and 'Idealized' Woman Under Patriarchal Aesthetics

Firstly, Song Yunping's appearance and demeanour perfectly align with the aesthetic paradigm of a patriarchal society. Both her fair and delicate features and her gentle, melodious soft voice captivated Lei Dongbao from their very first encounter. The novel repeatedly emphasizes Song Yunping's shyness before marriage. Within the narrative, Lei Dongbao, embodying a patriarchal gaze, consistently views Song Yunping as an object of admiration, appreciating her reserve, modesty, and timidity. During their courtship, when confronted with Lei's intense gaze and bold confessions, Song Yunping feels too shy to meet his eyes, with the blush creeping all the way to her neck. Lei Dongbao attempted to make advances towards Song Yunping, but she pushed him out of the house. Surprisingly, instead of being angered, Lei Dongbao refrained from further rash actions and, out of respect, proposed marriage to her parents.

Psychologists believe that, shyness and social anxiety are highly interrelated (Anderson & Harvey, 1988). The term 'shyness' is often co-associated with notions of passivity, withdrawal, frailty, helplessness, and bewilderment. From the psychological perspective above, shyness is often viewed as a negative and passive state. However, shy women in literary works often attract greater male attention. This raises the question: why does shyness appeal to men despite its generally negative connotation? The reason, as Patricia Anne McDaniel (2003), points out, lies in the cultural constructs that associate shyness with femininity and submissiveness, traits often idealized in traditional gender roles. In another word, a shy woman can stimulate the male subject's drive, thereby satisfying his desire for control (Xie, 2006). As analysed above, this represents the first level of how Song Yunping's shy image conforms to the patriarchal aesthetic. The following section will further explore how this conformity operates on another level.

³ "White moonlight" is a term that originated in Chinese culture and has gained popularity in online discussions, especially in the context of romance. It refers to someone who is deeply cherished and loved, often representing an unattainable or idealized romantic figure. This person is usually seen as perfect in the eyes of the individual, even if the relationship with them may not have been realized or lasted. The "white moonlight" remains an unfulfilled longing or a pure, unsullied memory, symbolizing a kind of eternal love or affection that never fades.

Patricia A. M. points out shyness has traditionally been regarded as ‘the traditional link between women’s shyness and sexual modesty’ (2003, p. 16). The girl’s shyness symbolizes ‘purity’, indicating a lack of sexual experience and a strong sense of sexual shame. The detailed and repeated portrayal of Song Yunping’s shyness profoundly reveals the strict regulation of female chastity in a patriarchal society. Such depictions reinforce the ‘female bashfulness’ as a surface trait, thereby obscuring a deeper underlying logic: female shyness — chastity — ensuring the purity of male lineage — feminine desirability, decorum, and high social value. The underlying operation of this logic not only reinforces women’s submissive status within the patriarchal structure but also subtly conceals the implicit maintenance of patriarchal interests, making it pervasive yet difficult to detect. Song Yunping’s shyness and restraint stand in stark contrast to the enthusiasm and assertiveness of Wei Chunhong, Lei Dongbao’s second wife. While the former gains Lei Dongbao’s affection, the latter is repeatedly humiliated and disparaged by Lei Dongbao, who uses terms such as ‘lustful’, ‘cheap’, ‘flirtatious’ and ‘throwing herself at him’ to demean her. After Lei Dongbao is imprisoned, he becomes highly concerned about whether Wei Chunhong will remain loyal to him, explicitly warning her to ‘stay faithful’ and avoid any sexual relationships with other men. Unlike Song Yunping, Wei Chunhong never exhibits shyness when interacting with Lei Dongbao, instead demonstrating enthusiasm and assertiveness. As a result, Lei Dongbao frequently questions Wei Chunhong’s fidelity. This narrative indirectly reinforces the patriarchal logic that female shyness implies pre-marital chastity and post-marital fidelity—standards imposed exclusively on women.

From a moral and internal perspective, Song Yunping’s spirit of sacrifice and devotion aligns closely with the traditional expectations of women’s roles in a patriarchal society. She conforms to traditional familial ideology, embodying a wholly altruistic moral quality rather than pursuing self-serving individual development. Song Yunping, portrayed as mature and understanding, strongly insists on giving up the only opportunity in the family to attend university to her younger brother, simply because she is the elder sister: ‘How could she take the opportunity away from her brother?’ The use of ‘how could’ in the novel implies that her sacrifice is taken as a matter of course, yet the reasoning behind why she could not take it is left unstated. However, the underlying rule is clear: in a rural family dominated by patriarchal values, all resources—including educational opportunities—overwhelmingly favor boys. As a result, through Song Yunping’s voluntary sacrifice, her younger brother Song Yunhui naturally gains the life-changing opportunity to attend university.

The novel does not depict the reactions of Song Yunping’s parents, nor does her brother show any sign of modesty or refusal. The author seems to convey the following attitude: Song Yunhui is not at fault, as the opportunity to attend university was not something he actively seized; neither are Song’s parents to blame, as they did not explicitly force their daughter out of patriarchal favouritism. Instead, the blame lies solely with the political environment of the time and the Song family’s classification as part of the Five Black Categories(黑五类)⁴. This

⁴ The term “Five Black Categories” (黑五类) was used during Mao era (1949–1976) of the People’s Republic of China, especially during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) to refer to five social groups: landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, bad influencers and rightists. People who were labelled as members of these five groups were discriminated against in society. Their children also faced discrimination in various aspects, such as joining the Communist Youth League and the Communist Party, school graduation assignments, job recruitment, military enlistment, promotions, and even in relationships and marriage. After China’s reform

plot attempts to obscure gender oppression with the notion of class oppression, neglecting the harsh reality of countless rural girls being forced to drop out of school. Due to her family's political status, Song Yunping remains unemployed and instead takes up raising Angora rabbits at home to earn money to support her brother's university education.

Readers and viewers alike have expressed a desire for an elder sister like Song Yunping (to care for themselves), earning her the title of 'National Sister,' yet no one has expressed a desire to become Song Yunping. At Song Yunping's request, Lei Dongbao resolves the longstanding issue of removing the Song family's political stigma through forceful means, which wins approval. However, this also implies the price Song Yunping must pay—marrying Lei Dongbao, an uncouth man incompatible with her, with the purpose of 'supporting her natal family' and ensuring they are no longer mistreated.

Before her marriage, Song Yunping's sacrifices and devotion were directed towards her younger brother and parents; after marriage, they shifted to Lei Dongbao's family and even the entire Xiaolei Village. With the Lei family being impoverished and unable to provide a dowry, Song Yunping, who had no material demands, expressed no complaints. When discussing which major to pursue at the Radio and TV University, Lei Dongbao insisted without discussion that Song Yunping should study accounting, with the intent of having her serve as an accountant for the Xiaolei Village upon graduation. As a result, Song Yunping gave up her passion for literature and chose accounting, a decision made as a sacrifice for Lei Dongbao. In the novel, Song Yunping's family repeatedly emphasizes that she is 'strong-willed', but her determination is not about pursuing her own interests or fighting for her legitimate rights, but rather about sacrificing for her family without hesitation.

In stark contrast, Song Yunhui and Liang Sishen's value orientations in choosing their fields of study significantly differ from Song Yunping's: the former follow their personal aspirations and choose majors based on their interests, ultimately realizing the maximization of their individual potential. On the other hand, Song Yunping's choice is guided by the potential support it could offer to her family and her contributions to others.

After her marriage, Song Yunping had to manage household chores, care for her husband and mother-in-law, and raise Angora rabbits to supplement the family income, while simultaneously setting aside time to study her Radio and TV University courses. Due to the overwhelming workload, she fell ill multiple times. Despite these harsh conditions, she eventually graduated and obtained her accounting diploma, allowing her to assist Lei Dongbao in managing the accounts. Although her mother-in-law constantly bullied and made things difficult for her, Song Yunping still used the money earned from selling rabbit fur to improve her mother-in-law's living conditions first. Song Yunping's hard work, virtue, kindness, filial piety, and ability to respond to mistreatment with grace make her the ideal woman in a patriarchal society.

and opening-up period, the Cultural Revolution was thoroughly repudiated, and the concept of family background gradually lost its significance. Consequently, the term "Five Black Categories" is no longer used in political discourse.

The Sacrificed and the Oppressed: a Feminist Perspective

The high praise that Song Yunping receives in the novel primarily stems from the commendation of two male beneficiaries, Song Yunhui and Lei Dongbao, who extol her for her 'strong' character. However, a closer and more objective analysis of the text reveals that Song Yunping never truly solves any difficulties independently. The author even notes that 'she always pretended to be strong in front of her husband'. Whenever Song Yunping faces difficulties, she is always at a loss, repeatedly relying on Lei Dongbao to resolve the issues. When Lei's mother, with the intent of bullying Song Yunping, adopts a passive attitude and refuses to participate in any household chores, Song Yunping is left to bear all the domestic work alone, gradually becoming more emaciated. It is only after Lei Dongbao learns about the situation from Song Yunping that he reprimands his mother, accusing her of acting like a landlord's wife of the exploiting class who expects meals to be served and clothes to be handed to her. This stern rebuke forces Lei's mother to resume her responsibility of cooking, finally resolving the conflict that had troubled Song Yunping for a long time. Song Yunping praised Lei Dongbao, remarking that something she had been worrying about for nearly a month was resolved by him with just a few words, and that Lei Dongbao was indeed 'capable.' The novel further notes, 'She listened to Lei Dongbao, as his ideas were always unexpected, but most were good ideas', highlighting Song Yunping's admiration for and deference to her husband. As feminist geographers have noted, although women are often considered the protagonists of the private sphere, they are not necessarily its dominant figures; meanwhile, men are viewed not only as the protagonists of the public sphere but also as the dominant figures in the private sphere (Li, 2012). Thus, it is evident that neither Song Yunping nor her mother-in-law are the dominant figures in this household; the only authority is Lei Dongbao, as both the husband and son. Song Yunping's post-marriage happiness is entirely dependent on Lei Dongbao, who acts as the 'head of the household.' Through the above analysis, it is clear that Song Yunping lacks the ability and wisdom to independently solve problems. She endures pain and burdens without seeking resolution, only relying on her husband's intervention when she reaches her physical limits. Such a woman cannot, by any means, be considered 'perfect'.

In the domestic sphere, Song Yunping is unable to assert dominance; in the public sphere, she has even less of a place for herself. Song Yunping is knowledgeable, educated, and hardworking. If she were a man, it is highly likely that she would have achieved outstanding success in the public sphere and gained social respect and recognition. This is comparable to Lei Zhongfu, a villager who became wealthy and earned admiration, prestige, and power through pig farming. However, as a woman and a wife, she is confined to the narrow domestic sphere, where her role is limited to ensuring her husband enjoys a life of ease, with everything provided for him. Before her marriage, Song Yunping was already skilled in rabbit farming, earning a considerable income from selling rabbit fur that even exceeded her parents' salaries. This demonstrates her exceptional work capability and ability to generate income. After marriage, Song Yunping not only had to take on domestic labour but also engage in public labour. While her workload significantly increased, the fruits of her labour were exploited. At Lei Dongbao's request, Song Yunping instructed the women of Xiaolei Village in raising Angora rabbits, and the high-quality breeds she cultivated were distributed to the village free of charge as breeding stock. 'Vigorously promoting household farming' was one of Lei Dongbao's two major initiatives as the village secretary to advance collective prosperity. Song Yunping's tasks of breeding rabbits, improving the species, raising

and distributing breeding rabbits, and guiding the rabbit farming process were part of Xiaolei Village's public affairs. While Song Yunping led the women in rabbit farming and selling rabbit fur, similar to how Lei Dongbao led the villagers in constructing a brick kiln for wealth-building, the treatment they received was vastly different. Xiaolei Village became the largest Angora rabbit farming community in the county, and the women of Xiaolei Village became wealthy through rabbit farming. As the deputy secretary of the village, Lei Dongbao gained unquestionable authority, impressive political achievements, and honors such as being named a Provincial Model Worker in 1982 and a Deputy to the City People's Congress. However, Song Yunping's significant labour contributions were given without compensation—she neither received economic benefits nor recognition, awards, or even the most basic professional dignity. Her value and dignity stemmed solely from her identity as the wife of the deputy secretary, relying on her husband's status and wealth to gain social standing and respect. This parallels the situation of women in feudal society, who gained honor through their husbands' achievements.

It was initially expected that Song Yunping would finally be able to make professional strides after graduating from the Radio and TV University. However, the novel only mentions her working with the bespectacled accountant, a high school graduate who had recently married into Xiaolei Village, and an experienced accountant from the Commercial Bureau assigned to establish the accounting system and records for Xiaolei Village. Her specific role or title was never explicitly defined, once again highlighting the historically 'nameless' roles women have often been assigned. Song Yunping's role was limited to using her position as a wife to rein in Lei Dongbao, who often acted outside established norms, thereby contributing to the formalization of Xiaolei Village's financial management. Song Yunping, relying on Lei Dongbao's affection for her, became the restrainer of his misconduct. Although it may seem that she had finally stepped out of the domestic sphere and entered the public space, she did not, like the new generation of educated women, utilize the advanced knowledge gained through higher education to realize her own value or transform the world. Instead, she continued to play the role of a virtuous wife, fulfilling the traditional duty of supporting her husband by advising and influencing his decisions and development through her virtuous conduct. Ironically, the first time Song Yunping handled public affairs in her role as the accountant was also the moment when she met with the accident that led to her death. As sociologist Henri Lefebvre states, 'space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations but it also is producing and produced by social relations' (1979, p. 286). Space reflects social relationships, and Song Yunping's inability to enter the 'public space' signifies her inability to construct those social relations.

Song Yunping's death, while seemingly accidental, was in fact inevitable. From relinquishing the opportunity to attend university, to marrying Lei Dongbao and becoming pregnant, she gradually lost her sense of self and subjectivity. Her life became a continuous process of self-sacrifice and depletion, which ultimately culminated in the loss of her life. Song Yunping bore the burden of excessive labour that was not rightfully hers, a form of covert 'labour exploitation'. This manifested physically in her deteriorating health—'she couldn't hold on', 'her complexion worsened, waking up with swollen eyelids' and 'her face turned pale, eventually collapsing from exhaustion'. After a hospital examination, the doctor accused Lei Dongbao of 'abusing women', acknowledging the factual oppression he exerted over Song Yunping. However, her situation did not improve, as she soon fainted again, her body

overwhelmed by the strain. In modern and contemporary Chinese literature, the exposure of 'labour exploitation' is often direct and powerful. For instance, in the novel *Intoxicating Spring Nights* (1924) by Yu Dafu, Chen Ermei, who works at a cigarette paper factory, works ten hours a day, excluding lunch breaks. If she doesn't meet the required hours, her wages are docked, and she is sometimes forced to work even later. Despite this, her wages are insufficient to cover basic living expenses, leading Chen Ermei to express a bitter resentment toward the factory, declaring 'I absolutely loathe its very existence here'. However, Song Yunping's labour hardships remain largely hidden and do not elicit much sympathy from readers, who are instead engrossed in the seemingly sweet and romantic relationship between Song Yunping and Lei Dongbao, indulging in 'shipping the couple' (磕 CP)⁵ without reflection.

Song Yunping's name itself foreshadows the tragic trajectory of her fate and reflects the gendered power structures in a patriarchal society. The character 'Ping' (萍) refers to duckweed, a plant that floats on the water's surface, symbolizing fragility and helplessness. This sense of weakness and lack of agency, as well as the diminished sense of presence, conveys a tone of both sympathy and devaluation, highlighting her marginalized role within the societal order. In Su Yan's *Ode to Duckweed*, duckweed is referred to as a 'weak plant' (弱卉)(Li, 2021). Similarly, in Cao Zhi's *Poem of Duckweed*, the first two lines—'Duckweed rests on clear water, drifting east and west with the wind'—use duckweed as a metaphor for fragile women who are unable to stand independently, relying on men for survival. This literary tradition of associating duckweed with female dependence underscores the vulnerability and lack of autonomy attributed to women in traditional gender roles. A reader on WeChat Reading named Cui Haolun commented: 'The author gave her this name, and (I) couldn't help but start worrying about her fate.' Her name differs from her brother Song Yunhui's by only one character, yet their fates diverge dramatically. 'Hui' (辉) carries the meaning of brightness or brilliance, reflecting the lofty expectations their parents had for their son. This contrast reflects not only the expectations placed on the son but also reveals the broader societal differences in how sons and daughters are valued, highlighting the disparate paths and outcomes that the two siblings ultimately face. As scholar Xie Yu'e states, 'Gendered naming increases the social gender differences between men and women, reinforces the gender hierarchy, and reflects a male-centred gender value system' (2000, p. 105).

Song Yunping is also portrayed as a character with instrumental qualities in the narrative, serving primarily as a tool for advancing the storyline. Song Yunping exists in the novel for only five years within the time span of 1978-1998. Even in her final moments, she remains preoccupied with Lei Dongbao, not fearing her own death but rather feeling uneasy and worried about how Lei Dongbao would manage without her. Song Yunping's death is imbued with a strong sense of altruism: her life is sacrificed to spare Lei Dongbao from governmental punishment for his mistakes. On the other hand, the two male protagonists in the novel—Song Yunhui and Lei Dongbao—are closely connected through Song Yunping. Initially, Song Yunhui and Lei Dongbao disliked each other, but due to Song Yunping's influence, they became family. As they advanced in their professional endeavors, the two characters provided mutual support. Song Yunping serves as a powerful link between Song Yunhui and

⁵ Shipping a couple (磕 CP), refers to expressing support and affection for a favourite couple, either real or fictional, typically in media. 'CP' is an abbreviation for 'couple' and the action of '磕' indicates being emotionally invested in this pair.

Lei Dongbao, facilitating their collaboration and bridging the gap between them. After the two central male characters in the novel establish their connection, Song Yunping's essential 'mission' is completed, and she can die with her task fulfilled. After Song Yunping's death, Lei Dongbao, lacking oversight and constraint, becomes increasingly arrogant and authoritarian, leading him astray. As China's reform process enters its more complex 'deep water' phase, he even turns to criminal activities. It can be reasonably inferred that the author deliberately orchestrated Song Yunping's death to rationalize Lei Dongbao's transformation from a 'reform hero' to his eventual 'alienation.' This once again underscores the instrumental nature of Song Yunping's character, serving to justify Lei Dongbao's narrative arc and development.

Song Yunping's Death and the End of the Pre-Modern Women

In the novel *River of Time*, there are three characters who die (excluding suicides), and it is notable (whether by coincidence or design) that all three of these characters are women. When Song Yunping was pregnant, she died due to severe bleeding caused by an accident. Yang Xun's mother, who raised four children alone, repeatedly borrowed money from villagers to help Yang Xun with his business, eventually succumbing to stomach cancer under the strain of life's hardships and immense psychological pressure. Secretary Xu's wife died from a fall while hanging winter blankets on the balcony during a visit. Among these three women, Song Yunping and Yang Xun's mother are typical representations of self-sacrificing figures who endured hardship for others. The author devotes little attention to Secretary Xu's wife, only noting that they lived apart for long periods due to Xu's career aspirations. However, we can infer that, in supporting her husband's work away from home, she must have made significant sacrifices for the family. The author seems to use the tragic fates of these three female characters to subtly convey a certain message or emotional inclination to the readers, perhaps highlighting the burdens of self-sacrifice endured by women.

The death of Song Yunping serves two purposes: first, to freeze her in a moment of idealized beauty, leaving readers with a deep emotional regret and creating a powerful tragic effect. Second, it symbolizes the end of the traditional women in the context of China's reform and opening-up, heralding the arrival of a new era and the emergence of 'new women' figures, represented by characters like Liang Sishen and Ren Xia'er. From the author's narrative, it is evident that the ideal woman in the author's view is not Song Yunping, but rather Liang Sishen, who embodies subjectivity, independence, and modernity.

The portrayal of Song Yunping lacks novelty, as she represents the traditional 'mother archetype' characterized by virtues such as 'gentleness, dignity, composure, restraint, devotion, and sacrifice' (Liu, 1989, p. 33). Although Song Yunping in the novel has not yet had the chance to become a mother, her relationship with her younger brother, Song Yunhui, consistently exemplifies the qualities of an 'elder sister as mother'. This demonstrates her nurturing, protective, and self-sacrificing nature, embodying a maternal role even outside of biological motherhood. Such female characters, shaped by male gender ideals, have been written by authors for centuries. The character of Song Yunping can be seen as pale and stereotypical, unable to withstand the test of time. If she had not died unexpectedly, she would likely have gradually become an empty and symbolic figure of the 'virtuous wife and loving mother'. Over the years, she would have faded into a self-sacrificing role, much like Yang Xun's mother, eventually exhausting herself entirely for the sake of the family.

Each era brings forth its own art and spirit, and with it, specific representations of women in literature. In May Fourth literature⁶, the 'New Woman' is characterized by education and a sense of awakening, ready to challenge feudal family structures and step beyond the household. In revolutionary literature, the 'New Woman' must find her revolutionary guide, discard bourgeois sensibilities, and fully commit to the cause. In the narratives of agricultural collectivization⁷, the 'New Women' are portrayed as Iron Girls, physically strong and capable, adept both inside and outside the home. In the Seventeen Years Literature⁸, the 'New Woman' is expected to be just like men: fully engaged in industrial production, contributing to the Four Modernizations, and capable of mastering and improving large-scale machinery. This portrayal reflects the socialist ideal of gender equality through active participation in national construction and modernization efforts. In reform-themed online literature, the 'New Woman' is portrayed as someone like Liang Sishen in *River of Time*—beautiful, intelligent, courageous, and confident. She receives a solid education, enjoys a successful career with substantial rewards, maintains rationality in love, understands the importance of self-love, and embraces life's pleasures. Moreover, she embodies an awareness of individual rights, reflecting the development of a spirit of personal independence or individualism.

China's reform and opening-up was a critical milestone in the country's journey towards modernity. The discourse of modernity endowed the Chinese 'New Woman' with the legitimacy—and even a sense of superiority—to pursue humanistic aspirations such as protecting individual rights and realizing personal value. As Qi (2023), has argued, the 'New Woman discourse' carried an individualistic ideology from its inception. At the same time, the term 'modern' also signifies a break and departure from the past. Song Yunping, who encountered the surge of the reform and opening-up era, still embodies the pre-modern aesthetic values traditionally associated with women. However, she lacks the modern traits required by this transformative period, making her increasingly out of sync with the forward-moving spirit of the new era. Yichuan (2019), argues that Song Yunping symbolizes the 'origin point of the reform and opening-up era', which is indeed accurate. However, she is also forever confined to this 'origin point,' unable to progress beyond it.

Conclusion

This paper examines the portrayal of Song Yunping, a female character in the 21st-century reform-themed online novel *River of Time*. The study finds that the reason Song Yunping was adapted into an idealised figure in the television series and garnered widespread

⁶ May Fourth literature refers to a literary movement that emerged following the 1919 May Fourth Movement in China. It was characterized by a strong critique of feudal traditions and an emphasis on individual awakening, intellectual liberation, and social reform. This movement significantly influenced modern Chinese literature and its portrayal of women, promoting ideals of education, independence, and resistance to traditional gender roles.

⁷ Narratives of agricultural collectivization in China refer to literary works created during the socialist transformation period (1950s-1970s). These works depict the process of collectivizing rural farming under the Chinese People's Communes system. The literature reflects the practices and ideology of China's socialist construction at the time by portraying the struggles, collective labour, and social transformation of Chinese farmers during the collectivization process. It highlights the country's attempt to reshape rural society in alignment with socialist ideals.

⁸ Seventeen Years Literature refers to the body of Chinese literary works produced between 1949 and 1966, a period marked by the establishment of the People's Republic of China and ending with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. Literature during this era was heavily influenced by socialist ideology and state-driven goals, focusing on themes such as class struggle, national construction, and the glorification of workers, peasants, and soldiers. It was a key period in shaping the socialist realist tradition in modern Chinese literature.

acclaim lies primarily in her alignment with the patriarchal aesthetic paradigm. Through a close reading of the novel, it is revealed that Song Yunping is a typical representative of pre-modern traditional women, embodying a strong sense of devotion and sacrifice for the family. While the concept of personal development, as required by modernity, is faintly present in her thoughts, the conditions for its realisation are absent. Under the discipline of patriarchal culture, she faces oppression and injustice without understanding how to resist, and her labour goes unrecognised. As such, she does not represent the author's vision of an ideal woman.

Although both the reform literature of the 1980s and the 21st-century reform-themed online novels (exemplified by *River of Time*) are centred on China's reform and opening-up, the former is more focused on reflecting the present realities of the time, while the latter looks back from the present, offering retrospection, celebration, and reflection on the past. Therefore, *River of Time* does not simply portray a traditional female character like Song Yunping, but instead reflects the author's critique of such pre-modern female images as a modern female writer. It conveys the author's contemporary gender awareness and values, while also presenting readers with a new construction of the ideal female image envisioned by 21st-century female online novelists.

This research contributes to the fields of gender studies and reform-themed literary analysis by critically examining the patriarchal construction of female characters in Chinese reform-era narratives, with a particular focus on Song Yunping's portrayal in *River of Time*. The study offers a nuanced critique by integrating feminist and modernity perspectives, addressing gaps in existing literature that often overlook the paradoxical roles imposed on women within patriarchal and reform contexts. By situating Song Yunping's narrative within the broader historical and ideological framework of China's reform and opening-up, this research deepens theoretical understandings of gendered spaces and labour ethics, particularly highlighting the intersection of traditional familial roles and modern economic reforms. Furthermore, it re-evaluates how literary narratives reflect and shape societal values, contributing to the evolving discourse on women's roles in contemporary Chinese literature and providing a new lens to understand cultural shifts during periods of social transformation.

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