RECLAIMING THE FEMALE BODY: DISSOCIATING REPRODUCTION FROM CONFUCIAN AND SOCIALIST PATRIARCHY IN 1980’S CHINESE WOMEN’S LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Hu Xin’s “Four Women of Forty” and Lu Xing’er’s “The Sun is Not Out Today” as examples of efforts by 1980’s women writers to dissociate traditionally “feminine” qualities of nurturing, love, and motherhood from patriarchal demands driven by revolutionary forces and traditional forces.

This dissociation is similar to one represented by Henrik Ibsen’s character Nora, appropriated by May 4th writers in early 20th century China to encourage a realization of female individualism. Steering away from initial radical modes of writing, post-Mao literary trends urge for reconciliation of women with their biological roles. Some Western feminists believe emphasis on these roles trap women within traditional stereotypes. However, further analysis of 1980’s Chinese women’s literature reveals that the call for patriarchal overthrow continues within a context presenting solutions to the issue of balancing social responsibility and biology by achieving human status. This thesis is part of ongoing gender literature evaluation and will lead to a revised understanding of the goals of 1980’s Chinese women’s writing within its social context.
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CONCLUSIONS
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On the surface, it may seem that Chinese post-Mao female authors reinforce traditional stereotypes about Chinese women. Indeed, it seems that the theme of the “good wife and virtuous mother” made a comeback in post-Mao Reform years, especially in dramas, novels, and plays (Ming and Qi, 1999:3). Additionally, female authors like Wang Anyi, Tie Ning, Lu Xing'er, Hu Xin, and Zhan Rong, writing during the 1980’s tend to avoid feminist labels, seeking only recognition for literary ability on an equal playing field with men. Post-Mao authors also reject the conventional struggle against patriarchy outlined by Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, and especially the violent antagonism expressed against males in 1930’s author Ding Ling’s stories. They instead embrace the theme of unconditional love in the tradition of 1930’s author Bing Xin (Ming and Qi, 1999:2). The summation of these factors leads some Western feminists to believe that writing from this era promotes ideas that trap Chinese women within the home. Viewing reproduction as the issue central to women’s life goals without other desires is certainly a reversal of any feminist revolution in history. However, deeper analysis of stories published by women in the 1980’s, Hu Xin’s “Four Women of Forty” and Lu Xing’er’s “The Sun is Not Out Today,” indicates that these stories primarily feature women’s ideological struggles to claim selfhood. Far from being old-society housewives, the protagonists are strong, independent women who dissociate female values from patriarchal attachments. These women address issues pertinent to everyday, middle-class urban women regarding happiness in marriage, balancing family and career, and facing dual-pronged forces of oppression in Confucian patriarchal beliefs as well as Socialist policies restricting individual desire and family planning. The stories raise awareness about female suffering and loss of identity, and how to regain female identities. The stories’ protagonists’ happiness coincides with natural feminine characteristics in love and motherhood, but in such a way that they reclaim control of those characteristics from men. Although men remain vital parts of their lives, they act only as constructive forces.

These stories were chosen for their similarity in juxtaposing women trapped in feudalistic constraints to women breaking free of patriarchal demands using qualities considered naturally specific to females. The stories will be presented against a feminist reading of Henrik Ibsen’s play “A Doll’s House”
to indicate the common spirit the two stories carry with the original Chinese May 4th Movement for women’s independence. They will also be analyzed within a framework of the authors’ essays on gender. Their essays explore the idea of achieving humanity in a unique Chinese correlative context with philosophical analysis on Western and Eastern humanism by Ames and Hall.

This thesis’s background section in Chapter 1 will introduce the cultural and political context of Chinese sexism as it influences the post-Mao era, comparing traditional forms of oppression to revolutionary forms. “Traditional” forms follow the first social organizational structures in civilization, through Confucian doctrines essential for understanding the ingrained effect of thousand-year enforced cultural patriarchy. “Revolutionary” forms are addressed in Nationalistic dialogue treating the woman’s issue as an indicator of societal conditions and the eventual institutionalized Socialist patriarchy.

Chapter 2 introduces Chinese literary feminist themes connecting 1920’s radical feminist writing to 1980’s women’s writing follows, outlining first the idealized feminist revolution in Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House” and two schools of thought led by Xie Bing Xin and Ding Ling. This offers some context for traditions in Chinese literary feminism where 1980’s women writers will expand upon ideas of emancipation previously established in the 20’s and 30’s.

Chapter 3 seeks to refute the theory that 1980’s women’s writing solely focuses upon promoting feminine stereotypes. It investigates the portrayals of invasive patriarchal forces of the Chinese state and Chinese culture in Hu Xin’s in “Four Women of Forty” and in Lu Xing’er’s “The Sun is Not Out Today.” Furthermore, it brings to light the themes of emancipation expressed in 1980’s Chinese women’s writing common to those expressed in the Chinese enlightenment. The stories feature women enmeshed in the conflict between Confucian, socialist, and feminist desires, but offer outlets for women by portraying autonomous women freed from patriarchal demands while simultaneously reclaiming their femininity.

Chapter 4 delves into the authors’ perspectives as recorded in essays on gender, revealing their weight on recognizing women’s humanity as a solution to sexual equality, separating biological desire from social achievement. Contrary to belief, they are not focused exclusively on women’s issues.
The conclusion offers perspective on the implications these stories have as reflections of third wave global feminism, where literary themes are headed, and how they reflect the current society. Generalizations regarding the role of Confucianism as the sole agent of Chinese patriarchy are also addressed.

1.1 Background: A Brief Overview of Events Marking the Chinese Women’s Revolution

1.1.1 Traditional forms of oppression

The agenda of feminist movements anywhere is to combat patriarchal forces and fight for women’s rights. In China, these patriarchal forces present in two ways: one is the physical oppression of women in the institution of marriage and Confucian hierarchy. Combating this type of oppression is similar to combating sexist ideals of females as an inferior sex, and calls for revolutionary changes in the nature of second-wave feminism.

Prior to 208 AD, women were highly regarded. According to the Spring and Autumn Annals, ancient people had only a certain physical relationship to mothers and not fathers. Without marriage, polyandry was possible, and only the matriline could sustain lineages. A dramatic shift occurred as complex social organization gave rise to rigid marriage structures, including the arranged marriage, a 6-step formalized process that took power entirely out of a couple’s hands (Lee, 1986:10-16).

By the late Zhou Dynasty, the wedding ceremony had become cumbersome enough to have a strong impact on family wealth. Parents bore significant investment in the process. Social position often dictated the range of a wife’s duties, but the primary mission for women of every class was to bear a son. Later Confucian doctrine was inherently pro-natalistic, listing the failure to bear a son the greatest unfilial act: “There are three acts against xiao, foremost of which is being childless (Liu, 1998:25). Harriet Evans studies on mothers and daughters in 1990’s urban China indicates that many daughters believe children are expressions of a reciprocal duty as their motherhood makes their own mothers grandmothers (Evans, 2008:30). Margery Wolf’s 70’s study on Taiwan also said that a woman’s power depended on her place as the creator of the uterine family, especially of sons to carry on the ancestral line (Evans, 2008:188).
The direct interest in continuing the family line furthered the in-laws stake in a woman’s reproductive activity. As Hugh Baker summarizes in his study on Chinese kinship, “A man in China does not marry so much for his own benefit as for that of the family: to continue the family name; to provide for descendants to keep up the ancestral worship; and to give a daughter-in-law to his mother to wait on her and be, in general, a daughter to her” (Baker, 1979: 42-43). The husband/wife relationship was placed low on the scale of priorities, while the parent/child relationship was considered very important. Given a cultural situation where there was expected to be little communication between the sexes, it followed that the parent/child relationship affecting the daughter-in-law most in everyday life was going to be that with her mother-in-law1 (Baker, 1979:43).

In-laws controlled everything to the extent that the woman was not allowed to own personal property or savings; her possessions and gifts were dealt with upon the decision and whim of the in-laws (Lee, 1983:22). The force of patrilocal marriage that exiles them from their natal family and places them into the power of an alien one is considered one of the primary reasons for discrimination against girls that leads to further deterioration of women’s status even today (Croll, 2000:18).

Aside from a general lack of rights and status, oppression against women developed further in the forms of widow chastity, female infanticide, and footbinding. During the Song and Ming dynasties, writers insisted that women should die of starvation rather than repudiate chastity, preventing widow remarriage. Women who committed suicide for the sake of chastity were celebrated as martyrs, and shrines and monuments were erected by the government to promote the women as models of behavior

1This phenomenon is also represented by gifts of peanuts and other symbolic fruits during weddings, puns off the double meaning of seeds, and the wishes “may you have a hundred sons and a thousand grandsons (Baker, 1979:4). Extreme pressures are still exerted upon post-90’s women to marry and have sons for the sake of filial piety. This power is so strong that not having children is not an option; in one instance, a professed lesbian woman’s parents fully expected her to marry and give birth regardless of sexual preference, and she also expected to follow through as part of her reciprocal duty to her parents (Evans, 2008: 172).
Female infanticide was on the rise during the Ming and Qing, and often enforced by families without the mother’s choice (Lee, 1983:91). Female infanticide was also a method of limiting family size in the interest of resources (Baker: 1979:3), especially as and bridal gifts increased in expense. This behavior has morphed into sex-selective abortion. Use of ultrasound technology to determine the sex of an infant is banned, but is still rampant with the rising sex ratio inequalities under the One-Child policy (Croll, 2000:56).

Footbinding is the symbolic flagship of Chinese women’s oppression. It was theorized that Emperor Li of south Tang in 907-960 AD designed a shoe for his concubine to wear as she danced. Women’s feet were around 6 inches in this time period; after the Yuan conquered China, the foot size was reduced to 3 inches in the “golden lotus” form. Footbinding among the wealthy became a symbol of social status. People considered footbinding a basic privilege for people except for beggars, and became a criterion for matchmakers when arranging marriages. The process itself could kill girls by infection and broke their feet. Women could not walk outside of their homes without a maid’s help, enforcing faithful conduct. The practice itself was enforced by mothers binding daughters’ feet for fear of rendering them unmarriageable (Lee, 1983:95-101). In 1878 American missionary Young J. Allen began advocating for natural feet, and the anti-footbinding movement gathered momentum. Western educated writers and journalists began to promote women’s development and potential in the interest of the nation (Lee, 1983:112). It was during this era of Western exposure and nascent Nationalist sentiment that Chinese feminism was born.

National turmoil in the 1920-40’s provided an incentive to place feminist agendas on the political table. Liberation of the country using science and individualism after the disillusionment wrought by the 1911 Revolution drove cultural movements like the May 4th Movement forward. The condition of women became one of multiple indicators for the state of the nation, and accordingly, many male authors including Chen Duxiu, one of the eventual founders of the Chinese Communist Party, and Lu Xun, in stories such as “My Views on Chastity,” decried cannibalistic, self-destructive Confucian practices, especially the senseless oppression of women (Lu, 1918).
Some intellectual philosophers and women educated abroad pursued gender equality in light of humanity’s inherent properties, but these concerns took a backseat to the country’s dire situation. Socialist ideas also promoted mobilizing women, as Lenin wrote: “There can be no socialist revolution, unless a vast section of the toiling women takes an important part in it…It has been observed in the experience of all liberation movements that the success of a revolution depends on the extent to which women take part in it” (Lenin, 1918:11-13). In China, these ideas were adopted by the All China Women’s Federation, lasting through the 80’s, exemplified in phrases such as, “women are a great revolutionary force” and “class struggle is the motivating force of social change” as well as “the key to women’s emancipation is entry into social production” all support the idea that women’s emancipation was only one part and subordinate to the revolution. The Communists had reduced women’s oppression into class struggle. Policies towards women were part of broader socio-economic and political strategies (Croll, 1983:17).

In 1950 the Communist government implemented a new Marriage Law, a radical abolishment of concubinage, arranged marriage, and an implementation of women’s property and divorce rights, as well as children’s rights, a massive step forward from 1930’s Nationalist policies that retained concubinage and withheld divorce rights (Croll, 1978:157) Real backlashes, however, hindered actual realization of equality; women were killed by husbands or mothers-in-law for resisting traditional conventions (Kazuko, 1989:186). For total emancipation, not only economic reform was required, but also a change in consciousness; in response, the government initiated a propaganda campaign in the countryside after land reform was completed. Despite this, tremendous cultural inertia persisted as son preference, kidnapped child brides, uneven labor distributions, and a lack of female representation in the CCP government are still issues today (Croll, 1983, 2000, Stacey, 1983, Xinran 2002).

Witte’s “Transformation of Attitudes” (p. 331) reveals that most of the May 4th writing was done by men, who comprised the majority of radical feminists in China. This may be a reason why the woman’s issue and family transformation was still subordinate to political discourse. Also, a bifurcation occurred where Confucian doctrine became stronger in rural areas, whereas it lost hegemonic status with the urban elite (Stacey, 1983:102).
1.1.2 Patriarchy in Revolution: State Forces in the Household

_Suppression of Sexuality in Maoist China_

Not only was the women’s revolution incomplete, but revolution itself robbed women of an independent voice. It took precedence over gender as the solution to all inequalities, representative only of class struggle. During the 1950’s-1970’s, revolution itself enforced a new form of oppression on sexual identity and human individuality for not only women, but both sexes.

The socialist government’s war against petit bourgeois behavior began with a positive reflection by many urban women that “women no longer needed to trade sexual attractiveness for economic security” (Honig and Herschatter, 1988:42). Women and men dressed the same and worked outside the home; political campaigns demanded plain, austere clothes to show identification with the masses. In the interest of equality, sex no longer featured in self-identification³.

As Xinran describes from her personal account as a young girl growing up in that era, “There was little in either cut or color to distinguish Chinese women’s clothing from men’s […] Make-up, beautiful clothes and jewelry only existed in banned works of literature (Xinran, 2002:202). Hui Wu describes a personal experience in 1966 when she was warned away from wearing flowery, summer clothes by a middle aged woman for fear of persecution by Red Guards (Wu, 2005:222). High heels and lipstick were confiscated or smeared all over their bodies as women were paraded down streets by Red Guards for owning ‘foreign goods’ (Xinran, 2002:200).

³It is important to note that although sex was not part of self identification, special arrangements were made by the Women’s Federation to provide allowances for menstruation, pregnancy, and breastfeeding. Women were urged not to overexert themselves physically on the same level as men (Croll, 1978: 263-265). This may have contributed to some of the labor divisions or “light work” characterized by service or textile industries.
For women especially, immodest behavior and low-cut clothing implied loose morals; young women were educated to protect their chastity until marriage, and then after their husbands died, reinforcing a traditional view on female chastity. Likewise, even marital sex was a taboo topic, as an aspect of personal life; this also reflected an older reticence on the topics of puberty and sexual self-awareness (Honig and Herschatter, 1988:51-52). The CCP even set down a handbook of sexual regulations, warning against masturbation, decreeing how many times couples should have intercourse and when, and pushing people to marry late. Women’s transgressions were often more evident and easily punished (Stacey, 1983:231). Schools and families were unable and forbidden to give them even the most basic sex education. Sexual silence did not mean the absence of sexual desire or eventual recognition of natural physiological processes, but ignorance often caused physical harm. One powerful example is a letter published in a 1982 *Zhongguo Funu* [Chinese women] issue, which revealed that a 30-year-old woman, afraid to tell her mother about her period due to its shameful associations, had used unsterile rags to treat her menstruation as an adolescent and eventually became infertile from chronic gynecological infections (Honig and Herschatter, 1998:73). Xinran gives additional accounts of girls who were sexually assaulted under the premise that they were serving revolutionary causes (Xinran, 2002:185-204).

These regulations limited the writing of the time. The spirit of “free love,” courtship, and beauty were erased by the relegation of romance to the underground due to its representation of selfish desires. Many conflicts between social collective good and private interests were expressed as in Zong Pu’s story “Red Beans,” where two lovers are separated by ideology. The protagonist Jiang Mei can only seek comfort from her comrades while building her country as she reminisces over her history with the more capitalist-minded Qi Hong, who left for America. In another story “Residency Check” by Chen Ruoxi, a woman named Peng Yulian is suspected of committing adultery with a man. Peng’s husband is far away, and the entire neighborhood is on watch to police her behavior and catch her red-handed (Dooling, 2005:292-306). Very few women were able to publish women’s literature in the heavily political environment. A brief burst of criticism tumbled forth in the Hundred Flowers movement, upon which many writers were promptly persecuted.
State forces intruded directly into family planning in the interest of eugenics and the health of the nation. During the 1950’s and 1960’s, a “good socialist woman” insisted that women’s reproductive organs had a responsibility to the party-state to increase production (Evans, 2008:49). Not having children was out of the question. As the consequences of China’s extraordinary population loomed large, in 1979 the One-Child Policy was instated. The government enforced sterilizations and punished families for going over quotas. Rural peasants reacted negatively to community cadres enforcing the rule, and also fled villages. Women were abused by their families for giving birth to girls, and some removed their IUDs, refusing to pay fines and bribing officials (Herschatter, 2007:29-33). The policy came into direct conflict with Chinese pro-natalism originating from the belief that sons must carry on the ancestral line and care for elders. The One Child Policy created a major gendered side effect of increased sex selective abortion and the abandonment of female children (Croll, 2000:23-56); negotiations to the policy lowered the fines for families to have 2 children if the first was a daughter in an attempt to allow for one son. Though urban family planning slipped more easily into the one-child model, women still find themselves pressured to have one child, undergoing expensive fertility treatments, and often blamed for infertility (Herschatter, 2007:36). Women find themselves caught between two opposing forces, that of eugenics and a healthy state, and that of the Confucian demand of filial piety.

1.1.3 Reform Era Reactions

After the tumultuous Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the Four Modernizations became the focus for development. Positive contrasts were drawn to pre-revolution years, and reforms to the Marriage Law revisions increased inheritance rights and legislated against marital violence (Herschatter, 2007:18-25). However, problems created by the new system were yet to be addressed; first, the Women’s Federation laid claim to representation of all women, but answered primarily to China’s political agenda before a woman’s agenda (Barlow, 2004:258).

Whereas masculinizing roles had dominated in the Maoist years, old-fashioned protocols were returning in the Reform era. Mao revisionsists echoed Li Xiaozhang’s opinion that the Gang of Four had
mistakenly denied the special characteristics of females (Barlow, 2004:257). The reaction resulted in a rapid refeminization, which included promotion of sexual education, make-up, and a general pursuit of beauty (Honig and Herschatter, 1998: 46-55). Billboards no longer portrayed model worker women, but featured women as consumers. In Shanghai there was been a return to the curled hair and the cheong-san; now there brown haired, fair-skinned girls aplenty. Ideal definitions of femininity even adorn hospital walls, where new mothers are portrayed as sexually attractive consumers even while nursing; an unrealistic ideal according to most mothers, but nonetheless, a real social pressure (Chen and Gottschang, 2004:97).

Reformists believed that gender was a result of sexual difference, immutably scientific, and unchangeable. Thus, domestic labor, reproduction, and maintenance of the family were women’s burdens. In fact, during the reform era, women’s duties specifically as housewives and good mothers resurged from the beginning of the 19th century. An outlook on childrearing heavily reminiscent of 1920’s nationalistic motivations for healthy mothers was promoted by the All China Women’s Federation: “We must educate women with children to nurture carefully the next generation and turn their children into worthy revolutionary successors” (Croll, 1983:70). The resurgence of the woman’s role in the house was also illustrated by a village that mandated that its women work only in the home. These housewife roles have surfaced in television; in the 1991 series Yearnings, a housewife devoted herself to an uncaring husband and a crippled child. In response to the One-Child Policy of 1979, women have devoted themselves to creating the perfect children in the spirit of Margery Wolf’s “uterine family,” where the woman raises her status by birthing children (Herschatter, 2007:47-49).

In addition to the sexual divisions of labor that thrust women into traditional nurturing and domestic roles, women also earned less than men and remained severely underrepresented in leadership committees (Croll, 1978:15,55). Furthermore, woman’s double duty to the outside and to her domestic quarters overburdened themselves, noted by 1980’s Association for Women’s Studies leader Li Xiaozhang: “The anxiety of dual roles is a heavy millstone around our necks” (Li, 1988:125-35).
It is important to consider that throughout history and across cultures, peasant women have worked and handled reproductive duties simultaneously, so the view that this is a new problem is a bit elitist. Indeed, much of Chinese writing reflects only upon the urban middle and elite classes. This thesis specifically focuses on an urban point of view, but there are some important divisions between urban and rural women that should be kept in mind. To illustrate this point, an important 1960’s controversy is described in Elisabeth Croll’s book *Socialism vs. Feminism*. In the struggle between personal and societal responsibilities, many writers argued whether women should identify primarily with their sex or with their class (Croll, 1978: 306). Among females, there are indeed social disparities that produce different purposes and ideals of life. Wan Munjan, the author of a politically charged article in 1964 concluded that ‘abstract above-class’ women did not exist. In addition, Wan Munjan wrote that when physiology was emphasized for women, women became limited to speaking only on their ‘natural duties,’ which included romantic love, marriage, housework, child-bearing, and child-rearing, and were barred from speaking with authority on any other subject.

Wan Munjan’s remarks may imply that 1980’s women’s writing stayed limited to the subjects of romantic love and child-rearing because they were working within a strict political framework. Furthermore, some Western feminists see a focus on these topics as a return to traditional feminine models, strengthened by the context of Reform-era beliefs of female dependency and housewifery. The attitude of Western ethnographers studying China, such as Elisabeth Croll and Margery Wolf, disapprove of placing women in traditional nurturing roles, which perpetuate an inner-outer division of labor, locking women out of the public sphere and administrative power. However, a deeper analysis of some 1980’s women’s writing indicates that the focus on unification of an ambitions feminist consciousness with her female body has more of a therapeutic message for troubled women recovering from Cultural Revolutionary years, and ways to cope with dual demands in personal and public life.

In the 1980’s, a nationwide network of feminist scholars attempted to develop a theory of women’s liberation that would redefine the subject of Women that was nearly abandoned in the 60’s and 70’s. With the revival of this subject, the period after 1978 sparked an explosion of women’s writing. The
collective voice gave way to the subjective “I,” opening the gates for personal women’s issues, love, marriage, and family (Siyan, 2003:3). Early 1980’s writing reflected the conflicts between career and family experienced by women playing the role of both males and females at once. These conflicts led to the argument presented by Ruo Shi and others that some sexually defined roles ought to be recognized and retained while the female developed gender consciousness; however, the female should reject both exclusively masculinizing roles and old-fashioned protocols such as the virtuous wife and good mother (Ruo and Feng, 1987).

Many female writers sought to mediate between their own newfound feminine and individualistic identities while maintaining them separately from Confucian traditional forces and Communist state forces. In order to do this, they had to draw on the origins of a female identity separate from males, as human individuals. The concept of the female’s ability dissociate herself from dominating patriarchal forces hails from the 1920s-30s in a spiritual transformation initiated by protagonist Nora Helmer in the play “A Doll’s House.” The idea of elevating women to human status, presented when Nora lays claim to human responsibility outside of a woman’s responsibility, is also heavily emphasized by 1980’s Chinese authors.

Chapter 2: CHINESE FEMINIST LITERARY AWAKENINGS

2.1 Fleeing the Doll’s House: Nora’s Original Spirit of Individualism

Chinese literary feminism emerged under the heavy influence of the play “A Doll’s House” by Henrik Ibsen; Mao Dun said in 1938 that “It is no exaggeration to say that the women’s movement in the May Fourth period is nothing but Noraism,” Nora’s realization of her human responsibility alongside her duties as wife and mother (Mao, 1983: 258). Ibsen presented “A Doll’s House” in 1879 to a world more focused on Nora’s symbolic reaction to a comfortable bourgeoisie existence dominated by the silent majority than of a true feminist departure from a household. Ibsen himself denied writing on behalf of feminists at a Norwegian Women’s Rights League in 1898, setting out to accomplish a “description of humanity” (Ibsen, 1898). The play’s continuing richness nevertheless derives from new analyses
emerging that may not have been the original intent, especially the explosion of works inspired in the Chinese May 4th Movement of 1919.

The themes that arise in “A Doll’s House” are those of de-recognition of females as rational thinkers or as humans, and a departure of the female to realize her humanity. The lack of respect Torvald holds for Nora’s mind is evident throughout the story as he refers to her as a squirrel or an entertaining skylark, and consistently refers to Nora as a complete dependent. The end-scene Nora is filled with anger towards the men in her life who have kept her in the doll’s house in an anti-patriarchal stomp echoing Simone de Beauvoir’s second-wave feminism: “You and Papa have committed a great sin against me. It is your fault that I have made nothing of my life” (Ibsen, 1879: 111). To alter this, and to escape the doll’s house, she must escape Torvald, the memories of her father, and her own children. “I must try to educate myself—and you are not the man to help me do that. I must do that by myself. That is why I am leaving you” (Ibsen, 1879: 112). Torvald insists that Nora is neglecting her sacred duties to her husband and children; Nora retaliates that she has neglected a more sacred duty to herself. The two mutually exclusive principles; one cannot be attained while the other exists. There is no option but to abandon her previous identity as a mother to achieve selfhood, to abandon the 1890’s definition of “female” and become “human.”

Her decision to exit into the face of uncertainty is the key to the transformation. Her departure into the impossible modern environment where jungle law dominates, without a niche for a single woman, only enhances her existential bravery. As Durbach states in his analysis of Ibsen’s Myths of Transformation, Nora’s “new self must assume responsibility for shaping the consequences of a choice that secures her freedom at terrible cost” (Durbach, 1941:7).

Throughout time, Nora’s ultimate accomplishment has been discovering existence and bringing it into essence, nothing short of a secular miracle (Durbach, 1941:12). This theme embedded in a story of oppression and eventual confrontation was heavily imported through the filter of relevant Chinese cultural issues, by male and female authors alike. Nora’s awakening as a human being apart from her husband and family strongly paralleled the Chinese woman’s new awakening. Women in the early period of 1917-
1927 began to write “problem literature,” demanding rights as a human being and not an object. Females emerged as sentimental, private beings longing for a different life (Siyan, 2003:2). May Fourth movement literature flowered with New Heroines taking charge of their minds and lives. Women with “emancipated” hair, chopped short and freed from intricate designs, paraded in the streets; writers like Su Qing physically departed their marriages (Dooling, 2005:179-185). The spirit of Nora not only promoted fully fledged female emancipation but also opposition to oppressive cultural conventions; for example, a play by Hu Shi featured a girl named Tian Yamei who decides to marry the man of her choosing rather than follow a marriage arranged by her parents (Hu, 1919:1-9). These stories often finished with the triumphant departure or rebellion, and the reader was left to ponder the aftermath. Writers eventually realized a naïve escape could not serve as a simple solution to the woman’s issue; a single woman’s survivability in that era as well as the rippling repercussions of a quick exit became pockets of exploration.

Revolutionary era writer Feng Zi approached one facet of the post-exit world in her story “The Portrait,” exploring the fates of three men that this particular Nora, Ziwei, suddenly leaves behind. Ziwei despises the three men for living in the past, passing her portrait around, attempting to capture her image to hang on their wall (Dooling, 2005:221-222). In this representation the men and the past only represent traditional bondage within family, children, and independence; the desolate men are urged to keep pace with the reality of the times. In contrast, Lu Xun presented a 1923 lecture questioning the social reality of physical departure in “What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?” He separates the “dream” of emancipation from material reality, primarily economic leverage. Nora leaves without so much as a scarf to protect her from the cold. Likening her situation to a caged bird, the escaped bird must face predators and starvation without even the ability to fly. Citing examples of other stories where modern women end up degenerate, in brothels, or at home, he writes that Nora “is left with only two ways out: either go home, or go to the dogs” (Lu, 1923:2-3).

The Western definition of gender and its relation to humanity play a role in the reading of “A Doll’s House,” as well as the fact that the play, like many of its Chinese May 4th counterparts, was written by a man. A study by Hall and Ames comparing the Western and Eastern philosophical concepts of self
establishes that Western feminists must struggle to raise women within the boundaries of the Western concept of self. Many Western philosophies are built upon a dualistic view of women. This concept is that rational thinking is a male trait. Femaleness bespeaks a lesser human trait characterized by weaker reasoning. The female as an intelligently limited and emotionally compromised person stands on a step lower than that of the rational and high-achieving male. Therefore realization of human potential is the realization of maleness (Hall and Ames, 1998:81). However, although Hall and Ames also stress that Western women have never been denied humanity, this is not always the case. The Nora in Torvald’s eyes is sub-human, a squirrel, until she slams the door of her exit in his face. Nora herself may be quite clever, borrowing money and scheming behind her husband’s back for the thrill of independence, but she is also only a “doll” until she realizes her responsibility to her own mind and gains full human status. It remains true that Nora must exit her limited household to struggle against society to gain her reasoning skills, a traditionally male trait. She must search for a job, stay economically afloat, purchase a house, and thus acquire her own living in the men’s public world, playing by the man’s rule: failing this, she would return to subservience as Lu Xun predicted.

An alternative reconciliation between “females” and “humans” would occur in the 1980’s Chinese context. For the first time, Chinese women would be allowed to attain human status. Theoretically, the traits tied to women correlate not to sex but to cultivation of morality and self through education. Chinese women simply were barred from most methods of cultivation and were mostly denied from public roles as leaders. The idea of a female’s individual identity as a human, granting them the right to self-cultivation, would remain an influence throughout women’s writing in China when individualistic thought could be expressed. The end-goal of separation from patriarchy to reveal the female identity would be realized in two different ways. One is closer to second-wave Western feminist views of struggling against patriarchy, represented by Ding Ling, and the other is closer to the views of third-wave feminism, represented by Chinese post-Mao writers who emphasize reconciliation with feminine traits of sacrifice, love, and motherhood.
2.2 TWO LITERARY TRADITIONS OF THE CHINESE WOMEN’S PROBLEM

2.2.1 Ding Ling’s Radical Awakening

Just as two forms of patriarchy arose in 20th century China, two approaches to combating patriarchy arose in the mid-century, continuing on to post-80’s writing. One enforces a radical pursuit of individuality overthrowing the male: the other recommends an embrace of motherly love.

Ding Ling, a writer who became a fundamental force of Chinese feminism and a figure of political prominence during the socialist revolution, advocated an intense female self-awakening in the tradition of Nora, and also one declaring war with the masculine. In “A Woman and a Man,” a man has to rape his wife to clarify his exclusive sexual rights to her. Translator Tani Barlow notes that Ding Ling’s stories reduced masculinity to a matter of incomprehensible male sadism in which an abusive man seduces and betrays a “new woman” who has dared to choose him for her sexual partner and marriage to something less than prostitution, because prostitutes at least had sexual freedom. Ding Ling’s subjects are defined by their sexual drives and trace themselves back to true love, sexual ecstasy, affection, a mother’s love, fame, or happiness. However, due to both social chaos of the outside world and their own internal incoherence, they cannot learn to take what they want until it is too late (Barlow, 2004:138).

Many of her antiheroines are new women trapped in miasmic eroticism and a world where they are blocked in every aspect of achievement. These reflections often end in suicide. In “Miss Sophia’s Diary,” Sophia reflects on the pollution of her own will after an encounter with her beloved, Ling Jishi. “Why is he able to respond only to my helplessness...I even acceded to his insinuation that I try acting more feminine…I cursed him and ridiculed him secretly, even as inwardly my fists struck painfully at my heart” (Barlow, 2004:58). The Nora-like qualities of Sophia are noted by Amy Dooling, as Sophia responds to Ling Jishi’s true form, expectant of her vulnerability, with ultimate disgust and exit (Dooling, 2005). Sophia refuses to become lover to either suitor and separates her desirous self from the woman who demands sexual equality (Barlow, 2004:58). Through her, Ding Ling demands that women have independent personality; restricted by society, they must either alter it or depart from it.
2.2.2 Bing Xin’s Enduring Philosophy of Love

Ding Ling’s contemporary Bing Xin rejected radical challenges against patriarchal power. Her ideas of harmony were largely apolitical and affirmative, to the point where translator Martin Woesler has criticized her for glossing over ten years of Cultural Revolution turmoil as if they did not occur (Woesler, 2000:69). Ming and Qi attribute the return of Bing Xin’s themes in the 80’s to their nature as melds of Eastern and Western culture, not solely calls for liberation rooted in Western social traditions. This was crucial for acceptance in a Chinese nationalistic context (Ming and Qi, 1999:1-3).

Her works display Daoist themes of nature and all-encompassing darkness, reminiscent of the eternal void that came before divisions. Sunsets and mountains are often her subjects for drawing moral comparisons. In the essay “Several Pictures in My Life History,” she draws on ancient themes of goddess-worship, describing a woman with long sleeves as a lake goddess, “beautiful as peach blossoms and as cool as ice and frost” (Woesler, 2000:83). These images may seem like stereotypical standards of beauty set down by males for thousands of years, but Bing Xin implies that feminine qualities of fertility in fruit and flower symbols, as well as flexibility and fluidity in water, are natural. Ice and frost are also powerful forces that destroy crops or shatter men’s hearts. To her, women possess an innate, maternal love that is unselfish and eternal. In her “Letter to the Children No. 10,” Bing Xin portrays the mother as a protector by depicting the comfort of a mother’s embrace. In Letter No.7 she compares it to the sea, “deep, broad, and boundless” (Woesler, 2000:93). A mother’s love is given without condition or hesitation, and Bing Xin often finds herself reflecting on her mother’s embrace when she lays ill or is overseas.

She proposed the innocent heart and motherly love as remedies for the many conflicts Chinese women encountered. Suffering appears in her essays as clouds and shadows, but Bing Xin emphasizes that these are also natural: “Our life is no more formed exclusively by joy as it is exclusively by sorrow” (Woesler, 2000:133). A metaphor for the same idea appears in her first piece, “Smiles,” where she wonders, taking in the dewdrops and crisp air, that “out of the bitter rain and the loneliness of one lamplight, there could emerge such a beautiful picture” (Woesler, 2000:70). There is virtually no mention of specific grievances she holds towards men, only occasionally those in broader society. In the short
story “Boredom,” the lonely protagonist comments that she despises society’s universal selfishness and hypocrisy. The story’s pessimistic tone only changes as the protagonist approaches her home: “Near the roaring stove, her mother is sitting, pensively. Her little brother is asleep on her mother’s knee; his soft little face and his mother’s hand caressing him are gilded by the flame. This luminous little picture of happiness is framed in darkness and deep silence” (Woesler, 2000:116). The image contrasts with the vastness of snow reflecting the emptiness felt by the protagonist. There is flame and warmth between the mother and brother sitting in deep darkness, a truly ancient vision again echoing Daoist themes of natural harmony.

In the nature of Bing Xin, post-1980’s female writers promoted the idea that women’s liberation could only occur if women could reconcile their reproductive identities with their goals. Ming and Qi observe that Ding Ling’s work was the initial manifestation of an intense awakening more accepted by rebels, whereas Bing Xin’s ideas were more traditionally moderated, more compatible with both Eastern and Western culture, and thus longer lasting (Ming and Qi, 1999). The initial desire to break from traditional bondage burned as a flame in many youths, but was tempered by years spent during the Communist and Cultural Revolutionary years. This tempering is reflected not only by a great sense of oppression and disillusionment in their writing, but also a longing for women’s obliterated identities.

1980’s women’s writers were granted with the task of rebuilding a female identity with the added burden of shouldering a male’s equivalent share of production, as a result, choosing to promote natural feminine qualities, while avoiding strictly traditional definitions for women to allow for achievement of universal goals of human autonomy and self-recognition. For example, 1980’s author Hu Xin asked why there should be a universal standard for feminine beauty at all (Wu, 2010: 93). She insisted that human personalities were extremely diverse, and that females were indeed humans before females. The importance of the female as a human being is a strong theme emerging from writing during this time period. Despite the rejection of a universal female definition, or rejection of “feminism” as a category, 1980’s women have still realized a very feminist agenda of escaping oppression, reclaiming the female body from the state as well as patriarchal traditions. The separation of motherhood, love, and family—
fundamental properties of the female within the Reform era context—from males, notably in the stories “Four Women of Forty” by Hu Xin and “The Sun is Not Out Today” by Lu Xing’er, still guides the Chinese female towards a new independence within the context of thousand-year-old Chinese culture. The independence sought and achieved is the same as the human spiritual transformation that propelled playwright Henrik Ibsen’s character Nora Helmer into selfhood, inspiring a great Chinese women’s awakening at the start of the century, but in a form achievable in a world accepting of the existence of two different sexes.

CHAPTER 3: 1980’S DISSOCIATIONS FROM TRADITIONAL AND REVOLUTIONARY PATRIARCHY

3.1 RECONCILING LOVE AND CAREER IN HU XIN’S “FOUR WOMEN OF FORTY”

Hu Xin was born in 1945 in Nanchang City, Jiangxi Province. At the age of 23, during the Cultural Revolution, she was sent to Xintain Village Elementary School, 100 miles from Jingdezhen. The abrupt halt to her education and institutionalized humiliation that she experienced during this time period took their toll on her idealism, and she changed her name from Hu Qing, purity, to Hu Xin, hardship. This transition from youthful exuberance to disillusionment is reflected in Hu Xin’s characters in “Four Women of Forty,” her award-winning first story published in 1983 (Wu, 2010:79).

3.1.1 Themes of Oppression: Women Trapped by Traditional Patriarchal Forces

“Four Women of Forty” takes place in a women’s hospital where by chance, four friends from school reunite after twenty-three years of separation. Men are barred from the story in the female hospital setting, placing the story firmly within the realm of women’s literature. The four narratives featured resemble “su ku” speeches, where villagers would relate their bitterness in the Communist struggle against landlord oppression. There is an accusatory finger pointed primarily at traditional limitations on women resulting in loss of “self,” but also briefly on political campaigns, especially during the Cultural Revolution years, resulting in loss of opportunity.
Youth and age are juxtaposed to illustrate society’s victimization of the women. The characters Cai Shuhua, Qian Yehyun, Wei Lingling, and Liu Qing are unable to escape the indelible marks of age. Hu Xin herself was not far from that juncture at age 38, and in many ways, their situation reflects her own. At forty, the characters have experienced much beyond their innocent high school days, inculcated as wives, mothers, workers, and objects of institutionalized discrimination. Hu Xin establishes a contrast between the carefree past and the gray present, emphasizing the transformation of slender, bright girls to tired, aged women. Of Liu Qing, she writes, “she took first at all the exams […] She had held up her head and said, ‘I don’t see why girls can’t beat the boys!’ But after twenty years, all that fire had been spent. A pair of spectacles in yellow celluloid frames put Liu Qing’s pinched little face in sharp profile, and her thin and meager frame showed painfully through her old-fashioned cotton white shirt and blue trousers” (Xin, 1983:159). Liu Qing was once the leader of the group, wondrously advanced in her studies; now her “pinched” and “meager” frame implies weakness and years of hardship. Moreover, her excellent academic capacity led her to believe she could compete on the same level as men. Later on in the story, Liu Qing’s attitude mellows out as she turns her competitiveness into cooperativeness.

The young girls’ fiery idealism to dream far and achieve high is also illustrated as they set their standards against famous women in their fields. Yehyun bursts out with excitement: “Five years from now, I’ll be the second Pan Fengxia, the local opera queen!” (Xin, 1983: 166). A sequence of predictions and comparisons follows amongst the girls. Shuhua envisions herself as He Jiangxiu, a model spinner. Lingling sets her sights to imitate a famous obstetrician, Lin Qiaozhi. The girls hurriedly insist that Liu Qing must become a writer, but Liu Qing herself insists instead that she must settle for a village teacher’s role, like the Russian Varvara. Hu Xin reveals that the women’s realities are far from their initial dreams. Liu Qing never married or became a writer, but studied at normal school to become a teacher. Yehyun became an opera singer, but fell sharply from grace in her personal life. Shuhua was going to be the best textile spinner, but now has breast cancer and two ungrateful children failing in school. Lingling’s obstetrician license was taken from her during the Cultural Revolution, and she gave up her career to raise a family with a well-to-do researcher.
Hu Xin explores the reasons the women have for burning out by narrating their tales. The first factors are those of traditional demands on Chinese wives and mothers to place their husbands and sons before themselves. They lose their independent desires, and in turn, become dependent on their husbands power to support them. Hu Xin calls this the “duty of women” that Shuhua, Yehyun, and Lingling obey as married women.

Shuhua begins narrating her story with the proverb, “Even the hen loves her young. But to be a good mother, that’s another thing entirely.” Cai Shuhua’s career has interfered with her motherhood. Her children fail school while she works at the factory to support them; their failure in turn makes her a failed mother. Shuhua also attempts to handle her factory workload with additional loads of housework to keep her children studying. Shuhua’s husband implores her to take time off work for the children. “He reminded me that I am a mother who has overstepped the one-child quota limit—all the more reason I should spend more time on the children” (Xin, 1983:170). The state’s one-child policy compounds Shuhua’s guilt and sense of responsibility for her children; ironically, Shuhua’s husband has no consideration for his role in producing the second child. Although sterilizations could occur for males or females, abortion and IUD insertions put the onus of “contraception” on women. Shuhua’s husband also told her “that my so-called women work was at the bottom of the list. Party, government, army, workers, youth, and women—that’s the order they come in” (Xin, 1983:170). His hierarchy placing women’s work at the bottom of importance almost reflects the Confucian hierarchy placing women as subordinates. Cai Shuhua still fights for a solution to her love for Women’s Federation work and her motherhood. “I just don’t believe that you must shirk your duties as a women-work officer to qualify as a good mother” (Xin, 1983:170). This view is similar to one expressed about the desire of many 1980’s women, and women today, to seek successful careers and satisfactory family lives simultaneously, but exemplifies the impossibility of forcing women to take a double workload and succeeding in both (Croll, 1978, Wu, 2010).

In Qian Yehyun’s case, motherhood has interfered with her career. Yehyun strikes the reader as a cosmopolitan career woman full of cigarette smoke and covered in expensive clothing, never the kind to
bend to traditional demands. She has left a trail of broken marriages behind in an embittered search for love, instigated by an old poison between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law for the sake of the family line. Qian Yehyun is wholly without love and exceedingly bitter as a result: “We’ve been hearing about women’s liberation for the last hundred years, and where have we got? I suppose we’ve been elevated from men’s undershirts to his outer jacket!” (Xin, 1983:165). Yehyun’s fiery anger, directed at men, reflects some of the early sentiments expressed by Su Qing and Ding Ling.

Yehyun was a rising actress who was convinced to marry when her husband Sun offered to delay childrearing according to her career demands. Sun’s mother, however, began to harangue Yehyun. “First it was the force of tradition—continuing the line; then it turned to abuse—‘whats the good of a hen who doesn’t lay eggs?’” (Xin, 1983:172). Yehyun then gave birth to a girl and considered her duty fulfilled, but the demands continued. “Don’t forget the two thousand years of Chinese history,” Yehyun said contemptuously. “‘Beget a son; daughters do not fill that requirement’” (Xin, 1983:172). Under Sun’s pressure, she gave birth to another daughter. Yehyun resolved to stop her fruitless quest for a boy and had an operation. As a result, news spread that she had been adulterous, leading to mistrust and divorce. Sun remarried and his mother bragged about the girl’s purity and fecundity, again reflecting patrilineal values of chastity and propagation of the male line. Yehyun decided to marry the head of the work team out of spite, and was publically humiliated and beaten severely. She eventually married an elderly cadre of the Federation of Arts and Literature, and could not gain the respect of his older children.

Yehyun’s tale is full of modern promises that slip back into thousand-year-old Chinese pressures. Chastity, filial piety, especially son preference, and obeying parents-in-law all materialize like ghosts from the past to destroy Yehyun’s career aspirations. Sun’s mother’s pressure was funneled through Sun and weighed daily on Yehyun. The comparison of Yehyun to a hen laying eggs implies that Yehyun has no “self” outside of reproductive function; she does not exist outside of Sun’s patriline. A similar farm-animal analogy appears in Lu Xin’er’s “The Sun is Not Out Today” when an old woman asks Dan Ye if she is “brooding,” and additionally in Su Qing’s work as she complains that women are “cows” (Barlow, 2004). After Yehyun has an operation, assumed to be an abortion for the sake of her acting career, Sun’s
mother automatically sees it as a threat to Sun’s patriline. Yehyun’s expendability as a reproductive tool is emphasized by Yehyun’s replacement by a younger woman ensured to obey her duty to bear Sun’s sons.

Against the difficulties of balancing career and family life, some might advocate putting women entirely within the home. Hu Xin refutes this viewpoint with Wei Lingling’s story, one that represents the plight of many middle and upper-class housewives trapped within the home before they had an opportunity to breathe the outside air during the Chinese Enlightenment. Lingling appears elegant, well-dressed, and perfect, but underneath the smooth surface dissatisfaction looms; Lingling suffered a spiritual death to devote herself entirely to her family. She wonders what defines the 1980’s female, and asks, “is being virtuous wife and dutiful mother a woman’s born lot?” (Xin, 1983:176). Reform policies aimed at repositioning women as virtuous wives first and foremost and ordering women to do housework seemed to agree with the statement. Lingling disagrees: “Sacrificing oneself for husband and children is commendable, but not enough. One is imprisoned in the home” (Xin, 1983:176). Wei Lingling dropped her career as a doctor to marry Lao Muo, a successful virus researcher whose parents supplied the couple with cameras, TVs, stereos, washing machines, and numerous other technological luxuries. She takes care of her son, knits, reads, and strolls around her house. Her skin has turned soft and white, making her appear younger than her age. Her situation strongly resembles that of Nora Helmer’s, a comfortable bourgeoisie living filled with dresses, Christmas tree dressings, and tambourine dancing. Ibsen’s modern psychological emptiness and desire for existentialism echo in Lingling’s story as Liu Qing verbalizes Lingling’s affliction: “You’ve lost your soul” (Xin, 1983:177).

Lingling’s soul lay in her profession, regardless of her title and situation. She suffered from political sabotage during the Cultural Revolution, and as a result, her license as an obstetrician was revoked and she was assigned to a rural village. Despite this, she carried out a successful birth, pulling the baby out with a vacuum and then sucking out the foul-smelling amniotic fluid when it was asphyxiating. The villagers began calling her Dr. Wei out of gratitude (Xin, 1983:177-179). But these rewarding emotions are trapped in the past, and Lingling can only fall silent and recall lost happiness. Cai Shuhua tells her she is playing green leaf to support her husband’s blooming flower, not a useless or dishonorable
role. "‘But I’d rather be a wildflower myself,’ said Lingling vehemently, tears shining in her eyes, or perhaps it was the fire of her passionate longing […] ‘an old complaint goes this way: ‘There is no end to a man’s longings.’ But should people forsake their longings?’” (Xin, 1983:180). It is Lingling’s destiny to forsake her longings in her role as a housewife, but she suffers greatly. This indicates that Hu Xin also rejects traditional family models, contrary to the government-promoted female gender stereotype of a “good mother and virtuous wife” who belongs solely in the home.

Hu Xin’s rejection of traditional models also occurs when she addresses the idea of love. The three married women, Shuhua, Yehyun, and Lingling, at first show deep respect and love for their husbands by describing them with overemphasized modesty: “Cai’s pride in her husband shone through her modesty” (Xin, 1983:164). Lingling also lovingly complains about her husband’s incorrigible habits as a bookworm: “Her exaggerated complaints revealed all too clearly her deep satisfaction with him (Xin, 1983:164). Unfortunately, this affection is tainted by all-consuming dependency. Hu Xin comments that this is a problem central to many women: from the first moment they meet in a women’s hospital, “their conversation quickly turned to the subject central to ninety-nine percent of all women: husband and children” (Xin, 1983:164). Although each woman had a career, and dreamed only of their public successes in their youth, their family lives now dominated their identities. Additionally, when the others find out Liu Qing is ill, and has no husband, the other women wish to use their husbands’ workplace influences to bring Liu Qing to a better hospital, and to take her touring around the country. It is clear that she has no pillar of support or influence, so the other women take it upon themselves to provide vicarious masculine power.

3.1.2 Liu Qing’s achievement of career-family balance through pure love

From the onset, Liu Qing is set apart. She is the only woman in the group with a 2-syllable name, and the only unmarried one. Liu Qing does not have a life story for her “self” without a male partner and family. Bereft of husband and children, Liu Qing lacks femininity, which she even admits herself: “You three have done your duty as women […] which is more than I can say for myself (Xin, 1983:165). She is
not even a woman. Her awkwardness as a spinster is unparalleled by any other blunder or revelation, so much so that the group falls into embarrassed silence when they find out: “In China, old maids certainly are not honored; fashions and fads may come and go, but the state of single-blessedness has never been one of them. Poor Liu Qing—what should they say to take away the hurt?” (Xin, 1983:165). Hu Xin extends the effect of the thick atmosphere by describing the choking effect of Yebyun’s cigarette smoke. Liu Qing prepares to tell her story, but the other women wonder what happiness could exist in Liu Qing’s life as a single woman: “Her three friends sat down dubiously. What was she going to say? What could she contribute?” (Xin, 1983:181).

The paradox of Liu Qing’s formerly high achievement but exceptionally humble situation sets her apart from the other three women. Liu Qing’s rural status, like her single status, inspires pity. The other women represent factory workers, professionals, and entertainers; Liu Qing, the most refined intellectual, turned towards the simple life of a schoolteacher. Humbling descriptors border on disdain; the other women watch as: “she used the end of her shirt to wipe her glasses, and then wiped her tears with the back of her hand, just as the villagers do (Xin, 1983:185).

In the end, however, Liu Qing is the only enlightened woman. Once the academic superstar and wonder-girl, the leader of four, she still organizes the other women and rescues them when they cannot think of good proverbs for their stories. She plays the roles of pacifier and leader, the glue holding the group together. She alone transcends everyday limitations, achieving her career goals and attaining love.

Each woman began her tale with a proverb, and all were lamentations about the woman’s situation. Liu Qing’s introduction is not about women but instead the universal qualities of life and death: “What has been joy turns to ashes in the flash of a moment; nevertheless, it leaves its mark. Even so our lives, whether long or short, constantly changing, will end. As the ancients say, life and death are of paramount concern” (Xin, 1983:182). Her proverb focuses not on a solitary woman’s issue, but enters the realm of “humanity” possessed by both men and women. Men and women experience joy, sadness, pain, and death. The emphasis on common human qualities provides one major aspect of Hu Xin’s definition of womanhood. The second facet is the harmonious pursuit of noble love between men and women. This
idea appears in Hu Xin’s 1990 essay “My View on Women:” “Often, [women’s] pursuits and ideals lie in noble love. At the same time, however, yearning for romantic love does not mean depending on the male” (Wu, 2010:92). Although Liu Qing’s companions initially bear pride for their men and rely on them to help Liu Qing, they are oppressed by their dependency. The form of love in their current marriages cannot be the right type of love.

How does Liu Qing achieve liberation from traditional forms of marriage and dependence? Liu Qing’s male companion was a medical school graduate who fell into a crag and died during a rainstorm on his way to treat someone. She expresses the imagined purity of her love. “‘Did he love me? I don’t know—and do not need to know. I know that I love him. With all the force of my life. […] It was his love for the villagers that gave me inspiration, his unswerving attachment to his work that gave me strength. As I love him, I must love my work. Those poor, irregular village schools, those simple country children. My ideal rests with them” (Xin, 1983:187).

Liu Qing’s career prediction for herself has come true; she is no famous or refined writer, but a schoolteacher, just as she had planned so long ago. Perhaps avoiding comparisons to famous actresses, doctors, or spinners were unfortunately a form of recognizing her own capacity in a world with limited opportunity, but still achieving heartfelt success. In uniting her career with love and nurturing, Liu Qing has reconciled the two when the other women have sacrificed one for the other.

Additionally, by channeling her romantic love into a surrogate motherhood, she has effectively given birth and fulfilled the role of a mother. She is more successful than the over-the-biological-limit Shuhua, who cannot convince her children to study, the unwilling Yehyun who dragged her daughters into abusive and unstable families, the regretful Lingling, emptied by the loss of a career. Her loneliness at single-status is instantly erased when her real treasures greet her; they are her students, surrogate children for whom she has poured out her love. These students had rushed 20 km with their siblings to see her off. The students provided her with eggs and gifts, rushing onto the bus. Her words overflow with the magnitude of her gratitude: “When I die, I leave with you, O silent world, my last words—I have loved” (Xin, 1983:186). Thus, Liu Qing escapes enslavement through marriage or motherhood by
commemorating a man without living with him, and by raising children without bearing them. She possesses none but symbolically attains all. Her happiness stems from a representation of pure ideals un tarnished by society’s reality; the true absence of the two factors perhaps are Hu Xin’s way of expressing that these ideals cannot yet be achieved.

3.1.3 Embracing Female Qualities by Reversing Previous Limitations

As the stories of the four women of forty indicate, post-Mao China saw the rise of many career-and-family women, complicating their desires in the narrow space between family pressures and institutionalized limitations on female political achievement. What model should Chinese women follow to attain happiness? Many balancing acts either destroyed the children, the mothers, or deprived women of love. Though Hu Xin offers a solution in Liu Qing’s story, it is still a spiritual representation of ideals, because a literal translation implies cessation of true reproduction and the death of mankind.

Li Xiaojiang, a founder of the post-1980’s Chinese feminist movement and of Chinese university-level women’s studies, raised an interesting point regarding the effect of social forces in the context of anachronisms: “due to the restrictions on the kind of economic development domestic labor cannot be swiftly reduced, yet the responsibility of child rearing is still something that women must undertake […] The anxiety of dual roles is a heavy millstone around our necks, but it is one that we must continue to shoulder. This is the price we must pay for the advancement of History and women” (Barlow, 2004: 289).

Within her historical context, Hu Xin may be warning her audience not to aim too far because of strong limitations on women’s achievement created by government policy or technology. This was not to say that in the future women cannot attain their utmost, but expectations had to fit into a specific historical context. For now, she expresses the hope that women may reconcile motherhood and love with a woman’s satisfaction and gender-consciousness.

Although Hu Xin also writes that one cannot define a universal female, she believes that to secure happiness, women must embrace love. In a preface written for the 1993 reprint edition of “Four Women of Forty” titled “Women’s Footprints of Pain,” she writes that love is the only major way to realize a
woman’s dreams (Wu, 2010). This love is not the kind of all sacrificing love for children that Shuhua had, nor the spiteful love Yehyun suffered from, nor the soul-snatching sacrifice that Lingling performed to give up her true passion for a comfortable bourgeoisie existence. The purest love manifest in Liu Qing’s story is one that bolsters her own passion in teaching. To reinforce the idea that “yearning for romantic love does not mean depending on the male,” Liu Qing’s love cannot physically support her from the grave. Additionally, a woman’s happiness springs from motherhood. “The pain, dignity, and responsibility of becoming a mother are infused into her blood and heart. Just as Lu Xun wrote, “motherhood is inborn, and wifehood inculcated” (Wu, 2010:84). Hu Xin strongly believes that despite the pursuit of human independence, women should not repudiate their physical realities. She concludes that a female must have the courage to face her own limitations, which includes recognizing these desires.

Another way Hu Xin transforms limitations by altering definitions appears in the essay “A Pink Humor,” which was featured in a 1997 issue of Jinan Daily, Hu Xin calls for women to reclaim the term “little woman.” In historical context, a “little woman” is favored by men and accepted by women. The “little woman” projects the image of a little bird being petted in dependency. Hu Xin reverses the concept of a “little woman” much as feminist movements have reversed derogatory terms like “bitch” in the US (Brunell, 1998:2). Negative terminology can be reversed to represent solidarity and pride in a population’s characteristics in a rejection of an oppressive history. Hu Xin remarks that accepting the little woman means conversing confidently with the male-dominated world, despite a slight physical build; in a way, this makes her stronger. The “little woman” is criticized for speaking about trivial daily occurrences and confining herself to the dining room, delivery room, or bedroom. Hu Xin retorts that fighting in wars is not the only important duty; she seems to accept existing labor divisions as a consequence of natural female inclinations towards caring and child delivery. Hu urges women to recognize that little birds have their own beauty, and asks women to embrace their natural characteristics, not to look upon them as disadvantages (Wu, 2010: 85-86).
3.2 RECLAIMING THE MOTHER’S BODY IN LU XING’ER’S “THE SUN IS NOT OUT TODAY”

Like Hu Xin, Lu Xing’er also seeks to free women’s natural qualities from artificial male constructs. Lu Xing’er was born in 1949 and died of cancer in Shanghai in 2004. Aspiring to become a socialist hero in Mao’s revolution, she moved to Beidahuang for countryside re-education. The extreme poverty she experienced there cracked her political ideology and beliefs. After 1978, Lu became sharply disillusioned by the Cultural Revolution and began to study dramatic writing. Love in relationships displaced revolutionary spirit as topics of her works. Her short stories and novelettes explored affairs in the context of her social reality; “Under One Roof” was based on the true story of a high school teacher whose husband had an affair for years, but could not divorce because of society’s rejection of a divorced woman and her children (Wu, 2010:96). After Lu Xing’er herself divorced, she wrote even more about women’s daily lives. She began to examine career women and the female individual, knowing she had regained these after the divorce: “The loss of marriage has brought myself back, which is so important to my life. Establishing a family may not be difficult, but finding one’s self is, because many women often lose themselves and do not know how to position themselves in the family” (Wu, 2010:96).

While Lu Xing’er remains frustrated by social realities for women, she stresses emancipation from outside forces while discovering core attributes of “born women.” Solidarity and motherhood briefly unite the women waiting for abortion in “The Sun is Not out Today.”

In “The Sun is Not out Today,” the protagonist Dan Ye undergoes a transformation as she waits for an abortion in a hospital, which culminates in her decision to keep her child. Four other women, Qiu Ying, Fan Hong, Song Lizhen, and a hunchback, are present. These women’s stories represent a woman’s loss of self through marriage and motherhood, much like the women’s stories in “Four Women of Forty,” but these forces removing the mother’s body from her control are strongly reinforced by government regulations against single motherhood and enforcement of the One Child Policy. Dan Ye must fight both male patrilineal interests and the government’s force stigmatizing female reproductive biology to accomplish her realization of “self.” This might seem like a difficult task, but Lu Xing’er focuses on Dan
Ye’s psychology as she undergoes a slow transformation during her hours at the hospital. Her attitude towards the baby is key to her awakening.

Dan Ye’s perspective is that of an intellectual who focuses mostly on the philosophical nature of her love. Rosie Roberts notes that her “moral bricolage,” representing autonomous free will, is one that has not yet been assimilated by society. As a result, her experience of abortion differs from other women who live within the accepted, sexually constraining “moral bricolage” of the time (Roberts, 2005: 86-87). Dan Ye has become pregnant from an affair with a married man whom she respects for his intellectual achievements. She acknowledges that her secret trysts are unacceptable socially and to herself, but she relishes in the joy she feels and the hope that he will appear by her side in the hospital to support her. Dan Ye’s faith in free choice is emphasized by her internal monologue convincing herself the pregnancy was not forced upon her, as she continued the affair of her own volition. Her abortion, on the other hand, is socially and state enforced for an unmarried woman. Her final rejection of the abortion, an act of defiance against the state, represents her emergence into selfhood. This decision coincides with her exercise of free will as a human being, and also her natural ability to reproduce as a woman.

In contrast, the four other women waiting for abortions are trapped without free will or autonomy over their bodies. They represent receptacles for male desire bound by their relationships with their husbands and also their careers. They suffer from social stigma, leading to factory recommended, state enforced abortions that create physical trauma. Their own bodies are subjects of censure for actions imposed upon them by men in the family and men in administrative policy.

3.2.1 Barriers to single motherhood created by the state-enforced feudalistic “moral bricolage”

Lu Xing’er uses the inhospitable environment of the hospital to capture the disastrous effect of society’s accepted “moral bricolage” on women. Lu Xing’er employs a chorus of numerous, unnamed women offering phrases such as, “There’s no limit to the pains of women” (Lu, 1983:193) in response to Fan Hong, the hunchback, and the schoolteachers’ lamentations. They seem resigned to their status, their submission enforced by the hospital’s sterile and dead atmosphere. “SILENCE” and “CHECKPOINT”
are signs written in ominous, capital letters that litter the women’s operating area, demanding passive compliance. The entrance to the hospital further characterizes damage forced upon women by enforced abortions: “The interior of the entrance gaped at the women like the scoop of a bulldozer.” The association of the bulldozer with abortion portrays the existing system as one that crudely handles the women without a care for finer detail, perhaps a reflection upon the blunt execution of the one-child policy itself.

The author also translates the physical pain associated with obeying the “woman’s duty” into oppressive practice and silencing of women’s voices. Like the bulldozer, another indelicate metaphor is drawn to abortion in the first part of the story when an old woman remarks to the newly arrived Dan Ye, “So you have also come to scrape it off!” (Lu, 1987:193). The word “scraping” evokes imagery of an abrasive, hollowing procedure. People scrape things that are unwanted, and often scratch or damage the scraped surface. The procedure itself carries risk; the nurse mentions to the hunchback that after so many abortions, her body could not accommodate any more.

Men are also barred from this realm by the large letters, “MALE COMRADES NO ADMITTANCE.” Just as Hu Xin’s four women met in a women’s hospital, Lu Xing’er’s women enter a realm exclusively determined by women’s reproductive biology. The ability to bear children, under influence by the “woman’s duty” to produce sons and the state’s pressure to limit births, turns into a cause for great suffering. Again, as Stacey notes in her study on sexually silencing attitudes during the Cultural Revolution period, women’s transgressions were more evident (Stacey, 1983: 231). Males may escape paternal responsibility, but females cannot escape the obvious signs of pregnancy, branding them clearly as if with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Scarlet Letter. Moral stigma against promiscuity along with traditional double-standards on female chastity put even the married women under suspicion when they seek abortion in the story. These ideas are presented in Qiu Yin’s and Fan Hong’s stories.

The first woman Dan Ye encounters in the hospital is actress Qiu Yin, a beautiful woman stricken by bouts of vomiting. Several dichotomies are presented in this career-woman-wife. Dan Ye briefly contemplates that Qiu Yin’s beauty is enhanced by her paleness, as if her weakness, sickness, and
sacrifice make her more desirable. However, the reader learns that Qiu carries the weight of pregnancy and abortion as a personal burden, refusing Dan Ye’s support, as well as her own husband’s: “It doesn’t matter, I can cope. Actually, I will be on-stage tonight” (Lu, 1987:194). Her strength of will contrasts with physical weakness; she is ready to endure surgery and perform on the same day. When turned away for lack of a marriage certificate, she returns to the hospital with theater tickets, hoping to convince the doctor; she must appear on stage at all costs. Underneath Qiu Yin’s career motivations, however, lies her fear that her recently-promoted director husband will abandon her. She comments to Dan Ye, “I’ll lose myself and he will lose interest in me. I need time. I must keep my good looks. I must succeed on stage. So that he can’t do without me” (Lu, 1987:206). Qiu Ying’s body is not her own but instead a tool she uses to maintain influence with her powerful husband, shaped by his desires4.

The next woman Dan Ye encounters is actually pregnant and unmarried. Fan Hong is a young girl who arrives at the hospital without an official letter of recommendation due to her single status. As she tearfully relates, her older and more experienced boyfriend purposefully calculated her cycle while Fan Hong remained almost completely in the dark about her own sexuality: “He calculated the days of my period. I didn’t know. He is seven years older than I am” (Lu, 1987:196). The pregnancy would have expedited their marriage, but unexpectedly, his parents refused to approve the marriage and sent her off for an abortion (Lu, 1987:196). The idea that Fan Hong’s body is not her own arises not only from her boyfriend’s manipulation, but also the state’s silencing of sexual education through schools or families (Xinran, 2002: 203). Though it seems incredible that a man would know Fan Hong’s cycle better than herself, and the nurses laid the blame on Fan Hong’s head, but it could have happened with someone so young, unmarried, and inexperienced.

4 Returning to the topic of nursing women from the background section, many Chinese women will avoid nursing their babies to maintain their figures or desirability, so hospitals have had to campaign for breastfeeding in the interest of infants’ health (Chen and Gottschang, 2004:97).
Lu Xing’er gives human form to this moral stigma surrounding female sexuality in an old nurse policing the women. The nurse constantly lashes out, vocalizing her contempt for unmarried women and adulterers. She first reduces Fan Hong to tears: “Oho! So this is how your union people get their honorable mentions—by fixing up abortions for the likes of you without official approval from the factory authorities! So that these unplanned pregnancies go unrecorded and unreckoned!” (Lu, 1987:195). Fan Hong now carries the blame not only for her pregnancy but for her union’s undeserving honors, achieved by deception. The nurse continues categorizing “the likes of Fan Hong,” implying she is a loose, irresponsible woman. Lu encourages sympathy for the wrongly accused Fan Hong, who was manipulated by her boyfriend. The nurse accuses her as the solely responsible party, ignoring the man’s role in the conception, as she commands Fan Hong to stop crying; “A woman should know which side is up” (Lu, 1987:196).

Traditional attitudes towards premarital sex and babies born out of wedlock result in severe social pressure towards either abortion or marriage (Roberts, 2005:87). The one-child policy presents a significant barrier to single motherhood because single parent quotas do not exist. The hospital’s regulation requiring each woman to present a marriage certificate and refusing unmarried women is evident in the old nurse’s refusal to admit Fan Hong: “According to regulations, our hospital doesn’t deal with cases like yours. Nowadays there are special clinics for the likes of you. Outside the city. Everything self-paid” (Lu, 1987:195). Similarly, Qiu Ying hid her pregnancy from her work unit and neglected to bring her marriage certificate to the hospital. The old nurse denies Qiu Ying’s access to abortion: “I’ve made it clear. This hospital does not treat cases of pregnancy before marriage” (Lu, 1987:200). The nurse grants Qiu Ying the same scorn as she does Fan Hong, implying that Qiu Ying is lying about her marriage simply because she needs to undergo an abortion.

The significant barriers to single motherhood may reflect a motivation to protect the patriline; whereas in a matriarchal system the child responds to and supports his or her mother, the institution of marriage ensures the identity of the father and continuation of lineage. Social forces frowning upon babies born out of wedlock are thus reflections of male interest, enforced by the state’s refusal to allow single
motherhood. The child produced by the mother becomes not the mother’s property but the father’s in the patrilocal marriage system.

3.2.2 Conflict between pro-natalism and socialist family planning

Extremely pro-natalist factors embedded in Chinese society derive directly from Confucianism in ancestor worship, filial piety, and heir birth, as well as Buddhism, which prohibits killing. Children are considered insurance against old age, working hands for rural farmers, and heirs. Their cultural significance is reflected in popular blessings and symbolic gifts at weddings expressing wishes for a son to come as soon as possible or for “a hundred sons.” In addition, Imperial scholars had believed that if China was to be rich and powerful it needed a large population (Dikotter 1995: 103); in the early years of the PRC large families were encouraged. As Dan Ye realizes in the story, “all women, high and low, must brood like any old hen” (Hong, 1991:190). As Rosie Roberts writes in her analysis of Lu Xing’er’s story, “Women have been socialized into identifying their primary role in life as that of wife and mother” (Roberts, 2005:72). This is also a direct manifestation of what Harriet Evans calls the “You Must Have One Child” Policy in her interviews of daughters and mothers (Evans, 2008:170-186). A woman repeats this concept to Fan Hong: “Might as well get married right away and keep the baby. You must give birth to one child anyway, so why go through this extra pain?” (Lu, 1983:196). Perhaps a better statement would be the one presented by Hu Xin’s character Qian Yehyun, that in the thousands of years of Chinese history, only sons were acceptable, and since there was no guarantee, a mother would have to try several times for a boy.

The strength of pro-natalism in Chinese society clashes with the demands of the state to the point where community enforcers cannot oppose the age-old right of men to continue their family lines (Herschatter, 2007:29, Xinran 2002:8). Traditional views on abortion were negative unless the birth threatened the mother. After 1979, the state swung towards promoting all forms of birth control in the interest of preventing overcrowding and eugenically strengthening the population.
Although the policy’s purpose was to improve the greater society, the Chinese cultural environment created a gendered response that not only inhibits natural reproduction, but one that places conflicting, gendered pressure on women. Women are caught in an unnatural situation where on one hand they must meet the patriline’s demand to reproduce and on the other, the state’s demand to stop reproducing. The other two women whom Dan Ye meets are married mothers pushing the one-child limit. One is a prolific hunchback, who has come so often the nurse vilifies her for repeated offense: “If everybody behaves like you, we won’t be able to cope with all the work, even if our feet were turned into extra hands!” (Lu, 1987:198). The unidentified women on the benches murmur in response to each story that they never wish to bear girls because girls are destined to suffer; unexpectedly, the hunchback speaks up and says her husband complains she can only bear sons. While she wishes to have girls, she must come back again and again to abort them to avoid running over the one-child limit. Lu Xing’er implies that the limit on natural love and fertility is responsible for the hunchback’s incomplete, ragged state. Rosie Roberts’ analyzes her physical deformity as a metaphor for the state’s intrusion into her life (Roberts, 2005:77); her body is like an ossified fruit that could not grow ripe. Instead of bearing many seeds, she has shriveled up, like the half-ripe grapefruit of the lamp-post overshadowed by cloud that cannot ripen until the sun comes out. The primary school teacher responds to the hunchback’s expressed desire to bear girls: “You’ll have a string of girls. That is, if you are allowed to have them” (Lu, 1987:197). Reforms to the one-child policy itself to accommodate two children were also gendered towards son-preference; since the hunchback already bore a son, fines for bearing another child are significantly higher. Daughters, in effect, are blocked by the sex-dependent fine differential aimed at allowing families with one daughter to try for a son.

Although the hunchback mentioned her desire to bear daughters, however unlikely under the policy, was also subject to her husband’s demands even when her uterine device failed or was newly inserted. Similarly, primary school teacher Song Lizhen is waiting for her third abortion and treats it as a huge nuisance. She is accustomed to getting pregnant and subsequently losing her temper over it, so much so that she attempts to abort “the thing” on her own by skipping rope vigorously with her pupils. The
unnamed women raise a chorus of solidarity in response: “Men have no consideration. For us, it’s off to work at the crack of dawn. And after work, it’s cooking and washing. At night, you’re so tired you just want to sleep, but they won’t leave you alone!” (Lu, 1987:199). The hunchback and Lizhen represent married women whose duty towards housework, husbands, and patriline eliminates the option of abstinence or effective contraception; they must resort to abortion.

While abortions are a solution to their temporary problems, the three women who undergo the operation, the hunchback, Fan Hong, and Song Lizhen, have short and long-term consequences. First, pain and exhaustion weaken the women, illustrating their passivity and lack of free choice caught between biological demands of sexuality and state family planning responsibility. The little hunchback lay on a bed “hitting the unresponsive cement walls weakly. ‘It’s killing me, it’s killing me!’ […] Fan Hong lay on her bed as if in a swoon, her long hair spread appealingly across the white pillow. The primary school teacher lay face down on the edge of the bed, a helpless sight. She had started vomiting as soon as she got on the operating table” (Lu, 1987:202). They faint away in exhaustion, and the room is described as silent as an afternoon nap. An afternoon nap evokes images of normalcy, as if this were a daily restful activity instead of a day of pain interjected by bitter narratives spoken to a responsive crowd. Even the memories seem silenced; the operation has removed something bigger than the fetus: “The confidences on the waiting benches seemed lost in memory, like wisps of floating cloud” (Lu, 1987:202).

The previous confidences were a form of natural solidarity that empowered the women sharing stories in the hallway. As an exclusive “woman’s issue,” pregnancy draws the abortion clinic women together, young and old, married and unmarried. Older women peppered the inexperienced Fan Hong with advice, and showered the other women with empathy. The open environment stripped them of socially conditioned reserve: “Fan Hong, for the first time, let down all her barriers. She confessed all the secrets that she could never have borne to reveal and had had no one to tell” (Lu, 1987:197). Similarly, the women congregating in the hallway initially shock Dan Ye with their frank probes into her life, assuming she is a married mother, inquiring after the age of her “eldest,” asking why nobody is with her. “These women were so frank, so naked—no hedging about. Their candor made her want to speak out too”
(Lu, 1987:199). This is very different from the secretive Dan Ye of the first pages, kicking herself for thinking of her lover’s poetry, hiding her college badge: “Dan Ye didn’t care to hear about other people’s affairs. Nor did she want others to know hers” (Lu, 1987:191). Through her newfound candor, Dan Ye opens up to Qiu Yin for the conversations that alter the course of her life. The fundamental support of the women for each other vanishes after completion of the abortions, and the women act as if they are truly strangers again. The fruit of reproduction united all the women in their roles as child bearers and mothers, giving them a universal empathy, but without it, they cease to connect. Here Lu Xing’er emphasizes that motherhood is one natural and positive role, which, once separated from external forces, may lead a woman to her true nature.

3.2.3 Dan Ye’s self-realization through motherhood

Lu Xing’er presents embracing autonomous womanhood through reproduction as a method of counteracting feudalistic and state patriarchal forces. Motherhood itself must be for the woman; separation from external forces requires leaving the deceptive comfort of dependency. After the abortions are complete, the husbands and boyfriends arrive to pick up their women. Suddenly, the women forget their pain and swell with pride when their husbands send cars and taxis for them. In one instance, the nurse remarks that a waiting taxi carries style. Fan Hong responds with pride. “‘He hired a car to take me here and has ordered it to wait.’ Her eyes were recovered from their swoleness, and the sense of injury was also gone (Lu, 1987:202). Not to be outdone, the hunchback chimes in. “I also have a car […] He drives a truck. He’s coming to get me at ten (Lu, 1987:203). She begins to hurry. “‘He’s never late for work. His team has kept a record of excellence for years and years.’ Her eyes shone softly, with quiet satisfaction (Lu, 1987:203). The hunchback, described as a painfully wriggling and empty sack, willingly rushes her recovery to preserve her husband’s pristine work record. Song Lizhen’s husband also slips a message through from the door. “The primary-schoolteacher seemed to derive much comfort from the message. She smiled in embarrassment and barely concealed pride. ‘I can also leave now. He will take me back on his bicycle (Lu, 1987:204).’” Not even the cosmopolitan and career-oriented Qiu Ying escapes
this dependency as she rushes back to the hospital. She maintains her dependence on her husband by following through with the abortion that will preserve his desire for her and subsequently his influence on her career. Despite the bitter diatribes delivered by the women earlier when they complained about men’s demands and women’s suffering, they fall back into the comfortable cycle of womanly duties until the next round of abortions. By carrying out the abortions, they have failed to awaken and escape the cycle.

Despite Dan Ye’s tertiary educational training and Westernized “moral bricolage,” she initially hopes her lover will appear. When she arrives at the hospital, the other women present pity that she is alone and inquire after her man, assuming she is married. Dan Ye uncomfortably glances towards the bus station to see if her lover has come to lend her strength. A burst of hope flares up when she looks at the station, and lines of his poetry haunt Dan Ye as she continues to wait. Refusal to incriminate her lover is an additional burden Dan Ye bears silently. He is protected from the humiliation she bears as an unmarried college professor in an abortion clinic. She constantly fends off the probes of other women; “And you? You don’t look as if you’ve had children,” the actress observes. Dan Ye murmurs, “I have classes this term” (Lu, 1987:195). She is half-lying, half-hiding the true reasons. In her shame she hides her college badge. These protective and secretive actions reveal her continued dependence and attachment to the male investment in her pregnancy.

Dan Ye slowly breaks away from this dependency by embracing qualities universal to women while interacting with the women in the clinic. Her first lesson from observing the other women is that “all women were equal before this frosty glass pane, beautiful actresses or wizened hags, women with college badges or those without” (Lu, 1987:201). All women are united in motherhood, an undeniable property of the female. The abortion would be an induced birth, just as a mother would give birth to a fully developed child. Dan Ye begins to consider her own destiny as a woman: “Only through this as-yet-uncompleted cycle could she ever know what it is to be a woman” (Lu, 1987:205). Lu Xing’er believes that motherhood indeed is part of a woman’s natural destiny even apart from producing sons as part of the paternalistic woman’s duty.
Just as in Hu Xin’s “Four Women of Forty,” pure and unconditional love also appears in “The Sun is Not Out Today.” Dan Ye’s original belief in pure love and free will lays the foundation for her eventual transformation. She does not think of herself as a “loser” in a game of love, as the other women do; she is not tied to marital duty, housework, filiality to her in-laws, or the family name in her affair. Dan Ye is free to value the distilled idea of their love. She believes that this love translates directly into the products of love, children. This nascent idea surfaces when Dan Ye rushes to the Qiu Yin and attempts to convince her to keep her child: “Please keep your child […] I’m sure it will be beautiful just like you” (Lu, 1987:201). Qiu Yin turns the phrase around: “And I am sure your child, too, will be like you, elegant and refined (Lu, 1987:201). Dan Ye realizes her child’s innocent representation of her love for the man: “He, or she, must be elegant and refined, just as she had envisioned over and over again in her mind’s eye. Like her. And like him” (Lu, 1987:205). As Dan Ye loved his teaching, poetry, and mind, her child could also bear these positive qualities, innocent, but for the taint associated with children born out of wedlock imposed by society.

The injustice behind that taint becomes evident to Dan Ye as the nurse unleashes her fury against the women: “In moments like this, everything beautiful was desecrated, as the sun is by the thick slab of gray cloud” (Lu, 1987:198). She acknowledged that the affair and pregnancy was wrong, but the abortion is just as much a desecration of her love as the nurse’s desecration to the act of procreation, just as the government desecrated the hunchback’s wish to bear her fruit to term. Pure love between a man and a woman, as well as the love between a mother and her child are the true victims of this system.

Though it may seem that Dan Ye’s thoughts fall into line with a pro-life reinforcement of the feudal woman’s duty, she has removed duty to the patriline from the picture. She makes the decision to reject the former location of their liaisons, the stone bridge, symbolizing a permanent cutoff. When she looks towards the empty bus station, she reasons that he must have come and gone, and leaves the hospital. Consequently, this baby bears the fruit of her natural womanhood and the memory of romantic love. At the same time, she defies the state’s restrictions on single motherhood: “Give it a try. See if a tiny life illegally conceived has a right to survive. Dan Ye treasured her love. More, she treasured the life so
naturally born of that love. For that, she was prepared to pay the price. She was prepared to sacrifice even more” (Lu, 1987:206).

Dan Ye achieves a Nora-like emancipation in her realization of self, symbolized by her claim to the sun. And just as Lu Xun asks “What Happened to Nora After She Left Home?” the reader may ponder “What happens to Dan Ye after she chooses to keep her baby?” Rosie Roberts addresses this question in her analysis of Dan Ye’s true viability as a mother. The light shining through the clouds is described as “weak,” and Lu Xin’er acknowledges the “sacrifices” Dan Ye prepares herself to confront. Although Dan Ye is prepared to defy barriers to single motherhood, social forces working against single mothers, including lack of housing, pressure from the workplace and neighborhood committee for bringing shame, might force Dan Ye to retract her challenge. In Han Chunxu’s “Rejecting Fate,” the protagonist was equally determined to carry her baby, but could not withstand the pressure to abort any longer. She eventually underwent abortion at six months. The story uses interior monologue to reveal the woman’s overpowering grief, her anger at society and her remorse for her own failure to protect her child (Chuxu, 1987:1-17). Rosie Roberts indicates that Dan Ye’s and Han Chunxiu’s attempt to draw on ideas yet unassimilated by mainstream culture doom them to failure or provide additional difficulties navigating the experience of abortion in comparison to more orthodox culturally conditioned patients (Roberts, 2005:87).

Evidence exists, however, that single women now comprise 50% of abortions. While this might not reflect single motherhood itself, sexual mores are changing in China (He, 2000:1).

It also seems strange at first that Lu Xing’er could prize a woman’s affair with a man as the greatest form of love, where it has traditionally been the symbol of betrayal and depravity. However, this seems to be a form of liberation of love from marriage, removing complex responsibilities associated with the Chinese system. The man’s love for his son is given as the reason he cannot break his marriage, and Dan Ye respects this form of love. In her story “The One and the Other,” Lu Xing’er also romanticizes a new woman, Hua Qing, a designer who eats Western food and carries on a lifelong affair with a man, in contrast with the Elder Sister Song, who is so attached to her husband that she even leaves his place.
setting out for him after he dies. Hua Qing remarks that “those who marry, with home and family, are not necessarily happy. The meaning of life is not in these external forms” (Lu, 1987:219).

Although Lu Xing’er previously romanticized an affair to isolate romantic love from marital duty, Dan Ye must still separate from her lover to abandon her dependency on male support. A number of motifs mark Dan Ye’s internal transformation into the “male” role. Several times, she examines the sky. “The sky was still overcast. The yellow street lamp was probably extinguished by now. So. No sun. And no yellow either. Where then was the radiance?” (Lu, 1987:201). At this point, Dan Ye still associates the light with her lover; his absence results in the lack of radiance and the overcast sky. The obscured sky represents Dan Ye’s clouded internal love-conflict, and also the smothered individual wills of the women seeking abortions, including Dan Ye. Rosie Roberts interprets the hidden sun, at first a representation of Dan Ye’s absent male partner, as a metaphor for the male yang power to make decisions. The “sun” that is “not out today” stands for passive compliance with forces that control the mother’s own body (Roberts, 2005:82). The lamp, casting dim light, was compared to a half-ripe grapefruit, representing the mother’s body carrying an undelivered child.

After Dan Ye exits the hospital with her decision to keep the baby and break off with her lover, the sky may also reflect her new role as a self-sufficient, decision-making human being, and also as a mother. Lu Xing’er contrasts the newly emerged sun with the previous skies: “The sun had broken through the masses of clouds and gave out a weak light. A yellow globe. Like a ripe grapefruit. The sun was out” (Lu, 1987:207). Not only is Dan Ye a “ripe” grapefruit, in contrast to the first “half-ripe” lamppost description in her decision to carry a child to term, Dan Ye has claimed the sun for herself. In taking for herself the role of sun she redefines her position within all her personal and social relationships. Rosie Roberts also emphasizes the significance of Dan Ye’s decision as it poses a fundamental challenge to traditional gender relations in Chinese society (Roberts, 2005: 88). Though the sunlight is still weak, and societal expectations are in flux, the remodeling of traditional gender roles has begun.
3.3 A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF GENDER IDENTITY

Based on the above analysis, 1980’s authors Hu Xin and Lu Xing’er have both promoted romantic and motherly love as keys to breaking away from existing networks of oppression in post-Mao China. These values are part of a reaction against the ban against femininity laid down during the Cultural Revolution years. However, Lu Xing’er also warns against taking femininity too far. Traditional definitions of femininity were written by the pen of male desires. Instead, 1980’s authors generally agree that seeking greater human achievement, and acknowledging females as humans, is the best route for Chinese women to pursue.

3.3.1 Recalling the Iron Girls: Recovering Feminine Stereotypes

Women’s studies professor Hui Wu calls attention to accusations that post-1980’s Chinese women writers are maintaining values that trap females within the home. It is true that Hu Xin and Lu Xing’er do not wish to be associated with feminism, and encourage embracing characteristics associated with the private sphere. They also imply that a woman needs to look at herself critically to overcome her sense of sexual inferiority and to achieve happiness, focusing less upon the role the man plays to reform his own views, though he is often the agent of oppression. In fact, Hu Xin speaks out against pinning the blame on patriarchy. In her essay “My View on Women,” she writes, “blaming men for women’s suffering and pain may indicate an effort to veil low self-esteem and incapability, just like men blaming women for toppling empires already in self-destruction” (Wu, 2010:93). Hu Xin believes a return to matriarchy presents similar offenses enacted by patriarchy against women.

This is not to say that post-Mao women’s perspectives on gender completely diverge from those expressed in all types of Western feminism. The idea of global cultural context has become a critical factor of post-90’s third wave feminism. Chinese political and cultural experiences undoubtedly created a differently gendered female, and even a different human. Several factors support the differences between post-1980’s women’s writing in China and Western feminist literary traditions: first, changes under Mao rapidly redefined the role of the woman to the point where femininity was erased. Secondly, Buddhist,
and Daoist, and predominantly Confucian traditions formulate the fundamental definitions of human
achievement and respect. Reinforcement of gender roles from older generations, as well as the prevalence
of proverbs and sayings, create a unique network of sexism deeply embedded in culture. Enabling the
Chinese woman requires navigating this minefield of pitfalls within its own context.

Demands for equality that avoid the term “equal footing with men” are products of Maoist era
practices. Li Xiaojiang coined the idea that Maoist policies stripped women of their femininity (Barlow,
2004: 256). A second-wave Western feminist goal was to elevate female status to the same level as the
male, in effect, to become honorary males (Hall and Ames, 1998:88). That is precisely what occurred in
Mao-era Chinese feminism, when women became men so wholly that feminine articles were rejected. As
an example of a reaction to the restrictive policies laid down against love, intellectual thought, and
femininity, post-Mao writer Zhang Kang Kang’s oeuvre depicts the psychological disillusionment
resulting from severe repression. From her perspective, women were abnormal in the 70’s, when thick
browed, strong-armed women adorned posters, portraying masculine qualities were not truly part of
women. In the essay “We Need Two Worlds,” she stresses the differences between men and women:
“Women were virtually killed when deprived of the right to be beautiful, exquisite, and elegant. During
this long era, the female was virtually nonexistent in China. This is a serious traumatic lesson” (Zhang,
1992:139). This lesson taught many Chinese women to respect their womanhood.

As a result, most post-Mao women writers wish not to erase their femininity but to accept it. Mao
era desexualization held men’s standards higher and used them to judge women, perpetuating the power
imbalance. The phenomenon of women working outside the home in the public sphere does not
guarantee them working rights, as current problems with hiring and laying off women indicate. The
persistence of discrimination against women and girls despite economic development only emphasizes
that women’s liberation entails emancipation from patriarchal ideology itself; this was an idea
emphasized in “Four Women of Forty” by Liu Qing’s devotion to her teaching as an unmarried woman,
and in “The Sun is Not Out Today” in Dan Ye’s decision to have a baby as a single mother. Both portray
realizations of autonomy away from male support. This kind of independence must occur through an awakened of female consciousness, the professed goal of many post-Mao female writers.

3.3.2 Looking past femininity: advancing to human status

Claiming female characteristics for females is far from enough to achieve equality, because Chinese females were feminine long before the 20th century began. In the past, however, women in Chinese civilization were denied the option of even achieving human status. In Confucius’s words, “It is only women and morally retarded men that are difficult to raise and provide for. Drawing them close, they are immodest, and keeping them at a distance, they complain” (Hall and Ames, 1998:88). Despite the inherent sexism expressed in the Analects, human qualities respected in Confucian teaching were not fundamentally associated with biological sex, but with personal cultivation (Hall and Ames, 1998: 82).

Many post-1980’s writers sought to claim these human qualities for women. Unlike Nora Helmer’s model in “A Doll’s House,” where Nora needed to abandon her womanhood to develop selfhood, Chinese women may still possess characteristics inherent in women and achieve respect as educated humans. This is possible because the “difference” of biologically differentiated sexes had a correlative explanation based in Daoist philosophy of natural harmony between light and dark, heaven and earth, yang and yin. Although certain associations, e.g. heaven over earth, have certain hierarchal implications, both played an equally important role in establishing harmony. The extension of human rights to women provided a white space for a new definition of expected gender behavior for women. Some authors have indeed promoted the return of more traditional models of female sexuality and wifely qualities; others attempt to break women free from social constructs. Writers from this period also emphasize that femininity should not be taken too far, just as feminism should not turn into matriarchy. The most important goal for these writers remains fully recognizing women as humans. Human status represents autonomy, civilization, moral behavior, and the capacity for critical thinking. A woman can reach this by removing of any artificial constructs that have been imposed upon women in the past.

Lu Xing’er believes masculine roles and feminine roles imposed upon women are both artificial. In 1980’s Chinese society, both roles were simultaneously assigned to women: “The motto, ‘men and
women are the same,’ in fact, only sets requirements on women without asking men to do what women do—bringing up children with patience, taking care of house chores without complaints […] it requires females to be both woman and man; it fools women into taking in more responsibilities (Wu, 2010:99). Women seem to hold more than half the sky with the expectation that a woman act as a working man and as a housewife. In the essay “Femininity,” she writes that the new “femininity” forces a large number of women to remain “virtuous wives and good mothers,” while at the same time maintaining the momentum of their careers. Women demonstrating their sexuality, but at the same time competing against successful men in the workplace, are popular and promoted.

In addition, she reveals that women following this model are obeying a construction created by men: “Under their influence, some women trade themselves, perhaps unconsciously, as commodities with men for social status and material life. A close examination reveals that the promotion of femininity merely encourages women to please men (Wu, 2010:101). The word “feminine” invokes images from before Mao of demure, pale beauties fanning themselves under flowering trees. “For many years, women’s magazines have been flooded with fastidious consultation on how to enhance femininity (Wu, 2010:101). This means putting on lipstick and high heels, being pretty, soft-spoken, submissive, and exquisite. This “femininity” is defined on male terms, and includes the ideal Qiu Yin pursues in “The Sun is Not Out Today” to please her husband. There is also a fine line many women walk between capitalizing on their beauty for men’s money and subjecting themselves to the whim of men, especially in prostitution and college-girl escort services. Nancy Chen’s China Urban describes the taxable export “industry” of foreign marriage networks for Singaporean, Japanese, or other foreign men searching for Chinese wives, where women are purposefully portrayed as long-haired, reserved beauties offered up to perform housework, without much conversation or intellectual value (Chen and Gottschang, 2004:105-120).

So although Lu Xing’er promotes pure love expressed in the love of a mother as part of a woman’s happiness, she believes in avoiding overemphasis on femininity. In her point of view, this tightens society’s constraints on women, restraining them from achieving equality. Lu believes that when men draw those demands away, women will achieve equality. She comments that women excessively
mind tastes and likes, seeking to obtain men’s protection and love. Thus, Lu Xing’er warns that maintaining too much difference is in fact doing what Qiu Yin does, enhancing the female to appeal to the male. Lu also writes in her essay “Women and the Crisis” that pure superwomen are very much rejected by men. Man cannot accept the threat of a superwoman to his masculinity; women are pushed towards the model of the “Little Woman,” to be petted and cared for like a caged bird. Their sexuality is crucial to male comfort and acceptance. Lu Xin’er does not accept the “Little Woman.” Neither extreme will do.

Thus, while Lu advocates for motherhood, her motherhood is anti-traditional, removed from the patriline’s and the state’s demands, a “new woman’s” motherhood. She does not deny human biology, but she denies the necessity for male support, stressing that women should take a decision-making role in any endeavor. This is where selfhood and humanity arise. When the “woman” is stripped away from her socially conceived “feminine” layers, she is left with natural human qualities, the “sameness” linking men and women: “As women, we need to consider the same issue as men—the human issue—human integrity, human quality, human morale, human responsibility, human life, human sensation, and human thought” (Wu, 2010:102).

Likewise, Hu Xin asks why females must be rigidly defined separately from humans. Her thesis in “My View on Women” proposes that all humans are naturally different. Strong and frail, dependent and independent women may appear side by side everywhere. Abstinence may also be a choice for women, not to enforce patriarchal chastity, but to keep themselves armored from hurt. These are personal decisions based on free will. Hu Xin writes, “What upsets me most is men’s reprimand of women for not behaving like a female and women’s fear of losing femininity. What outrages me the most is the comment of literary critics that women’s writing has lost its feminine characteristics! Why can’t people forget that we are merely females? Yes, women are different from men. But aren’t men different from one another? Aren’t humans different from one another, and so are women? […] Personalities are indeed diverse and complex” (Wu, 2010:91). With a desire to categorize works and organize them according to broad characteristics, a single female may suddenly represent the behavior of her entire sex. By placing post-Mao women’s writing in the category of women’s literature, outside implications for feminism intrude on
what simply may be commentaries about social phenomena, just as Ibsen’s existential play “A Doll’s House,” focused primarily on human psychology, was harnessed by feminists around the globe. Thus Hu Xin, like Lu Xin’er, believes literary criticism places unnatural expectations on women’s writing when it could stand alone in its artistic quality: “As for literary works, they are artistic creations after all. Why should they be judged in relation to the writer’s sex?” (Wu, 2010:91). This clearly expresses a desire to be free of –isms and to be judged in a purely literary sense. Hui Wu echoes this perspective in her introduction to Hu Xin’s essays: “Post-Mao women writers feel that they should be regarded as human first and foremost and then as women when their writing is evaluated. They believe that their work is equally as good as men’s and they don’t need “-ism” to help them” Their purpose is to create art, just as men do (Wu, 2010:3).

As an example of women’s literature focusing on universal human struggle, Zhang Kang Kang’s story “The Right to Love” features a woman who spots her brother playing Russian violin music in an open plaza in the late 70’s and seeks to stifle him for fear that another wave of intellectual persecution might descend in the near future (Zhang, 1979:51-81). She is afraid to accept the man she loves because of his free ideals, and asks that he sacrifice his revolution. Her fear for the two men closest to her motivates her to protect them in a twisted, disillusioned manner, until she leaves to seek a new spirit. In the story, the ideological issues impact human freedom regardless of gender. Indeed, ideas were persecuted equally during the Cultural Revolution from non-gendered sources. The “love” expressed in this story is at once romantic and universal, between humans and even inanimate objects like the violins, or ideological, love for country and love of freedom. The passion experienced by the characters unites them in a love is strong enough to die for, floating on the last breaths of revolutionaries.

And yet, so many of these stories do feature issues pertaining specifically to women, especially their suffering. Returning to “The Right to Love,” the protagonist Shu Bei complicated love for the men is so strong she needs to sail away to redefine herself, in a Nora-like manner. The men stand strong in their love for their music and literature, unwavering, unfearing. Shu Bei’s history as a woman has inevitably gendered her reaction to the same universal events (Zhang, 1979:80). The truth known to many authors,
voiced by Lu Xin’er, is that “all feminisms, feminist standpoints, and all theories on women have come into existence just because women have never shared the world equally with men […] only when there is no doctrine to lecture women and no need to stress women’s standpoint—that is, when women stand up as human beings equally and naturally without the support of theory—will women be fully liberated as independent individuals” (Wu, 2010:109). Lu acknowledges that this point has not yet come; her futuristic views even seem ridiculous to her, but she also ridicules the impossibility of transcending this crisis by speaking as a visionary.

In the end, many women remain uncertain about what they should do to reconcile their difficult duties as mothers and wives within the constraints of the current society. Although woman’s issues must be addressed, 1980’s writers want to deal with human issues as well. Although femininity needs to recover, it must remain separate from male control. Society continues in flux, changing in response to writing, and writers responding to changes. There is, however, a common end goal for many 1980’s writing women, a definition sought out to guide females to the day when their writing can be judged purely for their artistic value, when social values change enough that women’s day is not required for men to remember to respect women. And at that point, women will still bear physiological and psychological differences to men, but they will embrace these differences in correlative harmony.

CONCLUSIONS

The ideas expressed in this thesis are part of existing ongoing scholarship on gender literature re-evaluation. It is hoped that they clarify a common thread of self-realization occurring in literature from the early 20th century that promotes women’s liberation either through revolution against femininity or reconciliation with it. Reconciliation with femininity may be especially important in modern cultures placing pressure on women to handle careers with reproductive family lives, as love and reproduction may still be a source of great happiness to a woman, and cannot be thrown away. To understand the legitimacy of female roles promoted by post-Mao women, we must not only understand the rejection of Mao-era ideas and the rejection of “feminist” labels, but also fundamental constructs defining the human
being in China. We have investigated in detail how two authors, Hu Xin and Lu Xing’er, have united women’s love and motherhood with personal empowerment in the narrow space between feudalistic and state enforced patriarchy, and how this can occur within a broad Chinese cultural context. This may also provide a window into alternate solutions proposed to problems plaguing educated women in China, which may also reflect on situations for any women facing the problems of career and family balance.

The ideas expressed by post-Mao Chinese female authors also fall smoothly in line with ideas expressed by third wave feminists despite their only access to early second wave texts written by Simone de Beuvoir and Virginia Woolf. Third wave feminism challenges a universal definition of femininity, focuses on reproductive rights, reclaims derogatory words, defines the woman on independent terms, and defines it in cultural terms (Brunell, 2008:197). All of these ideas have applied directly to the themes appearing in Chinese post-Mao women’s literature. With the development of third-wave feminism, the ideas expressed by Hu Xin and Lu Xing’er might be better accepted by an audience more aware of women’s rights in a specific context. As development workers seek to change gender ideology across the world, different models of female identity may be taken into consideration when promoting women’s rights.

Recent attempts to reconcile Confucianism with feminism have also offered new perspectives regarding Chinese women. These attempts seek to circumvent hierarchy and restore the possibility of a new Chinese woman coexisting with the ancient Chinese cultural context. As Rosenlee explains, the rationalization of Chinese equality is not built on opposition of sexes but on correlative relationships to a hierarchy. Theoretically, a woman can become a “ren” by fulfilling her given duties at home, establishing herself as head of the family. Family remains central to Chinese culture; in Confucian tradition, in order for a man to be successful he had to first cultivate his person, his family, and then the state. Both genders coexist, because theoretically the public sphere was just as important as the private. If there was a primitive labor division, nan geng nu zhi (the man ploughs and the woman weaves), this was a system of cooperation for maintaining harmony (Rosenlee, 2006: 176).
These ideas still clash with many who believe that labor divisions limit women’s economic value and as a result, their independence. Rosenlee concedes that the realities associated with the inner/outer labor division are still unacceptable because the power of males and rulers is authoritarian and absolute. Dominance in the family thus does not apply to a full range of true women’s rights because they cannot compete for public office or become members of the authoritarian ruling class (Rosenlee, 2006: 176), and women remain severely underrepresented in administration, maintaining a hierachical labor division and taking decision-making power away from women.

Despite attempts at ideological reconciliation between women and Confucianism, feudal ideas still present harsh realities for women. Violence against women internally within the household has increased, especially by men against spouses from far away counties or against women who do not bear sons. Sex ratio discrepancies have increased with the continued illegal usage of ultrasound technology to abort female fetuses under dual pressure from filial duty to continue the patriline and the One-Child Policy (Croll, 2000: 23-56). Trafficking of women has increased alongside imbalanced sex ratios; as former women’s radio show host Xinran describes in her account of a twelve-year-old girl who was kidnapped and sold to an old man, the police nearly refused to take any action despite evidence that the girl was bleeding from the iron chain around her waist due to extreme resistance from villagers (Xinran, 2002: 8). Additionally, as social mores change, extramarital affairs and prostitution have increased. Although Ding Ling once expressed that prostitutes had more freedom of choice than married women, the question of how far one should take the pursuit of individuality arises. Many of Lu Xing’er’s women are the third wheels of men in marriages; does this reflect true independence in love, or a thematic return to concubinage simply because there is male demand? With the commoditization of female bodies in advertising, foreign marriage exports, and prostitution, who is using who?

More radical ventures into taboo subjects such as the exploration of and capitalization of sexuality tend to appear in post 1990’s literature. The ideas promoted by Hu Xin and Lu Xing’er about a woman’s awareness of her oppression and ability to reclaim properties dominated by men for millennia do not push boundaries of propriety, but instead pose solutions to dilemmas faced by women in the
1980’s and even today. They have provided an escape route to suffering women trapped in the molds of “good wives and virtuous mothers,” just as Nora escaped from her doll’s house a century ago. The miracle of her self-realization has not faded from Chinese women’s literature. Post-Mao women have reversed the alienation of the female body from the female by reclaiming its inherent properties; love and children as pure ideals without the oppression of marriage, motherhood without the patriline. At the same time, they have not sought radical overthrows of men or experiments in sexuality, presenting models achievable by regular women in everyday life. Men have played a vital part in both love and reproduction; pure love between men and women is celebrated when free of feudalistic and governmental constraints. As Lu Xing’er says, “The world belongs to both sexes, of which neither can be missing (Wu, 2010:108).

Finally, it is important to remember that there is a fine line between acknowledging society’s limitations and accepting a system that could be improved. For example, modifications to the One Child Policy that provide for the possibility of a second child if one is a girl may be an attempt to counteract the high degree of discrimination against girls in the forms of abandonment and sex selective abortion, but also create an inherently gendered policy. Pensions were also offered to families with only girls. Though these are necessary measures to combat unique Chinese cultural reactions to an intentionally gender-neutral policy, they must only last as transition states until the policies are truly genderless. As an analogy, women’s writing about love and motherhood is nothing new; at one time, it was the only subject women could speak on with authority. However, keeping women’s biology separate from social desires allows women to acknowledge that they indeed will always celebrate motherhood, as post-Mao Chinese female writers do. Their experiences reveal that it in fact cannot be abandoned. Of social desires, however, women’s demand for collective access to decision making bodies, and demand for authority within government and workplace must also continue. The “double duty” of women will undoubtedly feature in years of women’s literature to come, as women continue to seek the methods of achieving equality and happiness within their lifetimes.
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