

《東華漢學》 創刊號
2003年2月 頁105-124
國立東華大學中國語文學系

Detecting a Historical Transition in Taiwan Feminist Fiction Reading “The Net” and “A Place of One’s Own”

Liang Shi *

Abstract

This article analyzes two short stories by Taiwan women writers to trace the evolvement of the feminist movement between the 1960s and the 1980s. “The Net” 網(1961) by Ouyang Zi and “A Place of One’s Own” 自己的天空(1980) by Yuan Qiongqiong both present a moment of revelation through a crisis faced by their main female characters. Yu Wenqin in

* 史亮 (Liang Shi)
Assistant Professor of Chinese,
Department of German, Russian and East Asian Languages,
Miami University,
U.S.A.

“The Net” and Jingmin in “A Place of One’s Own” find themselves in a position to break away from a patriarchal marriage. While Yu Wenqin, who initiates the challenge to the status quo, fails because of her surrendering to her husband’s dominance, Jingmin, who is involuntarily thrown into the crisis, chooses to leave her husband and embarks on a venture for independence. The irony is that between the two characters, Yu Wenqin is the one who possesses more modern personality traits. In comparison, Jingmin represents the traditional weak and submissive female. The differences in their characters, as well as in the paths each chooses in the crisis, testify to the progress of the feminist movement and to the changes in the social environment for women in Taiwan during this period. In the end, however, Jingmin’s breakthrough does not entitle her to claim a complete victory for gender equality, just like Yu Wenqin’s unsuccessful—but equally heroic—challenge should not be considered a total failure for the women of her generation.

Key Words

“The Net” ; Ouyang Zi ; “A Place of One’s Own” ; Taiwan feminist movement ; Taiwan fiction ; Yuan Qiongqiong .

Detecting a Historical Transition

in Taiwan Feminist Fiction Reading “The Net” and “A Place of One’s Own”

In 1949, when Simone de Beauvoir wrote “woman is made not born” (249), she pronounced a fundamental assumption that led, during the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave feminism to look into the process of socialization to explain gender inequality in the West. Among the many focal issues Western feminism has raised is the relationship between women and the state. While this issue is extremely complex, one major theme of modern feminism is that the state is a political tool that institutionalizes social and domestic structures and behaviors, which results in the oppression of and discrimination against women. Mary McIntosh, for instance, states the following in a well-known 1978 paper “The State and the Oppression of Women”:

One of the features of capitalist societies, especially in the more advanced stages of capitalism, is the important part played by the state in the economy and in the society at large. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the state plays a part in the oppression of women. ...the state does this not directly but through its support for a specific form of household: the family household dependent

largely upon a male wage and upon female domestic servicing. (303)

The type of household McIntosh identifies here is certainly not confined to the West or to capitalist society, but can be found universally throughout human history. In this article, I will explore how the traditional family structure and social environment affect the lives of the main female characters in two modern Taiwan short stories: “The Net” 網 (1961) by Ouyang Zi and “A Place of One’s Own” 自己的天空(1980) by Yuan Qiongqiong.

Although there is a lapse of two decades between the publications of the two stories, their female protagonists are both confronted, at certain point of their lives, with the dilemma of staying with their husbands in a traditional marriage of lopsided power balance or leaving their marriage for independence and freedom. The different choices the two characters make provide testimony to the historical transition of women’s worldview and social environment during the 1960s and 1970s in Taiwan.

Until 1976, there had been hardly a feminist movement to speak of in Taiwan. In that year, Liu Xiulian, who had returned from the United States after completing her study of law there, unveiled the notion of the “New Feminism” 新女性主義, signaling the beginning of a new era for women. Because of the particular socio-political conditions of the time, feminist movement remained mostly a cause of individual citizens and organizations up to 1987. It was only after the lifting of martial law in this year that feminism grew

into a fully-fledged mass movement.¹ “The Net” and “A Place of One’s Own,” therefore, are respectively the products of pre-awakening and awakening periods in the history of the Taiwan women’s movement.

The major crisis for the characters in each story also offers a moment of revelation for the readers. Having run into her college boyfriend, Tang Peizhi, on the street, Yu Wenjin experiences an awakening, which allows her to realize that she has given herself up — “her body, her mind, her will” (188)--completely to her husband, Ding Shizhong. During the past two years of her marriage, she did not exist as an individual but only as part of her husband. This awakening eventually leads her to stammering out, in a hesitant and timid manner, the request for a temporary separation. The moment of revelation occurs once Ding Shizhong has made a gesture to grant her request. Suddenly, Yu Wenjin is struck by panic, as if the earth has been taken away from underneath her. She collapses totally and throws herself at his feet, begging him not to abandon her. Her heroic attempt to regain herself requires tremendous effort and takes a long time in coming, but it only takes a second for her to surrender. The force she has to challenge is simply too mighty.

Unlike Yu Wenjin, who initiates the confrontation in her marriage, the main character Jingmin in “A Place of One’s Own” finds herself involuntarily thrown into the center of the

¹ For a general reference on this subject, see Wang Yage’s *Taiwan Fun ü Jiefang Yundong Shi* » 台灣婦女解放運動史 [History of Taiwan Women’s Liberation Movement], (Taipei: Juliu Tushu Gongsi, 1999).

crisis. The scene is a crowded restaurant, an unusual setting considering the nature of the matter to be discussed. Surrounded by three strong men at the table, Jingmin is decidedly outnumbered by her male counterpart. Liangsan, her husband, announces that he wants her to move out to an apartment so that his mistress can move into their house. His excuse is that the mistress is pregnant, whereas Jingmin, having been married for seven years, has not been able to bear him a child. The severity of the blow is compounded by Jingmin’s complete dependence on Liangsan, as shown, for example, by the fact that she does not even know the way home from the restaurant. Through the description of Jingmin’s weak personality and total lack of life skills in such a helpless situation, Yuan Qiongqiong successfully sets up the expectation that she is left with no choice but to accept the arrangement offered by Liangsan. It comes as a great surprise, therefore, to the men at the table, as well as to the readers, when she declares that she does not want a separation but a divorce, instead. From that point on, Jingmin embarks on a quest for a place of her own in a world largely unknown to her.

Jingmin’s impulsive decision to get a divorce represents, no matter how reluctant and timid in arriving at it on her part, a historical giant step in Taiwan women’s striving for independence and gender equality. Both Yu Wenqin and Jingmin reached the point of breaking away from a patriarchal marriage. The difference is that Yu Wenqin turns back, whereas Jingmin moves on. It is interesting to note that this difference between the two characters’ decisions basically reflects the changes in women’s consciousness and social environment during the period bracketed by the publications

of the two stories. By the end of 1970s, the feminist movement is already under way in Taiwan, even though its scale is still limited. We must remind ourselves, however, that it is no less a giant step in the first place for Yu Wenqin to reach the position from which she eventually retreats. Jingmin's successful liberation from her marriage owes directly to Yu Wenqin's awakening as well as her failed bid for freedom. The transition in the women's movement as shown by these two stories is not an abrupt change of direction but a gradual evolution of history.

The titles of the two stories point, by contrast, to their respective emphasis. "The Net" is a metaphor that suggests a state of stagnation and passiveness. The noun focuses on the interlacing socio-cultural forces that bind and trap Yu Wenqing from escape. It implies not only the conflict between the individual and his/her environment, but also a relationship between the act of catching and the prey to be caught, with the environment dominating the individual. On the other hand, the phrase "A Place of One's Own" is directed towards as well as optimistic about future. The title stresses subjectivity over its external environment, and action over passivity. The narration centers around Jingmin's struggling experience to become an independent member in society. It is a story about the subject trying to exert free will over his/her social milieu. This difference in emphasis is also born out by the narrative structure of each story. The moment of revelation comes at the end of "The Net." The story closes with Yu Wenqin's surrender, or metaphorically with her being caught by "The Net," leaving the sense that her feminist struggle is over. In "A Place of One's Own," the major crisis occurs in the

beginning, and functions as the prelude to the main story, which is Jingmin’s life after her divorce. The readers follow the ups and downs of her journey in searching for her self and independence.

Although Yu Wenqin and Jingmin share the same situation, i.e., both being entirely dominated by the husbands, the two characters are quite different in some significant, and sometimes ironic, ways. On the surface, Yu Wenqin appears to be a traditional wife who is totally subordinate to and dependent on her husband. There are many qualities about her, however, that distinguish her from the traditional Confucian woman. Two most obvious facts in this regard are that she has a college education, and her marriage is a result of her own choice rather than of her parents’ arrangement. The second point, although never explicitly stated in the story, can be drawn from the apparent fact that Yu Wenqin has some say in whom she marries because she is seen weighing the pros and cons, in her head, of marrying her husband instead of Tang Peizhi. Both the opportunity to receive an education and the choice of who to marry represent some of the remarkable improvements in social conditions for women in modern times. A further significant characteristic of Yu Wenqin’s modernity is that the basis of choice of her marriage is love, as shown by her repeated acknowledgements throughout the story that she truly loves Ding Shizhong. An ideal Confucian marriage is traditionally constructed not on mutual attraction but on the husband’s authority and the wife’s virtues. The concept of romantic love is relatively new to the Chinese mind, a fact that points to the modern aspect of Yu Wenqin’s mentality.

It is equally remarkable, however, that these modern

traits in Yu Wenqin's character did not, in the least, change the power structure of her marriage, which strictly follows the old model defined by Confucianism. Ding Shizhong has absolute dominance over Yu Wenqin, who willingly surrenders herself to him in complete submission and devotion.

With Ting Shih-chung [Ding Shizhong] it was quite different. He had really made her happy by taking her for granted, and by willingly accepting all her sacrifices. She felt secure with him, and was sure of herself as long as she could cling to him. Since their marriage two years ago, she had given herself up to him, offering him everything — her body, her mind, her will. Ting Shih-chung had never hesitated to accept these offerings, taking them as though they were his inborn right. Wen-chin [Wenqin] found contentment in her surrender, and drew immense gratification from the realization that she had lost herself for the sake of someone she loved. (188)

This quotation throws much light on the nature of Yu Wenqin's relationship with her husband. There are three points worth noting here. Firstly, she is inclined to sacrifice herself to Ding Shizhong to the extent that she has completely lost her self. During her brief awakening, she realizes that "For two years she did not seem to have really existed. She had not been living her own life, because Ting Shih-chung. ...would consider and arrange everything for her. He loved her tenderly and possessed her completely" (189).

Secondly, Ding Shizhong readily accepts Yu Wenqin's

sacrifices and feels it is only natural for him to control her. A sure indication of his ultimate power over her is that he opens her mail. Not only does he read Tang Peizhi’s letter, which is addressed to her, but also he writes back in her name. To Tang Peizhi’s question “Are you happy?” he replies: “My dear friend, I am the happiest woman in the world” (191). He is so used to thinking for her that he is confident it is his call to determine whether she is happy or not.

Thirdly, from giving up herself and letting Ding Shizhong possess her, Yu Wenqin is “rewarded,” in return, with contentment and gratification. This point is significant in that it demonstrates Yu Wenqin’s blindness to the injustice of the gender relationship to which she is subjugated. Her contentment and gratification are derived from the historical sediment of social conditioning accumulated through centuries. The higher education she received at university apparently has not led her to questioning the institutionalized gender structure. In order to understand this point better, we must investigate further the sources of Yu Wenqin’s contentment and gratification.

In several places in the story, Yu Wenqin explicitly states that she loves Ding Shizhong. It seems, therefore, that her happiness from her marriage with him is based on love. The use of the term “love,” however, is problematic and deceptive in the story. When read carefully, it shows that she never displays any sexual attraction or affectionate attachment to him, nor does she ever express any admiration in his virtue and intelligence. The lack of evidence in these areas indicates that her “love” for him does not rise from physical, emotional, moral, or intellectual origins. It is with Tang Peizhi that she

develops an emotional and spiritual relationship. This is evident in the following statement:

...those had been in many ways the most wonderful days of her life—the days when they were together as college students. On entering the classroom every morning, she would always meet his gentle smile. His eyes would glow tenderly at the sight of her. as of saying to her, “Oh, friend, my friend, here I am.” And then she would feel happy all day long, even without exchanging a single word with him. (188)

Yu Wenqin and her husband never develop such a mutual understanding to bring their hearts and souls this close. Theirs is a one-way give-and-take arrangement, which leaves no room for them to cultivate an equal and mutual relationship of affection and respect. I will argue, consequently, that since Yu Wenqin’s “love” for her husband does not involve affection and other familiar personal components, it is not love in the usual sense of the word, namely, romantic love.

It is in the socio-cultural areas where Yu Wenqin’s love is grounded. As seen previously, she gives herself up in exchange for her sense of security. She is reassured knowing that she can depend on Ding Shizhong. The question is: What is she afraid of? What does she need protection against? Yu Wenqin does not have a job even though women could go out and work at that time period. Financially, she has to be supported by a man. More importantly, she has no recourse to socio-political independence. While women of the time enjoyed opportunities of education and work, the social

circumstances for a single woman to make it alone remained dauntingly hard, not to mention the fact that the public opinion still overwhelmingly viewed independent women as an abnormal breed. It is true, therefore, that Yu Wenqin is economically vulnerable. In reality, however, her greatest fear is to become independent in a world hostile to single women. She chooses the easy way out by surrendering herself to Ding Shizhong in exchange for his protection. In the final analysis, her “love” for him is originated from her need for socio-economical safety and security. In other words, her “love” is not real but rather “contentment and gratification” produced through a twisted psychology, which, in return, is wrought by the social environment decidedly unfavorable to women. With this analysis, we may conclude that “The Net” that entraps Yu Wenqin consists not only of the external forces but also of her own mentality. Even “love” conspires to form a string in the snare preying on her.

Jingmin, in “A Place of One’s Own,” is a typical traditional female character. Compared with Yu Wenqin, she does not have much education. She and her husband, Liangsan, are introduced by a matchmaker. Although she does not consciously choose to be dependent, as the case with Yu Wenqin, she, probably driven by the inertia of the historical gender discourse, nevertheless gives Liangsan a blank check of power and puts herself blindly at his mercy. This may be seen by juxtaposing her following statements: on the one hand “She didn’t feel she loved Liangsan that much;” and, on the other hand, “She had always made herself up on account of him” (269).

Her reliance on Liangsan is no less than Yu Wenqin’s

dependence on her husband. On reflecting her situation in the restaurant, in which Liangsan breaks the news that he wants her to move out so that his mistress can move in, Jingmin admits, “For all seven years of her marriage she had always depended on Liangsan. She’d never even gone out alone on her own. She didn’t even know where this place was. Besides, she hadn’t brought much money because she was always with him. And now he had brought her here to tell her this” (268). After years of marriage she has become not just financially but also psychologically parasitic on her husband. Not only has she never earned money herself, but she does not even remember to take money with her when she goes to the restaurant, because she is unaccustomed to leaving the house without Liangsan.

Even her divorce with Liangsan serves as a reminder of how women are discriminated and brainwashed. The way she reaches the decision for the divorce suggests that she opts for it mostly because she thinks it is better for her in the long run. What she did not do is question the unfairness of the situation as well as the injustice of the social order. In the first place, it is Liangsan, not she, who cheats, and therefore is on the guilty side. If one of them is to be punished and kicked out, it should be him not her. Jingmin, however, quietly accepts his unfair treatment, and even feels a little guilty for not having borne him a child, while Liangsan, instead of apologizing and asking for forgiveness, never doubts his superiority and power. He feels that he is kind and generous to her by not abandoning her altogether and by renting a small apartment for her. Feeling that she will surely take his offer, he even has the audacity to suggest, after telling her to move out, that she

learn to cook the dish he orders from the menu. Liangsan’s insensibility and shamelessness is less shocking when we take into account the social conditions of the time. The majority of the public criticize Jingmin for making a rash and foolish decision. Even her women peers would expect her to tolerate her husband’s infidelity to hold on to her marital status and economic support. It is better, they seem to believe, to be married to an unfaithful husband than not married at all. From a feminist point of view, Jingmin, at this point, represents the worst example of women being victimized, both socially and psychologically, by the patriarchal society.

Of the two main female characters, Yu Wenqin is the one who has the most modern traits, but ironically it is Jingmin who is able to break away from “The Net” in order to find “A Place of One’s Own.” Jingmin’s changes in becoming an independent member of society represent some significant breakthroughs for women in Taiwan. After an initial failure running a small handicraft shop, which is, incidentally, financed with the money given by Liangsan in their divorce settlement, hence symbolizing her last connection with him, she eventually has a successful career as an insurance saleswoman, through which she achieves economical security on her own. In addition to her career success, Jingmin is able to construct a satisfying personal life. She falls in love with Qu Shaojie, the married manager of an import-export company. After she decides she wants him, she aggressively pursues him until they begin living together.

Jingmin’s changes are gradual and all multifaceted. At first she still acts the way she did when she was with Liangsan. She sat with her legs together and her feet tucked under her.

She was used to sitting in a constrained manner and couldn't loosen up all at once" (271). Soon after she becomes an insurance saleswoman, a dramatic change can be seen in her appearance and behavior. She turns darker and thinner, which are not considered beautiful by the time. She becomes less shy and reserved. She becomes more outgoing and manipulates people into buying insurance from her.

She had begun changing into a confident woman. Besides learning how to dress and make herself up, she had learned how to use people, learned how to deal with different kinds of people and what words were most effective to get what she wanted. (277)

These changes in Jingmin as well as her success in her social and personal life seem to suggest that in the end she has found a place of her own, and her story is a celebration of a woman's liberation.

There are parts in the story, however, that put Jingmin's success in question. She has an excellent sales record which enables her to climb the corporate ladder. Yet people buy the policies from her not because she is articulate and eloquent, but because they find it hard not to sympathize with her naivety and lack of persuasion with them. Her successful career is paradoxically based on customers' perception that she is an incompetent saleswoman who is probably in the wrong business. Even her appeal as being sincere, and thus trustworthy, stems from people's belief that she is not capable of lying, an essential trait for a successful salesperson. She wins customers by acting as the victim rather than the

predator.

While she plays the role of the aggressor and pursuer in her affair with Qu Shaojie, she, like in her business, is the weak of the two. When she is with him, “her confidence disappeared” (277). She goes out of her way to appear very feminine to him. She sits with her legs tucked underneath the chair instead of crossing them up high, the way she learned to do as a successful saleswoman. The image of the ideal femininity, which she tries to embody, is, of course, the traditional model, the one that she used to portray in her marriage with Liangsan. The difference between now and then is that this time she consciously chooses to benefit that ideal by hiding the new woman that she has become. Underlying her posture is the assumption that a successful career makes her less feminine and poses a threat to Qu Shaojie. By any definition, this is a regression that reverses the course of her progress towards independence.

Jingmin eventually convinces Qu Shaojie to buy some insurance from her, and shortly afterward, they begin living together. Ironically, she captures him as a result of her defenses completely collapsing which causes her to cry in front of him. Crying is a sign of weakness and acknowledgement of defeat. From the outset of their relationship, she assumes the inferior position between the two and allows the pendulum of power tilt towards his side.

While her affair with Qu Shaojie allows her to experience love and sexuality for the first time, on the broader social scale, it at the same time implies setbacks for women movement. Like in the beginning of the story, Jingmin is once again involved in a triangular relationship, only this time she

plays the role of the mistress. By having an affair with a married man, she does to Qu Shaojie's wife what Liangsan's mistress had done to her: women become victims and losers in the gender war. On the one hand, Jingmin emerges from the relationship as a woman with independent sexuality; on the other hand, the same relationship reinforces the patriarchal social structure. This triangle relationship works inherently against the women involved because it forces two women to compete for one man and consequently empowers him over them.

The imbalance of gender power resulting from Jingmin's affair is warranted on several socio-historical beliefs. One of them is the assumption that men's sexual desire is natural and inevitable. As Mary McIntosh argues, in her influential paper "Who Needs Prostitutes? The Ideology of Male Sexual Needs," that this assumption effectively turns women into passive "receivers" of male sexual acts and provides justification for men to seek other women than their wives to satisfy their sexual desires.² This is contrasted against the development of the ideal of "moral motherhood," which relegates autonomy from women's sexual behavior. If social expectations dictate that women could be "good" only if they are moral mothers, it follows that women who are sexually available and aggressive in relations with men are morally flawed. These views explain why Liangsan and Qu Shaojie are

² Mary McIntosh, "Who Needs Prostitutes? The Ideology of Male Sexual Needs," *Women, Sexuality and Social Control*, eds. Carol Smart and Barry Smart (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 53-64.

not condemned by society for having extra marital affairs, whereas Jingmin is victimized both as a wife and a mistress, though in different ways.

Jingmin’s encounter with Liangsan in the last scene is usually interpreted as an affirmation of her liberation as well as a celebration of her triumph in becoming an independent woman. To Liangsan she appears to be a totally different woman, confident, outgoing and content. Indeed, she has much to be proud of herself. On a deeper level, however, there is an undertone that can cause a little uneasiness among modern readers. From a feminist perspective, it is puzzling, to say the least, that she is compelled to tell him that she is married and has a son. It is understandable that she lies in order to take revenge on her ex-husband by showing that she is doing better than he is. She certainly accomplished this goal, for Liangsan is completely humbled and defeated. The problem is that this victory is won on Liangsan’s terms and not hers. Despite all her achievements in career and personal life, she does not feel the accomplishments are enough to establish her as a successful woman in front of Liangsan. By hiding her true accomplishments and lying about her life, she wins a victory at the cost of a bigger defeat. She gives in to the social prejudice against single and childless women. She must feel so embarrassed by the stigma associated with the status of being a woman without being married or having a son that she lies about these details “in order to save face” (279). The fact that she gets the upper hand of Liangsan only by playing his game, namely willing to have her life measured by the yardstick of the dominant patriarchal ideology, demonstrates that she fails to transcend the psychological boundaries set

against her. In the final analysis, Jingmin's liberation is limited because in the end she is caught by the same invisible "Net" that traps Yu Wenqin.

Reference

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Bantam Books, 1964. First published in 1949.
- McIntosh, Mary. “The State and the Oppression of Women.” *The Woman Question: Readings on the Subordination of Women*. Ed. Mary Evans. London: Fontana, 1982. 303-33.
- . “Who Needs Prostitutes? The Ideology of Male Sexual Needs.” *Women, Sexuality and Social Control*. Eds. Carol Smart and Barry Smart. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978. 53-64.
- Ouyang Zi. 歐陽子 “The Net.” Tran. Ouyang Zi. *The Unbroken Chain: An Anthology of Taiwanese Fiction since 1926*. Ed. Joseph S. M. Lau. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983. 185-94.
- . “Wang” 網 [“The Net”]. *Ouyang Zi ji* 歐陽子集 [The Collected Works of Ouyang Zi]. Ed. Chen Wanyi. Taipei: Qianwei Chubanshe, 1993. 35-50.
- Yuan Qiongqiong. 袁瓊瓊 “A Place of One’s Own.” Tran. Jane Parish Yang. *A Place of One’s Own: Stories of Self in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore*. Eds. Kwok-Kan Tan, et al. Hong Kong: Oxford UP, 1999. 265-80.
- . “Ziji De Tian-Kong” 自己的天空 [“A Place of One’s Own”]. *Ziji De Tiankong*. Taipei: Hongfan, 1981. 133-51.