

# Female Consciousness and Power Dynamics: A Study of Chinese Women's Literature in the 1990s

Yin Zhiyi<sup>1\*</sup>, Lim Choon Bee<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>PHD candidate, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia,

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor Dr. LIM CHOON BEE, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: climb@upm.edu.my, gs58502@student.upm.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i3/25051> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i3/25051

**Published Date:** 24 March 2025

## Abstract

This study examines the reconstruction of female consciousness in 1990s Chinese women's literature through feminist literary criticism and Foucauldian discourse analysis, contextualized within China's socioeconomic transformations and selective engagement with Western feminist theories. By analyzing narrative strategies that reconfigure patriarchal power dynamics, the research reveals how writers subverted traditional gender roles through re-imagined kinship relations, autobiographical politicization, and symbolic syntheses of global feminist frameworks with indigenous cultural paradigms. Key findings demonstrate literature's role in mediating China's gendered modernity, establishing dialectical models that contested patriarchal-state collusion while transcending East-West theoretical binaries. The study highlights the paradoxical nature of feminist textual production as both a product of cultural globalization and resistance to Western epistemological dominance. Future research should prioritize cross-cultural comparisons and intergenerational reception studies to further contextualize this literary movement within transnational feminist discourse.

**Keywords:** Female Consciousness, 1990s Chinese Women's Literature, Mother-Daughter Relationships, Personal Narrative, Gender Politics

## Introduction

The 1990s marked a watershed moment in Chinese women's literature, characterized by an unprecedented exploration of female consciousness and radical transformations in narrative strategies. This period witnessed the emergence of groundbreaking works such as Chen Ran's *Private Life* and Lin Bai's *One Person's War*, which boldly challenged traditional patriarchal narratives. These literary shifts were closely intertwined with China's rapid socio-economic changes, as the market economy's impact posed unprecedented challenges to traditional social structures and ideologies, creating unique opportunities for women writers to break

through patriarchal constraints. The distinctive female voices that emerged during this period not only reflected women's changing social status but also signaled a profound transformation in power relations within the literary field.

In recent years, scholarship on 1990s Chinese women's literature has flourished, covering aspects such as feminist themes (Widmer, 2020), narrative techniques (Plaks, 2014), and social contexts (Guo, 2010). However, existing studies often treat power relations as a background factor rather than a central analytical framework. For instance, when exploring women writers' personal writing, scholars have focused more on its autobiographical features while overlooking the power dynamics between this writing strategy and male-centered discourse (Li, 2017). This limitation has led to an incomplete understanding of how female consciousness interacts with various power structures within literary texts. Furthermore, although current research acknowledges the influence of Western feminist theory on Chinese women's writing, few studies systematically analyze how Chinese women writers adapted and transformed these theoretical frameworks to address local cultural contexts.

Drawing upon Foucault's theory of power relations and feminist literary criticism, this study examines how power relations shape and are shaped by female consciousness in 1990s Chinese women's literature. Foucault (1980) argues that power is not a unidirectional suppression but constitutes subjects through discourse. This research investigates how power relations manifest through various forms of female experiences in the texts, such as mother-daughter relationships, wife roles, and female genealogies, and what strategies women writers employ to challenge the authority of patriarchal discourse. Moreover, feminist literary criticism emphasizes the politicization of personal experiences, viewing "the personal is political" as an essential tenet of feminist literature (Felski, 2003). With a focus on representative works by Chen Ran, Lin Bai, Wang Anyi, Jiang Yun, and others, this study analyzes how the intersection of personal writing and political expression creates new possibilities for female subjectivity in literature.

Exploring these questions will provide insights into how Chinese women writers negotiated complex power dynamics while establishing their unique literary voices. Through close readings and contextual analysis, this research aims to uncover the operating mechanisms of power relations in Chinese women's literature, moving beyond thematic analysis to examine the structural dynamics of gender politics in literary expression. This study also offers a case study of the reception and transformation of Western feminist theory in local contexts, enriching our understanding of the globalization of feminist literary theory. Furthermore, it emphasizes how the evolving female consciousness in the 1990s Chinese women's literature challenges patriarchal structures, offering new perspectives on gender dynamics and identity formation.

The paper is organized into four sections. The first section examines the representation of mother-daughter relationships in the texts, arguing how they become a breakthrough point for women to break free from patriarchal shackles and establish a "female genealogy." The second section focuses on the deconstruction of the traditional "virtuous wife and good mother" image, revealing how women's resistance against the marriage system contributes to the formation of self-identity. The third section explores how women writers reconstruct female history through personalized writing strategies, challenging male-centered historical

narratives. The fourth section delves into women's private writing, analyzing the power dynamics behind the writing of body and desire, and highlighting the complex dimensions of female subjectivity. The conclusion summarizes the core arguments of the paper and reflects on the development trajectory and contemporary significance of Chinese women's literature.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs a dual theoretical framework that combines Foucault's theory of power relations with feminist literary criticism to examine female consciousness in 1990s Chinese women's literature. Female consciousness, in this context, refers to women's awareness of their gender identity, social position, and the power dynamics that shape their experiences. Foucault's conceptualization of power as omnipresent and operating through various social relations provides valuable insights for understanding how female consciousness emerges and functions within literary texts. As Foucault argues, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1978, p. 93). His emphasis on how power operates through discourse and knowledge production illuminates the complex ways in which female authors negotiate and challenge patriarchal structures through their writing.

Feminist literary criticism, particularly French feminist theory, complements Foucault's framework by providing specific tools for analyzing gendered aspects of literary production. Hélène Cixous's concept of "écriture féminine," which she describes as "the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (1976, p. 879), offers a crucial perspective for understanding how women writers construct alternative narratives that challenge patriarchal discourse. Similarly, Luce Irigaray's theory of female genealogy, which seeks to "situate the female subject within a genealogy of women" (1985, p. 44), helps reveal how women's writing can create what Kristeva terms "counter-discourse" - forms of expression that resist and subvert dominant patriarchal narratives.

The intersection of these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing four key aspects of power relations in women's literature. First, it illuminates how power operates within family narratives, particularly in mother-daughter relationships and marital dynamics. In works such as Chen Ran's *Private Life* and Lin Bai's *One Person's War*, these relationships represent not simply hierarchical structures but complex networks of power negotiation and resistance. Second, it reveals how women writers reconstruct historical memory through what Irigaray calls "female genealogy," creating counter-narratives to male-dominated historiography, as evident in Wang Anyi's *Fact and Fiction*. Third, it provides tools for analyzing how personal writing and body politics function as forms of resistance against patriarchal control, as seen in Chen Ran's and Lin Bai's works. Finally, it helps explain how female consciousness emerges through these various forms of literary expression and resistance.

This theoretical framework particularly suits the analysis of 1990s Chinese women's literature because it accounts for both the specific historical conditions of post-reform China and the broader implications of gender power relations. The rapid social transformation of this period, marked by economic reform, globalization, and the influx of Western feminist thought, created unique conditions for the emergence and development of female consciousness in

literature, producing new forms of power relations and resistance reflected in women's literary works. Scholars say the 1990s saw major social, economic, and cultural changes in China, including political shifts and changes in women's roles (Hayhoe, 2017). By combining Foucault's insights on power with feminist literary theory, this framework enables a nuanced analysis of how Chinese women writers navigated both traditional patriarchal structures and modernizing forces in their literary creation, contributing to a deeper understanding of female consciousness in Chinese women's literature.

### *The Politics of Gender and Power in Literary Representation*

The politics of gender and power in 1990s Chinese women's literature manifested through multiple interconnected dimensions that collectively challenged and reconstructed traditional patriarchal discourse. Women writers of this period explored power dynamics through various crucial relationships and narrative strategies: the complex emotional and power negotiations in mother-daughter bonds; the deconstruction of traditional wife roles and resistance within domestic spaces; the reconstruction of female genealogy through historical memory and maternal lineage; and the emergence of body politics and personal narrative as forms of political expression. These diverse yet interrelated aspects of literary representation reveal how women writers systematically challenged patriarchal authority while establishing new forms of female subjectivity. Through innovative narrative strategies and thematic explorations, they created what Dai Jinhua terms "a new discursive space" where women could articulate their experiences and challenge traditional power structures (Zheng, 2021). As we examine these different dimensions, we can observe how women writers developed sophisticated literary mechanisms to address questions of gender, power, and identity in ways that significantly transformed Chinese literary discourse.

### *Mother-Daughter Relationships: Power Dynamics and Identity Formation*

In Chinese history and literature, narratives about father-son, mother-son, husband-wife, and mother-in-law relationships are easily found. As Liu Chuanxia (刘传霞) notes, "In China, where family and state are similarly structured, social ideology places great emphasis on regulating and managing family relationship structures and power orders" (2007, p.244). These four relationships directly impact family stability and order. However, mother-daughter relationships rarely receive attention. In patriarchal culture, daughters' family connections are often interrupted by marriage; therefore, compared to other family relationships, mother-daughter relationships have less impact on family structure.

Contemporary feminism argues that although mother-daughter relationships are weakened in patriarchy-dominated family structures, they remain a powerful force. "In women, there is always more or less the shadow of that mother who makes everything right, who nourishes children, who stands against separation. This is a force that cannot be severed yet can defeat rules and regulations" (Zhang Jingyuan 张京媛, 1992, p.196). After entering patriarchal society, men began compiling male-centered genealogies, excluding matrilineal genealogies from historical writing, making them "non-existent" in human civilization history. As Irigaray observes. In patriarchal cultures, mothers and daughters are estranged. Establishing a female-centered culture that matches male culture requires reconstructing female genealogy and mother-daughter ties (Jacobs, 2007).

*The Emergence of Female Consciousness in the 1990s*

In the 1990s, as female consciousness flourished, women writers actively began seeking and expressing independent female perspectives and cultural identities. This transformation manifested particularly clearly in depictions of mother-daughter relationships. In works such as Xu Xiaobin's (徐小斌) *Yushe* (《羽蛇》), Xu Kun's (徐坤) *Nüwa* (《女娲》), and Zhang Jie's (张洁) *Wuzi* (《无字》), we keenly sense a commonality: women writers' autonomous choice of female perspective and cultural stance following the establishment of female consciousness. These works no longer adhere to measuring women's value by male standards. Female characters either achieve gender self-recognition through self-confidence, self-appreciation, and self-love, examining motherhood and humanity; or express disappointment in love through self-pity, self-sympathy, and self-torture, escaping cruel reality. Through these sharp questionings and hopeless explorations, in persistent pursuit of delicate affection, the spiritual history of femininity or humanity gradually unfolds. These mother-daughter relationships - confrontational, estranged, or interdependent - their diverse portrayals highlight feminine heterogeneous imprints distinctly different from patriarchal culture.

Lacan's mirror theory emphasises how children's attitudes towards mothers —particularly those of daughters —affect self-cognition and subject construction. This occurs because daughters not only receive life from mothers but can perceive female existence through them, taking this as a template for their own future existence. Moreover, children have a natural possessiveness towards mothers; yearning for maternal love is instinctive. However, mothers may not necessarily fulfil their role with selfless love, instead possibly adopting a bystander's attitude in collusion with the world, coldly observing or harming their daughters' fate.

As Bourdieu observes, the mutual torment and resentment between women “is humanity's deepest and most universal form of suffering; it represents the worst that dominators impose upon the dominated (perhaps in any social world, the dominators' primary privilege is being structurally exempt from falling into resentment)” (Biana, 2020).

In *You Are a River* (《你是一条河》), Lala (辣辣) harms her daughter while voluntarily reproducing. Lala has children despite her poverty. Continuous reproduction serves patriarchy and women's self-worth is tied to reproduction and maternal duty, not love or fondness for children. Family issues worsen after childbirth. Poor Lala sells her body and blood for menial labour. Led by Lala, who beats and scolds them, the children make rope and chop lotus seeds early in life (Zhou, 2010).

*Breaking the Cycle: Daughters Seeking Independence*

Her treatment of daughter Donger (冬儿) proves particularly cruel. Donger's care for the neglected twins fails to win maternal recognition, instead inviting disgust and hatred. Donger's childcare actually aligns with patriarchal expectations of women - reproduction and child-rearing as female maternal responsibilities. Yet just as Lala gained no respect for desperately bearing children, Donger's childcare earns no maternal “smiles”. Here, Donger mirrors child-bearing Lala, whilst Lala mirrors her husband during childbearing - as her husband treated her, she treats her daughter. This attitude towards her daughter can be seen

as attempting to reshape her own mode of existence through her daughter, further deepening patriarchal transmission within the family.

Once, Lala brought home *How the Steel Was Tempered* (《钢铁是怎样炼成的》) from burned books in the square. This book unexpectedly awakened Donger's deep inner self-consciousness; she clearly saw her mother's numb attitude towards life: "She clenched her small fist, wiping away tears again and again, vowing never to live like her mother, never to be such a vulgar, ordinary woman bearing loads of children!" (Ostrovsky & Prokof'eva, 1964). Later, through the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" movement, Donger swiftly escaped her original family, voluntarily heading to a remote area in Hubei, claiming to be an orphan, changing her name to "Jingsheng" (净生), eventually entering university and becoming an intellectual. Thus, Donger completely ended the patriarchal continuation her mother attempted to impose upon her.

Foucault divides power into two categories: institutions and machines, and the multiple relationships between various forces. Within family members, the second type of power relations exists - concrete, constantly changing power relationships. Specifically, in a family, male groups typically occupy power heights, with females existing as power accessories. However, when former power centres disappear, power accessories may relay to become new power centres - when patriarchal structures face challenges, mothers may become family's new dominators (Foucault, 2019).

This new power centre tends to maintain former power centre's influence, consolidating its new position by imitating previous power centre's actions. As Lin Xingqian (林幸谦) notes, they "imitate paternal authority under male subordination to suppress another woman... this problem represents women's predicament long erased and concealed by traditional patriarchal society" (2003, pp.203-204). This power interchange and transmission results from "knowledge" construction. Such "knowledge" possesses certain stability, originating from social institutions whilst existing in artificially, continuously internalised habitual behaviours. Under knowledge's operation, family becomes "the soil where ruling power takes root, making ruling power's function possible" (Foucault, 2019).

#### *Estrangement and Emotional Conflicts*

If mother-daughter relationships full of "spicy" conflicts result from excessive estrangement, another type emerges from estrangement-induced cold confrontation. The mother-daughter relationship in Wang Anyi's *The Thirty Chapters of Flowing Water* (《流水三十章》) exemplifies this. Here, the mother represents neither traditional virtuous wife and good mother nor cruel and ugly mother; she appears as an eternally dependent, immature fragile creature under her husband's protection, indulging in personal pleasures and emotional entanglements, neglecting children's emotional needs.

In these texts, mothers maintain patriarchal power, having internalized patriarchy. During power's operation, they follow patriarchal power's implementation standards. Hence, they transmit female suffering they experienced to their children, trampling daughters' self-esteem, all aiming to gain absolute control like "fathers." Therefore, although family power structure appears to change superficially, it essentially continues patriarchy, not only failing

to elevate women's social status but intensifying mutual destruction between women, particularly between mothers and daughters who should be intimate.

### *Zhang Daling's Journey: Alienation and Identity Formation*

Her daughter, Zhang Daling (张达玲), marginalised from childhood, becomes family's outsider. Sent to a rural wet nurse shortly after birth, she returned to her urban original family only at age eight. Facing unfamiliar family members, abandoned alienation surrounds her. Zhang Daling mechanically calls out "papa, mama," her family members appear flustered, mother awkwardly saying: "Daling, do you recognise mama?" (Wang, 2002, p.49).

For Zhang Daling, returning to the long-unseen family brings anxiety and uncertainty, yet she still yearns for sincere welcome and warm expression from family members, especially her mother. However, Zhang Daling's "return" receives no welcome befitting a relative; rather, she appears as an unavoidable outsider stumbling in. Foucault recognises both inclusive and exclusive mechanisms in discursive practices. Zhang Daling's rural displacement until age eight creates "outsider" discourse within the family, positioning her beyond family membership. Her marginal family position manifests both physically and discursively: family members cannot communicate normally with her, her presence challenges family normalcy. Therefore, Zhang Daling can only seek self-identification at discourse margins, a painful and solitary search. As time silently passes, she gradually realises this seemingly peaceful family has split into two small groups: parents on one side, siblings on the other, while she remains alone. Parents view each other as emotional destinations, children merely by-products of their love. Thus, when siblings mock and ostracise her, her hope for maternal protection and love appears absurd. Particularly after discovering her mother's enthusiasm for marital relations, her mother further seeks to escape her daughter's silent judgment, with already weak maternal love nearly vanishing:

"Those nine months of blood fusion, pulse interweaving, all mysteriously and unknowably proving their connection, she could not doubt this relationship... She gradually grew annoyed, discouraged... This child destroyed all her enthusiasm, hatred inevitably growing... Two women gaze at each other through an ancient mirror's reflection, their attempt at closeness creating distance... They need make no further effort, thus ending it" (Wang, 2002, p.69).

The mother's avoidant behaviour creates communication barriers between mother and daughter, further widening their distance. Zhang Daling gradually loses ability to express love in this loveless environment. Though living under the same roof, they seem separated by mountains and seas, their contact filled with pain, fear, and avoidance. Unfairly treated from childhood, young Zhang Daling deeply yearned for maternal protection, yet reality repeatedly shattered her hopes. Upon growing up, she chooses to become a sent-down youth, perhaps incomprehensible to outsiders but born from inner loneliness. She chooses to break not with ethical mother and family, but with the family system her mother represents. Her rebellion marks an important step in escaping family constraints, exploring self, and finding life's meaning. Later, despite achieving success, when family falls into difficulty, she unhesitatingly returns home, supporting the tottering family - becoming its pillar.

She's unlike her mother. Zhang Daling can support her family and work outside; she controls her life. All demonstrate her female consciousness and active choices. Zhang Daling manages

her life and defies patriarchy, unlike previous generations of women. She balances family and personal ambition, changing gender roles in Chinese women's literature. Zhang Daling defies filial duty and female subjugation by supporting her family alone. This shows how 1990s Chinese literature's younger women balance personal fulfillment with societal obligations to define themselves outside patriarchal constraints.

Zhang Daling's story shows patriarchal mother-daughter conflict crossing generations. Rebellious against her mother's passivity helps her gain independence. By taking charge and rewriting their stories, she shows women can change their fates. This conclusion supports the paper's theme of how literature expresses female consciousness in mother-daughter relationships. Zhang Daling's transformation from alienated daughter to independent woman is crucial to 1990s Chinese women's literature's gender identity reconstruction. Her reclaiming her subjectivity marks a cultural shift in how women challenge patriarchy and empower themselves.

### **Patriarchal Discourse and Daughters' Resistance**

In essence, these estranged mother-daughter relationships represent writers' reflection on inherent mother-daughter relationships in patriarchal texts. During girls' growth, poor communication with mothers often creates belief deficits and spiritual voids. When they turn hopeful eyes towards mothers, they see only spiritual deserts, remnants of decayed concepts, hollow pale faces; maternal guidance loses referential value. Daughters' estrangement represents not merely avoidance of individual mothers but resistance against potential, restrictive discursive power, including definitions of next-generation female roles and behaviours.

Through rejecting such discourse, daughters essentially seek breakthrough from existing knowledge and power structures, searching for freer, more individualised modes of existence. While their behaviour superficially appears as personal estrangement from mothers, it essentially questions and resists socialised, traditional discursive power. These questionings and resistances build upon daughters' awakened female consciousness. They hope to express themselves, attempting to find new positions within social discourse, thereby avoiding thought "desertification" and seeking personal spiritual independence and growth.

Furthermore, there exists another type of mother-daughter relationship built on warm affection. This deep mother-daughter friendship differs from deliberately constructed warmth in previous patriarchal texts; it emerges entirely from female perspective, spontaneous, carrying infinite love and hope.

### **Alternative Narratives of Mother-Daughter Relationships**

Zhang Jie's *Wuzi* (《无字》) explores mother-daughter relationships across three generations, tackling gender roles and female agency throughout history and culture. Maternal love, emotional dependence, and individual autonomy are examined in the novel through the lives of Mo He (墨荷), Fang Lianzi (方莲子), Wu Wei (吴为), and Chan Yue (禅月). From traditional maternal sacrifice to modern companionship and respect, mother-daughter relationships vary.



### **Survival and Motherly Sacrifice: Fang Lianzi, Wu Wei**

Survival and generational struggles shape Fang Lianzi and Wu Wei's mother-daughter relationship. They share endurance and hardship at the crossroads of traditional and modern society. Fang Lianzi represents mothers who endure political and social upheaval to protect their children. Her unwavering support and guidance help Wu Wei through extreme hardship. Wu Wei's independence temporarily separates them despite their strong emotional bond. She breaks up with her mother as an adult because she prefers romantic love. The suicide of Fang Lianzi shocks Wu Wei and makes her realize that maternal love is her life. Wu Wei visits Yuan (塬), a spiritual homeland, to reconnect with her mother's legacy and embrace her maternal lineage after seeking meaning. Even after separation and personal growth, their intergenerational trauma and longing show the mother-daughter bond (Sen & Daniluk, 1995).

### **Remaking Motherhood**

Wu Wei's relationship with Chan Yue is more modern than her mother's, which emphasizes sacrifice and emotional dependence. Wu Wei and Chan Yue's relationship is one of friendship, emotional openness, and mutual understanding, unlike previous generations' maternal love of suffering and endurance (Kutcher, 2000). Friendship replaced mother-daughter hierarchy in their relationship. Wu Wei wants to raise Chan Yue as a daughter and friend, defying patriarchy. Communication and intimacy trump control and duty. Chan Yue, like many young women, is rational and independent. Although she loves and respects her mother, she sees their relationship as equal. Chinese women's literature reimagined mother-daughter relationships in the 1990s as society changed. Wu Wei and Chan Yue's relationship is a new maternal model that gives daughters strength, wisdom, and autonomy.

### **Female Solidarity and Ideal Womanhood**

Wuzi's three generational narratives depict a world where maternal love and feminine solidarity unite women (Li, 2006). Zhang Jie transforms mother-daughter conflict into empowerment, healing, and emotional continuity (Wei, 1999). The novel imagines a utopian world where women help each other without patriarchal expectations. Fiction has traditionally portrayed women as submissive and suffering. This mother-daughter relationship challenges that. By depicting maternal bonds that change from hierarchical dependency to companionship and mutual respect, Wuzi promotes a feminist view of womanhood in which daughters shape their own fates rather than inheriting pain. Novel emphasizes maternal legacy and generational change. Wuzi shows women gaining self-realization and autonomy after generations of gender roles. The novel explores maternal love, sacrifice, and renewal, adding to gender and power dynamics in contemporary Chinese women's literature and highlighting women's resilience and agency across generations.

The deep affection between mothers and daughters not only builds on intimate connection based on shared gender but also serves as strategy resisting male violence and patriarchal system oppression. This narrative strategy not only questions traditional gender "myths" in texts but also, through equal and loving interaction between mothers and daughters, subverts passive, subordinate female images under patriarchy, demonstrating awakening and power of female subjectivity.

Furthermore, when daughters grow up and face major life choices, novels often leave open endings. This not only reflects women's uncertainty in seeking self-identification and

positioning but also emphasises individual women's subjectivity and autonomy when facing life choices, challenging fixed gender roles and social expectations. It explores possibilities for women's self-realisation and freedom within patriarchal framework.

The profound mother-daughter bonds not only stem from intimate gender-based connections but represent a strategy resisting male violence and patriarchal oppression. This narrative approach questions traditional gender "myths" in texts while demonstrating female subjectivity's awakening and power through equal, loving mother-daughter interactions. When texts depict daughters making crucial life decisions, they often employ open endings, suggesting both uncertainty in women's search for self-identity and emphasis on female individual agency in life choices. This challenges fixed gender roles and social expectations while exploring possibilities for women's self-realisation and freedom within patriarchal constraints.

The novel delves into the themes of maternal love, sacrifice, and renewal, thereby contributing to the gender and power dynamics in contemporary Chinese women's literature and emphasizing the resilience and agency of women across generations.

#### 1. Marriage and Female Identity: The Deconstruction of "Good Wife" in Contemporary Chinese Literature

In his seminal book named in translated in English "Essays of 'Just So'" (《而已集》), Lu Xun articulates a fundamental critique of constructed female identity, asserting that "women's nature contains motherhood and daughterhood; there is no wifeness. Wifeness is forced upon them, merely a mixture of motherhood and daughterhood" (Bruhn & Oliveira, 2022). Within patriarchal cultural frameworks, women's self-positioning remains intrinsically dependent upon family structures, whilst their gender consciousness undergoes systematic diminution. Literary representations predominantly construct wives as submissive and virtuous entities, their existence circumscribed by and contingent upon paternal/spousal authority.

Patriarchal societal structures institutionalized polygamous marriage systems by systematically imposing comprehensive behavioral restrictions upon wives and enforcing rigid gender roles across cultural, political, and moral dimensions. The strict codes of conduct that dictated the obedience and moral expectations of women reinforced unilateral gender control in both private and public spheres (Huang He 黄鹤, 2021, p.17).

Marital institutions undermine women's autonomy, relegating them to subordinate roles. Wang Yingqi (王英琦) challenged traditional depictions of virtuous wives and mothers in *Bei Zaocheng de Nüren* (《被"造成"的女人》) in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Evidently, the construct of *Xianqi Liangmu* (贤妻良母, virtuous wife and good mother) emerges as a manifestation of epistemic production rather than an inherent truth. This conceptual framework fundamentally challenges the necessity of women's self-definition according to prescribed matrimonial standards. This paradigmatic shift in consciousness embodies the establishment of female subjectivity.

In "Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader," editor Mary Eagleton offers a comprehensive anthology on feminist literary criticism's growth and diversity. This collection of prominent feminist theorist essays and excerpts illuminates feminist literature. Female identity, literary production, and gender analysis are covered in the anthology. Eagleton presents multiple perspectives on feminist literary theory and critiques it (Eagleton, 2010).

Following the emergence of feminist consciousness, literary discourse witnessed a proliferation of narratives depicting the dissolution of prescribed wifedom and, in extreme manifestations, spousal elimination. Fang Fang's novel (《奔跑的火光》), translated as *The Running Flame*, presents a paradigmatic example of this literary phenomenon. The protagonist Yingzhi (英芝), educated but originating from contemporary rural China, initially aspired to romantic fulfilment with Guiqing (贵清) before an unplanned pregnancy necessitated her "devaluation" through marriage. Her marital acquiescence paradoxically reinforced her in-laws' perception of her as an expedient acquisition - an unpaid domestic servant and reproductive instrument. Post-matrimonial constraints systematically eroded her autonomy, precluding both her previous economic activity through singing and her freedom of movement, effectively reducing her corporeal existence to an instrument of her husband's familial unit.

This systematic objectification manifests through multiple interconnected mechanisms. Resisting domestic confinement, Yingzhi conceptualises economic independence through musical performance and the construction of autonomous living space as means of escaping familial surveillance. However, her husband Guiqing's compulsive gambling addiction systematically depletes her earned capital. Her in-laws not only tacitly sanction but actively reinforce this behavioural pattern, normalising male privilege through the rhetorical query: "Which family's man doesn't engage in such activities?" (Fang, 2002, p.161).

When subjected to physical abuse from Guiqing, Yingzhi's attempts to seek refuge in her natal home encounter entrenched ideological barriers, exemplified in the assertion: "Once you depart this household, you become another family's member. Your position fundamentally differs from your brothers'" (Fang, 2002, p.190). This maternal counsel advocating endurance reflects deeply institutionalised gender expectations. For married women like Yingzhi, even natal families fail to provide meaningful sanctuary, reflecting their precarious positionality within both familial structures:

"Marriage fundamentally renders wives positionally indeterminate. Within both natal and marital genealogical frameworks, they remain unnamed entities - to the former, they constitute 'outsiders' inevitably destined for departure; to the latter, they represent 'foreigners' in perpetual subordination. Original filial relationships undergo systematic attenuation, while the establishment of new maternal bonds with mothers-in-law proves structurally problematic. The only avenue for relational reconstruction exists through procreation and child-rearing, redirecting emotional investment towards offspring as conjugal attachments progressively diminish" (Huang He 黄鹤, 2021, p.19).

Positioned precariously between two familial structures yet fundamentally belonging to neither, Yingzhi confronts existential challenges in isolation. Her survival strategies

encompass increasingly compromised measures: exotic performance, endurance of male harassment, and ultimately transactional intimacy with Wen Tang (文堂). Within this commercially dominated paradigm, her recognition of economic imperatives coincides with aspirations for gender equality and autonomous prosperity. However, she inadvertently reproduces traditional female patterns, positioning herself within male scopophilic frameworks, deriving paradoxical gratification from objectification. While this represents rural women's unprecedented articulation of long-suppressed corporeal desires, the implications prove problematic:

“This ostensible progress yields limited emancipatory benefits for women themselves; male hegemony remains the primary beneficiary. Exploiting Yingzhi's sexual autonomy, Guiqing secured matrimonial advantage whilst her male colleagues freely objectified her as a commodity, collectively precipitating her trajectory towards tragic resolution” (Shi Wanpeng 石万鹏, 2002, p.77).

While commercialisation ostensibly presents rural women with novel pathways for lifestyle exploration, it simultaneously subjects them to more pervasive market logic. Their existential challenges assume unprecedented dimensions, as Dai Jinhua (戴锦华) critically observes:

“As primary subjects of commercialisation's impact, women simultaneously function as agents and objects of China's modernisation processes. The commodity society not only increasingly reveals its inherent patriarchal foundations but necessarily reconstructs value systems with women's subordination as its fundamental prerequisite and sacrificial component” (2007, p.375).

Even when rural women like Yingzhi successfully navigate urban transition, their occupational options remain circumscribed within menial labour or sexual commodification frameworks. This phenomenon's structural foundations lie in the profound urban-rural dichotomy and systemic economic inequalities. Within this framework, rural regions face increasing marginalisation while bearing disproportionate developmental costs amidst urbanisation and market expansion pressures. This binary socioeconomic structure effectively renders rural populations, particularly women, as voiceless subjects incapable of autonomous expression, positioning them as multiply marginalised “others.” For rural women like Yingzhi, this constitutes a dual othering - marginalisation within already marginalised populations - presenting exponentially complex survival challenges.

Consequently, despite Yingzhi's persistent efforts, her circumstances remain structurally immutable; aspirations for destiny transformation manifest as unilateral fantasy. Although contemporary discourse has nominally introduced gender equality concepts to rural contexts, ostensibly granting women occupational mobility, the hermeneutic authority over “gender equality” remains firmly within patriarchal control. This nominal equality, rather than achieving genuine female emancipation, paradoxically provides contemporary males with rhetorical mechanisms for evading traditional responsibilities.

Yingzhi's husband exemplifies this manipulation of egalitarian discourse to rationalise female exploitation: “Contemporary society has transcended traditional expectations of male

economic provision. In this transformed social paradigm, gender equality dictates that capable women should generate income; men lacking such capabilities can manage domestic finances” (Fang, 2002, p.170). While modern “gender equality” discourse superficially provides Yingzhi opportunities for autonomy and self-actualisation, Guiqing parasitically exploits her labour, emerging as the primary beneficiary of ostensible gender equality and female independence.

More problematically, while benefiting from modern social frameworks, Guiqing simultaneously maintains traditional patriarchal authority, asserting familial dominance and proprietorship over Yingzhi. When she challenges his authority, he employs physical coercion, demonstrating complete disregard for her autonomy. As Shi Wanpeng (石万鹏) critically notes, “They adeptly deploy both traditional doctrines and contemporary rhetoric to systematically oppress and exploit women” (2003, p.61).

Following cumulative psychological trauma, Yingzhi’s suppressed rage manifests in desires for violent expression - screaming, self-harm, and metaphysical questioning of gender inequity. Ultimately, under the dual pressures of feudal patriarchal structures and modern commercial imperatives, she experiences progressive marginalisation culminating in the extreme act of spousal immolation. The tragic consequences extend beyond intended targets - her mother’s death during attempted intervention, familial destruction, and her own subjection to legal sanctions - illustrating the devastating ramifications of systemic oppression.

Fang Fang’s authorial stance towards Yingzhi exhibits profound complexity. The narrative demonstrates acute awareness of socio-cultural mechanisms of female oppression, expressing profound empathy for Yingzhi’s tragic trajectory. This consciousness manifests explicitly through Yingzhi’s articulation: “Despite decades of gender equality rhetoric, women invariably bear disproportionate suffering, with female complicity in their own subordination... they constitute humanity’s most profoundly disadvantaged demographic” (Fang, 2002, p.191). The text acknowledges both the protracted nature of female emancipation and its fundamental significance in social evolution.

Simultaneously, the narrative maintains critical distance from Yingzhi’s extreme methodological choices. Her singular focus on economic autonomy ultimately facilitates moral degradation, while her rejection of intellectual development results in strategic limitations. The narrative’s denouement - Yingzhi’s choice of extra-legal resistance despite available institutional recourse through her brother’s police intervention - reveals Fang Fang’s nuanced engagement with female predicaments. This complex portrayal demonstrates both profound empathy for systemic female oppression and critical examination of individualistic resistance strategies, ultimately manifesting sophisticated feminist consciousness.

Simultaneously, the narrative maintains critical distance from Yingzhi’s extreme methodological choices. Her singular focus on economic autonomy ultimately facilitates moral degradation, while her rejection of intellectual development results in strategic limitations. The narrative’s denouement - Yingzhi’s choice of extra-legal resistance despite available institutional recourse through her brother’s police intervention - reveals Fang Fang’s nuanced engagement with female predicaments. This complex portrayal demonstrates both

profound empathy for systemic female oppression and critical examination of individualistic resistance strategies, ultimately manifesting sophisticated feminist consciousness.

2. Female Memory: Reconstructing Matrilineal History in Contemporary Chinese Literature  
Virginia Woolf's reflection on the lack of maternal representation in male-authored narratives remains highly relevant: "What record of our mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers remains except tradition? One was beautiful; one had red hair; one was kissed by a queen. Beyond their names, marriage dates, and number of children, we know nothing" (Woolf, 1990, p.398). This astute observation powerfully elucidates how mothers have been rendered obscure in historical records.

Modern Chinese literature marginalizes and objects to women, according to English-language studies. Traditional narratives portray women as passive and bound by patriarchal norms, according to Amy D. Dooling in *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China. Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels* criticizes women's objectification and sexualization as non-humans. These analyses demonstrate society's marginalization of women's voices by denying female characters' subjective desires and psychological depth (Dooling, 2005).

In the 1990s, female writers responded to this historical erasure by presenting powerful family portraits imbued with subtle yet abundant emotional depth. Through fragmenting and reimagining history, they infused it with poetic significance. These works reveal traces at history's margins: female existence and narrative desires obscured by patriarchal culture and ideology, often overlooked by new historical novels. Their narratives demonstrate women's sense of destiny, internal growth, and spiritual trauma, allowing readers to traverse temporal tunnels to witness female resilience and spiritual strength.

Jiang Yun's *Lishu de Qiutu* (《栎树的囚徒》), translated as *Prisoner of the Oak*, exemplifies this reconstruction through its innovative narrative structure, in which different generations of women - Tianju (天菊), Fan Suli (范苏柳), He Liandong (贺莲东) - take turns narrating their stories. The interweaving narratives from different "generations" naturally connect family historical events and provide temporal continuity. Chen Guihua (陈桂花), as the first-generation lighthouse figure, demonstrates remarkable dignity when confronting the Nanyang Prefect about his son's whereabouts, leading to her eyes being gouged out. When bound back to the county town, she commits suicide by jumping into the Yi River:

"My grandmother Chen Guihua flew away, plunging into the Yi River... like a dancing golden leaf, like a passionate bird, like a fish returning home. Grandmother returned to her river home, merging with the Yi waters, flowing eastward, surging eastward, rushing toward the horizon" (Jiang, 1996, p.62).

Chen Guihua's tragic yet poetic death represents her pursuit of freedom and dignity, symbolizing female power and spirit in Puhu (朴园), influencing subsequent generations' self-determination. The family's second-generation woman Duan Jinchai (段金钗) chooses opium suicide after suffering her husband's betrayal and son's early death:

“When they found her body the next day, she was smiling distantly, the fragrance of opium would long mask the odor of death. Outside, the sunlight was like brocade. The women in our family were destined to die on perfect days. Two hundred li away, peonies bloomed unfailingly in Luoyang. Six hundred li away, azaleas bloomed unfailingly on Yangshan. Peonies and azaleas called to each other across the distance, bidding her farewell” (Jiang, 1996, p.104).

Fan Suli’s mother Guan Langyu (关蕙玉), witnessing Puhu’s decline after observing female family members’ downfall and destruction, chooses to hang herself:

“She hung from the beam in the west room, tall as a tree. She hung herself at the doorway of an era. Her wedding clothes, with their flying butterflies and blooming peonies, held a frozen kind of liveliness, a fossilized celebration. Every flower petal was filled with lead, butterfly wings bore the weight of thousands of jun. She departed with this never-returning celebration. She died for it. The rising sun broke through the window, shining on her, making her appear like a bleeding wound in this fresh morning” (Jiang, 1996, p.211).

Although life and death represent the universal fate of all beings, in Chinese culture, death remains a taboo subject. While new life’s arrival invariably elicits undisguised joy, death typically evokes fear and pain. However, in Jiang Yun’s writing, “death” is transformed and acquires a magnificent beauty, rendered as an exquisite ritual through evocative imagery - “dancing golden leaf,” “passionate bird,” “returning fish,” “azaleas,” “peonies,” and “butterflies.” When these women die, nature itself seems to celebrate, welcoming beautiful and strong women back to its embrace. The text deliberately blurs or obscures boundaries between reality and fantasy, present and history, creating a narrative style resembling an intricate maze of flowers and vines, allowing movement between reality and fantasy to traverse between present and history. Through death, the women of Puhu are transformed into immortals, returning to their mythical world of dreams.

He Liandong, representing the final generation of family women, remains consistently a clear-eyed realist, demonstrating kindness and inclusiveness. When her husband brings home a young redheaded girl, she doesn’t choose suicide for revenge but instead takes her children to live in the Baiguo An (白果庵), planning to support them by becoming a primary school teacher. When the era’s tide arrives and the family faces disintegration, she becomes the family’s spiritual pillar. When her children and nephews attempt to fervently integrate into the era, she soberly tells the next generation: “Child, you have no connection to this era” (Jiang, 1996, p.213). Meanwhile, she maintains the most clear-headed survival strategy:

“In an age most suited to fantasy, she refused to fantasize, maintaining the simple principle of reaping what you sow on ground fertile for fantasy. She never fantasized about integrating into this new era, becoming its master. She recognized with absolute clarity her status as a ‘sojourner.’ She carefully found her mustard-seed-sized position at the edge of the world and the era, clinging to the reef like a waterside creature, avoiding being swept away by the surging currents and whirlpools of the era” (Jiang, 1996, p.218).

From that day forward, she becomes a self-sufficient laborer - working as an accountant at a recycling station, diligently maintaining the family’s livelihood while caring for Fan Suli, who had fallen into difficulties due to an accident, and other family members. Even when family

members distance themselves from her for self-preservation, she maintains warmth, generously taking in Tianju, demonstrating her broad-mindedness and selflessness. However, to protect Gengchun (耕春), her husband's illegitimate son whom she raised, during the "Hong Bayue" (红八月), she unhesitatingly chops off her finger to remove a ruby ring stuck due to rheumatoid arthritis. Finally, she too fails to escape the family women's fate of self-mutilation and self-harm.

In Puhu, each woman lives authentically, infusing the place with life through their love, hate, joy, and sorrow. Their stories accumulate layer upon layer, weaving a family history rich in melancholy and emotional depth. Chen Guihua's death at the family history's source carries heart-wrenching beauty, her fate colored with romantic hues, while He Liandong stands at the other end, symbolizing the tenacity and greatness of female survival, her life resilient like stubborn sedge grass. These two women, one representing life's end and the other representing persistence in living, call to each other across historical currents, demonstrating the spectrum from romantic to realistic female vitality and family legend.

Wang Anyi's *Jishi yu Xugou* (《纪实与虚构》), translated as *Reality and Fiction*, is a notable work in contemporary Chinese literature. Wang uses realism and imagination to explore the complex relationship between reality and fiction in this 1993 novel (Xiao, 2008). The novel challenges traditional storytelling and literary truth by blending fact and fiction. It enhances the story and encourages critical thinking about story construction and perception. Wang Dewei's essay "Haipai Zuojia You Jian Chuanren" (《海派作家又见传人》) shows Wang Anyi's interest in uncovering lost matrilineal genealogies, unlike traditional 'family history' novels (Tu, 2021). The text begins with the mother figure, then traces through maternal relatives - the mother's aunt, third mother, mother's mother (narrator's maternal grandmother), and mother's grandmother (narrator's maternal great-grandmother) - before mentioning male ancestors.

The text's cross-narrative approach ingeniously combines the author's growth experience with family legends through alternating odd-numbered chapters recording contemporary mother-daughter conflicts and even-numbered chapters tracing family history from ancient Rouran (柔然) to the migration to Rujiawan (茹家湾). This creates a dual narrative framework spanning time and space, capturing both history's grandeur and legend alongside reality's ordinary and desolate nature.

While this structure resembles what Irigaray terms a "genealogy of women," the text reveals its own complexities as male heroes - from ancient Rouran ancestor Mugulu (木骨闾), Genghis Khan's guard, Qing officials Ru Dun (茹敦) and Ru Fen (茹夔), to great-grandfather Ru Jisheng (茹继生) - continue creating masculine history. The text's gender significance manifests through its narrative strategy: the "I" consistently narrates as a "present witness" while understanding family history alongside narrating personal growth experiences. The narrator's explicit presence as both character and author - identified as "Wang Anyi" - creates what Chen Shunxin (陈顺馨) terms particular narrative authority, being both "with-story" and "in-story" (p.47).



These works by female writers thus connect bloodlines, cultural veins, and female consciousness through writing family roots, creating innovative family ethical gender narratives. Through writing female/maternal family stories, these authors demonstrate both the persistence of female/maternal willpower and the formation of a spiritual genealogy. As Chen Biyue (陈碧月) aptly observes, they “reorder and describe women’s own historical and cultural memory from female spiritual experience” (2009, p.123). This writing approach emerges not simply as a creative choice but as a profound understanding of life based on women’s real situations and instincts, constructing a utopian world centered on women’s experiences.

### 3. Gender Politics: Power Dynamics and Private Writing in Contemporary Chinese Women’s Literature

The relationship between female writers and gendered writing remains inextricable. Despite the multiplicity of identity, perhaps no identity proves more natural and quotidian than gender: being female is both inherent to women writers and inescapable in all social practices and contexts. Gender thus profoundly constitutes how writers recognize themselves as “individuals,” becoming the deepest “inscription” in female writers’ self-recognition.

At the level of gender, how individuals become politicized forms the cornerstone for confronting and changing gender systems. This politicization manifests directly in bodily existence. Throughout human civilization, the body has been not merely a physiological entity but a direct bearer of power relations. As Foucault astutely notes at the beginning of *The History of Sexuality*, social conventions endow bodies with various cultural taboos, and he aims to reveal how discourse production and knowledge production impose these cultural taboos on bodies through historical processes (p.5). Human social attributes are established upon distinctly different bodies, with gender division of labor, social roles, and many issues in gender relations closely tied to bodies and people’s understanding of them (Foucault, 1990). The mechanism through which power shapes and manipulates bodies, as Foucault incisively explores in *Discipline and Punish*, positions the body within a framework jointly constructed by power and knowledge, where signifying practices are constrained by their dual effects (pp.210-218). This theoretical insight illuminates how female bodies have frequently been objects of strict control across different cultures and eras, where any overly free bodily expression might be viewed as a symbol of moral corruption.

Chinese women's literature changed in the 1990s with the emergence of "private writing," exemplified by Chen Ran (陈染) and Lin Bai (林白). This movement valued personal experiences and introspection over grand narratives based on collective ideologies. Wang Xiaoming (王晓明) identifies this trend as a "return to the self," shifting from collective ideologies to individual expression. This 1990s women's literature turn away from "reflection" and "root-seeking." explored personal spaces and identities. This period's works depict Chinese women's emotions, memories, and experiences in depth (Wang, 2004).

Chen Ran's 1995 novel *Private Life* (Siren Shenghuo) depicts an urban woman's private growth. Ni Niuniu (倪拗拗), the protagonist, is a shy, stubborn girl facing family conflict and parental tension. She has been an outsider in group life since her student days, with a tense but attractive sexual relationship with male teacher T and an ambiguous relationship with

female neighbor He (禾). In *Private Life*, Chen Ran challenges gender norms and shows a woman's inner world. Unlike earlier grand narratives, the novel's introspection and focus on personal experiences showed Chinese women's complexity.

Through descriptions of "the body," we easily discover Niuniu's trust and attachment to He: "I want to tell her that for years she has been the one I truly loved, I often miss her early care and affection for me, recall her intimacy and tenderness, this silent emotion growing with the passing years" (Chen, p.123). This represents a form of "sisterly affection." However, Chen Ran maintains rational distance, further expressing persistence in female subjectivity: "I don't need anyone else interfering in my life and body. I don't know what has thrown me into such terrible confusion, I don't know what to do? My wishes are caught at the cliff's edge, one step forward is the abyss" (p.123).

*Private Life*, published in 1995, carries strong autobiographical elements. Through the protagonist's description - her loneliness, obsession, non-conformity with reality, and image as a "stranger" - we can clearly discern Chen Ran's personal shadows. Moreover, the text's detailed portrayal of Niuniu's inner growth experience, through hallucinations and dreams showing two self-negating manifestations, presents the complex process of female psychological growth in multiple voices. Niuniu's spiritual journey reminds us of a Kafkaesque grotesque world, and Chen Ran herself says "I am drawn to Kafka's lifestyle and attitude, feeling extremely close in personality and thought" (Chen & Xiao, 1996, p.418).

Chen Ran's writing shows deep influence from Western philosophy and theory. In *Siren Shenghuo*, she mentions Karl Valentin's theory of "the stranger" and Kierkegaard's discussion of minorities versus majorities. Through these theoretical perspectives, Chen Ran reveals how gender is constructed and represented in cultural and social structures.

Lin Bai's *One Person's War* (《一个人的战争》, 1994) similarly depicts repressed and distorted female existence while boldly showing women's liberation through bodily self-pleasure. The text comprehensively writes about Lin Duomi's (林多米) exploration of "the body" - from a young girl's initial sexual awareness through anatomical models and charts in an attic, to understanding her body through observing childbirth and same-sex sexual play. This physical exploration is clandestine, conducted secretly behind mosquito nets, yet so alluring to her. She exposes her body in enclosed environments, pushing "self-realization" through masturbation to extremes. As Xu Kun (徐坤) aptly notes, this writing style marks "the arrival of a more determined, freer, more creative and uncompromising era of female writing" (p.64).

*A War of One's Own*, published in 1994, tells a purely female story. Lin Duomi grows up in a remote town, motherless from youth, spending an unusual childhood in a kindergarten attic. Her loneliness intensifies at Wuhan University, fostering dreams of free flight. After work, she travels to the great southwest, where an extraordinary journey to Chongqing brings sexual awakening and strong urges to "escape," changing her worldview. This represents Lin Duomi's simultaneous avoidance of and deep love for life. She is an internally strong woman, struggling tirelessly for dreams despite facing repeated challenges that lead her to feel alienated and disappointed with the outside world, ultimately falling into "self-isolation."

Private writing emerges as a conscious literary strategy, as Lin Bai elucidates: "Private writing is built on personal experience and memory. Through private writing, those personal sexual experiences once considered taboo by collective narratives are released from suppressed memory. I watch them fly back and forth, their shadows appearing marginal and strange within the collective discourse of nation, state, politics - it is precisely this strangeness that establishes their uniqueness" (Lin, 1996, p.125).

This demonstrates how women writers distance themselves from collective, male-dominated social narratives to focus on individual female experience and self-expression, marking the establishment of female consciousness. Under Chen Ran and Lin Bai's pens, women in "private" texts appear not merely as narrative objects but as subjects. Writing based on female experience becomes the foundation for women's right to speak. In patriarchal society, female expression has often been viewed as "other" rather than subjective expression.

Private writing allows women to write from first-person perspectives, placing personal experience and bodily sensations at the center, actively shaping their own bodily images and experiential narratives. However, when we position female experience within discourse systems, we discover that private writing's female experience is merely one product of discourse operation.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe*) influenced feminist discourse worldwide, including China. Focusing on female experience has shown how society positions women as the "Other" in a male-dominated world. *The Second Sex*'s introduction and translation shaped Chinese feminist thought. Chinese women writers and intellectuals seeking to express their identities and experiences relate to the work's critique of gender roles and support for feminine autonomy.

China's gender writing is political in two ways:

- Chinese women writers use their "Other" status to challenge male-dominated discourse with female-centered narratives.
- Women intellectuals are encouraged to write "As Women" to challenge patriarchal structures and reflect women's experiences.

Translation and reception of *The Second Sex* in China have been difficult. Translators and publishers have navigated complex socio-political landscapes to bring Beauvoir's ideas to China. These efforts helped Chinese society accept feminism and gender equality.

Here, "woman" carries special meaning - it refers to "women" who possess "female consciousness." Yet, viewed through Foucault's discourse theory, no a priori "female" essence constitutes truth. Within discourse systems, various concepts and definitions of "female" are merely discourse operations, constrained by various forms of power. Therefore, consistently emphasizing the uniqueness of female experience implies opposition to male experience, meaning female experience perpetually stands in opposition to male experience.

Patriarchal discourse marginalizes and subsumes women's experiences. *The Second Sex* author Simone de Beauvoir says education, literature, and myths shape women. She says girls are "conditioned by traditional female images, which they find extremely difficult to break

free from." Women's freedom and self-expression are limited by conditioning. Beauvoir's analysis highlights systemic female oppression by showing how social norms shape women's identities and experiences. She emphasizes that patriarchal standards limit women's roles and behaviors, preventing true autonomy. Society's gender inequality is criticized by feminist theories. Recognizing conditioning mechanisms can help overthrow patriarchal systems that limit women's freedom and self-realization (De Beauvoir, 1997).

Female writing thus fundamentally concerns the conscious struggle for literary discourse rights - women using their own voices to speak about themselves, their perceptions of gender relations and the world, and their feelings and thoughts about past, present, and future. In prolonged patriarchal culture, men have consistently held discursive power, both naming and interpreting, while women's existence never had the possibility of entering linguistic order.

With the spread of feminist theory and development of female consciousness, women writers have opened new chapters of self-writing. However, this writing style has not completely secured discursive rights for women. These female discourses often merely formally transform male centrality into female centrality, still imitating concepts and behaviors that once appeared in male discourse. The reshaping of female discourse is prominently manifested in textual structure innovation, such as using poetic language and exploring novel structures, with these intuition-based female discourses presenting characteristics of "yiyu" (呓语, delirium) and "xuanxie" (宣泄, catharsis). Although discourse form innovation reflects women's self-examination, it still fails to completely capture women's living reality authentically. As women writers' horizons broaden and thinking deepens, they become increasingly expansive and unwavering on their journey of self-discovery.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates how female consciousness in 1990s Chinese women's literature manifested through sophisticated negotiations with power structures, revealing complex strategies of resistance and transformation. Through examining mother-daughter relationships, marriage dynamics, historical memory reconstruction, and personal narrative, this research reveals how women writers systematically challenged patriarchal discourse while establishing new forms of female subjectivity.

The analysis of literary texts through Foucault's theoretical framework reveals power's operation at multiple levels in women's writing. In mother-daughter relationships, power functions both as a mechanism of patriarchal reproduction and as a potential source of resistance. The texts show how mothers can become intermediaries of patriarchal authority while simultaneously creating possibilities for alternative female genealogies. The treatment of marriage in these works exposes how power operates through both traditional constraints and modern discourses of equality, creating what Foucault terms "new regimes of truth" about gender relations.

Women's reconstruction of historical memory represents a crucial intervention in patriarchal discourse. By rewriting family histories from female perspectives, authors like Wang Anyi and Jiang Yun create what Irigaray envisions as "female genealogy," establishing alternative ways of understanding and recording history that privilege female experience. This process of

reconstruction not only recovers silenced voices but also establishes new modes of historical narrative that challenge male-dominated historiography.

The emergence of personal writing and body narratives marks perhaps the most significant contribution of this literary movement. These intimate narratives, as exemplified in works by Chen Ran and Lin Bai, demonstrate how women writers transformed personal experience into political expression. Through what Cixous terms “writing the feminine,” these authors created new discursive spaces where female subjectivity could emerge outside patriarchal frameworks.

This research advances feminist literary theory by revealing how Chinese women writers of the 1990s developed distinctive strategies for articulating female consciousness within specific social and historical contexts. Their works demonstrate that resistance to patriarchal power operates not merely through direct opposition but through the creation of alternative discourses and modes of expression. This understanding contributes to broader discussions about how literary innovation intersects with social transformation and gender consciousness in contemporary society.

Future research might examine how these literary strategies have evolved in response to changing social conditions and new forms of gender politics. Additionally, comparative studies could explore how these Chinese literary innovations relate to similar developments in other cultural contexts, contributing to our understanding of global feminist literary movements.

## References

- Barlow, T. E. (2004). *The question of women in Chinese feminism*. Duke University Press.
- Chen, R. (1995). *Siren shenghuo* [私人生活; Private life]. Writers Publishing House.
- Dai, J. (2007). *Shedu zhi zhou: Xin shiqi zhongguo nüxing xiezuoyu nüxing wenhua* [涉渡之舟 : 新时期中国女性写作与女性文化; The boat of fording: Chinese women's writing and women's culture in the new era]. Peking University Press.
- Fang, F. (2002). *Benpaode huoguang* [奔跑的火光; Running flames]. In Sainia (Ed.), *Guifuren* [贵妇人; The lady] (pp. 137-242). Xinjiang People's Publishing House.
- Felski, R. (2003). *Literature after feminism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon Books.
- Irigaray, L. (1985). *This sex which is not one* (C. Porter & C. Burke, Trans.). Cornell University Press. Retrieved from: <https://archive.org/details/thissexwhichisno0000irig>
- Jiang, Y. (1996). *Lishu de qiutu* [栎树的囚徒; The prisoner of the oak tree]. Huacheng Publishing House.
- Li, X. (2017). *Nüxing wutuobang: Zhongguo nüxing/xingbie yanjiu ershi jiang* [女性乌托邦 : 中国女性 / 性别研究二十讲; Female utopia: Twenty lectures on Chinese women/gender studies]. Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Lin, B. (1994). *Yige ren de zhanzheng* [一个人的战争; One person's war]. Writers Publishing House.

- Lin, B. (1996). *Jiyi yu gerenhua xiezu* [记忆与个人化写作; Memory and personalized writing]. *Huacheng* [花城], 5, 125.
- Lin, X. (2003). *Huangye zhong de nüti: Zhang Ailing nüxing zhuyi piping* [荒野中的女体 : 张爱玲女性主义批评; Female body in wilderness: Feminist criticism of Zhang Ailing]. Guangxi Normal University Press.
- Liu, C. (2007). *Bei jiangou de nüxing: Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shehuixingbie yanjiu* [被建构的女性 : 中国现代文学社会性别研究; The constructed women: Research on social gender in modern Chinese literature]. Qilu Press.
- Lu, X. (2014). *Eryi ji* [而已集; And that's all]. Beijing United Publishing Company.
- Shi, W. (2002). *Xin shafu ji: Jiedu Fang Fang de xiaoshuo Benpaode huoguang* [新杀夫记 : 解读方方的小说《奔跑的火光》; New wife-killing story: Interpreting Fang Fang's novel Running flames]. *Contemporary Literary World* [当代文坛], 3, 76-77.
- Shi, W. (2003). *Xianshi yizhong: Shangyehua shidai de xiangcun nüxing* [现实一种 : 商业化时代的乡村女性; A kind of reality: Rural women in the era of commercialization]. *Journal of Jinan University (Social Sciences)* [济南大学学报(社会科学版)], 4, 59-62.
- Wang, A. (2002). *Liushui sanshi zhang* [流水三十章; Thirty chapters of flowing water]. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Zhang, J. (1992). *Dangdai nüxing zhuyi wenxue piping* [当代女性主义文学批评; Contemporary feminist literary criticism]. Peking University Press.
- Zhang, J. (2011). *Wuzi* [无字; No words] (Vol. 1). People's Literature Publishing House.
- Zhang, J. (2011). *Wuzi* [无字; No words] (Vol. 3). People's Literature Publishing House.
- Widmer, E. (2020). *The Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth-Century China* (Vol. 268). Brill.
- Plaks, A. H. (Ed.). (2014). *Chinese narrative: Critical and theoretical essays*. Princeton University Press.
- Guo, L. (2010). *Tales of self empowerment: reconnoitering women's Tanci in late imperial and early twentieth-century China* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa).
- Hayhoe, R. (2017). *China's universities, 1895-1995: A century of cultural conflict*. Routledge.
- Zheng, T. (2021). *Self-closure through self-disclosure: rethinking "women's literature" in 1990s China*. McGill University (Canada).
- Jacobs, A. (2007). The Potential of Theory: Melanie Klein, Luce Irigaray, and the Mother-Daughter Relationship. *Hypatia*, 22(3), 175–193. doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2007.tb01096.x
- Biana, H. T. (2020). Extending bell hooks' feminist theory. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(1), 13-29.
- Zhou, J. (2010). *Interpretation of Female Images in Chi Li's Novel You Are a River (《你是一条河》)*. *Journal of Sichuan University of Science & Engineering: Social Science Edition*, (6), 84-87.
- Ostrovsky, N., & Prokof'eva, R. (1964). *How the steel was tempered* (Vol. 1). Progress Publishers.
- Foucault, M. (2019). *Power: the essential works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*. Penguin UK.

- Wei, Y. (1999). *Femininity and mother-daughter relationships in twentieth-century Chinese literature*. State University of New York at Stony Brook.
- Li, Y. (2006). Positioning Women in History. *国際基督教大学学報 3-A, アジア文化研究*, (32), 75-87.
- Kutcher, N. (2000). The fifth relationship: Dangerous friendships in the Confucian context. *The American Historical Review*, 105(5), 1615-1629.
- Huang, C. Y. (2021). *More than Friends: Gender, Space, and Interpersonal Relations in Medieval China, 3rd–10th Centuries* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania).
- Sen, C., & Daniluk, J. (1995). Themes in the relationships of mothers and their incestuously abused daughters: A feminist analysis. *Feminism & Psychology*, 5(1), 47-60.
- Bruhn, S., & Oliveira, G. (2022). Multidirectional carework across borders: Latina immigrant women negotiating motherhood and daughterhood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 84(3), 691-712.
- Eagleton, M. (Ed.). (2010). *Feminist literary theory: A reader*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Dooling, A. (2005). *Women's literary feminism in twentieth-century China*. Springer.
- Xiao, J. (2008). Can she say no to Zhang Ailing? Detail, idealism and woman in Wang Anyi's fiction. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17(56), 513-528.
- Tu, H. (2021). Left melancholy: Chen Yingzhen, Wang Anyi, and the desire for utopia in the postrevolutionary era. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 33(1), 122-160.
- Foucault, M. (1990). The history of sexuality: An introduction, volume I. *Trans. Robert Hurley*. New York: Vintage, 95, 1-160.
- Wang, B. (2004). *Illuminations from the past: Trauma, memory, and history in modern China*. Stanford University Press.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1997). *The second sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Vintage Books.