

## The Development of Female Roles: A Comparison between Chinese and Western Literature

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**Abstract.** This paper describes the influence of western feminism on Chinese feminist literature in the 1980s. Through the research of the history of feminist literature development and comparison between western feminist literature and Chinese feminist literature, the shortages and differences of Chinese feminist literature are revealed to promote the development of modern feminist literature. The depiction and portrayal of female characters in the literature vary greatly between Western and Chinese literature. While Western literature often reinforces the submissiveness of women and the idea of a man-centric world, Chinese female literature is marked by its revolutionary significance and close relation to the movement of democracy and women's liberation. Both Western and Chinese literature works have addressed the issue of sex workers, but with different approaches. Despite personal fights, female characters such as Marguerite Gautier challenge traditional concepts and stereotypes of sex workers in Western literature. It is important to acknowledge the impact of female authors in both Western and Chinese literature and to recognize the importance of feminism in promoting gender equality worldwide.

**Keywords:** feminism; Chinese literature; Western literature; gender equality.

### 1. Introduction

According to Wang Ning in her work *Feminist Theory and Contemporary Chinese Female Literature*, “from the social context and class background in which female literature rises, western female literature is a product in the development of capitalist production with the middle-class women as the main force who are both of certain bourgeois democratic sense and bourgeois ladies’ leisure for enjoyments. In contrast, the rise of modern Chinese female literature is closely related to the entire movement of democracy and women’s liberation and thus marked with strong social and revolutionary significance [1].” Due to the huge distinction between China and other countries’ history and cultural background, feminism is differently conveyed by authors who have different nationalities. However, western countries do share some similarities with China: the lower social status of women in literature and language. In western society, loads of books are describing a “man-centralism” world which stresses the necessity of men in a family while women, on the other hand, act as an accessory to men. Based on *Western Women and True Womanhood Culture and Symbol in History and Literature* by June O. Underwood, the submissiveness of women is a clear trait in western literature [2]. Regardless of the different categories of people they submit to, the women characters who submit to men are generally taken as someone that is admirable. Moving on to Chinese literature: according to Paul S. Ropp’s *Love, Literacy, and Laments: themes of women writers in late imperial China*, Chinese women at this time were strongly restricted by law: limit on women’s properties right, intension of husbands’ potency and dominance over wives, more severe penalty (compared to male) on female adultery, and unreasonable conditions of proving rape [3]. In the history of China, women were also influenced by the concept of “Sangang Wuchang” (which emphasizes how women should serve men and take care of children by doing almost all the housework and family chores). Due to the inequality of genders in the contemporary world, people thus try to blur the difference between

the two genders and associate feminism with becoming a man in order to reach the goal of gender equality. The lack of female writers, especially in the aspect of criticism in Chinese literature, gradually makes people marginalize or overlook Chinese woman's impact on literature, which undermines the positive effect on people's mindset between genders after the ten-year catastrophe of these literary works that are written by female authors. Based on the preliminary analysis of the literature written by women, this paper aims to investigate female roles in Chinese literature and how they affect society during the nineteenth century when criticism was popular and provocative for Chinese female authors. To demonstrate the importance of female writers in the field of literacy, the authors intend to make a small comparison between western countries and eastern countries' literature at the same time.

## 2. Historical background

In the 1980s, China's reform and opening brought about dramatic socio-economic changes, which liberated the productive female workforce. The identity and status of women in society changed, and a large number of women were liberated from domestic production and began to move into society and participate in economic development. At the same time, from the 1980s onwards, a conservative 'backlash' in Western politics resisted and fought back against liberal forces, including feminist trends. The second wave of feminism, which sought freedom, equality, and change, hit a low point in the late 1980s because of the strength of conservative forces. At that time, Western feminist thought shifted from radical to conservative. However, in the face of multidimensional issues such as race and class, Western feminists suggested that feminism should not be seen in isolation from issues such as human social status and class, and feminist thought became more diverse. After that, the third feminist thought emerged. Against this international backdrop, the Western feminist theory was introduced to China, resulting in a series of women's literature with contemporary characteristics and a new era of Chinese women writers. It is noteworthy that although Chinese feminist literature has witnessed tremendous development and progress, it has not converged with the international feminist trend but has taken on other characteristics in the context of China's unique national conditions. This article will analyze and draw on its significance by comparing the development and changes in feminist literature in China and the West in the 1980s.

## 3. Female roles in western literature

*The Lady of the Camellias* (*La Traviata* in French) is a representative novel written by Alexandre Dumas fils. The main character in the book, Marguerite Gautier, works as a courtesan in mid-19th century London, and falls in love with Armand Duval, who is considered much more respectable than Marguerite and comes from an upper middle-class family. She cannot free herself from her miserable past and move on to the future, but between her struggling process, it is obvious to see her purity and beauty of the heart. Given that it is the first literature work characterizing the protagonist as a kept woman, this book triggers people to think over the role of the courtesan, creating questions such as whether women doing work related to sexuality dealt with money trading should be considered "low" (referring to a low social status, low moral standards, and low inner expression).

In order to solve this problem, it is necessary to illustrate the issue related to sex workers. Trading on sexuality itself is a form of sexual violence; in other words, it is an extreme way of objectifying women as a tool to fulfil men's sexual wants in most cases. According to the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, prostitutes have the highest rate of mortality of all careers [4]. 9 out of 10 prostitutes are desperate to escape from prostitution. Almost half of the prostitutes have attempted suicide at least once. Studies have also pointed out that many prostitutes are sexually abused when they are girls (usually between the ages of 12-14) [4]. Most of them are drug addicted or mentally ill and a third of all prostitutes are forced by pimps to step into prostitution with strict regulations. Generally, the nature of sex trading is highly involuntary and truly manipulating for women workers. Then, the term "fallen

women”, raised by people at that time as the name of sexual workers, is actually unreasonable since they should not be taken as someone who is beneath moral standards due to its involuntariness.

Despite personal fights, Marguerite is clearly certain and hard to make a change in the end. Distain and discrimination are unavoidably accompanied with her as she was forced to step into the courtesan’s path. The failure of her fight can be attributed to the ruthlessness and indifference of capitalist society to the insulted and mutilated, and the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie in its moral concepts. However, her self-sacrifice exposes her inner world to the readers as something that is hugely different from the stereotype of sexual workers at that time. She challenges the traditional concept of the sin lying in the soul of a courtesan and keeps women with a noble virtue. The author, at the same time, utilizes a narrative description of the story to convey its tolerance towards humanity, as well as equity and respect for people with different identities. All of these important characteristics seem to be unusual from the 19th century mainstream value and opinions. Notably, the play adaption of the novel had been censored by the government for three times. However, according to *La Dame aux Camelias’ Effect on Society’s View of the “Fallen Woman”* by Christiana Johnson, “the public’s response proved more than a simple compliance with the government’s strategy” [5]. Indeed, society is persuaded by the positive virtues portrayed by the author and shifted their opinion on the “fallen woman”. For Marguerite Gautier, her self-sacrifice toward love stands out to be a characteristic that moves the public [5].

#### 4. Female roles in Chinese literature

For Chinese literature during the 1980s and 1990s, according to the article *Rejection of Postmodern Abandon: Zhu Tianwen’s Fin-de-siècle Splendor* by Shu-Chen Chiang, the gender problem became much more popular in Taiwan literature because of the books written by Zhang Ailing. As her most famous follower, Zhu Tianwen did not use any familiar concepts such as self-recognition of gender identity and patriarchal domination. Instead, she claimed that her literature is “postmodern” by herself. According to Webster’s dictionaries, the definition of “postmodern” means “of, relating to, or being any of various movements in reaction to modernism that are typically characterized by a return to traditional materials and forms or by ironic self-reference and absurdity” [6]. In other words, Zhu utilized a Chinese literature language to express a new context that is not as direct as before to convey feminism through literature. What makes her distinct from other modern woman writers is “[h]er belief that one could attain the intangible ‘true color,’ or ‘true essence,’ of Chinese culture through individual literary style is pronouncedly idealist. Her ensuing endeavor to master the traditionalist language style has undoubtedly benefited her art after years of practice.” [7]. Zhu’s book, called *Splendor*, focuses on the comparison between Taiwan complex and other places in China. Looking over this topic from different perspectives, Zhu gradually forms the relationship between intersectional fields which combine nationalism, sexuality, power, and classes all together as a collection of deep topics in society.

Feminism is not only reflected in long literary works, but also in poetry. A general conclusion of female-persona lyrics in poems both in Chinese and English is given by Tim-hung Ku in *Man in Woman’s Voice and Vice Versa*. Female-persona is defined in the passage as “man speaks in the persona of a female and releases his felinity suppressed in the phallic culture. Generally speaking, Female-persona lyrics, as an expression of androgyny or bisexual, are not popular among the whole world due to the cultural process of gender difference and stereotype of gender roles which is truly suppressive” [8]. Through the poems, Todorov’s model which is based on three perspectives (including the verbal, the syntactic, and the semantic) has been deepened and strengthened by authors and feminists. These three perspectives wholly express the problem of gender, androgyny, and mental analysis. According to Tim-hung Ku, “it is interesting to note that the most masculine poets, such as Shelley and Li Po, are inclined to produce most feminine poems, or to bind together femininity and masculinity in a dynamic whole in their poetry” [8]. These poems, overall, can take the role of gender

equity and soften the fixation on gender roles. In these ways, literature affects people's conception of genders, romantic relationships, and so does sex.

## 5. Influence of western literature on feminist literature in China

Before 1978, the theme of Chinese literature has been around history and society, and the content cannot leave the scope of the country and its people [9]. However, since 1978, the advent of reform and opening up has liberated people's humanity which had been suppressed for a long time in the "Cultural Revolution" and people have poured their repressed emotions and enthusiasm into literary works. At the same time, the introduction of western feminist literary criticism made people re-examine the feudal requirements for women before the reform and opening up, which led to the rise of Chinese feminist literature [10].

In the 1980s, writers generally criticized the persecution of human nature by the "Cultural Revolution", so Chinese feminist literature and western feminist literature both emphasized the natural nature of human beings and the awakening of female subject consciousness. Feminist writers call for human dignity and the liberation of humanity. In *The Light of Morning Mist*, a Chinese prose, the protagonist is faced with the choice of continuing to live a well-fed but meaningless life or pursuing happiness, which reflects the state of people gradually waking up from their numbness.

Influenced by the spiritual tradition of collectivism, in the 1980s, the fate of women under the pen of feminist writers was always closely connected with the development of The Times and always reflected the changes of social ideology. "Female literature achieves the understanding and cognition of the fate of human beings and times through self-examination or introspection of their own fate [11]." Female literature in this period reflected the enhancement of female consciousness by thinking about society from the perspective of self, rather than society pushing women to think about themselves. In Zhang Jie's *Love Cannot Be Forgotten*, "I" am confused about whether one should live a life separated from love and marriage like most people. "My" mother, who was young and naive, married a man without knowing it. "I" found that "my" mother had been deeply in love with another man, an old cadre, and wrote down her infinite affection for him in the notebook "Love, is not to be forgotten". Even though the old cadre has a family, they love "my" mother deeply. This reflects the female writers' thinking on the current situation of marriage. She questioned whether loveless marriages should exist and whether divorced love should be blessed. The writer's thinking raised questions about society's traditional standards of morality.

At the same time, feminist works reflect the beautiful yearning and constructive thinking for the new era. In Dai Houying's *People, People*, Sun Yue, the female protagonist gave up the person she truly loved for the sake of a past promise [12]. She deceived herself into thinking that she could not be someone who would break their words for love, but after that she was immersed in deep pain. It shows the traditional expectation of women is that they will love only one person and remain loyal to that person for their entire life. If their sentiment changes, they will be labelled as unethical people. This novel demonstrated the conflicts of social moral limitations on women and their emotional needs.

## 6. Conclusion

The research explores the history of the development of feminist literature and compares the differences and shortcomings between Western and Chinese feminist literature to further enhance the growth of modern feminist literature in China. Both Western and Chinese literature have tackled issues such as the depiction of female characters despite of different approaches. Overall, it is crucial to recognize the impact of female authors and the significance of feminism in advocating for gender equality. However, the compositions of western and Chinese feminist literature the authors researched is limited. Some of the interpretations may not be exactly accurate. In the future, more compositions in the 1980s will be evaluated to conclude more accurate analyses.

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