LITERARY CALLS FROM WOMEN NOVELISTS

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October 1976 saw the end of the disastrous ‘Cultural Revolution’ to the whole Chinese nation, marking the advent of a new epoch. Since then, Chinese literature of the New Period has been demonstrating its strong vitality in its recovery and prosperity, and contemporary Chinese literature has been in a new situation of calling for unprecedented flourish.

In this situation, the women novelists of the New Period have given forth their fascinating literary calls. Due to the imposed and distorted sexless sense of ‘women civilians’ over the long period of time after the founding of the People’s Republic, female writers could not but use their sexless discourse to cater to the need of the time or politics or even certain specific ideology, political line and policy. As a result, they could not help resolving themselves in the national politics dominated by the male-centric doctrine in line with the strategy of sexless writing and the socially permissible literary content and form. Now the women novelists are able to throw off the yoke of vulgar sociology and make their writings return to their life and literary creation proper. This takes place in the context of the ‘emancipation of man’ and the ‘emancipation of literature’ roused by the emancipation of the entire social ideology. Along with the joint promotion of the ideological emancipation and the reform as well as the increasingly awakening of the individual sense of life, the women novelists are made to continuously seeking after those lost important topics to the world of women. As they no longer devote to the so-called ‘facing the powder and not powdering the face’ (buai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang) and escape with a female consciousness from the mysterious center of the male authority, they face living men and women in society/culture/life rather than those men and women or ‘women civilians’ under the abstract ideological state/politics, so they are led by their ‘female pen’ into an unprecedented situation of literary creation.

Call of Significance

Of those rising in the New Period, Zhang Xinxin is the first to write with her own conscious female sense. In her ‘On the Same Horizon’ (Zai tongyi
dipingxian shang)\(^1\) which is full of female enthusiasm and critical spirit, she exposes the ‘unequal’ situation that contemporary Chinese women encounter in their daily realities although they are supposed to have been on the ‘same’ horizon with men. It actually marks the consciously literary calling of the women novelists of the New Period for sexual significance.

This novelette is designed in a parallel structure with an evident feminist sense, namely, it lays emphasis on the inherent difference between the male and female protagonists. It at the same time realizes the significance of both interpreting and deconstructing such ideas as the ‘same’ and the ‘equal’ through inter-contrast and inter-reference. The work represents Zhang’s idea of woman characterized by equal value between man and woman, thus enabling the reader to see the alienation of women in the form of male-centric factual power although they have got the ‘same’ working right in contemporary society lacking in a perfect living condition. As a newly married woman, the heroine is by no means satisfied with her position of a ‘second sex’ accessory, for her marriage has not enabled her to get real support and reliance from her husband. She realizes that in the present world women are ‘still confronted with various contentions in life’, in which ‘there is no such gentlemanly slogan as women first’. She, once becoming a wife and giving up her enterprise, cannot but avoid such a consequence as ‘being unable to have a dialogue with him (my husband) in spirit and professional field, so I was still in a position of losing him.’

The awakening female self-consciousness makes her long for self-struggle, practice writing with staunch will in an attempt to fulfill her own social value. However, her selfish husband is quite dissatisfied with her, for to him, it is true that contemporary Chinese society has posed a lot of requirements for women to achieve the equality with men, but in reality such a value equality between sexes is far from being realized. There are always some seams between the conceptual advocacy of the time and the specific requirements and factual reality. Whether in family life or in career competition, the heroine has never stood on the same horizon with her husband. Her husband only views her as his accessory, ‘needing her meekness and caress and expecting her to work silently without talking and even to know nothing,’ but on the other hand, he overlooks the pressure that life places on her. What is even worse, he turns a blind eye to her self-struggle, which finally dissolves the family. It is imperative that she strove for her own dignity and autonomy by escaping from her husband’s control. Obviously, the novelette corresponds in the form of art to the sharp criticism of the male-centric work made by Simone de Beauvoir in her well-known ‘The Second

\(^1\)This novelette is reprinted in *Series of Eminent Modern Chinese Writers: Representative Writings of Zhang Xinlin (Zhongguo xian dangdai zhuming zuojia wenku)*, Zhengzhou: The Yellow River Press of Literature and Art, 1988.