

# Intersecting Spaces in Contemporary Chinese Literature: Exploring Class and Gender

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**Abstract:** Chinese literature has always been an ideal site to locate grievances, resistance or any other issue concerning the Chinese people and society. Chinese Literature has served as a tool to represent various issues of social significance, class and gender being the most prominent one, however, they can be seen in the same space. This paper looks at some of these concerns of intersecting affiliations and how they shaped future of Chinese literature.

**Keywords:** Class, Gender, Marxism, Feminism, Wang Shuo, Wang Anyi

The debate on class and gender has been explored for decades and some very valid arguments have emerged on the possibility of an 'intersection' of Feminism and Marxism. These debates later broadened itself up in the larger question on relationship between gender ideology and foundation of women's oppression, and on whether patriarchal structures existed independently from those of Capitalism. On this too, there were many perspectives. While many scholars had argued that women's subordination existed much before the arrival of Capitalism, suggesting that a well-accepted gender ideology existed for long, but none explicitly espoused a Dual Systems approach.<sup>1</sup> For this study, typically the start of the theoretical debate on women, class and work has to be located at the intersection of Marxism and Feminism.

Such theoretical debates have been shaped not only by academic inquiries, but also by as relevant questions about relationship between women's oppression and class politics of the left, trade unions and feminist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially in the U.S., Britain and Europe. Then again, within both Marxist and Feminist circles, there have been inquiries into women as a social group and 'economic class'. It is important to remember that according to Marxists, women's social position expresses their exploitation by Capital; they do not delve into exploitation of women by a relationship of dependence and powerlessness vis-a-vis their husbands and fathers. When Marxist-Feminist approaches incorporated the concept of patriarchy as an analytical tool, they were able to connect 'the male power' into their class analysis. The incorporation of patriarchy into the class analysis was interesting, as it acknowledged a few facts, such as men within the same class, for example working class, enjoy certain privileges in society and wield power over women. Even with this acknowledgement by the Marxist-Feminist approach, the problem remained that the relationship between the two hierarchies, i.e. class and gender, was not completely unravelled. If these two hierarchies existed as two autonomous structures, then are we speaking of two separate systems, where one governs 'production' and another governs 'reproduction', or of a single system? While it seems justifiable that attempting to construct a single system, based on the argument that patriarchy served to the benefit of Capitalism, may have led to reductionism or essentialism, the Dual Systems analysis, on the other hand, has also not yet satisfactorily linked the two types of hierarchies. Such theoretical questions have not yet been resolved fully as each society that adapted to Marxism came up with their own unique local problems and

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<sup>1</sup>Dual system approach views class and gender as two different autonomous structures, i.e. women's oppression derives from the situation within an autonomous system of sexual division of labour and male supremacy. Class based oppression and gender based oppression (also termed as class struggle and sex struggle) are essentially two independent ideas in the development of history. For the above particular argument, see Lewis, Jane, "The Debate on Sex and Class", *New Left Review*, 149, January-February, 1985, p.108. For detailed understanding on Dual Systems theory and Social reproduction theory, please see Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, Rutgers University Press, 1983.

situations. China, having been newly introduced to Marxism in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also hoped to bring the ideal classless just society that will end its then-ongoing struggle with poverty and corrupt governance.

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Women periodicals also paid attention to the women's movements abroad. Around this time, they started focussing on the power of education and liberation of women in a modern State; the ideas of individuality, freedom and subjectivity were also welcomed into some debates. Prominent feminist voice of this period, Qiu Jin (秋瑾), through her journal *Vernacular* (白话 *baihua*, 1907) and *Chinese Women's Journal* (中国妇女报 *zhongguo funiubao*, 1907), advocated gender equality as a part of her 'revolutionary nationalism'.

Chinese women activists started pondering over the debate of the individual vs. the collective to move away from 'Four Generations under One Roof' (四世同堂 *sishi tongtang*) kind of family structure; they gave thought to ideas like whether women, as individuals, can take decisions of their own lives. In these debates and discussions around the turn of the century and early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women's intellectual ability and their ability to produce something, i.e. economic production, were constantly argued. While it was established that it was the age-old traditional culture and orthodoxy that held China backward and a 'New Culture' needed to be ushered in, the intellectuals and reformers were also thinking in terms of what proactive role they need to play at this juncture. While it was established that it was the age-old traditional culture and orthodoxy that held China backward and a 'New Culture' needed to be ushered in, the intellectuals and reformers were also thinking in terms of what proactive role they need to play at this juncture. While the New Culture Movement of 1917 was fighting the orthodox Confucian culture, tradition, philosophy or its way of life, it also helped the Chinese people fight the political system they were living in, i.e. the semi-feudal semi-colonial power structures.

In the discussion that Chinese culture must be revived, rejuvenated or completely rejected, Chinese people also pondered over questions like whose New Culture Movement and whose May Fourth Movement. At this time, ideas of both class and gender came to the fore.

As conceptualised or understood initially, Chinese scholars and intellectuals began realising that the Marxist framework provided a lot of answers to their queries. They understood that women are part of the deprived class or are downtrodden, therefore, the national liberation will usher in the liberation of women as well. It can be seen that China's exposure to both Marxism and Feminism roughly began at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Feminism perhaps not as a theory, but as questions that concerned the Chinese women. Chinese intellectuals realised that Chinese National liberation was not only a liberation from the clutches of foreign imperialist forces, but China was also looking to liberate itself from the existing forces of semi-feudal social structures that had deeply embedded intertwined issues of class and gender.

The contradictions even in their perception of Marxist literary thought that emerged in the 1920s and early 1930s; to a great extent, the contradiction revolved around the issues of how literature should serve the interest of the Proletariat and the cause of the revolution. It is important to mention that the Party leaders, during the Yan'an period, believed in the Marxist position that women will achieve equality only when they became economically independent by engaging in production.

Women's liberation movement also was gaining large support since the arrival of 'feminism' concept in China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Communist leadership while seeking women's participation in Chinese revolution presented a vision of a classless society. Chinese women believed that the revolution will end patriarchy and their gender-based discrimination could be resolved once they are liberated economically.

The discrepancies emerging out of this vision of classless society were visible and were pointed out even during the Yan'an period and shortcomings of Marxism being a class-based system and being blind to category of sex also emerged later in the post-Cultural Revolution China. Contemporary Chinese literature is an important site to witness that such discrepancies and shortcomings had kept making their way into the works of some writers. While these writers seem more associated with one particular concern or theme, they often showcased various other concerns in intersecting spaces.

### **Wang Anyi: Intersectional Examination of her Activism on Class & Gender**

Wang Anyi has explored many themes in her works spanning across decades, and thus, she is hard to be categorized as just as a feminist writer. Her initial writings explore Body writings (身体写作 *shenti xiezu*)

which heavily explored a female body and its bodily desire. She is famous for the exploration of sexual love in many of her works.

Wang Anyi mostly has women as protagonists in her works and her women characters are both victims and heroes in her works. She tries to sympathize with some characters, and with other characters she crafts them as strong woman that encourages others. However, it is important to note that her initial writing career only explored class-related issues, focused on the individual and sympathized with writers-intellectuals of those times, who during the Mao's time were perceived to be of low worth.

Her work *Life in a Small Courtyard* (《小院琐记》 *xiaoyuan suoji*, 1980), as discussed in previous chapter, is semi-autobiographical and discusses romantic love and relationships from close quarters. Through her woman character Song Song who likes both A'Ping and Huang Jian, the two male characters, Wang Anyi emphasizes that love is more important to humans than money or comfort.

In this work, it is remarkable to note Wang Anyi's attention to the concept of class, as the two male characters A'Ping and Huang Jian are portrayed as two class opposites. Wang establishes her stance clearly about the issues of 'class' and also offers a clarity when she separates the two kinds of elites; i.e. her understanding of 'elite' is different from the notions of 'elite' from the Mao period. According to the old framework from the Mao period, to be a worker or a peasant was glorious, while scholars and artists were perceived low in worth.<sup>2</sup> Wang Anyi's notion of 'class' is different from the Mao's ideas of 'class'.

Wang Anyi's notion of 'class' is based around refinement and her stance is antithetical to Mao's 'class' stance. Wang Anyi sees intellectuals and artists as having the 'most class'. Even in her works, Wang Anyi shows no self-doubt about the role and values of intellectuals in the society. Therefore, in the story, A'Ping, an artist from Shanghai, is more desirable to the protagonist Song Song than Huang Jian, the son of an affluent Party official. Song Song eventually chooses 'wealth' in terms of culture, over wealth in financial terms.

*The Base of the Wall* (《墙基》 *qiangji*, 1981). Published in 1981 and known as one of earliest best-known story of Wang Anyi, *The Base of the Wall* is the story of two children from opposite sides of a Shanghai Lane who, against all odds, befriend each other. The story of Du Xing (独醒) and A'nian (阿年) is powerful in its theme of the basic humanity that can transcend political prejudice even in times of hardship or societal crisis. In *The Base of the Wall*, the two sides of the wall represent the two basic classes of society, the 'haves' living in lane 501 and the 'have nots' living in lane 499. The story concludes on a discouraging note with, "The base of the wall is still there, entrenched. Almost an inch high, it sticks up from the ground in stubborn silence".<sup>3</sup> Even though many political changes have occurred in the time that has passed, the same divisions in society remain. Wang Anyi makes sense of 'class' or class-based issues, such as difficulty in maintaining a friendship, as she portrays how the Chinese society felt divided when two individuals came from two different class origins.

Published the same year, *The Destination* (《本次列车终点》 *benci lieche zhongdian*, 1981) is another such short story set in Shanghai. In the text, Shanghai is 'the destination' for a group of returning students who had been 'sent down' to the Chinese countryside during the Cultural Revolution. The Protagonist Chen Xin returns to Shanghai after spending ten years in the countryside. The story is full of trials and tribulations that the returning students faced attempting to re-assimilate themselves into their previous lives. Statements and descriptions, such as "You Shanghainese can't survive away from Shanghai", "Shanghai's progress and superiority" and "the department stores were full of all kinds of goods and people dressed in the latest fashion. Clean, elegant restaurants. New films at the cinemas. Shanghai presented what was new in China"<sup>4</sup> paint a picture of Shanghai as a modern urban space, exceptional in Chinese landscape, independent and out-of-the-way from the countryside; she portrays Shanghai as the epicenter of Chinese culture and class.

Wang Anyi's next publication was a novella *Lapse of Time* (《流逝》 *liushi*, 1982); it is a story of a Shanghai family and their experiences through the Cultural Revolution. Ouyang Duanli, the protagonist, is married to a rich merchant's son. During the Cultural Revolution, the family is labelled 'Capitalist' and forced to live like bankrupts. Because of poverty, Duanli goes through many humbling experiences to support her family,

<sup>2</sup> In the attempt to have revolutionary ideals, farmers and workers were glorified and were portrayed as the drivers of the economy. In the process of glorifying the common man, the writers, intellectuals or the rich were portrayed as the antithesis of these ideals; in other words, they were seen as the bourgeoisie with Capitalistic traits and were therefore vilified in the commoners' eyes.

<sup>3</sup> Chinese Literature, 1983, no.9, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Wang Anyi, *Lapse of Time*, *The Destination* 《本次列车终点》, pp. 2-3.

working as a nanny. Captured through the eyes of Duanli, the story continues Wang Anyi's exploration of the theme of 'passage of time', as she observes social continuity through the political changes in the country. Wang Anyi showcases in the story that how everyone remains acutely aware of one's 'class', Duanli being one amongst them who never abandoned her class consciousness; the writer juxtaposes her characters' class-consciousness in a time when the Chinese society was supposed to and should have destroyed class barriers (referring to Cultural Revolution period). The descriptions of Capitalist and working class are in stark comparison; Duanli, though forced to work in a factory or as a nanny, remains gracious, refined and cultured through the story, in comparison to other working-class people who seem pitiable in the story.

Wang Anyi brings to fore certain aspects of Chinese social realities in her works and highlights the contradiction that, the Chinese society where all people were going to be equal, reality was very different. Her work showcases how rural-urban stresses existed and how people retained a strong class-consciousness, that is to say that an intense awareness of being an intellectual or a peasant remained in Chinese people.

### **Wang Shuo: Intersectional Examination of his Activism on Class & Gender**

In post-Reform China, some writers started to dwell on issues related to emergence of different socio-economic groupings or 'classes' where economic disparity and social alienation were issues to reckon with. Wang Shuo has been preoccupied with representation of a social grouping that had lost privileges of the past, had little or no money and no special talent, and got into the company of the small time criminals etc. and his literature is termed 'Hooligan literature'. Frowned upon by many critics, his literary pieces broke many records and were exceptionally popular with the youth, specially college going students.

Many scholars regard Wang Shuo as a contemporary writer of 'common man' (平民 *pingmin*) fiction for his portrayal of a group of marginal or 'working-class' characters in contemporary Chinese society. Wang flaunted his hooligan characters as 'spiritual proletariat' (精神无产阶级 *jingshen wuchan jieji*) and had continued to represent this social grouping of small-time criminals. One of his most popular works, *Playing for Thrills*, presents the issues that the old 'aristocratic youth' faced when adjusting in the new environment of Deng's China. His characters resembled many people among Wang's past set of friends and therefore, this work like many of his other works is considered semi-autobiographical. The hooligan characters of his stories captured the imagination of many Chinese, especially the younger generation who feel marginalized and alienated, by legitimizing their desires and frustrations, and subverting the dominant ideology and culture.

In Chinese literary traditions, 'anti-heroes' of this kind have always been portrayed in negative light and that's why Wang's critics attack him for giving prominence to and bringing these vulgar, immoral and destructive 'hooligans' into the mainstream Chinese literature. Though he also depict an important element of this counterculture, i.e. the former 'aristocratic' youth experimenting sexually. He has also presented this 'historical sexual experimentation' within the gang, although with undertones of a repressive patriarchal mindset that discriminates on the basis of gender. For example, engaging with women is humiliating and was seen as an act of reversing the revolution or compromising on the revolutionary ideals. In order to uphold a puritanical environment, this discrimination was applied. The narrator feels that he was left out of this adventure, when he left town for one or two months, and finds himself lonely and incapable of managing a conversation with the opposite sex. The discrimination based on gender placed the two genders in Chinese society, men and women, at the two ends of the spectrum of natural human emotions.

Relationships with women of lower class, as defined through the story, would compromise the sense of exclusiveness and supremacy of the 'aristocratic' youth. Wang Shuo often brings 'class' and gender consciousness of the aristocratic youth wrapped in one incident, to highlight how sexuality was mixed with 'class' and how these relationships were the social reality of those times; the result of this experimentation was a strange mix of sexual emancipation and social conservatism.

Wang Shuo puts both men and women characters, as gang members, in similar situations to watch them fight for their freedom in various ways. A woman gang member openly rebels against her father's parental authority and when he resorts to physical punishment, she runs away. The narrator, a man, in a similar situation finds himself lacking the courage required to resist his father, so he resorts to other less harmful and passive means to counter his authority. He engages in guerilla warfare tactics like stay away during the day, escape out of his bedroom window at night, pretending to be dutiful son whenever it is necessary. The submissive and docile nature of Fang Yan in *Playing for Thrills*, as a result, reduces him to a marginal status in the gang and

he misses out on some of the adventures that the gang indulges in.

While Wang Shuo writes and attacks patriarchy or parental authority, he does not necessarily present it through his women characters. His views on gender and how it is perceived in China, often become visible through his treatment of women and through his portrayal of the double standards as to how the two genders are treated differently in Chinese society. There are obvious depictions of casual sexual relations throughout the novel, as Wang presents loose men and women with wavering or no moral compass. The new China, where one-night stands and infidelity are normalized, his work shows that the norm is to be loose and have fun. Sometimes, the way these depictions come through is that, culturally speaking, men are expected to be morally corrupt, and women are the embodiment of virtues like chastity and purity. But the exchange between Fang Yan and his friends in *Playing for Thrills* enlightens us that promiscuity became the most celebrated trait of a person, and the old place of virtue, intellect and power were replaced by it.

The dialogue between Fat Man Wu and Li Jiangyun is interesting in the way their subaltern social consciousness is depicted; even the sanctity of marriage is food for thought for a writer like Wang Shuo. Fat Man Wu upon discovering Li Jiangyun is married, says:

Glad to hear it, Fat Man Wu said, “now you should be thinking about taking a lover. Once you’ve fulfilled your marital obligation, it’s time to think about yourself, about hooking up with someone you really like.”<sup>5</sup>

Another woman gang member Liu Yan’s sexual experiences in life, mostly horrible ones such as harassment, sexual abuse and incest, are discussed in most humane manner with long paragraphs of her recounting the old stories. It is from these sad stories that Liu Yan’s impression and treatment of men, in general, is visible. She says:

After him I stopped counting. The majority were guys like you, who care only about yourselves, passing us around like melon seeds, eating the meat and spitting out the husks. None of you ever treated me like a real person, and I responded in kind.<sup>6</sup>

With the explicit narratives of self-indulgent and lecherous young Chinese men that think it is glorious to be debauch and violent, Wang Shuo is signaling toward degeneracy of Chinese youth. It is of little wonder that Wang would often run into some controversy or the other because of these explicit depictions. It is as though Wang breached a moral or ideological code of conduct by going against the rhetoric of Communist virtue of showing restraint and making sacrifices, and at the same time, disregarded the underlying Confucian traditional ideology with scornful account of chastity of the Chinese women.

In fact, the concept of *liumang* is itself a deeply gendered concept whereby women are most often perceived as sex objects, rather than fellow ‘players’ of the gang. Perhaps that’s why, objectification of women and undignified terms are blatantly visible in Wang’s works. One of the first impressions Wang brings in of how his male character talks of the female body is when Fang Yan refers to Bai Shan’s beauty, and remarks:

She was not pretty, but she had a great body.<sup>7</sup>

The images that Wang presents of Beijing’s dim-lit nightclubs provide an image of countless women waiting, as if they were commodities in a store, for the daring *liumang* hooligans to approve of them and those women were content with that. Fang Yan describes his other mates in the gang as people who would treat women as commodified property:

Wang Ruohai and a randy girl called Qiao Qiao – our group grope – were on my right. Another piece of public property, Xia Hong, was on my left.<sup>8</sup>

Wang uses words like 风流 (*fengliu*) and 情妇 (*qingfu*),<sup>9</sup> opening lines for Qiao Qiao, that introduces her as a

<sup>5</sup> translation from Howard Goldblatt, New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1997, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> translation from Howard Goldblatt, New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1997, p. 293.

<sup>7</sup> translation from *ibid.*, Goldblatt, Howard, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> translation from *ibid.*, Goldblatt, Howard, p.12.

<sup>9</sup> Both are terms for romantic partner and mistress respectively.

'randy' sex object and for Xia Hong, he uses the old Communist term of 'public property' to describe her. The concept of public property to refer to women or the violation of this 'public property' to refer to women as sex objects, is not only suggestive of sexism in Chinese society but is also disapproving of the Communist ideology at a certain level.

The nationalist discourse in China has one such tradition where female chastity is associated with that of the honor, integrity and morality of Chinese civilization, usually in direct proportion. Though this convention had its roots long before the advent of nationalist movements in China, Chinese women has served as a potent symbol of purity and goodness, i.e. the understanding of 'Chineseness' throughout the times. The tendency "to depict women as embodying the eternal Chinese civilizational virtues"<sup>10</sup> has long been a subject matter of nationalist discourse in China. Therefore, when writers like Wang Shuo's mention of corrupted females, no matter how harmless or mild it may seem, it may be symbolic of an aggressive critique of the corruption of the Party and of the nation. Such a notion not only undermines the moral authority of the Chinese State, but also confronts the fundamental notions of 'Chineseness'.

### Conclusion:

The above analysis helps to highlight the fact that the two authors have distinct themes and issues at hand to represent, although they have been known to depict some issues more prominently over the other issues. However, the subtleties in their work point to a more nuanced approach they had towards literary creativity. The Communist Party of China negated the any gender differences and the ideas of individuality and femininity were considered subversive. In this outlook, a woman's identity is class-revolutionary, the one that denies the autonomy of an individual especially when it's based on 'gender'. Therefore, women suffered doubly through the Communist ideology and also by Confucian ethics that demanded women to retain qualities like *xianfu* 贤妇 and *xiaonü* 小女, which included qualities like being submissive and sacrificing nature, that made any woman a noble woman.

While Wang Shuo was mocked for calling his characters 'spiritual proletariat', his claims of being Proletariat must be looked at in the light of unique historical conditions from which his 'common men' characters emerged as Proletariat. Similarly, Wang's descriptions of his women images, promiscuous or pure, symbolizing the prevalent gender relations and state of affairs of China are phenomenal.

The depiction of 'gender' or 'class' have been a constant in Wang Anyi and Wang Shuo's literary representations. The Communist Party through their old political slogans such as 'women hold up half the sky' and advocating women's equal right was practicing, symbolically speaking, a certain kind of political correctness. That is to say, by taking care of women's rights and merging their liberation with national liberation, the Party was moving away from implementing Feminist ideas into the Party policies/system and continuing to focus on the single overwhelming concern of 'class'. Therefore, the 'so-called' women's issues have resurfaced and found representations in Chinese literature time and again.

For Chinese intellectuals and writers, it may not be a difficult proposition to be able to trace the genesis of the two concerns, i.e. 'class' and 'gender', in their own societal and cultural norms and practices that had taken roots since the time of Confucius, a time long before Socialism arrived in China. Centuries-long 'iron grip' of Confucian teachings gained substantial ground, among which 'hierarchy' was an important tenet of these teachings. the rigid strictures of 'hierarchy' left no scope for questioning the elders, superiors or the establishment, political or literary. Thus, it is easy to see that perhaps for the Chinese writers, in their first encounter with these two concerns, there was no novelty or shock value when the issues of 'class' and 'gender' first found mention in literary writings. It is another truth that the writers may not have been newly introduced to these two concerns, thus, not shocked, but at the same time, they admit and acknowledged that the problems of 'class' or 'gender' were deeply embedded into the mainstream Chinese thought and culture; the literary works of the two writers stands a testimony to this reality.

<sup>10</sup> Duara, Prasenjit, "The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender, and National History in Modern China", *History and Theory*, Vol. 37, Issue 3, October 1998, p. 287.