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Article

The Depiction of Female Students in Novels of the Late Qing Dynasty

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Abstract: Girls' education was one of the most significant innovations in Chinese women's education during the late Qing Dynasty. Before the 1890s, instruction was largely given within the family or acquired by women through private study, and it remained confined to the private sphere of household and lineage. The spread of girls' schools after 1898 moved women, for the first time, from individualised domestic space into a socialised school space, and produced a new social category, the female student. This article examines the depiction of female students in eight late Qing novels published or serialised between 1902 and 1919. By identifying the features these figures share, namely unbound feet, restrained adornment, physical training, a mixed Chinese and Western curriculum and collective social activism, it analyses the dilemmas they encounter, the mentality of their contemporaries towards them and the progressive significance of such writing. The article argues that these narratives register both the first awakening of female subjectivity and the limits that a male-authored project of enlightenment placed upon it.

Keywords: late qing fiction; female students; character images; social mentality

1. Introduction

1.1. The Rise of Girls' Schools and the Emergence of the Female Student

Girls' education in China began with the mission schools founded by Western missionaries. With the political advocacy of Liang Qichao and other reformers, it was quickly bound up with the fate of the nation. In June 1898 Jing Yuanshan, a reform-minded figure, established in Shanghai the first girls' school run by the Chinese themselves. Schools thereafter spread like sparks across dry grass and gradually took hold. The Qing government went on to promulgate the Regulations for Nursery Schools and Family Education, the Regulations for Girls' Primary Schools and the Regulations for Girls' Normal Schools, by which girls' education acquired legal standing through the authority of the state. Around the founding of the Republic, girls' schools developed by leaps and bounds and growing numbers of women entered school. In 1904 the journal Women's World published part of a survey of girls' schooling: the four schools in Hunan counted about one hundred pupils, the four in Jiading eighty-five. By 1909, according to incomplete statistics compiled by the Ministry of Education, the country had 308 girls' schools and 14,054 female pupils, not counting mission schools, and the number of women going abroad to study was steadily rising.

1.2. The Female Student as a Modern Identity

As the new children of their age, late Qing female students drew public attention through their dress, deportment and activities, and images of them soon entered literary writing. Feudal society knew no female students in the true sense, so classical fiction had nothing to describe; the female student is therefore a modern construction of identity. The female students of late Qing fiction are the first generation in the lineage of modern Chinese literary representations of the schoolgirl, and although they suffer from a want of subjectivity and verisimilitude that the New Literature would later remedy, they

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remain well worth studying. Huang Xiangjin defines the female student as a woman who has received the new education at school [1]. The title was not confined to those still in school: the years of study were the most important turning point in such a woman's life, for her sense of self and her values were chiefly formed then, and in the eyes of others the female student remained her most conspicuous label. The female students discussed here therefore include not only those still at school but graduates who became women revolutionaries or founders of girls' schools.

1.3. Why Late Qing Fiction Turned to the Female Student

Three circumstances account for the appearance of such works. The first is the stimulus of national crisis: the need to save the nation from extinction and the eastward spread of Western learning transformed social reality and social ideas, and the female student, as a citizen, came to carry the hopes of salvation entertained by writers and readers alike. She therefore appears most often in political fiction, endowed with extraordinary capacities in order to awaken Chinese women and draw them into social change. The second is the influence of Western values and of celebrated women Chinese and foreign, together with the male-led enlightenment of the reformers, which was matched by the emergence of outstanding women in China itself; their high aspirations, remarkable abilities and new conceptions of womanhood gave writers a living source for their creations. Kang Tongwei and Kang Tongbi founded the Guangdong Anti-Footbinding Society; Li Run, Huang Jinyu and Li Huixian established the Chinese Women's Association and founded The Women's Journal, the first modern newspaper for women; Lü Bicheng, editor of the Dagongbao, and Chen Xiefen, editor of Women's News, championed women's rights; Hui Xing was principal of the Zhenwen Girls' School in Hangzhou, Huixian a donor to girls' schooling, and Zhang Zhujun a celebrated woman physician. The third is Liang Qichao's call for a revolution in the world of fiction: since the reform of society must begin with the reform of fiction, and the making of new citizens with the making of a new fiction, the novel was praised for its powers to fumigate, to steep, to sting and to lift, and rose from the status of a trifling genre to the dignity of literature, becoming an effective instrument for remaking society and saving the nation. Under the impetus of the new fiction, a body of novels addressing the emancipation of women appeared in the late Qing.

Scholarship has already mapped part of this ground. Wang Renhui and Gao Youpeng trace the growth and transformation of the female student figure in late Qing fiction [2]; Sun Xiuling examines the shaping of that figure between forward movement and return [3]; Huang Jinzhu compares the different presentations of the new woman in novels by men and by women [4]. These studies establish the typology of the figure and the gender difference behind it. The present article draws on them but attends less to typology than to the relation between the image of the female student, the predicaments she faces and the mentality that these representations disclose, and it reads the novels as a connected body of writing rather than as isolated examples.

2. The Texts Examined

Corpus and Selection: The texts discussed here are eight full-length novels written or published between 1902 and 1919, several of them unfinished or issued in parts. They are read not as a statistically representative sample of late Qing fiction but as a connected body of writing in which the figure of the female student is produced, circulated and contested. In the novels where the schoolgirl stands at the centre of the narrative she is discussed at length in what follows; where she appears only incidentally, the relevant passages are analysed in this section and are not returned to later.

2.1. Novels in Which the Female Student Stands at the Centre

The Valiant Beauties (Xiayi jiaren) was written by Wenyu Nushi of Jixi, identified by scholars as Shao Zhenhua, and appeared in two parts of twenty chapters each, published by the Commercial Press in April 1909 and July 1911; a third part never appeared [5]. Whereas most fiction on the woman question of the period inclined towards utopian

fantasy, this novel begins from the actual circumstances of women and discloses the conditions in which they really lived, and is thus a rare full-length novel in which women speak in their own voice. Centred on the Chinese Women's Xiaoguang Society, which Meng Dimin founds in Shanghai, it narrates the enlightenment of women through the schools established by its members in the countryside around Shandong, Jiangyin and Wucheng. The work exposes the worship of the Great Immortal, the keeping of Buddhist halls, geomancy and fortune-telling; it attacks footbinding, the purchase of bondmaids and concubinage; and it urges women to leave their boudoirs for the new education, offering a comparatively comprehensive survey of the problems women then faced.

The Yellow Embroidered Ball (Huang xiuqiu) by Yisuo runs to thirty chapters, of which the first twenty-six were serialised in New Fiction in 1905 and the last four supplied when the novel appeared in a single volume in 1907; it was later included in Ah Ying's anthology of late Qing literature [6]. Ah Ying's History of Late Qing Fiction calls it the best of the fiction on the woman question of its day. It tells how Huang Xiuqiu, an ordinary housewife in Freedom Village, is prompted by Madame Roland in a dream and encouraged by her open-minded husband Huang Tongli to rethink the value of women's existence, and how, through the two campaigns of unbinding feet and founding a school, she leads awakened women towards self-reliance. The novel displays the new turn in conceptions of women in the late Qing and the explorations of an egalitarian relation between the sexes and of democratic freedom undertaken by progressive intellectuals.

Orioles and Flowers amid the Battlefield (Zhandi yinghua lu), one of the three representative works of the Yangzhou novelist Li Hanqiu, was published as a patriotic novel by the Xinmin Library in Shanghai in 1919 and is also classified by scholars as social romance [7]. Its first half is set in the late Qing: Lin Saigu's father, once a candidate magistrate, purchases a seat in the provincial assembly after the revolution. Lin Saigu, who passes as a woman, links together the different female figures and their fates, some clinging to old ways and to illusions about the old society, others painfully awakening and moving into and taking part in a new life, so that a rich and rounded gallery of characters emerges. Lin Saigu and Zhao Yu attend the Chongshi Girls' School, where his own mother Ying Shunhua had studied. Miao Zhifen, who appears in the middle and later parts of the novel, attends the provincial normal school for women and serves as the women's chair of the students' union, taking an active part in patriotic lectures, boycotts of Japanese goods, strikes that she presses merchants to support, and the posting of handbills. Cool in a crisis, clear in her loyalties and ready to resist, she cuts Lin Saigu's arm when he offends her, a sharp contrast to the submissive heroines of earlier fiction.

A New Record of Demons in the World of Women (Zuixin nujie guiyu ji) was written by Cuotuozi of Xinyang and published by the Shanghai Jinbu Xiaoshuo She in 1909 [8]. It recounts the corrupt words and deeds of Yingniang and Shen Yu, pupils of the Changzhong Girls' School, who cultivate novelty for its own sake, satirises those cloistered women who learn nothing at school but arrange free marriages, and criticises the failure of girls' education.

2.2. Novels in Which the Female Student Appears Incidentally

Heroines of Eastern Europe (Dong'ou nuhaojie) began serialisation in New Fiction in November 1902 and had reached five chapters, unfinished, by July of the following year [9]. It opens with Hua Mingqing, a Chinese woman student at Geneva, and the rest of the text consists of the story of Sophia as she heard it from a Russian fellow student and retold it. Hua Mingqing was raised by an American missionary woman, received a traditional schooling in China, went with her foster mother to America for her education and, on the strength of her results, was sent by her school to study in Switzerland, where she came to know Russian women revolutionaries. Because the novel breaks off, her future can only be inferred from the author's intentions: Luo Pu modelled her on the life of Kang Aide as recorded in Liang Qichao's Record of Ms. Kang of Jiangxi, so as to stress the part played by study abroad and education in forming the new woman; she speaks of China's situation and declares both the Qing court and the Russian government barbarous

despotisms; she takes the women nihilists as her models and laments that among the two hundred million of her sisters not one has such learning, such resolve, such boldness; and she reads Rousseau's Social Contract. From these signs she is meant to grow into a patriot who takes the salvation of the country as her calling, the earliest Chinese woman to encounter the nihilists and the wider world.

Earthly Shadows over the Sea (Haishang chentian ying) by Zou Tao is among the earlier novels to touch on the late Qing female student [10]. The founding of a girls' school is one of the good deeds by which the heroine earns her return to the immortals, and although it occupies little space the author still introduces the pupils' new life at school. A complete record of one routine autumn inspection shows them studying both Chinese and Western subjects: they read Chinese books and learn needlework, and also read English books and learn drawing and arithmetic, the latter counting for more. Beyond their lessons they have other accomplishments: when Yunlan and her companions arrive to inspect, the pupils greet them with drums and music and display a lively and healthy temperament. Their examination results are modest, and Yunlan and the others respond chiefly with encouragement, partly because the pupils have studied for only a year and are still beginners, and partly because the school has but thirty-seven pupils, so little consciousness of the value of schooling had yet formed. Their courage in leaving the boudoir is affirmed, and at the same time a call is issued to those who have not yet left it.

Wu Jianren's The New Story of the Stone (Xin Shitou ji) is a late Qing reworking of the old novel that touches on girls' education [11]. It was serialised in the Nanfang bao from 19 September 1905 to 1 February 1908, left unfinished, and published by the Shanghai Gailiang Xiaoshuo She in 1908. Explaining girls' education to Jia Baoyu, a character observes that where there are boys' schools there are girls' schools, and that the boundary between the sexes is no longer as strict as it was; the curriculum includes needlework, light handicrafts, paediatrics and gynaecology. In the household of Dongfang Wenming the womenfolk all attend school or teach in one, and Dongfang Mei, receiving guests, is poised and wholly unembarrassed, conversant with commerce, technical skills, medicine and new inventions, and altogether unlike the women of the old order.

Free Marriage (Ziyou jiehun), printed by the Shanghai Ziyou She in August 1903, was presented as a translation by Zhendan nushi Ziyouhua from a novel by the Jewish exile Wanguhen, but was in fact written by Zhang Zhaotong as a political novel of revolutionary propaganda, and is a fine example of the writing on social transformation and the spirit of the young [12]. Huang Huo and Guanguan meet on their way to and from school, share the same aspirations and often read and talk together; later Guanguan persuades her mother to let her study abroad.

3. The Image of Female Students in Late Qing Fiction

Female students in late Qing fiction share a good many traits: natural feet and a strong, healthy body; a good education; a readiness to work for the group and for public affairs; and an unflinching acceptance of difficulty and obstruction. Meeting by chance, they recognise kindred spirits, form sisterly bonds and support one another along the road to their ideals, so that a self-reliant modern womanhood takes shape.

3.1. Bodies: Unbound Feet, Restrained Adornment and Physical Exercise

The remaking of the female body was arguably the earliest demand of the late Qing women's movement. When a female character enters a novel the description lingers on her appearance, her dress and her feet, and natural feet and an unpainted face are the shared marks of the new woman in fiction by men and women alike, the sign by which new and old women are told apart.

Footbinding was produced by a distorted male aesthetic. In a society centred on patriarchy that aesthetic made the three-inch golden lotus the measure of beauty. Since walking is the foundation of all activity, unbinding was for Chinese women the first step towards self-emancipation. In The Valiant Beauties every new woman, among them Meng

Dimin, Gao Jianchen and Xiao Zhifen, has natural feet, while the traditional figures, such as the young Mrs. Xiao, are bound. The novel describes more than once the pain and injury that binding inflicted: Chu Taigu, for instance, tells how her mother-in-law bound her feet when she was a child bride. It also registers the difficulty of the campaign against the practice, which could not be advanced even among the women who suffered most. When Meng Dimin raises the matter with the concubine of the Jiang family, whose daughters' feet had been bound, the concubine replies that the girl suffered three years before she had these small feet, that she is now very fond of how they look, and that though she has urged her to unbind them the girl refuses. In The Yellow Embroidered Ball Huang Xiuqiu's transformation begins with unbinding: afterwards not only does she walk freely and without mincing, but her temper alters, becoming calm, composed, wise and brave, so that she turns from an old-style woman into the model of a new one. Footbinding, then, was not merely a physical trait but bound up with temperament.

Heavy cosmetics were commonly regarded as the habit of courtesans, and restraint in adornment was accordingly one of the demands that most girls' schools made of their pupils, although it was never fully enforced.

Physical exercise was a subject in many girls' schools of the time. A New Record of Demons in the World of Women describes pupils learning and being examined in gymnastics. The Valiant Beauties uses Yu Zhifen's intervention in a quarrel to show the gulf in physical capacity between a pupil with natural feet who has trained and a woman whose feet are bound. The novel also dwells on the playground of the Guangming Girls' School, where Meng Dimin's commitment to gymnastics is made visible: she hopes by strengthening physical training to help women remake their weak bodies. Exercise concerned women's health, but it was also the material foundation of service to society and the nation. In Free Marriage Guanguan says that our bodies belong to the nation, that we eat our fill and dress warmly only to preserve this seven-foot frame, so that we may do our utmost for the country.

3.2. Manner: Poise, Composure and Courage

In order to awaken the world of women and rescue those who suffer, the pupils devote themselves to lecture meetings and to founding schools, speaking with assurance before large audiences in a manner both gracious and commanding. Whether the rights they pursue are those of the nation or those of women, they must constantly overcome obstacles and press forward, and so they display an independent, resolute spirit and a combination of wisdom and courage. The stereotyped frailty and dependence of women is repeatedly held up to blame. In The Yellow Embroidered Ball, when Huang Xiuqiu is arrested for propagating unbinding, she does not flinch but reflects that such experiences broaden one's courage, and that once one has been through them and understood them one can act all the better.

In The Valiant Beauties Hua Jianquan is rebutted by Xiao Zhifen at a lecture meeting and, though flushed to the ears and unable to answer, concludes that a talent like Xiao's ought to be recruited. When Liu Feiqiong is deceived and abandoned by her husband, Meng Dimin contrives her rescue, arranges her divorce and finds her work so that she can support herself. The new women are not only poised, wise and courageous, cool in a crisis; they are also magnanimous and considerate. Meng Dimin, having engaged Mu Bunshi as an adviser on the strength of her reputation, discovers her true character and, rather than humiliate her publicly, tactfully dismisses her with four thousand yuan to keep her from destitution, urging her to mend her ways.

The novel sets the new women represented by the pupils against the old. Meng Dimin, Gao Jianchen, Xiao Zhifen, Tian Rongsheng, Hua Jianquan, Meng Yaqing, Bai Huiqin and Meng Danru belong to the first camp; the young Mrs. Xiao, the women of the Jiang and Chu households and the third wife of the Kou family belong to the second. The old-style women are often bashful and timorous, bullying the weak and posturing before others, sometimes sacrificing public good to private interest. The new women, by contrast,

act from the standpoint of the group or the public, take the defence of collective rights as their business, and face hardship without fear.

3.3. Learning: A Chinese and Western Curriculum Combined

In the early Republic girls' schools multiplied, textbooks for women grew more accomplished and the curriculum widened. The Commercial Press's Revised Textbooks for Girls covered Chinese, moral instruction, household affairs and letter-writing; the Zhonghua Book Company's Chinese Textbooks for Girls covered Chinese, moral instruction, mathematics, domestic science and letter-writing. Their contents treated democracy, science, the form of the state, modern social institutions, the nation, the female citizen, human rights and civilisation, topics far removed from what women had traditionally read, tied to society and marked by modernity.

In Free Marriage Guanguan's study contains the fashionable objects that followed the import of Western science and learning: two maps of the heavens and the earth hang on the wall, with photographs of heroines ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign; on the desk lie all sorts of elementary textbooks, together with A Shallow Account of Politics, Lectures on the Social Contract and A Popular History of the French Revolution. Guanguan is already a pupil, her family is well off, and her mother not only supports her going to America but is willing to pay for her betrothed Huang Huo to go too. In The Valiant Beauties Meng Dimin, financed by her uncle, founds schools and becomes an enlightener of her sex. Believing that men's and women's education should be equal, she adopts a policy that gives weight to both Chinese and Western learning. To spread schooling more widely she divides her Guangming Girls' School into a primary and a higher division, with several study rooms, fourteen classrooms, five dining halls, a library, quarters for teachers, a parlour for teachers and a reception room for the pupils' relatives; the subjects offered include Chinese, history, English, arithmetic, gymnastics and music. Women going abroad to study are likewise common: Xiao Zhifen studied in Japan and America, and Meng Danru graduated from a women's college in New York.

3.4. Social Engagement: Participation and Solidarity

The lecture meetings and schools already mentioned belong to the pupils' public activity; what needs emphasis here is the closeness of the relations among them as they take part in it. Emancipation could not be achieved by individuals alone, and the pupils, who were more often criticised than helped, found in the classmates of their school days and the friends they made in society the force they could naturally rally. Their collective consciousness is strong: they place the revival of the world of women above personal happiness, uphold and practise its cause, and contribute their particular strengths to it. In The Valiant Beauties even the married Gao Jianchen and Meng Danru do not withdraw from the group but attend its activities constantly. Gao Jianchen's husband Lin Feibai, returned from study abroad and progressive in outlook, joins in as well, lending generous support to many of the society's undertakings.

4. Limited Freedom and Deepening Predicaments

4.1. Freedom of Marriage

The free spirit of the late Qing female student could show itself in study, marriage, choice of occupation, social intercourse and childbearing, but freedom to marry was probably the most crucial of these. As the Jewish elder says in a lecture in Free Marriage, what in this world does not require freedom, and why do so many men and women let every other freedom go and cling to freedom in marriage alone, if not because marriage is the great event of a man's or a woman's life and a marriage without freedom means a lifetime of hardship. Marriage was the choice that confronted the pupils as they came of age; study could be taken up at any time, but for most women of the day there was only one marriage, and a wrong choice could ruin a lifetime's happiness. Freedom in marriage accordingly became the first demand of the new woman. In late Qing fiction the pupils' autonomy in marriage is shown in the following ways.

The first is the marriage advertisement in the press, which displays young people's autonomy most plainly. In A New Record of Demons in the World of Women Xu Pengfei reads the newspaper to Xie Chenyu and the others; his account touches her, and she resolves to follow Miss Zhang and open a branch society for choosing a husband by free marriage, though she thinks its terms too loose and decides that her own advertisement must set stricter criteria if a true talent is to be found. Xu Pengfei offers to draft several strict clauses for her, and the next day produces five rules for the selection of a husband, has a thousand copies printed and distributed to the associations of the city; yet no satisfactory candidate appears.

The second is free choice. Marriage had always obeyed the command of parents and the good offices of matchmakers, and a woman had no voice in love or marriage, leaving the decision to her elders. The feudal code of the three bonds and five virtues and of the three obediences and four virtues pressed on women like mountains, while men might keep three wives and four concubines and even repudiate a wife. In The Yellow Embroidered Ball Huang Xiuqiu attacks the irrationalities of feudal marriage, holds that a woman may choose a good husband for herself and has the right to pursue freedom in marriage, and argues that the sexes should be equal within marriage and that a widow need not keep chastity but may remarry. Through her the novel opposes arranged marriage and asserts women's right to choose, views that go beyond the code of propriety and overturn the traditional view of women as subordinate to men. In Orioles and Flowers amid the Battlefield Ying Shunhua also attends a girls' school, yet her mother betroths her without consulting her and, knowing Lin Yaohua to be no good match, agrees to the union because the family still needs Lin's support. For the next generation of pupils, however, marriage is mostly a matter of their own choice. The moral shackles around the female student were loosening, and free choice was becoming fashionable among educated women, who behaved with greater boldness and initiative than their predecessors: readers frequently meet a pupil who falls in love at first sight and courts the man herself, sometimes defying her parents and eloping. Breaking off an engagement is rarely dramatised in these novels and is therefore passed over here.

The third is freedom to divorce. The fullest account of courtship and marriage in The Valiant Beauties is the tragedy of Liu Feiqiong, an orphan educated at a girls' school who had a bosom full of the blood of freedom and longed for a free marriage. Strolling in the school grounds one day, drinking tea and admiring the flowers, she meets Chu Mengshi, a handsome man richly dressed, and falls in love at first sight; they marry in secret and set up house in Shanghai. After three or four years Chu's appetite for novelty and his contemptible nature emerge, and he decoys her and her child onto a boat bound for his native Hunan. Only inside the Chu household does she learn that he already has a wife, after which her life becomes a death sentence: her mother-in-law pays her no heed, and the first wife, a woman of extreme cruelty, locks her and the child in a room, beats and reviles them daily and reduces them to a condition below that of human beings. Her sister is fortunately a pupil in a school of the Xiaoguang Society, and a fellow pupil, Ma Lianwu, investigates the case with zeal; the society intervenes, uses the law to force Chu Mengshi to consent to a divorce and to undertake maintenance for the child, and brings Liu Feiqiong out of hell. From a bold free courtship to a divorce undertaken for the sake of personal dignity, her story shows the first awakening of women's sense of autonomy. It also shows how the harshness of women's circumstances constrained the freedom of spirit they had already released.

4.2. Freedom of Movement

In The Yellow Embroidered Ball Mrs. Bi describes the oddities of Shanghai women: at first she took them for local residents, and such customs are common enough in Shanghai and Suzhou, nothing to wonder at; later she heard that they were all female students, who ride in rubber-tyred carriages to Zhang Garden, take dinner at the Yipinxiang on Fourth Avenue, and go to the theatres at Dangui, Tianxian and Chunxian; at the theatre they must have an uncurtained box close against the stage, and at dinner

they think nothing of sitting with several young students returned from abroad, joking freely, calling a singing girl for amusement, drinking a few bottles of champagne and a glass of brandy, and, carried away by high spirits, singing the tunes of The Nine Links and The Eighteen Touches while everyone claps and cheers, prettier and pleasanter to hear than a foreign dancing party. The comings and goings described here seem entirely natural today, yet they were then unacceptable to most people, including some who advocated girls' education and women's rights.

Mao Zhenxin, a woman editor of a newspaper in The Valiant Beauties, declares that she promotes women's rights exclusively and will condemn in full whatever injures them: women are people and men are people, so why should women not enjoy the same advantages as men; if men may visit courtesans and call for singing girls, why may women not. She recounts to a friend her own experience of doing so in a hotel. In A New Record of Demons in the World of Women the pupils of the Southern faction led by Xie Chenyu make common cause in a disturbance, drive out the matron Lady Li and thereafter win the freedoms of movement, attendance and leave: they drink tea at the Xiaohuayuan and watch the plays at the New Stage, and sometimes, when the mood takes them, traces of Shen Yu and her friends begin to appear even in the houses of Qinghe and Yingchun. A vivid passage follows: Xie Chenyu, Yingniang, Xueyan and Hongying go together to the Xiaoxiang Lodge to visit Lin Dailuo, the laureate of the flower list in the Fanhua bao. After three rounds of wine, at Shen Yu's suggestion, the four sing, one after another, the new song The Good Daughter that they learned at school. Proud of their fashionable identity as pupils, they use the song to celebrate the advantages of having stepped out of the boudoir and shaken off restraint. For them the name of pupil is no more than a fashionable ornament, and the school, that sacred place, no more than a paradise in which to escape the household and enjoy unbounded freedom.

Although the author writes of the pupils in a tone of censure, it is clear that with the spread of girls' schooling their social range widened greatly. Public restaurants had once been closed to women; then courtesans began to enter them and the teahouses to entertain guests, followed by servant women and other women of the lower orders. By the late Qing and early Republic the mood had opened, and women of the upper classes too began to frequent restaurants and taverns without being stared at. The demi-monde is often a city's most secret quarter, and that the pupils entered it may be read as a sign of their passage from boudoir and school into the social sphere. Their curiosity about it was in substance the claim of a growingly socialised woman to take part in public space and to have more human intercourse. Faced with a society wider than boudoir and classroom, they were indeed eager to try their strength. Such spaces not only enlarged their freedom of recreation but favoured the growth of a social consciousness, so that by coming to know society and taking part in it they might gradually come to serve it.

4.3. Economic Freedom

Economic freedom is the one aspect that much late Qing fiction on female students neglects. Unbinding liberated the body and girls' schools brought women into society, but society created no opportunity and gave no encouragement for them to make their way there: many pupils, once graduated, did not work but waited at home for marriage, and those who took part in public activity or founded schools drew on funds vaguely said to come from some wealthy relative. The social gender identity of women was thus far from adequately recognised; most girls' schools aimed at producing good wives and mothers and stressed women's natural identity as wives and mothers.

Beyond general education, the vocational schooling that gradually appeared made practical efforts to bring women into society and to economic independence. In The Yellow Embroidered Ball Mrs. Bi, who studied medicine abroad, uses her expertise to attach a hospital to the girls' school, and some pupils learn medicine from her outside their lessons. In The Valiant Beauties Meng Dimin and her friends, travelling in the countryside, see how much harm the superstitions surrounding silkworm rearing do to village women, and propose a school of sericulture to teach scientific methods, planning

two buildings, one for men and one for women, so that village women may solve the problem of earning a living. They also plan to exploit the orchards, bamboo groves, lotus ponds and fisheries of the countryside by founding a cannery and a subsidiary company to sell produce in Shanghai, thus bringing women into commerce. Their calculations are careful rather than perfunctory: how large the orchard is, how much fruit it yields, how many cans can be made each year, what the wholesale and retail prices are, what the workers' wages and the profits will be, and so on. The novel does not find time to narrate the actual founding of the sericulture, handicraft and medical schools, but it endorses the grand designs of Meng Dimin, Xiao Zhifen and the others.

The question of employment is treated in some detail in The Valiant Beauties, which even proposes that a factory for women's crafts should take precedence and the girls' school come second, since the provision of independent economic conditions for women is the more urgent task. Most of the pupils the author creates are not domestic figures confined to the boudoir but professional women able to shoulder social responsibilities. Many of them take up different occupations, displaying women's economic independence: the commonest is teaching Chinese, handicraft or geography in girls' schools, as Bai Huiqin, Huang Ruzhen, Wang Zegu, Li Xinru, Deng Guanya, Mu Bunshi, Hua Lianying and Liu Feiqiong do; others are Meng Dimin as president of the Xiaoguang Society, Tian Zhifang as secretary of the Qiming Girls' School and Gao Jianchen as adviser. The novel also presents newspaper editors, inspectors, receptionists, business managers and seamstresses, and, in Meng Danru, an industrialist who supports herself by growing vegetables and raising fish and sheep, a figure without parallel in the fiction of the time. It thus displays a comparatively advanced view of women's occupations, affirming that women, like men, may enter society and take up various trades to realise their own value.

4.4. Freedom That Ruins: The Pitfalls of Free Marriage

Orioles and Flowers amid the Battlefield laments that the word freedom has indeed made a number of women, and has also ruined a number. The complaint that freedom ruins women generally refers to the abuses of free marriage. Traditional ideas had loosened, yet the command of parents and constancy to a single husband remained unwritten social norms, and women still bore a one-sided and severe code of chastity. The pupils had more social experience than traditional women, but little experience of life, simple in character and unsettled in judgement, and were more liable than men to seduction and injury in love. As Yang Lianfen observes, on the surface the two parties in an open courtship are equal in freedom, but in practice women who had just moved from the seclusion of the boudoir into society, the world of men, lacked experience of dealing with the other sex and were commonly placed in the position of object, passive and easily hurt; in spirit and in body alike they were unfree. The chief cause of the pupils' stumblings in the pursuit of free marriage was the worthlessness of men who treated women as playthings, and it is they who ought above all to be condemned; yet some works tend to attribute the tragedy of the pupils to their misunderstanding of freedom and their failure to judge character.

In Orioles and Flowers amid the Battlefield Zhao Yu is compromised because she was close to Lin Saigu at school and his masquerade as a woman was exposed; though she grieves and resents his faithlessness, she can only wait for him to marry her. Liu Feiqiong's bitter fruit in The Valiant Beauties, described above, is a further instance. No wonder it was said that free marriage merely opens a door of convenience for men and becomes a boundless sorrow for women. A man in a free marriage may well be less restrained than under the command of parents: men's power grows more reckless, and the taking of a second wife while the first lives is regarded as a matter of course; the worst repudiate the wife of their youth and contract another union. The losses women then suffer and the difficulties they face are a hundredfold those of men.

4.5. External Pressure on Schools and Pupils

Many late Qing novels speak plainly of the darkness of life in the world of women, the backwardness of custom and the difficulty of founding schools, in order to wake the

numb and provoke reflection. In Earthly Shadows over the Sea Yunlan remarks that the opening of a single girls' school already gives rise to much gossip. In The Yellow Embroidered Ball, likewise, Huang Tongli and his wife meet many reverses in promoting the emancipation of women and founding a new school: officials credit rumours and send Huang Xiuqiu to prison, the mischief-making of Huang Huo raises fresh trouble, and venal and self-seeking officials make the running of the school still harder. In The Valiant Beauties the course by which Bai Huiqin builds a school in the countryside from nothing, meets endless difficulties and finally has to close it offers a truthful record of the experience.

When pupils are followed to their homes by male students and Bai Huiqin goes to remonstrate at the boys' school, the principal despises women's learning and pays her no attention; and the pupils themselves have not a scrap of backbone, for when one speaks up for them they hold one back, afraid of trouble, preferring to swallow the insult, and today, the affair being over, they are as cheerful as ever, without a thought of what has passed. Bai Huiqin, exasperated by their failure to live up to her hopes, teaches them the necessity of mutual support, but they are unmoved. In this episode the failure of education to take effect is more disheartening than external resistance. Later Bai Huiqin unwittingly engages a bad teacher, Huang Ruzhen, who not only neglects her lessons but runs a gambling den in the school; a pupil named Fang Tiangui steals her mother's jewellery to pay a gambling debt and takes her own life when the theft is discovered. The school is involved in litigation, its reputation is damaged, and it must finally close.

4.6. Internal Weaknesses of Schools and Pupils

At first girls' schools were founded with private funds and there was no unified code of education laid down by the state, so aims differed widely, subjects were arranged at will and standards of management varied. The teaching philosophy of The Yellow Embroidered Ball, for instance, though it includes science and the purchase of apparatus, and Western notions chiefly of Madame Roland and Western national heroes, holds fast to much of the old learning. The official's verdict in the novel, that the school merely teaches the girls to read a few characters and do a little needlework, that there is nothing remarkable in it, and yet that its standard and scale are quite complete and without the least taint of school ways, is a compliment that repays reflection.

The difficulty Bai Huiqin has in engaging women teachers in The Valiant Beauties likewise reflects the low level of teaching and the stale ideas of the schools. She searches the countryside for a whole day on the recommendations of friends and finds no one who combines a public spirit willing to teach without pay with the qualifications to teach; in the end she engages the wife and elder daughter of the local Gospel Hall pastor, who teach without preaching, and so the school is set going.

The reverse example of a school that is managed with method and that both rewards and admonishes is the Changzhong Girls' School in A New Record of Demons in the World of Women: its principal Jin Yanzhi came from a brothel and, having married an official as a concubine, founded the school only for reputation. Faced with her pupils' protests she is thoroughly frightened and yields again and again, until the rules lose all authority. At the close Xie Chenyu graduates second class and prepares to found a secondary school for girls, which with the school's hasty establishment at the opening of the novel forms a closed circle.

Besides the arbitrariness of their founding, some pupils did not value the chance of study. Their families did not take their learning seriously and they themselves did not see its benefit. In A New Record of Demons in the World of Women Xie Chenyu is the model of one who learns nothing: taking the newly arrived Yu Yingniang to the Zhenhua bookshop to buy The New National Songbook, she buys instead, out of her shallow learning, A New Discourse on the Union of the Sexes, and is mocked by the assistants. Later, at the cinema, male students tease them in English and the two do not understand the obscenity at all. A pupil named Zhu Xiluan, in an arithmetic examination, finds the others working at the gougu method they have learned; never having heard the term, she

is not ashamed of her ignorance but deliberately misreads it as a slender neck lightly hooked and thighs crossed, until the invigilator glares at her. In The Valiant Beauties the pupils take leave at will: their families know that their brothers may not miss lessons, but whenever there is a wedding or a funeral in the house the girls are kept away, and Bai Huiqin, having argued in vain, feels a deep sense of futility.

5. The Social Mentality Reflected in These Depictions

5.1. The Morbid Gaze on Female Students

The girls' school stood in public view, with young pupils passing in and out every day, music and laughter drifting from its grounds, exerting a constant attraction. Because the separation of the sexes was strict, the school was forbidden ground to men, and its enclosure, while it kept desire out, also intensified it. To some men the female student was a group that both provoked and eluded their physical desire. Driven by it, they gathered to watch, followed the pupils, and whenever girls left or entered the school crowded by the road, laughing and insulting them, eager to nail them to the pillory of offence against decency. In The Valiant Beauties Ni Guoxiu, a pupil of the Qihuang Girls' School in Jiangyin, is handsome and well dressed, and on her way home from school is pursued without scruple by a number of male students all the way to the hall of her house. Beside such visible crowding, the pursuit of pupils by the illustrated papers was silent and everywhere, and readers' appetite for such items made them in effect accomplices in the voyeurism. Under this unchecked gaze the female student was always the one seen and consumed. Novels of exposure about girls' schools, trading in private scandal and popular appeal, often have a man disguised as a woman infiltrate a school and form an ambiguous relation with a pupil, to attract readers. This morbid phenomenon, at once the invasion of male supremacy, the scrutiny of moral judgment and the commercial consumption of the female student, expresses unease, experiment and doubt in the face of the new, and the tug of war between old and new forces projects the ambiguity and contradiction of China's modernisation.

5.2. The Distorted Writing of Shanghai

A typical environment produces typical characters, characters who concentrate the common traits of others of their kind. If a novel provides no typical environment for its female students, the figure it creates will hardly be satisfactory. Besides the pupils themselves, then, some attention is due to the schools they attend or found and to their living environment. The Chinese Women's Xiaoguang Society and the Mingli School founded by Meng Dimin in The Valiant Beauties, the girls' school in Earthly Shadows over the Sea, the Chongshi Girls' School in Orioles and Flowers amid the Battlefield and the Changzhong Girls' School in A New Record of Demons in the World of Women are all in Shanghai. Apart from The Yellow Embroidered Ball and Free Marriage, whose places are invented, these novels make Shanghai the stage of their action or give its schools a large share of their content.

The reason is plain. After the Opium War Shanghai was among the first five ports opened to trade, formally declared open on 17 November 1843, and there began the modern chapter of the city's history. Contemporaries in the late Qing had not yet understood what the vague and remote modern world meant, but the daily transformation of Shanghai after its opening was plain to see. Hence, as late Qing novelists imagined modernity, Shanghai was repeatedly chosen as the setting of their stories. In their hands it is a window onto the world. When they describe it they dwell not only on its prosperity but, more often, on its depravity and terror, which represents what people then understood and imagined by the modern. The Shanghai of late Qing fiction is not the geographical city but a signifier. As Zhang Hongsheng points out, late Qing novelists by and large did not regard Shanghai's evil as something inherent in China but stressed its status as an enclave distinct from the rest of the country and imagined the wholesale collapse there of the traditional order of values. Steeped in Western modern civilisation and with its traditional values in ruins, Shanghai was seen as standing opposed to native

Chinese civilisation. The writing of Shanghai in these novels thus conveys contemporaries' fear, anxiety and helplessness before the modern world, and their longing to escape present reality.

5.3. Anxiety over the National Crisis

The Western powers opened the country by force and missionaries brought in ideas and culture, so that thoughtful people saw the strength of the West and the different ways of life and social positions of Western and Eastern women, and concluded that inequality between the sexes and the uselessness of women were among the causes of China's backwardness. Women's education thus arose. The reformers urged the abolition of such customs as footbinding and raised girls' education to a height never before attained, as a matter of the nation's future. Yet although women were the object of education, its ultimate aim pointed not to women themselves but to the next generation and the future of the state. Women's enlightenment rested on the expectations of men and of society, and the cultivation of women as independent persons was largely neglected. In the last analysis the emancipation of women at the time was an auxiliary to the salvation that the male elite sought; as a part of the late Qing revolution, women were only the weak beneficiaries of a movement in which they occupied a passive place.

The patriotic writing of the female student is especially prominent in late Qing fiction, above all in political fiction. In Free Marriage Guanguan and Huang Huo are kindred spirits, but Guanguan insists that the wedding must wait until the nation is revived. Not a word is given to their longing for one another; the novel records only their life-and-death adventures and their unremitting patriotic ardour. The members of the Restoration Party, represented by Princess Yifei, are heroines of iron who wear year in and year out a widow's face and have extinguished the emotional experience and physical traits proper to women. Because the purpose is so strong, the patriotic writing of the pupils tends to have more passion than truth; with its artistic roughness it reads like a simple medley, and its characters are thin and pale. The pupils whom the novels praise possess manly energy while their inner feeling is nearly blank, which is plainly an alienation of their image. In The Yellow Embroidered Ball, again, Huang Xiuqiu is less a truthful representation of a woman in a society that had released its feet than the imagining of the new woman by progressive intellectuals. It is for this reason that Zhang Li remarks that without the New Culture Movement there would have been no true completion of modern Chinese women's writing.

6. Conclusion

Late Qing fiction offers us women of boundless capacity, close to myth, who save the nation; fashionable women who are empty of learning and frivolous in conduct; and flowers of evil blooming in the dark. This article has traced the experiences of the female students in eight selected novels, drawn together the features they share, and analysed the social predicaments they face and the mentality their contemporaries held towards them.

The ideas expressed in these novels do not transcend their age or the themes of the enlightenment literature of the time; nevertheless they register how far the enlightenment of women had reached and the first awakening of a female subjectivity. In this lies the literary and social significance of texts produced at a moment of transition from tradition to modernity. Set beside later writing, these representations are thin in psychology and deficient in subjectivity, and their female students are often vehicles for a male project of national salvation rather than persons in their own right, which is precisely where they differ from the fuller female subjectivity achieved after the New Culture Movement. What they accomplish is nonetheless a first step: they put the schoolgirl into circulation as a literary type and made her visible as a subject of public concern.

The limitations of this study are twofold. The corpus is small and uneven in quality, several texts are unfinished, and the sample cannot support generalisation about the period as a whole; nor has the difference between fiction by men and by women been

systematically compared here. Further work might extend the corpus to the fiction and periodicals of the early Republic, examine how male and female authors treat the same figure differently, and set these texts against the actual records of girls' schools, so that the history of a literary image and the history of an institution may be written together.

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